

## When is an essential worker not essential? When they're a childcare worker

Late on the evening of 13<sup>th</sup> May, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced that arrangements to provide childcare to essential healthcare staff had been abandoned. That this announcement came two months<sup>1</sup> after government ordered the closure of childcare facilities indicates the extent to which childcare remains a peripheral, private matter in Irish public policy.

On 28<sup>th</sup> March, Government announced that everyone except those working in essential services<sup>2</sup> should stay at home until 18<sup>th</sup> May. Although these essential services included “non-centre based childcare for those providing essential services”, it seems clear at this juncture that there was little appreciation of the challenges of providing home-based childcare in the context of a pandemic. Notably, people could leave home for “vital family reasons, such as providing care to children”.

The working assumption appears to have been that the gap created by the closure of childcare facilities would be filled – as it always had been – by other family members, on an informal and unpaid basis. This despite the fact that such informal care is often provided by grandparents – a group highly vulnerable to Covid-19 – and that creches were being closed because of the possibility that children were potential ‘super spreaders’ of the virus.

Government clearly understood that ‘essential services’ had to include services that were “necessary to support other essential services”. Indeed the Government Action Plan<sup>3</sup> promised to “prioritise” childcare for essential workers – although without saying how it would do this.

Women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of the work of raising children, many of them doing so on their own; analysis<sup>4</sup> of Irish Labour Force Survey data shows just how important childcare services are to the fifth of the Irish workforce deemed essential by Government:

- Almost seven in ten are women, with women accounting for eight in ten employees in the relevant health sectors;
- More than half of essential employees have children; 43% are part of a couple, while 9% parent alone;
- Of the couples with children, around eight in ten have a partner who also works; about a fifth have a partner who is also an essential employee;
- Lone parenthood among essential employees is nearly twice the rate among employees overall (5%) – 9% of retail employees and 14% of ‘other health employees’ (e.g. health care assistants, hospital orderlies, pharmacy aides, and medical imaging assistants) parent alone;
- Approximately two-thirds of essential employees have a child younger than 14 years of age, with health professionals and those in defence and the armed forces most likely to have children aged under six;

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<sup>1</sup> Government announced closure of childcare facilities, initially for a period of two weeks, from 13<sup>th</sup> March.

<sup>2</sup> Department of an Taoiseach (28-Mar-2020) ‘List of essential service providers under new public health guidelines’. Available at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dfeb8f-list-of-essential-service-providers-under-new-public-health-guidelin/>

<sup>3</sup> Department of an Taoiseach (16<sup>th</sup> March 2020) *Ireland’s National Action Plan in response to COVID-19*.

Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/8d6058-government-publishes-national-action-plan-on-covid-19-coronavirus/>

<sup>4</sup> Redmond, Paul & McGuinness, Seamus (April 2020) *Essential Employees during the Covid-19 crisis*. ESRI Survey & Statistical Report Series No.85. Available at [www.esri.ie](http://www.esri.ie)

- Around 14% of essential employees are not Irish nationals, and are therefore less likely to be able to rely on family members for informal childcare;
- Many essential employees are relatively low paid – they have a very limited capacity to pay for additional childcare in order to do work that we regard as essential.

It is hard to account for such a significant policy failure.

The statement issued by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs<sup>5</sup> indicates that lack of insurance cover was a significant factor driving low uptake – only six childcare providers applied to participate in the scheme. But insurance cover for Covid-19 related claims has been an issue in a number of sectors since the crisis began<sup>6</sup>. Childcare regulations protect both children and staff; how these would be implemented in the context of a home-based programme should surely have formed part of considerations from the outset. And not for the first time, little consideration appears to have been given to how the childcare needs of the predominantly female 27,000 strong childcare workforce might be addressed.

The childcare needs of essential employees were to be prioritised. The failure to put in place any provision for these employees does not inspire confidence about how the needs of non-essential employees might be addressed. But any plan to re-open the economy will fail unless this issue is treated as seriously as other key aspects of the response to Covid-19.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Children & Youth Affairs (13 May 2020) 'Statement on cancellation of Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers'. Available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/news/701e2e-statement-on-cancellation-of-temporary-childcare-scheme-for-essentia/>

<sup>6</sup> Brady, Neil (3 May 2020) 'Central Bank of Ireland says insurers 'won't be paying out much' for business interruption. The Times. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/central-bank-of-ireland-says-insurers-won-t-be-paying-out-much-for-business-interruption-8gncvc565>