

Barnardos

Submission for Public Consultation on Future Funding of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare in Ireland

2 October 2020

The Expert Group has developed a set of principles to guide them in their work. The draft guiding principles and a description of each principle are set out here.

Strategic: The funding model should be based on an acceptance that ELC/SAC is a public good, which embodies both an essential investment in child wellbeing and development, and an important support for economic growth and 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.

Child-Centred: Funding should be allocated in the best interests of children.

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.

Professional and Valued Workforce: Funding should recognise that the quality of ELC and SAC is centrally 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 which feels valued and is motivated to deliver the best possible service to children.

Competent Sector: Funding should incentivise continuous quality improvement, innovation, and inter-agency working. The funding model should be evolutionary: it should minimise short-term disruption but also allow for/support desired long-term changes. For example, while respecting the existing diversity of scale and service offering, it should allow for longer-term changes required to support a sustainable sector.

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 and literature, as well as international models of best practice. It should also 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.

Please indicate if you agree or disagree with each of the guiding principles.

Strategic: Agree

Child-Centred: Agree

Family-Orientated: Agree

Professional and Valued Workforce: Agree

Competent Sector: Agree

Development and Implementation: Agree

Please provide reasons for your answers

- All guiding principles are welcomed as an important tool to provide clarity on the implications of a new funding model and to provide guidance on implementation.
- The guiding principles should be applied in all circumstances regardless of changes that arise. Funding mechanisms should be designed to prioritise the needs and rights of children over the needs of other stakeholders.
- **Family-orientated** principle- a child's access to ELC and SAC should not be contingent on a parent's participation in the workforce or education. This principle should extend to all families and include supports to those engaged in other important activities such as provision of care, accessing health and therapeutic services and particularly families with specific vulnerabilities or additional needs.
- To ensure a funding model that is accessible to all parents and easily operated by ELC and SAC providers, the **development and implementation** principle should incorporate mechanisms to ensure systems are easy for all stakeholders to navigate and user friendly. 'Input' should be strengthened to 'participation' by children, parents, providers, the workforce and other stakeholders.
- **Competent sector** principle- should provide for the infrastructure to support ELC and SAC to engage in continuous quality improvement, innovation and interagency working and avoid a two tier system resulting in better funded services providing a better quality service and poorly funded services providing a poor quality service.

Please indicate if you think the principles should apply to early learning and care, school age childcare, both, or neither.

Agree with all principles for both ELC and SAC.

Please provide reasons for your answers.

- ELC and SAC both provide important services to children and parents and as such warrant an appropriate set of principles to guide the decisions and implementation structures that will impact on their future funding.
- The nature of funding of such services has a significant influence of the quality of provision.

- SAC has traditionally lagged behind ELC in the development and provision of services. This funding model should mark a new approach where ELC and SAC are invested in and developed in tandem.

Do you have any additional comments to make on the draft guiding principles, including any suggested changes?

- It will be important to ensure that any new proposed funding model does not try to create a 'one size fits all' type model. Guiding principles of **accessibility and inclusivity** to meet the diverse needs of children, families, services and communities would be welcome.

Thinking about the State's current approach to funding early learning and care and school- age childcare and its policy objectives of quality, affordability, accessibility...

What are the strengths of the current approach to funding early learning and care and school-age childcare by the State or of individual funding programmes?

- The universal entitlement to two years of free pre-school under the ECCE scheme.
- The average age of children enrolling in primary school has increased.
- The provision of funding and supports through the Access and Inclusion model has supported the participation of children with disabilities in mainstream preschool.
- The higher capitation under the ECCE scheme has resulted in more ECEC graduates working in ELC settings and access to enhanced capitation.
- The capital grant funding has allowed ELC and SAC services to carry out essential maintenance work and to enhance their premises.

What are the weaknesses of the current approach to funding early learning and care and school-age childcare by the State or of individual funding programmes?

- Ireland has the second lowest public spending on ELC in the OECD (2019)
- The level of funding overall is totally inadequate for the provision of high quality services and an appropriately qualified and appropriately compensated workforce resulting in high staff turnover and highly stressed providers.
- The current approach to funding involves a complicated administrative structure for which the current level of funding does not provide for the completion of these administrative tasks.
- It does not provide adequately for ongoing development work or for CPD.
- The funding schemes are not meeting the needs of all vulnerable children and families. Many vulnerable children are not fitting the criteria to receive sponsor referrals and the sponsor referral process itself is difficult to navigate and

results in inequalities. Anecdotally sponsor agencies are not always adequately informed about how the process is to work.

- The National Childcare Scheme has a focus on labour activation and not on the needs and rights of children.
- The variability of funding levels, which change throughout the year, creates extra difficulties for providers and parents.
- The higher capitation in the ECCE scheme in many cases has resulted in the most qualified staff in a setting working with the preschool children and not with babies and younger children.
- The capital grant scheme changes from year to year making it difficult for services to plan for development and making applications.

What are the key challenges faced by children and families? If the challenges you identify differ across early learning and care and school-age childcare, please highlight these differences.

- Many children of school going age, in particular vulnerable children, do not have access to any subsidised SAC hours during the school term.
- The attendance rules of the funding schemes limits the flexibility for families in availing of ELC and SAC. Attendance at preschool is not a legal requirement for children under 6 years. Funding mechanisms should not make it effectively a requirement.
- There is no AIM support for children with a disability outside of the ECCE eligibility – it is also needed for very young children and children in school age childcare.
- It is well documented that the cost of ELC and SAC is one of the highest among high-income countries. The average cost of full day childcare in 2019 was €184 a week (DCYA, 2019).
- The cumbersome nature of applying for funding, particularly for parents with low literacy levels or for whom English is a second language, is challenging.
- Children attending ELC in areas with high levels of disadvantage and deprivation require service provision with higher ratios of staff to children to provide additional supports to help buffer the impacts. The current approach does not provide for such services to receive necessary additional funding.

What are the key challenges faced by providers and staff? If the challenges you identify differ across early learning and care and school-age childcare, please highlight these differences.

- The current levels of funding are inadequate to cover costs of delivery of quality ELC and SAC services.
- There is a considerable administrative burden on providers in relation to the current funding schemes. The level of funding does not allow for enough administrative support either in paid hours or personnel.
- Providers feel an obligation to support parents to access funding schemes, particularly in situations where parents have low literacy levels, language issues or are living in very challenging circumstances adding to their workload.

- Anecdotally we know that providers and staff feel the emotional impact when vulnerable children and families cannot access ELC and SAC due to cost issues.
- The ongoing challenges in the recruitment and retention of staff, widely accepted as being a result of low wages and poor working conditions such as lack of sick pay, present significant difficulties for providers in the delivery of a quality service.
- Providers are subject to compliance inspections in relation to funding schemes in addition to Tusla and DES inspections.
- Providers cannot plan effectively due to the insecure nature of their income which is dependent on the numbers of children in attendance and varies accordingly.
- Providers and staff struggle to access CPD due to lack of funding to meet associated costs of attendance.

What should be done to improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of early learning and care?

- A programme of long-term investment in ELC to bring the sector at least in line with OECD averages as soon as possible.
- A funding model that is contingent on continued efforts to meet and improve quality standards.
- A model that ensures accessibility and equality for all children.
- A capital grants system that ELC can access throughout the year for quality enhancement projects.
- Continuous funding of training and CPD for ELC workforce.
- Continuous funding of quality supports such as mentoring and consultation for providers.
- Expand current AIM model to include supports for younger children.

What should be done to improve affordability, quality and/or accessibility of school-age childcare?

- A programme of long-term investment in SAC to bring the sector at least in line with OECD averages as soon as possible.
- A funding model that is contingent on continued efforts to meet and improve quality standards.
- A model that ensures accessibility and equality for all children.
- A capital grants system that SAC can access throughout the year for quality enhancement projects.
- Continuous funding of training and CPD for SAC workforce.
- Continuous funding of quality supports such as mentoring and consultation for providers.
- Expand current AIM model to include supports for older children.

What role should the State play in ensuring early learning and care and school-age childcare is affordable, accessible, and of high quality? Please explain your answer, highlighting where, if at all, the role of the State should differ across early learning and care and school-age childcare.

- Put in place systems to ensure safeguarding of all children in ELC and SAC.
- Prioritise the needs and rights of children in all decision-making, planning, legislation and regulation.
- Support parents if they choose to stay home with their babies until they are at least one year old.
- Ensure services for children under 3 years are funded and supported to enhance quality, to at least the same degree as services for older children.
- Provide supports for childminders to enhance quality.
- Continue to monitor and enforce legislative and regulatory compliance of both ELC and SAC.
- Prioritise long-term investment in ELC and SAC to bring them into line at least with OECD average.
- Campaign to raise awareness in society in general of the importance and value to society of quality ELC and SAC.
- Ensure equal and easy access to quality ELC and SAC for all children and families close to their homes.
- Support the implementation of the Aistear and Síolta in ELC through access to quality supports including mentoring and consultation for providers.
- Provide supports for the implementation of quality guidelines for SAC.
- Ensure any proposed funding model addresses the particular challenges in providing services for disadvantaged children and families.
- Create an infrastructure which provides for funded non-contact time and CPD opportunities.
- Provide supports to enhance links and collaboration between all professional services for children and families and between ELC, SAC and schools.

What role should the providers play in ensuring early learning and care and school-age childcare is affordable, accessible, and of high quality? Please explain your answer, highlighting where, if at all, the role of providers should differ across early learning and care and school-age childcare.

- ELC and SAC services should strive to achieve and maintain compliance with all relevant legislative and regulatory requirements.
- Ensure children's rights are always central to practice.
- Ensure that they always consult and work in partnership with parents.
- Work collaboratively with relevant stakeholders in the provision of quality ELC and SAC services and contribute constructively to policy development.
- Work to develop and enhance the quality of their provision by implementing the Aistear and Síolta frameworks in their services and following recognised quality practice guidelines.

- Ensure appropriate working terms and conditions for their staff.
- Actively seek the engagement of parents and families.
- Be accountable to all stakeholders.

The State currently provides approximately €640 million annually to early learning and care and school-age childcare. First 5 commits to, at least, double investment in early learning and care and school-age childcare between 2019 and 2028. What do you think the State should expect in return for this investment? Please explain your answer highlighting differences across early learning and care and school-age childcare, if any.

- We very much welcome this commitment to a much needed increased state investment in ELC and SAC.
- A significant increase of funding should provide a funding model that works efficiently and effectively for children, families, providers, staff and communities.
- A model that will focus on tackling disadvantage, investment in quality ELC for disadvantaged children is a powerful and cost effective way to generate better life outcomes for children (Heckman, 2016).
- Funding that provides for the ELC and SAC workforces to be appropriately compensated for the work they do with fair and just working terms and conditions.
- A model that supports ELC and SAC services to focus on developing and maintaining quality provision with access to professional supports such as mentoring and consultation, as required.
- A model that can be accessed through streamlined and easy to use systems and processes.
- A model of funding that will create stability and security for ELC and SAC providers.
- Funding to support the provision of subsidised training and ongoing cpd.
- A move away from a system dependent on privately owned provision towards ELC and SAC which is predominantly publicly provided.

Do you have any further comments to make on the future funding of early learning and care and school-age childcare?

- We very much welcome the development of a new funding model for ELC and SAC in Ireland.
- ELC and SAC provide vital services to children and families and this needs to be reflected in the level of funding invested.
- The quality of provision for children, in particular in the early years, impacts significantly on children's wellbeing and quality of life and on society in both the short and long term.
- A new funding model will have the opportunity to create an effective approach to supporting ELC and SAC services to deliver quality, accessible, sustainable and inclusive services for children and families.

- There is a real need for long-term investment in ELC and SAC, however the immediate needs of the sector must also be addressed as a matter of urgency.
- It is important to acknowledge that there will likely always be services that will struggle to be sustainable for a variety of reasons, a funding model will need to build in additional supports for these services.
- Providers who serve areas and/or high numbers of families and children with particularly high needs require better ratios and particularly highly skilled educators and need additional funding to cover this.