



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,  
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige  
Department of Children, Equality,  
Disability, Integration and Youth



## Report on New Funding Model Consultation with Providers & Practitioners October 2020



# Introduction

This series of nine online consultation sessions with providers and practitioners (run in parallel with sessions on the Workforce Development Plan) was one part of a larger ‘Phase 1’ process in relation to a new funding model, which also included:

- An Ipsos MRBI survey of 500 parents undertaken in August and September.
- A call for submissions (17 September to 2 October) – 168 submissions made.
- A webinar held on 22 September that had attracted over 700 people.
- Seven focussed discussions held with a total of 57 parents.
- A closing webinar on the programme of consultation was held on 16 December 2020 (see [www.first5.gov.ie](http://www.first5.gov.ie) ). All parents that registered an interest in attending a session were invited to attend the closing webinar.

The next phase of the project will involve generating options to address the issues identified in Phase 1, including throughout the consultation, testing proposals and making recommendations for solutions. It is envisaged that recommendations of the Expert Group will be delivered to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in November 2021.

Seven topics across Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) were addressed:

- A. Addressing Affordability of ELC and SAC.
- B. Improving access to, and addressing disadvantage through ELC and SAC.
- C. Raising and supporting the quality of ELC and SAC.
- D. Ensuring availability of ELC and SAC places.
- E. Sustainability of ELC and SAC places.
- F. Administration of state funding for ELC and SAC.
- G. Role of capital funding in ELC and SAC.

Two additional sessions were then run to ensure feedback was heard directly from practitioners (as the previous sessions had been numerically dominated by providers). Feedback from these two sessions has been combined into one section below:

- H. Insights from ELC and SAC practitioners.

All respondents to the call for submissions and those registered for the opening webinar were contacted by The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) to express an interest in attending the seven themed focused-discussion sessions on future funding. Due to the nature of the events, numbers had to be capped and places were provided on a first-come, first-served basis.

In addition to this, to ensure a good mix of participants with as wide a variety of providers and practitioners as possible, there was a limit on the number of sessions an individual could attend. Demand for some sessions was higher than others and a waitlist was in operation and used to allow as many people as possible to participate. At the halfway point and based on lower registrations from practitioners, it was decided that a further two sessions would be run for practitioners only. A number of providers and representative groups then helped source individuals to participate in the two focused discussion sessions dedicated to practitioners only.

The nine discussions were held using Zoom, with feedback from participants being collected, in sessions, by a combination of Mentimeter (interactive presentation software), the chat function in Zoom, Google Jamboard and also verbally.

There is a considerable degree of repetition in the content that follows. This is because whatever topic within ELC and SAC one chooses to address, the underlying issues are similar and inter-connected. This report is purely a report on this part of the consultation process on the new funding model and, as such, priority has been given to being faithful to the contributions of the people who participated in the consultation.

#### Most consistent themes of this part of consultation:

- Lack of funding – low wages, poor terms and conditions.
- Urgency of issues – stress of issues – sustainability of services.
- Importance of retaining staff, especially experienced staff.
- Feeling that the sector/ workforce is not getting the recognition and respect it deserves.
- Need for more predictability/ certainty to help planning and support retention.
- Need to reduce over-whelming admin/ complexity – ‘too many agencies’
- Preference for a universal model, with flexibility to respond to needs.
- Concern that there is too much focus on needs of economy, rather than needs of children.
- Need for more attention on services for under-3s and school-age childcare.

This report has been prepared by the independent facilitators contracted to undertake this consultation on behalf of DCEDIY (formerly DCYA), Chris Chapman and Ali Warner from ‘The Change Exploratory’.

The summaries below are slightly condensed to avoid excessive repetition, but every effort has been made to capture the words of the participants.

Thanks are due to all who participated in the consultation and also to staff from DCEDDIY who have supported the process and to members of the Expert Group who attended sessions.

## Session dates

Date	Event	Number of Participants
Monday 12 October	Addressing Affordability of ELC and SAC	22
Tuesday 13 October	Improving Access to ELC and SAC	21
Wednesday 14 October	Raising and Supporting Quality of ELC	23
Thursday 15 October	Ensuring Availability of ELC and SAC places	26
Monday 19 October	Sustainability of ELC and SAC places	23
Tuesday 20 October	Administration of State Funding for ELC and SAC	26
Wednesday 21 October	Role of Capital Funding in ELC and SAC	19
Thursday 22 October	Insights from ELC and SAC Practitioners	20
Friday 23 October	Insights from ELC and SAC Practitioners	13
	<b>Total Attendances</b>	193

(Participants were invited to attend multiple events, if they wished.)

## A. Addressing Affordability of ELC and SAC (22 Participants)



## **Structure of session**

As with other sessions, the discussion began with an open invitation for participants to make any comments they wished in relation to 'Affordability'. There then followed a presentation giving context, including data showing:

- Parental fees in Ireland as amongst the highest in the OECD.
- Parental fees varying considerably across service type and location.
- 39% of parents surveyed finding it difficult to pay for ELC.
- One in three parents surveyed finding it difficult to pay for SAC.
- 97% of parents being aware of free pre-school under the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme.
- Just under half of parents being aware of financial support under the National Childcare Scheme (NCS).
- The desire for more affordable ELC and SAC being top of the list of changes parents would like to see.

Participants were invited to make any comments they wished to in response to the presentation. These comments and the earlier introductory comments have been summarised together in the 'Summary of Initial Comments' below.

Breakout group discussions were held to discuss what was working well and not working so well in terms of affordability for parents. Feedback from these discussions is in a table below.

Further questions were then asked in respect of possible priorities for improvement and brief discussions held to look at the potential for increasing awareness of NCS and how fee controls might work.

Finally, questions were asked in relation to what participants thought parents would want to add to these discussions and also thoughts regarding how to ensure work on affordability doesn't impact on working conditions for staff/ disadvantage/ availability/ sustainability of services.

## Summary of Initial Comments

<p>Suggested starting points for discussion</p> <p>“Need to recognise that ELC and SAC are unaffordable for vast majority of parents”</p> <p>“System needs more funding”</p> <p>“Funding targets not ambitious enough (will still be lagging in 2028)”</p> <p>“Disadvantage needs to be highlighted”</p> <p>“Research shows that a quality graduate workforce is needed”</p>	<p>Suggested principles to base discussion on</p> <p>“Keep child (and quality of care) at centre – affordability should be about a wonderful childhood and education and care that supports the development of the child”</p> <p>“Need to balance needs of child, family, staff and provider”</p> <p>“Need to consider affordability for all families”</p> <p>“Respect everyone’s views”</p> <p>“Consider all types of providers”</p> <p>“One model won’t suit all”</p>
<p><b>Starting observations</b></p> <p>“ECCE is working well for parents. NCS not working for parents or providers (esp. admin). NCS not well known to parents and can be difficult to access” – “A nightmare”</p> <p>“Willingness of parents to pay fees shows value placed on services”</p> <p>“Percentage increase in funding since 2015 looks impressive but reflects low base”</p> <p>“Income for community childcare providers for under-threes is making sustainability an issue”</p> <p>“Not surprising that SAC is not easily accessed – high costs”</p> <p>“Affordability also needs to apply to cost of getting qualifications”</p>	<p><b>Questions raised</b></p> <p>Queries raised re hourly average cost for full day care?</p> <p>“Do funding figures represent what providers receive or include Tusla, Better Start etc?”</p>

## Feedback from Breakout group discussions

What's working well	What's not working so well
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ECCE in terms of simplicity, affordability and universal access/ inclusivity</li><li>• SAC has become more accessible with introduction of ratios and moving from Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) to NCS</li><li>• NCIP programme with staffing grant</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• NCS administration for parents and providers</li><li>• Lack of knowledge regarding NCS – services can't explain fees and are reluctant to promote</li><li>• NCS subsidies low compared with Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP)</li><li>• Funding per child, rather than whole service</li><li>• Not clear who decides regarding affordability definition</li></ul>
<p><b>Other comments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 'Parental choice to stay at home for first two years is not available'</li><li>• 'Big differences between community childcare and private sector models' – 'For profit model is very difficult in the current environment'</li><li>• 'Managers sound ridiculous when they say they don't know what fee will be with NCS'</li><li>• 'Sustainability a big issue since government has been involved' – 'Affordability coming at cost of services and professional wages (wages make up 80% of costs)'</li><li>• 'After-school ratios and regulations have made job harder and services less able to be flexible' – 'All children should be able to access'</li><li>• 'ECCE rate not sustainable for providers' – 'It needs to be increased to €90 per child'</li><li>• 'If we are going to have a flexible system post Covid-19, we need to reduce burden on provider'</li><li>• 'Need a universal public model with fees on progressive scale (incl. free for people on lowest incomes)'</li><li>• 'Early Years should be recognised as a public good, in line with primary and secondary – all children equal under Constitution'</li><li>• 'Government funding needs a big increase – grants need to be more inclusive'</li><li>• 'Expert panels should include practitioners'</li></ul>	

## Possible priorities for improvement

Participants were asked to rank what they thought should be the top priority groupings of children and then to add further comments.

**Please rank (from 1 to 6, with 1 as top priority) the groupings of children you think should be top priority in the design of any new/enhanced scheme?**

Mentimeter



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As noted in the poll above, participants were asked to rank from one to six, with one as a top priority, the groupings of children they thought should be top priority in the design of any new/ enhanced scheme. The results were as follows:

- In 1<sup>st</sup> place, children of all parents;
- In 2<sup>nd</sup> place, children with additional needs who may have difficulty accessing services;
- In 3<sup>rd</sup> place, children of low-income parents/ families who have difficulty accessing services (households earning less than €35,000);
- In 4<sup>th</sup> place, children of all working parents;
- In 5<sup>th</sup> place, children of unemployed parents who may have difficulty accessing employment or training because of their child-rearing responsibilities; and
- In 6<sup>th</sup> place, children of low- and middle-income parents/ families who may have difficulty affording services (households earning less than €70,000).

Comments below have been listed under two headings to distinguish between participant comments that relate to 'starting principles' that might guide an overall approach and more specific suggestions for the targeting of resources. Flexibility was a priority in many comments.

## **Starting principles**

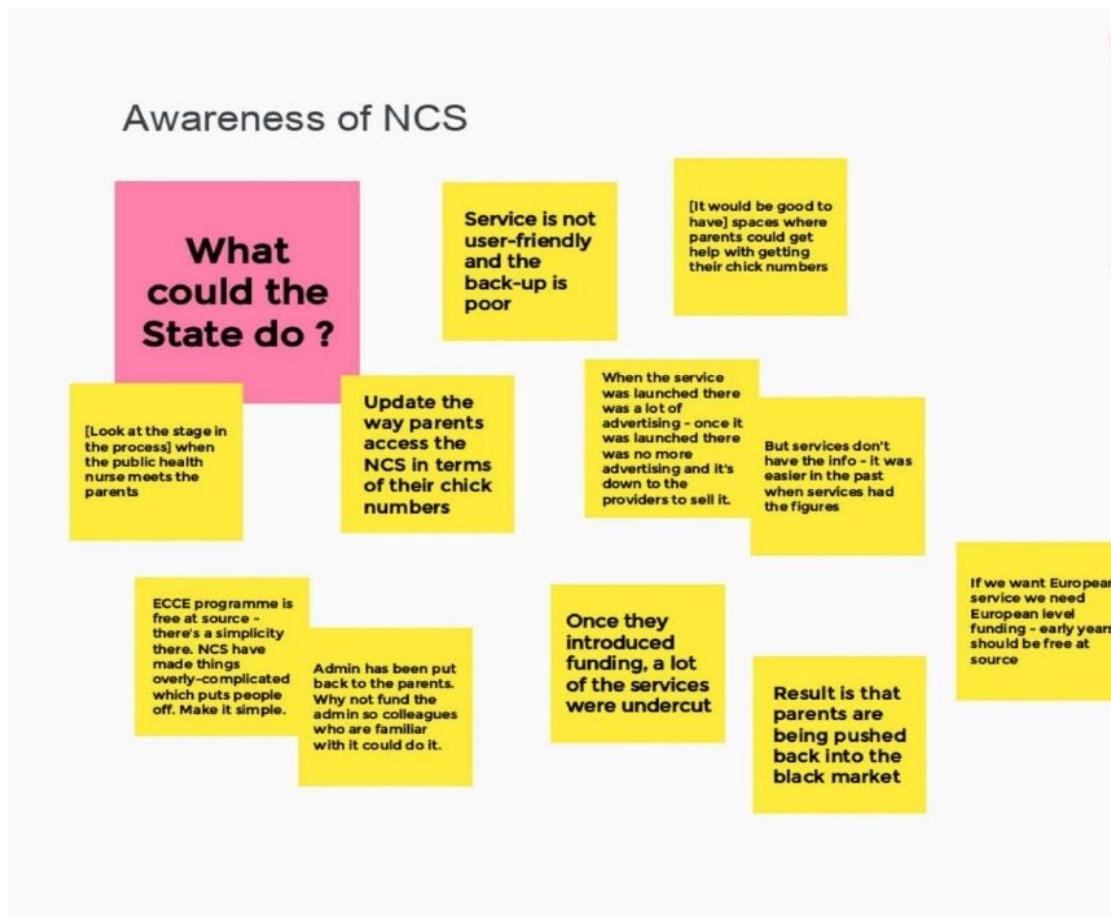
- “Start with what we are trying to achieve (a universal scheme) and work from there” – “Nobody should be left out” – “One fair, accessible scheme”
- “Should be built around weekly/ monthly fees (not hourly)”
- “Funding should be given to services to be flexible with”
- “It needs to be flexible and fair”
- “Inspections need to be proportionate to funding”

## **Other comments about targeting**

- “Give families from disadvantaged areas a foot on the ladder”
- “Middle-income families are often those that struggle”
- “Working families usually forgotten”
- “Regional differences need to be considered”
- “National Women’s Council advocate for a national pay scale alongside fee capping structure”
- “This time of a child’s life is critical to their development”

## Potential for increasing awareness of NCS and how fee controls might work

Whilst the question asked focused on the awareness of NCS, responses suggested participants felt there were other issues regarding how the scheme was operating that were more fundamental.



(Comments on Post-its above are duplicated for ease of legibility in Appendix 'A' at the end of this report.)

In discussing possible forms of fee control, participants' primary concern was clearly that anything that might serve to keep wages low would potentially have an impact on both staff and on the sustainability of services.



(Comments on Post-its above are duplicated for ease of legibility in Appendix 'A' at the end of this report.)

## Views on what parents might want to add to these discussions

- "They would like universal state-funded care like schools" – "State run"
- "Choice, reduced fees, quality and educators recognised for the work they do" – "Staff paid well and less staff turnover"
- "Ease of access and no admin"
- "Fairness, flexibility, equal access for everyone"
- "Flexibility for SAC"
- "Wide range of activities, less health and safety, more fun."
- "A national fees list and to be able to forecast costs (parents I know like the Danish model)"

## **Ideas on how to ensure work on affordability doesn't impact on working conditions for staff/ disadvantage/ availability/ sustainability of services**

- “Ask the right questions in the right order” – “Don’t just throw money at it, invest in sustainable solutions”
- “A balanced approach” – “Addressing both affordability and professional pay scales in tandem and in the context of moving towards a universal model on par with primary schools” – “Costs of providers have to be taken into account”
- “Universal access”
- “A state service”
- “Better funding (an investment) and proper wages (recognising experience and qualifications)” – “Up to European norms” – “Statutory pay scales and working conditions like other education sectors” – “Staff paid by government”
- “Money should follow teachers, not children” – “Money should go into facilities”
- “Career path”
- “Service Level Agreements (SLAs) to address issues” – “Less admin and a supportive inspection service”

## **B. Improving Access to, and Addressing Disadvantage through ELC and SAC (21 Participants)**



## **Structure of session**

Once again, the discussion in the second session began with an open invitation for participants to make any comments they wished in relation to 'Access and Disadvantage'. There then followed a presentation giving context, including data showing:

- The proportion of parents who would not have been able to send their child to pre-school without the ECCE Programme (highest amongst where maternal education level was lowest, where English/ Irish wasn't the first language and amongst lone parents).
- Increasing numbers of children and services availing of targeted supports under Access and Inclusion Model (AIM).
- A diversity of supports being offered through ELC and SAC settings (parental meetings, support linking with other services, easing path to primary school etc.).
- Lower uptake of ECCE Programme within certain cohorts (including Roma children, Irish Traveller children and generally children going on to schools with disadvantaged status).
- One in ten parents surveyed would like to see services more suited to their child's special needs.

Participants were invited to make any comments they wished to in response to the presentation. These comments and the earlier introductory comments have been summarised together in the 'Summary of Initial Comments' below.

Prior to the consultation, the Expert Group had considered possible priority cohorts for receiving additional support to improve access and/ or to mitigate the impact of early disadvantage. Participants were asked for their comments in relation to these potential priority cohorts and also to consider if there were any other cohorts of children that they thought should be prioritised.

Breakout group discussions were held to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of existing measures to improve access and address disadvantage. Feedback from these discussions is in a table below.

Further questions were then asked in respect of what should be done to improve access, what additional supports could be integrated into services to mitigate the impact of early disadvantage and what other actions are required.

Finally, questions were asked in relation to the interlinked nature of policy objectives and to seek any final closing comments.

## Summary of Initial Comments

<p><b>Suggested starting points for discussion</b></p> <p>“Any approach needs to be child-centred”</p> <p>“All children in all services (not just ECCE) should be assisted to access their local service”</p> <p>“There needs to be enough services in the country to provide access for all children – greater public and private investment is needed”</p> <p>“The goals of the sector are to develop affordable, accessible, quality services, but they also need to be sustainable”</p> <p>“NCS is focussed on labour activation, not rights of children”</p> <p>“Parental education is still the most significant factor”</p> <p>“A single state body is needed”</p> <p>“Childhood should be a wonderful time for all”</p>	<p><b>Suggested principles to base discussion on</b></p> <p>“Children are equal and they have rights, regardless of parental circumstance and economic background”</p> <p>“It is important that as a society, we value our most vulnerable and ensure access and inclusion for all”</p> <p>“Each child should have access to local (universal) services, embedded in their community” “Services should be available at all times, not just for 15 hours”</p> <p>“Models need to be practical, relevant and experientially based (and more than a job activation model), providing consistency and certainty”</p> <p>“All stakeholders need to be in the conversation”</p> <p>“Initiatives need to be user-friendly for parents and providers”</p>
<p><b>Starting observations</b></p> <p>“Free provision has meant and will mean more families accessing services – a positive”</p> <p>“AIM supports should be available all year round, longer hours and for younger children” – “many problems with AIM model”</p> <p>“AIM support worker rates of pay not reflecting cost of service”</p> <p>“Perhaps figures would be even better if there were stricter conditions on the €2 capitation for having an Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) in the service”</p> <p>“Administrative burden with schemes such as Community Childcare Subvention Programme (CSSP) Band A is leading providers to not offer services.”</p> <p>“Some parents are paying extra in ECCE services, as they are afraid their children will be left out”</p> <p>“Access to SAC is significantly reduced for disadvantaged families”</p> <p>“Under-12 months are a disadvantaged group due to regulations”</p> <p>“Childcare services are closing due to staff shortages/ under-investment – worried that there won’t be infrastructure left, by the time we get new model”</p> <p>“Services are not considered – it is all based around parents”</p>	<p><b>Questions raised</b></p> <p>“What about SAC?”</p> <p>“Why are some children still not getting access to services?”</p> <p>“Would measures to increase universality and overall quality achieve more than prioritising cohorts?”</p> <p>“Is graduate-led model restricting use of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and nursing staff?”</p> <p>“Do we need more investment in assisting services using AIM?”</p> <p>“What will replace the existing Community Childcare Scheme (CCS) for disadvantaged children?”</p> <p>“Is the research suspect? Definitions of ‘additional needs’ may vary?”</p> <p>“Expert Group needs provider voice?”</p> <p>“Does sector need a high-level review, rather than dealing with it bit by bit?”</p> <p>“How could change be implemented more quickly?”</p>

## Possible priority cohorts for receiving additional support

The Expert Group had suggested prioritising the following cohorts of children as being in need of additional supports to improve access and/ or to mitigate the impact of early disadvantage:

- Children who are at risk of poverty and disadvantage.
- Children for whom English or Irish is not a first language.
- Children with additional learning needs.

Twelve out of 23 comments made in response indicated specific agreement. No comments specifically disagreed.

The following suggestions for additional cohorts and further comments were also made:

- “Homeless children should be a cohort” – “We are seeing very specific issues in relation to behaviours of children cooped up for long periods” – “Homeless children and families in crisis”
- “Children in emergency accommodation”
- “Children in overcrowded households”
- “Children from single-parent families or from alternate family groups”
- “Children from the Travelling Community”
- “Children who have family members in prison or dealing with addictions etc.”
- “Blended families”
- “I would put additional needs before English as a Second Language (ESL)”
- “0-3s are not valued. Earlier interventions could make higher impact” (Comments similar to this were repeated throughout the consultation.)
- “This covers a broad range of children who cannot be helped through a market model”
- “Services have local knowledge – not all children present with a disadvantage, but there are issues”
- “There needs to be easier access for the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). The targeted support is very stigmatised and hard to access”
- “There needs to be flexibility around attendance (especially with children from the Travelling Community)”
- “Universal policies are always more effective in improving access – we need to prioritise ALL children”
- “Outdoor education provision is a factor”
- “Services need capital funding to expand and ensure they are not turning children away”

## Issues highlighted in breakout group discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of existing measures to improve access and address disadvantage

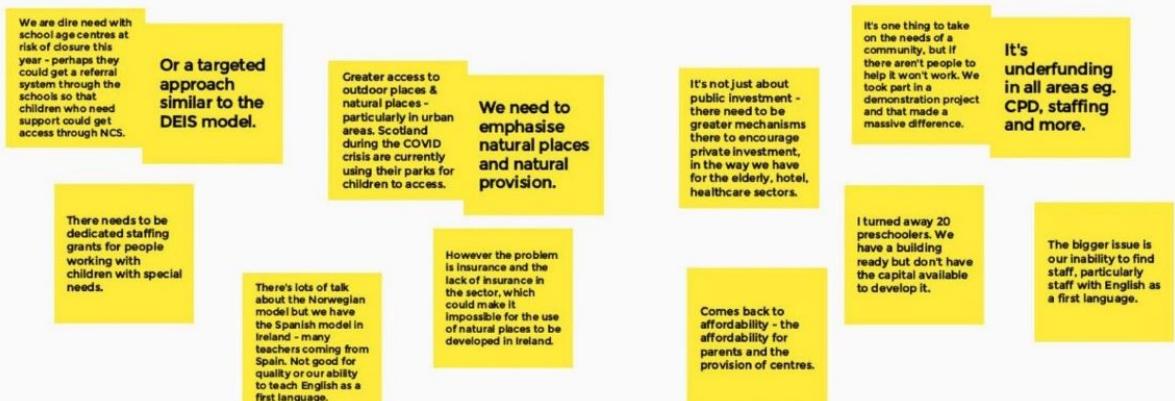
- “Biggest problem is underfunding (including impacts on affordability and staffing)”
- “Need for more specialists in the sector to support inclusion of children, families and communities – specialist books and resources needed too”
- “Specialist qualifications needed for AIM staff” – “Recruitment difficult” – “Need a panel of highly trained people (incl. people with additional languages)” – “Also a band of occupational therapists (OTs) specialists who can work to support staff on site”
- “Parents with English as additional language can't access NCS”
- “NCS has added to pressures on providers”
- “Lack of support for under-3s, full day care, SAC and children with an additional language” – “The earlier we can intervene the better” – “AIM needs to be available earlier”
- “The private/ public investment debate is a very challenging one”
- “Need demonstration projects that all services can learn from”
- “Some services in Cork get great support from OTs and Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs)”

The core issue in improving access was clearly seen to be funding and the impact that has on staffing.

### What changes are needed ?

### What should be done to improve access to early learning and care and school age childcare for these cohorts?

Mentimeter



(Comments on Post-its above are duplicated for ease of legibility in Appendix 'A' at the end of this report.)

There was interest in a wider range of support roles to mitigate early disadvantage.

Menti

What additional supports could be integrated into early learning and care and school age childcare to mitigate the impact of early disadvantage among these cohorts?

Would be fabulous to recruit some family support workers. Our settings have a lot of disadvantage & we used to have that - it would make a huge difference to have that again.

Why can't we use SNAs in the childcare sector - at the moment we're restricted by regulations. They would help supplement the AIM support workers.

At the moment we're losing AIM workers to the national schools.

Staff working with children with special needs need to be highly qualified - a higher level of training and a higher level of pay are needed.

We should be aiming for highly qualified people in this area, and with outdoor provision.

The provision of food within full day care for those in need is vitally important - the government could quite easily open that back up again. It should also include training for staff around healthy eating etc.

Would be good to have professional OT therapists eg. a panel that we can connect to so that staff can upskill.

We need lower qualified staff too eg. as in healthcare they have orderlies, we need the support staff who would change nappies and so on.

With the professionalisation of the childcare sector, we've lost access to assistants who could come in to help.

This could be a practical apprentice.

In a primary school they aren't worried about losing their teachers because of numbers as they are DEIS schools - we should have that model so that we're not worried about losing staff because of numbers.

Meals should be funded [and settings] shouldn't be worried about trying to keep their heads above water.

(Comments on Post-its above are duplicated for ease of legibility in Appendix 'A' at the end of this report.)

Menti

Acknowledging that early learning and care and school-age childcare has been shown to reduce inequalities among children, what else should be done to maximise the impact of early learning and care and school-age childcare on these cohorts? What key actions are required? What can government do? What can providers do? What can parents do?

Actions for government

The family support workers are ideal for wrap around care, and we need funds to recruit these people.

Actions for Providers

Actions for Parents

Look at a new model where the money follows the child - look at it from the child out rather than from the benefits for providers, and from a much earlier age.

We need to look at a more targeted approach to funding when looking at the most disadvantaged cases - staffing grant is best there.

Providers who refuse access to children with special needs should have to explain their actions - children with special needs my have been refused in other settings, don't think that should be acceptable.

Nb. A third of services are sole traders who cannot access AIM level funding.

Nb. Think it would be a bad idea to bring people into the sector who are not qualified - research has shown that it's important to have qualified staff.

Targeting those in the local community, having a focus of outdoor activities. Nature deficit is being diagnosed now.

There are huge benefits of an SNA teacher to a child with special needs, but we can't employ them as they aren't a Level 5.

(Comments on Post-its above are duplicated for ease of legibility in Appendix 'A' at the end of this report.)

## **Reflections in relation to the interlinked nature of policy objectives**

- “Funding is what links policy objectives together” – “Investment is key”
- “We cannot ensure quality without investment” – “Funding needs to go to the frontline first” – “Access and affordability will depend on public, not private investment”
- “Timely implementation needs to happen” – “Requires funding and meaningful collaboration between all stakeholders – more bottom-up than top-down” – “Multidisciplinary teams – supporting children at home as well”
- “Continuing good communication (two way) with services”
- “A child-centred approach will underpin and link all policies” – “A commitment to supporting children most in need (a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools [DEIS] model?)” – “School-age children from disadvantaged areas have been disproportionately hit” – “All age groups need to be priority”
- “A holistic approach supporting all stakeholders – children, providers and families”
- “Let parents decide regarding additional supports, rather than agencies trying to keep their budgets down”
- “Mentoring and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) need to be funded” – “An apprentice model would help”
- “Governance needs to be interlinked – it would help to only have to deal with one agency”
- “Providers should be on Expert Panel”
- “Outdoor provision is important for all, especially in inner-city areas”

## **Final Closing Comments**

- “NCS needs to change to address needs of disadvantaged families”
- “SAC and all ages need to be able to access AIM”
- “Childminders need support and access to funding”
- “Stricter conditions must be attached to Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) capitation, but first a panel system must be established to provide assistance in the classroom, if needed”
- “Mentoring supports needed”
- “Parents should be supported to stay at home for at least a year”
- “Positive that we are all talking together in these sessions – hope these contributions will be taken on board”

- “Significant funding needed across all areas (AIM, capital, professional development, non-contact hours, wages etc.)” – “Targeted funding needed in disadvantaged areas, ideally through staffing grants”
- “Quality and proper pay is key”
- “Support staff during Covid-19 time could enable less qualified staff to see progression opportunities”
- “If we don’t get support staff, many more services will close (note: Covid-19 pressure)”
- “Too many agencies” – “Need a one-stop-shop for childcare”

## **C. Raising and Supporting the Quality of ELC and SAC**

(23 Participants)



## **Structure of session**

The discussion in the third session began, as usual, with an open invitation for participants to make any comments they wished in relation to 'Quality'. Participants were then asked to give single words that would be essential in any description of high-quality ELC and SAC from the perspective of 'the child', the 'parent', the 'practitioner' and 'the provider' (these words have been collated into the word clouds below).

There followed a presentation giving context, including data showing:

- The proportion of staff with relevant degrees increasing in recent years.
- Evidence of parental involvement in ELC and SAC and the provision of additional supports for parents through these settings.
- Evidence of parental satisfaction.
- Low hourly wages and high proportions of staff on part-time and/ or sessional contracts
- High staff turnover rates.
- Evidence of variable quality and low proportion of staff with degrees working with younger children.
- One in six parents surveyed wanting to see a higher quality in services.

Participants were invited to make any comments they wished to in response to the presentation. (These comments and the earlier introductory comments have been summarised together in the 'Summary of Initial Comments' below.)

Breakout group discussions were held to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of existing strategies and approaches for raising and supporting quality and any new strategies/ approaches that are needed.

Further questions were then asked in respect of what high-quality ELC and SAC looks like and offers and how quality in ELC and SAC should be measured.

The question of whether funding to raise and support quality should be tied to a quality threshold or structured to incentivise continuous improvement was explored and also the question of how to avoid the risk of creating a two-tier system (if additional funding was tied to quality).

A final question was asked in relation to the interlinked nature of policy objectives.

**2a. From the perspective of 'the child', give one word that would be essential in any description of high-quality ELC and SAC?**



18

**2b. From the perspective of 'the parent', give one word that would be essential in any description of high-quality ELC and SAC?**



19

**2c. From the perspective of 'the practitioner', give one word that would be essential in any description of high-quality ELC and SAC?**



18

**2d. From the perspective of 'the provider', give one word that would be essential in any description of high-quality ELC and SAC?**



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To summarise from the four word clouds, high quality ELC and SAC services were seen to be well-funded, child-centred, recognising and respecting staff who work in them and working in partnership with parents.

## **Summary of Initial Comments**

- “Quality starts with professional recognition/ respect, followed by sufficient funding, delivering continuity of staff”
- “Quality costs money. Investment needs to be increased (unlike in the budget) and staff paid a professional wage (better pay and conditions)”
- “Staff need to be well-trained, educated and experienced” “Apprenticeships could help” “Also clear career progression paths as an incentive to keep people in the sector” “Third level education needs to be affordable”
- “A professional body would help”
- “Inspections need to be consistent”
- “There need to be clear guidelines as to what quality is – child-centred, fun, exciting, engaging, collaborative”
- “Important also to recognise that high quality is already being delivered by many”
- “AIM workers should be qualified to Level 7/8 and paid on Mercer scales. Intervention, rather than just inclusion should be the aim”
- “There needs to be proper consultation with the sector. Voices listened to and acted upon”

## **Comments following presentation**

- “Graduates are not staying in the sector and are looking for other roles” – “High-quality staff are constantly being lost, because of low pay” – “There has been a rise in qualifications without a rise in pay and conditions”
- “Parents put affordability before quality” – “Parents want flexibility, but services need certainty”
- “Quality improves children’s development and wellbeing”
- “Under-3s need to be prioritised” – “Interest in localised approaches”
- “Any new funding model must fund costs of provision and reward qualifications” – “Training is increasing, but at the cost of the individual”
- “Why isn’t Siolta being used as a guide to quality and to relate funding to quality?” – “There is a need for child-centred reflection, learning and growth”
- “There is some concern regarding quality of degrees”
- “Also concern regarding how much of budget is going on peripheral services (e.g. Better Start, inspection)” – “Too many bosses/ agencies” – “Support insufficiently co-ordinated”

- “Would be interesting to see data separated by service type (incl. to show impact of higher capitation in pre-school)” – “Queries regarding accuracy of average pay data”
- “First 5 strategy is welcome, but concern regarding how these strategies will reach services”
- “Need to avoid an ‘us and them’ between Department and sector. Great work is going on”
- “Need for parental and community involvement too”

## **Breakout group discussions**

These were held to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of existing strategies and approaches for raising and supporting quality and any new strategies/ approaches that are needed. The main points emerging were:

- “Lack of adequate funding affects quality” – “Investment needed, especially into pay and conditions”
- “Salaries and pay scales need to recognise and reflect qualifications in order to motivate staff”
- “Third-level education needs to be affordable”
- “Quality requires consistent reflection on practice”
- “Consistent, co-ordinated, joined-up approach needed between state agencies” – “One funding model, one body doing inspections” – “Already have Síolta and Aistear, no need to re-invent the wheel” – “A one-stop-shop for providers and staff, ensuring strategies connect to services (disparate nature of grants and funding is a big problem)”
- “AIM is not fit for purpose – needs to be intervention-based and graduate-led”
- “NCS funding is difficult for parents” – “NCS is broken”
- “0-3s are being disadvantaged”
- “Quality of degrees is concerning” (concern about the quality and relevance of some courses was a consistent theme across the consultation.)
- “The sector has the solutions and needs to be respected and listened to in the right way”
- “Quality comes from the top down”

## **What does high-quality ELC and SAC look like and offer?**

- “Look at Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP)” – “Guided by Síolta and Aistear”
- “Professional, highly qualified and skilled, better-paid staff” – “(Free) play-based, resourced learning environments, affordable” – “Consistent” – “Lots of space” – “Safe and fun”
- “Previous experience valued” – “Continuous reflection”
- “Inclusive, accessible to all, collaborative, child-centred/ child-led, inquiry-based, social and emotional wellbeing” – “Partnership and involvement of all stakeholders” – “Open door policy”
- “Good connections with school teachers”
- “Happy children and happy staff” – “Motivated staff” – “Happy parents”
- “A stress-free environment” – “Stress-reducing not stress-inducing” – “Supportive to children, families and wider communities”
- “Less paperwork, more time with children”
- “Note: it is all connected with care, but we are educators/ teachers”
- “An ECCE pre-school class should be graduate-led (level 7/8 for teachers and level 6 minimum for staff)” – “Mercer pay scales should apply” (see glossary)

## **How quality in ELC and SAC should be measured**

Quality was clearly seen to be multi-faceted:

- “Affordable and accessible and highly qualified, well-paid staff”
- “By teachers’ qualifications and experience (should be reflected in pay and conditions)”
- “By the outcomes of children”
- “Aistear and Síolta (QAP) plus newer research” – “Rewarding people based on where they are at”
- “Joint inspections and one governing body” – “Self-auditing by trusted professionals” – “A more experiential approach” – “Not having a focus on excellence, as per Department of Education and Skills (DES), creates a competitive not collaborative sector”
- “Through mentoring, observation, hands-on support and reflection” – “Collaborative networks of support, especially in rural areas” – “Less ticking boxes”
- “It is impossible to measure, as it is subjective”
- “I would like to give feedback on quality of service from Pobal, DES, Tusla, DCYA etc.”

## **Should funding to raise and support quality be tied to a quality threshold or structured to incentivise continuous improvement?**

- “It should go to better salaries, proper pay scales (based on qualifications and experience), working conditions and CPD (incentives)” – “Funding needed for third-level education, upgrading buildings, equipment etc” – “Degrees should be CPD and fully-funded”
- “It should be structured, giving a scale to clear guidance to incentivise quality/ continuous improvement and recognising quality that is already there”
- “Approach needs to be all-encompassing, both supporting those that need to improve and rewarding those that already deliver high quality”
- “If funding was linked to inspections, you would need consistency in inspections and it would be de-motivating for those that ‘failed’”
- “Quality comes from within – an intrinsic motivation”
- “Look at New Zealand Education Review Office Evaluation Model – based on being very well placed to offer a quality service”

## **How to avoid the risk of creating a two-tier system (if additional funding was tied to quality)**

- “Quality is being provided now (policy makers should come and visit), it has to be paid for”
- “Everyone wants to provide quality, but not everyone has the support and resources” – “Offer the support needed, incl. training, mentoring and CPD during hours” – “standards should be clear for services to follow”
- “Don’t tie quality to funding” – “Tie funding to wages and sustainability” – “Quality should be a separate issue assessed by one single inspection (build on DES inspections for ECCE)” – “Happy to have targeted supports for vulnerable children and children with disabilities”
- “Pay the teachers based on qualifications and pay scales” – “Evidence suggests that quality is linked to qualifications”
- “Use parents’ questionnaire to be sure services are being delivered to the same standard”
- “Split between private and community should be erased”
- “Note: we already have a two-tier system with higher and lower capitation” – “Under 3s losing out, needs degree-led workforce” – “Fund whole sector equally”

## **Final comments in relation to the interlinked nature of policy objectives**

- “Funding – recognise the work and sector, pay what is deserved and give fair working conditions” – “Pay us as teachers. It is an investment for the future. It works in other countries”
- “Government policy appears to prioritise parents over workers” – “All recent funding has gone into affordability” – “If there is no workforce, there will be no services”
- “There is an urgency. Many may not survive to see out this process. We were essential for return to work after lockdown and haven’t been recognised in budget”
- “Too many departments to answer to”
- “Focus on supporting quality, rather than assessing quality”
- “There can be a gap between policy objectives and reality e.g. NCS sponsorship”
- “Quality and funding issues cannot be removed from sustainability”
- “Need for more on the ground consultation with on the ground workers – listening to staff and valuing them”
- “There is great potential. A deeply co-ordinated approach and shared effort is needed”
- “Action is needed, not documents for the bookshelf”

## **D. Ensuring Availability of ELC and SAC places (26 Participants)**



## **Structure of session**

The discussion in this session began, once again, with an open invitation for participants to make any comments they wished in relation to 'Availability'.

There followed a presentation giving context, including data showing that:

- Capital funding has increased capacity and that significant further funding is earmarked.
- The number of services is relatively stable, but there has been a considerable increase in service size (pre-Covid-19).
- There is evidence (pre-Covid-19) of emerging pressure on places for 0-3 year olds and on both full and part-time places, as a whole.
- A large proportion of services are sessional and/ or seasonal.
- One in four parents report difficulty in arranging ELC/ SAC has prevented them looking for a job, whilst two in five say it has restricted their hours of work/ study.
- More ELC and SAC places to meet parental needs is a top priority for parents.

Participants were invited to make any comments they wished to in response to the presentation.

Breakout group discussions were held to discuss the availability of ELC and SAC options, the barriers to offering services to meet needs and what would motivate participants to offer such services.

The group then looked at the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach for ensuring demand meets supply and what could be done to ensure parents' needs and preferences are met.

Further questions were then asked in respect of the proportion of services that operate all year round and the variability of opening hours.

A final opportunity was given to make any additional comments.

## **Summary of Initial Comments**

- “It needs to be quality places, not just quantity. Sustainable and viable. Affordable” – “It all comes back to underfunding”
- “Availability of services depends on stable availability of staff (i.e. being professionally paid with decent working conditions)” – “Need greater access to different types of staff, including non-graduate staff”
- “Some places have lost smaller services which offer different choices/ meet different needs” – “Childminders have been largely excluded from this process and are a key resource” – “Some areas flooded with sessional services”
- “No yellow pack model. Quality costs money. (Note: private can be quality)”
- “Availability needs to include less advantaged children and rural areas and children of all ages, especially babies” – “(No. of baby places is reduced due to sleep and rest requirement from Tusla – this impacts on women returning to workforce)” – “Need incentives to provide for babies and toddlers”
- “Need to include all children according to their needs and the needs of the community – creating parental choice and flexible hours” – “Disadvantaged children are being further disadvantaged by NCS” – “NCS not supporting SAC”
- “Opening hours should be decided by the provider”
- “There needs to be a geographically sensitive way of assessing demand and planning locally – issues are diverse across the sector”
- “Greater need for capital grants, for both public and private providers – note: issues with planning permissions”
- “There is a need for inter-departmental collaboration – minimise the admin (particular children are being disadvantaged)”

## **Additional Comments after Presentation**

- “Under-3s seriously underfunded – no higher capitation for this group” – “Babies are starting later, this impacts on staff ratios” – “Providing for under-3s not sustainable – higher qualified staff not being attracted”
- “SAC seriously underfunded”
- “Waiting lists are concerning – huge demand for ECCE places” – “If you can't get staff, places will be limited – lack of state investment”
- “There is often availability, just not where required” – “No waiting lists in disadvantaged areas doesn't mean all needs are met” – “Most disadvantaged areas don't have ELC/SAC”

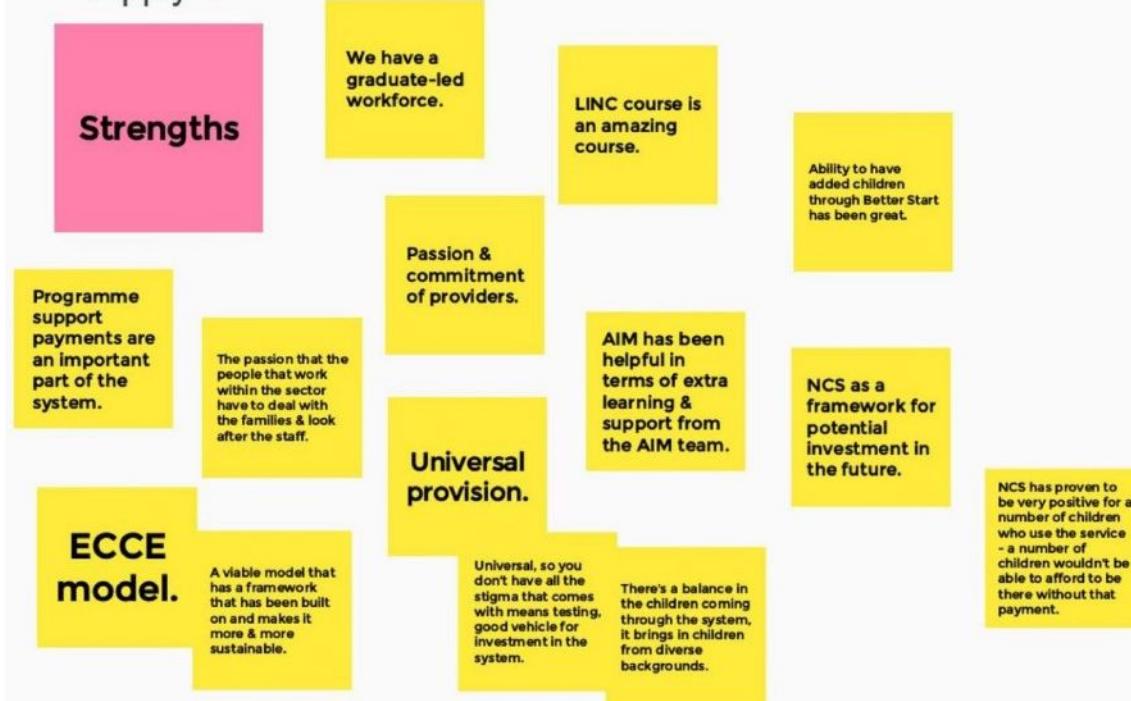
- “Waiting lists include people registered for following year ECCE, future enrolments not actually waiting” – “Some parents may put names down for multiple services”
- “Parents lack choices” – “Affordability is such a big issue that it can over-shadow others” – “Communication with parents who do not speak English is a problem”
- “Increasing places seems to be economy driven, rather than education driven”
- “Hard to be sustainable and to accommodate parents’ choices at same time”
- “ECCE is a viable model”
- “Is data available geographically?” – “Can ELC and SAC be separated in data?”
- “Lack of investment in outdoor facilities”
- “Professionalisation of sector is needed, incl. SAC”

## Insights from Breakout Discussions

- “Under-3s services not viable, need support and funding” – “Babies need a system with both well-compensated parental leave and ELC services”
- “ECCE seems to be only viable service” – “Need €100 for ECCE” – “Over-capacity in ECCE leading to unsustainability”
- “Capacity is available in some places, but no incentive to broaden services – money is a motivator”
- “Parents want choice – not many want 45 hours per week, flexibility is key” – “Parents only want morning ECCE sessions” – “Services not catering for shift work” – “Some parents need longer hours”
- “Funding based on hours attended doesn’t support sustainability – inconsistency creates staffing issues – staff need to be paid regardless of hours”
- “Large services are taking children from smaller services” – “Leaving issues to market is not efficient or effective”
- “Staff shortages preventing expansion – high staff turnover very problematic”
- “Covid-19 has impacted attendance”
- “NCS not supporting SAC” – “NCS not supporting vulnerable children and families as much as it should” – “Some children need support/ intervention, even if parent(s) not working/ training” – “25 hours NCS out of term resource could be better used with extra term-time session”
- “No AIM support for SAC” – “AIM is inconsistent, no visits for a year” – “AIM needs to extend beyond ECCE session” – “AIM needs to be available for under 3s”
- “Leadership for Inclusion Programme (LINC) is very beneficial, but if you have existing specialism/ qualification, it shouldn’t have to get repeated just to get money”

- “Sponsor referrals not working for vulnerable children”
- “Financial add-ons (LINC, AIM, higher capitation) need to be integrated, rather than add-on”
- “Lack of collaboration/ support/ priority from planning departments”
- “Bureaucracy is cumbersome/ soul destroying” – “Easy for parents to apply for funding, not providers” – “Pobal compliance could be simpler” – “Need more admin support/ admin professionalisation”

**What are the strengths/weaknesses of the current approach for ensuring that demand for early learning and care and school age childcare meets supply ?**



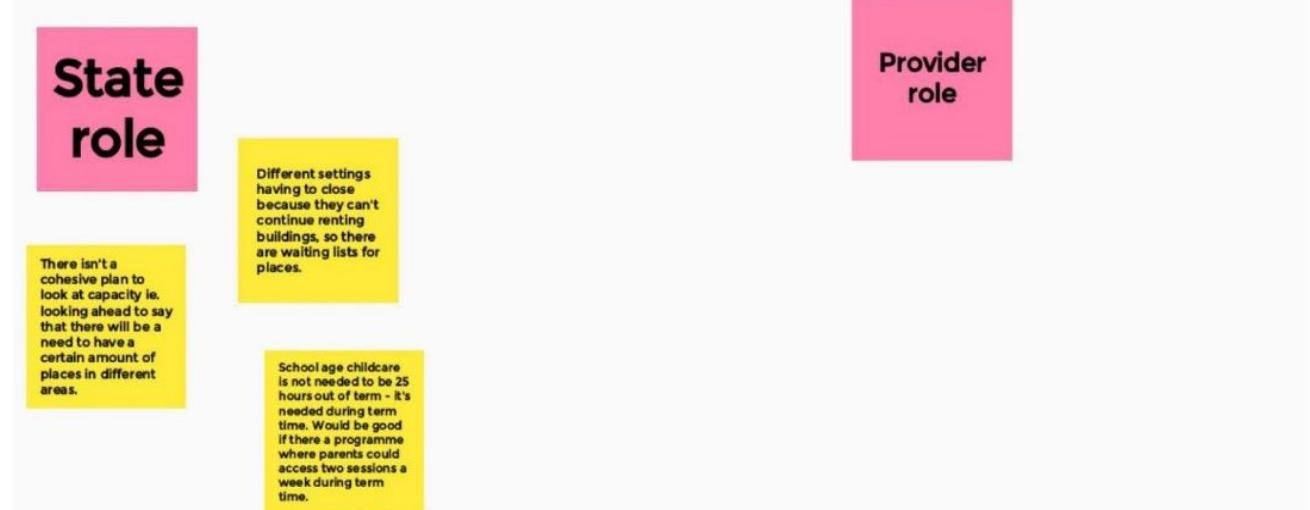
(Comments on Post-its above are duplicated for ease of legibility in Appendix 'A' at the end of this report.)

What are the strengths/weaknesses of the current approach for ensuring that demand for early learning and care and school age childcare meets supply ?



(Comments on Post-its above are duplicated for ease of legibility in Appendix 'A' at the end of this report.)

What can be done to provide parents with ELC and SAC services that meets their needs and preferences? What roles should the state and providers play ?



(Comments on Post-its above are duplicated for ease of legibility in Appendix 'A' at the end of this report.)

## **Comments in respect of factors relating to the proportion of services that operate all year round (currently under one in three)**

- “Needs to reflect needs/ wants of children and families” – “A mix of paid leave and services” – “(Note: some playschools are a choice, rather than childcare, we need choice)”
- “Flexible services are essential and appreciated by families”
- “If all services were available all the time, it might distract from parental contact with children”
- “Most of workforce are women with childcare needs of their own (e.g. I work with local childminders to give parents choice, as I run ECCE to suit my family’s needs)”
- “Depends on geographic and demographic needs”
- “Children at risk need supports in ELC and SAC”
- “Should aim for 50%” – “Two in three”
- “Should be funded enough to allow for vacancies during year”

## **Comments in respect of the variability of opening hours**

- “There shouldn’t be a minimum”
- “It should depend on needs of families in area” – “Feasibility studies should be done before registration/ planning permission for new services to evidence needs” – “A central body should oversee quality, information, programme delivery, finances and strategic planning”
- “Children would benefit from a consistent no of hours, maybe three-five” – “Consistency gives better outcomes for children”
- “45 hours per week to reflect diversity of working patterns” – “10 hours per day”
- “Providers need the same breaks as schools – work-life balance”
- “Encourage model via sustainable funding”

## **Additional comments**

- “Children’s needs first, then parents, then providers, then government policy” – “It needs a quality focus” – “Universality is key”
- “Staff, staff, staff – sort staff conditions/ pay scales first to sort retention” – “Pay non-contact time” – “(Wage subsidies are currently making a difference to sustainability)” – “Graduates are leaving for government roles” – “State should take on salary plus pension bill”
- “Realistic funding needed” – “It takes approx. 25 hours to deliver 15 hours of ECCE” – “ECCE is very underpaid, hours and weeks need extending” – “Claw back for time not attended needs to stop to help financial planning” – “Under-3 model unsustainable plus quality focus is on ECCE”
- “Funding model for community services pre 2007 was more sustainable and supportive of staff and families”
- “Services should be planned to meet needs of community”
- “Introduction of school meals programme would make a big difference”
- “AIM system is helpful but needs to cater for all, incl. SAC” – “Needs therapeutic interventions to support it” – “If AIM collaborated with Tusla earlier then targeted supports could be offered” – “AIM staff not paid enough” – “Current sponsorship scheme not effective” – “Parents don’t want stigma”
- “Programme Support Payment (PSP) completely insufficient given level of admin required and doesn’t cover any element of curriculum”
- “Many SAC services ready to support disadvantaged families, but currently at risk of closure”
- “NCS a good framework, but has increased admin and reduced sustainability” – “NCS as a labour activation model has removed supports from families who need them, but don’t meet funding criteria” – “NCS should be available to SAC during term time” – “NCS needs to be child-centred”
- “There will need to be commitment through implementation phase of plan” – “Lack of cohesive planning impacts availability and sustainability” – “Need multi-year capital funding to aid rational planning, alongside services only funded where evidenced need”
- “Number of departments, platforms, systems and complexity of rules need to be simplified” – “Timelines too late” – “Hard to get through to Pobal” – “Assigned link in County Childcare Committee (CCC) no longer there, less local support” – “Hive not fit for purpose” – “Small providers getting overwhelmed”

## **D. Sustainability of ELC and SAC places (23 Participants)**



## Structure of session

An initial presentation was made to give context, i.e.:

- Growing state investment in subsidy schemes.
- The relative reliance of different services on parental income/ state subsidies.
- The variety of sustainability challenges reported by providers:
  - HR/IR issues
  - Governance issues
  - Loss of premises
  - Population/ demographic changes
  - Changes to subsidy schemes
  - Changes to regulations
  - Succession
  - Managing multiple funder requirements/ service objectives
  - Financial planning
  - Finances
- Supports offered to individual services via case management process (CCCs and Pobal), Sustainability Fund (DCEDIY – €600,000 in 2018 and 2019) and the new Covid-19 Sustainability Support Fund.

Participants were invited to make any initial comments they wished to in response to the presentation.

Two breakout group discussions were held. The first to discuss the biggest challenges in relation to sustainability of services and a second to look at what could improve the sustainability of services.

## Initial Comments

- “Low investment is key challenge (note: EU averages and UNICEF recommendations)” – “Low pay and poor working conditions are key issues”
- “Difficult to recruit and retain staff” – “Recruitment difficult particularly for afternoon sessions” – “Degree staff leaving” – “Who will take over from me?” – “No sick pay” – “Stress”
- “It is impossible to keep up to date with changes in funding and rules” – “Impossible to plan and budget” – “Administration burden is such a strain” – “So much admin, we are forgetting to look after children, should use data on PIP and Hive, rather than constantly having to re-send” – “Needing additional admin staff” – “Engaging with National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI), Better Start etc. is fantastic, but large admin burden”

- “New layers have added workload with no sign of funding on the frontline” – “How much of budget goes to Better Start, compared to services directly?” – “Funding is going to parents and not going to services”
- “NCS is difficult for parents to access” – “Not fit for purpose” – “Time on paper applications not viable, can’t be backdated” – “Parents who are not married are getting great subsidy, some now not getting what they need”
- “Whilst LINC is great, it has made staff more attractive to outside employers and created a large amount of new work”
- “SAC has subsidised baby and toddler rooms for many years. Services that provide SAC have lower costs” – “Introduction of SAC ratios will mean we won’t be able to subsidise baby and toddler services” – “SAC numbers have halved this year”
- “Our ECCE rooms are subsidising baby and toddler rooms. We have to turn away babies, when we don’t have enough ECCE children”
- “Worried about when Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is stopped and rates waiver finishes – we won’t be able to maintain wage levels” – “EWSS is making us look sustainable”
- “Grandfathering coming to an end next year will be a big sustainability issue”
- “Children should not have a price on their heads, it should be centre funding, currently if a child is out, how do we survive?”
- “No motivation for new services to open”
- “Very worried about a potential cap on fees”
- “What is role of County Council planners in checking sustainability of services, before they grant planning permission?”
- “Evidence shows a public model would be best approach”

## **Biggest challenges in relation to sustainability of services**

- ‘For me, as a sole provider, it is the staffing crisis. I have to close service every time I need time off’
- “Recruitment and retention” – “Staff salaries need to be increased to retain level 8 staff” – “Signing on over the summer is not attractive to staff”
- “Low investment results in high fees and poor pay and conditions, need to increase towards 1% of GDP (UNICEF) and invest in salary scales – quality costs”
- “Administration is enormous – issues with Hive” – “Taking part in heavily funded programmes such as Better Start creates even more work” – “Hard to access information on what supports are available” – “Keeping up with updates from DCYA/ Pobal/ HSE/ NCS is a full-time job” – “Don’t know from Sept to Sept where we are going, as rules change so radically”

- “Sponsorship bodies (incl. Public Health Nurses [PHNs] not aware of NCS and their role” – “NCS model is flawed, very time-consuming, can be very slow (services end up subsidising until approval), loophole for parents who are not married” – “NCS causing issues within areas of deprivation, families not eligible under income assessed and lack of knowledge across parents and sponsor bodies” – “NCS possibly worse scheme so far, why change fees on a child’s birthday?” – “Parents/ families are unaware of eligible criteria for sponsor body supports”
- “AIM funding is not attractive when hours are usually 15 per week”
- “Operating on a 38-week model, with no increase in ECCE funding” – “Not having ability to mitigate income in ECCE service, as we have no ability to charge” – “Increase ECCE age range to sessional age range to allow services to take younger child, without penalty of rates” – “Having to put higher qualified staff in ECCE room, hard for baby rooms”
- “We subsidise baby room with ECCE. We have turned away children under 1, leaving them in unregulated, uninspected care”
- “After-school always supported babies and wobblers, now after-school numbers have dropped by more than a third, I am concerned if we can sustain baby room”
- “Have taken on new staff, but will be in trouble when EWSS ends”
- “Grandfathering coming to an end will be a huge problem”
- “Unable to budget for year, as funding depends on number of children and is released at different stages of year” – “Issue of completing registrations, where funding is not backdated”
- “Please start funding centres as the professional education establishments that they are plus pay salaries to those that have qualifications”
- “Market-based model is a challenge, affordability and decent pay are placed in conflict. Research shows public model works best in other countries”

## **What could improve the sustainability of services?**

- “If we knew EWSS was permanent, we could look at salary increases”
- “Ability to fund all staff based on qualifications and experience, not the room they work in” – “Real on-ground investment to boost morale and retention, we need people who feel content and valued to deliver high-quality education and care”
- “Recognition of workload providers face – non-contact time for all staff – compulsory CPD”
- “Professionalisation of sector” – “A wage scale linked to wage subsidy” – “Salary scales” – “No signing on” – “Better working conditions” – “Pensions”

- “A funded training programme so those considering a degree would see a point and a reward at end” – “Career paths” – “Investment in early years teachers”
- “A funding model that is clear and concise and that can be relied on to be in place for the long-term” – “Long-term plans with consultation and respect for individual needs of services” – “Future-proofing, so that incomes are protected and staff can be paid a professional wage” – “(Old Dept. of Justice staffing grant offered some security, enabling staff to invest in car loans etc.)”
- “Centres working on an annual budget (once-off annual funding), leading into a five-year plan (incl. capital), similar to a school budget” – “Whole service SLAs (annual funding, hours of service, conditions to raise quality, good governance, end of year annual audit, pay scales, CPD, implementation of Siolta)” – “Not funded by children or hours” – “Focus on funding, not attendance”
- “Streamlined inspections”
- “A public model similar to primary education. State pays full costs of wages according to a scale, in return for fee caps, governance etc.”
- “A change of attitude” – “Respect and recognition” – “Services are not big bad children to be beaten with a stick” – “Raise the status of the sector as a career option to attract and keep the best and most passionate”

## **F. Administration of State Funding for ELC and SAC**

(26 Participants)



## Structure of session

The session began with participants being asked to give a one-word reaction to the word 'Administration' (see word cloud below).

A presentation followed giving context, including:

- Significant increases in amount of state funding for ELC and SAC.
- An overview of administration and accountability requirements that apply to both grantors and grantees.
- The range of existing schemes and supports and mitigation for administration.

Participants were asked to share any experiences of funds that were administered particularly well and also to make any comments that they wished to do so in response to the presentation.

Breakout group discussions were held to discuss issues and challenges faced with how funding schemes are currently administered.

A second breakout group was held to identify potential solutions that would help make the administration of a new funding model easier/ assist providers with their work.

Finally, participants were asked if they could remove one administrative task, what would it be?

### Q1. Please give a one word reaction to the word 'Administration' .....

Mentimeter



## **Experiences of funds that were administered particularly well**

- ECCE – “probably the most straightforward” (although some disagree seeing it as “burdensome and placing responsibility for attendance on providers, not parents” – “If funding went to parents, it would cut out so much admin and let childcare services care for children”)
- “Wage subsidy during lockdown – Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) – EWSS”
- “The new reopening grant was quick and delivered very fast”
- “County Council Covid-19 grant had no conditions (why was DCYA grant different?)” – “County Council grant given promptly”
- “Capital fund this summer. Details concise. Easy to access. Funding in straight away” – “Capital grants”
- “AIM worked well when we needed it”
- “NSAI and Hanen grants are painless”
- “Previous EOCP grant looked at whole picture and not weekly number of children, it had faults, but not as many as current scheme”
- “Too many schemes” – “NCS a nightmare” – “Streamlining of ECCE into Hive ridiculous” – “Nobody in Pobal knows what is happening” – “Conflicting info from different people” – “Schemes announced too late for us to assess them” – “One central body for all admin would be a great help”

## **Comments in response to presentation**

- “Too many schemes, ridiculous amount of paperwork and compliance”
- “Why aren’t funds paid directly to parents to cut out admin?” – “We are facilitators of funds that aren’t our money, yet we are held accountable for it” – “We are like a social welfare office, we don’t want to know parents’ financial issues”
- “Can schemes be designed to be user-friendly?” – “Every funding is complicated and difficult to account for” – “It changes all the time”
- “The PSP underestimates the amount of time providers have to spend on administration, with little/ no help from Pobal” – “PSP does not recognise work done on NCS”
- “NCS not streamlined and definitely not fit for purpose, too much tracking” – “NCS fee calculations change” – “Remove NCS” – “NCS and ECCE a nightmare”
- “Why is communication with providers last minute on Thursday or Friday?” – “Constant repetition of requirements”
- “DCYA needs to look at a new scheme operator, if Pobal can’t fulfil requirements”

## **Bigest issues and challenges faced**

- Repetition of forms (x6) – Admin should be streamlined
- Complexity (x6)
- Time-consuming (x5)
- NCS adjusting hours weekly (x5)
- No/ under-resourced support (x5)
- Shouldn't be a providers' issue to get parents funding towards fees (x5) – “When parents are confirming, include fees, so no paperwork for service”
- Too many changes (x4) – Constantly changing rules – Higher Capitation changing rules every year
- Assumption providers are dishonest (x4)
- Being responsible for loss of funding, if hours change (x3) (“It should be great if parents collect children early!”)
- Inefficient systems (x3)
- Taking away from caring and educating children (x3)
- Too many schemes (x2)
- Counting hours (x2)
- The Hive and Pobal (x2)
- No flexibility with errors on Hive (x2)
- Higher capitation (x2) – uploading same info every year
- “NCS Contracts – provider should only have to accept”
- NCS fee calculations
- Age dependency of NCS
- “Six hours spent yesterday amending claims”
- “Parents’ portal and providers’ portal not synced”
- “Parents too much control over NCS – constantly waiting for confirmations”
- “Parents don’t understand NCS”
- “Scrap NCS”
- “If Tuesday deadline missed, funding lost”
- “Draconian contracts”
- “Compliance”
- “Not fit for purpose”
- “Parents could get support from Pobal”
- “Brackets used for CCP were more functional”
- “Contracts heavily weighted towards Dept.”
- “Bring NCS closer to ECCE”
- “Ticking boxes”
- “Very adversarial attitude during Pobal audits”
- “Administrative burden – all fee administration”
- “Monitoring ECCE daily attendance”

## **What could be done to make the administration of a new Funding Model easier?**

- “A central funding system administering wages and operation subsidy, not unlike schools” – “Salary scales for staff and funding for maintenance etc.” – “A central body to take over all the admin would be amazing – let services focus on quality”
- “Make parental declarations an online process”
- “Parents should pay full fees and look after funding themselves” – “Stop requiring parental confirmation on system, signed contract should suffice” – “Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) proves money can be paid directly to people” – “Parents should have fee confirmed when confirming registration” – “Parents should declare attendance and services be sent spreadsheet to confirm” – “For many the universal with all its admin is not worth it for €20 a week, parents don’t mind paying extra”
- “Get rid of hourly structure (makes children a commodity and encouraging services to pick the reliable ones) and weekly administration of NCS – a disaster system” – “A nightmare – service should be paid monthly” – “Base NCS on eight hours per day (higher may suit parents, but is not good practice)” – “Running ECCE and NCS wraparound is ridiculous” – “Services shouldn’t suffer when child doesn’t attend agreed hours” – “It shouldn’t cost parents to spend time with their child” – “Every child has different end dates, difficult to keep up – reduce confusion and uncertainty”
- “Services may head towards a model of avoiding government schemes”
- “Allow reduced hours in September for children to adjust”
- “Change language when a child does not attend, this is not ‘over-claiming’” – “We can’t pay staff or reward them for training and qualifications when there is so much uncertainty”
- “Fund administrators appropriately to take this work away from practitioners and providers” – “Reduce constant messaging from agencies”
- “A portal that functions” – “Get rid of Hive (or PIP)” – “Connect parent and provider portals, so CHICK numbers correlate” – “Intuitive, efficient, streamlined computer systems” – “CCCs given more access (they cannot see Hive)” – “Pobal and Hive need to be more collaborative”
- “Less repeating” – “Parents keep coming in with new codes trying to get higher subsidy”
- “Streamline time inspectors are on site – request data in advance”
- “Non-contact hours should be for curriculum planning etc., not only admin”
- “Allow us to register ECCE children in April/ May/ June to help us plan” – “PSP should be clear from September to allow planning”

- “Provide documents in a timely manner – rules before contracts – services find themselves non-compliant for rules they didn’t even know about”
- “Full training on how the model is set up”
- “Let us answer to one body” – “Responsibility appropriately shared between parents, providers, Dept., Pobal, CCC etc.” – “Admin put back on Pobal” – “Localise what you can” – “Streamline and take out micro-managing and rules that impact on quality” – “Think of us like schools” – “Support lines should be open and available”
- “Contract for the full year (a service model not a capitation model)” – “Negotiated contracts, annual budgets” – “Fix subsidy rates for the year (Aug to Aug)”
- “One scheme”

## **What more could the state do to assist providers with their administrative work?**

- “Have a state funded system, as with schools”
- “Scrap NCS” – “Scrap the Hive”
- “Scrap hour counting (children’s’ hours are not a commodity – over mid-term people are taking days just because they want funding)” – “Streamline to full/ part/ sessional” – “Allow us to submit opening hours as child’s hours” – “Daily/ weekly rates”
- “Take away unnecessary admin work” – “Put paperwork online” – “Stop annual repetition of inputs (e.g. Higher Capitation)” – “Put fees in with registration process, so Pobal don’t need to check”
- “State do admin direct with parents” – “Pay parents not providers”
- “One application per year, which can be altered without needing to reapply”
- “Have sufficient staff available in September to give support needed”
- “Contracts, rules and compliance available by April each year” – “Required documentation in a timely manner”
- “Finance administrator or access to one” – “PSP could be clearly laid out, so that providers can plan how much non-contact time to allocate” – “Non-contact hours should be at least five to 10 per week to cover planning, cleaning, prep, observations etc.”
- “Pobal inspections should give notice” – “Providers should be trusted as partners”
- “We need to say no to schemes until systems are fair” – “Offer to take over private services!” – “Totally inefficient practice from DCYA and Pobal”

## If you could remove one administrative task, what would it be?

- “Hour counting and rates – stop tracking the child, fund the service” – “Signing children in and out of schemes, rather than just service” – “Revert to sessional/part/full”
- “The Hive – all of that!”
- “NCS plus written contracts with parents – it should be set amount of funding like ECCE”
- “Fee changes – all fee administration should be removed from providers”
- “Waiting on parent confirmation – displaying ECCE and CCSP contracts, parents have signed and reviewed, why display as well?”
- “Logging ECCE each year (it could be done for two years)”
- “Spending hours trying to get through on phone”
- “Reading hundreds of pages of how-to guides – inefficient, ineffective systems”
- “Pointless notifications on Hive and PIP – one communication channel”
- “There has to be communication between departments. Some Tusla requirements have a cost that is not met by Pobal”
- “All of us are being penalised for a few who exploit the system”
- “Providers need change NOW”

## **G. Role of Capital Funding in ELC and SAC (19 Participants)**



## **Structure of session**

The session began with participants making whatever initial comments on 'Capital Funding' that they wished.

A presentation followed giving context, including:

- Reference to the large scale state capital funding that happened between 2000 and 2010 (€620 million).
- Annual capital funding for ELC and SAC 2015 – 2020 (between €6.8 and €9.6 million per year).
- The objectives of annual capital funding (to increase capacity and maintain and improve services).
- Details of AIM capital funding (€850k in 2020).
- Allocations for large scale ELC and SAC capital investment under Project Ireland 2040 (€250 million).

Following the presentation, further comments were invited. These have been grouped with other comments below under the title "Summary of Initial Comments".

Breakout group discussions were held to discuss strengths and weaknesses of current programmes.

Participants were invited to suggest any physical infrastructure that they thought every service should have.

A second breakout group was then held to suggest possible solutions for improvement. Participants were asked particularly to comment on how future capital funding should be prioritised and what enhancements to physical infrastructure are most needed?

Finally, participants were asked for comments on any changes that could be made to the way capital funding is administered and if they had any additional comments that they wished to make, before the session finished.

## **Summary of Initial Comments**

- “Current system is not working” – “separate strands not working” – “Feels like a lottery, rather than a response to need in area” – “Too rigid and timeframes too tight” – “Two identical applications, one approved, one declined”
- “More capital funding is needed – a long-term capital funding plan – based on geographic demand (some areas have over-provision)” – “Larger funding for building extensions/ creating additional places” – “Maintenance of quality important and refurbishments too” – “Need to increase limit of 50k for private creches (closer to 100k)” – “Fire reg. updates have cost us a bomb” – “Is investment for providers and parents or will it be for TUSLA/ Pobal?”
- “Why is multi-annual funding not an option for large projects?”
- “More audits and reviews”
- “Need for one straightforward, streamlined, simpler, efficient, fair, child-centred system” – “Too much work and research needed” – “No ‘yellow pack’ model – can’t cut corners with children’s lives”
- “It will allow greater accessibility”
- “Fear that capital will be focused on SAC”
- “Need to encourage both public and private sectors – needs to be inclusive – and based on needs of providers (not categories)” – “Currently a two-tier system” – “What is the concern regarding asset ownership? (a query regarding Project Ireland 2040)” – “Private owners need certainty to make investments”
- “Capital funding can mean loss of independent businesses” – “Surely community creches are an unfair interference in the market?” – “Dublin City Council (DCC) are building a crèche which will cause difficulties for existing operators”
- “Has 2020 funding actually been spent? – Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) loans can be used for childcare facilities”
- “Note: natural play areas” – “Covered outdoor play areas for all”
- “Would like to hear more regarding new planning guidelines and when universal design needs to be implemented”

<b>Strengths of Current Programmes</b>	<b>Weaknesses of Current Programmes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Funding available annually”</li> <li>• “Available to both private and community” – “everyone can apply” – “permits expansion” – “help towards building or refurbishment and long-term maintenance of buildings and resources, very important”</li> <li>• “Community services can meet costs arising from policy requirements”</li> <li>• “Seems like AIM funding for adaptation for specific student needs was helpful”</li> <li>• “Actual application form is quite easy”</li> <li>• “Reopening grant applications were straightforward”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Amount too low – often not enough to complete job to a high standard”</li> <li>• “Too specific, not needs-based” – “Need audits of needs at a local level” – “Too Dept. led” – “Limited scope” – “No focus on quality” – “Should be able to apply for refurbishments” – “More focus on maintenance” – “Doesn’t cover costs for private providers arising from policy/regulation changes” – “Needs more focus on disadvantaged children”</li> <li>• “Cannot spend before approval” – “Getting three quotes can be impossible”</li> <li>• “Difference between community and private” – “Private services excluded from strands” – “New services excluded” – “In past some CCCs may have shown favouritism”</li> <li>• “Can lead to over-supply – shouldn’t make other services unsustainable”</li> <li>• “Complicated applications – tedious procedures”</li> <li>• “Too short timeframes – would like to access year round – rules too tight”</li> <li>• “Services closing because they can’t access capital for enhancements”</li> </ul>

## Suggestions for physical infrastructure every service should have

- (Covered) outdoor/ all-weather area (x10)
- Staff room (x5)
- Separate sleep rooms (x4)
- A storage room (x3)
- An office (x2)
- Fire reg. compliance
- A sluice room for mops, hoovers etc.
- Indoor gym area
- Sensory room
- Individual rooms for specific use, e.g. arts etc.

- A kitchenette
- Nursing rooms
- Second-floor fire escape
- “The issue is planning permission and adequate funding”

## Priorities for future capital funding

- Local need (x6)/ needs-based (x3) – “CCCs should have role” – “When registration is complete, Tusla will have evidence for where investment is needed”
- To rebuild services (x2) – large scale capital investment needed (x5) – long-term plans (x2)
- Maintenance and quality (x4) – to keep services open – “Crèches are closing at an alarming rate”
- Link to energy efficiency (x3)
- Covered outdoor play (x3)
- A capital staffing grant (x3) – “Something similar to EWSS”
- Level playing field for all providers – more fair – no displacement (x2) – “Something that is rolling through the year”
- Extensions
- Sensory rooms
- “Universal guidelines as a framework for future strands”
- Capacity issues
- Public/ private partnerships – interest free loans
- “Split between new buildings, maintenance/ refurbishment, resources/ capacity”
- “In the past, many services received capital funding without planning permission, fire certs etc. – it was all bums on seats, not quality”
- “Pay scales, job security, higher morale”
- “More investment is needed – more collaboration between government agencies to give more holistic approach”

## Enhancements to physical structure most needed?

- Covered play/ outdoor/ all-weather areas (x8) – landscaping of gardens and space – natural settings (x4) – roof gardens in urban areas (x2)
- Energy efficiency (x7) – helps costs and health of children – Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) grants (x3), incl. for solar (x3) and air to water

- Renovations to old buildings (x3) – “Older services require large investment” – “Upgrading existing services”
- Sensory areas (x3)
- Fire regulation compliance (x2)
- Separate sleep rooms
- Extensions
- Disability access
- Kitchens
- Parking
- Rolling funding – “Stop changing goalposts, consult and inform in time to allow services to plan”

## **Changes to the way capital funding is administered**

- (Scheduled) funding cycles (x3) – ongoing funding programmes (x3)
- Long-term planning (x3)
- Efficient model – cut down on admin (x2) – faster processing – “Money paid out in first half of year to be spent by year end” – “Tell us early in year what proposed funding is”
- Put money where it is needed (x2), “Not review after review” – “Get rid of criteria”
- “Pay parents direct and fund services separately”

## **Additional comments**

- “We need more capital funding and we need to be able to spend it on what is needed” – “Individual funding depending on service need” – “Larger grants needed for essential works”
- “We need radical change” – “Sector to be seen as a whole” – “Realistic and practical solutions are needed”
- “Must mix local and national agendas”
- “Re-registering will create a lot of pressure for spaces” – “Need to fund regulatory changes” – “Regulations/ requirements change so quickly, hard to be proactive”
- “More collaboration between government agencies to give a more holistic approach to funding efficiency and effectiveness – don’t make these consultations tick-box exercises”

- “Respect and fairness – owner/ providers acknowledged for hours they put in” – “Funding model shouldn’t be divisive for profession – shouldn’t pit service types against each other”
- “If we could exempt capital grants from VAT, it would help”
- “Pay scale in line with qualifications”
- “Hopefully enough services will survive until funding model is developed – this process is heart-breaking”

## **H. Insights from ELC and SAC Practitioners**

(33 Participants)



Two additional sessions were held to ensure the overall consultation process was adequately hearing insights from ELC and SAC practitioners. These were attended by a total of 33 practitioners. The summaries below have been aggregated from feedback from both two sessions.

As with other sessions, issues of funding, wages and respect for the workforce were to the fore, with a clear view that if staff can't be retained then nothing else will matter very much.

## **Structure of sessions**

An initial general question was asked regarding what DCEDIY needed to hear.

A presentation was made to give general context, outlining:

- The aims of the new funding model (improving affordability, addressing disadvantage, ensuring sustainability, improving quality – and within that attracting and retaining a well-qualified workforce).
- Progress since 2015 (over 100,000 children benefiting from ECCE, numbers receiving subsidies has doubled, places up by 60%, AIM removing barriers, minimum qualification requirements, growing graduate employment and Learner Fund).
- Challenges (low wages, part-time and seasonal work, high turnover rates, high fees, variation in fees, difficulties for parents to pay, relatively low awareness of NCS, pressure on places, lower uptake of ECCE amongst particular groups).
- ‘What Parents Want’ – the results of a survey (highest ‘want’ was more affordable childcare).

Participants were invited to make any additional comments that they wished. These along with earlier comments are summarised below as ‘Summary of Initial Comments’

A first breakout group was held to discuss what was working well and not so well in the existing approach to funding and then a second breakout group was held to look at key priorities for the new funding model and how services would change from the perspectives of children, parents, practitioners and providers.

A final opportunity was given to make any additional comments for the consideration of the Expert Group.

## **Summary of Initial Comments**

- “Better investment needed” – “More understanding and support” – “More respect and recognition of qualifications and professionalism” – “Pay and pay scales to keep experienced staff” – “Conditions incl. sick pay, holiday pay, paid non-contact time” – “Training and education”
- “Professionalising the sector” – “Parity with junior and senior infant teachers” – “Setting the groundwork for schools”
- “One inspection body”
- “More investment in research”
- “Quality costs – parents need support, but also need a workforce paid enough to join and stay in sector”
- “Increasing investment has meant increased admin and taken time away from children”
- “Community sector is struggling with NCS (CCSP was better)” – “NCS not suitable for families not in full-time employment” – “NCS hard for people who don’t have computers/ phones” – “Lower uptake of ECCE in disadvantaged areas” – “ECCE scheme should be available all year round” – “It can be very hard to secure hours for children who genuinely need it (hard to get sponsor referrals)” – “Our opinions aren’t respected, as much as they should be”
- “One size-fits-all hasn’t worked and won’t work”
- “Current funding is for parents, where is the funding for practitioners?” – “Disappointing how little parents are concerned re quality” – “Little understanding of educational element of early years” – “Aims not explicit enough regarding wages”
- “Transparency needed regarding where money is spent” – “Need to be included in all talks affecting us” – “We are doing all the work on the ground and DCYA and TUSLA are ticking boxes – simplify it and give us time with children”
- “DCYA should pay staff direct. Pay shouldn’t be at discretion of providers”
- “We need to have idea where we are going. Will sector be nationalised? – should early years education be delivered under a for profit model? – Is a distinction being made between pre-school and full day care?”
- “Crazy that someone with a level 8 degree is earning below minimum wage”
- “I have a master’s degree and on €12 per hour. I earn €30 more than social welfare. That should be a priority to look at” – “Not everyone gets support to go to Level 7/ 8” – “I can’t stay in a career that is not sustainable for me” – “Colleagues ask me if they should do level 8. Hard to say no, but it’s a lot of work and they’re not going to get anything from it, unless they become a primary teacher”
- “I have seen a lot of practitioners leave the sector...this is where our quality comes from”

## Main insights from first breakout group (current funding model)

- “Funding not sufficient for decent pay and conditions” – “Salary scales are key to ensuring quality workforce” – “All issues stem back to a lack of recognition for staff” – “Staff need professional conditions of employment”
- “For happy children, you need happy staff, which means better pay and respect”
- “Funding is for all parents”
- “Funding isn’t working for staff or parents”
- “Continuation of wage subsidy schemes would be very beneficial”
- “Children in disadvantaged areas are being left behind – can’t access the hours they need (scheme aimed at working parents)” – “It can be very hard to secure hours for children who need it, but need sponsor, we are not respected”
- “Sick days are being used for Covid-19 testing and whilst waiting for results”
- “Paperwork is overwhelming” – “Increased funding requires too much admin, takes staff away from children” – “Hourly funding needs to stop” – “Staff are tired, being pulled in all directions” – “Need paid non-contact time to ensure quality and build supports” – “Why are staff being asked to do so much for funding for parents?” – “There has been no training for staff with scheme” – “Simplify it all and let us spend time with children”
- “NCS is not user-friendly – very hard to access at times” – “Hive not fit for purpose” – “NCS not working the way it is” – “Parents need support to talk them through NCS – (working parents do find NCS positive)”
- “There should be a 52-week option with ECCE for full day-care services” – “Professionals shouldn’t have to sign on in holidays” – “ECCE is universal, NCS needs to reflect this” – “The idea that ECCE funding can be pulled when a child misses a day is crazy, doesn’t happen in primary schools”
- “Funding for higher cap needs to go to graduate, not all staff”
- “One size doesn’t fit all and won’t – sessional and full day-care services are different, funding needs to be wrap around to suit all services”
- “Employees should be funded by government and higher capitation paid direct to staff”
- “Some people are on €12 an hour with a master’s degree and have had to pay for qualifications themselves” – “I just can’t stay in a career with no prospects for me”

<b>What is working well?</b>	<b>What is not working so well?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AIM (x7) and LINC great initiatives “but what is child supposed to do for rest of day” and “payment for level 7 worker could be improved”</li> <li>“Help from PHN is great”</li> <li>ECCE universal to all children (x5) – has highlighted value of early years education, especially the impact for disadvantaged children</li> <li>CCSP was working better than NCS (x3)</li> <li>NCS does cover school term and holiday</li> <li>Better Start Support (x2)</li> <li>“Higher Cap is a motivation”</li> <li>More courses being introduced like LINC – financial support for upskilling</li> <li>“There is funding where there wasn’t before – equipment enhanced”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More admin (x5) – NCS Hive (x4) – NCS too difficult to follow for parents (x2) – NCS not fit for purpose (x3) – no training for practitioners in NCS admin – too many emails</li> <li>Insufficient funding (x4) to ensure quality</li> <li>Low pay and conditions (x3) – no pension – no pay scales, no sick leave</li> <li>ECCE only 38 weeks (x3), staff have to sign on</li> <li>No mechanism for ensuring higher cap or LINC increase is passed to staff (x3)</li> <li>No higher cap for non-ECCE rooms (x2)</li> <li>Non-contact hours (x2) needed for room leaders</li> <li>Too many regulatory/ inspecting bodies (x2) – too many guidelines with inspections (x2)</li> <li>All is aimed at parents (x2), “Workers never considered” – “NCS a parent support model, doesn’t support services”</li> <li>“Skillset constantly changing”</li> <li>“The whole system – inconsistent quality through sector” – “Hours not working across schemes”</li> <li>AIM support only three hours</li> <li>Direct Provision excluded now</li> <li>“Government setting funding rates, but not taking responsibility for workforce”</li> <li>“Left high and dry last March”</li> <li>“I currently work with no contract, no sick pay”</li> </ul>

## **Key Priorities for new funding model**

- Retaining experienced staff/ graduate staff (x10) – i.e. pay scales and conditions
  - “Note: no job security” – “I think a huge number of people are going to leave the sector” – “People leaving will create a lot of pressure on those who stay”
- Universal childcare (x2) – equality for parents and children (x3)
- Guaranteed funding removing stress (x2) – investment in and recognition (x2) for educators and practitioners – “Shouldn’t have to spend all our time trying to get funding (overwhelming paperwork)” – admin time and responding to needs of parents
- More funding for under 3s (x2) – babies included in higher capitation
- Funding for training – more funding for upskilling (x2) – financial support towards degrees and masters (x2) – “Higher cap for staff directly”
- “Children are our priority always” – disadvantaged parents are definitely struggling (x2), “Children missing out due to eligibility” – “So many children need more than 20 hours per week” (x2) – “They aren’t even getting a hot meal”
- Better investment – “Universal funding similar to ECCE” – “Fund the places (incl. training, equipment etc.) to get better services”
- “Quality provision to ensure better outcomes for children at low cost to parents”
- “Parents could access work, if their children got more hours”
- “52-week contracts – paid for non-contact hours and non-contact weeks”
- “It should be a public sector, not a privatised one”

**If these priorities were addressed, how would services look different, from the perspective of .....**

<p><b>Children:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Happy staff and happy children – relationships would benefit (x3) – teachers have more time (x8) to support children in a relaxed environment – services more planned and cleaner (x2) – “Time would be more enriching and engaging”</li> <li>• Retention of staff (x7) leads to continuity/ consistency of care (x6), better quality services (x7) and better outcomes for children (x2) (who will become lifelong learners)</li> <li>• Staff getting recognition/ respect (x2)</li> <li>• All children having equal opportunities (x2) – “Their first experience of education and care would make them feel that they were the priority, regardless of background”</li> <li>• Sustainability (x2)</li> <li>• “I think as educators, we already give our all” (x2)</li> <li>• “More women in the workforce, better quality of life for families” – parents able to afford quality childcare. Confidence. Better work/ life balance</li> </ul>	<p><b>Practitioners:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My profession would be respected (x7) as a valid career choice” – “A more inviting area to work in and stay in” – more recognition (x4) for “Quality that is already there”</li> <li>• Less stressed (x5) – healthier, “Can afford to self-care when sick” – happier/ enjoying the moment (x5) – better quality of life/ work-life balance (x3) – “Less money worries” – “Not dependent on my partner for financial security”</li> <li>• Better pay – a pay scale – a living wage – better pay and conditions (x2) – “Not having to sign on in the summer”</li> <li>• “Better staff being attracted to sector and staying” – more committed (x2)</li> <li>• More time with children and families (x2) – children at the centre – “Strong, meaningful workplace relationships helping support the development of the children”</li> <li>• “Could access CPD without being out of pocket” – higher qualified staff – “Professionals not having to do so much paperwork and training on my own time”</li> <li>• Consistency – stability – security – quality – “I’d be able to stay in the sector that I love, that needs professionals like me”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Parents:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affordable (x4), accessible (x2) and consistent (x4)</li> <li>• Parents understanding/ respecting the value of education and staff (x4)</li> <li>• Confident in quality of care (x2) – Trust – a better partnership, staff with better understanding of child</li> <li>• More access to longer hours</li> <li>• Childcare paid for through USC or credits for parents – low cost/ free plus universal – “Quality of care shouldn’t be about income level”</li> </ul>	<p><b>Providers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less staff turnover/ better retention (x6) – high quality, highly skilled staff (x2)</li> <li>• Pay scales (x3), better pay and conditions (x3)</li> <li>• Respect and recognition (x2) – happier staff (x2) – more committed staff</li> <li>• “Insurance of income/ funding without stipulation”</li> <li>• Quality to a high standard – consistency</li> <li>• Higher equipment funding – more cleaning equipment</li> <li>• “Bigger profits for larger chains?”</li> <li>• “Provision of community well-funded services, rather than private”</li> </ul>

## **Additional comments for the consideration of the Expert Group**

- “We should be valued. Our observations often highlight developmental delays and we are ignored. We should be able to refer children for SLT etc. – Easier to assess a child in a childcare setting than in an office”
- “I can’t highlight enough the importance of sick pay – min 43/ 44 weeks funding for staff and 10 hours non-contact time per week”
- “In order to nurture strong well-rounded children, we need to nurture strong well-rounded educators”
- “Sector needs to be desirable for future practitioners or there will be no sector”
- “Funding for practitioners will allow quality to come through, childcare to be more accessible for all children and staff to be recruited and retained – educators and practitioners need to be prioritised now”
- “A more consistent approach is needed from governing bodies – huge stress created for practitioners”
- “Transparency is key”
- “Should be moving towards universal access models” – “Need a universal funding model that values all the skills needed”
- “All services should become community-based/ publicly funded to ensure quality and money going on children, not profit”
- “Early Years education needs to be re-instated and not Early Learning and Care” (x2) – “I would like to suggest that we are called Early Years teachers (that’s what children and parents call us). We are part of educational continuum – Early Years teacher evokes the educational and caring elements of our role”
- “Distinction needed between full day care and sessional/ pre-school settings. They are equal but different”
- “Review the aims of the new funding model. Issues in the sector are not being prioritised”
- “Bottom line is more funding to help – funding in the right areas, with children at the heart of Early Years – funding shouldn’t be an issue in supporting children’s education and care – a lot more investment is needed and fast”

# Glossary

**AIM** Access and Inclusion Model

**Aistear** The curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland

**BS/ Better Start** A national initiative established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to bring an integrated national approach to developing quality in Early Learning and Care (ELC)

**CCC** City/ County Childcare Committee

**CCSP** Community Childcare Subvention Programme

**CHICK code or number** Childcare Identifier Code Key

**CPD** Continuing Professional Development

**DCC** Dublin City Council

**DCEDIY** Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (formerly the Department of Children and Youth Affairs or DCYA)

**DCYA** Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now renamed the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth or DCEDIY)

**DEIS** Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

**DES** Department of Education and Skills

**ECCE** Early Childhood Care and Education

**ELC** Early Learning and Care

**ESL** English as a Second Language

**EU** European Union

**EWSS** Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

**First 5** Whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families

**GDP** Gross Domestic Product

**Grandfathering** Being exempt from a new rule by virtue of using an old rule

**Hanen Grant** Support for language development

**Hive** The dedicated early years programme portal for service providers

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- HSE** Health Service Executive
  - LINC** Leadership for Inclusion Programme
  - Mercer Pay scale** Pay scales recommended by international consultancy
  - NCIP** National Childcare Investment Programme
  - NCS** National Childcare Scheme
  - NSAI** National Standards Authority of Ireland
  - NWC** National Women's Council
  - OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
  - PHN** Public Health Nurse
  - Pobal** Pobal administer and manage Government and EU funding to address disadvantage and support social inclusion
  - Project Ireland 2040** "The government's long-term overarching investment strategy to make Ireland a better country for all of its people"
  - PSP** Programme Support Payment
  - QAP** Quality Assurance Programme
  - SAC** School Age Childcare
  - SEAI** Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland
  - Siolta** The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education
  - SLT** Speech and Language Therapist
  - Tusla** Child and Family Agency
  - TWSS** Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme
  - UNICEF** United Nations International Childrens' Emergency Fund
  - VAT** Value Added Tax
  - Yellow Pack** A generic term for cheap products/ jobs

## Appendix 'A': Comments made on 'Jamboards'

(The comments below are being duplicated here for ease of legibility)

Title	Page	Comments
Awareness of NCS	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “[Look at the stage in the process] when the public health nurse meets the parents”</li><li>• “ECCE programme is free at source – there's a simplicity there”</li><li>• “NCS have made things overly-complicated which puts people off. Make it simple”</li><li>• “Update the way parents access the NCS in terms of their chick numbers”</li><li>• “Admin has been put back to the parents. Why not fund the admin so colleagues who are familiar with it could do it”</li><li>• “Service is not user-friendly and the back-up is poor”</li><li>• “When the service was launched there was a lot of advertising – once it was launched there was no more advertising and it's down to the providers to sell it”</li><li>• “Once they introduced funding, a lot of the services were undercut”</li><li>• “[It would be good to have] spaces where parents could get help with getting their CHICK numbers”</li><li>• “But services don't have the info – it was easier in the past when services had the figures”</li><li>• “Result is that parents are being pushed back into the black market”</li><li>• “If we want European service, we need European level funding – Early Years should be free at source” level funding - early years should be free at source</li></ul>
Fee controls	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Fee control needs to be negotiated with those who are impacted the most. Sitting down and working out a service level agreement with the providers i.e. this is the amount you can do”</li><li>• “If you cap fees, you lock in wages as they are now and sustainability as it is now i.e. lowly paid people in childcare and smaller providers (70% of the country), will be kept where they are”</li><li>• “This is a massive question to be asking now, this is a future question and feels like the cart before the horse. Needs to be negotiated and agreed”</li><li>• “Fee controls are fine so long as the money for the service is provided by the government”</li></ul>

<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Fee controls contd.	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “There are only two ways that wages can increase – by funding from the government, or further investment by parents. Both sides need to be looked at”</li> <li>• “Capping fees is a central part of a public model – there has been investment, but it hasn’t come through to benefit women themselves”</li> <li>• “Wages take up 80% of the cost for services which reflects on the quality for parents. Wages need to be taken into account with any controls. You need good working conditions for practitioners in the sector”</li> <li>• “Everything starts with the staff. This whole business is staffed by women. They need proper conditions. Different premises have different rates and rents”</li> <li>• “There are good models in other countries where fees are capped and there is investment as well – a progressive model of subsidies for parents”</li> <li>• “Women’s Council is clear there needs to a national pay scale, right up to primary schools. Fee capping is one area of this, but needs to be worked in parallel”</li> <li>• “Rents are different in different areas but everyone is getting the same money. We talk about staff but the costs are important too”</li> </ul>
Changes to improve access	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We are in dire need with school-age centres at risk of closure this year – perhaps they could get a referral system through the schools so that children who need support could get access through NCS”</li> <li>• “There needs to be dedicated staffing grants for people working with children with special needs”</li> <li>• “Or a targeted approach similar to the DEIS model”</li> <li>• “There’s lots of talk about the Norwegian model but we have the Spanish model in Ireland – many teachers coming from Spain. Not good for quality or our ability to teach English as a first language”</li> <li>• “Greater access to outdoor places and natural places – particularly in urban areas. Scotland during the COVID crisis is currently using their parks for children to access”</li> <li>• “We need to emphasise natural places and natural provision.”</li> <li>• “However the problem is insurance and the lack of insurance in the sector, which could make it impossible for the use of natural places to be developed in Ireland”</li> </ul>

<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Changes to improve access contd.	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It’s not just about public investment – there need to be greater mechanisms there to encourage private investment, in the way we have for the elderly, hotel, healthcare sectors.</li> <li>• Comes back to affordability – the affordability for parents and the provision of centres”</li> <li>• “It’s one thing to take on the needs of a community, but if there aren’t people to help it won’t work. We took part in a demonstration project and that made a massive difference”</li> <li>• “I turned away 20 pre-schoolers. We have a building ready but don’t have the capital available to develop it”</li> <li>• “There has to be a needs analysis to deal with the capacity of the service to deal with children coming into the sector with additional needs/language”</li> <li>• “It’s underfunding in all areas e.g. CPD, staffing and more”</li> <li>• “The bigger issue is our inability to find staff, particularly staff with English as a first language”</li> <li>• “There isn’t the capacity there to take these children on, including funding, staffing, supports”</li> </ul>
Additional supports to mitigate early disadvantage	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Would be fabulous to recruit some family support workers. Our settings have a lot of disadvantage and we used to have that – it would make a huge difference to have that again”</li> <li>• “Would be good to have professional OT therapists e.g. a panel that we can connect to so that staff can upskill”</li> <li>• “Why can’t we use SNAs in the childcare sector – at the moment we’re restricted by regulations. They would help supplement the AIM support workers”</li> <li>• “At the moment we’re losing AIM workers to the national schools”</li> <li>• “We need lower qualified staff too e.g. as in healthcare they have orderlies, we need the support staff who would change nappies and so on”</li> <li>• “Staff working with children with special needs need to be highly qualified – a higher level of training and a higher level of pay are needed”</li> <li>• “With the professionalisation of the childcare sector, we’ve lost access to assistants who could come in to help”</li> <li>• “We should be aiming for highly qualified people in this area, and with outdoor provision”</li> <li>• “This could be a practical apprentice”</li> </ul>

<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Additional supports to mitigate early disadvantage contd.	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The provision of food within full daycare for those in need is vitally important – the government could quite easily open that back up again. It should also include training for staff around healthy eating etc.”</li> <li>• “In a primary school they aren’t worried about losing their teachers because of numbers as they are DEIS schools – we should have that model, so that we’re not worried about losing staff because of numbers”</li> <li>• “Meals should be funded (and settings) shouldn’t be worried about trying to keep their heads above water”</li> </ul>
Actions for government to reduce inequalities	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Look at a new model where the money follows the child – look at it from the child out rather than from the benefits for providers, and from a much earlier age”</li> <li>• “Note: think it would be a bad idea to bring people into the sector who are not qualified – research has shown that it’s important to have qualified staff”</li> <li>• “We need to look at a more targeted approach to funding when looking at the most disadvantaged cases – a staffing grant is best there”</li> <li>• “Targeting those in the local community, having a focus of outdoor activities. Nature deficit is being diagnosed now”</li> <li>• “The family support workers are ideal for wrap-around care, and we need funds to recruit these people”</li> <li>• “If a child is deemed to need additional access in the classroom, I can’t take them. Reducing ratios costs more money, especially if you are on higher capitation”</li> <li>• “There are huge benefits of an SNA teacher to a child with special needs, but we can’t employ them as they aren’t a Level 5”</li> </ul>
Actions for providers to reduce inequalities	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Providers who refuse access to children with special needs should have to explain their actions – children with special needs in my setting have been refused by other settings, don’t think that should be acceptable”</li> <li>• “Note: a third of services are sole traders who cannot access AIM level funding”</li> </ul>
Strengths in relation to demand meeting supply	34	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Programme support payments are an important part of the system”</li> <li>• “ECCE model”</li> <li>• “The passion that the people that work within the sector have to deal with the families and look after the staff”</li> <li>• “A viable model that has a framework that has been built on and makes it more and more sustainable”</li> </ul>

<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Strengths in relation to demand meeting supply contd.	34	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We have a graduate-led workforce”</li> <li>• “Passion and commitment of providers”</li> <li>• “Universal provision”</li> <li>• “Universal, so you don’t have all the stigma that comes with means-testing, good vehicle for investment in the system”</li> <li>• “LINC course is an amazing course”</li> <li>• “AIM has been helpful in terms of extra learning and support from the AIM team”</li> <li>• “There’s a balance in the children coming through the system, it brings in children from diverse backgrounds”</li> <li>• “Ability to have added children through Better Start has been great”</li> <li>• “NCS as a framework for potential investment in the future”</li> <li>• “NCS has proven to be very positive for a number of children who use the service – a number of children wouldn’t be able to afford to be there without that payment”</li> </ul>
Weaknesses in relation to demand meeting supply	35	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Funding model”</li> <li>• “Catastrophic weakness – there is a real issue in terms of pay for staff”</li> <li>• “Lack of investment by governments over many years leaves us in the infant phase in terms of where investment is concerned”</li> <li>• “Graduates are moving up to supervisor and manager roles, but the administrative burden is preventing them from actively participating in the quality childcare we are providing”</li> <li>• “Could there be a role for support staff – not even needing level 5 – so that the more qualified staff could be freed up to contribute to quality on the floor?”</li> <li>• “Waiting list for ECCE”</li> <li>• “Lack of provider support”</li> <li>• “Too much administration. Smaller providers are drowned in the administration, rather than being out there making sure that the quality is there out on the floor”</li> <li>• “Unsustainability of services i.e. terms and conditions”</li> <li>• “Timelines are too short in terms of planning, need longer than six months”</li> </ul>

<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Weaknesses in relation to demand meeting supply contd.	35	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Services are trying to get sponsor services for children, but children from asylum seekers and in other categories are not eligible. That's all put on the provider to support those parents”</li> <li>• “Can't access AIM until child is three years old”</li> <li>• “Big weakness tying bums on seats to wages – you could be going through a good phase financially but there's a risk in raising wages as you don't know where you'll be in six months”</li> <li>• “Finding staff who will only work three hours based on €13 per hour is almost impossible”</li> <li>• “On top of all the administration, there's the emotional piece of not being able to offer a service – or a service that is paid for”</li> <li>• “You have to have a medical diagnosis to access AIM, and you have to have a service in the local area”</li> <li>• “Staffing grants would make a big difference and retention would improve”</li> <li>• “Burden on the provider is overwhelming”</li> <li>• “If you're trying to develop your service, you have to relate with TUSLA, local County Council and you're on a waiting list while you're trying to get all your paperwork organised</li> <li>• e.g. bureaucracy and wages being paid”</li> <li>• “[You're] on your own, where it would be helpful to have support”</li> <li>• “Change of circumstance in service type takes six-eight months which is very difficult”</li> <li>• “Programme support payments are an important mechanism going forward and need expansion”</li> </ul>
State role in providing services to meet needs and preferences of parents	35	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “There isn't a cohesive plan to look at capacity i.e. looking ahead to say that there will be a need to have a certain amount of places in different areas”</li> <li>• “Different settings having to close because they can't continue renting buildings, so there are waiting lists for places”</li> <li>• “School-age childcare is not needed to be 25 hours out of term – it's needed during term time. Would be good if there a programme where parents could access two sessions a week during term time”</li> </ul>

