

# Response of the Early Years Inspectorate to the COVID-19 Pandemic between March 2020 and December 2021

## Executive Summary

This report was authored by Dr Sinéad Hanafin of Research Matters Ltd on behalf of Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate and provides an in-depth analysis of the Inspectorate's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Covering a period marked by both the pandemic and a significant cyber-attack on Tusla's IT infrastructure, the report highlights the Inspectorate's resilience and adaptability in supporting early years services, modifying inspection methodologies, and coordinating with public health authorities.

### Key Findings and Data Points:

#### 1. Initial Pandemic Response and Remote Operations:

- The government's directive on 12 March 2020 led to immediate closure of early years services, requiring the Inspectorate to adapt swiftly. This involved securing resources like laptops and mobile phones for remote work, as over 90% of Inspectorate personnel were initially office-based. Notably, the time to complete this initial response extended to six weeks, given logistical challenges in resource procurement.

#### 2. Inspection Protocol Adaptations:

- From June 2020, the Inspectorate implemented a "hybrid" inspection approach, in which early years services submitted documentation in advance, preparing them for in-person inspections. This was a significant shift, as previously over 90% of inspections were unannounced.
- By 12 October 2020, the Inspectorate resumed unannounced inspections. Inspection frequency adjusted over time, with a hiatus for inspections related to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme between January and March 2021 due to rising COVID-19 infections.
- Data from surveys indicated that 26.5% to 28.6% of inspection and registration personnel experienced steady workloads, while from July 2020 onward, 42.4% to 68.6% reported increased workload due to the reintroduced inspections and adaptations in inspection methods.

#### 3. Fluctuating Workloads and Redeployment:

- Personnel with public health qualifications were temporarily redeployed to health services, contributing to COVID-19 response efforts in nursing homes and assessment

hubs. Upon return, these inspectors leveraged their infection control experience to enhance safety protocols during inspections.

- Survey data captured variations in workload across four phases from March 2020 to December 2021. By the second half of 2021, 58.1% of administrative personnel indicated a marked increase in workload.

#### **4. Stakeholder Communication and Engagement:**

- Extensive inter-agency collaboration became a cornerstone of the Inspectorate's COVID-19 response. Regular meetings with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY), Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), and other organisations ensured consistent communication across the sector.
- Survey findings revealed that approximately 93.3% of Inspectorate administrative staff increased their use of online communication tools such as MS Teams, highlighting the shift toward digital engagement.
- Internally, 71.5% of Inspectorate managers and inspectors reported increased interactions with service providers, which included frequent communications related to COVID-19 protocol updates.

#### **5. COVID-19 Helpline and Provider Support:**

- The Inspectorate established a COVID-19 helpline, receiving inquiries from providers, parents, and the public. An initial surge in calls underscored the high demand for real-time guidance on safety and infection control. Feedback from inspectors indicated the helpline facilitated stronger relationships with providers, with approximately 90.7% of respondents finding it “very helpful” or “helpful.”
- The Inspectorate also organised an interactive webinar titled “Preparing to Reopen Early Years Services – Infection Control” in June 2020, with additional Question and Answer documents developed in response to providers’ concerns. Survey findings indicated that 86% of personnel found the sample policy on infection control to be a critical support tool.

#### **6. Changes in Administrative Processes and Technology Use:**

- Increased reliance on IT was noted, with around 79% of respondents reporting improvements in their technological capabilities. In addition, 43.2% of management and administrative staff reported higher use of automated processes, while a 60% reduction in paperwork was observed.
- Access to shared drives and IT resources also improved, facilitating remote and hybrid work models that became essential during the pandemic and the Tusla cyber-attack.

#### **7. Impact of Cyber-Attack in May 2021:**

- A significant cyber-attack on Tusla's IT systems added an additional layer of challenge in 2021, disrupting access to critical data. Inspectorate personnel adapted by using alternative communication and record-keeping methods. The response highlighted the Inspectorate's resilience and commitment to maintaining essential services under adverse conditions.

## 8. **Balancing Regulatory Requirements with Public Health Guidance:**

- The Inspectorate encountered challenges in aligning statutory regulations with evolving public health guidelines. For instance, the Inspectorate supported a pod structure to reduce potential virus spread in early years services, although this arrangement had no legislative mandate. Additionally, a surge in mandatory incident notifications strained resources, as each incident required tracking and regulatory follow-up.

## 9. **Renewal of Service Registrations:**

- Acknowledging the administrative burden on providers during the pandemic, the Inspectorate deferred the deadline for registration renewal documentation from June 2020 to November 2021. Adjustments included reducing required documentation, resulting in a streamlined re-registration process with three primary documents.

## 10. **Responsiveness and Provider Feedback:**

- Survey data reflected high responsiveness from providers, with nearly 94% of inspectors noting that providers were “very responsive” or “responsive” during the initial reopening period. However, by May 2021, the proportion indicating “very responsive” dropped to 14.7%, possibly due to “COVID fatigue” and shifting public attitudes as vaccination became more widespread.

## 11. **Positive Outcomes and Lasting Changes:**

- The pandemic response led to enduring improvements in processes and relationships across the sector. Survey responses showed strong positive feedback on the Inspectorate’s role as a partner in ensuring safe service delivery, marking a shift in provider perception from regulatory oversight to collaborative support.
- The increased use of online and automated processes streamlined administrative requirements, and ongoing collaboration with DCEDIY and HPSC have strengthened the Inspectorate’s capacity to adapt to future public health challenges.

### **Conclusion:**

The report underscores the adaptability and dedication of the Early Years Inspectorate in responding to the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through rapid operational adjustments, a shift to hybrid inspection methodologies, and robust support structures, the Inspectorate helped early years services resume operations safely. Key supports, including the COVID-19 helpline, webinars, and guidance documents, proved essential in sustaining confidence and compliance across the sector. By balancing regulatory standards with evolving public health requirements, the Inspectorate played a critical role in protecting children, staff, and inspectors, while the policy adaptations and strengthened partnerships developed through this period have left a lasting positive impact on Ireland’s early years sector.

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