EQUAL PARTICIPATION MODEL
POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

FEEDBACK FROM NGO WORKSHOP DAY 2

MARCH 28TH 2023

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INTRODUCTION

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.
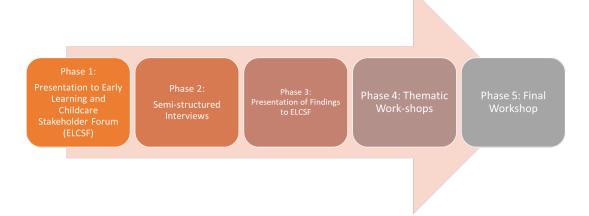
EPM: COMMUNICATIONS AND CONSULTATION PLAN

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.

| Phase 1: Presentation to Early Learning and Childcare Stakeholder Forum (ELCSF) | Phase 2: Semi-structured Interviews | Phase 3: Presentation of Findings to ELCSF | Phase 4: Thematic Work-shops | Phase 5: Final Workshop |

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.

NGO WORKSHOPS

The first pair of workshops were held on March 21st and March 28th, and were designed to be attended by 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.

NGO WORKSHOPS DAY 2 MARCH 28TH

The second NGO workshop, held on March 28th, posed six main questions to the participants, encouraging feedback and discussion regarding the barriers to accessing, participating/ learning and enjoying ELC and SAC settings. The six questions posed were:

1. What supports or solutions (help) could be offered to parents to help them overcome the barriers to accessing and participating in ELC and SAC?
2. What supports or solutions (help) could be offered to children to help them overcome the barriers to accessing and participating in ELC and SAC?
3. What supports or solutions could be offered to ELC and SAC services to help overcome barriers to access and participation?
4. What are the potential risks and challenges involved in introducing the EPM to ELC and SAC services, and how can they be overcome?
5. What would be the best way to promote the EPM among parents, ELCs and SACs?
6. What would demonstrate success for the EPM? How would we know if the changes work?

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

The remainder of this document provides a summary of the main discussion points and prominent issues raised by the participants in response to the above questions during the course of the NGO Workshop Day 2.

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

Having identified the main barriers to accessing and participating in ELC and SAC services in the previous workshop, the participants were encouraged to discuss and provide feedback on the supports or solutions (help) that could be offered to parents to help them overcome these barriers.

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION AND AWARENESS

This appears to be the most common theme, 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. A considerable portion of the responses emphasised the importance of efficient communication and awareness mechanisms. It was recommended that this could be achieved through a universal contact point for initial access to ELC and ECCE, a national campaign using various platforms (postcards, community groups, drop-in information centers, TV/radio adverts, a free phone number, a dedicated website), and ensuring information availability through visuals on familiar platforms such as Citizens Information and HSE websites.

INCLUSIVITY AND REPRESENTATION AMONG ELC AND SAC STAFF

This theme also emerged strongly with emphasis on tackling racism and discrimination, and promoting diversity within staff training and hiring practices, particularly in relation to underrepresented groups like Travellers and Roma. According to the feedback, there is a need to address racism and discrimination, particularly in relation to the Traveller community. Clear training on diversity for staff and measures to support underrepresented groups, such as the Travellers, Roma, and minority groups to act as staff, were suggested.

SUPPORT FOR ADDITIONAL NEEDS

For children with high additional needs, targeted supports are necessary. There were reports of inadequate access and a lack of suitable spaces, leading to the need for additional staffing, equipment, building upgrades and training.

STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

This was another prominent issue, emphasising the importance of training and professional development to understand and address the challenges faced by families accessing these services. According to the participants, it's crucial that staff have access to continual professional development and training to increase their awareness of the challenges people face while accessing these services.

LOGISTICAL SUPPORT

Solutions related to improving transportation, creating more after-school programs, and establishing universal access points were prevalent. Proposals include funding for an Early Childhood Travel Transport Scheme to mitigate challenges related to transportation, especially in rural areas, and the introduction of a universal after-school program in all school buildings.

RESEARCH AND TARGETED SUPPORTS

The need for research to better understand and address the barriers faced by specific groups was highlighted, though not as prominently as the above points. It was suggested that targeted research should be conducted to understand why specific groups are not accessing ELC & SAC, allowing for the development of more streamlined services.

SUPPORTS TO HOMELESS AND RELOCATING FAMILIES

The discussion underlined the need for a transfer scheme to support homeless families who face forced relocation, which often disrupts their access to ELC and SAC services.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Initiatives such as community mothers projects and parent and child groups in Family Resource Centres were mentioned as beneficial means of communication and community empowerment. Alongside this, suggestions were made regarding the provision of assistance for individuals with poor literacy to fill out forms needed to access services through enhanced community engagement.

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

The second question put to the participants referred to the supports or solutions (help) that could be provided to children, as opposed to parents, to help them overcome the barriers to accessing and participating in ELC and SAC services.

REPRESENTATION AND INCLUSION

This theme was quite prominent, with a strong emphasis on cultural diversity, including staff and children from various groups in the same setting, and the celebration of different cultures and traditions. The importance of fostering diversity and inclusion within childcare settings was emphasized, noting that encouraging representation of different groups of children and staff in the same setting can facilitate better participation. An appreciation of diversity and a value-based approach to preventing "othering" is crucial, creating an everyday practice of celebrating different cultures, such as Traveller pride, and cultural holidays.

ADDRESSING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

A significant focus was placed on meeting the individual needs of children, with suggestions for speech and language therapists, Public Health Nurses (PHNs), and additional needs workers in the settings. The need for supports such as onsite speech and language therapists and Public Health Nurses (PHNs), as well as the fast-tracking of needs assessments, were highlighted in particular. The presence of additional needs workers to facilitate participation was also suggested, with a call for more guidance around their potential role within SAC.

STAFF TRAINING AND WELL-BEING

Issues around staff training and conditions were highlighted frequently. This theme was tied to the improvement of service quality and children's participation. While there was a clear emphasis on the importance of staff training in fostering participation, it was emphasised that a lack of time set aside for Continued Professional Development (CPD) and training was regarded as a major barrier. Staff turnover and its impact on children's participation was also noted. Hence, improved staff conditions could foster better participation from children.

NUTRITIONAL SUPPORT

The provision of hot meals in settings, including the cultural aspect of different types of foods, was noted several times. Beyond basic nutritional benefits, this can also be used as a learning opportunity, introducing children to culturally appropriate foods from different cultures and ethnic groups.

EDUCATIONAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORT

The importance of programs like Highscope and the provision of homework support, particularly for families with literacy challenges, was underlined.

ACCESSIBILITY

Children should be met where they are, including accessible buildings for children who use wheelchairs, and creating videos of settings for children to familiarise themselves with, before attending ELC and SAC. A universal service, where all children have the opportunity to access ELC and SAC services, was advocated.

ACTIVITIES AND ENVIRONMENT

Emphasis was placed on age-appropriate activities, a fun environment, and the avoidance of practices that could exclude children, like sending them home for not being able to use the toilet.

RIGHTS AND EQUALITY FRAMEWORK

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.

COMMUNITY ROLE AND PARTNERSHIP

The role of County Childcare Committees in promoting inclusivity was mentioned, as was the importance of CE Schemes, working with the Department to target the inclusion of underrepresented groups.

WHAT SUPPORTS OR SOLUTIONS COULD BE OFFERED TO ELC AND SAC SERVICES TO HELP OVERCOME BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION?

The third question put to the participants referred to the supports or solutions (help) that could be provided to ELC and SAC services to help them to support parents, families and children to overcome barriers when accessing and participating in ELC and SAC services.

STAFF SUPPORT

The most prevalent issues revolve around staff, encompassing better wages, terms and conditions, professional development opportunities, and overall valuation of staff. Staffing challenges featured prominently in the responses, including low wages, poor working conditions, and lack of professional development opportunities. A comprehensive review of the ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) funding model and new core funding is necessary to ensure robust professional standards and competitive wages. Better terms, conditions, and pension plans should be in place for staff. Regular continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities should be built into working hours, focusing on areas such as the rights of the child, equality of outcomes, diversity, and human rights.

REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS

A high degree of emphasis was given to the need for better regulations and standards. Solutions in this category include the development of national guidelines for best practices in SAC, addressing data protection issues, and promoting the public sector duty in ELC and SAC settings. The introduction of national guidelines for best practices in SAC, similar to the robust system for ELC regulations is necessary. Improved communication tools and mechanisms need to be established to work around data protection issues when supporting vulnerable parents, families and children transitioning to SAC, as well as relocating in terms of housing.

SERVICE DELIVERY

Concerns were repeatedly expressed about service delivery, including the need for consistent and accessible service provision, a more efficient enrolment system, a central Garda vetting system, and reducing the burden of reporting requirements. A more consistent, accessible service model should be implemented that facilitates the reduction of administrative burden by providing funding and creating national templates for reporting. Improved enrolment systems for ELC, perhaps through a national service point, can provide better access to underrepresented groups. Implementing a centralised Garda vetting system will enhance service security and trust.

DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY

Solutions related to enhancing diversity and equality are vital. These include mandatory diversity and equality training for staff, and collaboration with the new child poverty unit.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS AND CHALLENGES INVOLVED IN INTRODUCING THE EPM TO ELC AND SAC SERVICES, AND HOW CAN THEY BE OVERCOME?

ADDITIONAL WORKLOAD AND ADMINISTRATION CHALLENGES

This issue was mentioned several times, indicating it is a significant concern. It includes the extra paperwork, additional reporting duties, and the administrative burden that these tasks could place on staff. There is a risk of staff reluctance due to the anticipated increase in paperwork and overall workload, which could lead to resistance in implementing the model. For example, the prospect of increased paperwork and administrative tasks, such as reporting, could pose a significant burden on already limited resources.

LACK OF ADEQUATE SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

This challenge was consistently highlighted, focusing on the risk of staff loss due to increased duties, lack of funding for extra work or training, and the need for additional supports to manage the changes. Insufficient funding could hinder additional work or training required for the model's implementation. The need for extra staffing (like floating or admin staff) also necessitates more funding. Implementing the model without providing additional support could lead to staff loss, especially if the new model increases reporting duties.

PROCESS CONCERNS (TIMEFRAME AND FEEDBACK)

These concerns involve the method and timeframe for implementation, the risk of a one-size-fits-all approach, and the need for a feedback mechanism. There was regular mention of the need for a suitable timeframe for services to be equipped and ready for the model's rollout. However, a one-size-fits-all approach to introducing the model could potentially backfire, and the need for a strategic, tailored approach that takes into consideration the unique needs of different services is emphasised. For example, there is a need for a system that allows services to adopt the model in a way that suits their context and to provide feedback on the implementation process.

INCLUSIVITY CHALLENGES

This includes the risks of segregation or pigeonholing, missing out on reaching certain groups, and the potential widening of the poverty gap, particularly if the model focuses too strongly on a targeted approach that creates a hyperfocus on certain groups, which could lead to further segregation rather than inclusive participation.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

When asked to discuss potential solutions and mitigating strategies to address the risks and challenges involved in introducing the EPM, the most prominent recommendations included the following:

- Develop a support programme to train staff before the change arrives, to increase their confidence with the new model.
- Consider a programme of administrative consolidation, grouping reporting duties to various Department, bodies and organisations (e.g. HSE, Tusla and Pobal), to minimise the amount of reporting.
- Establish a continual feedback mechanism, potentially through existing agencies like Pobal or the City and County Childcare Committees, to monitor quality and address issues as they arise.
- Encourage a mix of targeted and universal supports that acknowledge and support differences.
- Involve parents not just as users of services, but also in the design and delivery to ensure real participation.
- Look at best practices from other models of universal ELC and SAC like in Scandinavia and learn from how they overcame similar risks.

WHAT WOULD BE THE BEST WAY TO PROMOTE THE EPM AMONG PARENTS, ELCS AND SACS?

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

There's a strong emphasis on utilising diverse forms of communication to promote the EPM. Multiple forms of communication were suggested including social media, TV, radio, posters, videos, and word of mouth, indicating the significant emphasis placed on varied and effective communication strategies.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement was a prevalent theme, with a focus on utilising existing networks, engaging with community organisations, and recognising parents as part of these communities. The responses suggest that EPM needs to reach not just parents but also the broader community. Parents are part of various communities—geographical, interest-based, religious—and leveraging these networks can enhance engagement. Engaging with established community organisations, such as Family Resource Centres (FRCs), churches, and parent communities, is recommended.

TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING

The importance of building trust, ensuring the language used is easy to understand, and engaging with secure groups such as parent-and-toddler groups was consistently highlighted. The language used to communicate EPM should be accessible and avoid excessive use of acronyms. The term "Equal Participation Model" itself was flagged as potentially unengaging and confusing for the public.

MULTI-DISCIPLINARY INVOLVEMENT

The suggestion of having various professionals and departments involved was a prominent theme. The need for wrap-around services for disadvantaged groups was an integral part of this. Many examples were given during the discussion of the significant benefits of having an ELC or SAC that is located with easy access to other services that support the parents, families and children, e.g. Family Resource Centres.

ENGAGING WITH MINORITY GROUPS

Engaging with minority groups, like the Traveller community, was highlighted. Recommendations include liaising with National Traveller organisations and utilising existing communication networks. The National Action Plan Against Racism was identified as a relevant link for this demographic.

RESOURCES AND INCENTIVES

The need for more resources, funding, and meaningful incentives for services was mentioned, indicating the recognition of the material needs for successful EPM implementation. There's a clear call for additional resources and funding to support the implementation of EPM. Furthermore, providing incentives for services is recommended, with a note that the process should be more than just another box to tick for organisations.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL COORDINATION

The responses stressed the need for Departments to work together to address their respective needs and wants. Specifically, there's a call for the Department of Education to promote EPM in schools, which are not directly linked with SAC and ELC.

ROLE OF UNIONS AND EXISTING NETWORKS

Although not as heavily emphasised, the role of unions and the utilisation of existing networks where trust has been established was suggested for promoting the EPM and improving community engagement.

WHAT WOULD DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS FOR THE EPM AND THE RESULTING CHANGES?

EVIDENCE OF DIVERSITY - DATA COLLECTION

This suggestion was at the forefront, indicating the importance of tracking representation and understanding diversity within ELC and SAC services. This data can give a clearer picture of the representation in services and help in shaping policies and strategies.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Keeping families involved in the assessment process is crucial, ensuring that their voice is heard and their children's unique needs are met.

ACTIVE MONITORING

With a clear call against a mere tick box approach, this suggestion underscores the importance of rigorous and continuous monitoring of the model's effectiveness.

INCREASED REPRESENTATION

The need for representation of children from minority, ethnic, and disadvantaged groups in ELC and SAC, as reflected in CSO data, is a prominent aspect of the Equal Participation Model.

SENSE OF BELONGING

If staff, parents, and children express that they feel they belong, have a voice, and are supported by the system, this indicates successful implementation of the model.

AWARENESS AND UPTAKE

The value and purpose of ELC and SAC should be understood and promoted across diverse groups and communities, leading to a higher uptake in ELC and more SAC settings.

STAFF RETENTION AND SATISFACTION

While not as frequently mentioned, the potential impact on staff retention and satisfaction reflects the model's broad effects, signifying a healthy and inclusive work environment.