



Equal Start

A model to support access and participation
in early learning and childcare for all children



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FOREWORD



Disadvantage early in life poses multiple risks to children's development and can have long-term impacts on their life chances. The lasting impact of early disadvantage can be seen in inter-generational cycles of poverty and social exclusion.

We know that high quality early learning and care services have an important role to play in children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development and well-being and in helping to break these inter-generational cycles, alongside the provision of other key services for children and families. School-age childcare services can also play an important role in supporting children's holistic development, complementing the formal education provided in schools.

This underscores the importance of ensuring that children from all backgrounds can access and participate in high quality early learning and care and school-age childcare.

Delivering on a commitment in First 5 and the Programme for Government, I am pleased to publish Equal Start - our new funding model and a set of universal and targeted measures to support access to, and participation in, early learning and care and school-age childcare for children and their families who experience disadvantage.

Equal Start constitutes the fourth strand of Together for Better, the funding model for early learning and care and school-age childcare and complements the Early Childhood Care and Education programme, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), and Core Funding as well as other key policies that also support disadvantaged children within early learning and care and school-age childcare.

Equal Start adopts a tiered approach, which incorporates universal supports, child-targeted supports and setting-targeted supports, to ensure every child and every setting will benefit from a continuum of supports that reflects a continuum of need.

Equal Start priority cohorts will include children and families living in disadvantaged areas, Traveller children, Roma children, children availing of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor body, children experiencing homelessness and children in the International Protection system while Equal Start priority settings will include settings operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage, akin to the DEIS model in schools.

The allocation I announced in Budget 2024 of €4.5 million to commence initial roll out of the Equal Start from September 2024 (equivalent to full year costs of €13.5 million) combined with existing resources within my Department and other Equal Start Partners (such as Better Start, Pobal and Tusla), will support foundational groundwork to progress the following Equal Start actions, with full implementation of all other actions within the lifetime of First 5 – by 2028.

- Roll-out of funding for additional staff time in Equal Start targeted settings, which can fund a range of measures such as increased contact and non-contact time as well as engagement in training
- Appointment of six Family Link Workers to support the full roll out of the Traveller Parenting Support Programme to all 17 Tusla areas, with new responsibilities on Family Link Workers to engage with Traveller parents of children aged 1-5 years, supporting them to attend and participate in early learning and childcare, avail of the ECCE programme and where applicable applying for the NCS.
- Appointment of Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists to work in Better Start
- Review and updating of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines and associated training
- Review of the current Inclusion Co-ordinator role and updating of the Leadership for Inclusion Programme
- Development of a new Family Community Liaison role and development and rollout of an associated training programme
- Roll-out of Early Talk Boost to Equal Start target settings
- Roll-out of Meitheal training and engagement by early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners in Meitheal
- Development and roll out of Communications and Engagement Plan
- Development of a new strand of funding under the existing Case Management Process for critical incidents
- Roll-out Equal Start literacy and numeracy initiatives under the National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy.

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the development of Equal Start and I look forward to seeing how this new funding model contributes to our wider efforts to ensure that every child is happy and healthy and has the opportunity to reach their potential.



Roderic O'Gorman

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

OVERVIEW



Equal Start is a funding model and a set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and participation in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) for children and their families who experience disadvantage.

Background

First 5 committed to developing mechanisms to provide additional supports to ELC and SAC settings where there are high proportions of children who are at risk of poverty to mitigate the impacts of early disadvantage. Equal Start also responds to data showing that participation rates in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme are significantly lower for Traveller and Roma children than for children from other groups in society.

Equal Start provides measures that are additional to existing supports for disadvantaged children and families in ELC and SAC. It complements the ECCE programme, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), and Core Funding. Equal Start constitutes the fourth strand of the funding model proposed in the Expert Group report, *Partnership for the Public Good*.

Process of development

The development of Equal Start is built on a series of research studies undertaken by the Expert Group on the funding model. A public consultation process was then undertaken specifically on the design of Equal Start. To engage with ELC and SAC providers, early years educators, SAC practitioners and representative organisations, a number of semi-structured interviews took place, followed by a series of workshops, both online and in-person. Questions covered current barriers, challenges and issues related to disadvantage in accessing and participating in ELC and SAC, priority groups, and possible supports and actions.

Equal Start approach

More often than not, children experiencing disadvantage live in disadvantaged communities, and where there are high concentrations of disadvantage there can be a “multiplier” effect¹. Therefore, Equal Start prioritises ELC and SAC settings where disadvantage is concentrated. However, some children experiencing disadvantage live in other areas, and it is also important to tailor some supports to the specific needs of certain groups. For these reasons, in addition to prioritising children living in disadvantaged communities, other priority groups have been identified.

The identification of priority groups was informed by research evidence, consultation findings, national policy priorities as well as Ireland’s obligations under the European Child Guarantee. The availability of existing supports for some groups was also a factor (i.e. existing AIM supports for children with additional needs) as was the availability of administrative data that would allow us to identify the priority groups for the purposes of allocating Equal Start supports.

1 Cattan, S., Fitzsimons, E., Goodman, A., Phimister, A., Ploubidis, G. B. and Wertz, J. (2022), ‘Early childhood and inequalities’, IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities

To target supports effectively to priority groups, administrative data from the National Childcare Scheme and the ECCE programme (e.g. children's Eircode and ethnicity, as well as sponsor referrals) has been combined with Pobal's HP Deprivation Index, and with geocoded lists of homeless accommodation providers, International Protection Accommodation Centres and Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres. Equal Start can thus identify the proportions of children in different ELC and SAC settings who live in disadvantaged communities or are from priority groups. This data allows the targeting of Equal Start supports both to specific ELC and SAC settings where there is concentrated disadvantage and to other settings where there are children from priority groups attending.

The number of Equal Start priority settings will be updated annually, with any new providers scoring above the pre-determined threshold being designated as priority settings. Those settings designated as a priority setting will retain that designation for a two-year cycle, reflecting the need for settings to forward plan. Settings identified as consistently not meeting the threshold for priority designation after the two-year cycle will be given one year to transition out of the Equal Start priority designation. Services will not be transitioned out of more than one tier within a two year cycle, meaning a Tier 1 designated service will at most be transitioned to Tier 2, rather than out of priority designation entirely.

Strands of Equal Start

Equal Start comprises universal measures (strand 1), child-targeted measures to support children from priority target groups in all ELC and SAC settings (strand 2), and setting-targeted measures that provide additional resources to settings with a high concentration of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (strand 3).

Universal measures (Strand 1) – Every child and every setting

Strand 1 of Equal Start will provide universal measures – measures that are available in all settings and that will support positive experiences and outcomes for all children. Through their universal reach, these measures will support children from disadvantaged backgrounds in whatever ELC or SAC setting they attend. In addition, some of the measures here will prioritise Equal Start targeted settings and target groups in their initial roll-out but with the aim ultimately of universal roll-out to all ELC and SAC settings.² Measures under Strand 1 fall into three areas:

- A. Empowering parents** – communications initiatives to support parents (in particular parents from disadvantaged communities) to know about what services are available to them (both ELC and SAC settings and parenting supports), how to access them, and what financial supports can help them.
- B. Embedding inclusion in settings** – supporting ELC and SAC settings to be more inclusive through reviewing and extending Diversity, Equality and Inclusion and Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years (LINC) training, reviewing support for the Inclusion Coordinator role, strengthening admissions policies, and supporting settings' engagement in inter-agency cooperation for child welfare and protection.

² As noted in section 4, Equal Start measures will only be available in Core Funding Partner Services.

C. Supporting partnership between settings, families and communities – developing a new role in ELC and SAC settings of Family and Community Partnership Coordinator, introducing training to support the new role, extending the Better Start advisory role to support Equal Start, and supporting parents' involvement in settings.

Child-targeted measures (Strand 2) – Every child with a priority designation

Strand 2 of Equal Start will provide child-targeted measures – measures that are available in all settings and that will focus additional supports on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and priority groups. Measures under Strand 2 fall into two areas:

- D. Meeting practical needs** – additional, semi-flexible funding to support access and participation of children from priority groups, in all settings.
- E. Developing tailored responses** – working with representative organisations of target groups to co-create effective solutions to address barriers to access and participation in ELC and SAC for children from those target groups.

Setting-targeted measures (Strand 3) – Every setting with a priority designation

Strand 3 of Equal Start will provide setting-targeted measures – measures that specifically target settings that have been identified through the Equal Start identification model as settings with high concentrations of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Strand 3 will provide:

- F. Additional funding for settings in areas of concentrated disadvantage** – flexible funding for additional staff time to assist settings in supporting children in the most disadvantaged communities, as well as funding for additional meals in targeted settings to help address food poverty and the provision of targeted interventions for children experiencing language delay. The Equal Start identification model will also be used in other areas of ELC and SAC policy to support the further development of the progressive universal approach to policy set out in *First 5*.

Future development

In addition to actions under Strands 1 to 3, consideration will be given to further developments of Equal Start over the coming years. Further research and consultation will inform consideration of:

- *Exceptional needs funding* – the need for an additional, application-based funding stream will be assessed after the initial implementation of Equal Start.
- *Family and Early Childhood Centres* – in line with *First 5*, consideration will be given to development of a new model of local early childhood hubs to bring together a range of services to support parents and children, drawing on national and international experience.
- *Transport* – some transport for ELC and SAC settings is already subsidised through the National Childcare Scheme, and Measure D of Equal Start will include support for transport. Further consideration will be given to future development of additional support.

- *Review of professions required to work in ELC and SAC settings* – a review will be undertaken of professional roles that might be needed in ELC and SAC, particularly in areas of concentrated disadvantage, to support children’s access, participation and development.

Complementary policies

Equal Start is intended to complement a range of other policies that also support disadvantaged children within ELC and SAC. Equal Start forms the fourth element of the Together for Better funding model for ELC and SAC settings, which provides complementary universal and targeted supports through the ECCE programme and AIM, the National Childcare Scheme, and Core Funding.

Inclusion and equality in ELC and SAC settings are important parts of the *Aistear* curriculum framework, *Síolta* quality framework, and *National Quality Guidelines for SAC Services*. There is also a focus on diversity and equality in *Nurturing Skills*, and the work of the two inspectorates for ELC.

The Department funds Tusla to deliver parenting support services directly and through commissioned services at local level depending on need. In addition to universal parenting supports, one to one parenting support is also offered from a wide variety of professional and parent support services. Plans are in place to increase access to parenting supports for more disadvantaged families.

Implementation

An Equal Start Oversight Group will be established to provide national oversight and management, in continued collaboration with stakeholders, and a dedicated Equal Start Project Team will lead on implementation.

Equal Start delivers on a key commitment in *First 5* and it is envisaged that full implementation of all initial Equal Start actions will be within the lifetime of this Strategy – by 2028 – with three distinct phases:

- **Phase 1 (2024-2025).** Setting-level targeted funding will be prioritised, commencing with the introduction of staffing supports from September 2024. Preparatory work will be undertaken on a range of other Equal Start actions, including engagement with stakeholders.
- **Phase 2 (2026-2027).** Initial child-level targeted funding will be introduced, and new and updated training programmes will commence.
- **Phase 3 (2028).** Full roll-out of other Equal Start measures in Strands 1, 2 and 3.

Progress on Equal Start implementation will be measured at a national- and setting-level. At national level, there will be annual reporting on a short set of national indicators, and the Department will commission an independent evaluation after three years. At setting level, settings who qualify for targeted funding will be required to publish a short Tackling Disadvantage Plan. Implementation at setting-level will be monitored through self-evaluation and through auditing of a sample of plans.

BACKGROUND



Poverty and disadvantage in early childhood

According to the latest data from the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (2023), there are 43,138 children aged 0-5 and 58,643 children aged 6-11 at risk of poverty. This equates to 12.1% of children aged 0-5 and 13.8% of children aged 6-11. The latest consistent poverty rates among these age cohorts stand at 3.7% (or 13,191 children) and 4.9% (or 20,822 children) respectively and 167,273 children across both age cohorts are considered to be materially deprived³. At risk of poverty rates, consistent poverty rates and deprivation rates are significantly higher among children in lone parent families.

Within this cohort of children experiencing poverty and deprivation, we know there are particularly vulnerable groups, including Traveller children, Roma children, children experiencing homelessness, children seeking international protection and children in the care of the State.

Latest data shows that are 11,980 Traveller and 4,223 Roma children under 15 in Ireland. In addition, there are currently 4,399 children under 13 accommodated in International Protection Accommodation Services, there was 4,170 children in families accessing emergency accommodation during week of 19-25 February 2024 while 4,191 children under 14 were in the care of the State in 2022.

Data from the Department of Education Primary Online Database show participation rates in the ECCE programme or other pre-school settings vary widely across different cohorts of children. For example, in 2022/2023, only 74% of Traveller children and 64.7% of Roma children entered primary school from the ECCE programme or other pre-school setting, compared to 95.7% of white Irish children.

Table 1: Entrants to junior infant classes in mainstream national schools from the ECCE programme or other pre-school setting, by school designation and ethnicity (2022/23)

Ethnic or Cultural Background	2022	2022	
	All schools	DEIS	Non-DEIS
Irish Traveller	74.0%	74.8%	72.3%
Roma	64.7%	61.5%	70.0%
White Irish	95.7%	95.1%	95.9%

Source: Primary Pupil Online Database 2022/2023 Department of Education

³ The number of children calculated based on CSO population estimates for age group 2023 multiplied by poverty rate

The role of ELC and SAC

Experiencing poverty and significant inequalities early in life can have long-term impacts on life-chances.⁴ The lasting impact of early disadvantage can be seen in inter-generational cycles of poverty and social exclusion. While ELC and SAC are not a “silver bullet”, they have an important role to play in helping to break these inter-generational cycles, alongside the provision of other key services for children and families. As noted in the EU Council Recommendation that established the European Child Guarantee:

“One of the main determinants of social exclusion of children is the unequal access to key services, essential for their well-being and the development of their social, cognitive and emotional skills. Children living in poverty or children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to face barriers in accessing early childhood education and care, inclusive education, healthcare, healthy nutrition and adequate housing. They start their lives at a disadvantage, which can have long-term implications for their development and future prospects.”⁵

In relation to ELC, as part of a recent analysis of findings from the TALIS Starting Strong survey the OECD concluded that:

“ECEC can help give all children, and particularly those from less favourable backgrounds, a strong start in life. But to fulfil this promise, children from all backgrounds must have equal access to high-quality learning and development opportunities. Furthermore, building on ECEC to compensate for the disadvantages or greater educational needs that some children have because of their backgrounds involves allocating more resources to some children or ECEC centres.”⁶

SAC services can also play an important role in supporting children’s holistic development, complementing the formal education provided in primary schools. SAC services can play a particularly important role in the lives of children who struggle in formal education or who face difficulties in their home or community environment.

First 5 and Partnership for the Public Good

First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, 2019-2028 committed to:

“Develop mechanisms to provide additional supports to ELC settings where there are high proportions of children who are at risk of poverty to mitigate the impacts of early disadvantage. Specifically, informed by the DEIS model, develop a programme for the delivery of ELC in the context of concentrated disadvantage.”

This commitment to additional supports for children from disadvantaged backgrounds reflects the wider progressive universal approach of *First 5*, offering supports and services to all children at a universal level with extra provision for children with additional needs or challenges, to ensure that all babies, young children and their families benefit from ELC and SAC.

4 G. Duncan et al. (2012) ‘The Importance of Early Childhood Poverty’, in *Social Indicators Research*, 108/1.

5 Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee.

6 OECD (2023) *Levelling the Playing Field in ECEC: Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2018*, Education Working Paper No. 305, p.45.

The commitment to develop a programme of additional supports in ELC and SAC to help address disadvantage was examined and elaborated further by the Expert Group that published *Partnership for the Public Good* in 2021. The Expert Group report made a series of further recommendations on the nature of the programme to be developed and how it would fit with the other primary funding schemes for ELC and SAC: the ECCE programme, the National Childcare Scheme, and the new Core Funding scheme that was developed as a result of the Expert Group report. The recommendations of the Expert Group for a targeted programme to address disadvantage, and the subsequent consultation and research that have resulted in Equal Start, are summarised in section 3.

EU and UN commitments

The European Pillar of Social Rights states ‘all children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality’. ‘Provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity’ is a core statement of the EU Quality Framework for ECEC.

The European Child Guarantee recognises that disadvantage and exclusion at an early age impact on children’s experiences and opportunities later in life. Situated within the wider context of the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#), the Child Guarantee aims to ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the following key services: 1) early childhood education and care, 2) education (including school-based activities), 3) healthcare, 4) nutrition, and 5) housing.

In June 2022, [Ireland’s EU Child Guarantee National Action Plan](#) was published. It includes the *First 5* commitment to develop a model to provide universal and targeted supports to children at risk of poverty to mitigate the impact of early disadvantage, which is Equal Start.

Equal Start will also support the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#), particularly: *Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere*, by promoting access to services; *Goal 3: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*, and *Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries*, by promoting inclusion.

Actions in Equal Start respond to [recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023](#), such as the recommendations to:

- Strengthen measures to eliminate discrimination against minority groups;
- Ensure that teachers, childcare professionals and other professionals working with and for children systematically receive training on the right of the child to be heard; and,
- Strengthen measures for ensuring the equal access of children in disadvantaged groups to quality education.

Related policies and strategies

[Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools \(DEIS\)](#) is the main policy initiative of the Department of Education to tackle educational disadvantage. Analysis has shown that since the DEIS programme began in 2006, it has helped to improve outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁷ The DEIS plan was updated in 2017 with the aim of becoming “a proven pathway to better opportunities for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion”⁸. Following the most recent extension of the DEIS programme in 2022, the Department of Education have undertaken work on the overall allocation of resources to schools to address educational disadvantage. This work is being informed by a review by the OECD, *Strength Through Diversity – Education for Inclusive Societies* project. The design and development of Equal Start has been informed by the DEIS model, and this will continue to be a key alignment as children transition through ELC into schools.

The overarching national strategy for poverty reduction and improved social inclusion is the [Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020–2025](#), which recently underwent a mid-term review.⁹ The Roadmap aims to reduce the percentage of the population in consistent poverty in Ireland to 2% or less and to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU. The Roadmap highlights the importance of both income supports and access to services. It includes a commitment to develop mechanisms to provide additional supports to ELC settings where there are high proportions of children who are at risk of poverty to mitigate the impacts of early disadvantage.

To coordinate Government actions that reduce child poverty and foster children’s well-being, the [Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office](#) was established by the Taoiseach in 2023. The Office prioritised actions in six areas with the potential to make the most difference to children living in poverty. One of the six areas is ELC and SAC, in recognition of the evidence that participation in ELC and SAC benefits all children but has the greatest benefit for children living in poverty.

The work of the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office is one of the ‘spotlights’ for cross-Government action in [Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028](#). Young Ireland includes a commitment to develop a new child poverty target and reduce the number of children and young people in poverty over the lifetime of Young Ireland.

Published in 2023, [Ireland’s National Action Plan Against Racism](#) (NAPAR) commits to actions to make Ireland a place where the impacts of racism are fully acknowledged and actively addressed. It includes a commitment to introduce measures to address ethnic differentials in education and achieve equality of enrolment, retention, attendance, progression and outcomes for groups experiencing racism.

7 Educational Research Centre (2017) *The Evaluation of DEIS: Monitoring Achievement and Attitudes among Urban Primary School Pupils from 2007 to 2016*.

8 Department of Education, DEIS Plan 2017.

9 Department of Social Protection (2023) *Mid-Term Review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*.

The [National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy](#) (NTRIS) was published in 2017, and provides a framework to address the severe impacts of disadvantage and marginalisation experienced by members of the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland. The plan proposes actions at multiple levels including education, children and youth and anti-discrimination. A new plan is currently under development. A Traveller and Roma Education Strategy is also being developed by the Department of Education in collaboration with the Traveller and Roma organisations and with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Extensive consultations to support the development of the strategy were held between July 2023 and April 2024. These are complemented by the consultations undertaken to inform the development of Equal Start.

Complementary ELC and SAC schemes/programmes

When the Expert Group wrote *Partnership for the Public Good* in 2021, the ECCE programme and National Childcare Scheme were already in existence. The Expert Group recommended the addition of two new elements to the overall funding model for ELC and SAC, to operate alongside the ECCE programme and the National Childcare Scheme:

Core Funding, a new supply-side payment for providers designed to support quality (including improved staff pay), sustainability, and enhanced public management, with associated conditions in relation to fee control and cost transparency, incorporating funding for administration, and to support the employment of graduate staff.

Funding for new universal and targeted measures to address socioeconomic disadvantage.

As proposed by the Expert Group, the four funding streams, and their associated conditions, form an interlocking and integrated system of funding (see figure) which is designed to ensure progress on each of the main goals of ELC and SAC policy, and move in the direction of enhanced public management. Section 9 gives an overview of ELC and SAC schemes/programmes and policies that will complement Equal Start.

New Funding Model

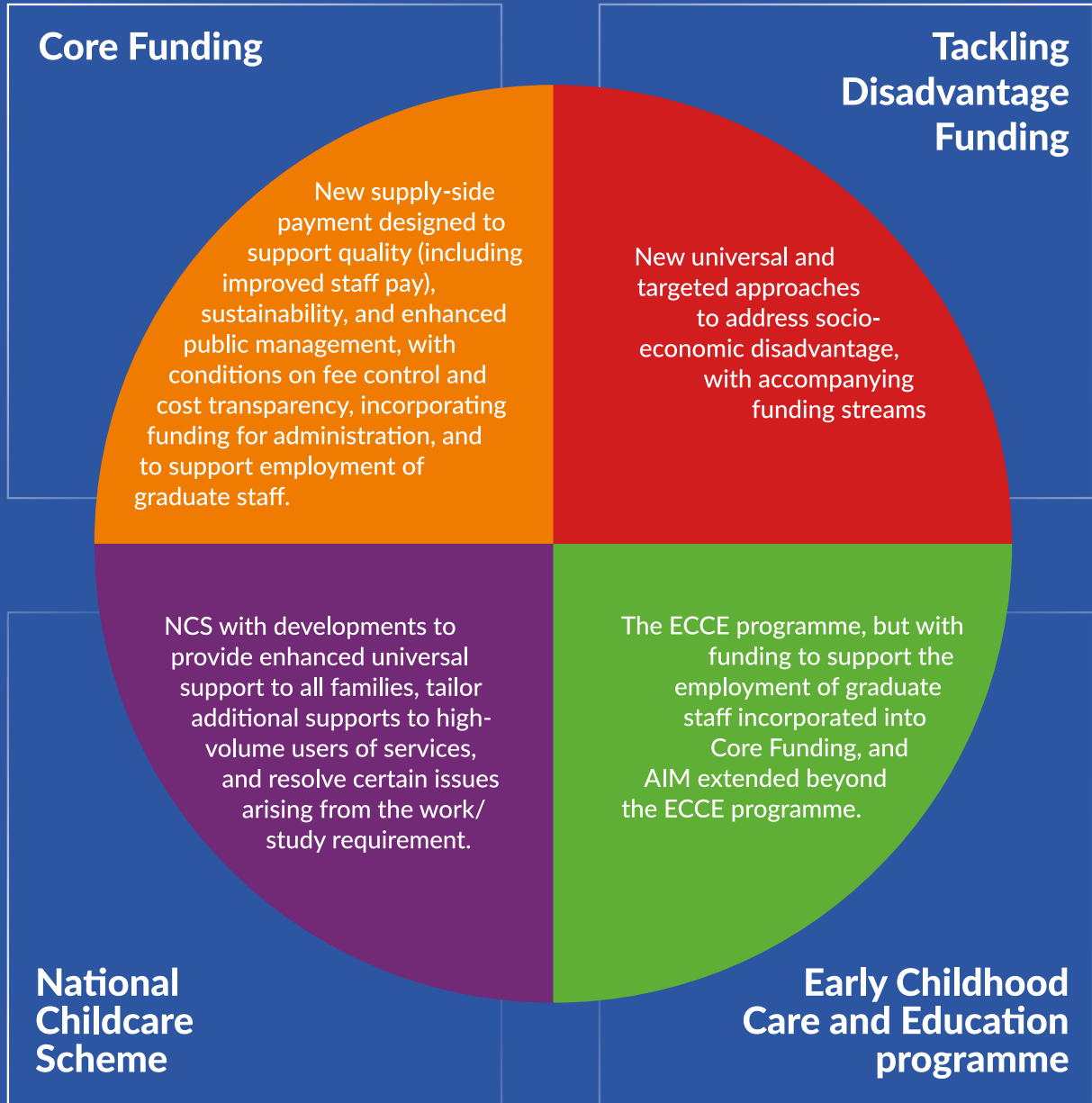


Figure 1 New Funding Model

PROCESS OF DEVELOPING EQUAL START



Partnership for the Public Good

In developing *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for ELC and SAC*, the Expert Group developed guiding principles to underpin the funding model for ELC and SAC (see Box 1 below) and carried out significant work in assessing the impacts of disadvantage and how to address them. This work was informed by stakeholder consultation and two key working papers by [Frontier Economics](#).

The first working paper 'Approaches to Identifying Children or Settings in Need of Additional Support' identified a range of child and family characteristics used in other jurisdictions to identify which children should receive additional support. These were categorised as follows: economic disadvantage; family composition; children with special educational needs or disabilities; children from an ethnic or regional minority, asylum seekers or migrants, and other children with additional language requirements; and children in extreme need.

The second working paper 'Funding Models Addressing Early Childhood Disadvantage' identified the various approaches used in other jurisdictions to support services operating in the context of disadvantage. Six broad approaches were identified, as follows:

1. Flexible additional funding provides settings with additional funding for disadvantaged children with a degree of discretion regarding how these funds are spent. This approach is generally justified by the need to compensate settings for the additional costs associated with disadvantaged children.
2. Conditional additional funding provides settings with additional funding for disadvantaged children: conditional, for example, on meeting a set of prescribed structural or process-quality standards, such as child-to-staff ratios or staff qualifications.
3. Grants provide funding to settings on a case-by-case basis, generally to address specific individual or setting needs. Such approaches are generally used to fund supports above those provided in automatic funding formulae.
4. Additional staffing policies involve the direct provision of staff, including those with specialist qualifications, to reduce child-to-staff ratios and enhance the provision of quality in targeted settings.
5. Other in-kind support includes Government provided in-service training, mentoring and advice services, pedagogical resources, and teaching materials for settings.
6. Specialised provision includes the delivery of focused curricula to disadvantaged children and provision serving disadvantaged children in designated settings separate from mainstream provision.

Partnership for the Public Good contained 25 recommendations grouped across five themes: Core Funding; Tackling Disadvantage; Affordability Measures; Fee Management; Role of the State. All 25 recommendations were accepted in full by Government.

Box 1: Guiding Principles underpinning Together for Better

Strategic

The funding model should be based on an acceptance that ELC and SAC serves the public good, providing both an essential investment in child well-being and development, and an important support for economic growth and for social equity. It should seek to support the delivery of this public value through the provision of high-quality, affordable, accessible, and sustainable ELC and SAC services. Within that framework, it should seek to address the real issues facing children, parents, providers, workers, and the State.

While recognising the reality of the existing “marketized” approach to ELC and SAC, the funding model should address any perceived deficiencies in this approach by supporting best use of available public management tools.

The funding model should, where possible, support other known forthcoming developments in the sector (such as the workforce development plan and review of the operating model), and should seek to remedy issues with existing funding approaches.

Child-centred

Funding should be allocated in the best interests of children.

Given the role of parents as primary educators, funding of ELC and SAC should promote partnerships between parents and providers that enhance children’s development.

Funding should provide additional support for children experiencing disadvantage and children with additional needs in order to enhance equitable access to, participation in, and benefit from ELC and SAC.

Family orientated

Funding of ELC and SAC should support parents participating in employment, education or training and should, in so far as possible, be cognisant of the reasonable needs and choices of parents.

Funding should support progressive universalism to provide progressively greater support to families that have greater needs but maintain enough universality to reflect the overall benefit of, and shared investment in, ELC and SAC.

Funding should mitigate the cost to families of ELC and SAC.

Professional and valued workforce

Funding should recognise that the quality of ELC and SAC is reliant on the quality of the workforce delivering those services. Accordingly, it should seek to promote the recruitment and retention of staff with the necessary qualifications; ongoing staff training and development; fair pay and working conditions; and a workforce that feels valued and is motivated to deliver the best possible service to children.

Competent Sector

Funding should incentivise continuous quality improvement, innovation, and interagency working. The funding model should be evolutionary: it should minimise short-term disruption but also allow for and support desired long-term changes.

While respecting the existing diversity of scale and service offering, funding should allow for longer-term changes required to support a sustainable sector.

Funding should reflect the reasonable costs to providers of providing the required service, including the differential costs of delivery for different ages.

Funding should be subject to robust regulation and accountability for public funds, but regulation and accountability should be cost-effective in order to maximise the funding available for actual service delivery.

Development and implementation

The funding model should be developed with input from parents, children, providers, the workforce, and other stakeholders.

The funding model should be evidence-based, informed by existing data, research, literature, and models of best practice. It should incorporate mechanisms for future data collection, evaluation, and review.

The funding model should be realistic and capable of practical application.

The funding model should be as transparent as possible, incorporating variables that are objective and measurable on a consistent basis across the system.

Equal Start Steering Group

A Steering Group was convened in 2023 to develop Equal Start. The Steering Group was chaired by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and comprised officials from a number of units across the Department as well as officials from the Department of Education and the Department of Social Protection and representatives from Better Start, Childcare Committees Ireland, Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC)/Tusla, and Pobal.

The Steering Group built on the work of the Expert Group – their guiding principles to underpin the funding model for ELC and SAC, their recommendations and their research and stakeholder consultation papers. This Group, with the support of a Technical Group, led by Pobal, advanced the initial work by the Expert Group to design an identification model.

The Steering Group also drew on other evidence, both national and international, including findings from the review of the National Childcare Scheme published in 2021 as well as emerging findings from a review of the ECCE programme, an evaluation of AIM, an OECD review of the DEIS model and a meals programme in ELC and SAC, which was piloted and evaluated in 2023.

Equal Start consultation

Building on stakeholder consultation undertaken by the Expert Group and to inform Equal Start design, the Steering Group engaged bilaterally with key Government Departments and Agencies as well as representative organisations, providers, early years educators and SAC practitioners through a series of semi-structured interviews - 20 in total. A number of independently facilitated workshops were also conducted online and in-person which examined current barriers, challenges and issues related to disadvantage in accessing and fully participating in ELC and SAC, identifying priority groups, and supports and actions that could be taken forward in Equal Start.

A list of Government Departments, Agencies and other Organisations that were engaged with as part of Equal Start development can be found in the Appendices.

The Steering Group also benefitted from engagement with parents with the support of the Children's Rights Alliance who, on behalf of the Department, conducted an online survey of parents, which yielded 156 responses, and held four focus groups, attended by 20 parents¹⁰. Through this process, parents' experience of accessing and participating in ELC and SAC was captured, in addition to the supports parents would like to see as part of the new model. A report of the findings from this survey and focus groups is available [here](#).

¹⁰ This data is currently in preparation for publication through interactive dashboards on the Early Learning and Childcare Data website.

Summary of consultation findings

Throughout the course of stakeholder engagement, there was broad consensus in relation to groups of children experiencing difficulties accessing and participating fully in ELC and SAC: children from low-income families, children from lone parent families, Traveller children, Roma children, refugee children and children seeking international protection, children experiencing homelessness, children with additional needs, and children whose first language is not English or Irish. Children living in families facing particular challenges, such as addiction or mental health issues, also featured strongly throughout the consultation process.

Stakeholders highlighted a myriad of barriers faced by these children in accessing and participating fully in ELC and SAC. Some barriers related to wider issues of affordability (including out of pocket costs for fees charged) and availability of places, with stakeholders describing particular challenges in relation to full and part time places for younger children, places in rural areas and places for school-going children, particularly out of term. Wider SAC issues were also highlighted, such as challenges accessing homework supports and challenges in accessing age-appropriate activities for school-going children, which stakeholders suggested was driven, in part, by different regulatory and quality standards in SAC.

Other barriers in accessing and participating fully in ELC and SAC, specific (though not exclusively so) to children experiencing disadvantage, included low awareness of existing supports among families (owing to a range of factors including language and literacy issues), challenges with access to digital technology to access schemes and difficulties navigating the application system, as well as fear and a lack of trust among families of ELC and SAC settings - driven by past experience.

Stakeholders also reported that certain cohorts – in particular Traveller and Roma children – are often denied admission to ELC and SAC settings and that there are particular challenges for children experiencing homelessness or in IPAS accommodation due to frequent relocation of families. Other challenges highlighted include extra costs associated with deposits, optional extras and extracurricular activities, a lack of transport and the limited availability of targeted AIM supports for children with a disability.

When in settings, unmet basic needs of children experiencing disadvantage – including hunger and tiredness – was highlighted as a significant barrier to children's participation in ELC and SAC as was limited cultural awareness and representation in settings themselves as well as in the composition of the workforce.

In addition to the lack of diversity of the workforce, the capacity of the workforce was also highlighted as a barrier to participation, both in terms of the time available to staff to effectively support the needs of children experiencing disadvantage and the skills they possessed, with a need for specific training as well as specialist staff highlighted. Staff recruitment and retention, undermining the quality of the staff child relationship, were also key concerns.

A range of solutions were put forward to address these issues.

Some solutions proposed were outside the scope of Equal Start though they offer important insights and will inform the ongoing development of wider ELC and SAC policies. For example, changes to existing schemes design were proposed, such as increasing the number of ECCE programme funded hours and weeks, extending AIM beyond the ECCE programme and introducing changes to the design of the National Childcare Scheme. The need for capital investment to address issues of undersupply was also highlighted and there was also a strong focus on wide-ranging workforce solutions relating to pay and conditions, initial and ongoing training as well as diversity, with parallels identified between these and stated commitments in *Nurturing Skills* (the Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC 2022-2028).

Other solutions within the scope of Equal Start included a communications campaign to raise awareness among disadvantaged families of supports that are available to them and of the importance of ELC and SAC more broadly. There was also a focus on specific measures to strengthen parental involvement in ELC and SAC, which would serve to build trust, foster a stronger sense of belonging and create greater opportunities to meet the unique needs of each child.

Stakeholders recommended specific supports to ensure the material needs of children are met while in settings (e.g. meals and clothing) as well as supports to facilitate smaller group sizes and increased non-contact time.

Stakeholders were in broad agreement that there should be universal as well as targeted supports. However, they cautioned that targeted supports should not solely be targeted on the basis of geography.

Stakeholders were also clear that owing to the diverse needs of children experiencing disadvantage, tailored responses would also be needed in addition to broad responses. There was also repeated reference made to supports that extend beyond ELC and SAC, with a need for specialist supports identified and the needs for any new funding and other supports to avoid, where possible, substantial additional administrative demands.

More detailed findings from the consultation process can be found [here](#).

EQUAL START APPROACH



Objective and goals

Equal Start is a funding model and a set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and full participation in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) for children and their families who experience disadvantage.

In support of this overarching objective, Equal Start consists of a series of measures to support children, settings and families. The goals of Equal Start are that:

- All **children**, in particular children experiencing disadvantage, have equitable access and participation in ELC and SAC settings.
- All ELC and SAC **settings**, in particular settings operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage, equitably promote the learning and care of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Parents and families**, in particular parents and families experiencing disadvantage, are empowered with the knowledge, tools and supports necessary for children to have equitable access and participation in ELC and SAC.

Children in priority groups

More often than not, children experiencing disadvantage live in disadvantaged communities and so prioritising children living in these disadvantaged communities for Equal Start supports makes good sense. A risk in relying solely on this for prioritisation purposes, however, is that some children experiencing disadvantage though not living in disadvantaged communities will be overlooked. Work by Frontier Economics as part of developing *Partnership for the Public Good* found that there is moderately less geographic clustering of disadvantage in Ireland compared to other countries.¹¹ Relying solely on prioritisation of settings would also undermine our ability to deliver Equal Start supports to certain groups that are tailored to their specific needs. For these reasons, in addition to prioritising children living in disadvantaged communities, other priority groups have been identified as follows:

- Traveller children
- Roma children
- Children availing of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor body¹²
- Children experiencing homelessness
- Children in the International Protection system

11 Frontier Economics, Working Paper 5: Approaches to Identifying Children or Settings in Need of Additional Support, 2020

12 Sponsor Bodies for the National Childcare Scheme are:

- Minister for Education to support parents under the age of 18 years to remain in education or training through access to childcare services
- Minister for Children to facilitate access to childcare services for applicants within the meaning of section 2 of the International Protection Act 2015 and programme refugees within the meaning of section 59 of the International Protection Act 2015, so that parents or children can access education, integration and other relevant supports.
- Tusla to enable participation in a childcare service as part of the provision of child care and family support services by the Child and Family Agency to promote the welfare of children who are in need of additional care or protection.
- HSE to enable participation in a childcare service where there is an identified need for childcare as an additional support to the home environment to meet child development needs for a child who is under the age of 4 years and who is not enrolled in a pre-school programme and who would otherwise not attend a childcare service.
- Local Authorities to support families who are homeless or moving out of homelessness, to access childcare services.

The identification of these groups was informed by a combination of factors, including research evidence (e.g. on prevalence of disadvantage in different groups), consultation findings, national policy priorities, as well as Ireland's obligations under the European Child Guarantee.¹³ The availability of existing supports for some groups was also a factor (i.e. existing AIM supports for children with additional needs) as was the availability of administrative data that would allow us to identify the priority groups for the purposes of allocating Equal Start supports.

While existing administrative data was readily available to identify some of these priority cohorts (e.g. children availing of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor referral), a number of steps were necessary to ensure all other priority cohorts can be identified.

New administrative data – children's Eircode and ethnicity – is now routinely collected through ECCE programme and National Childcare Scheme applications, allowing children living in disadvantaged areas to be identified (as a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage) and also for Traveller and Roma children to be identified.

In addition, geocoded lists of all homeless accommodation providers and all International Protection Accommodation Centres and/or Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres have been linked with administrative ELC and SAC data, allowing identification of all children in ELC/SAC settings who are living in homeless accommodation or are International Protection applicants.

Universal and targeted supports

Equal Start will adopt a tiered approach, which incorporates universal supports, child-targeted supports and setting-targeted supports. This tiered approach will ensure every child and every setting will benefit from a continuum of supports (both additional funding and other supports) that reflects a continuum of need.

The universal supports will apply to all children and all settings, reflecting the importance of ensuring access to, and equal participation in, high-quality ELC and SAC opportunities for children from all backgrounds.

The child-targeted supports will apply to priority groups of children experiencing disadvantage (designated as Equal Start-priority cohorts) in all ELC and SAC settings, recognising the need for support to follow these priority groups, as well as the need for tailored responses to meet their particular needs.

The setting level supports will apply to all ELC and SAC settings operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage (designated as Equal Start-priority settings), recognising the compounded impacts of concentrated disadvantage and the need for a tailored response for settings operating in this context, as is the case with the DEIS model in schools.

¹³ Groups identified in the European Child Guarantee are: homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; children with disabilities; children with mental health issues; children with a migrant background or minority ethnic origin, particularly Roma; children in alternative, especially institutional, care; and children in precarious family situations.

Universal

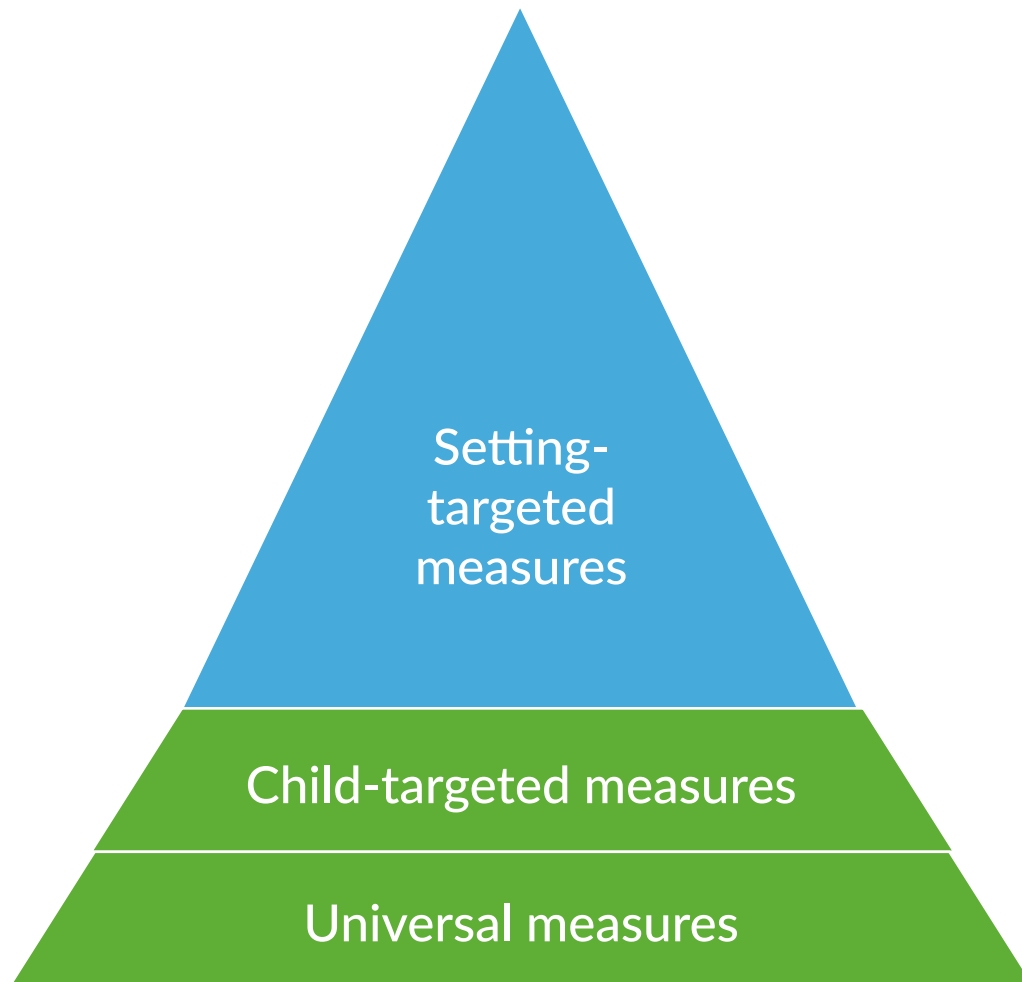
Every child and every service

Child-targeted

Every child with a priority designation

Setting-targeted

Every setting with a priority designation



Key:

● Measures in targeted settings

● Measures in all settings

Identification model

The Equal Start identification model objectively identifies Equal Start priority cohorts (i.e. cohorts of children experiencing disadvantage) and Equal Start priority settings (i.e. settings operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage) for child- and setting-targeted supports under Equal Start.

The identification model is underpinned by a range of administrative data on every child registered in each setting, specifically:¹⁴

- The Pobal HP Deprivation index for the small area in which the child lives, obtained through the child's Eircode.
- The child's ethnic group or background (if available).
- If the child avails of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor referral or has a Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) registration.
- If the child is living in homeless accommodation.
- If the child is living in an International Protection Accommodation Centre or Emergency Orientation and Reception Centre.

Equal Start-designated priority cohorts

Children that meet at least one of the following criteria will be designated as an Equal Start-priority cohort.

1. lives in a small area assigned as deprived under the Pobal HP Deprivation Index.
2. is from a Traveller or Roma ethnic background.
3. avails of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor referral or a CCSP registration.
4. is living in homeless accommodation.
5. is living in an International Protection Accommodation Centre or Emergency Orientation and Reception Centre.

Equal Start-designated priority settings

Settings operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage will be designated as Equal Start-priority settings. These settings will be identified in two steps.

Firstly, a child level disadvantage score will be calculated for all children registered within each setting. This score, which will be a number between 0 (least disadvantaged) and 2 (most disadvantaged), will be calculated using the following equation:

¹⁴ The DCEDIY have provided Pobal with a geocoded list of all homeless accommodation providers. This data is joined with administrative ELC and SAC data, to identify if a child accessing ELC or SAC is in homeless accommodation or is an International Protection applicant.

If the child meets at least one of the following criteria, they are assigned a score of 2:

1. If the child is from a Roma or Traveller ethnic background.
2. If the child avails of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor referral or a CCSP registration.
3. If the child is living in a homeless accommodation.
4. If the child is living in an International Protection Accommodation Centre or Emergency Orientation and Reception Centre.

If the child is none of the above, a score from 0 – 2 will be calculated based on the geographic deprivation score, using the Pobal HP Deprivation index, for the small area in which they live:

1. Score of 0 for any small areas higher than -7.5^{15}
2. Score of 2 for any small areas of -20 or lower
3. Sliding scale of scores (z-score) between -7.5 and -20

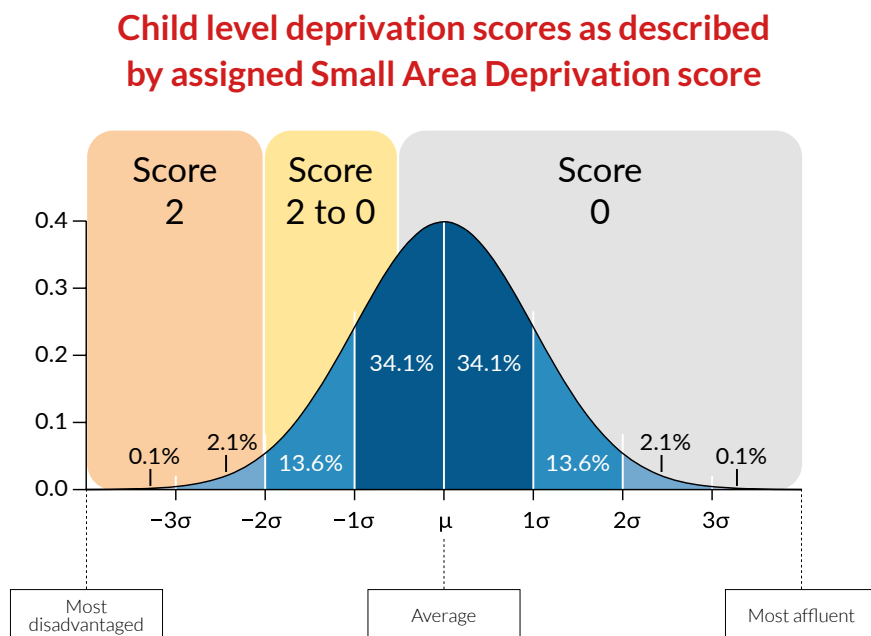


Figure 2 Child Level Deprivation Score

¹⁵ This is the same cut off point used by the Department of Education for the DEIS identification model.

Secondly, a setting-level disadvantage score will be calculated for all settings. This score, which will be a number between 0 (least disadvantaged) and 2 (most disadvantaged), will be calculated using the following equation:

$$\frac{\textit{Sum of Child Disadvantage Scores}}{\textit{Number of Scheme Children}} = \textit{Service Disadvantage Score}$$

Following the calculation of the national set of Equal Start setting level scores, settings will be ranked in accordance with their scores, with settings scoring above pre-determined thresholds designations as Equal Start priority settings. Two categories of Equal Start priority settings will be identified through this approach - Tier 2 (Disadvantaged) and Tier 1 (Highly Disadvantaged).

The number of Equal Start-priority settings will be updated annually, with any new providers scoring above the pre-determined threshold being designated as priority settings. Those settings designated as a priority setting will retain that designation for a two-year cycle, reflecting the need for settings to forward plan. Settings identified as consistently not meeting the threshold for priority designation after the two-year cycle will be given one year to transition out of the Equal Start priority designation. Services will not be transitioned out of more than one tier within a two-year cycle, meaning a Tier 1 designated service will at most be transitioned to Tier 2, rather than out of priority designation entirely.

Settings that Equal Start will support

Equal Start will support all settings that are Partner Services in Core Funding – both ELC and SAC. Only Partner Services will be eligible. This reflects the advice of the Expert Group on the Funding Model that participation in Core Funding should unlock participation in wider Department schemes and programmes, and that access to other Department funding streams should be open only to those settings participating in Core Funding.

As with Core Funding, Tusla-registered childminders (that are taking part in Core Funding) will be able to participate in Equal Start on a pilot basis in the first instance. Learning from the initial roll-out will inform decisions on whether any future adjustments are needed in the ways in which Equal Start applies to childminders. This approach is in line with the recommendations of the Expert Group on the Funding Model, which concluded, “We believe that it would, in principle, be reasonable to make the new funding streams [Core Funding and Equal Start] being recommended in this report available to registered childminders. There might however be a need to consider differences in costs of delivery and other operational differences between childminding and centre-based provision. We suggest that the Department develop an appropriate approach, taking account of the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028).” Throughout this report, references to ELC and SAC settings should be understood in this context. The details of how Equal Start will apply to childminders will be further considered in the roll-out of each Equal Start measure.

UNIVERSAL MEASURES (STRAND 1)

EVERY CHILD AND EVERY SETTING



Strand 1 of Equal Start will provide universal measures – measures that are available in all settings and that will support positive experiences and outcomes for all children. Through their universal reach, these measures will support children from disadvantaged backgrounds in whatever ELC or SAC setting they attend. In addition, some of the measures here will prioritise Equal Start target settings and target groups in their initial roll-out but with the aim ultimately of universal roll-out to all ELC and SAC settings.¹⁶

Measures under Strand 1 fall into three areas:

- A. Empowering parents** – communications initiatives to support parents (in particular parents from disadvantaged communities) to know about what services are available to them (both ELC/SAC settings and parenting supports), how to access them, and what financial supports can help them.
- B. Embedding inclusion in settings** – supporting ELC and SAC settings to be more inclusive, through reviewing and extending Diversity, Equality and Inclusion and LINC training, reviewing support for the Inclusion Coordinator role, strengthening admissions policies, and supporting settings’ engagement in inter-agency cooperation for child welfare and protection.
- C. Supporting partnership between settings, families and communities** – developing a new role in ELC and SAC settings of Family and Community Partnership Coordinator, introducing training to support the new role, extending the Better Start advisory role to support Equal Start, and supporting parents’ involvement in settings.

A. Empowering parents

Communications on ELC and SAC supports

Although there have been significant efforts at both national level (through the Department, Pobal and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations) and local level (through City/County Childcare Committees) to raise public awareness of ELC and SAC options and financial supports, findings from the consultation indicated varied levels of awareness of ELC and SAC schemes/programmes and financial supports, with particular concern around levels of awareness among families experiencing different forms of disadvantage. Data from a recent Ipsos poll commissioned by the Department shows that up to 40% of parents with children under 15 are unaware of the National Childcare Scheme.

¹⁶ As noted in **section 4**, Equal Start measures will only be available in Core Funding Partner Services.

Equal Start will include a communications and engagement campaign, providing key information to parents and target groups. This will aim to:

- Assist information reaching all families and stakeholders more equitably;
- Promote existing schemes/programmes and supports;
- Facilitate parents and families to make informed decisions and access necessary supports;
- Ensure all communication campaigns reach their target audience.

Accessible information will be provided on a universal basis to raise awareness of ELC and SAC supports, but some communications will be tailored to specific target groups. Travellers and Roma communities, homeless families and families in transition, and families who have moved to Ireland from another country, will be specific target groups within communications.

ACTION 1: COMMUNICATIONS ON ELC AND SAC SUPPORTS

- **Develop an inclusive communications and engagement campaign on ELC, SAC, and financial supports for parents. Target communication methods, key messages, and languages of communication, to Equal Start target groups. Develop and test messages in partnership with priority groups, including the Traveller community and Roma community, and with the National Adult Literacy Agency.**
- **Communicate clearly how ethnicity information will be utilised in Equal Start to allay potential fears from within Traveller and Roma communities.**

Communications on parenting supports

Parents and families experiencing disadvantage can face additional pressures and challenges. A number of resources exist to support parents dealing with difficult environments and situations, but these are not actively and consistently promoted through the ELC and SAC sector. Given the close and ongoing interactions between parents and ELC and SAC settings, and the important role of ELC and SAC settings in supporting children's early learning and holistic development, there is an opportunity for the ELC and SAC sector to play a stronger role in supporting parents. This role for ELC and SAC settings includes signposting parents to existing parenting supports and, in some settings, providing parenting supports in and through the ELC and SAC setting itself.

Making quality-assured parenting supports more accessible will assist parents to access and receive important information that can support their decision-making and support them to manage difficult life situations based on evidence and best practice.

Even if not all ELC and SAC settings are in a position to provide parenting supports themselves, all settings can help signpost parents to parenting supports, which is why this communication action will be a universal measure within Equal Start. This measure will complement the development of the role of Family and Community Partnership Coordinator, discussed in **section C** below.

ACTION 2: COMMUNICATIONS ON PARENTING SUPPORTS

- **Develop and implement a communications plan in conjunction with the ELC and SAC sector to strengthen the role of ELC and SAC settings in signposting and delivering parenting supports.**

B. Embedding inclusion in settings

Updating and extending roll-out of the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines

When AIM was introduced in 2016, it was accompanied by the publication of an updated [*Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education*](#), the implementation of which was supported by the development and roll-out of Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion training. While the focus of AIM was on children with a disability, the Guidelines and training had a wider aim of supporting diversity, equality and inclusion in ELC settings, as one of the universal supports under AIM. The Guidelines and training therefore are a key support also for Equal Start.

The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion training programme has been delivered by the City/County Childcare Committees to settings providing the ECCE programme since 2016. This training aims to foster awareness about diversity, equality and inclusion and to encourage and support those working in the sector to advocate for inclusion for all children and their families within the setting. It explores key issues around equality, diversity and inclusion and promotes quality practice.

Approximately 3,000 settings have engaged in Diversity, Equality and Inclusion training since it was first introduced, with most reporting a positive impact of the training in terms of staff attitudes and practices towards equality, diversity and inclusion.

While the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion training continues to be relevant, given changes since 2016 in policy and in society it is now timely to review the training, and also to make a renewed effort to bring the training to a larger proportion of early years educators and SAC practitioners.

ACTION 3: DIVERSITY, EQUALITY AND INCLUSION GUIDELINES

- Engage an expert to review the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines* and training, and update in line with Equal Start and recent changes in policy and society.
- Review the strategy for roll-out of Diversity, Equality and Inclusion training with a view to significantly increasing the proportion of ELC and SAC settings and staff working within those settings who have undertaken the training.

Review Inclusion Coordinator role and LINC training

The role of the Inclusion Coordinator is to provide leadership within the ELC setting in relation to issues of diversity, equality and inclusion. The role of the Inclusion Coordinator was established in 2016 through AIM. The main role of the Inclusion Coordinator is to lead inclusive practice, inclusive pedagogy and an inclusive culture within the ELC setting providing both support and information to staff and parents on inclusion of all children.

To ensure Inclusion Coordinators were appropriately qualified, the LINC (Leadership for Inclusion) training programme was developed, providing a special purpose award at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) specifically to support the role.

Access to the LINC programme was prioritised with the target of ensuring one Inclusion Coordinator per setting, in at least 80% of settings in the initial roll-out. Participation in LINC and the development of the Inclusion Coordinator role was incentivised by the introduction of supplementary capitation under the ECCE programme for settings with a qualified Inclusion Coordinator.

According to the recently published evaluation of AIM, 91% of providers agree that having a named Inclusion Coordinator impacts positively on inclusive culture, pedagogy, and practice, and they viewed it as a positive resource for leadership in inclusion in ELC settings. The same report indicated from a parents/guardians point of view that, though none had heard of 'AIM Level 1' and few (ELC settings) were using the term 'Inclusion Coordinator', they were implicitly aware of Level 1's importance.

However, while there has been strong uptake of the LINC programme, with 5,153 graduates from the programme, the number of Inclusion Coordinators currently stands at approximately 2,600.

With the introduction of Equal Start, this role and LINC training will be reviewed in conjunction with the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines. It is envisaged that the role of the Inclusion Coordinator will be expanded and given greater responsibility for access and inclusion for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Equal Start target groups.

In line with commitments in *Nurturing Skills*, the Inclusion Coordinator role will be built on as a designated "distributed leadership" role within ELC and SAC settings, with a view to "leading inclusive practice, inclusive pedagogy and an inclusive culture within the setting, and providing support and information to staff and parents on inclusion of all children, as well as supporting development and recognition of diversity in the staff team" (*Nurturing Skills*, p.54).

In addition, uptake and retention of Inclusion Coordinators will be further supported through reforming the funding available to settings with an Inclusion Coordinator, with reformed funding contingent on possible future negotiated Employment Regulation Order identifying Inclusion Coordinators as unique roles/additional responsibilities. An employee taking on the role of Inclusion Coordinator would then be remunerated in accordance to terms and conditions of the role as set out in a possible future Employment Regulation Order.

ACTION 4: INCLUSION COORDINATOR ROLE AND TRAINING

- Review the role of the Inclusion Coordinator in line with Equal Start priorities and commitments in *Nurturing Skills*, and review LINC training to support the updated Inclusion Coordinator role.
- The Department commits to reforming the funding to settings with an Inclusion Coordinator, with reformed funding contingent on possible future negotiated Employment Regulation Order identifying Inclusion Coordinators as distinct roles/ additional and its associated terms and conditions responsibilities.

Strengthen guidance and requirements for inclusive admissions policies

Children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds do not always feel welcome, safe or included in ELC and SAC settings. Findings from the consultation with Traveller parents by the Children's Rights Alliance highlighted unconscious bias, lack of staff awareness and cultural training as barriers to participation of Traveller children. The rates of participation in the ECCE programme among Traveller and Roma children are markedly lower than the national average.

It is a regulatory requirement for all ELC settings to have an "inclusion policy", which is defined as "a policy specifying the manner in which it is ensured that the needs (including the physical, emotional and intellectual needs and the religious beliefs (if any)) of all preschool children attending the setting are addressed in the setting." While Tusla's Quality and Regulatory Framework specifies that the inclusion policy should be developed in line with the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines and should include "how the settings ensures equality of access into the setting for all children", the regulations do not require settings to have inclusive admissions policies.

SAC settings are not currently required to have an inclusion policy, as the current regulations for SAC settings are initial regulations that focus primarily on registration requirements. However, the *National Quality Guidelines for SAC Services* recommend that SAC services should have "a comprehensive Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy supporting the participation of all children / young people. This includes children / young people from identified minorities, regardless of their cultural background, ability or disability", and the Government has committed to introducing comprehensive regulations for SAC services.

The Equal Status Acts specifically prohibit discrimination on the equality grounds (other than age) in admission to ELC services (as an "educational establishment"). SAC services are not specified in the same way, but are covered by the general prohibition on discrimination in provision of goods and services. For a child with a disability, the legislation requires a provider to do all that is reasonable to accommodate the child.

Under section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, public bodies (as defined in that Act) also have a duty, in the performance of their functions, to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and protect the human rights of its staff and the persons to whom they provide services. The definition of public bodies for this purpose can, subject to regulations, include organisations either wholly or partly funded out of public monies.

In order to support inclusive approaches to admissions into ELC and SAC settings, Equal Start will include the development of guidance on admissions policies and will examine the possible introduction of regulatory requirements for settings to have an inclusive admissions policy.

ACTION 5: INCLUSIVE ADMISSIONS POLICIES

- Review the guidance on inclusion policies to ensure there is adequate support and recognition for priority target groups including Traveller and Roma children and families.
- Provide guidance on admissions policies, and explore the possible introduction of regulatory requirements for ELC and SAC services to have an inclusive admissions policy.
- As part of the introduction of comprehensive regulations for SAC services, introduce a regulatory requirement for SAC services to have an inclusion policy.
- Consideration will be given to extending to ELC and SAC services the duties arising under section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014.

Support the role of ELC and SAC services in inter-agency cooperation for child welfare and protection

According to data from the latest Annual Early Years Sector Profile Survey, one in four settings engage with Tusla or family support services (26%) and the HSE (24%) on at least a monthly basis.

Situations in which ELC and SAC services may play important roles in inter-agency cooperation to support children include the Meitheal process. Meitheal is a case co-ordination process for families with additional needs who require multi-agency intervention but who do not meet the threshold for referral to the Tusla Social Work Department under Children First.

ELC and SAC services may face challenges in participating in these roles, in particular in facilitating the management and staff time that can be involved. Equal Start will include the development of guidance and supports for ELC and SAC services to support services to take part in inter-agency cooperation such as Meitheal processes.

Consideration will also be given to making participation in Meitheal processes a requirement in Core Funding Partner services, recognising the additional funding that is provided through Core Funding for non-contact time.

ACTION 6: INTER-AGENCY COOPERATION FOR CHILD WELFARE AND PROTECTION

- Strengthen guidance and support for ELC and SAC services on inter-agency cooperation for child welfare and protection.
- Consider if participation in Meitheal processes could be a requirement for Core Funding Partner Services.

Critical Incident Fund

A critical incident is a situation that overwhelms the normal coping capacity of the service. The types of critical incidents experienced by services may range from the death of a member of the service community to physical assaults or serious damage to property. Guidance for ELC and SAC services on planning and responding to critical incidents was recently published by Barnardos on behalf of DCEDIY, with the assistance of City/County Childcare Committees and the Critical Incident National Working Group.¹⁷

The development of a special fund for the support of children and staff in services affected by critical incidents is essential for ensuring their physical and mental well-being in difficult times. The Critical Incident Fund could, for example, fund a service request for play-therapy sessions, or counselling and well-being supports for staff.

ACTION 7: CRITICAL INCIDENT FUND

- **Develop a Critical Incident Fund for the support of children and staff in services affected by critical incidents.**

Well-being supports for early years educators and practitioners

High levels of stress and burnout among early years educators and practitioners was raised in the course of the Equal Start consultation process, linked to low pay and poor working conditions, a lack of recognition as well as administrative and regulatory demands. Stakeholders described how early years educators and practitioners working with children and families experiencing disadvantage and, in particular, those working in settings operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage, faced even greater demands. Stress and burnout undermines the quality of interactions and children's experiences and also leads to high levels of staff turnover, impacting the consistency and quality of care.

Complementing wider policies to improve pay and working conditions, to support recruitment and retention, and to streamline administration and regulation, Equal Start will develop and rollout well-being supports for early years educators and practitioners and supports for early learning and childcare settings to enable more supportive working environments to be created for staff.

The development of these supports will be informed by results from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS Starting Strong) which Ireland is participating in 2024, as well as consultation with stakeholders.

ACTION 8: WELL-BEING SUPPORTS FOR EARLY YEARS EDUCATORS AND PRACTITIONERS

- **Develop and introduce well-being supports for early years educators and practitioners, in addition to supports for early learning and childcare settings to enable more supportive working environments to be created for staff.**

¹⁷ Barnardos (2023) [Critical Incidents in Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Services: Planning and Responding](#)

C. Supporting partnership between settings, families and communities

Family and Community Partnership Coordinators

Partnership with parents is one of the central pillars of the *Aistear* early childhood curriculum framework and *Síolta* the national quality framework for early childhood education, and is a focus of the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*.

Nurturing Skills identified a future role within ELC and SAC settings of Family and Community Partnership Coordinator, “leading and supporting partnership and engagement between families and the service provider and to pilot the delivery of parenting programmes through ELC and SAC services” (p.54). Equal Start will include the development of this new, additional role in settings, recognising the importance of liaison between settings, families and communities in supporting access and participation in ELC and SAC for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Families experiencing different forms of disadvantage including homelessness can experience barriers in knowledge and information of services available to them. Families can also experience barriers in accessing supports and services. For example, the National Childcare Scheme application process can be challenging for some parents and families to access the online portal, have the requisite details to apply online and to understand which level of support to apply for.

In line with the approach set out in *Nurturing Skills*, the new role will be a “distributed leadership” role, which – like the Inclusion Coordinator role – will involve additional responsibilities for an individual within the service but could be carried out in principle by anyone within the service, whether early years educator or SAC practitioner, lead educator, or manager. In most cases, a Family and Community Partnership Coordinator will continue to work directly with children as an early years educator or SAC practitioner, albeit with additional responsibilities. Depending on the service, it may be a shared role with the Inclusion Coordinator or may be a different staff member who works in tandem with the Inclusion Coordinator.

Like with LINC training for the Inclusion Coordinator role, specialist training will be developed in order for an individual to become a Family and Community Partnership Coordinator. In the first instance, the training will be prioritised for Equal Start-targeted services, but over time – and dependent on available funding – the role will extend to other ELC and SAC services on a universal basis.

Family and Community Partnership Coordinators will have a key role in other Equal Start measures that involve engagement with parents, including actions to empower parents under Measure A (communications on ELC supports and communications on parenting supports) and actions to support parents’ involvement in settings.

The role will have some parallels with the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) role within DEIS schools, and it is expected that Family and Community Partnership Coordinators will liaise with HSCL Coordinators and develop relationships with the schools where children will enter Junior Infants.

Similar to the Inclusion coordinator funding reform committed to above, consideration will also be given to supporting the development of such a role and supporting settings in meeting the costs of negotiated terms and conditions contained in a future Employment Regulation Order identifying the Family and Community Partnership Coordinator and its associated terms and conditions.

ACTION 9: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP COORDINATORS

- Develop a role profile for Family and Community Partnership Coordinators, drawing on the experience of the Inclusion Coordinator role and other family outreach and liaison roles (e.g. Home School Community Liaison Coordinators in DEIS schools; Traveller Parent Support Programme Family Liaison Workers).
- Develop a LINC-type training programme to be a requirement for the role, with priority initially for Equal Start-targeted settings.
- Develop conditional funding for settings to provide for the role, with priority initially for Equal Start-targeted settings. In line with Inclusion Coordinator funding reforms above, funding will be contingent on possible future negotiated Employment Regulation Order identifying Community Partnership Coordinator as distinct roles/ additional responsibilities and its associated terms and conditions.

Extending Better Start advisory role

Since its establishment in 2014, Better Start has played a crucial role in enhancing the quality of ELC settings through mentoring and coaching initiatives. Building on this foundation in 2016, that role was extended to include AIM, with Early Years Specialists providing advice and guidance on the inclusion of children with a disability in ELC settings. As part of Equal Start, the advisory role of Better Start will be extended further, to provide guidance and support to ELC and SAC settings on issues related to inclusion and disadvantage

The extended advisory role will be available to ELC settings (with a particular focus on Equal Start-targeted settings), to Inclusion Coordinators and to Family and Community Partnership Coordinators. It will include guidance on effective approaches to inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and priority target groups, including a focus on supporting partnership between settings, parents and communities, supporting the broader role of Family and Community Partnership Coordinators.

The supports available will increase over time as the capacity of Better Start is increased.

The extension of this new Better Start advisory role to SAC settings will be developed as part of a wider extension of Better Start to support SAC settings over the years ahead, subject to available budget resources. Up to now, Better Start has exclusively supported ELC settings. Their remit will in future expand to include support for quality, inclusion and Equal Start measures in SAC settings.

ACTION 10: EXTENDING BETTER START ADVISORY ROLE

- Extend the Better Start role to provide advice and guidance to ELC settings (and, over time, to SAC settings also), to Inclusion Coordinators and to Family and Community Partnership Coordinators, on effective approaches to inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and priority target groups, including a focus on supporting partnership between settings, parents and communities.
- Appoint Early Years Specialists (Traveller and Roma Advisory) to work in Better Start.

Supporting parents' involvement in settings

First 5 committed to support greater parental involvement and engagement in children's early learning in ELC settings, with specific commitments to:

- Develop advice, guidance and training for ELC settings to build effective working relationships with all parents, families and communities.
- Support ELC settings to create opportunities to encourage and strengthen involvement of parents such as parent-practitioner meetings, parental advisory boards, home-ELC liaison officers, designated staff with responsibility for supporting parents, including initiatives in collaboration with the National Parents Council.



The Expert Group on the Funding Model also recommended a stronger partnership relationship between parents and settings:

“The engagement and outreach services for parents and families, which are already provided to varying degrees by some ELC and SAC settings, should be enhanced and extended to all settings. ... They may offer parents the opportunity to make suggestions or requests, give feedback, raise concerns, arrange one-to-one meetings, and generally improve liaison between parents and providers/practitioners. They may also offer information and assistance to parents in relation to, for example, child well-being and development, language and literacy, nutrition, work activation, and the different ELC and SAC schemes supported by the State.”¹⁸

It is a regulatory requirement that all ELC services provide information to parents on basic features of the service, including its policies and procedures. As a step in the process of strengthening these partnership links between parents and settings, Core Funding has introduced a requirement that Partner Services should develop a “Parent Statement”, which they must publish and disseminate to all their parents.

According to data from the latest Annual Early Years Sector Profile Survey, the large majority of settings report engaging informally with parents on a daily basis (89%) and one in three (35%) report formal engagement with parents every month, for example through parent-staff meetings.

Under Equal Start, further actions will be progressed to strengthen partnership relationships between parents and settings. Settings will be supported and – at a later date – required to develop policies on partnership with parents. Settings will also be given guidance on how to develop effective “parent partnership groups”, partnership committees, or other mechanisms to give parents a more structured role in ongoing engagement with the setting.

The new Family and Community Partnership Coordinator role to be developed in settings will play an important role in strengthening parents’ involvement in settings.

Among the benefits of stronger parental involvement in settings, it is anticipated that settings will better reflect the cultures of the families and communities they are working with.

ACTION 11: STRENGTHENING PARENTS’ INVOLVEMENT IN SETTINGS

- Support – and at a later date require – ELC and SAC settings to develop policies on partnership with parents.
- Develop guidance for ELC and SAC settings on introducing “parent partnership groups”, partnership committees, or other mechanisms to give parents structured and more formal roles in ongoing engagement with settings, informed by existing models of good practice.

18 *Partnership for the Public Good*, p.73.

CHILD-TARGETED MEASURES (STRAND 2)

EVERY CHILD WITH
A PRIORITY DESIGNATION



Strand 2 of Equal Start will provide child-targeted measures – measures that are available in all settings and that will focus additional supports on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and priority groups.

Measures under Strand 2 fall into two areas:

- D. Meeting practical needs** – additional, semi-flexible funding to support access and participation of children from priority groups, in all settings.
- E. Developing tailored responses** – working with representative organisations of target groups to co-create effective solutions to address barriers to access and participation in ELC and SAC for children from those target groups.

D. Meeting practical needs

Families experiencing economic deprivation do not always have sufficient resources to provide for essential items, such as appropriate clothing, thus creating a barrier to participation in ELC and SAC services. Children experiencing poverty can miss out on the childhood experiences of their peers such as outings. Safe outdoor spaces to play are not there for many families or in some urban services in areas of concentrated disadvantage. Transport to and from services can also be a significant challenge for families experiencing disadvantage, where families do not have cars or where public transport is not available or is too costly.

Having additional funding will assist services to cater for and ensure inclusion for every child. It will assist services with the practical day-to-day engagement, which will help meet the needs of the child. For example, children who experience disadvantage may not have all the materials required for full participation in the service like sufficient nappies, or a pair of wellies for playing outside. The funding could also be used for parent meetings, translation services, or to assist services with the provision of transport for children from priority groups to and from the setting (see also section 8 on Future Development of Equal Start). Access to these supports can have a significant impact on how children engage within a service and how comfortable and welcome each child and family feels.

As there are disadvantaged children in all areas of the country and potentially in any setting, this additional strand of funding will be available to all ELC and SAC settings that are Core Funding Partner Services. An allocation approach will be determined prior to roll out.

This additional, semi-flexible funding, will permit:

- The promotion of equal participation for all children;
- Flexibility for services to make decisions based on children's needs;
- Encouragement of a culture of inclusivity;
- Provision of greater choice for parents when selecting ELC services.

ACTION 12: PROVIDE FUNDING TO SERVICES TO SUPPORT DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN WITH PRACTICAL NEEDS

- Introduction of a new, semi-flexible funding stream for all ELC / SAC settings to support access and participation of disadvantaged children through helping to meet their practical needs for participation. Funding will be allocated on the basis of the new Equal Start identification model in relation to children who are identified through the model. Funding can be used flexibly across a range of purposes that will be specified.



E. Developing tailored responses

Some of the barriers to access and participation in ELC and SAC services are specific to particular target groups. For example:

- For homeless families and families in transition, frequently changing accommodation can make it difficult to access ELC and SAC places and for children to establish a daily routine or settle into a service.
- Some Traveller and Roma families may not see the benefits of sending their children to ELC, which can have negative consequences when entering the school system if it is their first time in an out-of-home setting.
- Families experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation may feel distrust around the provision of information and also in engaging with services that operate within the dominant Irish culture. Ethnic and racial minority families may not feel that their children are safe and welcome in all services, based on both recent and historic experiences.

Equal Start will involve engagement with National Childcare Scheme sponsor bodies and with representative organisations for target groups to co-develop tailored responses for priority groups. Equal Start will involve working with homeless representative organisations to co-create effective solutions to address barriers to access and participation in ELC and SAC. This may include determining potential actions to facilitate urgent movements from one service to another, for families in transition. Likewise, Equal Start will involve full roll-out of, and liaison with, the Tusla Traveller Parenting Support Programme, which employs community development workers to support Traveller and Roma children, to support greater participation in ELC and SAC services.

The Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) will be a key resource in developing tailored responses for specific priority target groups and supporting delivery of coordinated responses at local level.

ACTION 13: DEVELOPING TAILORED RESPONSES

- **Work with representative organisations of specific target groups to co-create effective solutions to address barriers to access and participation in ELC and SAC for children from those target groups, informed by existing models of good practice.**
- **Appoint six Family Link Workers to support the full roll out of the Traveller Parenting Support Programme in all 17 Tusla areas, with new responsibilities on Family Link Workers to engage with Traveller parents of children aged 1-5 years, supporting them to attend and participate in early learning and childcare, avail of the ECCE programme and where applicable applying for the NCS (see also Action 10 in relation to appointment of Early Years Specialists (Traveller and Roma Advisory) to work in Better Start).**

SETTING-TARGETED MEASURES (STRAND 3)

EVERY SETTING WITH
A PRIORITY DESIGNATION



Strand 3 of Equal Start will provide setting-targeted measures – measures that specifically target settings that have been identified through the Equal Start identification model as settings with high concentrations of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Strand 3 will provide:

F. Additional funding for settings in areas of concentrated disadvantage – flexible funding for additional staff time to assist services in supporting children in the most disadvantaged communities, as well as funding for additional meals in targeted settings to help address food poverty and the provision of targeted interventions for children experiencing language delay. The Equal Start identification model will also be used in other areas of ELC and SAC policy to support the further development of the progressive universal approach to policy set out in *First 5*.

F. Additional funding for services in areas of concentrated disadvantage

Staffing support

Although there is less geographic clustering of disadvantage in Ireland than some other countries, the Expert Group on the Funding Model nevertheless recommended a targeted funding stream for services working with concentrated socio-economic disadvantage. This recommendation reflected research that shows that a high concentration of disadvantaged children can result in a ‘multiplier’ effect, compounding the disadvantage.

While AIM provides additional funding to ELC services to support children with a disability to participate through reducing the adult-child ratio in the room, there is no funding stream at present that provides additional funding to a whole service to reflect the need for additional needs across the service as a whole.

Partnership for the Public Good recommended that setting-targeted funding should broadly support additional staffing, with flexibility for services to use this funding for a range of staffing purposes:

“[T]he targeted funding stream could be used to fund a range of measures such as increased contact time (e.g. by reduced child-to-staff ratios or extra staff support); extra noncontact time (to facilitate better parental liaison and supports, liaison with health and social care/protection services, including engagement in the national Child and Family Agency’s case co-ordination process for families with additional needs who require multi-agency intervention but who do not meet the threshold for Social Work referral (Meitheal)), and co-ordination within service settings such as meetings, planning, mentoring, and advice services to support staff); and the development of the highest possible quality workforces (e.g. by incentivising training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for existing staff and the employment of graduates).” (p.100)

As noted earlier, the Equal Start identification model supports the provision of two tiers of funding, depending on the degree of concentrated disadvantage in the setting.

In determining the frequency with which funding levels are to be reviewed, a balance needs to be struck. On the one hand, there is a need to provide services with a degree of security in their additional funding, to allow for planning and to facilitate staff recruitment where required. At the same time, there is a need to ensure that funding responds to changes in services' levels of disadvantage (whether increasing or decreasing) to ensure that the limited funding available is used to the greatest effect in supporting children in the most disadvantaged communities. To achieve this balance, funding levels will be reviewed on a two-year cycle, with newly established services to be considered for setting-targeted funding at any time between the two-year funding review windows. Settings no longer meeting the threshold for priority designation after the two-year cycle will be given one year to transition out of their Equal Start priority designation. Services will not be transitioned out of more than one tier within a two year cycle, meaning a Tier 1 designated service will at most be transitioned to Tier 2, rather than out of priority designation entirely.

ACTION 14: STAFFING SUPPORTS

- **Provide flexible funding for additional staff time for Tier 1 and Tier 2 Equal Start-targeted services to assist services in supporting children in the most disadvantaged communities to access and participate in ELC and SAC.**

Free meals programme

Food poverty can be a significant problem for children and families experiencing economic disadvantage, resulting in children having insufficient food at home and relying on meals provided in ELC or SAC settings. Insufficient nutritious food hinders children's development and impacts the ability of children to equitably participate in, and benefit from, ELC and SAC services.

In line with regulations, all ELC services operating for full-time hours currently provide food, which varies according to their hours of operation.

Based on the [findings of the First 5 Meals Pilot programme](#), Equal Start will provide funding for additional meals for all children in targeted ELC and SAC services, beyond minimum regulatory requirements. This will:

- Allow all children in targeted settings to have access to sufficient food during the hours of ELC and SAC provision.
- Avoid stigma of offering food to certain children only.
- Ensure that food provided follows nutritional guidelines.
- Provide additional learning opportunities through the activities and social interactions that take place during meal times.

ACTION 15: ADDITIONAL NUTRITION PROGRAMME

- **Provide funding for additional meals to be provided in targeted ELC and SAC settings beyond minimum regulatory requirements, to help address food poverty.**

Targeted intervention for language delay

Delays in language development is closely linked with disadvantage and stakeholders in the Equal Start consultation raised the need for specific interventions to address language delay and support the development of communication skills among children experiencing disadvantage.

Early Talk Boost is a targeted intervention, delivered by trained early years educators, to a group of up to eight children aged 3-4 years old with delayed language. Training for early years educators comprises a one-day course and children who are selected to take part in the programme attend three sessions per week for an 8-week period. Sessions take place in their setting during circle/story time, with each session lasting 15-20 minutes.

Early Talk Boost was launched in Ireland in 2016, and in 2022 the Department provided funding through What Works Dormant Accounts as part of an initiative to scale three models used in the Area-Based Childhood Programme. In 2023, additional funding was committed, and in 2024 Early Talk Boost was mainstreamed by Tusla, with a focus on areas of high socio-economic disadvantage. To date, 11 new areas are involved, working across 33 early learning and care settings, with 34 primary care speech and language therapists and 66 early years educators engaged.

Through Equal Start, Early Talk Boost will be rolled out to Equal Start-designated settings complementing other training available to ELC and SAC settings such as Hanen and Lámh.

ACTION 16: TARGETED INTERVENTION FOR LANGUAGE DELAY

- Roll-out Early Talk Boost to Equal Start-designated settings

Use of the Equal Start identification model in complementary policy areas

The Equal Start identification model will also be used in other, complementary areas of ELC and SAC policy to support the further development of the progressive universal approach to policy set out in *First 5*. The model provides an objective, evidence-based methodology for identifying services where there are high levels disadvantage and in which there is therefore a strong case for additional targeted support, on top of the universal supports that are provided across other ELC and SAC schemes/programmes.

Initial programmes that will take make use of the Equal Start identification model are:

- The pilot Nurturing Skills Learner Fund. If demand for funding exceeds the available budget, one of the criterion to be used in awarding funding will be whether an early years educator is working in an Equal Start-designated service.
- The Building Blocks capital programme. A key feature of the programme will be the prioritisation of funding for settings working in disadvantaged communities, with use of the Equal Start priority designation under consideration.

Other programmes may in future also make use of the Equal Start identification model.

There is further discussion of complementary policy areas in section 9 below.

ACTION 17: WIDER USE OF THE EQUAL START IDENTIFICATION MODEL

- Use the Equal Start identification model in complementary policy areas to identify services in need of additional funding and supports, on top of the universal funding and supports available to all services as well as to inform other prioritisation in resource allocation.



FUTURE DEVELOPMENT



The actions under Strands 1 to 3 above will commence now and progressively develop over the years ahead, subject to available budget. In addition, preparatory work will commence in the near future on planning for the measures below, to explore the scope for introducing these as extensions to Equal Start over the coming years. The measures below will involve further research and consultation as preparatory steps.

Exceptional needs funding stream

One of the recommendations of the Expert Group that developed *Partnership for the Public Good* was that “Depending on experience with the universal supports and targeted funding, the Department should explore the need for a further element of funding which could allow individual settings to apply for funding to address the exceptional needs of individual children.” (p.18).

In line with the recommendation, it is not proposed to introduce this measure in the short term. Rather, the need for the measure will be assessed after initial implementation of Equal Start. The Expert Group recommended the measure should be introduced if there is “substantial evidence of children who do not sufficiently benefit from the universal and targeted elements” of Equal Start.

If there were a need for its introduction, in addition to the universal and targeted measures set out in Strands 1 to 3 of Equal Start, such a measure would be application-based and would have the intention only of meeting exceptional needs, not of providing ongoing funding to settings.

Family and Early Childhood Centres

First 5 committed to pilot the development of Family and Early Childhood Centres, acting as local hubs, to bring together a range of services to support parents and children in early childhood. *First 5* points to a range of services that could be brought together at local level, facilitating access to services, especially in disadvantaged communities:

“Services could include child and maternal health, well-being and development services; ante and post-natal supports including breastfeeding; information sessions for parents (on topics such as early nutrition); parenting supports and services (both evidence-based programmes and parent-led peer support models); prevention and early intervention services; ELC provision including childminding supports; and parent and toddler groups.”

This commitment recognises the close connections between these services in the lives of young children and their families, and the importance of getting access to the right services at the right time in early childhood.

The development and piloting of a new model of local early childhood hubs would draw on experiences in Ireland (such as Family Resource Centres) and other jurisdictions (such as Sure Start Children’s Centres in the UK). It would also draw on the findings of current OECD research on effective approaches to addressing disadvantage in early childhood, which includes consideration of how to integrate services effectively at local level.

Initial consideration will be given to the approach when examining options for capital funding as part of the National Development Plan.

Transport

The issue of transport to and from ELC and SAC settings was raised during the consultation process in designing Equal Start in 2023. It also emerged as an issue in the independent review of the ECCE programme (due to be published in 2024). The ECCE programme review found that access to transport can be a barrier to uptake and attendance for children living in homeless or refugee accommodation centres, Traveller and Roma children living on halting sites, and other children who do not have access to transport and live far from their ECCE programme setting.

While many children attend local ELC and SAC settings that can be reached on foot or by public transport, many children are brought to settings by car. Nationally, Census 2022 data indicates that three-quarters of children aged from birth to 4 years old travel to ELC settings or school by car.

Preliminary data from the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Survey 2022/23 indicates that 22% of ELC and SAC services offer transport, whether pick-up, drop-off or both. The availability of transport is more common in services offering both ELC and SAC, in private services, and in services that are not on school premises.

Where transport services are provided by ELC and SAC services, the cost of these services is generally integrated into the services' overall fee structure. As such, the National Childcare Scheme already subsidises the costs of transport provision.

In addition, under Equal Start, in the shorter term, it is proposed that the permitted uses of the semi-flexible funding for services to meet individual children's practical needs (see Action 12) should include financial support for local transport arrangements for children affected by socio-economic disadvantage.

Consideration will be given to transport arrangements for ELC and SAC as part of wider work underway to integrate public transport with school transport.

Review of professions required to work in ELC and SAC services

During the consultation to inform the development of Equal Start and the new funding model, calls were made for access to a wider range of professions in ELC and SAC to support the needs children experiencing disadvantage, e.g. speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists.

This links to consideration given in AIM to the benefit of facilitating the attendance of nurses and therapists to support the participation of some children with complex medical needs and/or a disability in ELC settings. A pilot scheme has been running for some years in collaboration with HSE for nurses or healthcare assistants to attend ELC settings to assist children with complex medical needs. The pre-school and in-school therapy demonstration project piloted the use of speech and language therapists (SLT) and occupational therapists within ELC settings.¹⁹ The latest First 5 Implementation Plan (2023-2025) commits to 'scope the provision of certain therapeutic supports through educators in ELC and SAC settings under the supervision and guidance of relevant professional therapeutic expertise'.

19 NCSE (2020) *Evaluation of In-School and Early Years Therapy Support Demonstration Project*.

Currently the Early Years Services Regulations require that employees in ELC services who are working directly with children must be qualified early years educators. There is no such regulatory restriction for individuals who are not employees, such as HSE health care assistants or speech and language therapists. However, addressing regulatory barriers is only a first step in developing effective approaches in ELC and SAC settings that bring together relevant professions to support children and families.

A review will be undertaken of the range of professional roles that might be needed in ELC and SAC settings, particularly settings in areas of concentrated disadvantage, to support children’s access, participation and development. The review will include research on international experiences and further consultation. The review will also consider regulatory implications.



COMPLEMENTARY POLICIES



Equal Start provides for a set of additional measures, forming the fourth element of the Together for Better funding model for ELC and SAC settings. While Equal Start has a specific focus on supporting access, participation and positive outcomes for disadvantaged children, it is intended to complement a range of other policies that also support disadvantaged children within ELC and SAC. This section gives a brief overview of complementary policy areas, noting in particular supports for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The policies set out here are closely interconnected and mutually reinforce each other as well as reinforcing Equal Start. Their interconnections reflect the overarching vision set out in *First 5*, in particular its progressive universalism. Progressive universalism – the combination of universal and targeted approaches to support the participation of all children in universal, mainstream services – underpins the policy approach to ELC and SAC in Ireland. As described in *First 5*:

“Progressive universalism, which offers supports and services to all children at a universal level with extra provision for children with additional needs or challenges, is a key mechanism to ensure that all babies, young children and their families benefit. This is the basis of the First 5 Strategy. It prioritises strengthening services and supports for all (for example in parenting, ELC and health services), includes particular measures for children and families who need additional support, and ensures that services and interventions are proportionate to the level of disadvantage.” (p.27)

ECCE, NCS and AIM

The progressive universal approach is reflected in other strands of the Together for Better funding model, in particular the ECCE programme, AIM and the National Childcare Scheme.

The ECCE programme, introduced in 2010, is a universal programme, available free of charge to all children for up to two years before starting primary school, on a part-time basis (3 hours per day, 38 weeks per year). With 96% of children in the relevant age-cohort taking part, it is nearly universal in its reach, providing valuable early learning and play experiences in early childhood for nearly all children, regardless of social background.

Data from the Growing Up in Ireland study demonstrates the significance of the ECCE programme particularly for less advantaged who would not have enrolled in and benefitted from preschool education had it not been for the ECCE programme. Just 61% of families from the lowest income quintile in that study reported that they would have been able to send their child to pre-school even without the ECCE programme, compared to 91% of families from the highest income quintile.

There are now plans to introduce a statutory entitlement to this programme, in line with a commitment in *First 5*.

To help realise the universal ambition of the ECCE programme, AIM was introduced in 2016, providing both universal and targeted supports to facilitate access and participation of children with a disability. Since AIM was launched in 2016, more than 26,000 children have received over 58,000 targeted supports in over 4,000 settings nationally. In the pre-school year 2022/2023, more than 7,000 children benefitted from AIM supports.

There are now plans to extend AIM beyond the ECCE programme, in line with a commitment in First 5 and recommendations in *Partnership for the Public Good*. Commencing from September 2024, ECCE children will benefit from AIM outside the ECCE programme hours – in term and out.

Similar to AIM and in line with recommendations in *Partnership for the Public Good*, Equal Start will now provide both universal and targeted measures to support access and participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The National Childcare Scheme, introduced in 2019, complements the ECCE programme, providing subsidies to reduce the costs to parents for children to participate in ELC outside the ECCE programme and in SAC. The National Childcare Scheme combines both universal and targeted measures:

- A universal subsidy – currently €1.40 per hour, rising to €2.14 per hour in September 2024 – significantly reduces net costs for parents.
- An income-assessed subsidy, which provides higher rates of subsidy to families with lower incomes. Income-assessed subsidies are available to families with reckonable income below €60,000 per year. The lower the family’s income, the higher the rate of subsidy. Families with reckonable income below €26,000 are eligible to the maximum rate of subsidy, thus providing the highest level of financial assistance to families experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

For some families, the National Childcare Scheme provides free access to ELC and SAC. In particular, the scheme includes arrangements for specified target groups to receive free access, where referred by a sponsor body. There is some overlap between the groups sponsored under the National Childcare Scheme and the Equal Start target groups. There are currently five groups of children and families supported under the National Childcare Scheme sponsorship arrangements:

- Children who are homeless or whose families are moving out of homelessness.
- Children of asylum seekers and programme refugees.
- Where there is a referral by Tusla to support child welfare.
- Parents under the age of 18 who are still in education or training.
- Where there is a referral by the HSE for a child under the age of 4 where there is an identified need for ELC as an additional support to the home environment to meet child development needs.

Frontier Economics was commissioned to undertake a review of the first year of the National Childcare Scheme.²⁰ The report, published in 2021, found that, reflecting the progressive nature of the Scheme, the National Childcare Scheme covered considerably higher proportions of family ELC and SAC costs for families with lower incomes. Well over half of families in disadvantaged areas receiving support under the Scheme had over 50% of their costs covered, while less than a quarter in affluent areas had over 50% of their costs covered. The report also highlighted some concerns including barriers to take-up among some vulnerable families and the level of support for some families relating to the capability to use the online application system, improvements needed to the sponsor referral process and availability of places.

20 Frontier Economics (2021) [12-Month Review of the National Childcare Scheme](#).

A study of childcare costs by the OECD, published in 2022, covering the same period of the review found that the reforms of childcare support in Ireland provided significantly higher benefits to low-income families, driving the net childcare costs for low-income lone parents close to zero.²¹

Following on from these reports, a number of enhancements were made to further improve the affordability of ELC and SAC, implementing recommendations in *Partnership for the Public Good*, specifically:

1. Extending the National Childcare Scheme universal subsidy to all children under 15.
2. Removing of the practice of deducting hours spent in pre-school or school from the entitlement to National Childcare Scheme subsidised hours.
3. Increasing the minimum subsidy available under the National Childcare Scheme from 50 cent per hour to €1.40 per hour. (The rate will rise further to €2.14 per hour in September 2024.)
4. Increasing the sponsor rates from children over 1 to €5.30 per hour (September 2024)

An evaluation of the National Childcare Scheme will commence in 2024. This, along with other recommendations in *Partnership for the Public Good*, will inform future enhancements to the Scheme.

Core Funding

Core Funding was introduced in 2022 and is designed to meet the combined objectives of:

- Improved affordability for parents by ensuring that fees do not increase;
- Improved accessibility for children by ensuring providers offer the ECCE programme and/or the National Childcare Scheme, including sponsored arrangements;
- Improved quality through, inter alia, better pay and conditions for the workforce by supporting agreement on an Employment Regulation Orders through the Joint Labour Committee and the employment of graduate staff; and
- Improved sustainability and stability for services.

With an allocation of €259 million in its first year and €287 million in year 2 and participation rates of 95%, Core Funding has supported:

- The introduction of a fee freeze at September 2021 levels, which has ensured the increases to National Childcare Scheme subsidies were fully felt by parents.
- The introduction of a requirement on services to offer the National Childcare Scheme to all eligible families, including sponsored arrangements, which has led to a 20 per cent increase in the number of services offering the National Childcare Scheme (from 3,146 in the 2021/22 programme year to 3,789 in the 2023/24 programme year to date) and a 52 per cent increase in the number of sponsored children (rising from 4,046 in the 2021/22 programme year to 6,133 in the 2023/24 programme year to date), thus substantially widening access to this State support.
- The introduction of historic Employment Regulation Orders for the Early Years Services Sector, which came into effect in September 2022 providing minimum hourly rates of pay for early years educators and SAC practitioners, increasing the wages of an estimated 73 per

21 OECD (2023) [Net Childcare Costs in EU Countries, 2022](#).

cent of those working in the sector. Updated Employment Regulation Orders are expected in 2024, increasing minimum rates of pay by a further 5%, as recommended by the Labour Court, and removing the three-year experience requirement for graduate lead educator/manager minimum pay rates.

- Extended support for graduate-led provision outside the ECCE programme, with almost 3,000 services now receiving Graduate Premiums.
- Significant growth in capacity for cohorts and in areas where there is undersupply, allowing greater access for children and their families.

The Core Funding allocation for Year 3 of the Scheme 1 (September 2024-August 2025) will increase by 15% - to €331 million. The additional funding of €44 million will support delivery of a range of enhancements to support improved affordability and accessibility for families, improved pay and conditions for the workforce, and improved sustainability and stability for providers.

Síolta and Aistear

The *Síolta* national quality framework for early childhood education and *Aistear* early childhood curriculum framework both place a strong emphasis on inclusive practice in ELC settings. *Síolta* and *Aistear*²² underpin programmes of initial and continuing professional development for early years educators, as well as the early years inspection frameworks for both Tusla and the Department of Education Inspectorate. *Síolta* and *Aistear* are also supported through the National Síolta Aistear Initiative, which provides a range of CPD programmes and resources for early years educators. *Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC 2022-2028*, commits to the full national roll-out of the National Síolta Aistear Initiative by 2028.

One of the four themes of *Aistear* is “identity and belonging”: “The theme of Identity and Belonging is about children developing a positive sense of who they are, and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community.” *Aistear*’s four aims under this theme are:

1. Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories.
2. Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended.
3. Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others.
4. Children will see themselves as capable learners.

A number of the principles and quality standards set out in *Síolta* are relevant to the objectives of Equal Start, including the principles of:

Equality: “Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education. ... It requires that the individual needs and abilities of each child are recognised and supported from birth towards the realisation of her/his unique potential. This means that all children should be able to gain access to, participate in, and benefit from early years services on an equal basis.”

22 Aistear is in the process of being updated, with planned publication of the updated framework in Q3 2024.

Diversity: “Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated. ... Quality early childhood environments should demonstrate respect for diversity through promoting a sense of belonging for all children within the cultural heritage of Ireland. They should also provide rich and varied experiences which will support children’s ability to value social and cultural diversity.”

National Quality Guidelines for School-Age Childcare

The *National Quality Guidelines for SAC Services* are parallel to the *Síolta* quality framework for early childhood education in ELC settings. An introductory awareness-raising programme on the *National Quality Guidelines for SAC Services* is currently being developed. In addition, in line with commitments in *Nurturing Skills*, work has begun on developing a Level 5 qualification in SAC which, following a lead-in period, will in future become a minimum qualification to work in SAC. The *National Quality Guidelines for SAC Services* will underpin both the new level 5 qualification and the comprehensive regulations on SAC, which will also be developed over the coming years.

Like *Síolta*, the *National Quality Guidelines for SAC Services* set out principles and guidelines for good practice. Like *Síolta*, its principles include principles on equality and diversity:

- “Equality, diversity and non-discrimination are championed by staff and children.”
- “School age childcare services need to support the representation and participation of school age children from a diversity of backgrounds.”

Nurturing Skills

Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC 2022-2028, includes a number of commitments to strengthen diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce. *Nurturing Skills* commits to:

- Integrating the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines* with the new self-evaluation framework for ELC settings – which, in line with commitments in the *First 5 Implementation Plan 2023-2025*, will be a single quality framework for both self-evaluation and external evaluation of ELC settings.
- Alongside the broader promotion of careers in the sector, work will be undertaken to promote gender balance and diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce. Actions will include collaboration with representative organisations and diversity networks at both national and local level.
- Data collection and research on diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce will be strengthened. Consideration will be given to including ethnic and other identifiers if a national register of Early Years Educators is established. Once baseline data is available, consideration will be given to targets for diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce and/or in entry onto initial professional education courses at levels 5 to 8.
- Development of a range of entry-routes into the sector (including apprenticeships or other work-based learning, and access programmes in further and higher education) will be examined. In considering different entry routes into the sector, the scope for targeting potential early years educators and SAC practitioners from groups that are less well represented in the workforce will be examined.

Quality assurance

Regulations and inspections of ELC services have a strong focus on inclusive practice. The regulations require that every ELC service has an inclusion policy, “in which it is ensured that the needs (including the physical, emotional and intellectual needs and the religious beliefs (if any)) of all preschool children attending the service are addressed in the service”, and that all staff have information and, where necessary, training in the inclusion policy.

Tusla’s Quality and Regulatory Framework requires that ELC services develop their inclusion policy in line with the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines*, and that the inclusion policy should set out how the service ensures equality of access, creates a culture of inclusion, reflects diversity in its equipment and materials, and responds to bias or discrimination.

In addition, the Department of Education Inspectorate carries out education-focused inspections of ELC services. The *Guide to Early Years Education Inspections* is based on the Síolta national quality framework and Aistear curriculum framework. Among the 20 key outcomes that are assessed as part the inspection are:

- The atmosphere and organisation of the setting nurture babies and young children’s learning and development and support the inclusion of all children.
- Children’s sense of identity and belonging is nurtured.
- Children learn in an inclusive environment.
- Clear two-way channels of communication are fostered between the early learning and care setting, parents, families, babies and young children.

Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy strategy

Ireland’s Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood is the successor to Learning and Life strategy 2011-2020. This new strategy encompasses both ELC settings and schools, as well as supports for the development of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in families and in communities.

The strategy includes a strong focus on supporting diverse learners, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds and priority target groups. Reflecting the increasing diversity of Irish society, the strategy also reflects the diversity of languages spoken in children’s homes.

National Transitions Policy

Work is underway to develop a national transitions policy. The policy will focus on a range of transitions, including the transition from home to ELC, the transitions through ELC, and the transition to primary school.

The policy will include a strong focus on groups of children who are more likely to experience adjustment difficulties during these transitions, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Supply management

A Supply Management Unit was established in the Department in 2024. A key part of the Supply Management Unit’s remit will be to develop a planning function, for monitoring, analysing and forecasting of supply needs, in line with a recommendation of the Expert Group in *Partnership*

for the Public Good. The Unit will also develop policy to respond to evidence of supply and demand misalignment, including through the design and delivery of the Building Blocks Capital Programme, funded under the National Development Plan.

In keeping with previous large-scale capital investment programmes, including the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programmes (EOCP I, 1998-99 and EOCP II, 2000-06) and the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP, 2006-2010), the Building Blocks Capital Programme will prioritise investment in areas of disadvantage.

The Building Blocks Capacity Expansion Grant makes available funding to services to increase the number of full or part time places for 1-3 year olds through internal renovation and reconfiguration. The scheme funds projects valued between €50,000 and €100,000. In recognition of the propensity for community (not-for-profit) services to be located in areas with high concentrations of children experiencing disadvantage, 100% funding is being made available to community services for expansion projects. By contrast, private (for-profit) services will be required to provide match funding of 50% of the project costs. €18 million is being made available for this scheme in 2024.

The Building Blocks Capacity Extension Grant will make available funding to services to increase the number of full or part time places for 1-3 year olds through extensions to their existing building. The scheme is in the design phase and is intended to be launched later in 2024 with funding to be made available to services in 2025. A number of key features are currently under consideration including the prioritisation of funding for services with an Equal Start priority designation, with a positive weighting for Equal Start-designated settings.

Reform of the operating model

In March 2022, Government accepted the findings of the independent Review of the ELC and SAC Operating Model in Ireland that a dedicated state agency is the optimal operating model for the sector for the years ahead. It is envisaged that this dedicated agency will undertake the functions currently carried out by Pobal Early Years (including Better Start), the City/County Childcare Committees, as well as operational functions currently undertaken by the Department.

Significant progress has been made in advancing this ambitious and transformative reform programme. The Department has commenced a comprehensive phase of analysis, planning, consultation, and engagement with sectoral stakeholders, to determine how the recommendation arising from the Review can best be implemented. This phase includes a detailed design of a new agency, which will include determining the appropriate national, regional and local structures.

A key recommendation in *Partnership for the Public Good* is that responsibility for outreach and greater participation in ELC and SAC by families at risk of poverty and disadvantage should be assigned to the local structures, which emerge from this reform.

Parenting supports and programmes

The Department funds Tusla to deliver parenting support services directly and through commissioned services at local level depending on need. In addition to universal parenting supports like parenting courses, workshops and support groups, one-to-one parenting support is also offered from a wide variety of professional and parent support services such as social workers and psychologists.

Plans are in place to increase access to parenting supports for more disadvantaged families. These include:

- Home visiting: Taking into account the findings of a national review of home visiting services, funding from the Children’s Fund will be used to develop a National Home Visiting Programme within Tusla which aims to increase the number of home visiting services to parents with a particular focus on Traveller families and lone parents;
- Traveller Parent Support programme: In 2024, the Department secured funding for Tusla for the Traveller Parent Support programme to be mainstreamed into core programme delivery through Tusla’s Prevention Partnership Family Support (PPFS). The programme will be delivered in 11 areas with a Family Link worker in each. The Traveller Parent Support programme aims to address earlier intervention and support for parents from the Traveller community. One of the aims of the programme is to increase the capacity of Traveller parents to receive parenting support programmes in a culturally appropriate and supportive way; and
- With support from the European Social Fund:
 - the expansion of parenting supports to young parents, through the addition of 4 new sites and the expansion of 11 existing Young Parent Support Programme sites.
 - the recruitment of 17 family support practitioners to support families living in IPAS accommodation.

IMPLEMENTATION



Oversight

An Equal Start Oversight Group, chaired by the Department, will be established to provide national oversight and management of Equal Start, in continued collaboration with relevant stakeholders. A dedicated Equal Start Project Team, within the Department, will lead on Equal Start implementation, with Pobal as scheme administrator.

In addition to Equal Start implementation, the Equal Start Project Team will contribute to a wider Together for Better Implementation Team within the Department. Its purpose will be to ensure the various strands of the funding model (the ECCE programme, AIM, the NCS, Core Funding and Equal Start) continue to develop as an interlocking and integrated model of funding, consistent with the funding model's overarching guiding principles and policy objectives.

Timeline

Equal Start delivers on a key commitment in *First 5* and it is envisaged that full implementation of all initial 17 Equal Start actions will be within the lifetime of this Strategy - by 2028 - with three distinct phases. Other actions outlined in Section 8 (Future Development) require further consideration before implementation timelines can be determined.

As with all funded initiatives of Government, resourcing for Equal Start actions must be sought through the annual estimates process and voted on by the Oireachtas. Budget 2024 allocated €4.5 million to commence implementation of Equal Start actions from September 2024 (equivalent to €13.5 million in full year costs).

Phase 1 (2024-2025)

A number of Equal Start actions require significant foundational groundwork, including reviewing and updating existing guidance and developing new guidance, reviewing and updating existing specialist roles and training programmes (for Inclusion Coordinators) as well as developing new roles and training programmes (for Family and Community Partnership Coordinators). This Phase will also require intensive engagement with key stakeholders to develop tailored responses for certain cohorts of children and planning for the extended Better Start advisory role. Much of this foundational work will be undertaken within the initial implementation period.

Setting-level targeted funding will be prioritised in Phase 1, commencing with the introduction of staffing supports from September 2024.

Phase 2 (2026-2027)

In Phase 2, initial child-level targeted funding (i.e. tailored responses and funding to services to support disadvantaged children with practical needs) will be introduced, along with new and updated guidance and associated training and supports. Also in this Phase, the updated Leadership for Inclusion Programme and a new programme in respect of Family and Community Partnership Coordinators will open for the initial intake of students, with Equal Start-designated settings prioritised for places.

Phase 3 (from 2028)

Phase 3 will see full roll-out of the 17 Equal Start actions.

UNIVERSAL MEASURES

A	Empowering parents
<p>1. Communications on ELC and SAC supports</p>	<p>Develop an inclusive communications and engagement campaign on ELC, SAC, and financial supports for parents. Target communication methods, key messages, and languages of communication, to Equal Start target groups. Develop and test messages in partnership with priority groups, including the Traveller community and Roma community, and with the National Adult Literacy Agency.</p> <p>Communicate clearly how ethnicity information will be utilised in Equal Start to allay potential fears from within Traveller and Roma communities.</p>
<p>2. Communications on parenting supports</p>	<p>Develop and implement a communications plan in conjunction with the ELC and SAC sector to strengthen the role of ELC and SAC services in signposting and delivering parenting supports.</p>
B	Embedding inclusion
<p>3. Updating and extending roll-out of Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines</p>	<p>Engage an expert to review the <i>Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines</i> and training, and update inline with Equal Start and recent changes in policy and society.</p> <p>Review the strategy for roll-out of Diversity, Equality and Inclusion training with a view to significantly increasing the proportion of ELC and SAC services and staff working within those services who have undertaken the training.</p>
<p>4. Review Inclusion Coordinator role and LINC training</p>	<p>Review the role of the Inclusion Coordinator in line with Equal Start priorities and commitments in <i>Nurturing Skills</i>, and review LINC training to support the updated Inclusion Coordinator role.</p> <p>The Department commits to reforming the funding to settings with an Inclusion Coordinator, with reformed funding contingent on possible future negotiated Employment Regulation Order identifying Inclusion Coordinators as distinct roles/additional and its associated terms and conditions responsibilities.</p>

<p>5. Inclusive admissions policies</p>	<p>Review the guidance on inclusion policies to ensure there is adequate support and recognition for priority target groups including Traveller and Roma children and families.</p> <p>Provide guidance on admissions policies, and explore the possible introduction of regulatory requirements for ELC and SAC services to have an inclusive admissions policy.</p> <p>As part of the introduction of comprehensive regulations for SAC services, introduce a regulatory requirement for SAC services to have an inclusion policy.</p> <p>Consideration will be given to extending to ELC and SAC services the duties arising under section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014.</p>
<p>6. Inter-agency cooperation for child welfare and protection</p>	<p>Strengthen guidance and support for ELC and SAC services on inter-agency cooperation for child welfare and protection.</p> <p>Consider if participation in Meitheal processes could be a requirement for Core Funding Partner Services.</p>
<p>7. Critical incident fund</p>	<p>Develop a Critical Incident Fund for the support of children and staff in settings affected by critical incidents.</p>
<p>8. Well-being supports for early years educators and practitioners</p>	<p>Develop and introduce well-being supports for early years educators and practitioners, in addition to supports for early learning and childcare settings to enable more supportive working environments to be created for staff.</p>
<p>C</p>	<p>Supporting partnership between settings, families and communities</p>
<p>9. Family and Community Partnership Coordinators</p>	<p>Develop a role profile for Family and Community Partnership Coordinators, drawing on the experience of the Inclusion Coordinator role and other family outreach and liaison roles (e.g. Home-School-Community-Liaison in DEIS schools; Traveller Parent Support Programme Family Liaison Workers).</p> <p>Develop a LINC-type training programme to be a requirement for the role, with priority initially for Equal Start-targeted services.</p> <p>Develop conditional funding for settings to provide for the role, with priority initially for Equal Start-targeted settings. In line with Inclusion Coordinator funding reforms above, funding will be contingent on possible future negotiated Employment Regulation Order identifying Community Partnership Coordinator as distinct roles/additional responsibilities and its associated terms and conditions.</p>

<p>10. Extending Better Start advisory Role</p>	<p>Extend the Better Start role to provide advice and guidance to ELC services (and, over time, to SAC services also), to Inclusion Coordinators and to Family and Community Partnership Coordinators, on effective approaches to inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and priority target groups, including a focus on supporting partnership between settings, parents and communities.</p> <p>Appoint Early Years Specialists (Traveller and Roma Advisory) to work in Better Start.</p>
<p>11. Strengthening parents' involvement in settings</p>	<p>Support – and at a later date require – ELC and SAC settings to develop policies on partnership with parents.</p> <p>Develop guidance for ELC and SAC services on introducing “parent partnership groups”, partnership committees, or other mechanisms to give parents structured and more formal roles in ongoing engagement with settings.</p>

CHILD-TARGETED MEASURES

<p>D</p>	<p>Meeting practical needs</p>
<p>12. Funding to services to support disadvantaged children with practical needs</p>	<p>Introduce a new, semi-flexible funding stream for all ELC and SAC settings to support access and participation of disadvantaged children through helping to meet their practical needs for participation. Funding will be allocated on the basis of the new Equal Start identification model in relation to children who are identified through the model. Funding can be used flexibly across a range of purposes that will be specified.</p>
<p>E</p>	<p>Developing tailored responses</p>
<p>13. Tailored responses</p>	<p>Work with representative organisations of specific target groups to co-create effective solutions to address barriers to access and participation in ELC and SAC for children from those target groups.</p> <p>Appoint six Family Link Workers to support the full roll out of the Traveller Parenting Support Programme in all 17 Tusla areas, with new responsibilities on Family Link Workers to engage with Traveller parents of children aged 1-5 years, supporting them to attend and participate in early learning and childcare, avail of the ECCE programme and where applicable applying for the NCS.</p>

SETTING-TARGETED MEASURES

F	Additional funding for services in areas of concentrated disadvantage
14. Staffing supports	Provide flexible funding for additional staff time for Level 1 and 2 Equal Start-targeted services to assist services in supporting children in the most disadvantaged communities to access and participate in ELC and SAC.
15. Additional nutrition programme	Provide funding for additional meals to be provided in Equal Start targeted ELC and SAC settings beyond minimum regulatory requirements.
16. Intervention for language delay	Roll out Early Talk Boost to Equal Start designated settings
17. Wider use of the Equal Start identification model	Use the Equal Start identification model in complementary policy areas to identify services in need of additional funding and resources, on top of the universal funding and supports available to all services or to prioritise the allocation of other supports, as well as to inform other prioritisation in resource allocation.

Measuring progress

In line with recommendations in *Partnership for the Public Good*, progress on Equal Start implementation will be measured at a national and setting-level.

National level

At the national level, the Department will publish details of the targeted funding at setting level and will also develop a short set of national indicators for monitoring progress on Equal Start, with targeted funding and indicators reported on annually. This report will include progress on the target for ECCE programme uptake set in the *First 5 Implementation Plan (2023-2025)* (i.e. by 2028, uptake rates to the ECCE programme or an equivalent pre-primary programme by Traveller and Roma children will be more closely aligned to the national average).

In addition, the Department will commission a formal and independent evaluation of Equal Start after three years.

Setting level

At the setting level, settings who qualify for targeted funding will be required to publish a short Tackling Disadvantage Plan.

Services will be expected to set out their approach to addressing disadvantage, informed by the Department's guidance on expenditure, as well as the expected improvements and outcomes for the children, parents, staff and setting. The implementation of the plan will be monitored through self-evaluation and will be used to assist local actors in providing meaningful supports or advice. A sample of plans will be audited centrally to assess policy outcomes.

APPENDICES



Appendix 1: Recommendations in Partnership for the Public Good

Core Funding

1. Develop and implement a supply-side payment to providers to support the provision of quality services. The new payment – which they have called Core Funding - would offer better financial sustainability to providers in return for a cultural shift to a partnership relationship between providers and the State, which reflects the public good dimension of ELC and SAC.
2. The Core Funding should
 - a) Be calculated based on a setting's capacity (number/age of children, type/duration of service) and its associated staffing complement.
 - b) Include whatever extra funding the Government decides to make available to support the Joint Labour Committee (JLC) process, which is currently underway.
 - c) Incorporate additional funding to meet the extra costs to providers arising from the implementation of the Workforce Plan including opportunities for staff progression and development within the sector.
 - d) Incorporate funding for administration and to support the employment of graduate staff.
 - e) Unlock access to a package of supports and resources, including capital funding and quality supports.
3. Providers who sign up to Core Funding should be required to
 - a) Follow the fee management system.
 - b) Implement the quality improvement measures under the Workforce Plan.
 - c) Implement the relevant practice frameworks.
 - d) Develop, implement, and report on an annual quality development plan.
 - e) Provide transparent financial reports and participate as required in cost surveys and other necessary data collection exercises.
 - f) Offer the NCS and ECCE programme to all eligible children/parents, including children accessing the NCS through sponsorship arrangements.
4. Providers who apply for Core Funding should be provided with guidelines on the types of expenditure that this allocation can be spent on, and the governance and accountability arrangements that will apply. The local level of the operating model should support individual settings to ensure that, save in exceptional cases, they can be confident of complying with such accountability requirements.
5. To assess the impact of the introduction of Core Funding, the DCEDIY should develop a reasonably short set of national indicators outlining the benefits which it expects to achieve from this additional funding (reduced staff turnover, better qualified staff, more stable parental fees, increases in non-contact time, etc.) and publish progress reports thereon.

6. From a funding perspective, and despite the differences between childminding and centre-based provision, the Expert Group believe that it would, in principle, be reasonable to make the new funding streams being recommended in this report available to registered childminders – though some modifications may be needed. They suggest that the DCEDIY develop an appropriate approach, taking account of the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028).

Tackling Disadvantage

7. Develop and provide universal training, materials and supports to promote and enhance understanding of socio-economic disadvantage and an inclusive culture in ELC and SAC for providers, educators/practitioners, parents, and children. These supports should focus on both settings and staff.
8. Develop and implement a mechanism to identify and allocate targeted funding to support services with high levels of concentrated socio-economic disadvantage. The identification approach should be based on the aggregate deprivation scores of the home addresses of all children attending the setting. The extra funding should be calculated based on the setting's capacity and staffing and should be expressed as a budget that could be used partly in the form of an additional financial allocation and partly in the form of additional supports in kind.
9. This targeted funding should be used by eligible services to provide more consistent and higher quality interaction with children and their families. This could be achieved in a variety of ways, such as lower staff/child ratios, increased non-contact time, extra training/CPD, attracting and retaining higher qualified staff, more outdoor activities and outings, and extra education and play resources.
10. Providers who qualify for targeted funding should have some flexibility in deciding how best to use this additional funding but should be required to publish a short specific plan outlining how they intend to spend their allocation for the forthcoming year and a report on how they spent their allocation for the previous year. Providers should be provided with guidelines on the types of expenditure that this allocation can be spent on, and the governance and accountability arrangements that will apply.
11. The DCEDIY should develop a reasonably short set of national indicators outlining the benefits that it expects to achieve from the universal supports and targeted funding and publish progress reports thereon.
12. Depending on experience with the universal supports and targeted funding, the DCEDIY should explore the need for a further element of funding which could allow individual settings to apply for funding to address the exceptional needs of individual children.
13. Consider extending AIM to all ELC and SAC settings.
14. Assign responsibility for outreach to, and greater participation in, ELC and SAC by families at risk of poverty and disadvantage to the local structures, which emerge from the Review of the Operating Model which is currently underway.

15. While maintaining the principle that families where all parents in the household are participating in work or study qualify for more hours of ELC and SAC than households where one parent is available to care for children, address the specific impact of the NCS 'work/study test' on hours of access for children at risk of poverty or disadvantage. This could involve, for example, increasing standard hours to ensure children could have access to a greater number of ELC and SAC hours during term time.

Affordability measures

16. Remove the existing age limit on the universal NCS subsidy so that it is available to all children covered by the scheme and increase the rate of the subsidy to maximise take-up.
17. Replace the existing "multiple child deduction" element of the NCS with a "multiple child factor", so that families with two or more children receive higher subsidies and experience lower withdrawal rates as their income increases.
18. Consider, including as part of the future evaluation of the NCS, developing the NCS so that subsidies and total household expenditure on ELC and SAC are linked to total household income. Further to fee certainty being achieved, this change could include explicit withdrawal rates for families on income-assessed subsidies and/or a cap on the percentage of income paid by parents with the State meeting any further costs.

Fee management

19. The DCEDIY should develop a searchable price comparability website for parents. If necessary, it should amend the contracts with providers to allow it to express providers' fees in a readily comparable manner (such as average hourly rates by age band).
20. The DCEDIY should collect data on provider costs based on the costing model developed by Crowe. Participation in these surveys should be mandatory for all providers wishing to receive Core Funding.
21. Providers that sign up for Core Funding should be required to participate in a new fee management system. Initially, the new fee management system would involve an agreement not to increase parental fees from the September 2021 baseline for the September 2022 to August 2023 programme year.
22. The new system should focus first on limiting increases in fee rates. The DCEDIY should explore, using the provider cost data gathered under R20, the management of actual fee rates - including whether it would be reasonable to introduce a common national provider fee structure in the medium term, including transitional arrangements, for example where all fee rates would have to fall within a specified percentage tolerance range around a given rate.

Role of the State

23. The Minister should ensure that the DCEDIY and the operating model have the expertise and resources required to take on an enhanced public management and support role in the sector. In addition to the functions outlined in other recommendations (e.g., fee management), the State should be responsible for :

- a) Capacity planning, establishing demand, identifying gaps in supply and actions to address gaps.
- b) Offering families an information source on provider fees, vacancies, inspection reports, other information on quality, etc.
- c) Planning, guiding, and supporting the development of an optimal ELC and SAC sector, in terms of size and service offering.
- d) Supporting providers to operate sustainable, high quality, affordable services.
- e) Managing centre closures, e.g., sourcing alternative places, alternative providers and supports for re-opening.

It is essential that these responsibilities be supported and delivered by strong local structures.

24. The DCEDIY should continue its Sustainability Funding and review and update this funding stream to take account of the new funding model. Sustainability Funding should act as a final safety net for a small number of services who may experience sustainability challenges.

25. In the medium term, the Minister should mandate the DCEDIY to examine whether some element of public provision should be introduced alongside private provision.

Appendix 2: Organisations and bodies engaged with in the consultation phase

The following agencies, NGOs, and ELC and SAC services were engaged with as part of Equal Start development:

- Afterschool Academy Huntstown Community Centre
- After Schools Education & Support Programme (Lower Sheriff Street)
- Athboy Community Childcare CLG
- Barnacarroll Childcare Services
- Barnardos
- Carraig Briste & Killeghney Early Years
- Childcare Committees Ireland
- Childhood Development Initiative
- Children's Rights Alliance
- City/County Childcare Committees
- Cocoon Childcare (Artane)
- Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta
- Crann
- Creative Kids and Co. Pre- School
- Crumlin Childcare Centre
- Darndale Belcamp Integrated Childcare
- Daughters of Charity, Child & Family Services: St. Mary's EYS and St. Louise's ECDS
- DCEDIY, Traveller and Roma Policy Unit
- Deansrath Family Centre
- Department of an Taoiseach, Child Poverty and Well-being Unit
- Donegal Travellers Project
- Doras Buí
- Dublin North West Partnership
- Dublin Steiner School
- Early Childhood Ireland
- Education Sub-Committee, National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS)
- FAB Huggie Bears Wexford
- FamiliBase
- Finglas Childcare CLG
- Focus Ireland
- Gaeloideachas (Naíonraí Chaitlín Maude)
- Glenfields Community Childcare
- Graiguecullen Parish Childcare Centre CLG
- Higgys House Creche
- Irish Refugee Council
- Irish Traveller Movement
- Jack and Jill Playgroup CLG
- Jelly Tots
- Kids Inc
- Kilbarrack Foxfield Preschool and Afterschool
- Kilkenny Community Early Years Project CLG
- Krafty Kidz Ballyconnell
- Larkin Childcare Facility (0-3 years)
- Mellow Spring
- Men in Childcare Network
- National Childhood Network

- National Parents Council
- National Traveller Women's Forum
- National Women's Council
- Navan Educate Together Pre-School
- Navan SCP Local Management Committee
- Northside Family Resource Centre, Riverside Childcare Centre St. Mary's Park Limerick
- OMEP Ireland
- One Family Ireland
- Our Lady of Lourdes Childworld
- Parkside Community Development CLG
- Pavee Point
- Portlaoise Family Resource Centre (FRC National Forum, Childcare sub-group)
- Preparing for Life
- SAOL Beag Childrens Centre
- Scribbles and Giggles Pre-School
- Sherpa Kids (Dublin 5 & 13)
- Sligo Springboard Family Support Service
- South Dublin County Partnership
- SPEC's, Bray (ABC Programme)
- St. Catherine's Community Services Centre
- St. Vincent de Paul
- St. Brigids Day Nursery
- Stepping Stones Early Years Centre
- Tait House Creche
- Tallaght Childcare Centre
- Teach Spraoi Community Childcare - ELC & SAC
- Technological University Dublin
- Technological University Shannon
- Templeshannon Community and Childcare Centre LTD
- The Beehive Play, Learn Grow
- Tigers Childcare
- Traveller Visibility Group
- Trinity College Dublin
- Tubbercurry Family & Childcare Resource Centre
- Tusla, ABC Programme and Education Support Service
- University College Dublin
- Urlingford Childcare
- YMCA Childcare



Delivering on a First 5 Action



A key strand of Together for Better, the funding model for early learning and childcare.



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