

FUNDING MODEL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Workshop #1: Addressing disadvantage

April 2021



CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
1 Context	9
1.1 Background to the First 5 project	9
1.2 Role of Frontier	10
1.3 Structure of Phase 2	11
1.4 Attendees	12
1.5 Structure of this document	12
2 Format and focus of workshop #1: Addressing Disadvantage	13
2.1 Preparation and areas of interest	13
2.2 Format of the day	13
2.3 Attendees	14
3 Additional needs and resources	16
3.1 Additional needs associated with disadvantage	16
3.2 Rationale for additional resources	19
3.3 Types of resources that settings require to meet the needs associated with disadvantage	20
4 Proposals for targeting of settings that are dealing with disadvantage	25
4.1 Identification of settings in need of extra support	25
4.2 Proposed allocation features of a disadvantage support funding model	28

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document summarises the key conclusions emerging from the first Phase 2 stakeholder workshop which focused on *Addressing Disadvantage*.

Context

Frontier Economics are carrying out a programme of stakeholder engagement with the Early Learning and Childcare Stakeholder Forum (ELCSF) on behalf of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Expert Group. The Expert Group have been asked to develop a new funding model for early learning and care (ELC) and school aged childcare (SAC) in Ireland to recommend to the Minister and Government. The Expert Group's Terms of Reference¹ include proposing a new Funding Model for ELC / SAC. In delivering on these Terms, the Expert Group is **not** asked to propose changes to the current model of delivery (i.e. privately-operated provision). Therefore the proposed new funding model will take the current delivery model as given and seek to achieve policy objectives of quality, affordability, accessibility and contributing to addressing disadvantage in a privately-operated market through increased public funding and public management.

This stage of stakeholder engagement is focused on generating proposals for a new funding model to feed into the Expert Group's work.

Priority areas

The first Phase 2 workshop focused on addressing disadvantage. The four key questions where we wanted stakeholders to provide input were:

- What additional needs do children at risk of disadvantage have?
- How could additional resources allow settings to effectively address disadvantage?
- How should a model be designed to identify settings for additional support?
- What are the potential gaps associated with the development of approaches to address disadvantage?

We have summarised the key areas of consensus and disagreement immediately below. More detailed conclusions from the workshop then follows.

¹ <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Terms-of-Reference-1.pdf>

AREAS OF CONSENSUS

- The additional child-centric needs associated with disadvantage vary considerably from child to child due to the multi-faceted nature of disadvantage.
- Additional needs can manifest themselves in a variety of ways (inability to access services, more intensive service provision required at the setting level, more specialist input required).
- Participants felt that a hub model could be used to allow multiple settings to access expertise or specialist resources. The hubs could provide home liaison staff, occupational therapists or specialised pedagogical resources.
- Participants proposed that a pure geographic targeting model is fundamentally unsuited to identifying settings in need of disadvantage related supports.
- There was a strong consensus amongst stakeholders that there needs to be a mechanism whereby settings can reach out and call for additional resources.

AREAS OF DISAGREEMENT

- Staff training was proposed as a potentially helpful additional form of support in this context by multiple participants. Others felt that this would not represent an effective use of resources as training ELC and SAC staff cannot substitute for the additional specialist resources that were needed to tackle disadvantage.
- The majority of participants did suggest that there is a need for some sort of targeting to help settings that are disproportionately catering for disadvantaged children and families. However, this view was not universal, and some stakeholders were uncomfortable with offering additional services to some settings and not others. We were told by some stakeholders that a DEIS type model would not be sufficiently ambitious and is risks “papering over the cracks”.
- Some stakeholders suggested that there may be an underlying tension between dealing with disadvantage and for-profit provision. This was not a universally held view.

Additional needs associated with disadvantage

There was a strong consensus that disadvantaged children will have their own needs which have to be identified on an individual basis. There was an acknowledgement that disadvantage can lead to greater complexity in ELC / SAC provision. However, the specific needs of children who are experiencing different forms of disadvantage will vary on a case by case basis and this will reflect the diverse and multi-faceted nature of disadvantage. For example, the additional needs of a child from an ethnic minority such as the Travelling Community may be different to a child who is at risk of poverty.

Participants suggested that the issue of disadvantage should be re-framed around inclusion and that term disadvantage may in itself be unhelpful.

While we were told that the needs of any specific child will be unique there are several factors which stakeholders felt were more likely to present themselves in the context of disadvantage. We have categorised these needs into three groups:

1. Additional needs which should be addressed in order to **ensure access** to an ELC/SAC setting. These requirements can include the need to proactively target disadvantaged families for outreach activities.
2. Additional needs which should be addressed **within a service**. These requirements can include greater levels of parental and family engagement, additional staff effort to build a routine with children, provision of meals and spare clothes.
3. Additional needs which should be addressed **outside of a service**. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised that children experiencing disadvantage may be more likely to need specialist input from other services (e.g. speech and language, physiotherapists and occupational therapists).

Use of extra resources to meet those needs

There was an agreement amongst participants that child centric supports delivered at the setting level can be an effective tool in developing an inclusive ELC and SAC service. Some participants suggested that settings know the needs of their local populations and are best placed to identify families who are at risk of falling through cracks in the system.

We were told that a full suite of additional resources was required at the setting level to cater for the varying needs of children at risk of disadvantage. In particular participants agreed that it was not possible to choose between additional funding and in-kind resources.

Additional staffing resources were the most commonly cited requirement for promoting inclusion. The majority of stakeholders agreed that training for staff to help eliminate barriers to delivery of an inclusive offering could be a positive element of a new funding model. In particular stakeholders emphasised that that funding of this type of training could allow settings to better cater for the needs of all children (including those who are at risk of disadvantage). Participants noted that for this type of support to be beneficial, significant investment in the design of these courses was needed. We were told that it is vital that the content was relevant (in particular participants felt training should focus on helping staff to identify needs and providing them with the skills to cater for all children's requirements) and high-quality trainers are used.

Some stakeholders did express reservations about the provision of additional training. We were told that many children at risk of disadvantage primarily needed access to specialists. Early years practitioners may not themselves provide these specialisms and providing additional training was not going to replace the need for outside expertise.

Multiple participants proposed a hub or co-operative model which would allow for some pooling of specialist resources between settings that could be used to meet needs associated with disadvantage. These hubs could act as centres of experience and expertise which individual settings who are trying to provide for the needs of disadvantaged children could utilise. These hubs could include dedicated

home liaison staff, occupational therapists or specialised pedagogical resources. It was suggested that integration between these hubs and individual services would enable a higher quality of child centred provision.

All stakeholders agreed that all aspects of early years provision needed to be adequately funded for any one part of the system to function effectively. We were told that the ELC and SAC model sector will not realise its potential if other parts of the system are not adequately resourced.

Model design

All stakeholders agreed that there needs to be a large emphasis on universality for any funding or support model. We were told that the aim should be that all providers have access to resources and staff such that they can offer high-quality care. The majority of participants did suggest that there is a need for some sort of targeting to help settings that are catering for children who are in most need of support due to acute disadvantage. This type of targeting was generally seen as an additional layer on top of what should be a universally high level of provision.

The most consistent message that we were told in relation to identification of settings is that a pure geographic model is fundamentally not fit for purpose in this context. Multiple stakeholders independently noted that geographic based approaches will miss many child specific issues and disadvantaged children are based everywhere around the country. The main proposal from participants in this context was that any allocation needs to be child centric rather than geographic. Participants suggested a number of factors that could be used to help identify which settings were in most need of support:

- Family composition metrics.
- Child health and development indicators.
- Deprivation variables.
- Usage of specific services associated with disadvantage; and
- Frequency and types of adverse experiences.

Participants were very keen to avoid any sort of labelling that would classify certain setting as disadvantaged settings and other as non-disadvantaged. Participants suggested that all settings should instead be included within a universal system which allocates resources based on children's needs.

Potential gaps

There was a strong consensus amongst stakeholders that in addition to any centralised targeting of resources there also needs to be a mechanism whereby settings can reach out and call for additional resources. This would be based on evidence that children in their care face additional needs that are not accounted for adequately by the centralised targeting system.

We were told that imperfections in any centralised allocation process were inevitable and could reflect variation in children's backgrounds within a single setting or changes to a settings' intake of children over time. We were told that the crucial element for this application fund is how quickly the settings can access support.

Participants did acknowledge that some level of accountability was needed to ensure that additional resources allocated to settings to mitigate disadvantage were spent appropriately. However, there was a strong impression that the current administrative burden is very high and needs to be simplified.

Some stakeholders advocated for an out of scope model whereby provision was managed by the state. They told us that introducing additional supports in the current sector would amount to “fiddling around the edges”. Other participants noted that there may be an underlying tension between dealing with disadvantage and for-profit provision.

1 CONTEXT

1.1 Background to the First 5 project

*First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*² was published in November 2018 and sets out an ambitious programme of work across Government Departments to improve the experiences and outcomes of children in Ireland from birth to age 5 across all aspects of their lives in the coming ten years.

1.1.1 Role of ELC & SAC within *First 5*

One of the major objectives of *First 5* is that babies and young children have access to quality Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Care (SAC) which is tailored to their stage of development and need.

FIRST 5: OBJECTIVE #8

Babies and young children have access to safe, high-quality, developmentally appropriate, integrated ELC (and school-age childcare), which reflects diversity of need.

Allied to that objective, *First 5* identifies as a key building provision of further public funding that enables the best outcomes for babies, young children and their families.

FIRST 5: BUILDING BLOCK #5

Additional public funding that is strategically invested to achieve the best outcomes for babies, young children and their families.

The Irish Government has committed to at least doubling investment in ELC and SAC by 2028. As committed to in *First 5*, to ensure that this commitment is realised in a transparent and efficient manner that delivers for children, families and the State a new Funding Model is being developed.

1.1.2 Role of the Expert Group

On 18 September 2019 Minister Zappone announced an Expert Group to develop a new Funding Model for ELC and SAC. The Expert Group's Terms of Reference are as follows³:

² <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f7ca04-first-5-a-whole-of-government-strategy-for-babies-young-children-and/>

³ <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Terms-of-Reference-1.pdf>

EXPERT GROUP TERMS OF REFERENCE

Agree a set of guiding principles to underpin the new Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School Age.

Review the existing approach to funding Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare services by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in terms of its alignment with the guiding principles as well as effectiveness in delivering on the policy objectives of quality, affordability, accessibility and contributing to addressing disadvantage.

Drawing on international evidence, identify and consider options on how additional funding for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare could be structured to deliver on the guiding principles and above policy objectives.

Agree a final report including a proposed design for a new Funding Model, with accompanying costings, risk analysis and mitigation and phased implementation plan (with funding likely to become available on an incremental basis) to recommend to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and ultimately Government.

In delivering on these Terms, the Expert Group is not asked to propose changes to the current model of delivery (i.e. privately-operated provision) rather the Group should seek to further achieve policy objectives of quality, affordability, accessibility and contributing to addressing disadvantage in a privately-operated market through increased public funding and public management.

The full Terms of Reference set out a detailed list of matters that are in scope for consideration by the Expert Group and are available at: <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Terms-of-Reference-1.pdf>

1.2 Role of Frontier

Frontier have been commissioned as a research partner to provide support to inform the development of a new Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare. This has involved the production of research reports.⁴

As part of our role as research partner Frontier have been commissioned by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) to carry out a programme of stakeholder engagement on behalf of the Expert Group.

1.2.1 Building on previous engagement

At the first meeting of the Expert Group in October 2019 special consideration was given to consultation and engagement, with an options paper presented to and discussed by the Expert Group. In the initial meetings and as outlined in the project plan, it was agreed that consultation and engagement would be composed of three phases:

- Phase 1: Identification of key issues

⁴ <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/publications-2/>

- Phase 2: Development of deeper understanding of key issues and generation of proposals.
- Phase 3: Testing of proposals

Phase 1 was completed in December 2020, and the results have been published.⁵ Frontier are undertaking Phase 2 which will allow for the generation of proposals for new funding model and explore in-depth the issues identified in Phase 1.

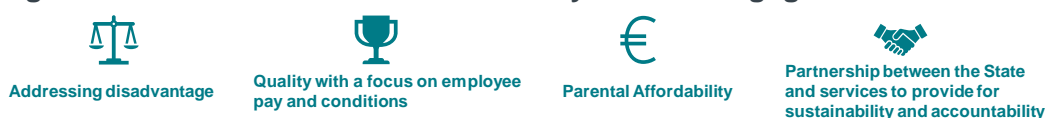
1.3 Structure of Phase 2

We have three overall objectives as part of the Phase 2 engagement:

- Explore the specifics of Phase 1 issues raised and the potential trade-offs
- Generate proposals for funding model design
- Establish level of consensus for specific ideas for the new funding model

We have been asked by the Expert Group to explore four themes as part of Phase 2.

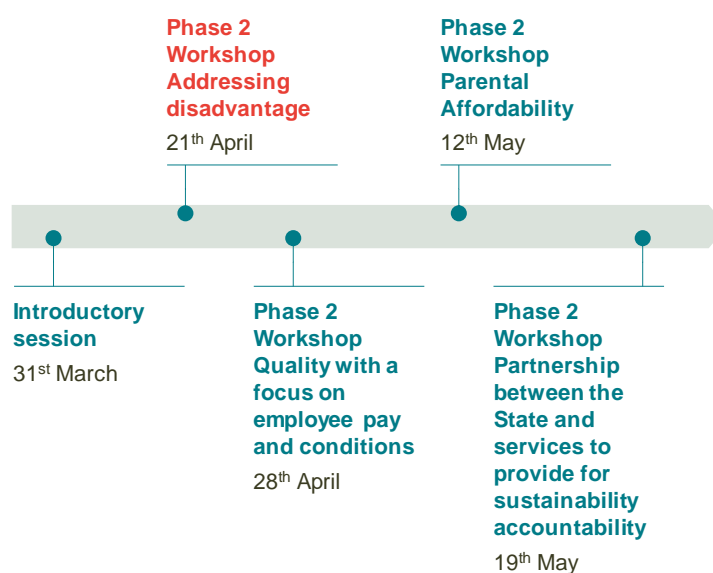
Figure 1 Four themes to be covered by Phase 2 engagement



Source: Expert Group

Each of the themes were discussed in depth during a half-day virtual workshop. The first of these sessions focused on disadvantage and was held on April 21st. An introductory session occurred on 31st March to let all participants know what to expect during Phase 2.

Figure 2 Timing of Phase 2 engagement



⁵ <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/1.-Phase-1-Consultation-and-Engagement-Overview-of-Phase-1.pdf>

1.4 Attendees

The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has established an Early Learning and Childcare Stakeholder Forum (ELCSF). The ELCSF's member include representation from the following constituent groups:

- providers.
- practitioners.
- parents.
- children; and
- academics.

Engaging with this broad base of stakeholders will allow us to incorporate a variety of different perspectives and ensure that all proposals are robustly tested by those with requisite expertise.

Frontier Economic are carrying out a programme of stakeholder engagement with this group.

1.5 Structure of this document

The remainder of this document is structured as follows:

- In Chapter 2 we provide detail on the specific format and structure of the first half-day workshop focusing on disadvantage.
- In Chapter 3 we summarise the key messages coming from the workshop in terms of the child-centric needs associated with disadvantage and how additional resources can help settings meet these needs.
- Finally, in Chapter 4 we present stakeholders' proposals for how to best allocate resources to settings in this context.

2 FORMAT AND FOCUS OF WORKSHOP #1: ADDRESSING DISADVANTAGE

2.1 Preparation and areas of interest

Prior to the workshop session a briefing document was shared with all participants which contained:

- a summary of key pieces of input evidence which the Expert Group have considered in relation to disadvantage, including Frontier working papers; and
- existing models which we can learn from and build on including the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)⁶ and the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) model.⁷

The document also outlined the key questions we wanted to discuss with stakeholders during the session. This allowed representatives to consult with their members and colleagues in advance. The four key questions where we wanted stakeholders to provide input were:

- What additional needs to children at risk of disadvantage have?
- How could additional resources allow settings to effectively address disadvantage?
- How should a model be designed to identify settings for additional support?
- What are the potential gaps associated with the development of approaches to address disadvantage?

2.2 Format of the day

The half-day session on disadvantage was divided into five sessions and a short break (Figure 3).

The break-out group sessions allowed each smaller group of stakeholders to discuss a set of issues in-depth with a Frontier facilitator. The Frontier facilitators each followed a topic guide during these breakout sessions so that each stakeholder was given the opportunity to provide input across a common set of questions. The Frontier facilitators took detailed notes during each of the breakout group sessions which were not otherwise recorded.

During the two plenary sessions the Frontier group facilitator then provided an oral summary of the key points raised during the small group discussions and members of other groups could challenge and ask questions and respond to further prompts put forward by the Frontier team. This meant that we could identify areas of consensus and tease out proposals that were supported by multiple stakeholders. The plenary sessions were also attended by representatives from DCEDIY who did not participate actively but and were present in an observatory capacity only.

⁶ <https://aim.gov.ie/>

⁷ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/DEIS-Plan-2017.pdf>

We have summarised the key findings from sessions 2 and 3 in Chapter 3 the insights and proposals generated during sessions 4 and 5 are contained in Chapter 4.

Figure 3 Structure of workshop

Session 1	Whole group session including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objectives for the day Summary of background information. Collation of the relevant issues to be considered.
Session 2	Break-out session #1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What needs do children at risk of disadvantage have? How could resources allow settings to effectively address disadvantage? What form of additional resources would work best in the context of ELC/SAC? (resources to reduce staff: child ratios, additional capitation, home liaison staff, additional training, grants)?
Session 3	Plenary session #1 including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A presentation from each group on their conclusions on the design of a model to address disadvantage in ELC/SAC. Identification of the drivers of variation in conclusions
BREAK	
Session 4	Break-out session #2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How best to identify settings? Design of a model to address disadvantage in ELC/SAC e.g. how the threshold for in/out is set, what way the model should be structured? With these types of approaches, who would be left out? Are there gaps?
Session 5	Plenary session #2 including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A presentation from each group of their conclusions on the design of a model to address disadvantage. Identification of the drivers of variation in conclusions

Source: Frontier

2.3 Attendees

The following organisations were represented during the workshop on addressing disadvantage:

- ACP
- Barnardos
- Better Start
- BLÁTHÚ Steiner Early Childhood Association
- Chambers
- Childcare Committees Ireland
- Childhood Services Ireland
- Children's Rights Alliance
- Childminding Ireland
- Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta
- Community Providers Forum
- Disability Federation of Ireland
- Early Childhood Ireland
- Early Years
- Federation of Early Childhood Providers
- Gaeloideachas
- High Scope
- IBEC

- ICTU
- Men in Childcare Network
- National Parents Council
- National Travellers Women's Movement
- National Women's Council of Ireland
- NCN
- Ombudsman for Children
- OMEP
- One Family
- PLÉ
- Pobal
- Seas Suas
- SIPTU
- SVP
- Treoir
- Tusla

3 ADDITIONAL NEEDS AND RESOURCES

3.1 Additional needs associated with disadvantage

The Expert Group have been asked to consider how additional public funding could contribute to mitigating the effects disadvantage in the context of a privately-operated ELC/SAC sector by supporting provision that contributes to reducing inequalities between children.

We asked stakeholders to highlight the **additional needs** that children at risk of disadvantage have to help to diagnose the underlying issues in this context.

3.1.1 Stakeholders emphasised that the needs of disadvantaged children vary

Participants emphasised that it was not possible to consider all children at risk of disadvantage together. The specific needs of children who are experiencing different forms of disadvantage will vary on a case by case basis and this will reflect the diverse and multi-faceted nature of disadvantage. For example, the additional needs of a child from an ethnic minority will be different to a child who is at risk of poverty. This is in keeping with a previous international review of family and child characteristics carried out by Frontier which noted that jurisdictions use a range of family and child characteristics to identify which children should receive additional support. These include:

- Economic disadvantage
- Family composition
- Children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND)
- Children from an ethnic or regional minority, asylum seekers or migrants, and other children with additional language requirement.
- Children in extreme need, including those who are geographically isolated or are in foster care, those whose parents are seriously ill, disabled or fleeing violence at home, and those who are known to child protection agencies.

We were told that ELC/SAC services should be able to provide an inclusive offering to all children. There was a strong consensus that the single most important thing for the funding model to facilitate was a universally high-quality offering which can identify and meet the diverse needs of all children including those at risk of disadvantage.

Stakeholders highlighted that certain groups within society such as Travellers may be at a higher risk of disadvantage for a variety of reasons and may need to be separate consideration as a result.

3.1.2 Participants highlighted that children at risk of disadvantage can have a range of additional needs

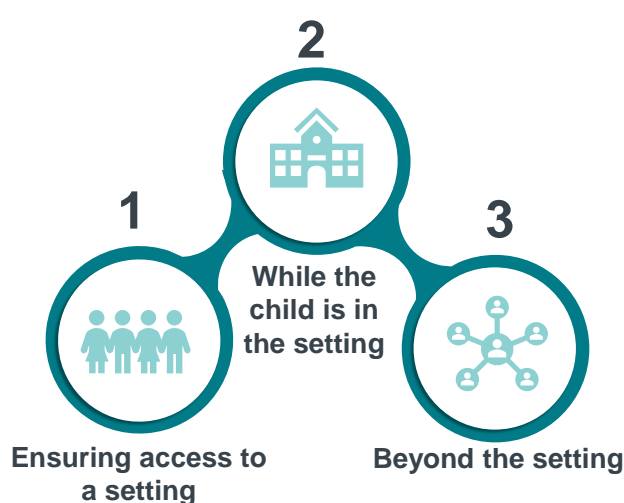
Stakeholders agreed that disadvantage can lead to greater complexity in ELC / SAC provision for a number of reasons. Participants highlighted a wide variety of

additional needs that can be associated with different forms of disadvantage. We have categorised these needs into three groups:

1. Additional needs which need to be address in order to **ensure access to the setting**.
2. Additional needs which need to be addressed **within a service**.
3. Additional needs which need to be addressed **outside of a service**.

As we have described above the needs of any specific child will be unique but there are several factors which stakeholders felt were more likely to present themselves in the context of disadvantage.

Figure 4 Areas of additional needs associated with some disadvantaged children



Source: Stakeholder engagement

Additional needs which should be addressed in order to ensure access to the setting

Additional needs can manifest themselves prior to a child entering a setting which means child does not make it to the setting. Therefore, participants noted that some disadvantaged families needed to be **proactively targeted** by ELC and SAC providers. Families from socio-economically disadvantaged areas, families from certain ethnic groups and/or families that have moved to Ireland from abroad may not be aware of services and schemes that they can access. We were told that they are more likely to face significant information barriers. Even if socio-economically disadvantaged families are aware of relevant services they may face other access barriers such as transport costs.

Children from disadvantaged families may therefore need to be targeted by providers via dedicated outreach campaigns.

Additional needs which should be addressed within a service

We were told that some children from disadvantaged homes may have a chaotic routine. This can be related to family composition or periods of extreme need such as family illness. ELC and SAC providers may therefore need to place **more emphasis on building a routine** with these children. By providing a “home away

from home” we were told that settings can provide children from disadvantaged backgrounds with a greater level of resilience.

There was widespread agreement amongst stakeholders that in many cases **parental and family engagement has to be prioritised to a greater extent** if a child is from a disadvantaged background. We were told that the additional needs associated with disadvantage extend beyond the children and include disadvantaged families. Participants told us that caring for a child cannot be independent of caring for the child’s family and that it may be the case that parents of disadvantaged children require more support than other parents. Participants noted that these additional needs of families can themselves vary extensively and some parents from disadvantaged backgrounds may need:

- training and mentoring on how best to provide care outside of ELC and SAC settings.
- a dedicated contact who they can engage with at the setting who can share information and also signpost linkages to other services (see next section).

Stakeholders were keen to clarify that settings cannot replace families and act as parents for disadvantaged children. However, they do need to maintain an ambition of parental involvement which can be a significant challenge in some cases.



Sometimes families do not always know how best to help themselves. We can point them in the right direction

Stakeholder

Multiple stakeholders agreed that disadvantaged children who may be at risk of poverty will also have a range of additional **practical needs** which attending an ELC or SAC service such as the provision of meals and spare clothes. Participants emphasised that these factors may seem trivial, but

their importance should not be underestimated.

Other children who are at risk of different forms of disadvantage, in particular those coming from an ethnic minority may struggle with **socialisation and therefore need additional support** to help with this.

As we have outlined above multiple stakeholders told us that given that the specific needs of children who are experiencing disadvantage will vary on a case by case basis. As a result, one generic approach will not meet the needs of all children due to the diverse and multi-faceted nature of disadvantage. Therefore, when a child enters a setting the provider firstly **has to determine what the child’s unique needs are**.

Additional needs which need to be addressed outside of a service

Settings need to adapt to the unique needs of each child and determine what services are needed both within that setting and also potentially beyond the setting. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised that children experiencing disadvantage may be more likely to **need specialist input from other services** (e.g. speech and language, physiotherapists and occupational therapists). In many cases the ELC

or SAC settings can be a gateway for disadvantaged children to access these other services that they need.

3.2 Rationale for additional resources

We also explored with stakeholders what extra resources at the setting level are needed to address the needs we have highlighted above. Participants felt that settings need to deliver a high quality of care to all children including those at risk of disadvantage. We were told that currently services are attempting to meet the needs described above without additional resources. There was a strong consensus that this is not sustainable.

3.2.1 Funnelling resources via settings help to minimise any stigma attached to disadvantage supports

Participants emphasised that there is a significant **stigma issue** at play in relation to disadvantage. We were told that this could be magnified if the onus is solely put on families to come forward. Concentrating additional resources at the setting level can help to partially mitigate this type of family level stigmatisation.

3.2.2 Settings will be well placed to identify needs within their community



We need to trust settings to respond to local needs.

Stakeholder

There was also a strong consensus that settings know the needs of their local populations and are best placed to identify families who are at risk of falling through cracks in the system. We were told that settings will know their local families and children better than anyone else. Participants emphasised ELC and SAC professionals' ability to build strong relationship with parents and members of the community. We were told that often early years practitioners are the first port of call for parents. This allows practitioners to identify needs associated with disadvantage which can be dealt with in settings. In this way setting-based supports can still be child centred and focused on the needs of the children which participants repeatedly emphasised.

3.2.3 There was agreement that setting level supports would not be sufficient by themselves

Stakeholders agreed that additional supports for disadvantage were needed at the child level as well as via settings. For example, some participants noted that these type of supports need to extend childminding, which may be disproportionately used by families experiencing economic disadvantage due to its relatively low costs. Participants emphasised that there is a diverse range of types of care available in the sector, and that parents should choose the type of care that suits them. To allow for this choice stakeholders felt as though all care options needed to achieve

a consistently high-quality threshold and be inclusive for all children regardless of their background.

Other participants noted that currently a setting-based model may not be robust enough to pick up all needs (e.g. children with a specific disability) and some resources need to follow the child as a result. Many participants agreed with this type of approach and felt it needed to be present alongside setting based supports for disadvantage.





3.3 Types of resources that settings require to meet the needs associated with disadvantage

We also explored what types of additional resources are required at the setting level in order to better address the diverse range of needs we have highlighted above. In order to deliver an inclusive service, we were told that settings needed to start from the needs of each child. Settings could then devise an appropriate plan to address these requirements. Stakeholders felt that implementing this type of plan will require a suite of resources. We have divided the resources required into a number of categories below.

3.3.1 Participants felt that a suite of resources were needed, and each element needed to be designed to achieve a specific aim

We were told that a full suite of additional resources was required at the setting level to cater for the varying needs of children at risk of disadvantage. In particular participants agreed that it was not possible to choose between additional funding and in-kind resources. There was a consensus view that a balanced model of additional support was needed and that combined in-kind support and funding. In particular participants noted that additional funding and in-kind supports offered different benefits and should be used together to address different gaps that currently exist.

Figure 5 Relative advantages of in-kind support vs. provision of additional funding

Advantages of in-kind supports	Advantages of additional funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Allows for high quality resources to be used across all settings such as pedagogical materials  Direct government provision of specialist staff (e.g. therapists) means that all settings can benefit from their expertise regardless of size. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Allows for settings to hire additional permanent staff. This can allow more attention to be given to children who have more complex needs as a result of disadvantage.  Flexible additional funding allows settings to determine what the specific needs of children in their care are and address them in an appropriate way

Source: Stakeholder engagement

However, stakeholders did also note risks associated with both forms of resource allocation. In particular we were told that some providers are currently overburdened to the extent that they do not currently have the time to engage with in-kind supports such as pedagogical resources. This further emphasises why in-

kind supports need to be provided alongside additional funding which would help to ease this burden.

Participants noted that any additional funding need to be readily accessible and not subject to unnecessary bureaucracy. Multiple participants felt that previous funding mechanisms have been accompanied by significant and in some cases unanticipated administrative burdens which reduces the attractiveness of making an application. Participants **suggested that any additional funding stream in this context should explicitly account for the associated administrative tasks** and compensate settings accordingly.

3.3.2 Additional staffing resources were the most commonly cited requirement for promoting inclusion

Several participants proposed that **lowering staff: child ratios** would help with combating some forms of disadvantage. In particular we were told that this will help to foster trust between the child which can be more fragile when the child has complex needs and also potentially highlight additional needs more quickly.

Other participants highlighted that instead or alongside increasing the number of staff it was vitally important was that staff are paid for undertaking additional tasks which explicitly cater for disadvantaged children's needs. For example, multiple stakeholders proposed that there needs to be more funding for **staff's non-contact time** with families.

In addition, to increasing the number of staff there was a very strong consensus that **reducing staff turnover** was essential in developing and maintaining a high quality and consistent provision for all children especially those experiencing disadvantage. Multiple providers spoke about how they had invested in training up staff (see next section) only for employees to leave and enter the primary education sector. This type of staff attrition and churn makes it harder to offer a consistent service that some children from disadvantaged backgrounds require above all else.

Participants suggested that any additional funding targeted at staff in this context needed to be realistic in term of its magnitude. For example, we were told that currently AIM funding exists which is designed to reduce staff: child ratios. However, participants emphasised that actually getting people with the funding provided is a huge struggle.

3.3.3 There was a diversity of opinions regarding the role of additional staff training

The majority of stakeholders agreed that training for staff to help eliminate barriers to delivery of an inclusive offering could be a positive element of a new funding model. In particular stakeholders emphasised that that funding of this type of training could allow settings to better cater for the needs of all children (including those who are at risk of disadvantage).

This view assumed that any additional training in this context would be **fully funded by government**. Participants proposed that for this type of support to be beneficial significant public investment in the design of these courses was needed. We were told that it is vital that the content was relevant (in particular participants

felt training should focus on helping staff to identify needs and providing them with the skills to cater for all children's requirements) and high quality trainers are used who know the area. Other stakeholders suggested that this type of training should also cover softer aspects such as ensuring each setting has a welcoming and inclusive culture in place. Several stakeholders noted that given current rates of pay in the sector, staff will be very reluctant to go on a training course if they are not compensated appropriately.

The majority of participants proposed that this type of training needs to be **universal in nature and cover all staff**. This viewpoint is driven by a perception that all staff need to be able to understand and address individual needs and promote inclusion. We were told that every ELC/SAC practitioner needs to be able to understand and address individual needs and know when to bring in outside expertise to help with this. Participants felt that this broad coverage will help guarantee that disadvantage can be tackled in a consistent way. If training of all staff is not possible, we were told that there needs to be careful consideration of how those who do attend share the learnings with colleagues.



The entire staff team need to be tuned in to the needs of children.

Stakeholder

Other stakeholders suggested that ideally this type of training would be built into practitioners' qualifications rather than provided in the middle of people's careers. However, there was a recognition that these two things could happen in parallel.

Some stakeholders did express reservations about the provision of additional training in this context. We were told by some participants that training was unlikely to be the best solution as many children at risk of disadvantage primarily **needed access to specialists**. There was a concern expressed that early years practitioners could not themselves provide all these specialisms and providing additional training was not going to replace the needs for outside expertise. To address these concerns the aims of any training should be made explicit at the outset and the expectations of ELC and SAC staff should be clarified.

The following proposal summarises attributes of a new training offer that participants suggested would be effective.

Figure 6 Summary of participants' proposals on training to promote inclusivity

Training attribute	Description
Up-front design	Significant investment needed to ensure training is designed by experts who understand the sector and the multi-faceted challenges of inclusion.
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Allows staff to understand different aspects of disadvantage and cater for needs more effectively ▪ Provides staff with guidance on how to deal with traumatic events and engage in self-care if they have experienced a distressing event which is related to a child's needs. ▪ Guidance on how to build a culture of inclusivity.
Scope	Clarify that ELC/SAC staff are not expected to fulfil multiple specialisms but instead help to signpost to other services and integrate with other agencies where possible
Coverage	Training should extend to all staff and relevant principles should be incorporated as part of relevant qualifications

Source: Stakeholder engagement

3.3.4 Multiple participants proposed a hub or co-operative model which would allow for some pooling of resource

Multiple participants noted that having specialists embedded in services can be beneficial in terms of working with children with disadvantage, this could include speech and language practitioners for example as well as physiotherapy expertise or occupational therapists. ELC and SAC providers cannot themselves provide all of these specialisms and diagnose all needs.

Several providers noted that it will not be possible for all services to have this type of specialist expertise embedded (especially in smaller settings). As a result, multiple participants **proposed that hubs** could be established which settings could tap into. These hubs could act as centres of experience and expertise in certain areas which individual settings who are trying to provide for the needs of disadvantaged children could utilise. These hubs could include dedicated home liaison staff, occupational therapists or specialised pedagogical resources. It was suggested that integration between these hubs and individual services would enable a higher quality of child centred provision.

Participants proposed that these more specialist services should be integrated as closely as possible with the core ELC and SAC provision. Having clear linkages and overlapping administrative processes between the hub and the individual setting will mean that children and families get a better and more joined-up experience and minimise any potential disruption (e.g. children missing time in an ELC setting for a specialist appointment).

These hubs could include dedicated expertise on specific aspects of disadvantage. It was suggested that this could be provided in conjunction with charities working

to address poverty for example. This type of engagement with the voluntary sector was seen to have been successful in the context of disability. One participant noted they had in the past successfully collaborated with Enable Ireland.

As we described above participants reported that often in the context of disadvantage entire families require additional supports rather than just children. For example, lone parents or Travellers are frequently at risk of disadvantage and may benefit from certain types of training / support that could be included within a hub model.

Other participants proposed a slight variant of this approach whereby several smaller settings could share specialist resources (such as a home support liaison officer which could be helpful in reaching out to disadvantaged families) which would not be tied to a central hub.

3.3.5 ELC and SAC provision was seen as one part of a wider system all of which needed adequate funding

In line with the points raised above there was a strong consensus that **all aspects of early years provision** needed to be adequately funded for any one part of the system to function effectively. We were told that the ELC and SAC model sector will not realise its potential if other parts of the system are not adequately resourced.



You can't just fund one part of early years. Every cog needs to be funded.

Stakeholder

Stakeholders felt that the ELC and SAC provision is in large part reliant on other services. For example, stakeholders emphasised that ELC and SAC services may be waiting for an allied health service to carry out diagnostic tests on children. In many cases we were told that these tests involve long wait times. This has knock-on effects on the service the ELC and SAC providers are able to deliver as they do not have an expert view on the needs of the child. This is true across the board, but participants noted that it could be particularly apparent in the context of disadvantage where children may have more complex needs and as a result may be interacting with multiple services.

Participants told us that this type of systemic underfunding will lead to greater costs down the line if settings do not know what the needs of children are. Participants also proposed that the funding model should ultimately strive to play a role in not only mitigating disadvantage but addressing the root causes of disadvantage and poverty (e.g. via paternal labour market activation). Participants noted that if the ambition is only to reduce the impact of disadvantage there is a risk of "papering over the cracks" and the current model may in some circumstances be fundamentally unfit for purpose (see next section).

4 PROPOSALS FOR TARGETING OF SETTINGS THAT ARE DEALING WITH DISADVANTAGE

4.1 Identification of settings in need of extra support

We also asked stakeholders to put forward proposals for how the funding model could target resources in a way that would help meet the needs of disadvantaged children.

4.1.1 The majority of participants suggested that there is a need for some sort of targeting; some stakeholders expressed reservations about targeting resources at specific settings

All stakeholders agreed that there needs to be a large emphasis on **universality** for any funding or support model. We were told that the aim should be that all providers have access to resources and staff such that they can offer high-quality care.

The majority of participants **did suggest that there is a need for some sort of targeting** to help settings that are catering for children who are in most need of support due to acute disadvantage. This form of weighted provision of resources should be aimed at achieving equal quality of provision based on the child centric requirements at each location. Multiple participants did acknowledge that there are known hotspots for disadvantage which cannot be ignored. This type of targeting was generally seen **as an additional layer on top** of what should be a universally high level of provision. In addition, stakeholders suggested that any targeting model needs to be accompanied by a clear rationale as to why certain services are receiving certain supports and an evidence-based justification needs to be provided.



Any extra resources allocated to specific settings should be the cherry on top. All settings should have access to the right mix of resources and staff

Stakeholder

Some participants felt that a model that targets settings for additional supports was not sufficiently ambitious and that access to high quality services should be the standard universally, and not just for specific identified settings. Participants noted that this should start with ensuring that every setting is adequately funded, not just those who are judged to be at risk of disadvantage. Those stakeholders were very uncomfortable with some settings getting access to additional services which are not available across the board and highlighted that the current model is not sustainable.

Stakeholders repeatedly acknowledged that this is a difficult question to answer and there is no perfect approach.

4.1.2 Geographic identification was viewed as inherently unsuitable in the current context

The most consistent message that was expressed by the vast majority of stakeholders in relation to identification of settings in need of additional support is that **a geographic model is fundamentally not fit for purpose in this context**. Multiple stakeholders independently noted that geographic based approaches will miss many child specific issues and disadvantaged children are based everywhere around the country. Several stakeholders noted that a significant portion of disadvantaged children do not attend DEIS schools for example. Other stakeholders highlighted that geographic allocations lead to artificial cliff-edges around administrative boundaries (e.g. between two counties) which could lead to two very similar settings on either side of a boundary receiving very different supports.

In addition, participants noted that the multi-faceted nature of disadvantage means that any geographic identification is complex. In order to identify settings in a fair way participants suggested that any targeting mechanism needs to **clarify exactly which aspects of disadvantage** it is seeking to address (e.g. socio-economic disadvantage) and then set out transparently which criteria relate to that objective. If this type of targeting model does focus primarily on socio-economic disadvantage, then participants noted that other facets of disadvantage (e.g. disabilities or ethnicities) need to be dealt with via other mechanisms.

The main proposal from participants in this context was that any allocation needs to be **child centric rather than geographic**. Participants agreed that the identification model should have at its heart the care needs of children in each setting. The majority of participants were therefore not in favour of any sort of pure location-based approach.

4.1.3 Participants put forward a range of child centric datapoints that could be used to facilitate identification of settings

Participants agreed that any targeting of additional resources should be evidence based and transparent. They suggested a number of factors that could be used to help identify which settings were in most need of support:

- **Family composition metrics** within a particular setting were proposed as appropriate targeting criteria. In particular lone parent status was seen to be a key risk factor for disadvantage.
- We were also told that average **child health and development** indicators such as physical, cognitive and emotional scores of children were seen as vital indicators of additional need and could provide a strong justification for additional resource allocation at the setting level.
- **Deprivation variables** such as parental income was also frequently suggested by participants in this context. Despite the majority view around limitations of geographic targeting Pobal's index of deprivation was also cited as a very

helpful data point that gives an indication of the level of disadvantage in an area. Participants pointed out that this would need to be augmented with information on the actual children attending a setting in a given area. Participants also noted that there is already granular data available from the National Childcare Scheme (NCS)⁸ which captures data on families who have applies for targeted supports. Participants proposed incorporating that type of information into a targeting model.

Figure 7 Child centric data points that could be used to identify settings in need of additional disadvantage related supports



Source: Frontier

- Other participants proposed that data should be collected on **the extent to which children in each setting require specific services** associated with disadvantage (this could include areas where charities working to address poverty are most active or where a higher rate of special needs are identified). However, other participants noted that this would be an imperfect indicator as in many cases those who are most disadvantaged will not be making use of all the local services that are available to them.
- Finally, participants put forward the idea that data **on the frequency and types of adverse experiences** could also inform settings where additional funding could be targeted. These types of adverse experience could be informed by absence rates from ELC or SAC settings or recorded behavioural issues. These would help to highlight settings that are in most acute need of extra resources.

⁸ <https://www.ncs.gov.ie/en/>

Across all of these categories of information participants emphasised that the information used needs to be as up to date as possible especially given potential changes in people's circumstances brought about as a result of COVID-19 and the associated economic implications.

4.2 Proposed allocation features of a disadvantage support funding model

4.2.1 Participants were more enthusiastic about an allocation model with multiple bands rather than a binary indicator

Participants were very keen to avoid **any sort of labelling** that would classify certain setting as disadvantaged settings and other as non-disadvantaged. This feature of the DEIS model was not viewed positively.

Participants suggested that all settings should instead be included within a universal system which allocates resources based on children's needs. A granular targeting model which includes multiple different levels that better reflects the level of need was seen to be more appropriate. Participants told us this would help to minimise the impact of somewhat arbitrary cliff edges in terms of resource allocation between settings.

4.2.2 Participants agreed that an agile and responsive application-based system was needed as part of the new funding model

There was a strong consensus amongst stakeholders that in addition to any centralised formulaic targeting of resources within certain settings there also needs to be established mechanisms whereby settings can reach out and call for **additional resources**. Participants suggested that a pathway needs to be established where extra resources are allocated to a ringfenced fund. Settings could request funding based on evidence that children in their care face additional needs which are not accounted for adequately by any centralised targeting system. We were told that imperfections or gaps in any centralised allocation process were inevitable and could reflect:

- A small number of children who are at risk of socio-economic disadvantage within a wider setting. Setting based averages may therefore mask significant variation.
- Needs associated with non-socioeconomic disadvantage which can be harder to measure on a consistent basis with data (this could include Travellers).
- Changes to a settings' intake of children which have occurred since the centralised allocation was determined. Participants noted that the DEIS model that is used in schools is hard to update and in reality, things can change quite quickly.

The assessment of child centric needs was seen as essential by providers to ensure no one falls through the cracks. Multiple stakeholders felt that providers and early years professionals were well placed to make those assessments and

determine needs and less visible aspects of disadvantage that are not picked up by formulaic allocations. Stakeholders proposed that the funding model needs to be responsive to this. ELC workers were described as ‘undercover’ professionals because of the strong relationship they build up with parents and members of the community, such that they are the first port of call for parents (ahead of a doctor or other specialist). This allows ELC professionals a position of trust from which they may be able to better support children at risk of disadvantage

We were told that when children get enrolled in a centre the crucial element is how quickly the settings can access support. Multiple participants felt that previous funding mechanisms have been accompanied by significant and in some cases unanticipated administrative burdens and have been slow to actually allocate resources. Stakeholders proposed that any application-based model has to be responsive. Participants emphasised that new needs could arise quickly, and funding needs to be made available in an efficient manner to allow settings to deal with these needs. For example, a major employer may shut in a local area which can lead to acute and rapid disadvantage. Likewise, stakeholders noted that COVID-19 and the resulting economic crisis may lead to certain areas experiencing disadvantage more acutely in the coming years. Settings may then have to provide more meals for example. Participants noted that there is a significant risk that this type of application-based funding system cannot be overly burdensome or time consuming or it will not be utilised effectively.

Participants suggested that this type of application-based supports could sit alongside other permanent allocations which provide providers with certainty and the ability to make forward looking investments (e.g. hiring additional staff).

4.2.3 Participants suggested that flexibility in funding allocation was needed in the context of disadvantage

Participants proposed that in the future there should be a move away from tying receipt of funding from the attendance of children at a setting. As noted above children at risk of disadvantage may be more likely to have inconsistent attendance at a setting. If additional supports are directly tied to attendance and number of hours at the setting providers will struggle to provide an inclusive service. A more forward-looking model was suggested whereby the government provides funding upfront based on an expected level of service delivery. One provider described how they had a child who was consistently half an hour late due every morning due to issues at home. We were told that this led to the setting losing out on significant amounts of funding. Multiple stakeholders felt that annual staffing grants or annual child-level capitation rates would be more suitable.

We were also told that disadvantaged families may be more likely to have unpaid fees. This can undermine provider sustainability unless it is met with additional resources. Participants suggested that there could be an element of the new funding model which helps to address this and support provider sustainability.

4.2.4 Participants suggested that any process to ensure accountability needed to be proportionate and explicitly incorporated into the design of the model

Participants did acknowledge that some level of accountability was needed to ensure that additional resources allocated to settings to mitigate disadvantage were spent appropriately. However, there was a strong impression that the current administrative burden is very high and needs to be simplified. Currently we were told that there is a risk that setting managers may experience burn out due to the amount of time they need to spend complying with administration requirements.

Participants proposed that the time that settings will need to spend complying with any scheme needs to be built into the allocation of funding and explicitly paid for.

Some participants suggested pooling the administrative burden in some way between settings. That could occur via the sharing of administrative resource for example. A network structure amongst multiple smaller settings could also in this regard. Another suggestion was to shift some of the administrative burden from providers to the state. We were told that there needs to be a better technology system to supporting existing schemes like the NCS as well as any new funding streams.

4.2.5 Some participants did propose that the new funding model should extend to non-setting-based care

Some participants noted that we will need to consider the timeline for childminding services to come under this type of funding umbrella. We were told that childminders are part of infrastructure and needed to be considered alongside any setting-based supports.

4.2.6 Some stakeholders did express a strong preference for a more fundamental change

Multiple stakeholders did advocate for an out of scope model whereby provision was run or directly managed by the state. They told us that introducing additional supports in the current sector would amount to “fiddling around the edges” given that the current model is not fit for purpose.

Other participants noted that there may be an underlying tension between dealing with disadvantage and for-profit provision and felt that state or non-profit services are best placed to address disadvantage. Some stakeholders felt that there is strong evidence to back up these claims.

