

Supporting Vulnerable Children, Young People and their Families

– DCYA and Tusla Services responding to COVID-19

1. Introduction

In this crisis it is critical that we mobilise around the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families. This paper outlines the service and support infrastructure that is in place through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. These include those services that have been designated as essential front-line services in the current COVID-19 crisis (those addressing child protection; children in care; domestic, sexual and gender based violence; and certain youth work services), other key supports (youth, community, and family services) and coordinating or governance structures (Children and Young People’s Services Committees; Education and Training Boards).

This paper illustrates the innovative responses to the COVID-19 pandemic provided by these services, supports and structures. All of these are working to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. It demonstrates how policy and provision is responding in an integrated manner to emerging needs through an overview of the system of supports. It centralises an agenda to improve our responses for vulnerable children, young people and their families.

Optimising this system of supports is essential so that all services are coordinated, mutually reinforcing, and responsive to emerging issues during the various phases of the COVID-19 crisis. DCYA, Tusla and constituent sectors are fully committed to this.

This paper is intended to provide a composite overview of the service infrastructure in place for children, young people and their families provided by DCYA, Tusla and their key sectors. It includes summary information on the range of service responses in place, with each area web-linked for more detail. This will be live and dynamic, updated to ensure that new innovations developed in response to emerging needs during this COVID-19 pandemic are identified and shared across the infrastructure working with and for children, young people and their families.

The development of this paper has been informed by relevant divisions in DCYA, service directorates in Tusla, and the work of the National Advisory Council for Children and Young People under Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020.

2. Overview of Welfare and Wellbeing Infrastructure

The diagram below illustrates the services, both directly provided and indirectly supported by the State. It is important to see these not merely as stand-alone services, but part of an integrated system of supports which make up the service infrastructure of children, young people and their families. This infrastructure involves services focusing on targeted responses, including others which are more universal and/or open-access.

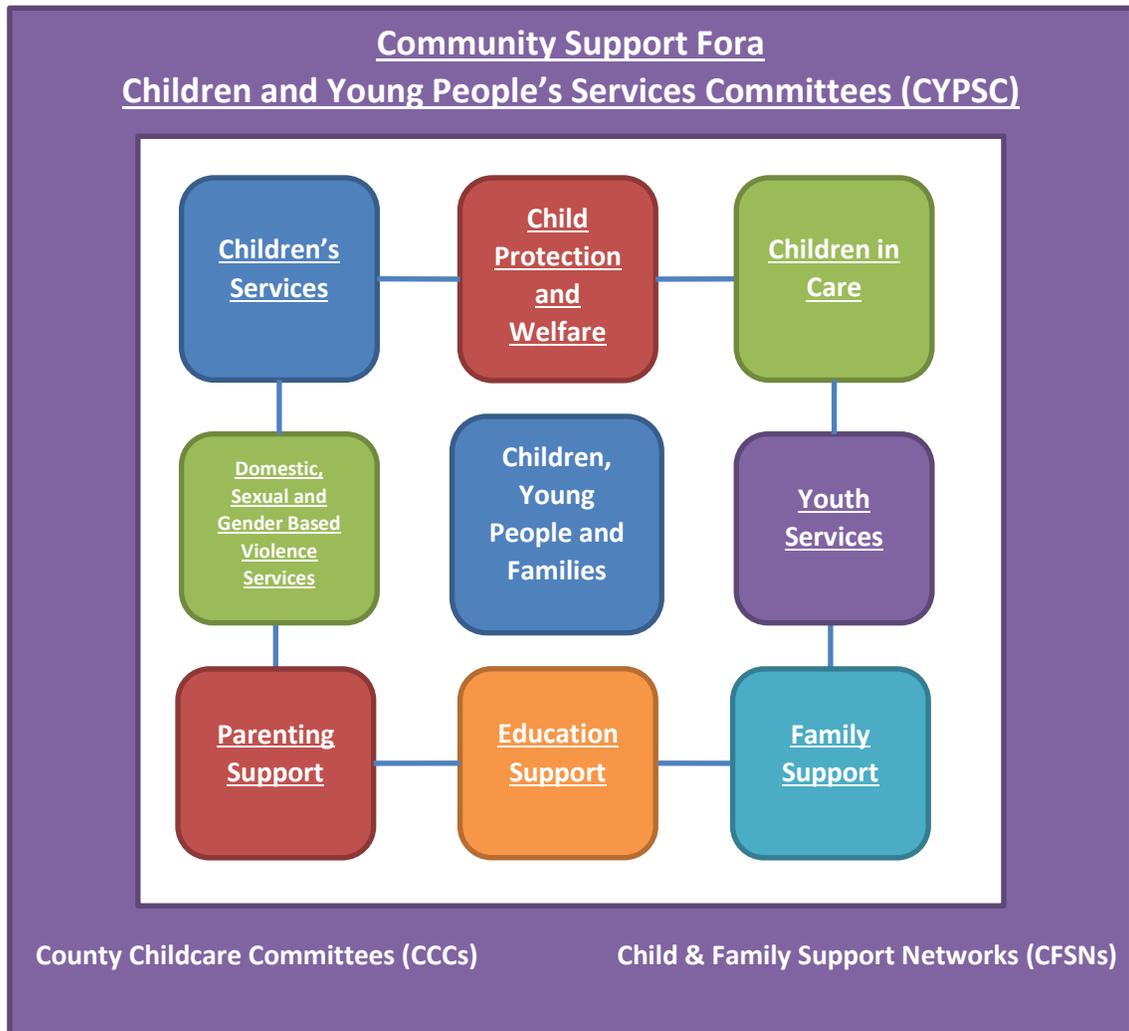


Figure 1 DCYA and Tusla Service Infrastructure for Children, Young People and their Families

3. Planned Communications Focus on Vulnerable Children

On foot of this paper, it is envisaged that a communications campaign will be explored with GIS focusing on addressing the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families. This campaign will operate on a thematic basis, highlighting supports and services across a range of children and young people's sectors and illustrating the coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **purpose** of the campaign will be to

- I. Centralise a shared message to citizens, in particular vulnerable children, young people and their families on the infrastructure of supports and their adaption to the crisis;
- II. Demonstrate the role of this robust, mutually reinforcing system in supporting resilient and cohesive communities;
- III. Stimulate service integration and innovation across the system in response to COVID-19 by sharing/building on good practice.

Target Audiences

This campaign will target vulnerable children, young people and their families; service providers and managers; and key decision-makers in associated sectors. Key messages for children, young people and families will center the robust service infrastructure, providing a thematic breakdown of the system of provision with key statistics and highlighting major adaptations to service the needs of vulnerable groups. For service providers, managers, and key decision-makers the campaign should demonstrate good practice in meeting the needs of children and young people and demonstrate innovations that statutory, community and voluntary services are making to improve their offering.

Key Voices

This campaign will marshal key figures in children and young people's sectors in statutory and non-statutory roles and make particular use of the expertise of the National Advisory Council under Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People. Taking the paper by sections, it is proposed to nominate an individual with expertise in this area in a short video demonstrating what the supports are, how they can be accessed, what additionality these are providing in this crisis, and how it links to the wider system. This would include policymakers and providers in DCYA, Tusla, and independent experts/sectoral representatives from the National Advisory Council. It would also involve the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, and could also include the Taoiseach and other key ministers.

4. Child Protection and Welfare

Tusla has a primary responsibility to promote the safety and well-being of children. All Child Protection and Welfare referrals or concerns about children are being screened and assessed in line with normal practice and where a child is at immediate risk, they receive an immediate response. Anyone with a concern about a child's safety or welfare should contact their local duty social work office, details are available on the [Tusla website](#) or use the [Tusla online portal](#).

Actions

The following measures and innovations are being taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Guidance issuing to all staff engaged in child protection and welfare to ensure service continuity that is safe, supportive and responsive.
- Information and guidance disseminated to all A&E hospital departments, Gardaí and on-call doctors that the Tusla National Out-of-Hours team continues to operate during this period.
- Ensuring a proactive media presence highlighting the importance of child protection, welfare and wellbeing during this period where support structures (schools etc.) are not in place.
- Information and direction to all government departments and agencies of their responsibility to keep children safe and to comply with Children First obligations for any new services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Information and direction to all government departments and agencies to encourage take up of relevant training such as the Children First eLearning Programme available on [the Tusla website](#).
- Ensuring ongoing engagement from social workers through access and digital means.
- Supporting CYPSCs in the dissemination and reiteration of the Tusla procedures and pathways regarding Child Protection and Welfare.
- DCYA, Tusla and the Department of Education and Skills have reached out to schools and teachers who are continuing online classes to encourage these teachers to report their concerns to Tusla and let teachers know that social work offices remain open to respond to children at risk.
- Securing 'essential services and worker' designation for some Tusla staff (Children in Care, Child Protection, TESS and DSGBV).
- Enhanced communication and collaboration between DCYA and Tusla.

5. Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

The purpose of Sexual Violence and Domestic Violence Services is to assist individuals, children, and families who experience domestic violence and abuse. Tusla identified domestic violence as a critical service area the agency and its partners will focus on during this public health emergency. [Further information about Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Services, including a list of national services, is available on the Tusla website.](#)

Actions

The following measures and innovations are being taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Active and direct engagement with DSGBV organisations in planning and implementation of supports, mitigations and identification of emerging needs.
- Ensuring that staffing resources are adequate and enable services to manage both demand and contingency due to impact of COVID-19 on staffing through additional funding for staff replacement.
- Working with providers to identify additional accommodation capacity to respond to individual cases/needs.
- Providing additional financial support, PPE equipment and direct ICT resources to enable safety and continuity of service provision.
- Leading at local and national levels in seeking to identify transition pathways for all residential social care facilities.
- Supporting a proactive information and media response from Tusla highlighting stepped up service provision in the Child Protection & Welfare, Care, education and DSGBV.
- DCYA is inputting into a cross-departmental action plan and campaign on DSGBV issues during the COVID-19 pandemic and support to Tusla in the ensuring enhanced refuge service provision and implementation of mitigations.

6. Children in Care

Tusla aims to provide safe, reliable and effective services for children in Care and to develop a range of placement options for children with additional needs. Tusla is committed to ensuring that children and young people are supported to live at home with their families, near their friends and schools and within their own communities. Children who require admission to care are accommodated through placement in foster care, placement with relatives, or residential care. [Further information about care services is available on the Tusla website.](#)

Actions

The following measures and innovations are being taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Increasing the number of foster carers through the implementation of emergency measures to allow swift recruitment and approval of foster carers.
- Liaising with stakeholders including HIQA and the Irish Foster Care Association regarding a potential amendment and temporary suspension of certain aspects of the regulations relating to the placement of children in foster care, to ensure that family based care remains as the main form of alternative care in Ireland.
- Supporting Tusla to draft a proposal outlining an alternative, remote assessment of potential foster carers to join an emergency panel of carers.
- Suspending the National Standards for Foster Care 2003 to allow for more than two unrelated children to be placed with approved foster carers, if necessary.
- Redeploying Youth Workers into the Children’s Residential Care Sector in order to supply a potential shortfall in care staff. This will allow Youth Workers to voluntarily redeploy into the children’s residential care sector for the period of emergency measures.
- Maintaining contact between children in care and their families in line with HSE guidance and GDPR.

7. Education Supports

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) emphasises the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention for children and young people. TESS has three strands, the Educational Welfare Service (EWS), the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP). TESS works with schools, families and other relevant services to achieve the best educational outcomes for children and young people. [Further information and updates about TESS is available from the Tusla website.](#)

Actions

The following measures and innovations are being taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 420 HSCL Coordinators are working with and supporting parents of children who attend DEIS schools. Since the closure of schools, HSCL Coordinators have been in regular contact with families, ensuring families have access to and can use online learning platforms, distributing hard copies of school work, providing games and books in addition to other resources.
- Information and guidance has been developed by DCYA and TESS to schools to ensure ongoing access and engagement with vulnerable students in their learning and transitions.

- Maintaining ongoing contact with vulnerable families and their children remotely to support parents and the wellbeing of the young people including families in direct provision accommodation, homeless accommodation/hubs and DSGBV settings.
- Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) are maintaining contact with all students and families in open cases, and TESS staff are continuing to make home visits in certain emergency cases in compliance with HSE guidelines.
- Maintaining the School Meals Programme. The Programme will be used to support schools to identify pupils unlikely to receive nutritious meals during the current crisis and provide for these children while schools are closed. [Further information about the School Meals Programme is available from Gov.ie.](#)
- Identifying best practice innovations from the TESS service strands to support knowledge exchange and replication.
- DCYA is supporting TESS in the identification and dissemination of coordinated best practice responses to COVID-19.

8. Family Support

The main focus of Family Support services is on early intervention aiming to promote and protect the health, well-being and rights of children, young people and their families, with attention to those who are vulnerable or at risk. Key structures for the delivery of family support include the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) Service, Tusla ABC Programme, Family Resource Centres (FRCs), and Community and Voluntary Sector Family Supports. [Further information about family support services is available on the Tusla website.](#)

Actions

Measures and innovations being taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic include:

- ABC sites ensuring that the needs of some of their targeted families from the Traveller community, families living in homeless hubs and Direct Provision are identified and met.
- ABC sites delivering Speech and Language services using tele-therapy and home learning packs.
- FRCs identifying local responses to locally expressed needs of children, families and communities.
- Community and Voluntary Family Support Services are coordinating support in respect of food poverty in conjunction with SCPs, and with Gardaí and other services to assist in the distribution of essential goods.

- Supporting families through signposting in collaboration with Tusla’s PPFS and Social Work Services. Services have been delivered remotely and young people are supported to maintain contact with one another online. Tusla have issued guidance and advice [online](#) for the delivery of frontline services.

9. Meitheal

[Meitheal](#) is the Tusla-led early intervention national practice model that identifies a child’s and their families’ needs and strengths, and brings together a team around the child to deliver preventative support. Practitioners in different agencies can use and lead on Meitheal so that they can communicate and work together more effectively to bring together a range of expertise, knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the child and family within their community. Meitheal is delivered as part of the [Prevention, Partnership and Family Support \(PPFS\) Service](#).

Actions

- Tusla has issued guidance to Senior Managers for PPFS in ensuring business continuity within the Meitheal process during this time.
- Guidance has also been given on meetings and home visits for practitioners maintaining the Meitheal process for vulnerable children and families who may need additional help and supports at this time.

10. Parenting Supports

Parenting Support is both a way of working and a set of activities that provides information, advice and assistance to parents and carers in relation to raising their children, in order for the children to reach their full potential. Continuing to support parents during COVID-19 is a key focus for DCYA, Tusla and its partner agencies.

Services across Ireland continue to provide information and printed advice for parents. [Parentline](#) is a free national confidential helpline which provides support, guidance and information to parents. The Genesis Programme, which operates through the Tusla ABC Programme, has produced a resource document aimed at [supporting parents and families through the weeks ahead](#).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tusla has engaged with a large number of the agency’s funded organisations, many of which provide parenting supports. Organisations including FRCs are adapting the way they provide their support services for parents and their families so that both universal and targeted support remains accessible to parents. One-to-one services are being provided over the phone and many group-based parenting supports are available online. This is in addition to the existing helpline services for parents, details of which can be found at gov.ie/parents.

Parents Centre

Parents are faced with a large volume of information from different government bodies and agencies. It is important that parents can easily navigate the high-quality information produced by trusted sources.

A new online resource for parents developed by DCYA – Parents Centre on gov.ie/parents – brings together information for parents in one easy to navigate portal. Parents Centre provides trusted high-quality information and online resources for parents and their families at this time on a range of topics including learning, parenting and information on supports for parents.

Actions

The following measures and innovations are being taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Launch of Parents Centre on gov.ie/parents which will be updated as new resources become available by DCYA.
- Developing online resources for parents of babies and young children including learning/play plans for younger children.
- Provision of phone and email support to parents by some local parenting support services including FRCs and community and voluntary organisations.
- Adaption of services to ensure both universal and targeted support is still accessible for parents by community organisations. Home-visiting services are using phone and video calls to maintain contact with and support parents. Online delivery of group-based parenting support services and parenting seminars has been introduced.

11. Youth Services

Through DCYA, a range of universal and targeted funding schemes and programmes support the provision of youth services to young people throughout the country including those from disadvantaged communities. The funding schemes support national and local youth work organisations, services and programmes throughout the country offering non-formal learning and development opportunities for young people to help them overcome adversity and reach their full potential. Within this funding, specific supports for LGBTI+ young people across the country are provided.

Actions

The following measures and innovations are being taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Adopting innovative or technology based solutions including use of digital meeting platforms to engage with vulnerable young people. Through this youth work support, online learning, life coaching and counselling is being provided.

- DCYA is supporting communication with young people in relation to COVID-19, and with Comhairle na nÓg across the country who are working on developing local messaging for young people.
- Launching a new Digital Youth Information Online Chat Service - an online information service directed at young people aged 16-25 who can ask questions to a trained youth information officer on live chat.
- Creating 'resilience packs' and 'positivity boxes' distributed to vulnerable young people.
- Foróige are running a series of digital campaigns rooted in youth development supporting young people to successfully navigate through the next weeks and months, with a specific focus on minding their mental, physical and social health and learning new life skills.
- Redeployment of appropriately skilled staff to support other bodies and agencies.
- Participating in a range of 'community response' initiatives both locally and nationally.

12. Children's Services

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tusla has engaged with a large number of the agency's funded organisations. Many of these organisations provide welfare and wellbeing services to children, young people and their families. Tusla's commissioning approach is the process to ensure that the total resources available to children and families are applied to improving outcomes in the most efficient, effective, equitable, proportionate and sustainable way. Further information about commissioning is available on [the Tusla website](#).

Actions

The following measures and innovations are being taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Tusla has developed a guidance to all its funded services to ensure community mobilisation of resources in response to COVID-19. Information on this can be found [online](#).
- DCYA has provided funding to support Childline until July 2020 under the [What Works](#) initiative in response to the sharp increase in calls to Childline and to allow the service to implement planned innovations. This will allow the service to deal with specific COVID-19 related inquiries and to test new service response innovations.
- The [What Works](#) information platform is continually being developed as a source and resource to support best practice responses for those working with children and young people in the area of prevention and early intervention.

13. Coordinating Structures

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC)

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) are a key structure identified by Government to plan and co-ordinate services for children and young people in every county in Ireland, with 27 CYPSC established nationwide. CYPSC improve outcomes for children and young people by enhancing interagency co-operation at a local and national level. Further information about CYPSC, including your county CYPSC, is available [online](#).

CYPSC offer supports to children and young people who may feel isolated and worried during the COVID-19 pandemic and work with homelessness and direct provision services to provide supports. CYPSC are continuing to respond to the pandemic, documenting their response online. To access this response, copy and paste the following link **directly into your web-browser**: <https://www.cypsc.ie/fileupload/Documents/Resources/Co-ordinators%20Network/COVID-19%202020/FINAL-CYPSC-PAPER-in-response-to-COVID-19.pdf>

Local CYPSC Coordinators continue to actively lead the coordination of work locally and have been advised to allocate up to 50% of their programme budget to emerging COVID-19 needs as appropriate up to June 2020, if required. Some CYPSC have been active with regard to food provision, while others are supporting provision of hard copy education materials. DCYA is supporting CYPSCs in the identification and dissemination of coordinated best practice responses to COVID-19 and CYPSC are engaging with their Local Authority in respect of the Community Response Fora below.

Each CYPSC is also informed by the work of local structures and networks such as [Child and Family Support Networks \(CFSNs\)](#) and [County Childcare Committees \(CCCs\)](#).

CFSNs consist of all services that play a role in the lives of children and families in a given area, with 115 networks nationwide. In this crisis, CFSNs are raising awareness of the services that are currently operating within communities. Care is being taken to ensure that families are getting the support they need, while also ensuring that families are not unduly burdened with different services offering similar supports. CFSNs are working to identify and support families which have not previously availed of services but who require additional support at this time. Information on this can be found [online](#).

CCCs offer a wide variety of services locally including advice on setting up a childcare business, childcare information sessions, and training courses for those considering a career in childcare, and advice and support on applying for government funding. CCCs also offer services to parents, such as providing information on local childcare facilities and information on parent networks.

Community Response Fora

In the current crisis, Local Authority Community Response Fora has been established in every local authority area to help ensure vulnerable community members affected by emergency arrangements are supported. These fora will lead the co-ordination of COVID-19 community supports and resilience in each area. For a full list of fora and with contact details for each, see the following [online resource](#).

As CYPSC operate on local authority boundaries and have senior local authority representation in the role of CYPSC vice-chair, there is a clear alignment and CYPSC have been encouraged to contact their Local Authority in respect of the recent Community Response Framework.

14. Summary of Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla COVID-19 Responses

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs' mission is to lead the effort to improve outcomes for children and young people in Ireland. DCYA and Tusla has taken a leading role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, working to ensure all services are fully capable and mobilised to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people. This includes leading on significant actions and innovations which will improve in the lives of service users across the system of provision, and working in collaboration with other departments and agencies to deliver service re-orientation responsive to emerging issues in the various phases of COVID-19.

Actions

DCYA and Tusla are leading the following measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigate its impact for the most vulnerable. The following represent an account of many of these actions achieved and being advanced as of the 27 April 2020.

- Securing 'essential services and worker' designation for some Tusla staff (Children in Care, Child Protection, TESS and DSGBV).
- Enhanced communication and collaboration between DCYA and Tusla.
- Guidance to all staff engaged in child protection and welfare to ensure service continuity that is safe, supportive and responsive.
- Supporting a proactive information and media response from Tusla highlighting stepped up ongoing and enhanced service provision.
- Information and direction to all government departments and agencies of their responsibility to keep children safe and to comply with Children First obligations for any new services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Information and direction to all government departments and agencies to encourage take up of relevant training such as the Children First eLearning Programme available on [the Tusla website](#).
- Supporting CYPSCs in the identification and dissemination of coordinated best practice responses to COVID-19.
- Supporting TESS in the identification and dissemination of coordinated best practice responses to COVID-19.
- Inputting into a cross-departmental action plan and campaign on DSGBV issues during the COVID-19 pandemic and support to Tusla in the ensuring enhanced refuge service provision and implementation of mitigations.
- Ensuring that staffing resources are adequate and enable services to manage both demand and contingency due to impact of COVID-19 on staffing through additional funding for staff replacement.
- Leading at national level in seeking to identify transition pathways for residential social care facilities and DSGBV accommodation.
- Development of emergency measures to increase the number of foster carers through swift recruitment and approval of foster carers.
- Suspending the National Standards for Foster Care 2003 to allow for more than two unrelated children to be placed with approved foster carers, if necessary.
- Development of project seeking the redeployment of Youth Workers into the Children's Residential Care Sector in order to supply a potential shortfall in care staff. This will allow Youth Workers to voluntarily redeploy into the children's residential care sector for the period of emergency measures.
- Information and guidance developed by DCYA and TESS and issued to schools nationwide to ensure ongoing access and engagement with vulnerable students in their learning and transitions.
- Ensuring that TESS supports maintain and develop contact with vulnerable families and their children remotely in direct provision accommodation, homeless accommodation/hubs and DSGBV settings.
- Supporting EWOs to maintain contact with all students and families in open cases, and TESS staff are continuing to make home visits in certain emergency cases in compliance with HSE guidelines.

- Working with the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and Tusla to maintaining the School Meals Programme. The Programme will be used to support schools to identify pupils unlikely to receive nutritious meals during the current crisis and provide for these children while schools are closed.
- Ongoing support for community and voluntary supports via PPFS Service (including Tusla ABC Programme) to maintain and outreach to children and families via virtual home visiting, Speech and Language services using tele-therapy, delivery of home learning packs and the distribution of essential goods.
- Continuing to support families through signposting in collaboration with Tusla's PPFS Service and Social Work Services. Services have been delivered remotely and young people are supported to maintain contact with one another online.
- Developing a comprehensive online information platform of resources and advice via Gov.ie [for parents](#) during COVID-19 and delivered as a key part of the Government Information Services (GIS) 'Wellbeing' thematic focus in media.
- DCYA has provided funding to support Childline until July 2020 under the [What Works](#) initiative in response to the sharp increase in calls to Childline and to allow the service to implement planned innovations. This will allow the service to deal with specific COVID-19 related inquiries and to test new service response innovations.
- The [What Works](#) information platform is continually being developed as a source and resource to support best practice responses for those working with children and young people in the area of prevention and early intervention.
- Supporting the youth sector to adopt innovative or technology based solutions including use of digital meeting platforms to engage with vulnerable young people. Through this, youth work support, online learning, life coaching and counselling is being provided.
- DCYA is supporting communication with young people in relation to COVID-19, and with Comhairle na nÓg across the country who are working on developing local messaging for young people.
- Launching a new Digital Youth Information Online Chat Service - an online information service directed at young people aged 16-25 who can ask questions to a trained youth information officer on live chat.
- Youth services creating 'resilience packs' and 'positivity boxes' distributed to vulnerable young people.

- Foróige are running a series of digital campaigns rooted in youth development supporting young people to successfully navigate through the next weeks and months, with a specific focus on minding their mental, physical and social health and learning new life skills.
- Redeployment of appropriately skilled youth work staff to support other bodies and agencies.
- Youth work organisation participating in a range of ‘community response’ initiatives both locally and nationally.

Appendix A: Indicative Services and Funding Provision

Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence

Services/staff	59 organisations
Existing funding provision	€ 25.3m

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS)

Services/staff	SCP: 327 staff EWO: 100 staff HSCL: 420 staff
Existing funding provision	SCP: €24.7m

Family Support

Services/staff	121 FRCs 12 Tusla ABC areas
Existing funding provision	Family Resource Centres €17.5m PPFS Service (including Tusla ABC) €9.5m

Youth Services

Services/staff	1,400 youth work staff
Existing funding provision	€61.79m

Children's Services

Please note that the below funding provision represents the total Tusla allocation to outside agencies in Tusla's Business Plan 2020. It counts provision which is also presented in other sections such as funding directed towards FRCs, DSGBV, SCP, Counselling and Family Supports.

Services/staff	Approximately 800 total funded organisations
Existing funding provision	Grants to outside agencies: €168m

Service Coordination

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC)

Services/staff	27 CYPSCs nationwide, with 27 Local Co-ordinators and 1 National Co-ordinator
Existing funding provision	€4.65m

County Childcare Committees (CCCs)

Services/staff	30 CCCs nationwide
Existing funding provision	€11.1m