

**A Report on the findings of a Call for Submissions on the New Funding Model
for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC)**

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Executive Summary

Background

- This report details the findings of a Call for Submissions on the New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) conducted by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).
- The development of a New Funding Model for ELC and SAC is one of the key actions of First 5, the whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families (2019-2028).

Respondent profiles

- There were 166 valid responses to the Call for Submissions on the New Funding Model.
- The most common type of respondent was private for-profit providers (42.2%), followed by practitioners (40.4%), community not-for-profit providers (19.9%), parents (16.3%), employee representatives (6%), employer representatives (5.4%), advocacy organisation representatives (5.4%), childminders (4.8%), others (4.8%), students (3.6%), Childcare Committee representatives (1.8%), academic/academic institution representatives (1.8%) and Government Department or agency representatives (0.6%).
- In terms of the type of service provided, 36.8% of respondents provided both Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 31.9% provided Early Learning and Care only, 4.2% provided School-Age Childcare only and 27.1% of respondents were not a service provider or did not respond to this question.

Level of agreement with guiding principles

- The Call for Submissions asked respondents what their level of agreement was with a number of guiding principles related to the New Funding Model.
- The guiding principle with the highest level of agreement was 'Professional and Valued Workforce' (96.9%), followed by 'Child-Centred' (95.1%), 'Strategic' (94.4%), 'Competent Sector' (93.1%), 'Development and Implementation' (90.7%) and 'Family-Orientated' (86.4%).

Application of guiding principles

- The majority of respondents agreed all guiding principles should be applied to both ELC and SAC. For example, 89.5% of respondents agreed a 'Professional and Valued Workforce' should

be applied in both ELC and SAC, followed by the guiding principles of 'Child-Centred' (88.2%), 'Competent Sector' (86.7%), 'Strategic' (85.6%), 'Family-Orientated' (84.9%) and 'Development and Implementation' (84.3%).

- The main reasons given for the application of guiding principles to both ELC and SAC were that both sectors are equally important in terms of providing quality education and care to children and both sectors often share the same staff.

Current approach to State funding of ELC and SAC

The key strengths of the current approach to State funding identified by respondents were:

- The ECCE scheme due to its universality, accessibility and high level of uptake.
- The NCS as it reduces the cost of childcare, is means-tested and supports low-income families.
- The AIM programme as it supports children with disabilities to access the ECCE scheme.
- The CCS and CCSP programmes as they enable vulnerable children to access ELC and SAC.

The key weaknesses of the current approach to State funding identified by respondents were:

- Lack of funding/high cost of providing ELC and SAC.
- Low pay and poor working conditions of staff.
- The high volume of administration.
- The ECCE scheme in terms of the short number of hours provided.
- The NCS as it is perceived to be difficult for parents to understand and access.
- The AIM programme due to its age restrictions, *i.e.*, restricted to ECCE scheme age.

The key challenges identified related to the current approach to State funding were:

- Challenges faced by children and families such as cost, access, times and quality-related issues.
- Challenges faced by providers and staff such as pay and working conditions, administration, inspections and regulations, and lack of funding and investment.

Priorities for additional investment

- Key themes identified related to improving affordability, quality and/or accessibility of ELC were increased funding/reduced cost; better pay and working conditions; a better qualified

workforce; ECCE-related changes; better training, CPD and career progression; and reduced administration and inspections.

- Key themes identified with regard to improving affordability, quality and/or accessibility of SAC were increased funding/reduced cost, better quality services, better pay and working conditions, better training and CPD, better-qualified staff, and transport.

Role of the State and providers

- Key themes identified related to the role the State should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality were funding/investment, improving staff pay and working conditions, respect and recognition, less paperwork and inspections, and training and CPD.
- Key themes identified related to the role providers should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality were qualifications, training and CPD, improving pay and working conditions, more funding for providers, supporting staff and families, compliance with regulations, and policies and management of funding.
- Key themes identified in relation to expectations for return for investment were quality-related outcomes, better pay and working conditions, more affordable childcare, better qualified and trained staff, better recognition of the sector, and higher staff retention and recruitment rates.

Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

State investment in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) has increased by 141% in the last five years. This funding has been used to remove barriers to access so that children can enrol and meaningfully participate in high quality, more affordable ELC and SAC. As a result of this funding, there has been a doubling in the number of children in receipt of State subsidies who are now enrolling in these services.

First 5, a whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families (2019-2028), was published in November 2018 and commits to major initiatives on family leave, children's health services, parenting supports, child-friendly communities and Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare services among a broad range of actions. The First 5 Implementation Plan, published in May 2019, describes the steps that will be taken in the initial implementation phase – from 2019 to 2021 – and a First 5 Implementation Office has been established to monitor and report on implementation.

Two key First 5 actions in relation to Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare are:

- **New Funding Model:** First 5 commits to doubling investment in Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare in order to make further progress towards average OECD levels of investment. A key vehicle to ensure that such significant additional investment delivers for children, families and the State will be a new funding model.
- **Workforce Development Plan:** First 5 commits to introduce a range of measures so that by 2028: all regulated childminders and School-Age Childcare staff will hold a minimum qualification; and there will be a graduate-led Early Learning and Care workforce, with at least 50% of staff working directly with children in centre-based settings and coordinators supporting the work of childminders holding an appropriate degree-level qualification (with an initial target of 30% reached by 2021). First 5 commits to developing a Workforce Development Plan to support the achievement of these targets and raise the profile of careers in Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, establish a career framework and leadership development opportunities, and work towards building a more gender-balanced and diverse workforce.

1.2 Methodology

The New Funding Model Call for Submissions survey primarily consisted of open-ended questions. A number of questions were closed and these were analysed quantitatively and described using descriptive statistics. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from the Call for Submissions open-ended responses. This involved reading through all the responses and identifying themes and sub-themes related to each question. A fair representation of the qualitative data collected was assured through strategies such as content analysis to measure the frequency of identification of themes. It should be noted that the quotes detailed in this report are taken directly from responses to the Call for Submissions and do not reflect the opinion of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

1.3 Respondent profiles

There was a total of 166 valid responses to the Call for Submissions on the New Funding Model. The background of respondents who completed the Call for Submissions are set out in Table 1 below. It should be noted that there was not an equal representation of respondents from all backgrounds; therefore, the opinions of respondents from particular backgrounds may be stronger than others.

The most common type of respondent was private for-profit providers (42.2%) followed by practitioners (40.4%). The next most common type of respondent was community not-for-profit providers (19.9%) followed by parents (16.3%), employee representatives (6%), employer representatives (5.4%), advocacy organisation representatives (5.4%), childminders (4.8%), other (4.8%), students (3.6%), Childcare Committee representatives (1.8%), academic/academic institution representatives (1.8%) and Government Department or agency representatives (0.6%). There were no responses in the category of nanny/au pair. Those who identified as 'other' included a former private for-profit provider, 'quality mentor' and a babysitter.

Table 1: Respondent background

Background of respondents	Number of responses	%
Private for-profit provider	71	42.8%
Practitioner	70	42.2%
Community not-for-profit provider	33	19.9%
Parent	27	16.3%
Employee Representative	10	6%
Employer Representative	9	5.4%
Advocacy Organisation Representative	9	5.4%
Childminder	8	4.8%
Other	8	4.8%
Student	6	3.6%
Academic/Academic Institution Representative	4	2.4%
Childcare Committee Representative	3	1.8%
Government Department or Agency Representative	2	1.2%
Nanny/Au Pair	0	0%

*Responses do not add up to 100% as respondents could choose more than one category of response

As can be seen from Table 2, some respondents identified as more than one respondent type. 16.3% identified as practitioners and private for-profit providers; 11.4% identified as parents and practitioners; 7.8% identified as parents, practitioners and private for-profit providers; 3% identified as practitioners and community not-for-profit providers; 2.4% identified as practitioners and childminders; and 2.4% identified as practitioners and students. 21.1% identified as a private for-profit providers only, 16.3% identified as practitioners only, 14.5% identified as community not-for-profit providers only, 3% identified as parents only and 1.2% identified as childminders only.

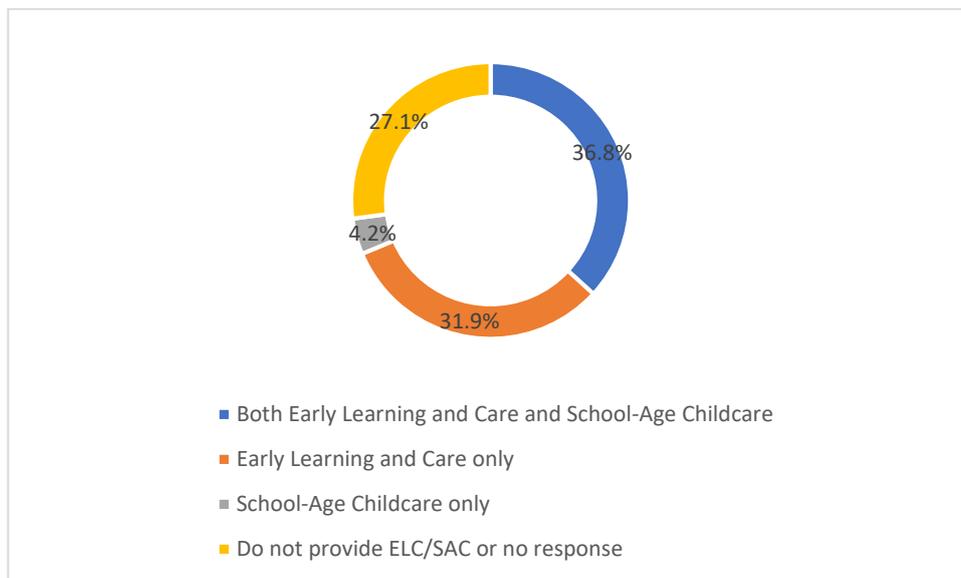
Table 2: Respondents who identified as more than one respondent type

Background of respondents	Number of responses	%
Practitioner and Private for-profit provider	27	16.3%
Parent and Practitioner	19	11.4%
Parent, Practitioner and Private for-profit provider	13	7.8%
Practitioner and Community not-for-profit provider	5	3%
Practitioner and Childminder	4	2.4%
Practitioner and Student	4	2.4%

Type of service provided

In terms of the type of service provided, 61 (36.8%) respondents provided both Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 53 (31.9%) provided Early Learning and Care only, 7 (4.2%) provided School-Age Childcare only and 45 (27.1%) respondents were not a service provider or did not respond to this question (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Type of service provided by respondents



Section 2: Guiding Principles to Drive Allocation of State Funding

2.1 Introduction

The Call for Submissions asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with a number of guiding principles developed by the Expert Group to guide them in their work. These guiding principles are set out below:

- **Child-Centred:** Funding should be allocated in the best interest of children.
- **Competent Sector:** Funding should incentivise continuous quality improvement, innovation, and inter-agency working. The funding model should be evolutionary: it should minimise short-term disruption but also allow for/support desired long-term changes. For example, while respecting the existing diversity of scale and service offering, it should allow for longer-term changes required to support a sustainable sector.
- **Development and Implementation:** The funding model should be developed with input from parents, children, providers, the workforce and other stakeholders. The funding model should be evidence-based, informed by existing data, research and literature, as well as international models of best practice. It should also incorporate mechanisms for future data collection, evaluation and review. The funding model should be realistic and capable of practical application. The funding model should be as transparent as possible, incorporating variables that are objective and measurable on a consistent basis across the system.
- **Family-Orientated:** Funding of ELC and SAC should support parents participating in employment, education or training and should be, in so far as possible, cognisant of the reasonable needs and choices of parents.
- **Professional and Valued Workforce:** Funding should recognise that the quality of ELC and SAC is centrally reliant on the quality of the workforce delivering those services. Accordingly, it should seek to promote the recruitment and retention of staff with the necessary qualifications, ongoing staff training and development, fair pay and working conditions, and a workforce that feels valued and is motivated to deliver the best possible service to children.
- **Strategic:** The funding model should be based on an acceptance that ELC/SAC is a public good, which embodies both an essential investment in child wellbeing and development, and an important support for economic growth and social equity. It should seek to support the delivery of this public value through the provision of high quality, affordable, accessible and sustainable ELC and SAC services. Within that framework, it should seek to address the real issues facing children, parents, providers, workers and the State.

2.2 Level of agreement with guiding principles

Table 3 below outlines respondents' levels of agreement with the guiding principles, from the highest to the lowest levels of agreement.

Table 3: Level of agreement with guiding principles

Guiding Principle	Agreed	Disagreed	Total
Professional and Valued Workforce	158 (96.9%)	5 (3.1%)	163 (100%)
Child-Centred	155 (95.1%)	8 (4.9%)	163 (100%)
Strategic	153 (94.4%)	9 (5.6%)	162 (100%)
Competent Sector	149 (93.1%)	11 (6.9%)	160 (100%)
Development and Implementation	146 (90.7%)	15 (9.3%)	161 (100%)
Family-Orientated	140 (86.4%)	22 (13.6%)	162 (100%)

Professional and Valued Workforce

Overall, 158 (96.9%) of respondents agreed with the guiding principle of a 'Professional and Valued Workforce' and five (3.1%) disagreed. Of those respondents who disagreed with this principle, four out of five were practitioners, three were community not-for-profit providers, three were private for-profit providers, two were parents, one was an employee representative, one was an employer representative and one was a childminder.

Child-Centred

In total, 155 (95.1%) respondents agreed with the guiding principle 'Child-Centred' and eight (4.9%) disagreed. Four out of eight respondents who disagreed with the principle 'Child-Centred' were practitioners, four were private for-profit providers, two were community not-for-profit providers, one was an employee representative and one was an employer representative.

Strategic

In terms of the 'Strategic' principle, 153 (94.4%) agreed and nine respondents (5.6%) disagreed. Six out of nine respondents who disagreed with this principle were practitioners, five were private for-profit providers, four were parents, two were community not-for-profit providers, two were childminders, one was an employer representative and one was a lecturer.

Competent Sector

A total of 149 (93.1%) respondents agreed with the guiding principle of a 'Competent Sector' and 11 (6.9%) respondents disagreed. Seven out of the 11 respondents who disagreed with this guiding principle were private for-profit providers, six were practitioners, three were parents, two were community not-for-profit providers, two were advocacy organisation representatives, one was a childminder, one was an employee representative and one was an employer representative.

Development and Implementation

Overall, 146 (90.7%) respondents agreed with the guiding principle of 'Development and Implementation' and 15 (9.3%) respondents disagreed. Nine out of 15 respondents who disagreed were practitioners, nine were private for-profit providers, four were community not-for-profit providers, three were parents, two were advocacy organisation representatives, two were employer representatives, one was an employee representative and one was a childminder.

Family-Orientated

Finally, 140 (86.4%) respondents agreed with the guiding principle of 'Family-Orientated' and 22 (13.6%) respondents disagreed. Of those respondents who disagreed, 13 were private for-profit providers, ten were practitioners, five were parents, four were community not-for-profit providers, two were advocacy organisation representative, two were childminders, two were employer representatives, one was an employee representative, one was a Childcare Committee representative and one was a student.

2.3 Reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the guiding principles

Respondents were asked to provide reasons for their answers as to why they agreed or disagreed with the guiding principles.

2.3.1 Professional and Valued Workforce

A 'Professional and Valued Workforce' was the guiding principle for which there was the highest level of agreement (96.9%). According to respondents, the guiding principle of a professional and valued workforce is important in terms of the provision of quality ELC and SAC, retention of staff, and supporting the workforce. However, in order to attain a professional and valued workforce, respondents agreed there should be better pay and working conditions in the sector, introduction of a pay scale, good quality training and ongoing professional development, and that workers' qualifications and experience should be recognised in their wages. More respect and recognition of the important educational role of workers is also necessary to ensure the workforce are valued and remain motivated. Some respondents felt the current funding model for the ECCE scheme was unfair as high capacity benefits owners and money is generally not passed down into workers' wages.

- *"We support the guiding principle of ensuring quality of service via central reliance on trained and developed staff who are fairly paid and have good working conditions so that they feel valued and motivated to deliver the best possible service."* [Community not-for-profit provider]

2.3.2 Child-Centred

Overall, 95.1% of respondents agreed with the guiding principle of 'Child-Centred'. The guiding principle of child-centred was considered to be one of the most important from which the other guiding principles should flow. Some respondents (4.2%) suggested children's rights should be to the forefront in relation to a child-centred approach to funding. Legislation mentioned included the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1992) and the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017).

- *"The UN Convention the Rights of the Child encourages States to develop a positive agenda for rights in early childhood. The Convention calls for an understanding that early childhood is not merely preparation for adulthood and requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right."* [Advocacy organisation representative]

Some respondents (4.2%) argued that, for child-centred guiding principles and policies to be properly implemented, there needs to be adequate funding to back up the guiding principle, for example, better wages to ensure a degree-led workforce. Reducing inspections and administration was also suggested so a more child-centred approach can be taken. According to respondents, a child-centred approach to funding should ensure that all children from all backgrounds, advantaged or disadvantaged, and with all levels of ability and needs are catered for adequately. Expansion of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), a programme that supports children with disabilities access the ECCE programme in mainstream pre-school settings, to include children under three years of age and those in full-time childcare settings was highlighted as necessary to ensure a child-centred approach. A group working with Traveller children felt it was essential that services be developed in partnership with parents so that parents can influence the design and delivery of the model of publicly funded care in line with best practice.

- *“Child-centred: there needs to be a more balanced approach to funding, where it is also focussed on the needs of those working in the sector. This is just politically correct language – if we fail those working in the sector, we will also fail the children.”* [Private for-profit provider]

2.3.2 Strategic

The majority (94.4%) of respondents agreed with the guiding principle of a ‘Strategic’ approach to funding. Having a strategic approach to funding was considered to be important in terms of targeting groups of children who are most in need, reducing future costs to the State (*e.g.*, in education and physical and mental health) and bringing the ELC and SAC sector to the forefront of Government policy.

- *“(Strategic) plans must address issues of child poverty, disadvantaged families and children with additional needs.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

Key issues highlighted related to a strategic approach included supporting parents to access employment/training, the ongoing professional development of staff and the well-being of children. Key aspects of children’s well-being to be addressed to ensure a strategic approach included supporting children with additional needs, child poverty and disadvantage. Expansion of the remit of the AIM programme for children with disabilities was identified again as an issue. One respondent

raised concerns that a strategic approach might be a disadvantage for smaller childcare services. For example, it might be difficult for sessional childminders to meet funding criteria if certain strategic areas are not met.

- *“Strategic implies that funding will only be given if certain criteria can be met e.g., provide places for babies and after schoolers...thus completely EXCLUDING, ECCE sessional, childminders.”* [Parent, practitioner and childminder]

2.3.3 Competent Sector

Overall, 93.1% of respondents agreed with the guiding principle of a ‘Competent Sector’. However, a number of concerns were raised by respondents who disagreed with this guiding principle. Both an advocacy organisation representative and a private for-profit provider raised concerns in relation to maintaining diversity of provision in the sector. They argued that a competent sector approach to funding could favour a model of large corporate childcare providers over smaller service providers, particularly in rural and smaller communities. Another not-for-profit organisation agreed that the principle of a competent sector should provide for infrastructure to support ELC and SAC to engage in continuous quality improvement, innovation and interagency working and avoid a two-tier system resulting in better funded services providing a better quality service and poorly funded services providing a poor quality service. Finally, a former academic argued that the concept of a competent sector is undermined by the low level of funding of the sector in Ireland compared to other OECD countries.

- *“A competent sector yes, but not in the favour of large corporate chains and to value the small indigenous holdings within rural and small communities.”* [Private for-profit provider]

2.3.4 Development and Implementation

In total, 90.7% of respondents agreed with the guiding principle of ‘Development and Implementation’. Respondents generally agreed that the guiding principle of development and implementation taking into account to the needs of children, staff, families, providers and other stakeholders was very important. The idea of co-construction of funding models between Government and all stakeholders, particularly providers, was deemed to be essential. Meaningful participation by

children, parents, providers, workforce and other stakeholders in the development of the model was suggested to ensure a funding model that is accessible to all parents and easily operated by providers. It was recommended that systems should also be easy for all stakeholders to navigate and user-friendly.

- *“The funding model needs to be co-constructed in partnership with the main stakeholders, especially the providers who will be delivering the schemes.”* [Advocacy organisation representative]

Private for-profit providers argued that current expectations and demands on providers are unacceptable in terms of providing a quality service with subsidies which, in their opinion, barely cover their costs and staff wages. They also argued that the current system is too prescriptive in terms of the times and days provided which might not suit all parents, *e.g.*, parents working full-time or shift workers. The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was also singled out as being “inequitable” and “not fit for purpose”, disadvantaging working parents and overloading providers with issues.

- *“Development and implementation must be co-constructed, we have a NCS system not fit for purpose and this cannot be continued and result in overload of issues for providers delivering government schemes.”* [Private for-profit provider]

With regard to a funding model being evidence-based and informed by research, literature and international best practice, a community not-for-profit provider advocated that research must be conducted across the sector, be continuous, evaluated regularly and include input from all stakeholders.

2.3.5 Family-Orientated

The lowest level of agreement was with the guiding principles of ‘Family-Orientated’ (86.4%). Respondents’ main reason for disagreeing with this guiding principle was that it is at odds with the ‘Child-Centred’ guiding principle. Respondents felt that good-quality ELC and SAC should be provided to all children irrespective of their parent’s employment, education and training status. Fourteen

(18.4%) respondents argued that excluding families who are not in employment, education and training might result in the exclusion of their children, which is contrary to a child-centred approach. Families where parents are not in employment, education and training are usually at higher risk of disadvantage, poverty, homelessness *etc.* It was argued that children who experience multiple disadvantages are generally most in need of high-quality childcare to support their care, attachment and food needs as well as cognitive and social emotional development and can benefit most from these services. Therefore, it was agreed that the guiding principles should firstly be child-centred, focusing on the needs of the child with recognition of the family status and needs to be secondary.

- *“I would not agree entirely with the narrow focus of the family-orientated one where the funding is based on the parents’ participation in work, education and training as this excludes some families and in particular impacts on the children and families who are not engaging in work education and training, therefore, this is not in line with the child-centred principle where all children have equal access.”* [Childcare Committee representative]

- *“Family-orientated also needs to incorporate the best interest of families, i.e., children may be in ELC and SAC instead of at home as this is the best place for that child(ren) at that time, for their attachments food, routine, care needs *etc.*”* [Childcare Committee representative]

Other arguments made against the family-orientated principle of the funding model included families lack of choice of care for their children, *e.g.*, part-time childcare, shorter days and more flexible times, and the right of children to be cared for by their family up until two years of age.

- *“The funding should be family-orientated and take into account that sometimes parents want to treat their children to days with them and this should not be curtailed by the stringent rules of the funding model.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

2.4 Application of the Guiding Principles

Respondents were asked to indicate if they think the guiding principles should apply to early learning and care, school age childcare, both, or neither. Table 4 below outlines how the guiding principles should be applied to Early Learning and Care, School-Age Childcare, both, or neither. The majority of respondents agreed all the guiding principles should apply to both Early Learning and Care and School-

Age Childcare. Overall, more respondents agreed the guiding principles should apply to Early Learning and Care over School-Age Childcare.

Table 4: Guiding principles’ application to Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare

Guiding Principles	Early Learning and Care	School-Age Childcare	Both	Neither	Total
Professional and Valued Workforce	15 (9.3%)	2 (1.2%)	144 (89.5%)	0 (0%)	161 (100%)
Child-Centred	13 (8.1%)	2 (1.2%)	142 (88.2%)	4 (2.5%)	161 (100%)
Competent Sector	13 (8.2%)	2 (1.3%)	137 (86.7%)	6 (3.8%)	158 (100%)
Strategic	15 (9.4%)	2 (1.3%)	137 (85.6%)	6 (3.7%)	160 (100%)
Family-Orientated	11 (6.9%)	2 (1.3%)	135 (84.9%)	11 (6.9%)	159 (100%)
Development and Implementation	16 (10%)	3 (1.9%)	134 (84.3%)	6 (3.8%)	159 (100%)

Professional and Valued Workforce

The most highly ranked guiding principle for both ELC and SAC was a ‘Professional and Valued Workforce’, with 144 (89.5%) respondents agreeing this guiding principle should apply to both ELC and SAC, 15 (9.3%) respondents agreeing it should apply to just ELC and two (1.2%) respondents agreed it should apply to just to SAC. Of the 15 (9.3%) respondents who agreed a professional and valued workforce guiding principle should apply just to ELC, eight were practitioners, six were private for-profit providers, three were community not-for profit providers, two were employer representatives, one was an employee representative and one was a parent. The two (1.2%) respondents who agreed it should apply to just SAC were private for-profit providers.

Child-Centred

In terms of the ‘Child-Centred’ guiding principle, 142 (88.2%) respondents agreed it should apply to both ELC and SAC, 13 (8.1%) respondents agreed it should apply to just ELC, two (1.2%) respondents agreed it should apply to just SAC and four (2.5%) respondents agreed it should apply to neither. Of the 13 (8.1%) respondents who agreed the child-centred guiding principle should apply to just ELC, six were private for-profit providers, six were practitioners, three were community not-for profit providers and one was an employer representative. Both (1.2%) respondents who agreed it should just apply to SAC were private not-for profit providers. Of the four (2.5%) respondents who agreed it

should apply to neither ELC nor SAC, three were private for-profit providers, one was a community not-for profit provider and one was a practitioner.

Competent Sector

Overall, 137 (86.7%) respondents agreed the guiding principle of a 'Competent Sector' should apply to both ELC and SAC, 13 (8.2%) respondents agreed it should apply to just ELC, two (1.3%) respondents agreed it should apply to just SAC and six (3.8%) respondents agreed it should apply to neither ELC nor SAC. Of the 13 (8.2%) respondents who agreed a 'Competent Sector' guiding principle should apply to just ELC, seven were practitioners, six were private for-profit providers, three were community not-for-profit providers, two were employer representatives, one was an employee representative, one was a childminder and one was a parent. The two (1.3%) respondents who agreed it should just apply to SAC were private for-profit providers. Five out of the six (3.8%) respondents who agreed it should apply to neither ELC or SAC were private not for-profit providers, one was a practitioner, one was an advocacy organisation representative and one was a parent.

Strategic

In terms of the 'Strategic' guiding principle, 137 (85.6%) respondents agreed it should apply to both ELC and SAC, 15 (9.4%) agreed it should be apply to ELC, two (1.3%) agreed it should apply to SAC and six (3.7%) agreed it should apply to neither. Of the 15 (9.4%) respondents who agreed the strategic guiding principle should apply to just ELC, nine were practitioners, seven were private for-profit providers, and three were community not-for profit providers. The two (1.3%) respondents who agreed it should be apply to SAC only were both private not-for profit providers. Of the six (3.7%) respondents who agreed it should apply to neither, three were private for-profit providers, three were parents, two were practitioners, one was a community not-for-profit provider and one was a childminder.

Family-Orientated

With regard to the 'Family-Orientated' guiding principle, 135 (84.9%) respondents agreed it should apply to both ELC and SAC, 11 (6.9%) respondents agreed it should apply to just ELC, two (1.3%) respondents agreed it should apply to just SAC and 11 (6.9%) respondents agreed it should apply to neither ELC nor SAC. Of the 11 (6.9%) respondents who agreed the family-orientated guiding principle

should apply to just ELC, six were practitioners, four were private for-profit providers and three were community not-for-profit providers. Of the two (1.3%) respondents who agree it should just apply to SAC, one was a private for-profit provider and one was a practitioner, childminder and parent.

Development and Implementation

Finally, 134 (84.3%) respondents agreed the guiding principle of 'Development and Implementation' should be applied to both ELC and SAC, 16 (10%) respondents agreed it should apply to just ELC, three (1.9%) respondents agreed it should apply to just SAC and six (3.8%) respondents agreed it should apply to neither ELC nor SAC. Ten out of the 16 (10%) respondents who agreed development and implementation guiding principle should apply to just ELC were practitioners, six were private for profit-providers, three were community not-for-profit providers, two were employer representatives, one was an employee representative, one was a childcare manager, one was a childminder and one was a parent.

2.5. Reasons the guiding principles should apply to Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare

The Call for Submissions asked respondents to provide reasons for their answers as to why they think the Guiding Principles should apply to Early Learning and Care, School-Age Childcare, both, or neither.

2.5.1 Guiding principles should apply to both Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare

The majority of respondents agreed the guiding principles should apply to both ELC and SAC. While it was recognised that ELC and SAC differ in relation to their structure and focus, respondents agreed they are both equally important sectors providing important education and care provision to children. Both ELC and SAC are also often provided by the same staff in services. As children of all ages require high-quality childcare provision, guiding principles such as being child-centred are important to all children in both ELC and SAC. According to respondents, ELC and SAC should both be part of a continuum of care for children, and therefore, should be seen as one sector which is linked seamlessly and viewed holistically. Both sectors were also judged to be important to the economy in terms of working parents.

- *“Both Early Learning and Care and school-age children need to be considered together. We need to move away from a disjointed sector and create and use a holistic approach going forward.”* [Private for-profit provider and academic/academic institution representative]

Respondents also felt that, in order for the guiding principles to be applied to both ELC and SAC, a number of changes should be made, including more funding to implement the guiding principles; the workforce to be professionalised, valued and respected more; pay to reflect worker’s qualifications; introduction of a pay scale; more ongoing professional development; and less paperwork, inspections and regulations. It was suggested there should be one umbrella body responsible for both ELC and SAC. Some respondents put forward the idea that ELC and SAC should be integrated into the national education system.

- *“My answer is simple; both age groups deserve to receive professional service provision.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

2.5.2 Guiding principles should apply to Early Learning and Care

As Table 4 shows, more respondents thought application of the guiding principles was more important in the area of ELC than SAC. For example, they argued that ELC requires the most qualified staff as they are working with the youngest children. The need for more funding for ELC compared with SAC was raised by some respondents. Some respondents (3.6%) stated ELC should be provided by the State.

- *“I believe we should have our most highly qualified staff working with our youngest children. Graduates with a minimum of 3 years’ experience should be leading our baby and toddler rooms.”* [Parent, practitioner and student]
- *“Early Years should be fully State-funded, allowing parents to go back to work. Thus paying for it through their taxes.”* [Practitioner]

Some respondents, including a quality mentor, felt that ELC providers have been given the responsibility to provide SAC without adequate supports, training or recognition. One respondent, who was an employee representative and academic, disagreed with SAC being included alongside ELC and emphasised the need the type and style of education and care for both sectors to vary according to their age and stage of development.

- *“Many ELC services provide SAC as no other body can do so. It has been left the ELC sector to provide this service with little to no recognition, support or training to support it.”* [Quality mentor]

2.5.3 Guiding principles should apply to School-Age Childcare

A smaller number of respondents thought application of the guiding principles was more important in the area of School-Age Childcare. This was due to difficulties related to SAC including the lack of specific professional qualifications for workers in SAC; the current workforce being primarily female and trained in Early Years care and education; the lack of focus on SAC as a specific sector; SAC as a solution for working parents rather than having a specific educational focus; lack of SAC provision in summer holidays; and SAC being secondary to ELC in terms of funding, development and provision.

Recommendations made by respondents to improve SAC included:

- Relevant qualification specifications for SAC practitioners, *e.g.*, specific QQI qualifications.
 - Qualifications and training for SAC to include social care and youth work skills.
 - More gender diversity in the SAC workforce, *e.g.*, more male workers.
 - Development of an outcomes based model of SAC with a focus on education.
 - Provision of SAC for children in summer months.
- *“We have recently added two new rooms for our afterschool children, and it is for that age group, because up until now, all services seem to think, its ok just to put them into the playschool room for the afternoon afterschool. Not in my book, we value and respect our SAC who deserve exactly the same as those in Early Years.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

Section 3: Current Approach to State Funding of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare

3.1 Introduction

This section details the strengths and weaknesses of the State's current approach to funding Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare and its policy objectives of quality, affordability, accessibility as well as key challenges faced by children and families and providers and staff.

3.2 Strengths of the current approach to funding

The Call for Submissions asked respondents what are the strengths of the current approach to funding ELC and SAC by the State or of individual funding programmes.

3.2.1 ECCE scheme

The most commonly identified scheme considered to work well was the ECCE scheme. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme provides early childhood care and education for children of pre-school age. The scheme is offered in ELC settings (pre-schools, Montessoris, crèches, playgroups) for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week, 38 weeks of the year. All children are entitled to two full academic years on the ECCE scheme.

The key strengths of the ECCE scheme identified by respondents were:

- The universality and accessibility of the scheme ensures access to ELC services for all children.
- The high level of uptake of the scheme by children.
- The scheme is easy for parents to understand and does not have much paperwork.
- The scheme is publicly funded, free and accessible to all parents irrespective of income.
- Development of the scheme from one to two years.
- The scheme offers children opportunities to learn, play and socialise with other children.
- The scheme ensures children from all backgrounds have an equal level of education and learning through the Aistear Curriculum Framework.
- The scheme results in positive outcomes for children and parents.
- The scheme prepares all children for primary school.
- The scheme's funding model is child-focused, paid to the provider on a regular basis, reflective of hours and days attended, has Higher Capitation levels and is easy for providers to manage.
- Higher Capitation for the scheme has resulted in more graduates working in ELC settings.

3.2.2 National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was the next most commonly identified scheme considered to work well. The NCS is a statutory entitlement to financial support for childcare with universal and income-related subsidies for children up to the age of 15. Key strengths of the NCS identified by respondents included:

- The scheme reduces the cost of childcare for parents.
- It is means-tested and supports families most in need of affordable childcare, *e.g.*, low-income working families.
- The scheme supports parents to access employment, education and training.
- The scheme supports the provision of childcare in disadvantaged communities.
- The scheme provides funding to a wide range of families.
- The model allows for organic, supply-driven delivery of services without the need for national infrastructure planning or capital investment.
- There is one single access point for the scheme.
- The funding model is flexible to accommodate future developments and changes.
- The scheme is flexible and transparent for parents.
- It has less administration and paperwork for providers than previous similar schemes.
- The NCS website is useful for parents to self-evaluate and has support systems.
- The scheme provides 'wrap-around' funding for users of the ECCE scheme.

3.2.3 Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

The next most commonly cited programme judged to work well was the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). AIM is a programme that supports children with disabilities to access the ECCE programme in mainstream pre-school settings. According to respondents, the key strengths of the AIM programme are:

- The programme supports children with disabilities to access the ECCE programme.
- The programme supports inclusion of all children in ECCE.
- Children are able to access childcare within their own communities.
- The programme supports services to access resources and trained staff to facilitate children with additional needs.
- The programme is quick and easy for providers to use.

3.2.4 Community Childcare Subvention programme/Community Childcare Subvention Plus programme (CCS/CCSP)

The Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme and the Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) programme supported disadvantaged parents and parents in training, education or low-paid employment can avail of childcare at reduced rates. Key strengths of these programmes outlined included:

- The programmes ensure children who are most vulnerable have access to childcare services, food, a supportive environment *etc.*
- The programmes supports parents who are unemployed or have low incomes to access childcare services.
- The programmes are accessible to children of all ages.
- The programmes are easy for providers to manage.

3.3 Weaknesses of current approach to funding

Respondents were also asked to identify the weaknesses of the current approach to funding ELC and SAC by the State or of individual funding programmes.

The key weakness of the current approach highlighted were:

- Lack of funding/high cost of providing childcare.
- Low pay of staff working in childcare.
- High volume of administration associated with funding programmes and paperwork duplication in relation to children accessing more than one scheme.
- Poor working conditions of staff, *e.g.*, no holiday pay, sick pay, pensions.
- Difficulties in accessing funding programmes, *e.g.*, parents accessing funding online.
- Too many schemes coming from different Departments.

3.3.1 ECCE scheme

The ECCE scheme was the most commonly identified scheme in terms of weakness related to specific funding programmes. Key weaknesses of the ECCE scheme highlighted by respondents included:

- The number of hours offered by the scheme are too short, *i.e.*, 3 hours per day/15 hours per week.
 - The scheme is not suited to working families due to the low number of hours per week.
 - There is inadequate capitation funding for the scheme to provide a quality service.
 - The ECCE scheme is funded for 38 weeks and does not provide for holiday pay.
 - Pay and working conditions for ECCE staff are very low which is a disincentive to attracting graduates.
 - The ratio of children to staff in ECCE is high and affects the quality of the service, *e.g.*, children accessing the scheme at a young age who need a lower ratio.
 - ECCE ratios make it difficult for providers to allocate full day-care spaces.
 - Profits from ECCE payments go directly to providers, not to staff wages.
 - Services with more children receive more ECCE funding despite having the same overheads as services with fewer children.
 - Services in rural areas have less children accessing the scheme, and therefore receive less funding.
 - The Higher Capitation in the ECCE scheme has resulted in the most qualified staff in a setting working with preschool children but not with babies and younger children.
 - Cut-off dates for the scheme mean some children miss out accessing it by days.
 - The scheme is highly regulated, *e.g.*, paperwork, inspections.
 - Non-contact hours are not funded and additional costs are carried by service providers.
 - Services receiving funding might not be sustainable into the future.
- *“The Higher Capitation model discriminates against under 3s. Higher-qualified staff are placed in ECCE rooms to avail of the higher funding, meaning children at a critical and sensitive stage of development experience lesser-qualified adults. The provision of early experiences for under 3s in services is poor.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

3.3.2 National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was the next most frequently mentioned scheme in relation to weaknesses. The key weaknesses related to the NCS outlined by respondents included:

- The NCS scheme is difficult for parents to understand and access, *e.g.*, online accessibility.

- The NCS website is difficult for parents to navigate, particularly those who have low literacy or technical ability.
- Many parents lack knowledge and awareness of the scheme.
- The scheme does not compensate low-income families who are not in employment, education and training.
- Many families are above the threshold for reckonable income.
- Parents transitioning from CCSP to NCS have lost subsidies, which means they have become more marginalised.
- The NCS is based on an hourly rate model which is restrictive and reduces the level of support that services can give to children and families, especially those on lower income who are struggling but not yet in crisis.
- The scheme should be broadened to include families who require supports to stay out of the care system, *e.g.*, Hardiker Model Level 2.
- NCS is not linked with the AIM model; therefore, children with additional needs who stay in full day-care or are out of ECCE age cannot access additional support.
- The NCS model is restrictive in how it operates and does not allow for a holistic approach to family life.
- NCS portal is difficult to navigate for providers.
- Administration/paperwork associated with the scheme is time consuming for providers, *e.g.*, weekly submission of information by providers, attendance tracking.
- The scheme does not offer any supports to parents so providers often have to help with registration *etc.*
- Scheme supports for providers are poor, *e.g.*, support line, email responsiveness.
- Lack of investment in technology related to the scheme, *e.g.*, NCS app does not allow for completion of applications on a phone.
- Providers have access to parents' financial information which is inappropriate.
- The inability to backdate the scheme payments causes a financial burden for parents and providers.
- Certain families are benefitting more than others are, *e.g.*, low- and middle-income families are judged not to benefit much from the scheme.
- The scheme encourages longer hours of attendance for children to receive more funding while some parents may prefer access to part-time childcare.

- *“The transition from the CCSP to the NCS has disenfranchised more marginalised families. We work with many families who have poor or no literacy, with limited access to technology and without the digital literacy required to engage with applying online.”* [Advocacy organisation representative]

3.3.3 AIM programme

The next most frequently highlighted funding programme was the AIM programme. Key weaknesses relating to the AIM programme mentioned included:

- The AIM programme being age-restricted, *e.g.*, should be expanded to include children from the age of 6 months and up to School-Age Childcare.
 - AIM programme is not linked with the National Childcare Scheme.
 - AIM funding levels are too low to cover staff wages *etc.*, *e.g.*, €13 per hour.
 - AIM funding does not equate to Higher Capitation allowance per child.
- *“AIM funding should be available to all children with additional needs, not just starting at an ECCE level.”* [Private for-profit provider]

3.4 Key challenges faced by children and families

Respondents were asked what are the key challenges faced by children and families with regard to the current approach to State funding, and if the challenges differ ELC and SAC The key themes related to challenges for children and families and the frequency in which these themes were identified are outlined in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Key themes related to challenges for children and families and frequency of themes

Theme	Frequency of theme
Cost of childcare	143
Access to childcare	85
Times	79
Quality-related issues	45
ECCE related issues	35
AIM related issues	17
Language and literacy issues	5

3.4.1 Range of perspectives

Cost of childcare was most commonly identified by private for-profit providers, followed by community not-for-profit providers, advocacy organisation representatives, parents and practitioners. Access to childcare was most commonly identified by parents and private for-profit providers. Practitioners were the respondent type most likely to identify times as a challenge. Quality-related issues were most commonly identified by practitioners and parents.

3.4.2 Cost of childcare

The high cost of childcare was the most commonly identified challenge for families. The cost of childcare in Ireland was considered to be one of the highest in Europe and the cost of childcare in Dublin was highlighted as being more expensive than the rest of Ireland. The cost of childcare for families with more than one child in ELC was also highlighted. The cost of ELC was judged to be more expensive than SAC. It was also stated that the high cost of childcare can be a prohibiting factor in terms of parents, and in particular mothers, working.

- *“Cost of quality childcare and school aged services. It is forcing parents to choose whether it is worth their while working.”* [Parent, practitioner and private for-profit provider]

3.4.3 Access to childcare

Access to childcare was the next most frequently identified challenge. According to respondents, there are not enough childcare places available to cater for all children who need them. A lack of childcare places for children under three years of age, and in particular babies, was highlighted. This was judged to be as a result of lack of capacity of providers due to the high cost of staffing childcare for babies. Respondents also agreed there is a lack of School-Age Childcare places currently available. School-Age Childcare can be staff intensive in terms of school drop-offs and collections and homework support. Some providers also do not have enough space to provide this type of childcare. Difficulties in accessing childcare was judged to have a knock on effect on parents in terms of childcare choice and employment.

- *“Not enough places within this county for babies and after school care – I had 27 babies on my list for this September, we only cater for 9.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

3.4.4 Times

The times childcare is available was the next most identified challenge for children and families. This included lack of flexibility in terms of the times and days that childcare is available. The three hours of childcare available through the ECCE scheme was judged to be too short. Lack of time and flexibility of childcare was considered to be a bigger challenge for parents who are working full-time compared with parents who are working part-time or in the home. Other issues included some services not operating out of school term times and less children accessing childcare during summer holidays.

- *“Very little flexibility is offered to parents. 39% of services operate 31 hours or more during term time. In addition, more than half of services operate for 38 weeks or less. Few settings offer flexible hours.”* [Advocacy organisation representative]

3.4.5 Quality-related issues

The next most commonly mentioned challenge was quality-related issues. This primarily related to children and families difficulties in accessing good-quality childcare provision. Respondents discussed unequal access to quality childcare in different geographical areas, high turnover of staff, low levels of staff qualifications, lack of available childcare provision and poor quality childcare facilities.

- *“Lack of high quality childcare, high turnover of staff, inconsistency in practices, low qualifications.”* [Parent]

The lack of appropriately qualified staff and good quality facilities for School-Age Childcare was also highlighted. Some respondents felt School-Age Childcare does meeting the needs of children, *e.g.*, children might not want to go to a crèche after school and needs specific more one-to one supports with homework *etc.*

- *“In relation to children who are school age many of those don't want to go to crèches after school is over.”* [Parent]

3.4.6 ECCE-related issues

ECCE related issues highlighted as challenges included short hours that do not suit working parents, lack of ECCE places, changing criteria for eligibility and the 38-week provision model. It was suggested that pre-school provision hours should be increased and transferred to primary schools.

- *“The constant changing of everything related to ECCE scheme (ages of eligibility).”* [Private for-profit provider]

3.4.7 AIM-related issues

The main challenge identified related to the AIM programme was the lack of availability of the programme for children with disabilities outside of the ECCE scheme. This included childcare for children with disabilities under three years of age and of school age. The short hours and term-time availability of AIM within ECCE was highlighted as a challenge for children and families. Lack of funding for AIM staff was also discussed as a challenge. It was suggested that AIM staff should be paid more and be higher qualified, *e.g.*, Level 7 or 8 Qualification.

- *“There is no AIM support for children with a disability outside of the ECCE eligibility – it is also needed for very young children and children in School-Age Childcare.”* [Advocacy organisation representative]

3.4.8 Language and literacy issues

Challenges for parents for whom English is their second language or who have literacy issues were highlighted. This included challenges for parents understanding and accessing funding schemes, *e.g.*, completing paperwork and online applications. Parents' lack of access to technology was also discussed.

- *“The current funding model creates difficulties for parents who must use MyGov and CHICK but who lack English or Irish language and/or literacy skills and who may not have email access.” [Community not-for-profit provider]*

3.5 Key challenges faced by providers and staff

The Call for Submissions asked respondents what the key challenges faced by providers and staff are and if challenges differ across Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare. These key themes and the frequency with which themes were identified are set out in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Key themes related to challenges for providers and staff and frequency of themes

Theme	Frequency of theme
Pay and working conditions	188
Administration, inspections and regulations	114
Lack of funding and investment	103
Recruitment and retention of staff	61
Lack of training, CPD and career progression	30
Lack of support	29
Lack of respect and recognition	28
Issues related to a graduate-led workforce	15
Sustainability issues	15

3.5.1 Range of perspectives

Pay and working conditions were most commonly identified by practitioners and private for-profit providers followed by community not-for-profit providers and parents. Administration, inspections and regulations as well as lack of funding and investment were most frequently identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners. Recruitment and retention of staff were most commonly identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners and parents. Lack of training, CPD and career progression were most commonly identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners and community not-for-profit providers.

3.5.2 Pay and working conditions

The most commonly identified challenge for providers and staff related to pay and working conditions. Overall, respondents agreed pay for childcare staff is too low, does not reflect their qualifications and they should have a pay scale. Poor working conditions included lack of holiday and sick pay and pensions. Low pay and poor working conditions was judged to have an impact on other areas such as retention of staff.

- *“Low rates of pay and poor conditions of employment for ECCE staff despite high levels of responsibility for children and families.”* [Parent and community not-for-profit provider]

Low pay for staff teaching ECCE was highlighted in particular. Some respondents suggested staff should have similar pay and working conditions to primary school teachers.

- *“Early Years teachers should get better payments. People have no idea how hard, stressful and responsible this work is. We are preparing children to go to school. Early Years teachers are working more hours than primary teachers and for less money. It must be changed.”*
[Practitioner]

3.5.3 Administration, inspections and regulations

The next most frequently identified challenge faced by providers and staff was administration, inspections and regulations. While both providers and staff deal with administration, inspections and regulations, providers were considered to be most impacted in this area. The high volume of paperwork associated with funding schemes as well as inspections increases workload and impacts on contact time with children and quality of childcare provision. It was suggested that paperwork for funding modes and inspections should be streamlined and more supports should be provided to help providers and staff.

- *“Too much administrative work is put on all staff and providers. As a provider, I spent every weekend catching up on administrative work.”* [Private for-profit provider]

3.5.4 Lack of funding and investment

The next most frequently identified challenge faced by providers was lack of funding and investment. Lack of funding and investment is primarily linked with low pay, poor-quality childcare provision, the 38-week model of funding and inadequate facilities. Respondents identified lack of funding and investment in both ELC and SAC.

- *“Not enough funding to pay staff a professional salary and run a high-quality service.”*
[Private for-profit provider]

3.5.5 Recruitment and retention of staff

Recruitment and retention of staff within the childcare sector as a whole was the next most commonly cited challenge. Providers find it difficult to recruit and retain staff due to low wages and poor working conditions, lack of opportunities for training and career progression, and lack of respect and recognition of workers. Challenges related to recruitment and retention of staff can result in staff shortages, which has an impact on the quality of childcare service provision.

- *“The ongoing challenges is the recruitment and retention of staff, widely accepted as being a result of low wages and poor working conditions such as lack of sick pay, present significant difficulties for providers in the delivery of a quality service.”* [Advocacy organisation representative]

3.5.6 Lack of training, CPD and career progression

Lack of training, continuous professional development and career progression was the next most commonly mentioned challenge for providers and staff. Challenges discussed included lack of opportunities, access, funding, and incentives to engage in training and CPD. Lack of management training for providers was identified as a particular gap. The provision of specific training for SAC was raised as an issue as ELC staff who often provide this service may not be suitably trained.

- *“Providing our own SAC training online as ELC staff are not necessarily suitably trained for SAC.”* [Private for-profit provider]

3.5.7 Lack of support

Overall, providers and staff identified lack of support as a key challenge. This included lack of financial support, administrative support, inspection support, training support, supports for children with special needs and support to deliver quality childcare provision.

- *“Lack of support and acknowledgement of the work done in preschool services by the State.”* [Practitioner]

3.5.8 Lack of respect and recognition

Lack of respect and recognition was the next most commonly discussed challenge faced by providers and staff. This included lack of respect and recognition for staff as childcare and education professionals by government and parents. Lack of recognition of qualifications in pay and working conditions was also highlighted.

- *“Lack of respect and recognition within the education sector.”* [Practitioner]

3.5.9 Issues related to a graduate-led workforce

Issues related to a graduate-led workforce was the next most cited challenge for providers and staff. Low pay and working conditions, lack of a pay scale and lack of recognition of qualifications in pay make it difficult to attract and retain staff in the sector. It was suggested that a graduate-led workforce with support from less-qualified staff would be the most sustainable model.

- *“There is too much emphasis on a graduate-only workforce. What we need is a graduate-led workforce and sometimes the two separate terms gets confused. In order to best leverage our graduates they need to be supported by less-qualified or non-qualified support staff in order to increase the supply of EY workers. This will attract greater numbers of staff to enter the*

sector making it a more stable workforce with alternative paths in to the sector." [Private for-profit provider and employer representative]

Section 4: Priorities for Additional Investment

4.1 Introduction

This section outlines priorities for additional investment to improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare.

4.2 Improving affordability, quality and/or accessibility of Early Learning and Care

Table 7 below sets out the key themes related to improving affordability, quality and/or accessibility of ELC and the frequency of identification of themes.

Table 7: Key themes related to improving affordability, quality and accessibility of ELC and frequency of themes

Theme	Frequency of theme
Increase funding/reduce cost	223
Better pay and working conditions	135
Better qualified workforce	51
Better training, CPD and career progression	31
ECCE related changes	30
Reduce administration and inspections	23

4.2.1 Range of perspectives

Increasing funding and reducing cost was most commonly identified as a theme by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners, community not-for-profit providers, parents and advocacy organisation representatives. Better pay and working conditions were most commonly identified by practitioners followed by private for-profit providers, parents, community not-for-profit providers and employer and employee representatives. Practitioners followed by parents and private for-profit providers were most likely to identify a better-qualified workforce as a theme. Community not-for-profit providers and advocacy organisation representatives most commonly identified better training, CPD and career progression as a theme. ECCE related changes were most frequently identified by practitioners followed by private for-profit providers and parents. Private for-profit providers were most likely to identify reduced administration and paperwork as a theme.

4.2.2 Increase funding/reduce cost

Increasing funding and reducing cost was the most commonly identified way to improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of ELC. A State-funded model of the whole ELC sector was suggested by some respondents.

- *“State funding for the complete childcare sector. Free childcare (no funding application necessary) for all children over 6 months.”* [Practitioner and community not-for-profit provider]

4.2.3 Better pay and working conditions

Better pay and working conditions for staff in the sector was the next most frequently cited way to improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of ELC. Introduction of a pay scale and pay based on qualifications was considered to be important in this regard. According to respondents, improving the pay and working conditions of workers in the sector would improve the quality of workers and provision, improve retention of workers, and give workers respect and recognition as childcare professionals. Many respondents suggested that ELC workers should have similar pay and working conditions to primary school teachers.

- *“Staff should have a pay scale and get qualifications to degree level like primary school teachers and be paid accordingly.”* [Parent, practitioner and private for-profit provider]

4.2.4 Better-qualified workforce

A better-qualified workforce was the next most frequently cited way to improve quality of ELC. This included attracting and retaining workers with better qualifications through better pay and working conditions as well as offering incentives for workers to gain qualifications.

- *“All staff need to be encouraged to upgrade their qualifications; this should come with higher pay and benefits.”* [Parent and practitioner]

4.2.5 Better training, CPD and career progression

The next most commonly cited way to improve quality of ELC was through better training, CPD and career progression for workers. More opportunities, funding and incentives for training and CPD and career progression was recommended by respondents, *e.g.*, standardised training and CPD, paid training, staff cover, training and CPD reflected in pay, more specialised training in special needs *etc.*

- *“Standardised training and recognition of training and upskilling, with CPD as an integral part of the position.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

4.2.6 ECCE-related changes

The next most commonly identified way to improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of early learning and care was related to making changes to the ECCE scheme. Suggested changes to the scheme included extending the scheme funding model from 38 to 52 weeks, extending the scheme from two to three years, increasing the scheme from three to four hours, increasing general funding, running the scheme through the Department of Education and Skills, increasing the pay of ECCE staff, the State paying staff directly, increasing the qualification of staff, lowering the ratio of children to staff and reducing administration for the scheme.

- *“Extend ECCE - it is a funding model that has proven itself to work. I would love to see the 38 weeks extended to 52 weeks, but if this was not feasible then an additional hour or 2 per day would work really well.”* [Practitioner and private for-profit provider]

4.2.7 Reduce administration and inspections

Finally, reducing administration and inspections was suggested to improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of ELC. Providers called for more supports for administration as well as a streamlining of inspections, *e.g.*, one governing body.

- *“Have one governing body for inspections and consistent guidelines.”* [Parent, practitioner, private for-profit provider and student]

4.3 Improving affordability, quality and/or accessibility of School-Age Childcare

Table 8 below outlines key themes discussed by respondents in relation to how affordability, quality and/or accessibility of SAC can be improved and the frequency of identification of themes.

Table 8: Key themes related to improving affordability, quality and accessibility of SAC and frequency of themes

Theme	Frequency of theme
Increase funding/reduce cost	100
Better quality services	30
Better pay and working conditions	20
Better training and CPD	20
Better qualified staff	20
Transport	5

4.2.1 Range of perspectives

Increasing funding/reducing cost was most commonly identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners, community not-for-profit providers, advocacy organisation representatives and parents. Better quality services was most commonly identified by advocacy organisation representatives followed by private for-profit providers, practitioners and parents. Better pay and working conditions were most frequently identified by practitioners followed by community not-for-profit providers and private for-profit providers. Better training and CPD was most commonly identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners and parents. Better-qualified staff was most commonly identified by practitioners followed by parents and private for-profit providers. Transports was most frequently identified as a theme by practitioners.

4.3.2 Increase funding/reduce cost

Increasing funding and reducing the cost was the most commonly identified suggestion made to improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of SAC. Respondents put forward the idea of a universal State-funded model of SAC. Some respondents felt funding for specific groups such as vulnerable and disadvantaged children was important.

- *“Funding for after school care for the most vulnerable children should be prioritised.”*
[Community not-for-profit provider]

4.3.3 Better-quality services

Improving the quality of SAC was the next most frequently cited way to improve SAC services. Suggestions made to include quality of SAC included development of a quality mark, development of a quality practice framework/quality guidelines, quality inspections, quality supports such as quality training and mentoring and better quality facilities.

- *“Quality provision that is recognised by a quality mark or centre of excellence award.”*
[Employer representative]

4.3.4 Better pay and working conditions

Better pay and working conditions was the next most frequently identified way in which to improve quality of SAC.

- *“Fair rate of pay for practitioners, the need for floating staff in every room to cover sick days, training days, non-contact time and cleaning.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

4.3.5 Better training and CPD

Better training and CPD for workers was the next most common way in which to improve quality of SAC. Ensuring workers are properly trained to work with school-aged children and their specific needs, which are different to younger children, was deemed to be very important.

- *“Training, as afterschool children require a completely different approach than pre-schoolers which most of us have trained as.”* [Private for-profit provider]

4.3.6 Better-qualified staff

Better-qualified staff was the next most discussed manner in improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of SAC could be improved. It was suggested that childcare degree programmes could be adjusted to include modules on SAC.

- *“School-aged children need qualified staff who can support them in all areas of their development. EY degree programmes can be adjusted to include school-aged modules with equal importance of EY modules.”* [Parent, practitioner and student]

4.3.7 Transport

Finally, provision of transport was identified as a way to improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of school-age childcare by a small number of respondents.

- *“Services are limited in taking SAC due to transport costs. Funding towards this would allow greater participation.”* [Practitioner]

Section 5: Role of the State and Providers

5.1 Introduction

This sections sets out what role the State and providers should play in ensuring Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare is affordable, accessible and of high quality. It also address how these roles should differ across Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare.

5.2 Role of the State

The key themes related to the role the State should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality and the frequency in which themes were identified are set out in Table 9 below.

Table 9: Key themes related to the role the State should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality and frequency of themes

Theme	Frequency of theme
Funding/investment	187
Improve staff pay and working conditions	87
Respect and recognition	59
Less paperwork and inspections	50
Training and CPD	35

5.2.1 Range of perspectives

Funding/investment was most commonly identified by practitioners followed by private for-profit providers, parents and advocacy organisation representatives. Improving staff pay and working conditions was also most commonly identified by practitioners and private for-profit providers. Respect and recognition was most frequently identified by practitioners followed by private for-profit providers and community not-for-profit providers. Less paperwork and inspections was most frequently identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners and community not-for-profit providers. Training and CPD was most commonly identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners and parents.

5.2.2 Funding/investment

Increased funding and investment was the most commonly identified role the State should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality. Many respondents suggested childcare should be universal and State-funded.

- *“Childcare should be State-funded as it is the foundations to early education. Research shows the better the investment in the Early Years services the higher the return.”* [Parent, practitioner and private for-profit provider]

5.2.3 Improve staff pay and working conditions

The next most frequently cited role the State should have in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality was to improve staff pay and working conditions. This included introduction of a pay scale, holiday pay, sick pay and pensions.

- *“The State should take responsibility for pay and conditions of the workforce as is in all other levels of care and education continuum.”* [Private for-profit provider]

5.2.4 Respect and recognition

Better respect and recognition of those working in ELC and SAC and to be valued as professional childcare providers and educators was the next most commonly discussed theme.

- *“I just would love for us to be respect and given the recognition that we deserve. I feel during lockdown that childcare services in Ireland were really missed. We do give so much to our society. I feel that this should be acknowledged.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

5.2.5 Less paperwork and inspections

Less paperwork and inspections was the next most frequently cited role the State should have in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality. Respondents suggested this would

serve to increase providers' and practitioners' contact time with children and improve the quality of childcare services. Respondents suggested inspections should be streamlined, conducted by one governing body and include quality standards checks. It was also suggested parents and providers should be supported to complete paperwork, *e.g.*, online.

- *"Streamline the inspection process so that the sector doesn't have to be inspected by 3 different bodies, this is both time consuming and stressful for both educators and children alike."* [Quality mentor]

5.2.6 Training and CPD

The next most commonly suggested role the State should play was in the area of training and CPD. This included ensuring there is adequate funding for training and CPD as well as supports such as paid training, days off, staff cover and better accessibility.

- *"The State should make provisions for providers to be able to provide staff with relevant training and training days to allow for these."* [Community not-for-profit provider]

5.2.7 Other suggestions

Other suggestions made by respondents included:

- Expansion of the ECCE scheme.
- One governing body responsible for the ELC and SAC sector.
- Treating ELC and SAC as teachers, *e.g.*, similar to primary school teaching model.
- Ensuring staff are better qualified, *e.g.*, degree-led workforce.
- Introduction of quality standards for ELC and SAC.

5.3 Role of providers

The key themes and frequency of themes related to the role providers should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality are detailed in Table 10 below.

Table 10: Key themes related to the role providers should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality and frequency of themes

Theme	Frequency of theme
Qualifications, training and CPD	87
Improve pay and working conditions	57
More funding for providers	55
Compliance with regulations and policies	40
Support staff and families	30
Management of funding	17

5.3.1 Range of perspectives

Qualifications, training and CPD were most commonly identified by practitioners followed by private for-profit providers, community not-for-profit providers and parents. Improved pay and working conditions was most frequently identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners. More funding for providers was most commonly identified by private for-profit providers and providers. Support for staff and families was most commonly identified by community not-for-profit providers followed by practitioners and private for-profit providers.

5.3.2 Qualifications, training and CPD

The most commonly identified role providers should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality was through staff qualifications, training and CPD. According to respondents, providers should ensure staff are appropriately qualified and support staff in training and CPD to ensure the high quality of childcare provision in both ELC and SAC.

- *“Encouraging staff to engage in CPD and to, where possible, improve their qualifications and encouraged to stay in the sector thus ensuring continuity of care for the children.”* [Parent, practitioner and childminder]

5.3.3 Improve pay and working conditions

The next most frequently cited role providers can play was to improve pay and working conditions for staff. It was suggested that improved pay and working conditions would increase the quality of staff and childcare provision and increase retention of staff in the sector.

- *“They (providers) should endeavour to provide the best level of pay and conditions possible to their staff.”* [Advocacy organisation representative]

5.3.4 More funding for providers

Provision of more funding by the State for providers was the next most highlighted theme. It was suggested that the current funding of ELC and SAC is not sufficient to provide affordable, accessible and high quality services. According to respondents, increased funding would allow providers to pay higher wages to staff, increase staff retention and improve the overall quality of ELC and SAC.

- *“If providers have increased funding they can offer higher wages to staff, retaining highly qualified staff with better work conditions, which will have an impact on quality.”* [Parent, practitioner and private for-profit provider]

5.3.5 Compliance with regulations and policies

Compliance with ELC and SAC regulations, rule, policies, standards etc. was the next most discussed role providers should play.

- *“Services should keep abreast of updates on First 5. First 5 CPD provided very popular and effective with childcare practitioners during lockdown.”* [Practitioner and private for-profit provider]

5.3.6 Support staff and families

Supporting staff and families was the next most commonly highlighted role providers should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality. This included supporting staff, children and families, particularly those who are disadvantaged.

- *“Providers need to examine ways of supporting marginalised families to apply for placements either within their own setting or through developing partnerships with organisations or services who can support this.”* [Advocacy organisation representative]

5.3.7 Management of funding

Proper management and allocation of State funding was the next most discussed role providers should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality.

- *“We believe that providers must manage funding so that each child is central and the service is affordable for all parents.”* [Community not-for-profit provider]

5.4 State Expectations for Return for Investment

The State currently provides approximately €640 million annually to ELC and SAC. First 5 commits to, at least, double investment in Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare between 2019 and 2028. The Call for Submissions asked respondents what they think the State should expect in return for this investment, highlighting differences across ELC and SAC, if any.

Table 11 below details the key themes related to expectations for return for investment and the frequency in which themes were identified.

Table 11: Key themes related to expectations for return for investment and frequency of themes

Theme	Frequency of theme
Quality-related outcomes	83
Better pay and working conditions	65
More affordable childcare	44
Better recognition of the sector	44
Better qualified and trained staff	39
Higher staff retention and recruitment rates	17

5.4.1 Range of perspectives

Quality-related outcomes were most commonly identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners, community not-for-profit providers, parents and advocacy organisation representatives. Better pay and working conditions were most commonly identified by private for-profit providers

followed by practitioners and community not-for-profit providers. More affordable childcare was most frequently identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners and parents. Better recognition of the sector was most commonly identified by practitioners followed by private for-profit providers and community not-for-profit providers. Better-qualified and trained staff was most frequently identified by private for-profit providers followed by practitioners and parents. Finally, higher staff retention and recruitment rates was most frequently identified by private for-profit providers.

5.4.2 Quality-related outcomes

The most frequently identified expectation of the State in return for investment in ELC and SAC between 2019 and 2028 was quality-related outcomes. This included high-quality childcare provision and education, high-quality and committed workforce, high-quality facilities and environment, and childcare that is child- and family-centred.

- *“High-quality childcare where children and families are at the centre of the organisation.”*
[Community not-for-profit provider]

5.4.3 Better pay and working conditions

Better pay and working conditions for ELC and SAC staff was the next most commonly identified expectation. This included introduction of a pay scale for workers.

- *“Decent pay and conditions for the workforce – the Mercer proposed pay scales should be implemented within 5 years.”* [Advocacy organisation representative]

5.4.4 More affordable childcare

The next most cited expectation was more affordable childcare for families, which could result in more parents returning to work and benefits for the economy. An expectation that the cost of provision of childcare would be reduced for providers too was highlighted.

- *“A public model would seek to significantly reduce costs for both providers and parents.”*
[Advocacy organisation representative]

5.4.5 Better recognition of the sector

Better recognition and valuing of staff in the ELC and SAC sector as professional childcare providers and educators was the next most highlighted expectation.

- *“A professional recognised service with happy staff which will have an extremely positive impact on the children in their care and in turn the future generations of our country.”* [Parent and practitioner]

5.4.6 Better qualified and trained staff

Better-qualified and trained staff was the next most frequently identified expectation. Recognition of qualifications and training in staff pay was also discussed.

- *“The State should expect a high-quality and committed workforce, a range of childcare practitioners that are trained, qualified, and have pay and conditions that will encourage them to remain in the sector and in the country.”* [Private for-profit provider]

5.4.7 Higher staff retention and recruitment rates

Finally, higher retention and recruitment rates for ELC and SAC staff was another expectation discussed by respondents.

- *“They should expect high-quality childcare services with staff that are retained which is of benefit for the children.”* [Parent, practitioner and private for-profit provider]

Finally, it should be noted that many respondents felt increased investment in ELC and SAC was now only bring Ireland up to an EU average level of funding for childcare.

- *“Doubling the investment in childcare would just about get Ireland up to EU average. It should expect then that instead of having a quality under-funded system, that it would have a quality properly funded system.”* [Private for-profit provider]

Section 6: Key Messages from the Workforce Development Plan Call for Submissions

6.1 Introduction

This section outlines the key messages related to the new funding model identified in the Call for Submissions on the Workforce Development Plan for ELC and SAC. The Call for Submissions on the Workforce Development Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare was conducted by the DCEDIY alongside the Call for Submission on the New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare. There were 603 responses to the Call for Submissions on the Workforce Development Plan.

6.2 Key messages

The following key messages related to the new funding model were identified in the Call for Submission on the Workforce Development Plan:

Vision for ELC and SAC workforce

- In terms of a vision for the ELC and SAC workforce, the most commonly identified theme was better pay and working conditions followed by recognition and respect for the workforce and a qualified and graduate-led workforce.

Naming of the profession

- The Call for Submissions asked respondents to suggest job titles for a number of ELC roles.
- The most commonly suggested job title for a qualified (NFQ Level 5) practitioner in an ELC service was 'Early Years educator' followed by 'Early Years practitioner' and 'Early Years assistant'.
- The most commonly suggested job title for a graduate (NFQ Level 7 or 8) room-leader in an ELC service was 'Early Years teacher' followed by 'Early Years educator' and 'preschool teacher'.
- The most commonly suggested job title for the role of pedagogical leader for a whole ELC service was 'pedagogical leader' followed by 'manager' and 'Early Years educator'.

Barriers to workforce development

- The most frequently identified barriers to attracting and retaining more workers in the ELC and SAC sector were low pay and poor working conditions.
- Low pay was also the most frequently identified barrier to achieving a graduate-led workforce in ELC and SAC by 2028.

Attracting and retaining workers

- Better pay and working conditions were the most frequently identified themes related to how working in the ELC and SAC sectors could be made more attractive to workers.
- More respect and recognition was the next most commonly cited way of attracting more workers, in particular valuing workers through increased funding for the sector.
- It was also suggested that training and ongoing professional development should be better funded, free to workers and workers should be paid to participate in order to make the sector more attractive to workers.
- Increased pay and better working conditions were the most commonly cited ways of improving retention of staff in the ELC and SAC sector.
- More funding for training and career progression opportunities was also suggested to improve retention of staff.

Policies to support a graduate-led workforce

- Policies related to pay were the most frequently identified policies to best support achievement of a graduate-led workforce by 2028
- Policies related to training, CPD and career progression were the next most frequently identified, *e.g.*, training grants and paid time off for study.
- Policies related to working conditions were also identified as important to achieving a graduate-led workforce. This included introducing policies on sick pay, holiday pay, pensions, maternity benefits, health insurance and more secure long-term contracts for workers in the sector.

Ongoing professional development

- The most commonly mentioned barrier to practitioners' ongoing professional development identified was cost followed by time and lack of incentives.
- The high cost of professional development alongside the low pay of practitioners were highlighted as barriers.
- The most common suggestion as to how practitioners' ongoing professional development should be supported within the sector was improved access to ongoing professional development through more funding.
- The next most common suggestion to support practitioners' ongoing professional development was recognition of qualifications and ongoing professional development in pay.
- Finally, the most commonly identified suggestion as to how practitioners' ongoing professional development can be supported through training was financial support.

Section 7: Key Messages for Policy from the New Funding Model Call for Submissions

7.1 Introduction

This section outlines the key messages for policy taken from the findings of the Call for Submissions on the New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, which are set out under a number of thematic headings below.

Funding/cost of childcare

- Lack of funding/high cost of providing ELC and SAC was the most commonly identified weaknesses of the current approach to State funding identified by respondents.
- Cost was the most commonly identified challenge faced by children and families related to the current approach to State funding.
- The most frequently identified theme related to improving affordability, quality and/or accessibility of ELC was increased funding/reduced cost.
- Increased funding/reduced cost was also the most commonly identified theme related to improving affordability, quality and/or accessibility of SAC.
- Funding/investment was the most commonly identified theme in relation to the role the State should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality.

Pay and working conditions of staff

- The most commonly identified challenge faced by providers and staff was pay and working conditions.
- Better pay and working conditions was the second most commonly identified theme relating to improving affordability, quality and accessibility of ELC.
- Better pay and working conditions was the third most commonly identified theme relating to improving affordability, quality and accessibility of SAC.
- Respondents agreed that, to attain the vision of a professional and valued workforce, there should be better pay and working conditions in the sector including the introduction of a pay scale.

ELC and SAC graduate-led workforce

- A 'Professional and Valued Workforce' was the guiding principle with the highest level of agreement (96.9%) among respondents.
- A 'Professional and Valued Workforce' was also the most highly ranked guiding principle identified by respondents that should be applied in both ELC and SAC (89.5%).
- Respondents suggested graduate qualifications should be recognised in staff pay.

Training, CPD and career progression

- Qualifications, training and CPD was the most commonly identified theme related to the role providers should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality.
- Providers of ELC only most frequently identified qualifications, training and CPD as a theme related to the role providers should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality.

Administration, inspections and regulations

- The high volume of administration associated with funding programmes and paperwork duplication in relation to children accessing more than one scheme was identified as a key weakness of the current approach to State funding identified by respondents.
- Administration, inspections and regulations was the second most commonly identified challenge faced by providers and staff related to the current approach to State funding.
- Reduced administration and inspections was a theme highlighted related to improving affordability, quality and accessibility of ELC.
- Reduced administration and inspections was more commonly identified as a theme by providers of ELC only.
- The streamlining of inspections through one governing body was suggested by respondents.

Access to childcare

- Access to childcare was the second most frequently identified challenge faced by children and families with regard to the current approach to State funding of ELC and SAC.
- The need for more places for children under three years of age, and for babies in particular, was highlighted by respondents.

School-Age Childcare

- Increased funding/reduced cost was the most commonly identified theme in relation to improving affordability, quality and accessibility of SAC.
- Better quality services was the second most common theme highlighted to improve affordability, quality and accessibility of SAC.
- Other themes identified to improve SAC included better pay and working conditions, better training and CPD, better qualified staff, and transport.
- Respondents suggested staff should be trained to work with school-age children who have specific needs, which are different to younger children.
- In terms of facilities, it was suggested that SAC should be provided in facilities appropriate to this age group.
- The provision of SAC in primary school sites was proposed.

ECCE scheme

- The ECCE scheme was identified by respondents as the key strength of the current approach to State funding.
- However, the ECCE scheme was also the most commonly identified scheme in terms of weaknesses related to specific funding programmes.
- The short number of hours provided was highlighted as a key weakness of the ECCE scheme, particularly for working parents.
- Respondents suggested the ECCE scheme should be extended, *e.g.*, from 3 to 4 hours and from 38 to 52 weeks.
- Lowering of child to adult ratios for younger children accessing the ECCE Scheme was also suggested.

NCS

- The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was the second most commonly identified scheme as regards weaknesses of specific funding programmes.
- Difficulties for parents understanding and accessing the NCS was the most commonly identified weakness of the scheme.

- Respondents suggested the NCS should be easier for parents to understand and access and more supports should be provided to parents and providers to access the NCS, *e.g.*, online supports.

AIM programme

- The AIM programme was the third most commonly identified specific funding programmes in terms of weaknesses
- The AIM programme being age-restricted was the most frequently identified weakness of the programme.
- Respondents suggested the AIM programme should be expanded to include children under three years of age and school-age children.

Section 8: Conclusion

This report on the findings of a Call for Submissions on the development of a new funding model for ELC and SAC highlighted a number of key issues.

In terms of the guiding principles to drive allocation for a new funding model and the application of these guiding principles, a 'Professional and Valued Workforce' and a Child-Centred' approach were considered to be most important for both ELC and SAC. However, the guiding principle of 'Family-Orientated' had the highest level of disagreement and changes were suggested in relation to this area, including ensuring all families have equal access to ELC and SAC irrespective of their status.

The Call for Submissions highlighted the strengths of current funding schemes such as the accessibility and universality of the ECCE scheme, the NCS reducing cost for parents and the benefits of the AIM programme to support children with disabilities to access ELC. However, the findings also identified challenges related to the current funding schemes such as the short hours of the ECCE scheme, perceived difficulties for parents accessing the NCS and the age restrictions of the AIM programme.

Key challenges for children and families identified related to the current funding of ELC and SAC were cost and access to childcare. Key challenges for providers and staff were pay and working conditions and administration, inspections and regulations. However, quality-related issues such as retention of staff were highlighted as challenges for children and families as well as providers and staff.

Increasing funding and reducing the cost of ELC and SAC were common themes put forward to improve affordability, quality and accessibility of both ELC and SAC. While increased funding and investment was considered to be the key role the State should play in ensuring ELC and SAC is affordable, accessible and of high quality, the key role of providers in this regard was considered to be supporting staff in terms of qualifications, training and CPD.

Finally, an increase in quality-related outcomes was outlined as the State's main expectation for return for investment in ELC and SAC.