

EQUAL PARTICIPATION MODEL
POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

FEEDBACK FROM FINAL WORKSHOP

MAY 16TH 2023

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FINAL WORKSHOP

This report refers to the information presented and gathered at the final workshop of the EPM Phase 4 of Strand 1. A description of the process adopted is provided in Appendix I.

INTRODUCTION

The final workshop of the EPM Phase 4 of Strand 1 was held on May 16th, with the aim of providing an overview of certain feedback gathered to date, and an opportunity for additional comments and recommendations to be made by the participants. On this occasion, the workshop was open for attendance by all those who attended the previous workshops, including NGOs, Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) services, staff and other organisations.

CONTENT

The introductory section of the final workshop provided an overview of the process involved in developing the model to date, as well as guidance regarding the next steps to be taken. A presentation was given by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) regarding the scope of the model, and the process by which some information, identified in previous workshops, has been categorised as outside the scope of the EPM, but which will be provided separately as information to other stakeholders within the DCEDIY, as well as other Departments other than the DCEDIY.

The main section of the workshop then provided the participants with an overview of information gathered from the workshops to date, combining the feedback from both pairs of workshops, allowing the opportunity for comments and recommendations. At the final workshop, the focus was specifically on information regarding the groups of people impacted by barriers to ELC and SAC, the types of barriers that affect access, participation/ enjoying and participating in ELC and SAC, and the potential solutions to these barriers. In line with this approach, the categories of feedback presented for comment at the final workshop were as follows:

1. Parents, families and children that experience difficulties accessing ELC and SAC
2. Parents, families and children that experience difficulties participating/ enjoying and learning in ELC and SAC
3. Barriers to accessing ELC and SAC
4. Barriers to participation/ enjoying and learning in ELC and SAC
5. Supports to parents and children
6. Supports to ELCs and SACs

REPORT

This report represents the feedback gathered from the final workshop. It combines the feedback from both pairs of initial workshops, including the contributions of NGOs, as well as an Appendix that includes information that was regarded by the DCEDIY as outside the scope of the EPM, but which will be provided as information to other stakeholders within the DCEDIY, as well as other Departments other than the DCEDIY.

WHO HAS DIFFICULTIES ACCESSING ELC AND SAC SERVICES?

The content below provides an overview of the feedback from the workshops regarding the parents, families and children who have difficulty accessing ELC and SAC services. Participants were given the opportunity to discuss the feedback to date and recommend potential additions or changes. There are a significant number of groups listed, so the information is provided in bullet-point format to better identify those impacted.

- At the final workshop, the participants were eager to state that there is one major universal barrier to access that impacts all regardless of their background, i.e., the availability of spaces. Put simply, there is a general shortage of spaces available that impacts upon, and creates difficulties for all.
- Roma families in Ireland often face difficulty in securing ELC and SAC places due to high refusal rates. Discrimination and systemic racism, unfortunately, are regular experiences for this group, further complicating their access to these services.
- Traveller families face similar struggles. The effects of such discrimination and limited educational access resonate across generations, impeding their engagement with ELC and SAC services. Previous negative experiences or educational apprehension, along with a general reluctance to trust the system, significantly amplify the problem for ethnic minorities and the Traveller community.
- Refugee families also face a unique set of obstacles. Regular relocations between centres interrupt their access to ELC and SAC places, while language barriers and trauma-related issues create hurdles to integration. An insufficient level of resources, experiences and appropriately trained staff to handle trauma and grief in ELC and SAC environments further disadvantages these families.
- In Direct Provision Centres, limited digital capacity hampers families' access to service information. This digital gap can often be the difference between utilising vital services and remaining isolated.
- Children with additional requirements face their own unique challenges. There's limited availability of suitable places in ELC and SAC services, and these children often experience the intersectionality of additional needs, ethnicity, or homelessness. There's also a lack of support in SAC settings for children with such needs.
- Low-income families, particularly single-parent families, struggle with the financial burden of accessing ELC and SAC services. The system's complexity creates obstacles, making it hard for low-income individuals to pay for private SAC services upfront. It was also highlighted that this situation affects middle-income families as well.
- Families experiencing systematic racism, particularly ethnic minority families, face barriers such as discrimination and lack of representation in ELC and SAC settings. The lack of an ethnic identifier in ELC prevents a comprehensive understanding of these families' experiences.
- Homeless families also face significant challenges. Constant relocation due to homelessness affects access to ELC and SAC services, with challenges in accessing ELC and SAC places outside of their catchment areas.
- For families grappling with language and literacy issues, accessing information on ELC and SAC services can be difficult. In Gaeltacht areas, ethnic minorities face additional challenges with English/Irish language barriers.
- In rural areas, there is limited availability of ELC and SAC services, and there are transportation challenges in accessing these services. There's also inconsistency in service provision across rural and urban areas.

- Children on the edge of care struggle to access services when child protection issues exist. Similarly, children with behavioural issues or undiagnosed needs have difficulty accessing and progressing in ELC and SAC settings due to limited staff training or support.
- Parents with limited access to information face difficulty navigating the system or understanding the value of ELC and SAC services. For children pre/post the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme there are limited ELC and SAC places in rural areas, and challenges related to toilet training or transitioning between programs exist.
- Families in need of wraparound services struggle due to the limited availability of these services outside of school hours. Finally, families with children aged 0-2 years face issues due to limited availability of ELC and SAC services for this age group and a lack of additional support or resources.

WHO HAS DIFFICULTIES PARTICIPATING/ ENJOYING AND LEARNING IN ELC AND SAC?

Feedback from the workshops regarding the people who face difficulties participating, enjoying and learning in ELC and SAC can be grouped into four main categories, parents, children, families and ELC/SAC services.

Participants at the final workshop were given the opportunity to discuss the feedback to date and recommend potential additions or changes.

PARENTS

Certain parents face difficulties in supporting their children to participate, enjoy and learn in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) settings. This includes parents with low literacy levels, who often struggle to access and navigate these services. Language barriers and cultural differences can also hinder communication and understanding between parents and ELC or SAC staff. Parents of children with additional needs can encounter challenges accessing AIM or Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support. There are also parents experiencing homelessness, domestic violence, or living in direct provision, whose circumstances affect their ability to consistently participate in these services. Single parents may encounter difficulties juggling multiple responsibilities while accessing ELC and SAC services. Additionally, some parents struggle with establishing routines or trust in the education system, particularly if they have had negative experiences with education in the past. Specific cohorts of parents, such as those from Traveller, Roma, LGBTQI+, refugee, lone parent, low-income, or homeless families, as well as parents with mental health issues or those caring for ill family members, also face unique challenges in this context.

CHILDREN

Some children have difficulties participating, enjoying and learning in ELC and SAC settings, due, in part, to an absence of expertise in this area, and the impact of a high staff turnover generally within the sector. Children with language difficulties, including those with language delays or communication issues, often face struggles, while children from diverse cultural backgrounds might not see their culture reflected in the core setting or curriculum. Children who have experienced trauma and require specialised support in ELC and SAC services might also have difficulties and, likewise, children with additional needs waiting for AIM support, children with behavioural issues or additional needs, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed, and children experiencing hunger, cold, or inadequate facilities can face significant barriers to participation and learning. Children from specific cohorts, such as migrant, Traveller, Roma, or those with English as a second language, can also encounter difficulties in these settings.

FAMILIES

For some families, fully participating, enjoyment and learning in ELC and SAC settings can be difficult. Low-income families are likely to struggle to afford extracurricular activities, resources, or participate in donation-based events like family fun days or sports day trips. It was also highlighted in all workshops that middle-income families could be affected by the increased costs of ELC and SAC services, although there is a potential for this cohort to be neglected. Families may also have inadequate access to subsidies, benefits, or support systems, such as the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). Discrimination, bias (conscious or unconscious), or lack of representation in ELC and SAC services can impact families' experiences and participation. The limited availability of ELC and SAC places can affect families' ability to access these services, as can living in areas with inadequate facilities or infrastructure, such as rural locations or areas with limited transportation options. Families with diverse values, norms, or faith-based beliefs can feel unrecognised or unaccommodated in ELC and SAC services. Finally, families dealing with barriers related to digital literacy or access to information and support may find it difficult to fully participate in these services.

ELC AND SAC SERVICES

While not a direct service user, feedback from the workshops highlighted the need to acknowledge the difficulties facing ELC and SAC services in term of participation, enjoyment and learning. The feedback mentioned staff burn-out, implying that employees in these services often face excessive workloads, stress, or emotional exhaustion, potentially due to high demands, the complex needs of the children and families they serve, and additional tasks such as paperwork. Certain ELC and SAC Services find it difficult to effectively support parents, families and children, while services lacking experienced or skilled staff in supporting children with difficulties or those unaware of inclusive practices can struggle to create a supportive environment. Those without proper transition policies or support for children and families entering or leaving the service may not adequately meet the needs of families and children. Services that need, but cannot provide, interpretation or translation services often face barriers to participation and communication for non-English-speaking families. Lastly, services with a non-diverse workforce might encounter difficulties understanding and supporting children from ethnic minorities, thus compromising their ability to foster an inclusive and diverse environment.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS CAUSING DIFFICULTIES IN ACCESSING ELC AND SAC?

1. Limited availability of places: Due to a lack of space, staffing issues, and inaccessible premises, ELC and SAC services cannot offer additional places. This is particularly difficult for children with additional needs or mobility issues. A lack of necessary training or resources for staff, excessive paperwork, and expectations for managers, frozen fees, and inconsistent funding structures exacerbate the issue. As mentioned in the responses to Question 1, earlier, many participants noted that it is important to acknowledge that the lack of places, and the prevalence of waiting lists, is a universal issue that impacts all parents, families and children regardless of their background.
2. High costs and insufficient support: Despite subsidies, many families find ELC and SAC services unaffordable, which hampers their access and limits their work opportunities.
3. Inclusion challenges: Many ELC and SAC services fail to be inclusive of children from diverse backgrounds or with additional needs. This failure creates access and participation barriers. Families, particularly those from minority backgrounds, can face discrimination or denial of services. Insufficient consideration of cultural backgrounds can lead to exclusion or disengagement.
4. Increasing prevalence of trauma among children: As more children present with trauma-related issues, services struggle to meet their needs. This struggle extends to challenges like toileting, often related to trauma, which can result in exclusion from ELC and SAC services.
5. Complex application processes: Bureaucratic procedures can be challenging for parents, particularly those with limited literacy skills or those who speak English as a second language. Inconsistent enrolment policies and deadlines across preschools and schools can create difficulties as well.
6. Lack of understanding, and awareness, of ELC and SAC benefits: Families might fail to recognise the value of ELC and SAC services for their children's development or may be unaware of available subsidies and supports.
7. Difficulty accessing digital information: Accessing digital information can be a struggle for families due to limited digital literacy, resources, or access to technology, particularly in Direct Provision Centres. Parents with limited literacy skills often face challenges understanding their rights and available options.
8. Terminology can have a direct impact upon access to ELC and SAC: Changes in terminology, such as the renaming of the Early Intervention Team (EIT) to Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT), has the potential to create confusion. Furthermore, it's important to note that the use of the word 'disability' in supports and services can create a negative impression and result in a barrier to access.
9. Stigma and past negative experiences: Negative experiences with ELC and SAC services or past abuse experiences can make parents and children hesitant to engage, creating barriers to access. Generational trauma and cultural differences can affect engagement as well.
10. Insufficient support for children with additional needs and diverse backgrounds: Inadequate resources, specialist skills, and tailored support within ELC and SAC services will give rise to barriers for these children.
11. Differences in funding structures, curricula, and standards between ELC and SAC: Unique barriers for each sector, such as limited availability of SAC services in disadvantaged areas and less regulation regarding qualifications, can complicate access.

12. Transportation challenges: Limited or unreliable transportation options, especially in rural areas, can impede access to ELC and SAC services.
13. Limited support for transition and settling in: Insufficient support for children during the transition into ELC and SAC services can create barriers, especially for children with additional needs.
14. Communication challenges with healthcare professionals: Barriers can be imposed by external agencies, such as health services or government entities, due to long waiting lists, complex referral processes, or lack of support for ELC and SAC services. Long waiting lists for assessments and early intervention services can prevent timely access to support.
15. Family dynamics and mental health issues: Complex family situations, such as addiction, separation, and mental health challenges, can prevent parents from prioritising their children's access to ELC and SAC services.
16. Lack of continuity of care and support outside of academic years: ELC and SAC services might not be able to provide sufficient support during non-academic periods, which poses challenges for families requiring year-round care. The limited availability of support and resources outside of regular ELC and SAC hours has the potential to create barriers for families needing flexible care options.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATING/ ENJOYING AND LEARNING IN ELC AND SAC (OTHER THAN ACCESS)?

1. **Staff and Training:** There's a significant issue with the quality and accessibility of training and professional development opportunities in ELC and SAC services in Ireland. This limitation can leave staff ill-prepared to provide effective support to children and families. Specific training areas, such as diversity and inclusion, trauma-informed care, and creative play, require more focus. Furthermore, the current support system inadequately addresses the complex trauma and social determinants of health affecting children and families. The availability of relief staff is also limited, causing disruptions to the continuity of care and support when regular staff are absent.
2. **Service Ethos:** The ethos of the service providers often reflects a lack of understanding and awareness of diversity and inclusion. Moreover, there is a shortage of resources dedicated to fostering an inclusive culture. Consequently, this can result in an environment that might not feel welcoming, inclusive, caring, and open to all families and children.
3. **Barriers Related to Cultural Representation:** Cultural representation within ELC and SAC services is currently lacking, with insufficient representation of children's backgrounds and lived experiences in visual aids, stories, toys, and equipment. Opportunities for specialists from diverse communities, such as members of the migrant community, to contribute to the service or take on teaching roles are scarce. Furthermore, events celebrating diversity, like Traveller Pride Week, are not widely observed. The limited representation of diverse cultural backgrounds, in terms of staffing, materials, and resources, can lead to feelings of exclusion or disconnection among children and families.
4. **Barriers Related to Infrastructure and Planning:** The physical space available for ELC and SAC services, both indoors and outdoors, is inadequate. This affects children's opportunities for play, exploration, and learning, limiting their full potential.
5. **Barriers Related to Additional Needs:** Support and resources for children with speech and language difficulties are limited. There is a lack of therapeutic resources and a long waitlist for services, which adversely affects children with additional needs. The support for transitioning children with additional needs between services and educational settings is also inadequate.
6. **Barriers Related to Costs:** The expansion of services might involve additional costs, which are not always financially feasible for both service providers and families.
7. **Basic Needs:** Unmet basic needs, such as hunger or tiredness, can negatively impact children's ability to participate, enjoy, and learn in ELC and SAC services. Overcrowded services and disrupted attendance due to issues like relocation can impair children's sense of belonging and connection to the service.
8. **Barriers Related to Parental Involvement and Support:** Opportunities for active parental involvement in ELC and SAC services are limited, which can reduce engagement and support for children and families. Additionally, parents might feel uncertain about the benefits of the service, especially for children with additional needs in mainstream settings.
9. **Barriers Related to Language and Communication:** Language barriers can hinder effective communication and support between staff, children, and families. There is also limited use of visual aids and materials in multiple languages, which is crucial for inclusivity and accessibility for diverse families.

10. Relationship Element between Staff, Families, and Children: Low staffing levels can undermine the development of strong connections between staff, children, and families, which is crucial for providing effective support.
11. Family Resources: Financial constraints can act as a barrier for low-income families, preventing their participation in activities like tours or excursions. This can lead to feelings of isolation and embarrassment.
12. Systemic Barriers: Systemic barriers pose a significant challenge within ELC and SAC services in Ireland. Communication among staff, parents, and other stakeholders often falls short, leading to difficulties in addressing issues collaboratively. Moreover, there's a chronic underinvestment in these services, which results in obstacles when it comes to staffing and resource allocation. Another concern is the absence of a comprehensive framework for SAC. This lack of a unified structure creates inconsistencies in the quality of service and support provided, affecting the overall effectiveness of these services.
13. Barriers Related to Policy and Inspection: Current policies and the available funding inadequately support the inclusion of all families and children, regardless of their backgrounds or needs. This shortcoming has the potential to limit the ability of ELC and SAC services to provide equitable support and opportunities for all children.
14. Barriers Related to Research and Evaluation: There is limited access to research and evidence-based practices in the field. This lack of access can affect the quality and effectiveness of the services offered in ELC and SAC settings, potentially hindering children's learning and development.
15. Barriers Related to Monitoring and Accountability: The existing monitoring and accountability mechanisms do not sufficiently ensure that ELC and SAC services are consistently overcoming barriers to children's participation, enjoyment, and learning. Additionally, there is a lack of transparency and openness in reporting on the progress and outcomes of the services. This can affect the trust and confidence that children, families, and other stakeholders have in these services.
16. Barriers Related to Rural and Remote Settings: For children and families living in rural and remote areas, access to ELC and SAC services is notably limited. This further exacerbates the barriers to participation, enjoyment, and learning, making it even more challenging for these communities to avail of these crucial services.

WHAT SUPPORTS OR SOLUTIONS (HELP) COULD BE OFFERED TO PARENTS AND CHILDREN TO HELP OVERCOME THE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING, PARTICIPATING, ENJOYING AND LEARNING IN ELC AND SAC?

- It would be beneficial to develop a broad curriculum for staff training that addresses topics such as cultural competence, unconscious bias, and inclusive language. Additionally, establishing mandatory diversity and inclusion policies within ELC and SAC environments, complete with explicit guidelines and repercussions for non-adherence, is essential.
- Targeted awareness campaigns can help spread information about available services and guidance on accessing them, with several suggestions related to increasing public awareness about the available services through a variety of channels such as a national campaign, websites, TV and radio ads, and more. Collaborating with local community centres, faith-based organisations, and minority group representatives can be effective in this regard, along with the use of social media, radio, and print advertising.
- Policy development should be inclusive and engage a diverse range of stakeholders, including parents, community members, and minority group representatives. Adopting a human rights-based approach to policy development ensures that the rights and needs of all children and families are considered and addressed. This includes the need for the adoption of an overarching Human Rights and Children's Rights framework was mentioned, highlighting the need for ELC and SAC services to prioritise equality of outcomes, which encompasses more than just care.
- Family engagement and support can be heightened by offering regular workshops, seminars, and support groups for parents and caregivers, covering areas like child development, parenting skills, and resource availability. To foster a sense of ownership and cooperation, families should be involved in the decision-making processes within ELC and SAC settings.
- Addressing service limitations and barriers involves confronting issues related to childcare accessibility and affordability, especially for low-income and middle-income families. There should be greater access to on-site support professionals such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and special education teachers, along with regular training for ELC and SAC staff on identifying and addressing the specific requirements of children with additional needs or developmental delays.
- Specific cohorts of parents and families, such as those marginalised like Travellers, Roma, refugees, and parents with additional needs or mental health issues, require targeted support. It's also vital to improve transportation options and solutions for rural populations and socially isolated families.
- To solve transportation issues, partnerships could be established with public transport providers to offer discounted or free travel for children attending ELC and SAC programs. A community-based shared transportation system could be implemented to improve access in remote areas.
- Tailored support programs can be offered to meet the specific needs of different groups, including LGBTQI+ families and children, and families affected by domestic violence, substance abuse, or mental health issues. Feedback from underrepresented communities could be gathered through surveys and focus groups to inform the design of targeted support programs.
- A wraparound support services system can be established by collaborating with local health services, social workers, and other support agencies. This approach addresses the physical, emotional, and social needs of families. A centralised database can help streamline information sharing and coordination among service providers.

- An inclusive curriculum and activities can be developed by involving families in the design, development, and adaptation of relevant ELC and SAC programs. The incorporation of culturally diverse books, materials, and lesson plans, along with the organisation of events celebrating different cultural traditions, fosters respect for diversity and a sense of belonging.
- The provision of multilingual staff and resources is essential to support communication with diverse families effectively. This can be done by offering translated materials, interpretation services, and opportunities for staff to learn additional languages.
- A centralised information portal can be developed to offer comprehensive information on ELC, ECCE, and SAC services, including available subsidies, eligibility criteria, and application processes. Digital literacy challenges faced by certain groups of parents and families need to be addressed to ensure they can access these services.
- Employment opportunities for underrepresented groups could be increased by providing targeted scholarships, mentorship programs, and internships for those pursuing careers in ELC and SAC. Partnerships with local colleges and training institutions could also help develop a diverse pipeline of qualified professionals.
- The development of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework, which includes indicators to measure progress in increasing access and participation of underrepresented groups, is crucial. Regular assessments should be conducted, and policies and programs should be adapted based on the feedback and data collected, ensuring continuous improvement.
- Community outreach and collaboration can greatly enhance the reach and impact of ELC and SAC programs. To achieve this, partnerships should be established with local community organisations, businesses, and institutions. Utilising community spaces, such as Family Resource Centres, community buildings, libraries, parks, and cultural centres, can offer suitable venues for hosting events and activities that promote ELC and SAC services.

WHAT SUPPORTS OR SOLUTIONS (HELP) COULD BE OFFERED TO ELCs AND SACs TO HELP PARENTS AND CHILDREN OVERCOME THE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING, PARTICIPATING, ENJOYING AND LEARNING IN ELC AND SAC SETTINGS?

- The most prominent solution recommended was an increase in funding dedicated to Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) services. This includes boosting capital funding for the improvement of infrastructure and capacity. It's also essential to allocate financial aid towards staff training, resources, and administrative costs, thereby fostering a well-supported environment for these services.
- A focus on staff training, recognition, and well-being is of utmost importance. This involves implementing paid in-service days for comprehensive staff training. Funding should be provided for mandatory and specialised training programs, such as trauma-informed practice, anti-bias, and diversity training. Additionally, support must be available for staff members' mental well-being, including access to external counselling and other mental health services.
- Recognise the need for professional development and training for staff to better understand and support diverse cultures, languages, and family backgrounds. It's vital to provide resources and guidance on addressing children experiencing trauma and promoting inclusive practices. Attention should also be given to the challenges associated with non-contact time for staff and its impact on service quality and staff well-being.
- Specialised training and support should be made available to staff members. This includes core training in areas like the Hanen Program, Lámh, and trauma-informed practice, along with compulsory training in First Aid Response, fire safety, manual handling, and designated liaison roles.
- Efforts should be made towards improving staffing and child-to-staff ratios. Lowering these ratios, based on children's needs, can enhance the quality of care and support provided. Increasing staff capacity through additional funding for recruitment, salaries, increments, and pensions is also a key step.
- Enrolment is another area that needs addressing. Systems around enrolment in ELC services need to be enhanced, or a national service point should be established to market these services to underrepresented groups better. Furthermore, all children should have the right to access ELC and SAC services without needing a practitioner to advocate for them.
- Promoting inclusivity and diversity in ELC and SAC services is paramount. This involves supporting children experiencing trauma, developing more inclusive and diverse curricula, and addressing conscious and unconscious biases and discrimination. Celebrating various cultures, languages, and family backgrounds within ELC and SAC services is crucial, as is addressing service gaps for specific age groups. Nutritional support is also important, both in terms of basic nutritional benefits towards participation as well as a learning opportunity for introducing children to culturally appropriate foods from different cultures and ethnic groups.
- Family and community support plays an essential role in enhancing these services. Encouraging engagement between ELC and SAC services and family support workers can improve awareness of local services. Collaborative efforts between ELC/SAC services, schools, youth services, and other community resources should also be enhanced.
- Transition support is another critical aspect. A policy on transitions between ELC and primary school could significantly help children and families navigate these changes. Moreover, a system that allows

information sharing between schools and ELCs/SACs, while respecting data protection requirements, needs to be in place – without having to liaise with a third party organisation.

- Establish national guidelines on best practice in SACs and reviewing ELC curricula to ensure they reflect the communities they serve.
- Collaboration with professionals should also be promoted to maintain a cohesive support system for children and families, including improved access to services like the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for early childhood and SAC settings.
- Finally, funding for family support services, such as family support hubs, individual care plans with support from Family Support Workers and Home School Liaison personnel, and expansion of proven effective models of family support services, is an essential step in providing the necessary support to families accessing ELC and SAC services.

APPENDIX I PROCESS FOR THEMATIC WORKSHOPS

Thematic Workshops

BACKGROUND

Meehan Tully and Associates Ltd. were assigned to host a number of thematic workshops on behalf of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The aim of the workshops was to gather feedback from representative organisations, service providers Early Years Educators and School-Age Practitioners, which would inform the Equal Participation Model (EPM) Policy Development Project.

EPM POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The aim of the EPM policy development project is to deliver a model of universal and targeted supports in a strategic policy framework to address the impacts of disadvantage in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) in a child-centred manner, assisting services to better support children and families from all backgrounds in an equitable way. The project is being implemented by the EPM development Project Team, and guided by the EPM Communications and Consultation Plan.

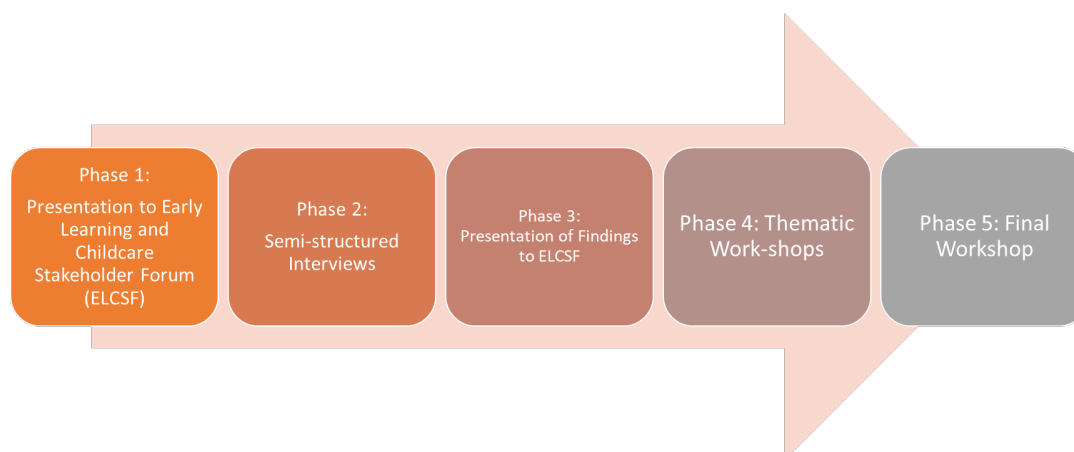
EPM: COMMUNICATIONS AND CONSULTATION PLAN

The communications and consultation (C&C) plan sets out how the EPM development Project Team will engage, in the design stage of the project, with the primary external and internal stakeholder groups for the EPM.

1. Strand 1: Engagement with Representative Organisations, Service Providers, Early Years Educators and School-Age Practitioners
2. Strand 2: Engagement with Parents and Children
3. Strand 3: Inter- and intra-Departmental stakeholders

STRAND 1: ENGAGEMENT

The five phases of engagement involved in Strand 1 are illustrated in the diagram below.



Of the above phases, Phase 4: Thematic Work-shops is relevant to this assignment.

FACILITATED WORKSHOPS

Phase 4 of Strand 1 was comprised of two pairs of workshops, held to gather feedback and facilitate the discussion of common themes and responses to the design of the EPM, as well as a final workshop to discuss the general findings raised in the previous sessions. The participants for the two pairs of workshops were:

1. Non-governmental organisations who work with and/ or advocate for, or represent, the different cohorts of children the model will try to reach, including Traveller, Roma, homeless, refugees, migrants, lone parent families.
2. ELC and SAC providers, educators, practitioners and ELC and SAC representative bodies. In addition to this element of Phase 4, two online sessions were held with staff working in ELC and SAC services.

METHODOLOGY

STRUCTURE

The facilitated onsite workshops used a 'café-style' setting with each table seating between 6-8 people. The number of tables depended on the number of attendees, which resulted in between 4-8 tables being used across the different workshops.

CAFÉ STYLE DISCUSSION

The methodology can be summarised as follows:

- Facilitator to commence the workshop with a PowerPoint presentation, introducing the EPM and/ or the schedule for the day
- The main focus of the workshop is centered upon discussions to be held by the participants at each of the tables:
 1. One topic is introduced and described by the Facilitator, e.g., barriers to access, solutions, etc., with a brief overview of the breadth of discussion to take place
 2. Each table to nominate a notetaker, using large colored card to be provided by the facilitator
 3. The topic is presented for discussion among all the tables at the same time, but each table to discuss the topic separately
 4. Upon conclusion of the discussion, the facilitator will seek summary feedback from each table, as well as encourage discussion from other tables; and gather all colored cards (notes).
 5. On a number of occasions, participants are moved between tables by the Facilitator (using a simple number system) to ensure that participants can begin the new discussion with new people.
 6. The next topic is introduced, following the steps above.

REPORT

A report was prepared by Meehan Tully and Associates Ltd. on the workshop feedback gathered at each Workshop Day. A final report was then prepared, gathering all of the feedback and categorising the information in terms of its relevance to the EPM.

APPENDIX II ADDITIONAL DIFFICULTIES FACED BY FAMILIES, PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Although not everything that arose during the consultation process can be addressed through the EPM, work is underway through other avenues which addresses some of the elements outside the EPM's remit. This section describes additional difficulties faced by families, parents and children that were raised during the workshops.

ADDITIONAL DIFFICULTIES FACED BY FAMILIES, PARENTS AND CHILDREN

The following items have been identified as contributing towards difficulties faced by families, parents and children in accessing ELC and SAC services, but which are outside the remit of the Equal Participation Model (EPM.)

1. Children not in the EPM remit
 - Families with children aged 12-15 who face difficulties accessing after-school care covered by NCS
2. Housing/ Homeless system
 - Location of direct provision centres (often isolated) limits access to ELC and SAC services.
 - Housing instability and homelessness:
 - Families facing housing issues or homelessness struggle to access consistent ELC and SAC services due to transience and instability.
 - Frequent moves and unstable housing situations make it difficult for families to maintain continuity of care and access to ELC and SAC services.
3. Hours of operation
 - Parents with Irregular Work Schedules:
 - Challenges accessing services due to inflexible hours or limited availability.
 - Shift workers or full-time working parents struggling to find suitable ELC and SAC services.
 - Flexible Scheduling and Programming:
 - Implement flexible hours of operation, including extended hours and weekend availability, to accommodate diverse family schedules.
 - Offer customisable programming options, such as part-time, full-time, or drop-in services, to meet the varying needs and preferences of families.
4. AIM
 - Services with inadequate or inappropriate equipment and facilities, such as preschool rooms for school-age children or limited sensory rooms
 - Improve access to ELC and SAC services for children with additional needs, particularly those who require more than the standard 3 hours of AIM support
 - Extend overall service hours and weeks, particularly for ECCE and AIM support, to better accommodate family schedules and needs
 - Access and Inclusion
 - Extend AIM support to after-school services or expand SNA provision to ensure consistent support across both ELC and SAC settings.
 - Improve access to necessary assessments by increasing funding in relevant departments.
 - Provide SNA support or extend the AIM program to after-school services.
 - The need to re-evaluate work activation schemes in the context of ELC services, ensuring that children are not negatively impacted by their parents' employment or training status.

APPENDIX III ADDITIONAL DIFFICULTIES FACED BY ELC AND SAC SERVICES

Although not everything that arose during the consultation process can be addressed through the EPM, work is underway through other avenues which addresses some of the elements outside the EPM's remit. This section describes additional difficulties faced by ELC and SAC services that were raised during the workshops.

ADDITIONAL DIFFICULTIES FACED BY ELC AND SAC SERVICES

The following items have been identified as difficulties faced by ELC and SAC services in the facilitation of access, participation and learning, but which are outside the remit of the Equal Participation Model (EPM.)

1. Staffing and Operational Issues

- Services with high staff turnover, leading to relationship breakdowns and family withdrawals
- Recruiting and retaining qualified staff, particularly for afternoon and specialised positions, can limit the capacity of ELC and SAC services.
- Insufficient capital funding for infrastructure and service expansion can result in inadequate service provision and limited access.
- High staff-to-child ratios in SAC settings, potentially affecting the quality of care and individualised support for children.
- Insufficient respect for ELC and SAC staff as professionals, impacting staff morale and retention.
- Ensure staff recognition through professional development opportunities, improved terms and conditions, and support for work-life balance.
- Inadequate wages and limited professional development opportunities for staff, impacting their confidence and skills in building security and trust for children.
- Insurance costs limiting the expansion of facilities, such as the addition of pre-fabricated buildings or other improvements.
- Challenges in attracting and retaining qualified staff in rural and remote settings, affecting the quality and consistency of care and support available to children and families.
- Staff Qualifications and Retention
 - Recognise all graduates in core funding and improve wages to attract and retain qualified staff.
 - Encourage staff diversity by opening the sector to individuals from different communities.
 - Reflect qualifications and higher capitation for SAC.

2. Capital/ Physical Accessibility and Availability of Services

- Infrastructure Expansion and Improvement
 - Allocate funds for the construction or renovation of community childcare centres and private facilities, focusing on underserved areas.
 - Implement safety and accessibility audits for existing facilities, ensuring they meet the requirements of children with additional needs and diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Inadequate infrastructure, such as a lack of wheelchair access, insufficient outdoor space, or limited capacity, can create barriers for families seeking ELC and SAC services.
- Physical Environment
 - Insufficient capital funding, resulting in inadequate facilities that might not be age-appropriate or accessible for children with additional needs.
 - Insurance limitations that restrict activities and premises, potentially hindering children's engagement and learning experiences.
 - Insufficient funding for specialised facilities, such as sensory rooms, impacting the availability and quality of services for children with additional needs.

- Dependence on fundraising for essential resources like toys and equipment, placing an undue burden on families.
 - Inadequate physical space for ELC and SAC services, both indoors and outdoors, affecting children's opportunities for play, exploration, and learning.
3. Regulation
- Lack of qualifications and regulation in the SAC sector, resulting in disparities in service quality and support for children.
 - Frequent and potentially burdensome inspections, negatively affecting staff morale and focus on child-centred care.
 - Governance and Inspections
 - Streamline governance under one agency, such as the Department of Education.
 - Review and improve the inspection process, ensuring consistency and support for services.
4. National Childcare Scheme
- Simplify the funding model for NCS and incorporate new funding into existing schemes.
5. Garda Vetting System
- Implement a centralised Garda vetting system to streamline the process and allow for transferability between services.
6. Administration and Compliance
- Develop centralised supports for funding applications and provide clear information on criteria and scoring mechanisms.
 - Reduce or fund the administrative burden associated with compliance, reporting, and paperwork by factoring these costs into service delivery budgets.
 - Consolidate and streamline data collection and communication between ELCs, SACs, and schools, addressing data protection concerns.
 - Streamline reporting requirements to reduce the burden on services, possibly by providing funding for these activities and developing national templates that can be adopted by all services.
7. Technology and Digital Literacy
- Invest in technology infrastructure and provide support for staff to improve digital literacy.
 - Adapt systems like HIVE to improve communication between parents and ELC/SAC services.
8. Long-term Planning and Continuous Improvement
- Encourage the development of community-based services, tailored to local needs, with ongoing support and funding; with potential to use community spaces to promote ELC and SAC services.
 - Implement open-ended capital programs and fast-track processes to improve capacity and infrastructure in a timely manner, and evaluate impact upon equal participation and access.
 - Regularly review and update the curricula of third-level institutions that train ELC practitioners to ensure they are reflective of current demographics and service requirements.
9. Continuous Professional Development:
- Offer ongoing training opportunities for ELC and SAC staff, focusing on the latest research, best practices, and innovative approaches in the field.
 - Establish a mentorship and peer support program, facilitating knowledge sharing and collaboration among professionals from diverse backgrounds.

APPENDIX IV TO BE REFERRED TO OTHER AGENCIES

Although not everything that arose during the consultation process can be addressed through the EPM, work is underway through other avenues which addresses some of the elements outside the EPM's remit. This section describes additional issues that are outside the remit of the DCEDIY but will be referred to other agencies.

TO BE REFERRED TO OTHER AGENCES

The following items have been identified during the workshops and will be referred to other agencies as feedback relevant to the sector.

1. Families Awaiting PPS Numbers or Other Documentation:
 - Difficulty accessing ELC and SAC services due to delays in receiving necessary documentation, such as CHICK codes and PPS numbers for refugees or working immigrants.
 - Families seeking citizenship, no access to CHICK codes, lacking PPS numbers, or facing legal challenges will often encounter difficulties accessing ELC and SAC services.
 - Reduce the timescale involved in processing access for those without current access to CHICK codes, PPS numbers, etc.
2. Families Not Meeting Habitual Residency Condition:
 - Difficulty accessing services due to not reaching the habitual residency condition.
3. Housing and Accommodation
 - The impact of accommodation conditions on children's participation in ELC and SAC services, for example difficulties experienced by Travellers or other marginalised groups