

Leo Varadkar TD
An Taoiseach
Department of the Taoiseach,
Government Buildings,
Merrion Street Upper,
D02 R583

26 March 2020

Re: Children's Rights Alliance Response to Covid19

Dear Taoiseach,

I am writing to you on behalf of the members of the Children's Rights Alliance to raise our concerns for children and young people across the country in the midst of the Covid19 virus outbreak.

On behalf of our members we would like to thank you, your Government Ministers and the Health Service Executive for the swift action taken to flatten the curve of this global pandemic. This is the greatest challenge our country will have faced in recent times and we commend the work that has been done to protect the health and safety of the people of Ireland.

We know the Government continues to work on solutions to the ripple effect restrictions are having across a broad range of sectors in society. We recently met with members to understand the issues children, young people and families now face in these very uncertain times. Protecting the most vulnerable families during these unsettling times is the least we can do and they deserve the very best of our efforts. For this reason, we would like to bring to your attention issues of prime concern to the Children's Rights Alliance members during this time. We also propose some solutions which would help ensure that the families who are struggling the most do not get hit the hardest by this public health crisis.

What we are seeing;

Service providers are experiencing difficulty keeping in touch with vulnerable young people and young people themselves keeping in touch with each other.

Many of our members expressed great concern with keeping in touch with young people they work at this very difficult time. The ISPCC reported a huge spike in calls to their service while Cork Life Centre reported that 55% of their young people surveyed have expressed anxiety in relation to Covid19. Youth workers are going to extraordinary lengths to reach young people on platforms they are using rather than through Facebook and Twitter. Access to broadband is also not consistent and poses a real danger for youth workers working with vulnerable children who have no means to contact them.

We also need to be mindful at these times of children's online safety while they are at home and are more likely than ever to be spending time on devices. There needs to be a balance in terms of online and offline use. This time presents a great opportunity to talk to children about the dos and don'ts of social media and our members such as CyberSafeIreland have put together resources for parents on this and positive online activities for children and young people.

Child Protection Concerns

Child protection and welfare concerns remain during times like these, social workers are doing great work in ensuring that child protection and welfare services continue to operate during these challenging times. We are concerned about children who are on the child protection notification register who, while they still have their social worker engaging with them are now without all the other community supports that would have been central to ensuring their safety such as school, homework clubs and other community supports. In a time when these services are closed and children are spending more time at home we have no idea what is happening behind closed doors. We need the full community to play their part in keeping these vulnerable children safe and we need to look at how other services can play their role to make sure these children are seen.

Children living in Direct Provision, emergency accommodation, domestic violence situations, households are experiencing particular issues where there are addiction issues and other vulnerable children.

We are particularly concerned about children who are now confined to living in inappropriate or potentially dangerous situations. Access to domestic violence services and supports may be more difficult so Government could look to resourcing these organisations or enabling contact between vulnerable young people and supports they need by increasing connectivity and broadband access. Many families will find it impossible to adhere to social distancing when living in direct provision centres or emergency accommodation. Alternative accommodation should be sought as a matter of urgency.

Concern for vulnerable families unable to afford or access food.

One in ten Irish families experience food poverty. Now, during a global pandemic, the pressure is only increased for these families as many relied on breakfast clubs or school meals and are now struggling to access and afford the food they need. Government has made great progress building the foundation for a national school meals programme. We now need to call on providers who are in a position to prepare these meals and enable them to continue their service outside the school environment and into communities where children now need it the most. We know that Government is also about to make an announcement about the national school meals alternative scheme which is welcome. We also think it is vital at these times that alternative providers play their role in this including early years providers, youth work settings and alternative education settings.

Communication with children and young people

Members have raised concerns about the negative connotations surround young people in the current narrative around Covid19. Many young people are, like you or I, anxious about protecting their families and their friends. Labels of "vectors" or focusing on the minority not respecting social distancing is not a helpful way to engage the vast majority of young people who are adhering to restrictions and providing help to those around them. The Government has done an extraordinary

job communicating the danger of the virus and the necessary steps we need to take but more child-centred communication is required to really engage younger people with these important messages.

Education

The changes in education were immediately felt by young people and their families across the country. Members have highlighted the need for a coordinated approach to home learning. While many schools are doing great work adapting to the new reality the approach is not consistent. A standardised template as to how schools should approach home learning in the coming weeks could be developed. There is also an urgent need for clarity around State examinations. We know these exams cause high levels of stress and anxiety in the normal school year, and we are now very far from their normal routine. It is also a great cause of worry for students who planned to finish their education after the Junior Cert who now may not have any qualification.

Children with additional needs

For children with additional needs, their support systems have been greatly disrupted by the arrival of the Covid19 virus. Services like play therapy and speech language therapy can no longer happen and our members have raised concerns about how this would impact children and young people, particularly those in the autism community or those children for whom routine is paramount. The Government can make this easier on families by providing advice and resources to for the home environment and put plans in place to allow for young people with additional needs, anxiety or mental health issues access outside space in the event of further restrictions as has been done in Spain. An increase in the domiciliary carers allowance could also be considered to help these families.

Challenges for one parent families

There needs to be greater clarity and consideration given to families when it comes to the social distancing and physical distancing measures now in place. For people parenting alone, it may not be possible to go to a grocery shop or a Post Office without their child/children and we have heard of some cases where parents are being refused access. A possible solution to this could be the introduction of family shopping times like those that have been introduced for our older or vulnerable citizens. The access to additional social welfare payments is welcomed but as access to these depends on being able to access the internet Government needs to ensure that there are other ways to apply for payments.

Children in detention

The restrictions on family visits for public health reasons is having a wide impact but this is being acutely felt by children in detention centres. It is more critical than ever that detention is only a last resort because there is a risk of 'cluster amplification' in places which puts children, staff and their families at increased risk. There is a need for special measures to ensure adequate education provision is being provided by the Education Training Boards to students at Oberstown during wider school closures. Unlike primary or secondary schools in the community, students are still on site and will have less access to internet.

The steps taken so far have been necessary, but they have had implications which concern those of us working with children and young people. It is our job to ensure that their impact is lessened as much as possible. There are solutions that the Government can take to address these concerns and we will continue to engage with our members and all government departments to support your efforts against the spread of this virus.

Your Sincerely,

Tanya Ward
Chief Executive
Children's Rights Alliance