



An Roinn Airgeadais
Department of Finance

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Circular 28/2001: Civil Service Childcare Initiative - Scheme of Capital Grants

A Dhuine Uasail,

I - Introduction

1. I am directed by the Minister for Finance to say that as announced in Budget 2001, the Government has decided to provide for the establishment of childcare facilities for Civil Servants throughout Ireland. As an employer, the Government is committed to creating a working environment which allows staff to balance work and family responsibilities. Accordingly, the Government has allocated £10 million capital for the provision of 15 crèches for the Civil Service over the two year period 2001 - 2002. A sum of £5m has been included in the 2001 estimate for the Office of the Minister for Finance.

2. This Circular sets out the procedures to be followed in allocating grants to Departments under the initiative. In summary, Departments which intend to apply for capital grants are requested to carry out a preliminary survey of likely childcare needs of staff and, in the light of this survey, submit a proposal to the Civil Service Equality Unit, 15 Lower Hatch Street, Dublin 2, no later than Friday 15 June 2001.

3. Following receipt of the proposals, the Minister for Finance will select suitable projects for grant aid in 2001 and 2002 to ensure that the Government's target is met within the provision by the end of that period. Projects will be selected on the basis of, among other things, the cost of the project, and the numbers of children being catered for.

II - Management of crèches

4. This scheme of grants under the Government's Civil Service Childcare Initiative is intended to provide for the capital costs of the facilities. However, it is clear that significant issues relating to the management of crèches will also arise in establishing and operating the new crèches.

5. Agreement in principle has been reached with the staff side on management arrangements for the Civil Service crèches. It is proposed to establish a new agency which will promote and manage all Civil Service crèches. The agency will:

- [a] promote the provision of crèches in the Civil Service in accordance with Government policy,*
- [b] advise Departments generally on that provision, and,*
- [c] contract with suitable individuals or companies to run Civil Service crèches, on foot of tenders considered and decided by the board in accordance with normal public accounting procedures.*

6. The proposal at [c] that the new agency would contract for the provision of childcare in the crèches established under the present grant scheme is considered necessary to ensure that these crèches all operate in accordance with appropriate common management, financial and childcare standards. Where crèches are not meeting these standards, it will be open to the board of the agency to end the contract and seek to find an alternative provider.

7. It is proposed that the board of the new body, to be appointed by the Minister for Finance, will represent the Minister and Civil Service staff unions. Members with expertise on childcare will also be appointed.

8. The agency will employ or contract a manager or agent, who on the instruction of the board will:

- [a] promote the opening of Civil Service crèches,*
- [b] advise Departments generally on the provision of such crèches,*
- [c] help to identify suitable premises and child care providers,*
- [d] organise the submission of tenders for childcare provision to the board, and,*
- [e] regularly inspect crèches and report to the board.*

9. It must be stressed that these are proposed arrangements and are subject to further discussions with the staff side, and final approval by the Minister for Finance. It is envisaged that the new body will be established in sufficient time to allow the new agency to arrange contracts for childcare provision in crèches provided under the scheme of capital grants.

III - Scheme of capital grants

10. Departments wishing to avail of capital grants under the scheme are requested to:

- [a] carry out a survey of childcare needs among staff,*
- [b] consider the availability of suitable premises for crèche and childcare facilities,*
- [c] prepare initial estimates of both the capital and non-capital costs involved in the project, and,*
- [d] where possible, obtain certain other information in relation to local circumstances.*

In the light of this examination, Departments should submit an initial proposal to the Civil Service Equality Unit, Department of Finance, no later than 15 June 2001. It is accepted that the proposals will be preliminary in nature. While Departments are not expected to submit final proposals, a preference will be given to projects which are as advanced as possible.

11. Following receipt of the proposals, the Minister for Finance will select projects for grant aid in 2001 and 2002 on the basis of, among other things, the quality of the project, its cost, the number of children being catered for and, how the proposal accords with the Government's aim of providing a range of facilities throughout Ireland.

(A) Survey of childcare needs

12. The capital grants available under the scheme will be provided for the following childcare needs:

[a] crèches or nurseries for infants up to the age of 2;

[b] play schools, kindergartens, day centres, childminding facilities for children from 2 to 5 years of age;

[c] Montessori facilities for children up to 5 years of age,

[d] any suitable combination of [a] to [c].

It is intended that full-time childcare will be provided. However, part-time care may also be provided under any of these categories, if places are available. After-school care may also be provided in the crèches if sufficient space is available once provision has been made for full-time care of the type listed in the four categories. The survey of staff carried out by Departments should also ascertain the need for after-school care.

13. Pre-school facilities are governed by the Child Care [Pre-School Services] Regulations, 1996 and 1997. The regulations are administered by Health Boards. It is essential that, in planning the provision of facilities, Departments make themselves aware of the particular requirements set down by local Health Boards. From the outset, planning must be carried out on the basis that the facilities to be provided meet the standards laid down by the Health Board.

14. In particular, Health Board requirements include specific rules about the space which must be provided for children and about the provision of separate rooms and facilities for children of different ages. These requirements may restrict a provider's ability to offer some or all of the types of childcare listed above.

15. To be eligible to apply for a full or part-time place in a Civil Service crèche, a person must:

[a] be a civil servant serving in a Department or in a body under the aegis of a Government Department in an established or unestablished position; full-time and part-time staff are equally eligible; and

[b] be the parent or legal guardian of a child under 6 years of age on the date on which the place is expected to be taken up.

If after-school care is planned, eligibility for the service should be restricted to the same category of people at [a] and to those who are the parent or legal guardian of children of school going age.

16. In preparing initial proposals, Departments must assess the needs of their staff for childcare facilities. Clearly, before approaching their staff, Departments should so far as possible have an initial outline of the location and type of facilities they intend to offer and inform staff accordingly.

17. In planning the provision of crèches, Departments should be aware that the operation of the crèches will be carried out in accordance with national agreements. Under these national agreements, employers meet the capital and equipment costs of premises, with all other running costs being met from fees paid by the users of the crèche. With the subsidisation of capital costs, the fees charged to parents are likely to be below commercial levels. This policy will be applied by the new agency in deciding on contracts for the provision of childcare in the facilities grant aided under this initiative.

18. It is a matter for Departmental management to consider how best the survey of childcare needs can be carried out. Nonetheless, it is likely that questionnaires answered directly by individual members of staff will offer the best data. In assessing initial projects for grant assistance, Departments should be aware that, although other methods of assessment are not ruled out, a preference will be given to proposals which are based on data collected directly from staff in this way.

19. Management will need to consider the possibility of consulting Departmental Councils or Partnership Committees as part of the survey.

20. In preparing the preliminary proposals, Departments must evaluate the information received from staff. Departments should bear in mind that it is unlikely that the individual childcare needs of all staff will be met by the scheme, particularly in the initial stages. It is also essential that Departments frame the proposal in the light of an assessment of the longer-term demand for childcare. In view of the significant expenditure being undertaken by the Government under this scheme, projects which will cater for a significant level of demand for the foreseeable future will have a preference.

(B) Availability of suitable premises

21. Departments must also make a preliminary assessment of the availability of premises within the relevant areas and include this assessment in their initial submission. It is accepted that, in the short time available, Departments may not be in a position to provide more than a very brief assessment of what premises might be obtained. Nonetheless, every effort should be made to carry out such an assessment for inclusion in the preliminary proposal.

22. Departments should consider the possibility of obtaining professional advice from estate or property agents on the availability of premises and their cost. A report from an estate or property agent indicating what suitable premises might be obtained in an area may be sufficient to allow a proposal to go forward to the next stage, even if particular buildings have yet to be identified.

23. Where possible, staff should be given an indication of the location and nature of the facilities before replying to the survey questionnaire.

24. In carrying out the assessment of premises, Departments must make themselves generally aware of the relevant Health Board requirements in regard to buildings and premises and of the implications these requirements may have for the type of facility which can be provided.

25. It is intended that payments made to Departments under the scheme will be granted for the adaptation, refurbishment and equipping of existing premises, obtained by Departments either by rent or lease.

26. Proposals for building new premises to house childcare facilities are not necessarily ruled out. However, it is unlikely that such proposals will be preferred unless it is clear that [i] building new premises is the only means of providing childcare facilities for a significant number of staff, [ii] the demand for the facilities will be permanent, and [iii] the building work can be completed in a reasonable time. In addition, Departments should be aware that the Minister for Finance will wish to ensure that the allocation of funds for new buildings did not prevent other projects elsewhere from going ahead.

(C) Initial estimate of cost

27. As explained above, the capital grants will cover the cost of refurbishing and equipping the premises to provide suitable childcare facilities to Health Board standards. In the light of the information collected in the surveys of childcare needs and suitable premises, Departments should decide what type of childcare facilities they should provide for staff and prepare initial estimates of these costs. **It is accepted that, at this stage, only very preliminary estimates can be given. However, Departments must do all they can to provide complete and accurate estimates of the costs in submitting a preliminary proposal.**

28. **In accordance with various national agreements, employers provide the premises and a subvention towards the equipment for childcare facilities with other costs being met from fees paid by the users. Departments should be aware that this policy will be adopted by the new management agency in operating the new civil service crèches.**

29. Where costings can be provided by Departments, they should therefore include estimates of:

[a] the annual cost of renting, leasing or, where necessary, building suitable premises,

[b] the cost of refurbishing the premises to a suitable standard, and,

[c] the cost of equipping the premises to provide the childcare facilities which it is planned to provide.

In addition to considering the possibility of considering professional advice on premises, it is suggested that Departments might consider approaching local Health Boards or other local crèches for informal indications of the likely cost.

(D) Other information

30. **If possible, Departments should assess the availability of suitable childcare providers in a position to manage and operate the proposed facilities and include such information in their preliminary proposal.** No formal commitments should be made to any provider, pending the establishment of the new management agency [section II above].

31. It is essential that Departments should, where possible, co-operate with other Departments and offices to see whether joint childcare facilities can be set up. This is particularly important for smaller Departments and offices which may not have otherwise have sufficient numbers to justify the establishment of separate facilities. It is also likely to be of particular importance outside the larger urban areas. In particular, where Departments are decentralising functions, the building or refurbishment of general office premises presents a good opportunity to establish childcare facilities. Information on the possibility of joint facilities should be included in the proposal being made to the Department of Finance.

IV - Conclusion

32. **Departments wishing to apply for grants under this initiative should submit an initial proposal to the Civil Service Equality Unit, 15 Lower Hatch Street, Dublin 2, no later than 15 June 2001. All enquiries arising under this Circular should be directed to the Civil Service Equality Unit [01 - 639 6229 or Lo-Call 1890 66 10 10].**

33. Following receipt of the proposals, the Minister for Finance will select suitable projects for grant aid in 2001 and 2002. Projects will be selected on the basis of, among other things, the general quality of the project, its likely total cost, the number of children being catered for, the likelihood of finding suitable premises, where this can be assessed, and the geographical spread, having regard to the general policy aim of providing an appropriate range of facilities throughout Ireland.

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J. McGovern
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