

Judge

Friends.

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School

Direct Division

Life in Lockdown: Children's views and experiences of living in Direct Provision during the Covid-19 pandemic

A report by the Ombudsman for Children's Office 2020

included

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for children

EXCLUSION

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Helped

Rights

Acknowledgments:

The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) would like to thank Alketa Hotaj for her work and support on this report. We wish to offer our special thanks to the children who participated in this project. We appreciate that to speak up when you are in a vulnerable position takes courage and a willingness to trust. To protect the anonymity of all involved we have made the decision not to name the centres where the children live.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed most of our lives. For children, it has changed school, family life and social life. Many children have experienced isolation from their friends and family, have been worried about family members and are struggling with taking care of their own mental health.

These difficulties are often worse for children living in Direct Provision accommodation. Living in confined spaces, losing the physical, educational and social environment of school, poor internet access and the high number of cases reported in Direct Provision accommodation all contribute to children's increased levels of anxiety and sense of isolation.

Up to October 24, 2020 there were 313 cases of Covid-19 reported in Direct Provision accommodation.¹ This represents 4% of all Direct Provision residents in Ireland², and compares to 1.3% of the rest of the general population who have contracted the virus.³

While efforts to accommodate those residents who need to self-isolate and to increase and improve testing are positive, the living circumstances of those in Direct Provision accommodation will undoubtedly continue to contribute to Covid-19 cases among this population. Children are aware of this and live with increased anxiety for their own and their family's safety.

Methodology

The OCO wanted to give the children who participated in our [Direct Division – Children's views and experiences of living in Direct Provision](#) consultation an opportunity to tell us how they were coping during the Covid-19 restrictions. We wrote and sent text messages to parents and children who had participated in the Direct Division consultation, offering them the opportunity to participate in an online or telephone interview with OCO staff about their experiences of living in Direct Provision accommodation during the initial months of the pandemic. Children were also given the opportunity to write to us about their experiences. A small number of children decided to participate in these interviews. This is not a representative sample nor should it be interpreted as such. It is the lived experiences of six children. We have protected these children's right to anonymity with all names and locations removed, although it should be noted that the children were living in four different centres.

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- 1 HSE, Epidemiology of COVID-19 Outbreaks/Clusters in Ireland Weekly Report Highlights Prepared by HPSC on 28th October 2020 for the week ending 24th October 2020. [See https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/surveillance/covid-19outbreaksclustersinireland/COVID-19%20Weekly%20Outbreak%20Highlights_Week432020_web%20version_v1.0_28102020.pdf](https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/surveillance/covid-19outbreaksclustersinireland/COVID-19%20Weekly%20Outbreak%20Highlights_Week432020_web%20version_v1.0_28102020.pdf)
 - 2 Based on a total population of 6,736 people seeking international protection and living in Direct Provision or emergency accommodation provided for by the Department of Justice and Equality. [See https://www.kildare-street.com/wrans/?id=2020-10-08a.649](https://www.kildare-street.com/wrans/?id=2020-10-08a.649)
 - 3 Based on a total of 60,287 confirmed cases reported by the HSE to 28th October 2020 (see [https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/casesinireland/epidemiologyofcovid-19inireland/COVID-19_Daily_epidemiology_report_\(NPHET\)_20201030%20-%20website.pdf](https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/casesinireland/epidemiologyofcovid-19inireland/COVID-19_Daily_epidemiology_report_(NPHET)_20201030%20-%20website.pdf)) and a total population figure of 4.76 million (see <https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/newsevents/documents/census2016summaryresultspart1/Census2016SummaryPart1.pdf>)

Covid-19 and Communal Living

Fundamentally, the children we spoke to expressed unique challenges and vulnerabilities due to their living conditions. The inappropriate nature of communal living in Direct Provision was exposed during the lockdown. Unlike their Irish peers living in the community, these children lacked the ability to shield themselves and their families from the virus.

“If we have our houses far away it would be great because we live far away from other people. For example, like Irish people have some distance they can keep. We do not feel safe because there are loads of families here. Me and my family still do not feel safe. Even when I go outside sometimes, I do not feel safe.”

The children expressed a great deal of worry and fear about the initial days of the lockdown. One child explained:

“I was worried, stressed and tired. I was worried because I heard so much about the cases. I was scared that it would come to [Direct Provision centre]. [The Direct Provision centre] is kind of a small place, and once few people get infected it is so easy for everyone to get infected. That is why we were so scared about us getting infected. Because we have my grandma, we were stricter about it, because she is very weak.”

The difficulties of communal living were also highlighted by one child whose family had to self-isolate in a hotel in Dublin after the centre management became worried about their exposure to a confirmed case. The child explained her period of isolation in Dublin and how this made her feel in the following conversation.

Child: *“They moved us to Dublin because they thought we communicated with someone who had coronavirus. So, they had to move us to protect other people from getting the virus. My mum went and got tested for the coronavirus because they thought she had it. When the test came out negative, we came back to the centre.*

OCO: *Do you know where you went to?*

Child: *We went in Dublin to a kind of hospital. There we got tested.*

OCO: *Did you have to stay overnight in Dublin?*

Child: *We had to stay there. You know the way when someone has coronavirus, they say you should stay at home all the time. They put us on isolation because they thought we had the coronavirus. But my mum went and got tested and came out negative.*

OCO: *That must have been very scary?*

Child: *Yeah it was. We were there for two weeks.*

OCO: *How did that make you feel?*

Child: *I felt like I was being blamed for something I did not have. Because I did not have the coronavirus. When I came here [Direct Provision accommodation centre] most of the kids did not want to play with me that much. Everyone got tested then. They kind of stayed away from us. It was kind of like we had the coronavirus. After all those days I spend on the hotel without having the coronavirus I felt like*

I was been blamed for something that I did not have... I was worried about my mum.”

Food

Many residents rely on buses from the centre to the local town in order to supplement the food that they are given in the centre. In the initial days of the Covid-19 restrictions bus services stopped in some centres, while some centres also closed their on-site shops. One child told us:

“In the Direct Provision centre it was hard because they stopped buses and everything, which was for our safety. They were so strict especially when we went to the laundry and shop. It was so, so strict...Yeah, stayed in home for so long. I was the one who went to the shop to get the groceries before Covid-19 happened. But then only one person could per family and my mum or, dad were the ones who went. We just had to stay at home which made me feel so lazy.”

However, some self-catering centres with shops, made obtaining groceries more accessible.

“They started to make an online shop where you can order everything there and they can bring it to your house.”

These changes were very welcome and allowed families to maintain some normality.

Obtaining food was difficult in some centres, even where food is directly provided. One child explained that their canteen is in a separate building and that they were asked to queue outside, regardless of the weather, to collect their food on paper plates.

“We have to go outside to the canteen. And the food is horrible. Most of the times the food is horrible. They say that we should line outside. We have to do social distancing outside of the canteen. When we go inside, we have to go one by one. If one comes out one goes in. When we are in the canteen, they give us these paper plates and put our food on there. They put our foods there and we take our foods home. To eat our food at home. We do not eat in the canteen.”

School

The closing of schools presented challenges for many children. However, due to digital poverty, language barriers and a lack of face-to-face time with teachers, children living in Direct Provision accommodation were presented with unique, and sometimes insurmountable, challenges. Many children living in Direct Provision accommodation do not have access to laptops, with some of the children we spoke to attempting to join classes on their phones. Computer rooms in the accommodation centres, where they existed, were closed during the lockdown.

Child: *“[I had class online] but it was very hard to do it because of the WIFI. I could not log in most of the times... I told [the centre manager] that I could not log in*

with the WIFI. She said that the teacher will send, try to send books and colouring for me. And then she started to send me those to do it.

OCO: How did that made you feel, when you were not able to join in with your class mates?

Child: I feel like people think that I was not doing my work. Like I was not keeping up with my school work... I was doing my best."

One child further explained that some laptops had been donated to the children in the Direct Provision centre, and while hugely appreciated, these arrived in the summer months when the school term was over.

Direct Provision centres provide WiFi to their residents in varying ways. Some centres have centralised WiFi that covers the residents' rooms. In others, particularly self-catering accommodation, residents can install their own WiFi. Who bears the cost of WiFi also differs between centres. Unstable internet connections lead to frustration among the children when trying to engage in online classes.

"It was bad. It really was not good. We did quizzes in classes as well. I would hear the questions late so I would answer late. You know, in Kahoot I did not have time to press an answer so I would lose the quiz every single time. I never got a chance to win. It was so annoying because I am so good on the subject. Whenever the teacher would explain or telling us the homework, I could not hear them properly. Especially the homework, I had to go and ask other people. The internet sometimes really messed with us."

Many children living in Direct Provision accommodation do not speak English as their first language and benefit from direct interventions and help from their teachers, which became almost impossible for some of the children we spoke to. These challenges culminated in enormous stress for the children that spoke to us.

"It was hard... It was so stressful. Normally in school they would explain it more, you would be able to understand it better. You are more comfortable to ask questions. But on-line you feel you have to leave it and try to sort it out yourself. It was a lot harder. I felt so uncomfortable, so uncomfortable on on-line classes."

Due to language barriers it was also difficult for parents to offer children support with their school work.

"If my mum knew English that would be great because I would understand it way better. My mum could explain it, the homework. Yeah to be honest it was too much. I was not good at English or reading at that time. I used to send emails to teachers to explain them which they did. But it is way better to go school and understand stuff than online."

Some children's external English classes were paused during the lockdown which made homework very difficult. However, one child reported that an NGO offered English classes online and this offered much needed support.

“Like every day it was new homework. It was not easy for me. Then I started to do the Zoom classes as I said. I started to understand it way better.”

Most of the children that we spoke to expressed fear and worry about falling behind in school.

“It was so hard, so much harder. And it was stressful, very stressful. You cannot even sleep properly because of it.”

Isolation and Boredom

Many of the difficulties that emerged in our consultation, [Direct Division](#), were magnified during the strict lockdown in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Children living in Direct Provision accommodation had previously highlighted to us that they were socially isolated due to the remote nature of their centre. Reflecting this, one child who spoke to us explained:

“It feels like I am just stuck at home doing nothing. I am not enjoying living like I used to before Covid-19.”

A common theme in our [Direct Division](#) consultation was frequent boredom due to a lack of facilities and contact with the outside world. This was magnified during the lockdown. As one child explained:

“I [used to go] outside and listen to music while I am swinging on the swing. One day they took the swings and all the things that we play that are on the playground. They told us that we should not touch them or come near them or play with them. So, after that time I stopped going outside. And we were not allowed most of the time to go outside. They said that we should just stay at home.”

While all children in Ireland found that their play parks were closed and they were asked to stay at home, children living in Direct Provision accommodation often live in remote areas and confined spaces, sometimes just one room, with their entire family. This put additional strain on families, especially larger families with small children. One child explained what staying at home meant for her and her siblings.

“They are playing with friends outside in the corridor. They have been playing [in the corridor] for the past two weeks but she [baby sister] needs fresh air. The hardest thing has been staying at home. I mean it is good staying at home and do stuff at home. But like you need fresh air. You cannot stay at home for the months that has been the quarantine. You cannot just stay at home for months without going outside.”

The lack of creche facilities during the lockdown also put pressure on older children to support their parents with childcare.

“My mother said that lockdown really helped her. Because me and my sister stayed home and helped her. Because she would have not been able to manage

two babies at the time. Because my sibling who is two years old, she is small. I really helped her [mother]. If I was not there she would have been suffering. That's what she said. In the morning when the baby would start crying I would go and give it to her. And also when other siblings would wake up I would give them food to eat. I personally think I helped her."

Some accommodation centres ensured that the children were provided with activities that they could do at home, which the children greatly appreciated.

"[the hardest thing was] Not going out and hanging out with my friends. Not going to school and doing sports. It was a boring thing staying home all day. It was not good for us to just watch TV and stay on our phone. But I had other stuff to do like paintings and reading books. There is this lady [in the centre] she gave me two bags full of books. They were so old. They were so good and had so much information about old cars, old days and the UK. It was so great. I read some of the good ones but I have so many more to learn. It just makes me feel way better than just staying on my phone."

As the restrictions eased and children were able to socialise outside, centre managers kept a watch on the children's behaviour.

"It is not safe and we have to do social distancing all the time. And it is hard because we are not used to it and just forget. We start talking with each other and forget and start coming closer to each other. [The centre manager] said we were going to be tested twice if we did not do social distance. And it actually hurts when you are being tested... I think she was right. Because if we stop doing the social distancing and someone goes somewhere and comes back with the virus."

Some children appreciated the rules about going outside.

"...going outside together it was strict at first. I think it was good because they were worried about us and our safety."

Information about Covid-19

The information provided to residents varied between centres, adding to the sense of confusion and panic that the children we spoke to felt. Most children we spoke to said that they were provided with written information and found this useful.

Child: *“You know the first week of lockdown everyone was so confused and not too many people knew a lot about it. But they hand out information sheets. Yeah, they gave information about it.*

OCO: *Was it in different languages?*

Child: *Yeah, they gave translated sheets.”*

However, when information was not provided in different languages, children sometimes had to translate this for their parents and become the conduit for such information.

“Yeah, it would have been good even for other people living in here. But my parents do not know that much English. My mum can understand it but she cannot read it very well. My dad can talk but cannot read it. I would say it would have been very great if it was [translated] because they could have understood it even more. I had to translate it to them. My mum uses a translator on her phone for all the languages. She uses that when sometimes I do not understand something.”

Even where information was provided, children expressed some confusion about what was expected of them to keep themselves safe.

“If my friend has it and we touch each other would I get it... I would say there has not been enough information. There is not information about, for example, if I put on a mask and someone puts on a mask and comes to sit next to me, can I get the coronavirus? I am worried if you can get the coronavirus sitting next to each other. Do you get me?”

Information however, even when accessible and sufficient, did little to assuage fears that the children felt. As one child stated:

“The hardest thing was staying home and seeing the cases going up and up. Also seeing people dying was very hard. And then searched up in the Google about how many cases there are in Ireland and seeing thousands of cases.”

Easing of the first lockdown and looking forward

As restrictions eased during the summer, the children that we spoke to were looking ahead to the upcoming academic year and returning to school. For some children this brought feelings of excitement.

“Well it is great right now. Before when the coronavirus started everything got closed. Right now, the parks, sports are opened, activities and everything. It is great for now. The bus is on but only two people are allowed per house, I think.

School will start in a bit which I am so excited for. Cannot wait to go there... I am counting the days every day to go back there. Because when you go to the school you have more time to learn. You have more time to spend with your friends, the teachers. You get to do more stuff than you do at home."

Other children, however, felt extremely worried about returning to school after such a prolonged break. One child explained that living in a Direct Provision centre increased their worry about being isolated in school without having seen her classmates for so long. This is because she believed that her classmates who lived in the community would be able to see each other during the restrictions.

"I am worried, nervous. We do get summer holidays where do we not see each other for two months. But this is kind of different. We have been in a lockdown. They personally see each other because they live closer. I do not know how to put this because it may be a little bit weird. I cannot go to their houses and have a sleepover, and do what they can do it. That's what kind of happens during summer holidays."

It is to be expected that many children experienced anxiety about returning to school and being exposed to Covid-19. The anxiety of the children living in Direct Provision accommodation about this was apparent.

"I would say I am a little bit [worried] because it has been months since I have not gone to school. It will be easier for me to get the virus if I am not safe. Putting on a mask, gloves, hand sanitizer and everything. Yeah because all the time I need to be careful what I am going to touch. And also, what I go near and who I am talking to. Have to do social distance."

"I am worried about [getting] it. Because if I get it I have small siblings, they could not say what is wrong with their body. I am worried because you never know who has got it. But we have to go back to school. We have to do it. It is scary."

Children who are seeking asylum often have underlying trauma, as documented in our consultation [Direct Division](#), and for many their life has involved much instability and many moves. For these children, stability and routine can be very important. As such they crave stability and a normal life. In this context, some of the children we talked to voiced their fear that things would change again and a further lockdown and school closures would happen.

"I am very worried. They are saying that they are going to close everything again. I really do not want this to happen. I just want to go to school. My whole life has been moving schools. Since I came to Ireland, I just have been moving schools. I just have not had the opportunity to study in just a school."

Children living in Direct Provision accommodation often have to change school as their living circumstances change, such as moving from one centre to another, or when they are granted leave to remain. This instability in their school life can be a source of anxiety.

“It is a big of a worry. It is in all my head. I feel it like we are just going back for two weeks and then it is going to happen again and we will just go back to on-line classes. And in the new course?! Last year it was a little bit easier because we knew the course and we were just revising. And it was still hard. But now it is a new course, new school, new teachers, everything is new. It is going to be a lot harder. I cannot imagine how hard it will be.”

As we highlighted in our [Direct Division](#) consultation, children seeking international protection often live a life of uncertainty, a life which is on hold, while they await a decision on their applications. The ‘pause’ that we all felt during the Covid-19 lockdown was acutely felt by the children we spoke to who remain desperate for their new lives in Ireland to begin.

“I do not want everything to close again. I cannot do it. I just want to go to school. I want to play sports, learn and become someone. I want to make my parents proud, like they are making me proud. They brought me here for a better life. I cannot imagine to do the same thing from the start again.”

Conclusion

The issues outlined in our [Direct Division](#) consultation remained and were often intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions: social exclusion, physical isolation from their communities, lack of facilities and lack of space and privacy. The boredom, loneliness and frustration felt by most people during the lockdown was magnified for children living in Direct Provision accommodation by the fact that they had to stay indoors, often in one small room, with their whole families for months. In the [Direct Division](#) consultation the children pointed to privacy, play and rest, food, access to information and education as some of the rights that were most impacted by living in Direct Provision accommodation. The inability of children to realise these rights was exacerbated during the Covid-19 lockdown. The right to education was most affected by the lockdown, with all of the children we spoke to expressing difficulty with keeping up with school due to a lack of support services, digital poverty and language barriers.

The majority of the children that we spoke to in the [Direct Division](#) consultation felt most included with their peer groups in their centres. There was a sense of camaraderie within many of the centres, the children supported each other and formed close bonds. These bonds were challenged as outbreaks in centres occurred. With families being removed from centres to self-isolate elsewhere, fear grew among residents and this led to children reporting stigmatisation.

Without exception the children we spoke to about living in Direct Provision accommodation during the first Covid-19 lockdown expressed worry for their safety and fear for the future. The lockdown amplified the isolation, exclusion and marginalisation of these children who were already living, in many cases, on the fringes of Irish society. However, the Covid-19 pandemic also brought many of the shortcomings of the Direct Provision system into sharp relief and there now appears to be the political will to firstly improve and subsequently dismantle this system.

Messages from Children

The children we spoke to were given the option to express their opinions and feelings about the Covid-19 restrictions in writing. Some children chose to write a letter entitled Dear Ireland. These messages refer to the frustration of living in Direct Provision accommodation, boredom during the restrictions and gratitude for the safety measures put in place. The following section presents their messages.

I have experienced a lot during the Covid-19 and I have never found my self in a ~~great~~ situation like this before until this past few months and days. I feel lonely and worried. I am especially worried about my school and my school work. I do online homework but sometimes I don't understand some of the things. If I was in school I would be so happy ~~at~~ and I know I have much to learn and I am just hoping to go back to school in the next few months and they are many things that I was hoping my teacher would help me learn but now that I'm ~~not~~ not in school I will just have to wait and be patient. Sometimes I find the food real horrible and I spend the whole day without eating that much. I keep quiet because I know that if I complain there will be nothing that I can do because we are not allowed to go out of the centre sometimes to ~~by~~ our own food and I hope things could change one day. I wish things could go back to normal and my Mom would cook for us.

This was all not the question sorry, but in direct provision we were taken care of nicely. We were provided hand sanitizer and masks and other safety things for the Corona Virus

Ireland
I want the people into know that, the same way the feel about not having any freedom not, to go visit their friends and family or travel since this pandemic. Is the same way I have felt living in Direct Provision for 5 years. Also the fear of not knowing about anything going to family next.

I don't really know what to say it has been very boring join this ~~the~~ time.

living in a direct provision centre ~~is~~ during this pandemic season has changed ~~every~~ ^{most} things. Eg. while going shopping there's a limit and having to meet up with friends has been totally different.

I thank the Government for placing the rule of social distancing (2m) which has really helped which the spread of the virus.

I would like to thank the Government for placing and helping us fight through this tough times.

Thanks.

Ombudsman for Children's Office
Millenium House
52-56 Great Strand Street
Dublin 1
D01 F5P8

T: 01 865 6800
F: 01 874 7333
E: oco@oco.ie
www.oco.ie
@OCO_Ireland