

Key Findings Arising from Early Years Inspection Reports (March 2020 to December 2021)

Executive Summary

The report, authored by Dr Sinéad Hanafin on behalf of Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate, explores how Ireland's early years services responded to the pandemic's demands, implementing extensive protocols to safeguard children, staff, and families. The study analyses **6,630 COVID-19-related regulations** within **3,520 inspection reports** from **3,035 services**. Using the US Occupational Safety and Health Association's (OSHA) Hierarchy of Controls model, the report categorises COVID-19 responses across elimination, substitution, engineering, administrative, and personal protective measures.

Key Measures and Findings

1. Elimination Controls

The first level of control, elimination, aims to remove COVID-19 exposure entirely. Early years services were closed from March to June 2020, though some reopened earlier for critical workers' children. After reopening, services restricted entry, checking temperatures and ensuring compliance with the Government's exclusion policies. Staff and other adults entering were required to confirm their health status and understanding of COVID-19 protocols. Additionally, each service designated an isolation area for suspected cases, managed with waste control and personal protective equipment (PPE).

2. Substitution Controls

Substitution measures focused on replacing riskier indoor environments with safer outdoor and well-ventilated spaces. Services adhered to strict ventilation standards, supported by Tusla's guidance, which mandated airflow through open windows, fans, or air conditioners. Outdoor spaces, vital for reducing infection risks, were widely used, with some services encouraging children to play outside for extended periods.

3. Engineering Controls

To further control risk, early years services implemented engineering measures like the pod system, where children and staff were grouped into consistent cohorts. Pods minimised contact, with separate resources, break areas, and staggered schedules. This approach was reinforced by adjustments to the physical layout to ensure safe distances were maintained, particularly during drop-off and pick-up times. Services structured outdoor spaces to keep pods apart, while ensuring toys and equipment were restricted to individual groups, reducing potential transmission risks.

4. Administrative Controls

Administrative measures changed daily interactions and improved safety procedures. Services innovated with remote and digital communication for parents, avoiding in-person meetings. Staff adhered to updated policies, particularly regarding handwashing, a

cornerstone of pandemic response. Enhanced cleaning protocols were introduced, with focus areas including high-touch surfaces, toys, and soothers, which were cleaned or replaced frequently. Services documented cleaning schedules and provided ample supplies of disinfectants, liquid soap, and paper towels to meet increased hygiene standards.

5. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

As the final control, PPE provided a last line of defence. While children were not required to wear face masks, adults used face coverings, aprons, gloves, and other PPE as needed. Each service stocked PPE, particularly in isolation areas, and ensured staff training for proper usage and disposal.

Context and Response Strategy

The report highlights that early years services operated in a medium-risk environment, as staff and children had frequent close contact. While children experienced mild or asymptomatic COVID-19 cases, they could unknowingly spread the virus, necessitating thorough prevention measures. The Government's *Resilience and Recovery 2020–2021 Plan* emphasised combining multiple control measures, reflecting a complex pandemic response. Early years services integrated all five levels of the Hierarchy of Controls, adapting their operations to meet stringent safety standards.

Examples of Effective Implementation

Inspection reports provided examples of rigorous COVID-19 measures across service types. In one sessional service, staff used a COVID-19 policy updated in September 2021, which outlined hygiene, toy cleaning, and distancing measures. Parents adhered to exclusion policies, helping maintain safety by not bringing sick children. Handwashing was closely monitored, with children and staff using hand sanitiser stations, and an isolation area was prepared with PPE for potential COVID-19 cases.

Another example involved services establishing daily temperature checks, sometimes taken in the presence of parents. Some settings recorded temperatures multiple times per day, increasing vigilance. Staff completed return-to-work training, gaining familiarity with procedures and minimising exposure. Many services kept meticulous records, ensuring accountability and facilitating contact tracing if needed.

Analysis of Control Levels

Each level in the Hierarchy of Controls addressed unique aspects of pandemic management:

- **Elimination:** Service closures and restricted access helped manage initial exposure. Return-to-work protocols included training and health declarations.
- **Substitution:** Ventilation and outdoor spaces lowered airborne transmission risks. Tusla's guidance underscored the importance of adequate airflow and identified outdoor settings as safer options.
- **Engineering:** Pods limited inter-group transmission. Services also adjusted layouts and staggered schedules to promote distancing.
- **Administrative:** Services expanded digital communication with parents, implementing remote engagement while reinforcing handwashing and enhanced cleaning protocols.

- **PPE:** PPE was used primarily for staff and in high-risk scenarios like isolation rooms. Proper storage and usage training reinforced this protective measure.

Regional and National Impact

The report notes that early years services reopened relatively quickly compared to schools and universities, highlighting their critical societal role. This rapid reopening supported essential workers, especially single parents and healthcare professionals, who relied on childcare. A survey by the Central Statistics Office revealed that 25% of adults aged 25–33 faced childcare challenges due to facility closures. Reopening early years services enabled a return to work for many, mitigating broader social impacts.

Challenges and Successes

While the report acknowledges the successful compliance of most services, certain challenges persisted, particularly around ventilation and safeguarding. Tusla’s Technical Guidance Document on ventilation offered practical support, though not all facilities had ideal setups. Additionally, managing multiple pods with minimal contact required continuous adjustments and close monitoring.

In conclusion, this report documents adaptability and resilience of Ireland’s early years services in navigating COVID-19. Through comprehensive planning, strict adherence to control measures, and innovative solutions, these services maintained safe environments for children and staff.

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