

Minister Roderic O’Gorman, TD
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth
Block 1, Miesian Plaza,
50 – 58 Lower Baggot Street,
Dublin 2
D02 XW14

By email only

19th May 2021

RE: Financial support for the continuation of play pods

Dear Minister O’Gorman,

I am writing to you in relation to the decisions which need to be made in the coming weeks regarding the continuation of the play pod system for Early Years services and the financial supports that enable Early Years services maintain play pods.

Childhood Services Ireland (CSI) have welcomed the effective financial supports provided by your Department to services since the pandemic began. To date, the EWSS, Sustainability Fund, and COSP in particular have ensured that services have remained sustainable over the last year and childcare workers have been retained in employment. Furthermore, these financial supports have proved essential in ensuring services maintain the integrity of the pod system.

However, CSI are cognizant that financial supports have to change in level and scope as the economy enters a new phase of recovery and we welcome recent Government commitments to avoid cliff-edge effects as supports are adapted or withdrawn. The coming months will provide significant co-ordination challenges for your Department as it seeks to balance the cost of support for the Early Years sector and ensure services remain safe for children, families, and staff through adherence to public health measures.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme and Play Pods

The play pod system has proved immensely important and effective in managing the public health crisis by limiting interactions between children and their families as well as staff. The introduction of this system has in turn necessitated an increase in staffing requirements with corresponding increases in staffing costs. Despite an improved roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine, it is our position that the play pod system should remain in place until December 2021. It is therefore imperative that services are enabled to continue implementing this system through appropriate State funding. To date, the EWSS with exemptions for Early Years services in demonstrating a reduction in turnover has been crucial to enact this intervention.

CSI fully acknowledge that the EWSS will be entering a new phase in the coming weeks whereby supports may be tapered for the whole economy by the Department of Finance. It is CSI's position that the EWSS should be continued for the Early Years sector in its current form, or an alternative but appropriate form, until December 2021 in line with play pod continuance. Although acknowledging a tiered approach to financial supports may be introduced by the Department of Finance, CSI believe the situation faced by Early Years services remains to be unique due to the high operating costs resulting from the play pod system and the wholly undesirable consequence of potentially passing this cost on to parents by increased parental fees in the absence of sufficient financial support.

In our opinion, the extension of the EWSS, or an alternative but appropriate form of funding, until December is the most appropriate timeframe as it will permit those services who continue operations over July and August to do so safely where these services operate at usual capacity. A December extension will also provide essential assurances and stability for providers while planning their staffing needs for the upcoming academic year which will facilitate a smooth reopening of the ECCE programme in September without any unnecessary uncertainty faced by staff and providers.

Coordinated Approach

CSI believe that a collaborative approach between your Department and consultative partners is crucial in successfully navigating the next few months as we deal with what is hopefully the end portion of this pandemic. What became evident during the reopening phases of the Early Years sector, particularly in January 2021, was the benefit of early dissemination of information to providers whether through FAQ documents, webinars, or publications. This, coupled with close consultation with stakeholders, permitted a significantly smoother reopening phase compared to summer 2020. It is CSI's position that similar engagements should be devised for the September 2021 reopening of the ECCE programme which ideally provides necessary information on key decisions before sessional services break up for summer.

CSI feel these aforementioned measures would balance the dual objective of ensuing services remain viable over the coming months and that such services are safe for the children and their families as well as staff and providers with no unintended extra cost on the children and their families.

CSI are looking forward to our continued engagement with you and your Department on the above matters.

Kind regards



Darragh Whelan
Director, Childhood Services Ireland

CC: Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe, TD
Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, TD