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An Independent Review of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme in Ireland

Final Report | April 2024

Glenda Walsh, Franka Winter, Thérèse Farrell, Karen Orr, Karen Hanna, Suzanne McCartney, Mark Ballentine, Annemarie Millar

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[1] For details on the role of the "Designated Listener", see section on the Children's rights informed approach (Chapter 2).

Glossary

AIM – Access and Inclusion Model

CCC – City or County Childcare Committee

CCS – the Community Childcare Subvention

CCSP - the Community Childcare Subvention Plus

CCSR – the Community Childcare Subvention Resettlement

CECDE – Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

CPD – Continuing Professional Development

CPEAG – Children's, Parents' and Educators' Advisory Group

DCEDIY – Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

DCYA – Department of Children and Youth Affairs

DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

ECCE – Early Childhood Care and Education

ECDI – Early Childhood Development Index

ECI – Early Childhood Ireland

ELC – Early Learning and Care

EPM – Equal Participation Model

EPPE – Effective Provision of Preschool Education

ERO – Employment Regulation Order

HSCLC – Home-School-Community Liaison Coordinator

HSE – Health Service Executive

JLC – Joint Labour Committee

LINC – Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years Programme

NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCN – National Childhood Network

NCS – National Childcare Scheme

NDA – National Disability Authority

NFQ – National Framework of Qualifications

NTRIS – National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy

OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

SAC – School Age Childcare

SEED – Study of Early Education and Development

SEN – Special Educational Needs

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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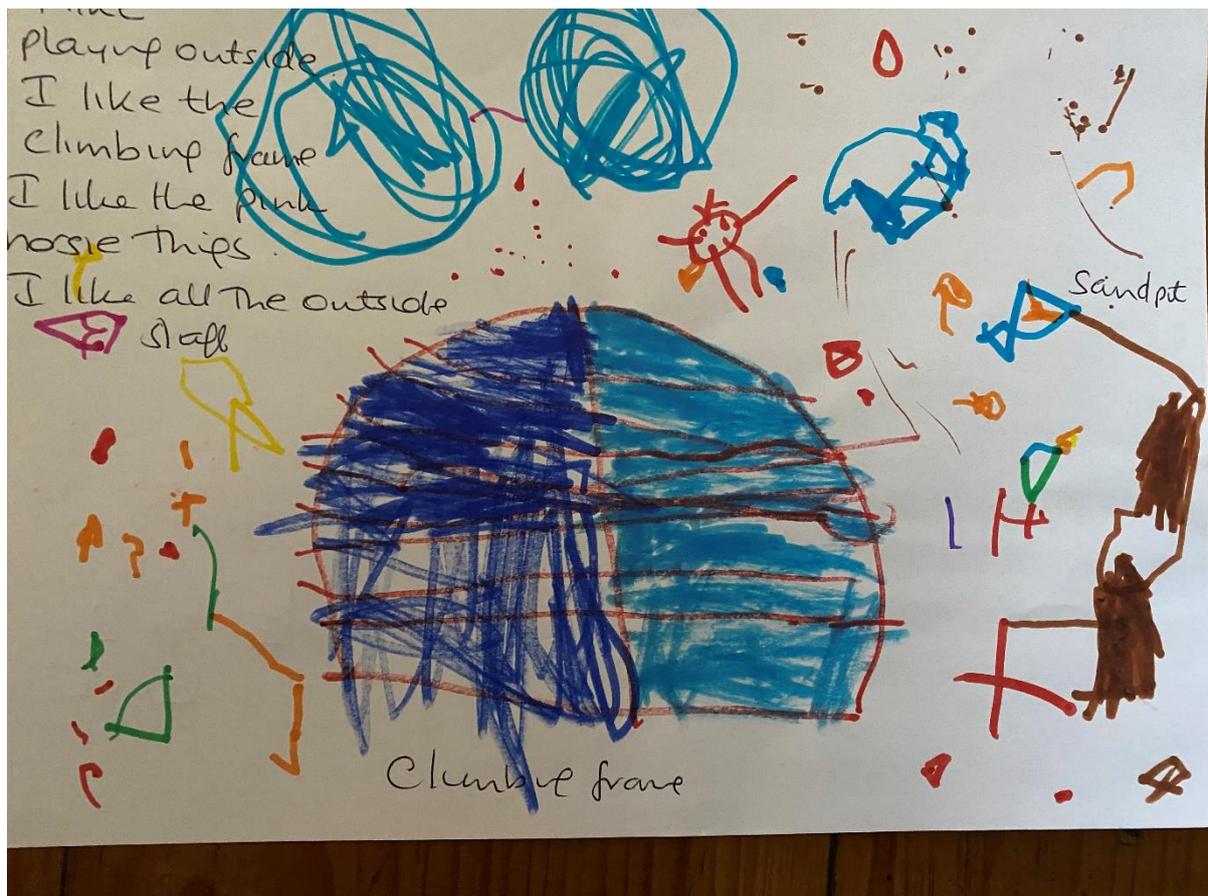
Introduction

Children in Ireland have been enjoying free preschool education under the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme since 2010. In 2022, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) commissioned Stranmillis University College to carry out a review of the programme in collaboration with Dublin City University and establish what was working well and what could be improved. This review marks a significant milestone in the journey of Early Learning and Care (ELC) development in Ireland. It recognises the successes achieved over thirteen years of implementing the ECCE programme and expresses a commitment to ensuring that the programme is achieving its goals for all children, irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or ability.

The review addresses the following research questions:

- Is the ECCE programme being implemented as intended, i.e. is it a universal programme available free to all children within the eligible age range, providing them with their first formal experience of early learning for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week for 38 weeks of the year for up to two years?
- Is it meeting its core objectives, i.e. to promote better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children; and to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children?
- Can the programme be further enhanced based on international evidence and experience to date?

The review comprises four work packages:

- Work Package 1 (WP1) consists of an evidence review covering relevant policy documents and existing data in relation to the ECCE programme in Ireland, as well as research-based evidence on international best practice in ELC.
- WP2 covers two large-scale online surveys of ECCE programme providers and parents, as well as in-depth visits to 30 services across the country, including interviews with managers, educators, and parents, conversations with children, and practice observations.
- WP3 engages with national and international experts, including policy makers and representatives of different interest and advocacy groups with relevance to the ECCE programme.
- WP4 is designed to gather the experiences and views of parents from low-uptake groups, as well as the professionals supporting them.

This report consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 covers WP1 and reviews the relevant evidence, including policy documents, existing data on the ECCE programme, and research-based evidence on international best practice in ELC. It also addresses the history of the ECCE programme and the concept of quality in the context of ELC. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology used throughout the three empirical Work Packages. Chapters 3 to 5 cover WP2. Chapter 3 presents children's views of the ECCE programme, including the aspects they enjoy most and least and their suggestions for enhancing the programme. It is based on playful conversations with children and artwork completed during the visits to the 30 settings. Chapter 4 reports on parents', providers', and educators' perspectives on the ECCE programme and is structured along a range of key implementation criteria. It draws on interviews and focus groups conducted during research visits to 30 services contracted to deliver the ECCE programme, as well as two large-scale surveys of parents and providers. Chapter 5 reports on findings from practice-based observations carried out at the 30 settings and offers insights into the quality of ECCE programme provision in practice. Chapter 6 covers WP3 and presents the perspectives of national and international experts, including representatives of national Government organisations and arms-length bodies, interest and advocacy groups, international policy makers, and experts from academia. Chapter 7 covers WP4 and reports on the perspectives of parents from low-uptake groups and other disadvantaged groups, as well as professionals working to support these groups. It details barriers and enablers of participation and uptake and makes suggestions for programme enhancements to increase accessibility for all children. Chapter 8 draws together the findings from the previous chapters and details opportunities for enhancement based on the findings discussed throughout the report.
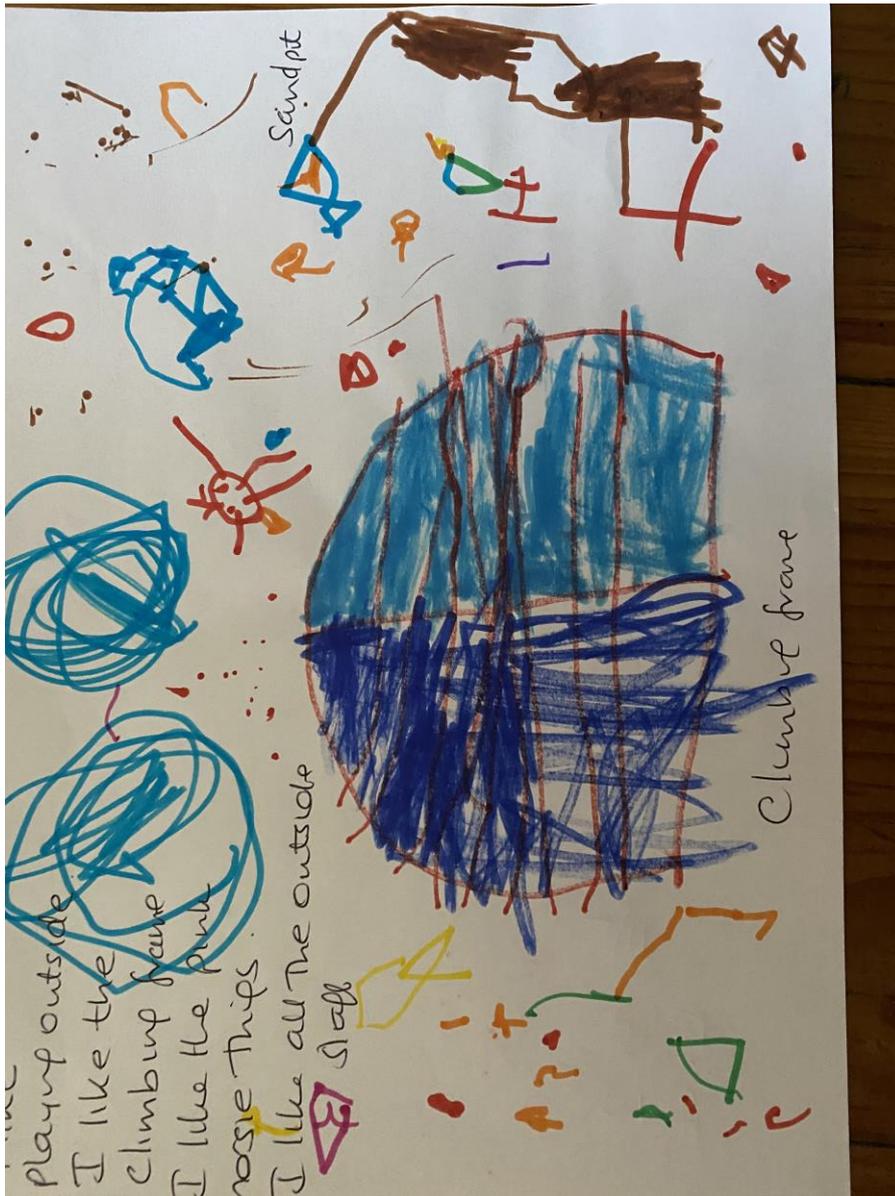
Chapter 1: Evidence review

The Irish Government introduced the ECCE programme in 2010 and extended it in 2016 and again in 2018. The aim of the programme was to 'benefit children in the key developmental period prior to starting school' (DCYA, 2010). A review was commissioned in 2022, in fulfilment of a commitment expressed in First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, 2019-2028. This evidence review forms an important part of this report. It provides an overview of relevant policy documents and existing data in relation to the ECCE programme, as well as international evidence and two international case studies representing best practice in ELC. For the purpose of this review, the term ECCE is used to refer to the Early Childhood Care and Education programme in Ireland, while the term ELC refers to early learning and care more generally, and to the early learning and care sector specifically.

The evidence review is structured as follows:

The introduction to the evidence review describes the historical context in which the ECCE programme was introduced and developed. This historical perspective includes an examination of the research evidence that was available at the time and that informed policy decisions about the ECCE programme. The introduction also provides a discussion of quality in ELC, with a particular focus on process quality.

The remainder of the evidence review is divided into three parts. Part I reviews the ECCE programme based on policy documents and research-based evidence on best practice. It constitutes the main body of the review. The programme review addresses five areas:

- Structural parameters
- Accessibility and inclusivity
- Providers, workforce, and working conditions
- Governance and quality control, and
- The interface with other programmes and initiatives.

It describes both the current situation in Ireland with respect to these areas and the international evidence in relation to best practice, based on key studies conducted in Europe and the UK and systematic reviews and meta-analyses covering the international literature, including studies from different parts of the world.

Part II examines international obligations and the ECCE programme's contribution to meeting targets.

Part III provides a comparative analysis of international trends in ELC, based on data from the EU, OECD, and UNESCO. This quantitative analysis is complemented by two qualitative case studies of innovative approaches in Scotland and New Zealand. These case studies include a brief overview of each ELC system from a structural perspective and discuss specific "areas of excellence" developed in the two countries.

Historical context of the ECCE programme

To review and analyse the ECCE programme critically, it is essential to trace its genealogy and to position it within the historical, social, economic, scientific and political construct of its time. Data from the Department of Social Protection indicates that there are close to 123,000 children of eligible age for participation in the ECCE programme in Ireland. However, roughly 17% of children do not avail of the second year of ECCE with their parents instead opting to enrol them in primary school, leaving an eligible cohort of 113,000 children[2]. Birth rates have steadily decreased over the past decade and were 20% lower in 2022 than in 2012. In recent times, the landscape of education in Ireland has changed with an increased emphasis on early childhood education. Previous investment focused on children from a school-age only, but over the past two decades, the focus of attention has begun to shift towards the youngest children. The first legislative control over ELC in Ireland came into place in the form of the Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations in 1996, followed by *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009), frameworks aimed for all children aged birth to six years of age, with a particular focus on babies and toddlers, as well as young children.

In historical terms, the period 1960–1990 marked an increased interest in ELC in Ireland. Traditionally, extended families provided an important aspect of ELC. However, increasing urbanisation resulted in

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[2] This figure is based on calculations carried out by DCEDIY to determine ECCE eligibility using data provided by the Department of Social Protection on children who are claiming the child benefit payment. This figure is based on a point in time and was calculated for the 22/23 year in July 2022.

families living in cities and towns away from the extended family and hence relying on alternative services. Women's increased participation in the workforce also led to increased demand for ELC in Irish society (Penn and Lloyd, 2014).

Prior to the introduction of the ECCE programme, ELC services in Ireland had been provided by competing private, commercial and, predominantly, community-based sectors and this continues to be the case. Between 2000 and 2010, 63,927 ELC places were created using funding provided under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP, 2000-2006) and the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP, 2006-2010). In addition to Capital grants, EOCP funding facilitated the establishment of the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) and provided staffing grants for community services. At that time, ELC services remained largely parent-funded at the point of use, although a universal Early Childhood Supplement of €1,000/year per child, paid to parents of children less than six years of age to offset the high costs of ELC, was introduced in 2006. This supplement was replaced by the ECCE programme in 2010. At the time, there was significant variation in the pedagogical approaches, staff qualifications, payment rates, and attendance fees (Neylon, 2012) and this market-driven approach was contested from a rights-based perspective as it did not ensure equality of access to preschool services for all children in Ireland (Hayes, 2005).

With Ireland's accession to the European Economic Community in 1973 and increased connections to international organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Irish policy gradually became more influenced by European and international developments (CECDE, 2006).

It is now widely recognised that high-quality ELC holds many benefits for all children and families. This insight is underpinned by an increasing amount of empirical evidence, which has shown a positive impact on medium- and long-term outcomes for children, as well as their families (European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2022; CARE project), ranging from cognitive, language, and social development to educational and labour market outcomes, social integration, and even reduced crime rates.

Some of these benefits were already known at the start of the 21st century and informed the introduction and development of the ECCE programme. For example, at the time, evidence already supported the view that high-quality ELC could play an important role in enabling all children to realise their full potential by improving their cognitive, social, and behavioural outcomes. It was also known at the time that disadvantaged children stood to benefit the most, but that they flourished even more in socio-economically mixed settings, providing a powerful argument for a universal preschool programme.

An NESF report on Early Childhood Care and Education, carried out in 2005, thus recommended the introduction of universal, government-funded ELC provision on economic, social, and educational grounds, arguing that early intervention offered the highest economic returns, benefitted all children's cognitive, social and behavioural development, and particularly improved social outcomes for disadvantaged children. It specifically recommended a State-funded, one-year, sessional, universal preschool programme of 3.5 hours per day over 48 weeks, with a view to increasing the duration of the programme to two years at a later stage. Many of these recommendations were realised in the ECCE programme.

The NESF report highlighted the rich base of ideas, understandings, recommendations, research findings, and records of good international practice available to policy makers at the time. In particular, it drew on several key longitudinal studies, including the English Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study, and studies of experimental intervention programmes for disadvantaged children in the US, such as the Chicago Child Parent Centre Programme, the Carolina Abecedarian Project, the Perry Preschool Project in Michigan and the Headstart programme. These and other studies demonstrated the potential for ELC to improve child outcomes in the medium and long term across a broad range of indicators. The NESF report also included a cost-benefit analysis, which estimated a net benefit return of €4.60 to €7.10 for every Euro invested, depending on the underlying assumptions of the model employed in the study.

At the same time, a discussion about specific characteristics of effective and high-quality ELC was beginning to develop. A growing consensus was emerging that formal pedagogical approaches were inappropriate for young children, and that much better outcomes could be achieved through play-based and child-centred programmes (Walsh et al., 2010; POST, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; BERA SIG, 2003; Bennett, 2005; Stephen, 2006; Dockett at al. 2007).

In England and Northern Ireland, the EPPE and EPPNI studies were beginning to identify key factors associated with different outcomes, such as starting age, ratios and group sizes, type of service, overall quality, staff qualifications and CPD, and pedagogical approach. In the interim, these particulars have received renewed attention in research, increasing our understanding of quality in ELC and of the factors that influence outcomes.

The publication of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education "Ready to Learn" (Government of Ireland, 1999) signified an important development in the history of early childhood education in Ireland. The objective of the White Paper was to facilitate the development of a high-quality system of early childhood education. It set out policy on education for young children and was predominantly "concerned with the formulation of policy concerning the education component of early education services" (Government of Ireland, 1999, p.9).

The White Paper argued that high-quality early intervention through preschool education was by far the most cost-effective way of addressing educational disadvantage by easing children's transition to school and developing their capacity to learn. The White Paper drew on international evidence to show that children who had experienced quality preschool education went on to perform better in primary school than those who had not attended preschool, demonstrated better cognitive, social, and language development, and experienced long-term improvements in academic achievement. The White Paper also stressed the evidence for ELC quality as a key factor in children's development. Experiences from targeted early intervention programmes in Ireland, including the Early Start pilot, the Rutland Street Project, targeted preschool provision for children from the Traveller community, and the Breaking the Cycle pilot programme also informed the White Paper. These experiences generally confirmed the benefits of preschool attendance, as well as the importance of quality.

In 2002, the then Department of Education and Science launched the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), whose aim it was to develop and co-ordinate early childhood education in Ireland. The Centre developed *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and played a vital role in the development and implementation of the

national policy approach to early childhood learning. The publication of *Síolta* contributed significantly to the realisation of the objectives of the White Paper.

In the same year that the CECDE was established, the European Council published the Barcelona Targets, which recommended that all Member States "provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age" (p.3).

Ireland's historical investment in ELC services can also be viewed in light of The Childcare Transition (UNICEF, 2008). The report compared and evaluated twenty-five economically advanced countries in relation to their provision of ten early childhood care and education standards. Ireland's performance was poor, as it achieved only one of the ten standards. The report identified that, at the time, most European governments had committed "a preschool place to all young children and that 80% of the staff were trained" (UNICEF, 2008, p. 2). In Ireland, however, it was reported that only 5% of children aged three years of age were attending preschool education programmes (Forfás, 2008). This statistic highlighted the urgency of a governmental response to the lack of high-quality ELC provision in the country.

The introduction of the ECCE programme in 2010 was a landmark moment in this respect. The universal programme is available in principle to all children (within the eligible age range) and aimed to provide them with their first formal learning experiences prior to starting primary school. The programme duration was extended to up to two years in 2016 and the eligible age range was extended twice, to include children from their third birthday in 2016, and from two years eight months in 2018. In 2016, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced with the aim of creating a more inclusive, accessible preschool environment, so that all children could benefit from high-quality, meaningful early learning experiences. The model aims to achieve this by providing universal supports to ELC settings, as well as targeted supports, which focus on the needs of the individual child, without requiring a diagnosis of disability.

In order to support the universal ECCE programme eligibility, it was necessary to rapidly expand the previously very small Irish ELC sector. A publicly funded private-sector model was adopted to achieve this goal. While this approach succeeded in rapidly creating a large supply of ECCE programme places, it also had important implications for quality, governance, accessibility, and availability across all sectors of society, which will be discussed in detail at different points throughout this report.

In 2018, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families*, detailed policy direction for the ECCE programme, including a commitment to evaluate the ECCE programme in advance of putting it on a statutory footing, and to provide continued funding to support the two years of the programme. The ECCE programme policy review follows a series of current and upcoming reforms and policy developments including those announced for Budget 2023 and Budget 2024, which committed to an allocation for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) of €1.108 billion in 2024.

The review aims to build on the work and progress of the past decade to identify which elements of the ECCE programme are working well and where improvements could be made. While the ECCE programme constitutes a very significant development towards improving access to high-quality education for all young children, important challenges remain.

Quality in ELC

Debate in the field of ELC policy is increasingly focusing on enhancing the quality of provision, reflecting both progress in relation to universal access and the insight that positive outcomes depend on the quality of education and care: it is now widely recognised that only high-quality ELC improves outcomes for children, and that low-quality ELC can even cause harm (OECD, 2018). However, quality in ELC is a multi-dimensional and contested concept that covers at least three domains: "structural quality" (e.g. staff qualifications, group size and adult-child ratios); "process quality" (children's experiences within ELC, educator-child interactions and relationships, and educational practice, etc.); and "system quality" (governance, funding, and regulatory standards) (Eadie et al. 2022).

In recent years, there has been growing emphasis on "process quality", defined as "children's daily interactions through their ECEC settings, including with other children, staff and teachers, space and materials, their families and the wider community" (OECD, 2021a). This dimension of quality is increasingly appreciated as "the primary driver of gains in children's development through ECEC" (OECD, 2018). However, as a micro-level indicator, it is much harder to regulate than some of the structural and system features of ELC quality, and more dependent upon educators' levels of skill, and thus upon qualifications, training and experience. As a result, structural and system features that have a bearing on process quality, such as staff training, working conditions (including staffing levels and workload), and career pathways, have moved into the centre of policy makers' attention.

The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva et al., 2004; 2010), a large-scale longitudinal study conducted in England, found that the most effective pedagogic practice used play-based environments as the basis of instructive learning and combined teaching with rich free play. In-depth qualitative studies of some of the most effective settings revealed four key areas of high process quality that predicted higher-than-average outcomes for children, including the quality of interactions, initiation of activities, behaviour expectations and discipline, and provision for diversity.

The quality of interactions between adults and children, and between peers, was an important predictor of outcomes. Responsive, sensitive and nurturing relationships and a pedagogy focused on "sustained shared thinking" were found to be particularly effective, highlighting the importance of opportunities for focussed work in pairs and small groups. Adult modelling of skills, use of open-ended questions, and formative feedback on children's work were also predictors of improved cognitive outcomes.

A balance between child-initiated activities and high-quality, adult-initiated focused group work was also observed in the most effective settings. Child-initiated activities were particularly effective where children had opportunities to manage and direct their own learning, while adults supported children's learning by extending their thinking. With regards to discipline and behavioural expectations, the most effective settings managed behaviour by supporting children to rationalise and talk through their conflicts, rather than distracting them or telling them to stop. Training, developing and monitoring provision for diversity (catering to children of different genders, cultural backgrounds and abilities or interests) also improved outcomes for disadvantaged children.

The large-scale, longitudinal Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), another key study of quality in early years settings, also included 16 case studies of high-performing early years settings in England (Callanan et al., 2017). This study identified a number of key ingredients of good practice in early years settings. Child-centred, flexible and responsive curricula that built on children's interests informed learning in high-quality early years settings, as did ongoing and effective assessment and progress tracking that is used to support learning and development, identify children in need of additional support, and inform curriculum planning. Successful assessment and progress tracking was found to be dependent on factors including regular communication between staff, sufficient time for observation (a function of adult-child ratios and of paid non-contact time), and well-trained staff, among others. Highly effective settings drew on diverse curricula which emphasised all key areas of learning. Socio-emotional development was fostered through warm and responsive relationships, modelling of pro-social behaviour, consistency and routine, and encouraging independence and co-operation between children. Early language development flourished in language-rich environments with high-quality adult-child interactions and where parents were supported to extend their child's

learning at home. Skilled staff were key to supporting cognitive development in age-appropriate environments with a wide range of resources. Finally, high-quality settings also supported transitions into and out of the setting through home visits, close relationships and information-sharing with parents and other settings, and by offering children a gradual transition into the setting and preparing them for the transition to primary school through school visits and activities that foster independence, among others. Key themes of good practice stressed in the SEED study include child-centred practice, skilled and experienced staff, and an open and reflective culture.

Finally, the Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European ELC (CARE) developed a European framework of quality and wellbeing indicators (Moser et al., 2016), including indicators at a municipal, regional or state level, at a setting level, and at a group and educator level, which cover a wide range of areas. Quality indicators at the educator and group level focus on process quality, including warm, respectful, and sensitive interactions; provision of small-group and one-to-one activities to support sustained shared thinking; support for collaborative communities of learners; and a holistic, play-based, and child-centred curriculum, among others.

While quality in ELC across the globe has always been associated with child-centred beliefs, (where the child is placed at the centre of the learning experience), opportunities for play and developmental psychology (Wood and Hedges, 2016), a body of research evidence has showcased that the child-centred play-based experiences that many children receive in practice do not necessarily promote children's cognitive and metacognitive processes. Instead, children need high quality interactions with peers and adults for such learning to effectively take place (Walsh et al., 2019, Jensen et al., Zosh et al., 2018, Hedges and Cooper, 2018). In this way, there has been a shift in thinking in recent years away from Piagetian notions of learning and development where children are perceived to interact freely within the environment, towards a renewed emphasis on Vygotskian and post Vygotksian theories which foreground relationships, including pedagogical relationships with educators, in determining young children's learning and development (Hedges and Cooper, 2018 and Walsh et al, 2019). Consequently, a growing body of international evidence has been calling for play and play-related activities to be more closely aligned with a proactive and intentional pedagogy (Hedges, 2014; Pramling-Samuelsson & Pramling, 2014 and Fleer, 2015), ensuring a greater synchronicity between playing, learning and teaching in practice. For example, in the USA, Weisburg et al. (2013, 2016) have carved out a middle ground known as "Guided Play", which sits between free play and direct instruction. Similarly, Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) in the Netherlands developed the concept of "Developmental Education" for 4-8-year-old children, where the role of the teacher in children's play is granted greater importance. Likewise, Hakkarainen et al. (2013) have established an innovative approach to adults and children becoming genuine partners in the play scenario, building on a Finnish model known as "play worlds". Interpreting the lessons learned from a Northern Ireland longitudinal evaluation, Walsh et al. (2017) point towards a new integrated Early Years pedagogy known as "Playful Teaching and Learning", informed by a pedagogical concept, "playful structure" (Walsh et al, 2011) which "initiates and maintains a degree of playfulness into the learning experience while maintaining a degree of structure to ensure effective learning takes place" (Walsh, 2017:15). Indeed, Pyle and Danniels (2017) have developed this concept further, advocating a continuum of play-based experiences in the early years setting which encompasses a range of play types, a concept which has been embraced and extended by Zosh and colleagues in 2018. **Error! Reference source not found.** explains this notion of play as a nuanced and multi-dimensional space more fully:
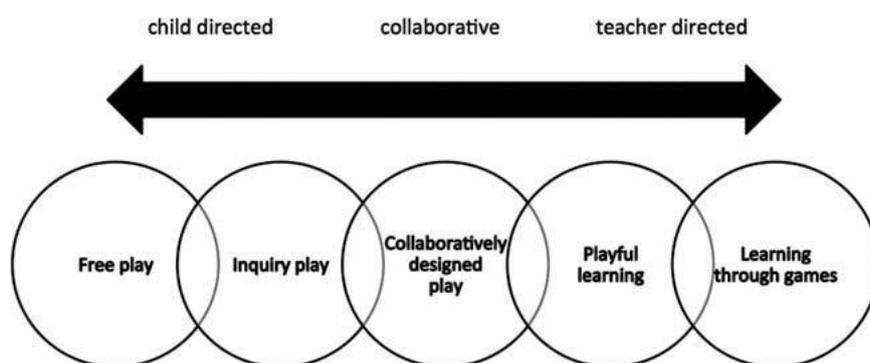
Figure 1 - Continuum of play-based learning (Pyle and Danniels, 2017)

Evidence has been accruing in recent years on the impact of these more integrated and balanced notions of play in practice, in particular guided play, and their positive impact on the academic and developmental aspects of children's learning (see Zosh at al., 2018 and Jensen et al., 2019 for a review). Indeed, a recent systematic review and meta-analysis of evidence on guided play as compared with direct instruction and free play was conducted by the PEDAL Research Centre at the University of Cambridge (Skene et al., 2022). Drawing on interventions from 39 studies, they found that guided play had a greater positive effect than direct instruction on early maths skills, shape knowledge and task switching and a more positive impact on spatial vocabulary than free play. Likewise, evidence from an 8-year longitudinal evaluation of a play-based intervention compared with more traditional teacher-directed methods (Sproule et al., 2021) indicate that when a sense of playfulness was infused into classroom practice, even during more structured activities, the quality of the overall learning experience was higher. The findings revealed that more nurturing relationships were established, ensuring higher levels of child confidence and well-being, children were more inclined to take risks, to think outside the box and to try out more challenging experiences without fear of failure, creating opportunities for higher levels of thinking to be sustained. Higher levels of motivation and concentration on the part of the children were in evidence, encouraging more engaged learners in practice.

Such trends in pedagogical thinking, in terms of the importance of play and playful pedagogies, are also clearly reflected within Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) in Ireland. All settings in the ECCE programme are contractually required to operate in accordance with it, as well as with Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CEDCE, 2006). These frameworks inform the Early Years Education Model of Inspection, used by the Department of Education when inspecting ECCE programme services (Department of Education – Inspectorate, 2022a).

The most recent Chief Inspector's Report in Ireland (Department of Education – Inspectorate, 2022b:85) found that the overall quality of provision in the ECCE programme is "good or better" (i.e. "very good" or "excellent"). Quality learning experiences based on child-centred approaches were observed in many settings and play-based approaches to learning are becoming more widespread, even though a more formalised approach was observed in some settings. This was often due to parental expectations and to "a misperception that it is the role of ELC settings to prepare children for primary school" (Department of Education – Inspectorate, 2022b: 102). Challenges were also identified in relation to meeting individual learners' differing needs, developing emergent, child-

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centred learning programmes and approaches to assessment to inform planning for children's learning, and developing children's communication and higher-order thinking skills.
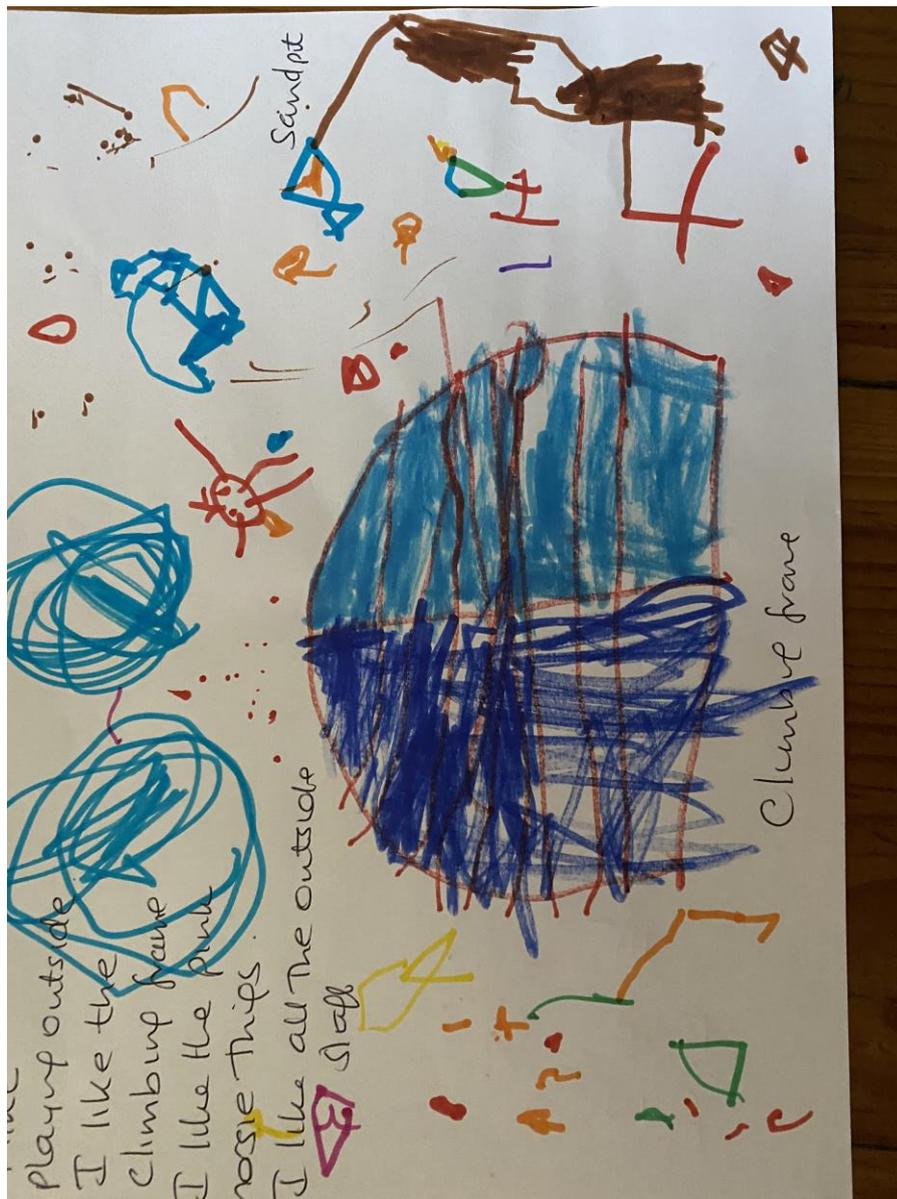
Part I: ECCE programme review – policy and best practice

Part I of this review explores key characteristics of the ECCE programme, including structural parameters, provider and workforce characteristics, and the governance structure. It also addresses issues around accessibility and inclusivity, and highlights interfaces with other programmes. It describes and discusses policy and practice in relation to each parameter, based on existing evidence on the ECCE programme. Where relevant evidence is available, practical challenges and present research-based evidence on best practice in relation to each factor are also discussed.

Structural parameters

Structural factors of ELC programmes are "not, on their own, sufficient to ensure high process quality and promote children's development, learning and well-being" (OECD, 2021a). Their main role is to create conditions which support good process quality, the latter being a much stronger predictor of

positive outcomes for children. Despite these caveats, structural parameters are important policy levers because they are relatively straightforward to interpret and address and comparatively easy to measure. They can also be directly controlled by Government policy and are one of the main mechanisms by which Government policy can influence process quality. As a result, they are important features of international targets.

The remainder of this section describes key structural parameters of the ECCE programme, presents evidence on best practice, and discusses ECCE programme delivery in the context of this evidence.

Eligibility and uptake
Policy and practice
The ECCE programme is a universal programme and available in principle to all children within the eligible age range, but is not compulsory. Eligibility is dependent on age. Children must be at least two years and eight months old on 31st August of the calendar year of entry, and not older than five years and six months by 30th June of the following year.

Children become eligible once they meet the minimum age requirement and remain eligible for two years. A child's eligibility cannot normally be deferred. Where parents feel that their child is too young to start the ECCE programme, their only option is to opt out of the first year and thus reduce their child's overall time spent in ELC. Current eligibility rules are not seamlessly integrated with rules on compulsory school starting age for all children: depending on their birth date, children normally 'run out' of ECCE programme eligibility between the ages of 4 years 8 month and 5 years 8 month. Schooling only becomes compulsory once a child turns 6, however, due to the single school starting date, almost all children must, in practice, start school before their 6th birthday. Children born between January and August can remain in the ECCE programme up to the start of the school year where schooling becomes compulsory (although not all do). However, for children born between September and December, there is a year-long gap between the end of ECCE eligibility and the start of compulsory schooling.

Exceptions to the upper age limit are possible if the applicant can demonstrate how an ECCE programme setting would meet the needs of their child better than a primary school setting – usually by presenting medical advice supporting the exemption.

In 2020/21, across both ECCE programme years, 83% of all eligible children were registered on the programme (Pobal, 2022). 95% of children eligible for the first ECCE programme year availed of the offer, while 71.6% of children eligible for the second ECCE programme year availed of it.[3] Participation rates are not distributed evenly across birth months, but the relationship between birth month and probability of ECCE registration is reversed between the first and second ECCE year. As is evident in Figure 2, below, children born between January and September are more likely to avail of their first eligible ECCE year than those born towards the end of the year.

The picture is different for the second ECCE programme year (Figure 3). Children born in the early months of 2018 were much less likely to avail of the second ECCE programme year than those born

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[3] These percentages were calculated based on live births in 2016 and 2017 as reported by the Central Statistics Office and participation numbers given in the Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020/21 (Pobal, 2022). Children eligible for the first programme year were born in 2017, while children eligible for the second programme year were born in 2016.

later in the year. Children born in January and February 2018 were more likely to be in school by September 2022 than in the ECCE programme.

The probability that a child born between January and April 2018 would avail of both ECCE programme years fell below the average of 69.3% (Figure 4).

Probability of availing of the first ECCE programme year, by birth month (2019-born children)

Probability of availing of the first ECCE year (2019 children)
Mean probability of availing of the first ECCE year (2019 children)
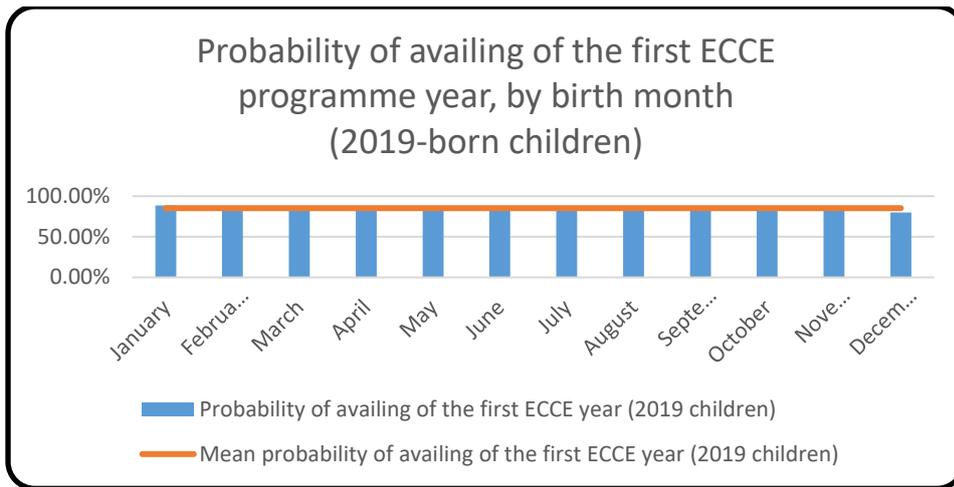
Figure 2 - Probability of availing of the first ECCE programme year, by birth month

Probability of availing of the second ECCE programme year, by birth month (2018-born children)

Probability of availing of the second ECCE year (2018 children)
Mean probability of availing of the second ECCE year (2018 children)
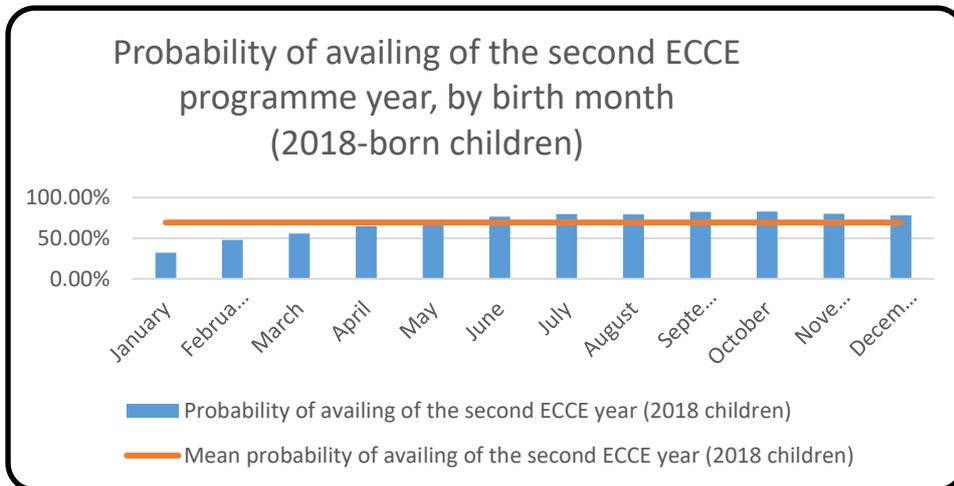
Figure 3 - Probability of availing of the second ECCE programme year, by birth month

Probability of availing of both ECCE programme years, by birth month/quarter (2018-born children)

Probability of availing of both ECCE years, by birth month   Mean probability
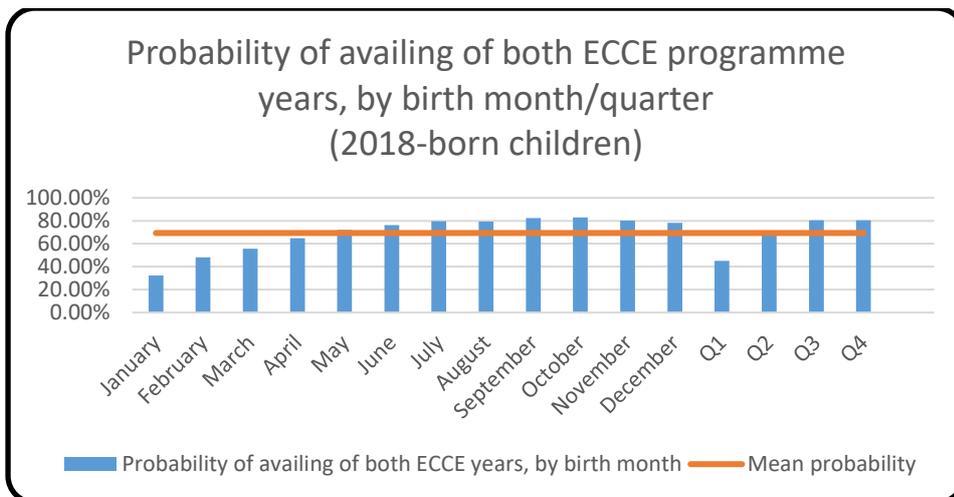
Figure 4 - Probability of availing of both ECCE programme years, by birth month/quarter

Uptake rates (at least for the first programme year) are high in comparison to other European and OECD (2021b) countries: in 2019, when data was last published, the average share of children between 3 years of age and the starting age of compulsory primary education participating in ELC in EU member states was 92.8%.

There is currently a single point of entry at the beginning of the programme year in September, down from three points of entry between September 2016 and September 2018. The single point of entry was restored to support continuity of staffing, streamline administration processes, and make budgeting easier for ECCE programme providers, as well as making it easier for parents to secure a place for their child (NDA, 2018). The changes also aimed to ensure that all children were eligible to receive the same number of weeks and addressed concerns around integration of children into established groups. However, some TDs[4] raised representations suggesting that some parents would prefer greater flexibility in this regard.

Table 1, below, details the changes in eligible age range, the maximum number of funded weeks, and entry points over time.

Table 1 -Changes in ECCE programme rules on eligible age range, maximum number of funded week and points of entry

Parameter/Year	September 2010	September 2016	September 2018
Age range in September of enrolment year	3 years, 2 months – 4 years, 7 months	3 years, 0 months – primary school enrolment	2 years, 8 months – primary school enrolment
Maximum number of weeks	38 weeks	88 weeks ($\bar{x}$ = 61 weeks)	76 weeks
Points of entry	September	September, January, April	September

Evidence and best practice
Relevant evidence in relation to eligibility and intensity includes evidence on the impact of different preschool starting ages, different primary school starting ages in relation to ELC policy, and the length and weekly or daily intensity of different ELC programmes.

Universality and statutory entitlement
Van Huizen and Plantenga (2018) found that disadvantaged children are more likely to benefit from participation in high-quality ELC than children from higher socio-economic sectors. There is insufficient evidence on the differential impact of universal and targeted programmes on disadvantaged children's outcomes, but van Huizen and Plantenga report one study indicating that universal programmes produce increased benefits (in the short-term) for this group, compared to targeted programmes. Melhuish and Gardiner (2023) confirm this finding, indicating that disadvantaged children improved more in their development when attending settings with children from mixed backgrounds rather than from homogenous disadvantaged backgrounds.

There is currently neither a statutory right to an ECCE programme place, nor a requirement to participate in the programme. A UNESCO (2021) study found a growing trend to adopt compulsory preschool education, with 51 (mostly upper-middle and high-income) countries currently requiring

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[4] A Teachta Dála (TD) is a member of Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Oireachtas (the Irish Parliament).

participation by law. According to the study, countries with free and compulsory preschool education had higher rates of early childhood well-being, as measured by the Early Childhood Development Index. The report therefore recommends that all countries implementing SDC Target 4.2 should legislate for at least one year of universal free and compulsory quality preschool education. However, compulsory ELC is controversial and may have the effect of criminalising marginalised communities. This is a concern in the Irish context, where children from Traveller and Roma communities are substantially less likely to avail of the ECCE programme than the general population for reasons that may be more effectively addressed by other means.

Preschool starting age

The evidence in relation to preschool starting age is contradictory: van Huizen and Plantenga's (2018: 206) systematic review of the evidence concluded that a preschool starting age below 3 does not improve results compared to starting at age 3. This contrasts with findings from the Effective Provision of Preschool Education Study (EPPE) (Sylva et al., 2004) and the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2021), carried out in England. Both longitudinal studies found that starting preschool before age 2 was related to better cognitive and socio-emotional child outcomes at 7 (SEED), especially for disadvantaged children, and that these benefits persisted through primary and secondary school (EPPE). An evidence review (Melhuish et al., 2015) carried out as part of the Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European Early Childhood Education and Care (CARE) project, funded by the European Union, also presents evidence that a starting age at preschool of two to three years is most beneficial. However, studies from different countries covered in the CARE project review produced very different results for different age groups, suggesting that context and the specifics of different ELC systems may have an important moderating effect. Moreover, the SEED and EPPE studies measured outcomes for two-year-olds in settings that differed from those for three- and four-year-olds in important characteristics, such as adult-child ratios and (to a lesser degree) frequency of CPD, number of supervisions per year, and whether a training budget was in place (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018). This is not usually the case in settings in Ireland, where two- and three-year-olds, and sometimes four- and five-year-olds participate in the ECCE programme together.

School starting age

While the issue of primary school starting age is beyond the scope of this review, it is relevant insofar as it relates to ECCE programme policy, in particular eligibility rules.

While practice in early primary school in Ireland is becoming more play-based, evidence indicates that a higher overall school starting age than the current average school-starting age may be more conducive to positive outcomes. In a Danish study, Dee and Sievertsen (2015) argue that formal schooling is "more developmentally appropriate for older children" due to their advanced cognitive and socio-emotional development and that an extended period of informal, play-based learning in an ELC setting helps foster language development, cognitive and emotional self-regulation, and thereby also improves outcomes. They suggest that "there may be broader developmental gains to policies that delay the initiation of formal schooling (and that support playful early childhood environments)" (p. 37). Comparative research based on data from the PISA study also demonstrates that an early school starting age affords no long-term advantage in reading achievement (Suggate, 2009).

The introduction of the second ECCE programme year has seen an acceleration of an existing trend towards a higher school starting age in Ireland. However, the youngest third of each ECCE programme cohort (children born between September and December) could legally delay school entry by a full

year after their eligibility ends. The evidence on school starting age presented above shows that this can be beneficial. Current ECCE programme eligibility rules do not support parents in making this choice.

Deferral

Northern Ireland has recently introduced preschool (and primary-school) deferral for the youngest quarter of each cohort (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2022). Although this offer does not come with any additional ELC entitlement, it increases parental choice on preschool-starting age (and, in consequence, primary school-starting age) for children at the lower end of the age distribution without compromising the amount of preschool provision a child can avail of. In the first year of the new policy, 138 children requested to delay starting preschool. Based on projected school population figures for 2023/24, this equates to approximately 2.5% of the age group eligible for deferral.

In contrast, in Scotland, children born between August and February are automatically entitled to an additional year (1,140 hours) of funded ELC since August 2023 (see Scotland case study below). A two-year pilot study (Eunson, Glencross and Diaz, 2023) showed increases in uptake among children born between August and December in pilot areas, compared to the figure for Scotland overall, with percentage point increases ranging from -6 (Shetland) to 16 (Stirling) in the year after the pilot began. The pilot evaluation found that the new policy supported child-centred decision-making and increased choice by removing financial considerations. The study also noted "promising indications" that stigma around deferral in more deprived areas could be reduced through child-centred discussions between parents and ELC staff and stressed that positive language was key in this regard.

In contrast to these policies, the National Disability Authority advised against deferrals in their report on over-age exemptions to the ECCE programme based on the research evidence on the benefit to children of progressing through the school system with their peers, and in particular the knock-on effect of deferral in the teenage years. Equally, it is important that the focus of the NDA review was on deferral on grounds of disability or additional needs, not on age grounds. The concerns raised by the NDA therefore need to be balanced with the potential benefits of deferral to the youngest children of the ECCE programme cohort – especially those born between October and December, whose first-year uptake rates are below average.

Intensity

All children are eligible for three hours of provision per day, five days a week, and 38 weeks per year from September to June. At 25.5 hours/week, the average time children over the age of 3 spend in formal ELC (including 15 hours ECCE programme provision and any other state-funded and privately funded care) is below the EU average of 29.5 hours (European Commission, 2021b). This figure may have increased since the recent enhancements to NCS, although data to confirm this is not currently available.

Best practice in relation to time intensity depends on the underlying goals: EU strategies and targets, such as the European Care Strategy and the updated Barcelona Targets, tend to approach time intensity as a policy lever for increased female labour participation. From this perspective, time intensity needs to be sufficient to support the main carer's return to paid employment and can be delivered through childcare, rather than ELC. The National Childcare Scheme is in place for this.

However, the main goal of the ECCE programme is to improve child outcomes (rather than maternal employment rates) and programme intensity should be assessed in relation to this goal. Evidence on the association between time intensity and child outcomes is not unanimous.

For example, Xue et al. (2016) examined associations between intensity and child outcomes based on longitudinal cohort study data from the US. They used a range of approaches to measuring intensity, including length of programme attendance (one vs. two years of participation in the Head Start programme), attendance vs. absences, and total number of hours per week in ELC, among others. They found a significant positive, short- and medium-term association between duration of Head Start participation and children's academic but not social skills. Some, less strong, evidence of a positive relationship between regular attendance and academic and social outcomes was also found. There was, however, no reliable or consistent relationship between hours of operation per week and child outcomes. All associations were modest in scale.

In contrast to the above, van Huizen and Plantenga's (2018) meta-analysis of evidence on child outcomes of universal ELC found some evidence that full-time programmes lead to more positive results than part-time programmes. An OECD (2018) evidence review also argues that full-day programmes (defined as five to six hours a day) afford more opportunities for programme development, involving children in planning of activities, and engaging in more process-oriented activities. Longer hours can also provide more time to prepare for the transition to primary school and have been shown to be particularly helpful for disadvantaged children.

Melhuish and Gardiner (2023) examined data from the SEED study and found that children may experience both negative and positive outcomes as a result of spending time in ELC provision. These outcomes differ depending on socio-economic background, home learning environment, and service quality, and tend to affect socio-emotional development. However, Melhuish and Gardiner (2023: 4) also found that the number of hours spent in ELC had little impact on negative outcomes:

> *"Most of the negative impacts seen for externalising behaviour of more time in an early years setting are already seen by the time a child is in provision for 15 hours a week. Increasing hours beyond 15-20 per week does not appear to further increase externalising behaviour, except for non-disadvantaged children, and only if in provision for 35 hours or more per week. (…) There will be little extra benefit to children's development of early years provision of greater duration than 15-20 hours per week, but if the provision is of high quality, there are unlikely to be adverse effects for disadvantaged children, and longer hours could bring wider benefits to families (e.g. by allowing parents to work)."*

The relationship between time intensity and process quality in ELC is not clear (OECD, 2018) – evidence in this regard is inconsistent and varies depending on the measure used to rate interactions between children and staff. Qualitative differences between half-day and full-day settings in some studies, such as different age ranges, may also play a role. Further research is needed to establish if and how time intensity of ELC is related to adult-child interactions and to child development.
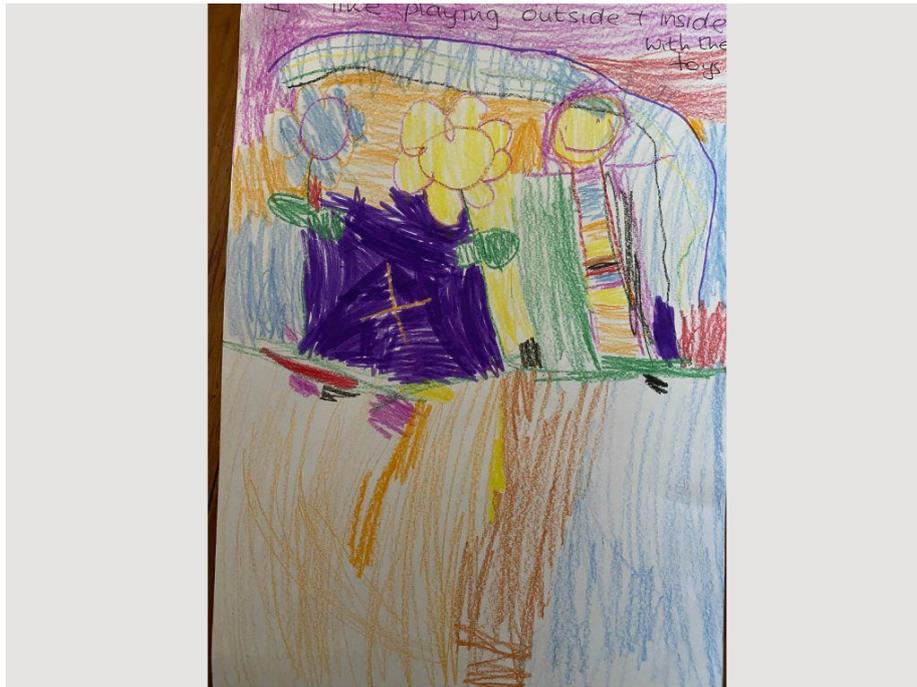
Adult-child ratio and group size

Policy and practice

The minimum adult-child ratio for the ECCE programme is 1:11, while the minimum ELC ratio for 3-6 year-olds outside the ECCE programme is 1:8. De facto group sizes and adult-child ratios in ECCE programme rooms vary and ratios are substantially lower in services operating with AIM Level 7 support. The average de facto ratio in the ECCE programme is approximately 1:9. As of June 2023, 63% (n=2468) of services delivering the ECCE programme had at least one child with approved AIM level 7 attending. There is currently a minimum enrolment of 8 children per room, although exemptions are possible under certain conditions. Administrative data from the Early Years Platform shows that in June 2023, 150 settings had fewer than eight children enrolled in the ECCE programme. 35% of these 150 settings had seven children and 26% had six, while 15% had five children, 13% had four, and 5% had three children. Only eight settings had fewer than three children enrolled. Several of these eight micro-settings were either in very remote locations or had other immediately obvious and legitimate reasons for the very small number of children. The 150 settings included 14 childminders, who had between four and six children in the ECCE programme each.

Evidence and best practice

Several systematic reviews and meta-analyses assess the impact of child-staff ratios and group sizes on different child outcomes, and a range of ratios and group sizes are recommended in best practice guidance. However, the evidence on both ratios and group sizes in relation to child outcomes is generally weak (Daalgard et al., 2022; Melhuish et al., 2015).

Melhuish et al. (2015) report that recommended ratios for two- to three-year-olds range from 1:4 to 1:5, while for three- to five-year-olds, a ratio of 1:10 to 1:17 is often suggested. Ideal group sizes for two- to three-year-olds should not exceed ten to 12 children, while three-year-olds may learn best in groups of 14 to 18, and four- to five-year-olds in groups of 20 to 24 children. However, the authors caution that the evidence underpinning these recommendations is weak. It is also far from unanimous.

The SEED study (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018) found a lower overall adult-child ratio across the whole setting to be the strongest predictor of quality in private settings for two-year-olds in English settings. In voluntary settings for three- to four-year olds, this indicator was also associated with higher overall quality, and a lower adult-child ratio for three- to four-year-olds was associated with improved educational quality. In the SEED study, 77% of participating settings for 3- to 4-year-olds had an adult-child-ratio of 1:8 (mean 1:7.6), while 15% had a ratio between 1:5 and 1:7, and 5% between 1:2 and 1:4. Only 4% of settings had a higher adult-child ratio between 1:9 and 1:11. Ratios for two-year-olds were substantially lower, with 91% operating at a ratio of 1:4 and 6% at an even lower ratio. In-depth case studies of 16 highly effective settings, carried out as part of the SEED study, found that low adult-child ratios facilitated effective assessment, monitoring, and progress tracking, as staff had more time to carry out regular observations of individual children (Callanan et al., 2017).

A meta-analysis of 60 years of programme evaluations from the US (Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017) found a non-linear relationship between ratios/group sizes and child outcomes, whereby an (albeit weak) association could be found at the low end of the distribution, but none beyond a certain threshold: only very small class sizes and adult-child ratios above 1:7.5 were associated with increases in interaction quality that were sufficient to effect statistically significant, but modest, improvements in cognitive, achievement, and socio-emotional outcomes. Furthermore, any such effect was only significant in the short term. The evidence was less strong for socio-emotional outcomes, as a smaller number of studies included in the meta-analysis had reported data on these. A further caveat was that the smallest classrooms with the highest adult-child ratios tended to form part of presentation programmes (such as Perry Preschool) or programmes for disadvantaged children, and the authors stress that similar outcomes could not be expected in preschool settings for the general population. The study identified an optimum adult-child ratio of 1:7.5 and group size of 15. Further reductions in child-teacher ratio and group size beyond this threshold only produced small effect sizes, while efforts to reduce ratios or group sizes were ineffective if they fell short of these benchmarks (within reasonable bounds). The authors conclude that where current group sizes and ratios meet acceptable standards, efforts to reduce them that fall short of these optimum levels may not be a cost-effective way of improving quality in ELC.

Perlman et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of evidence on associations between adult-child ratios in centre-based preschool-age ELC settings and a range of cognitive, language, and socio-emotional outcomes. The systematic review showed few significant relationships between ratios and child outcomes. Due to the large range of outcome measures used in the literature, only three studies (on associations between ratios and children's receptive language) could be included in the meta-analysis. The meta-analysis showed no significant association between adult-child ratio and children's receptive language scores. The authors caution that the study designs used in the studies included in their review did not allow them to identify possible interactions between child characteristics and the impact of ratios on child outcomes. It is therefore possible that ratios could have a significant impact for certain groups of children (e.g. children with disabilities or additional needs, newcomer children, or other disadvantaged children), that is not evident from the studies included in the review.

An OECD (2018) review found largely consistent evidence that a low adult-child ratio has a positive impact on the quality of interactions between staff and children, although the evidence is not wholly unanimous in this regard. They also found some evidence that a smaller overall group size has a

positive impact on process quality, but this evidence is less strong than that in favour of adult-child ratios. The evidence was unclear on the relationship between child-staff ratio or group sizes and outcomes in relation to child development and learning (OECD, 2018). Similar findings were reported in a Campbell review (Daalgard et al., 2022).

Group sizes and adult-child ratios appear to be most important in their capacity to facilitate or hinder process quality, including the quality of interactions between adults and children, which is a much stronger predictor of outcomes. For example, Daalgard et al. (2022) found tentative evidence that a smaller group size improved process quality, "defined as more positive adult/child and child/child interactions, less coercive and controlling adult interference, and less aggressive and more prosocial child behaviour".

Aside from the generally weak and inconclusive evidence on the matter, the main problem in judging the possible impact of group sizes and adult-child ratios in settings delivering the ECCE programme results from the fact that the age group that is eligible for the programme straddles two groups that are usually treated separately in research and in guidance on best practice – guidelines for two-year-olds recommend much lower adult-child ratios and maximum group sizes than those for three- to five-year-olds. The recommended group sizes and ratios suggest that the current rules may be adequate for older children, but less so for the youngest children availing of the ECCE programme. One third of each cohort will become eligible for the ECCE programme while under the age of three and remain below this threshold for up to four months.

A minimum group size may be relevant in relation to social skills development and is an important consideration in the context of the National Action Plan for Childminding (DCEDIY, 2021), which includes plans to make registration mandatory for childminders, thereby increasing the pool of childminders eligible to provide the ECCE programme. However, our literature review did not produce any clear evidence in favour of or against a specific minimum group size in ELC. In a study on regulable features of ELC homes, Clarke-Stewart et al. (2002) found mixed evidence on group size: while some studies reviewed showed that home-based caregivers were more responsive and positive when fewer children were present, opposite results were obtained in other studies, where a larger group size was often associated with higher care-giver training and a more professional approach. In their own study, quality, level and recency of training, beliefs on child-centred pedagogy, and compliance with age-weighted group size cut-offs influenced the quality of care in the expected direction, but the absolute number of children enrolled was not associated with the quality of care. Children who received higher-quality care scored better in tests of language, cognitive development, and cooperation. This suggests that a minimum group size is not the most important factor to consider in delivering ECCE programme provision through registered childminders.

Many of the benefits children obtain from attending a group setting (for example, developing co-operation, empathy, consideration and respect for others; working in pairs and in groups and participating in group discussion; and developing friendships) can be achieved in groups of four or more children, while small groups also offer some unique potential benefits, such as more and better adult-child interactions. Considering that the existing evidence is generally supportive of small group sizes and that there doesn't appear to be any evidence to the contrary, the current permitted group size in a registered childminding setting of four to five children appears to be viable.

Funding

Government spending on ELC in Ireland is low, compared to other European and OECD countries, but funding has increased over the years and recent funding commitments in Budgets 2023 and 2024 constitute a significant boost. Together for Better is the new funding model for early learning and childcare that brings together three major programmes, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme - including the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) – the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and Core Funding, with a fourth programme due to launch in September 2024 – the Equal Participation Model (EPM). Since September 2023, through ECCE capitation and Core Funding combined, services receive a minimum of €79.20 per child per week in capitation under the ECCE programme and a maximum of €95.85 with additional funding for graduate lead educators and graduate managers in the case of sessional services. This includes a flat rate allocation of €4,075 for all sessional-only services, and a minimum base rate allocation of €8,150, intended to benefit small, part-time and school-age services.

Accessibility and inclusivity

Accessibility is a key concept in the assessment of ELC systems and has been defined in the context of the OECD Starting Strong project as "an umbrella term that encompasses geographical distribution (rural/urban) and proximity, affordability, flexibility and adequacy for different age groups as well as children with different needs" (Ünver et al., 2018:3). Availability, physical access, cost and quality are important factors affecting accessibility and were subsequently added to the OECD definition.

Availability

While the ECCE programme is in principle available to all children within the eligible age range, there is not currently a legal entitlement to a place. Limited or restricted availability of ECCE programme places may affect some children's ability to avail of the hours they are eligible to receive.

At the moment, providers delivering the ECCE programme are not distributed evenly across socio-geographic areas. As of June 2023, 84% of services were located in electoral divisions designated "marginally below" or "marginally above average" on the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, while 69% of the population reside in small areas located in these deprivation bands[5]. In contrast, "affluent" and "very/extremely affluent" areas (9% of services vs. 17% of the population), "disadvantaged" areas (6% of services vs. 12% of the population) and "very" and "extremely disadvantaged" areas (0.4% of services vs. 2.9% of the population) had relatively fewer services per resident. In some highly rural areas, large distances may need to be covered. Data on the socio-geographic distribution of children in the age bracket eligible for participation in the ECCE programme is not currently available.

Supply doesn't always match demand. Latest data from the Early Years Sector Profile for 2021/22 shows significant unused capacity for the ECCE programme in some areas, including 11,800 vacant sessional places, and vacancy rates in provision for 2-6-year-old (non-school going) children ranging from 12% to 22% of filled places, depending on age.

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[5] Pobal advise that data on the socio-geographical distribution of the general population "shows the percentage of the population in each deprivation band by small area. Because ELC and SAC services usually support a larger population than just within a small area the deprivation score at electoral division level is used to determine the deprivation range of each service. While the methodologies between the two calculations are different, it still offers a broad insight into the lack of services in Very or Extremely disadvantaged areas" (Personal correspondence, 27 June 2023).

There are also qualitative differences between ECCE programme providers depending on location. For example, the ratio of community (not-for-profit) to private services operated for profit varies by level of affluence/disadvantage and between counties. Community-operated services are more likely to be located in disadvantaged areas and, according to data from the Early Years Platform, there are currently no commercially-operated services in very or extremely disadvantaged areas. It is not clear whether there are qualitative differences between ECCE programme delivery in privately-run and community-operated settings in Ireland.

The unequal distribution of ECCE programme settings across different parts of the country (Pobal, 2022) is at least in part due to the absence of significant planning controls in relation to providers entering and exiting the market. While other countries ensure equal access and coverage by planning ELC provision at a local level and enforcing entry and exit controls, this is not the case in Ireland (Penn and Lloyd, 2014).

Availability of ECCE-only services may also affect accessibility. Under the current programme rules, settings providing a sessional service may offer a maximum additional 30 minutes a day, on an optional basis. These services must not prioritise ECCE programme places on the basis of uptake of optional minutes, according to rules.

In contrast, providers who offer part-time or full-time services in addition to ECCE programme sessions are allowed to prioritise a child who will avail of a part-time or full-time place over a child who will avail of free ECCE programme hours only, as long as an ECCE-only option is nominally available on the fees list. This means that, in areas where demand for ECCE programme places exceeds supply and all providers prioritise paying children, a situation may arise where a child cannot avail of free ECCE programme hours. This rule also limits parental choice for parents who prefer to look after their children at home outside of the ECCE programme.

The extent to which providers prioritise children whose parents pay for wrap-around care is addressed in chapter 3.

Application and registration process
The application process is decentralised. Parents/carers are responsible for approaching potential settings individually to secure a place for their child. Lists of participating services are available from local City or County Childcare Committees (CCCs). Once a place has been offered and accepted, the participating service registers the child for the programme.

This system places the onus on parents/carers to secure a place, especially in areas where competition for ECCE programme places is relatively high. This is similar to the application process for a school place. However, parents have the right to appeal a school's enrolment decision and the DES can give binding directions to schools in this context. The Educational Welfare Service of Tusla can also offer support to parents who are struggling to find a school place for their child. No such support is currently available on the ECCE programme. Chapter 7 discusses barriers to uptake resulting from this system.

Under the current rules, providers are not required to publish admission criteria and waiting lists are not subject to inspections. While providers must comply with equality and anti-discrimination laws, there is currently a lack of transparency in relation to admission criteria and waiting lists, which may potentially affect equal access for disadvantaged groups.

A coordinated application system based on either "equal preference" or "first preference first" principles is used in some countries with a statutory entitlement, such as Northern Ireland, to allocate preschool places efficiently. Coordinated schemes are "intended to establish mechanisms that ensure that, as far as is practical, every child living in the local authority area who has applied in the normal admissions round receives an offer of one, and only one, school place on the same day. (…) Equal preference schemes are good practice as they usually result in more parents getting one of the schools they want" (Department for Education and Skills, 2006: 34, 37). Such a system can also provide some protection for disadvantaged groups.

However, the current system is very accessible for parents/carers with low literacy levels, as ELC settings can be approached in person and the necessary paperwork can be carried out by staff. Should a coordinated scheme be considered in future, it would be imperative to put in place adequate supports for parents/carers who struggle with forms. Home-School-Community Liaison Coordinators [HSCLC] currently offer similar support in primary schools under the DEIS scheme and could serve as a model for ECCE programme admissions.
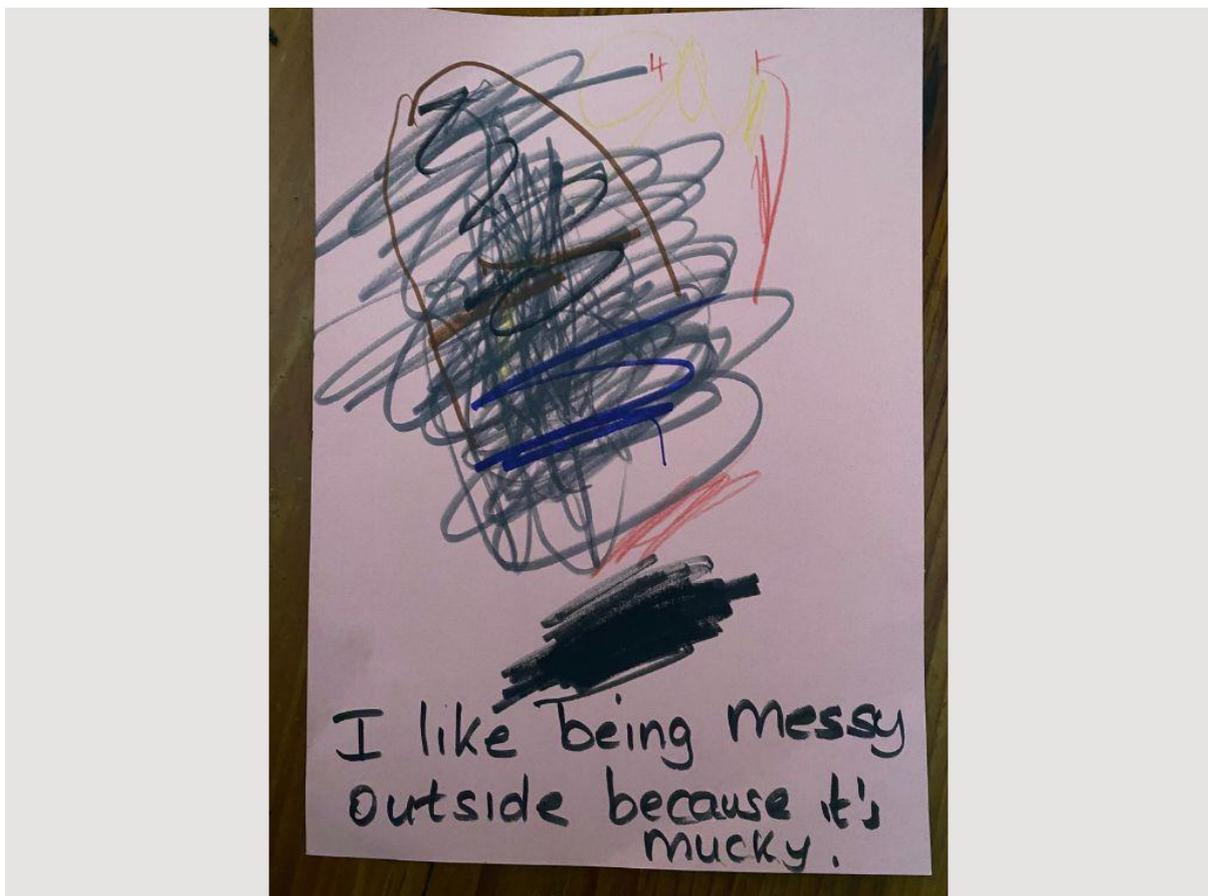
Inclusivity and disadvantage

It is widely recognised that ELC can be "an effective tool to achieve educational equity for children in a disadvantaged situation" (European Council, 2019: 14), and data from Growing up in Ireland (Murray et al., 2019) shows that the ECCE programme has reduced the gap between children from the lowest

and highest income quintiles with regards to affordability and likelihood of attending ELC (although this data is now quite old)[6].

Nevertheless, uptake of the ECCE programme is uneven across society (Murray et al., 2019): children from the highest income quintile (98%) are slightly more likely to participate in the ECCE programme than those from the lowest income quintile (92%). Parents who have never been employed (12%), those with Junior Certificate or less (10%), and those with a disabled child (9%) are more likely not to avail of ECCE than other groups. However, it is important to note that children who don't avail of ECCE may be availing of other types of pre-school provision, e.g. the Early Start programme (up to 1,600 places), Early Intervention Classes run in schools funded by the Department of Education for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) from age 2.5, and HSE specialist preschool provision for children with complex disabilities. A significant proportion of children with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not availing of ECCE are likely instead availing of one of these alternative programmes. In addition, some children are likely to be in non-ECCE childcare arrangements, e.g. with a childminder or nanny, while others are looked after at home by parents, carers, or relatives. The GUI study reports that "those who had not availed of the [ECCE] scheme were asked for the reasons why. The main factors were having childcare arrangements in place already, their own preference or feeling the child was not ready" (Murray et al., 2019: 115).

The Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report (Pobal, 2022) details absolute numbers of children from disadvantaged groups attending ECCE programme sessions, as reported by providers through the Pobal Early Years Service Profile survey. Reported numbers are given on one-parent families (5,346), children with neither English nor Irish as their first language (8,060), and those from Traveller (779) and Roma[7] backgrounds. However, these numbers are likely to be higher in practice, as only 57% of eligible services completed the survey. Because the distribution of Traveller and Roma populations across the country is uneven, it was impossible to extrapolate from the reported numbers.

The Department of Education Primary Online database includes data on the percentage of children in three groups (Traveller, Roma, and White Irish) who attended an ELC setting prior to starting primary school (see Table 2). The database does not differentiate between ECCE and other types of ELC. This data shows that, in 2022, 74.0% of Junior Infants from an Irish Traveller background and 64.7% of Roma children had attended an ELC setting prior to starting primary school, while 95.7% of white Irish children had done so. Furthermore, Junior Infants from a White Irish or Roma background who were attending DEIS schools (91.6%), which are located in disadvantaged areas, were less likely to have attended an ELC setting prior to starting primary school than their peers in in non-DEIS schools (95.0%). This relationship was reversed for children from an Irish Traveller Background.

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[6] The Growing up in Ireland study follows a cohort of children born in 2008 – the results reported here thus refer to children who attended ECCE in 2011/2012 or 2012/2013. Key programme parameters, including the duration of the ECCE programme, have changed in the interim.

[7] Pobal (2022: 58) report that "services reported 7,284 children with disabilities and/or additional needs attending their services in 2020/21, with 65% availing of ECCE", but no absolute number is given for ECCE programme children. 65% of 7,284 equals 4,711.

Table 2 - Percentage of Junior Infants in mainstream schools who participated in ECCE, Early Start, or another ELC programme prior to starting primary school, by ethnic or cultural background and school type

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%

Initiatives and programmes have been put in place to address barriers to participation in the ECCE programme and in ELC more broadly, and to promote inclusivity in the sector. As an overarching framework, DCEDIY (2016) developed and published a Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education in 2016. In addition, targeted policies were developed to improve accessibility and inclusivity for specific groups, some of which are detailed below. However, further efforts are still required to ensure inclusion of children from Traveller and Roma backgrounds, children with complex disabilities (who are currently catered for in specialist preschools), and other groups with low participation rates, as committed to in First 5.

As part of its European Framework of Quality and Wellbeing Indicators, the CARE project (Moser et al., 2016) developed several quality indicators that are relevant in relation to inclusivity. Most of these indicators operate at a setting level and include:

- A clearly formulated social and educational mission based on values including universal child's rights, equal opportunities, inclusiveness, democratic citizenship, and valuation of diversity, and established in dialogue with all stakeholders in the local community;
- A diversity policy which is based upon respect for differences in abilities and in cultural and religious traditions, and which details how children with special or additional needs, socio-economically disadvantaged children, and children from cultural and language minorities are included and supported in practice;
- A diverse staff team with complementary skills and qualifications and that is representative of the wider community.
- A sensitive approach to differences in views, values and priorities between the setting and parents. Alternative views, values and priorities should be incorporated in pedagogical plans and practices or otherwise respectfully and constructively discussed with reference to professional knowledge and with a view to building consensus.

Supports for children with disabilities/additional needs

The original ECCE programme allowed children with disabilities to commence the programme later or avail of their funded hours over the course of two years instead of one, and to attend beyond the programme's upper age limit if either of the former adjustments made this necessary. No further supports were initially provided on a national basis to help children with disabilities access the programme.

A review of the policy (NDA, 2018) found that, in practice, overage exemptions were often used by children who had started together with their age peers and as a means of accessing additional time in the ECCE programme. It also found that the available evidence called for a cautious approach to overage exemptions, which may not be in the best interest of most children, except in very rare cases. However, stakeholder consultations showed that parents and staff were generally supportive of the

policy and often had concerns regarding their child's school readiness and schools' ability to offer adequate support. Lack of information and advice, delays in accessing supports, parents' and ELC educators' perceptions about 'school readiness' and ideal school starting age, and poorly developed transition planning processes contributed to these views.

The National Disability Authority raised a number of key points with DCEDIY following completion of its review. It supported the Department's view that the ECCE programme extension from one to two years and the introduction of AIM had greatly reduced the need for overage exemptions. It noted that the existing system of overage exemptions should cease (for all but the most exceptional cases) once an enhanced supportive process for children and parents had been established. In particular, a seamless gradated transition planning process for children availing of AIM should be implemented from the start of the first ECCE programme year to ensure that parents know that supports and services are in place for the child transitioning to primary school. As part of this process, the NDA also highlighted the need for a route for parents to flag a developmental delay on entry into the ECCE programme, and a mechanism for referral to the HSE under AIM to ensure that children are assessed and interventions are implemented in a timely manner, allowing for effective transition planning. The NDA also drew attention to the need for DCEDIY to provide basic signposting information to all parents though multiple channels and were of the view that SENOs could take a more active role in providing information on supports available to children with additional needs in a primary school setting. They also noted that DCEDIY and the Department of Education should consider greater alignment in areas of policy affecting ELC. At the time of writing, the policy remains under development.

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced in June 2016 to ensure that children with disabilities can access mainstream services and participate in the ECCE programme in a meaningful way. AIM is a child-centred model, comprising seven universal and targeted levels of progressive support, which are provided based on need and do not require a formal diagnosis of disability. Operating under the realm of DCEDIY, AIM is supported by a range of agencies and initiatives, including Pobal, the Childcare Committees (CCC), the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years Programme (LINC), Better Start, and the Health Service Executive (HSE), who provide training, information, equipment, therapeutic supports, and assistance.

Additional funding for AIM was made available in Budget 2023 and Budget 2024 and payments increased by 14% in September 2022, rising from €210 per week to €240 per week. In line with a commitment from First 5 to extend AIM, from September 2024 there will be expansion of targeted AIM supports to ECCE children beyond time spent in the ECCE programme, in term and out of term. Higher capitation rates are also paid to services which employ an Inclusion Coordinator who has completed specialist training. In 2022/23, 6.7% of children enrolled in the ECCE programme received targeted AIM support – a 28% increase relative to the previous year.

An ESRI study (Whelan et al., 2021) estimated, based on Census 2016 and PIP data, that uptake of targeted AIM supports increased sharply in all counties between 2016 and 2019, suggesting greater awareness among parents and educators, as well as improved programme capacity. The largest increases were observed in counties that had low uptake rates in 2016. The authors highlight that a 100% participation rate would be neither expected nor appropriate, given the voluntary, application-based nature of AIM and the fact that not all children with disabilities require targeted supports to participate in the ECCE programme. They point out that it is unclear what the most appropriate uptake rate might be. Despite the generally positive trend, there remains large variation in uptake rates

between counties. This could be explained in a number of ways, including by variations in levels of childhood disability across counties; however, it is equally possible that it reflects unmet need in some parts of the country.

An end-of-year-one review of AIM (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019) found that stakeholders reported improved accessibility and inclusivity of the ECCE programme through greater awareness and understanding, better access to information and supports, and improved adult-to-child ratios. However, it also highlighted gaps in provision, especially in smaller settings, with anecdotal evidence indicating that children with additional needs were sometimes not offered a place by providers. The report found that challenges also remained in relation to including children with very complex and/or nursing needs in mainstream preschool settings, and turnaround times for putting supports in place were too long, among other concerns. A more comprehensive end-of-year-three report has since been undertaken and will be published in late 2023.

To address some of these challenges, a new scheme – known as the "Complex Healthcare Needs Trial" – is currently being trialled. This scheme is designed to allow children with complex healthcare needs to attend the ECCE programme with the aid of 1-1 nursing support provided through AIM.

A two-year In-School and ELC Therapy Support Demonstration Project pilot was carried out in schools and ELC settings. An evaluation report for this project, which involved the development and implementation of a speech and language and occupational therapeutic support model for mainstream schools, special schools and ELC settings, was commissioned by the National Council for Special Education and published in 2020 (Lynch et al., 2020).

Supports for children from Traveller or Roma backgrounds
Roma and Traveller children are substantially less likely to attend the ECCE programme than the general population: while 96.5% of 2019 Junior Infants with a white Irish ethnic background had attended an ELC setting (ECCE or otherwise) before starting primary school, only 63.4% of entrants with a Roma ethnic background and 74.9% of those from an Irish Traveller background had done so (DCEDIY, 2022b).

Little data is available on reasons for low preschool attendance. Rutigliano (2020) argues that spatial segregation, access to transportation, and lack of trust from Roma parents towards the institution of education all play a role in other European countries, as well as Roma parents' concerns about bullying and discrimination, and a cultural preference for family-based care of young children. Research by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2020) states that 27% of Irish Traveller parents/guardians reported that their children had been bullied in school because they are a Traveller. It is likely that mistrust built on negative experiences with schooling more widely is also a factor in preschool attendance.

As discussed above, the current ECCE programme rules provide little transparency or protection against discrimination, and anecdotal evidence reported to the research team suggests that this may also play a role, although no hard data is currently available.

Despite this, relatively little effort has been made to address the low uptake among Traveller and Roma families since segregated provision was phased out in the early 21st century. The NESF (2005) report on Early Childhood Care and Education recommended that the specific needs of Traveller children and families in relation to ELC provision should be addressed and recommended that the 'éist'

diversity and equality training programme, developed by Pavee Point, should become part of mainstream provision. They also stressed the need to reflect opportunities to involve Traveller interests in the structures established to manage the delivery of ELC services.

I like my own time.

I like playing with the swing

The swing.

doctor's things

Doctor's things

block area.

Abby   Katie

Playing together

The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCYA, 2016) offer practical guidelines and advice for ELC settings on fostering inclusive environments for Traveller and Roma (and other minority) children. The Government's National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) committed all relevant Departments and agencies to promoting the ECCE programme and AIM within the Traveller and Roma communities "in order to facilitate access for every child to free preschool" (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017: 25). However, an Early Childhood Ireland (2021: 6) submission towards a National Action Plan Against Racism for Ireland points out that there are currently "no policy targets or appropriate national programmes that seek to improve access to and participation in ELC" for Traveller and Roma children. However, a new commitment has been made in First 5 so that 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, a general commitment is included in First 5 and a new funding model for ELC and SAC, the EPM, is currently being developed by DCEDIY. EPM will provide a mix of universal and targeted supports to improve access to ELC and SAC services for children and families who are experiencing disadvantage. Thus far, the scoping, consultation and engagement phases which will shape and inform the design of the model have been completed.

A number of initiatives support Traveller and Roma children in other European countries. In Northern Ireland, the Toybox project – funded by the Department for Education and delivered by "Early Years

– the organisation for young children" in Northern Ireland – provides play-focused home visits to Traveller children, aiming to improve access to high quality early education, formal schooling and family support.

An OECD Education Working Paper (Rutigliano, 2020) reviews the literature and examples of relevant policy initiatives for the inclusion of Roma students in Europe, with a dedicated section on Roma inclusion in ELC. Initiatives aimed at creating inclusive ELC systems focus on creating environments that foster the wellbeing of minority children, allowing them to feel safe and achieve their full potential. This involves creating inclusive and diversity-conscious curricula. However, in practice, content on Roma has been found to be frequently inappropriate and inaccurate, and the need for guidelines to support schools in this process has been highlighted. In some countries, preschools have been encouraged to employ Roma staff. For example, Romania and several Nordic countries use mediators with a Roma background to foster inclusion and engagement with Roma families (Rutigliano, 2020). In Slovenia, dedicated preschools were established in Roma settlements with the aim to reduce barriers and increase enrolment (Skalar, 2019). These nurseries maintain close relationships with integrated preschools in the area, engaging in joint activities on a weekly basis. Although there have been concerns about the quality and sustainability of these settings, they have had a positive impact on participation rates. An OECD review also recommended more staff training on specific needs of Roma and Traveller children, e.g. on supporting transitions to primary school and adapting support for children from nomadic communities, who may attend intermittently (OECD 2021c).

Supports for newcomers

Data on newcomer children in ELC, including immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, is scarce. Early Childhood Ireland (2021: 9) point out that "currently, there is no monitoring of access to ELC and SAC services by children and families in the social groups in Ireland most at risk of experiencing racism and discrimination. This requires annual measurement and monitoring." In the context of the war in Ukraine, which has brought large numbers of child refugees to Ireland, this seems particularly pressing and there is now a commitment to develop an ELC online database that includes this data. As part of the EPM currently under development, a marker on ethnicity is being introduced to ECCE programme applications to assist in the allocation of resources and to underpin future policy and planning decisions.

Before the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme in 2019, the Community Childcare Subvention Resettlement (CCSR) scheme provided ELC funding for children resettled in Ireland under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2018; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019b). At any one time, eligible children could be registered either for the ECCE programme or for CCSR, but not both. Between September and December 2019, 154 unique children were registered for the CCSR scheme (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2020). This scheme was discontinued, but the sponsor arrangement under the NCS, which replaced the CCS scheme, performs the same function. The NCS sponsor arrangement allows vulnerable children and families to be referred to the scheme by certain sponsor bodies so they can receive free ELC. International protection applicants and refugees are among the groups covered by the NCS sponsorship arrangement. Unlike CCSR, those in receipt of the NCS sponsor subsidy can also avail of the ECCE programme.

Data on the Growing up in Ireland study cohort born in 2008 shows that, at the time, children whose parents were both born abroad were less likely to participate in the ECCE programme (92.8%) than those with one (96.3%) or two Irish-born parents (96.0%), but significantly more likely to have started school by age 5 (Darmody, McGinnity and Russell, 2022: 42). The study also found that by age 5, "children of eastern European, western European and African mothers are more likely to be in the lowest quintile of [English] vocabulary scores than the children of Irish mothers" (Darmody, McGinnity and Russell, 2022: 60). At a six-fold increased risk, this effect was particularly pronounced for children of eastern European mothers. Having a father born abroad and having two non-native English-speaking parents was also associated with an increased likelihood of being in the lowest quintile of vocabulary scores at age 5. More recent data is not available. The authors point out that participation in ELC can support newcomer children's acquisition of English language skills.

No data is currently available on ECCE programme uptake among asylum seekers, undocumented or homeless children, but according to the 2016 Census, children from 0 to four years account for the largest percentage of children experiencing homelessness. A recent Children's Rights Alliance study (Scanlon and McKenna, 2018) highlights the importance of educational settings, including preschools, as a source of safety, routine and predictability for children in this situation. A recent evidence review of ELC in refugee contexts (Ereky-Stevens, Siraj, and Kong, 2023) also highlights the importance of ELC as a source of safety, stability, normality and support. The authors argue that refugee children benefit from "interactions with emotionally responsive educators who are respectful and trustworthy (…), who model and explain expected behaviour (...), and who focus learning on emotion regulation and development of empathy". Special training for staff can also help create culturally responsive environments where refugee children thrive.

Cost to parents/carers

The ECCE programme is provided free of charge to all children, and rules prevent providers from charging parents/carers directly. However, providers are allowed to charge extra for a small number of optional services, which are defined in the rules.

Pobal will start collecting information on the extent to which providers charge for optional extras in the programme year 2023/24, and findings from the surveys carried out for this review are discussed in chapter 3. In recent years, rules around optional extras have been reviewed and amended to provide clarity. Optional extras can only be offered from a limited prescribed list. Providers must give an accurate description and detail the total cost and frequency with which optional extras may occur on its fees list. A parent statement, introduced under Core Funding for the programme year 2023/24, aims to bring greater transparency to parents. The rules also state that optional extras must not be required for active participation and that no child should feel excluded. However, whether any particular activity is required for active participation or whether non-participating children might feel excluded is open to interpretation. The current rules thereby create a grey area around allowable charges, which may undermine the free character of the programme.

Providers who offer part-time or full-time care or an optional 30 minutes are also free to set their own fees for these services (although a fee freeze under core funding, which 95% of services are in contract for, has been put in place to prevent further increases). This creates a situation, whereby providers who prioritise paying part-time and full-time children are able to charge for the ECCE programme in all but name. Depending on how the additional hours are funded, this can constitute a barrier.

Service providers may also charge a booking deposit of up to four times the weekly capitation fee (i.e. up to €276), which must be refunded within two months of the child's start date (Citizens Information, 2022). Large booking deposits may be prohibitive for low-income families. Data on the prevalence of booking deposits for ECCE programme places and on the average amount parents are charged was collected for this review and is discussed in chapter 3

Aside from the service charges discussed above, it is well known that parents often incur costs in relation to their children's education even where education is nominally free (Barnardos, 2022). The cost of attending preschool is lower than that of attending primary or secondary school, as expenses such as school books, computers and uniforms are not usually expected. However, transportation costs also affect parents of preschool children. Data on average parental spending on preschool transport is not available. In rural areas and areas with fewer ECCE programme providers, transportation costs might constitute a significant burden.

A hidden cost arises in the second ECCE programme year in relation to the difference in funded ECCE programme hours and Primary School hours, which can affect ELC costs and/or parents' ability to engage in paid work.

Providers, workforce, and working conditions

Provider profile

The ECCE programme is delivered through privately operated providers, who receive public funding, subject to regulatory compliance, to provide the universal preschool programme. In 2020/21, 4,022 providers were contracted to provide the ECCE programme (Pobal, 2022).

The market is very diverse, including playschools, naíonraí, Montessori, as well as daycare services and a small number of childminders (most childminders don't qualify to deliver the ECCE programme. In 2021, only 47 childminders were in contract with Pobal to deliver the programme (DCEDIY, 2021b: 57)). Approximately three out of four providers operate for profit, with the remainder operating as not-for-profit community services (Pobal, 2022). Services range in size from "single room solo-operators, to mid-sized community services, to chains of large multi-room services" (First 5, 89). Some providers offer a "sessional" service that provides the ECCE programme only, while others also offer parent-funded wrap-around care, as well as other government-funded schemes.

Penn and Lloyd (2014) reviewed the international literature and compiled evidence from five countries (Norway, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Australia and the UK) whose ELC provision operates primarily in the private sector, to identify implications for quality and accessibility, and to establish successful strategies for ensuring high-quality, equitable provision. They found strong evidence across all five case studies that quality varies substantially within market-based ELC sectors, with poorer areas being associated with poorer quality than wealthier areas. Access is inequitable, with more provision and choice available to parents who can afford higher fees. They argue that adequate public funding and strong regulatory measures, including planning controls, are essential to mediate the variability in quality and access in market-based models. Ireland has public funding and regulatory measures in place, but limited planning controls in relation to the ECCE programme and other ELC provision.

The authors also point out that ELC markets do not follow the principles of free market economic theory, chiefly because parental choice is limited by factors such as local availability, income, transport, working and service opening hours, lack of information, etc. – in practice, parents often have limited choice of providers, regardless of quality. Parents are also often reluctant to change providers, due to the disruption caused. Research quoted by Penn and Lloyd has also highlighted that parents are rarely in a position to assess the quality of a setting, due to lack of access and lack of familiarity with relevant criteria.

This has implications for best practice in funding policies. Penn and Lloyd argue that supply-side funding combined with strong regulatory and monitoring systems (as implemented for the ECCE programme) can help ensure quality in a market-based ELC system. A range of robust measures have been put in place in Ireland to ensure the safeguards that Penn and Lloyd recommend. For example, the ECCE programme (along with all other ELC funding in Ireland) receives supply-side funding and a regulatory regime – consisting of a set of legal minimum standards enforced through inspectors - operates for all ELC provision.

Several reports advocate greater public engagement with planning and provision. For example, a recent review of the operating model for ELC and SAC in Ireland (Indecon, 2021: xvi) recommends "active engagement with planning of local provision, intervention to address gaps in supply, [and] selected targeted State provision to provide for disadvantaged groups and to test best new ideas. This should also take place where there is market failure".

Workforce characteristics
Since 2016, all ECCE programme staff working with children must have at least a Level 5 qualification in Early Childhood Care and Education on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), or equivalent, while lead educators must be educated to NFQ Level 6, at a minimum. CPD is not currently required to work in the ELC sector or to gain a promotion.

The minimum qualification requirements for Lead Educators are low in comparison to other EU Member States (European Commission, 2021: 143, 139). Ireland is "unusual in not having a degree-level qualification requirement for Lead Educators (i.e. 'room leaders') … [and] no qualification or training requirements for centre managers" (DCEDIY, 2021a: 43). However, an increasing percentage of the workforce in centre-based ELC services actually hold higher-than-required qualifications, with an estimated 72% holding an NFQ Level 6 (or higher) qualification and 37% being educated to NFQ Level 7 or above in 2023. The percentage of lead educators with qualifications at NFQ Level 7 and above has steadily increased over the past few years, rising from 38.5% in 2019 to 42.6% in 2021 (Government of Ireland, 2023: 17). In First 5 and Nurturing Skills, the Government has committed to all Lead Educators having a relevant degree-level qualification by 2028.

The NFQ Level 5 requirement for educators is high in comparison with other European countries, where qualification requirements for assistants are often lower or absent. As of June, 2023, 91% of ECCE programme services which had completed a Core Funding application attracted a Graduate Lead Educator Premium for at least one of their ECCE programme rooms, and 53.5% were in receipt of a Graduate Service Manager Premium.

A meta-analysis of recent international evidence (OECD, 2018) has shown a positive association between initial training and the quality of adult-child interactions in classrooms for children aged 3-6, in particular where initial training included ECE-related content – however, the same study found no evidence that quality of and exposure to developmental and educational activities depended on staff qualifications, and the evidence was mixed for relations between staff qualifications and children's language and literacy skills.

Another meta-analysis (Manning et al., 2019) found significant positive correlations between teacher qualifications and the quality of ELC environments, including overall ELC qualities, as well as subscale ratings such as programme structure, language, and reasoning.

Likewise, the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) Project in England found that settings with highly-qualified staff tended to achieve higher quality scores and that children attending these settings made more progress (Sylva et al., 2004). In particular, educators qualified to RFQ level 5 (equivalent to NFQ Level 6) provided more experience of academic activities, encouraged children to engage in activities with higher cognitive challenge, provided the most direct teaching through demonstration, explanation, questioning, modelling etc., and were the most effective in their interactions with the children, using the most 'sustained shared thinking'. Interestingly, less well qualified staff also performed better when working alongside better qualified colleagues.

Also in England, the SEED study (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018:28) found "a higher overall level of staff qualification" to be "the strongest predictor of all quality measures for three- to four-year-old settings" in the private sector. A more highly qualified manager was also associated with higher process quality in settings for two-year-olds and for three- to four-year-olds. In a study comparing data from the EPPE (1998 – 1999) and SEED (2014 – 2016) studies, Melhuish and Gardiner (2019) also found that quality of ELC provision increased substantially in the time between the two study periods. They argue that this improvement may be due in part to policy initiatives aimed at raising staff and manager qualifications and facilitating in-service professional development.

In contrast, in their analysis of data from the National Pupil Database (England), Bonetti and Blanden (2020) found only a very small positive association between having at least one graduate staff and

children's outcomes as measured by EYFSP scores at age five. Similar effect sizes were found for graduate staff working directly with children and those working in other roles. In comparison, the effect of a graduate member of staff on child outcomes was much smaller than the effect of socio-economic disadvantage or birth month.

An OECD (2018) meta-analysis found some evidence of an association between higher levels of pre-service qualifications and higher-quality adult-child interactions, but that the quality and quantity of exposure to developmental and educational activities did not depend on levels of initial training. They also found no consistent association between pre-service training and children's development and learning, especially in relation to emerging academic or behavioural/social skills. Another meta-analysis and systematic review (Falenchuk et al., 2017) also found only very weak associations between pre-service qualifications and children's language outcomes, and none with mathematics outcomes. A scoping review of the extent and consistency of the literature on domains of quality in ELC (Eadie et al., 2022), which draws on systematic reviews and meta-analyses in the field, found that findings on the impact of educator qualifications on outcomes were inconsistent across reviews.

In addition to qualification levels, the content of initial training has also shown to be an important factor. A recent OECD (2021a) review discusses the links between the content of initial training and process quality in ECEC. It highlights that work-based learning during initial education for ELC professionals and preparation to implement and use a curriculum are key factors associated with quality provision. Furthermore, breadth of content is positively associated with attitudes and practices related to process quality. The study also quotes evidence that programmes that included practical placements also tended to cover more content areas than purely theoretical programmes.

Ireland has placed a strong emphasis in recent years not just on raising qualification levels in ELC, but also on strengthening the content of ELC qualifications, e.g. through the Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for Level 7 and 8 qualifications, developed in 2017 and 2018 to improve the quality and consistency of degree programmes, and the work of the Qualifications Advisory Board. Since 2017, initial education programmes in ELC must include supervised practice placements of at least 35% of the overall course duration. Since 2021, the Professional Award-type Descriptors for NFQ Levels 5 and 6 require a minimum of 150 hours/annum of professional practice with children aged 0-2 and older children. Content requirements of initial education for assistants in settings for children aged 0 to 5 are very high in Ireland, compared to other OECD countries, covering a wide range of key areas. Since 2021, initial professional education programmes must also cover curriculum framework implementation, planning, and assessment, as well as "pedagogical practice aligned with the framework, such as enquiry-based, inclusion, developmentally appropriate practice, and children's individual needs" (OECD, 2021a).

Working conditions and pay
However, experience from England has also shown that attempts at raising qualification levels in the sector can be hampered by the poor overall working conditions and lack of career progression which make work in ELC an unattractive option for well-qualified staff. For example, the creation of new Level 3 and Level 6 qualifications in England did not improve recruitment of higher-qualified staff to the sector and the Government had to abandon entry requirements introduced to improve standards as providers struggled to find sufficiently qualified staff. Pascal, Bertram, and Cole-Albäck (2020: 6) argue that this failure is due to a continued "disparity in the perception and treatment of Early Years Professional/Early Years Teacher and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) staff in the sector. They are not

viewed as having equal status as intended, due to differentials in pay, career progression and professional status. The numbers accessing EYE and EYT training routes have been erratic and have not grown significantly." This experience demonstrates that significant improvements in overall working conditions, status, and opportunities for progression are essential to securing a better-qualified workforce.

While ELC is a low-pay sector in many countries, wages in Ireland compare unfavourably on an international level, relative both to the national minimum wage and the average wage. Part-time work is more common in the Irish ELC sector than in other countries (DCEDIY, 2021a: 44), and large parts of the workforce are employed on temporary (22%) or ECCE programme term-time only (42%) contracts (DCEDIY, 2021a: 78), while paid non-contact time and benefits such as sick pay, maternity pay, and pensions are often lacking. There is limited opportunity for career progression and additional training tends to have little impact on pay. As is the case in most European countries, staff turnover rates in the sector are high and many services report challenges in relation to staff recruitment and retention. These staffing issues can have a negative impact on children's development and wellbeing, as well as quality of provision and access to services (DCEDIY, 2021a). A European Commission (2021a) report highlights that improvements in career prospects, salaries, and working conditions can help ease pressures on recruitment and staff retention.

A Joint Labour Committee (JLC) was established in 2021 to draw up an Employment Regulation Order (ERO), which sets minimum rates of pay conditions for employment in the sector. This provides an ongoing, independent, formal mechanism by which employer and employee representatives can negotiate pay rates for the sector. As a result of an agreement reached in the JLC, EROs for Early Years Services came into effect in September 2022. These EROs set new minimum hourly rates of pay for different roles and qualification levels, thus creating a new pay structure within Early Years Services. The new minimum hourly rates of pay range from €13.00 per hour for Early Years Educators and School-Age Childcare practitioners to €17.25 per hour for Graduate Managers. These EROs were backed by the new Core Funding Scheme, worth €259 million in its first year. The JLC can be used for further pay increases over time, supported by future increases in Core Funding. Negotiations are currently underway to update the ERO.

There is some evidence (OECD, 2018) that higher staff salaries are associated with higher process quality, while other studies have shown no effect. Establishing a relationship between staff pay and process quality is often complicated by the fact that other relevant factors – such as qualifications or type of setting – are also often associated with the level of pay. It is therefore not always possible to establish which factor determines outcomes.

The European Framework of Quality and Wellbeing Indicators, developed as part of the CARE project (Moser et al., 2016), includes proposals that a positive work climate and high level of staff wellbeing should be pursued by building a fair and transparent system of salaries, incentives and support for CPD, collaborative inter-personal and team relationships, staff involvement in decision making, and adherence to relevant national guidelines, regulations and collective agreements. Working conditions, salary levels, CPD opportunities and career prospects should reflect the importance of high quality ELC and should be equivalent to professions of similar status and societal impact, such as primary education and health care.

Workforce development

A well-qualified workforce, which has benefitted from high-quality initial training and is able to access high-quality CPD throughout their career, is key to developing conditions in which process quality can flourish. Research has shown that both high-quality initial training and CPD have an effect on the quality of adult-child interactions, which in turn has an effect on child outcomes (OECD, 2018).

CPD has been identified as "the most consistent predictor of quality adult-child interactions, and also has direct links to child development and learning" (OECD, 2018: 79). A rapid evidence review (Scobie and Scott, 2017) reports that specialised in-service training on process quality has a larger effect than pre-service training, particularly on collaborative work, support for play, and support for early literacy, mathematics and science.
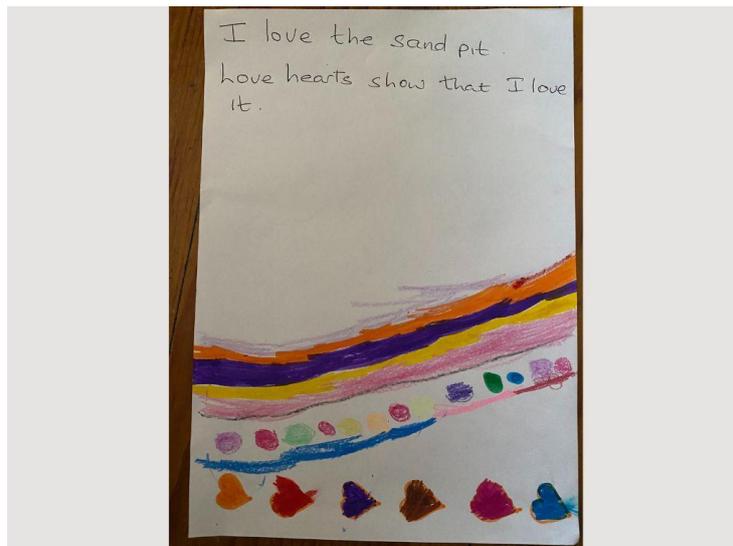
While quantitative research on the relationship between CPD and children's outcomes in European settings is still limited, a recent meta-analysis (Jensen and Würtz Rasmussen, 2019) found "an overall positive effect on children's outcomes in Europe". The effect sizes reported by the authors were largely in line with the larger body of relevant US-based research. Suggestive evidence, which is limited by the small number of studies included in the meta-analysis, implied that CPD aimed at targeting children's cognitive outcomes is most likely to have a positive impact, and that even relatively short training interventions can be beneficial. Eadie et al. (2022: 17) also found "clear indications [across literature reviews] that forms of ongoing professional development which were integrated into practice such as coaching were likely to be effective".

In England, the SEED study (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018) found that having a training plan in place was a strong predictor of setting quality in voluntary settings for two-year-olds as well as in voluntary settings for three- to four-year-olds. Having a training budget was also associated with better educational quality and adult-child interactions in nursery classes/schools.

Egert, Fukkink and Eckhardt (2018) also found a link between professional development of ELC teachers in US settings and child outcomes via improved classroom quality. Their meta-analysis found that training programmes of more than 45 hours' duration and those which include an element of coaching are most likely to produce significant improvements of overall quality. Joo et al. (2020: 15), however, reported "negative significant effects for pre-academic skills and null effects for cognitive abilities or overall outcomes" linked to providing CPD for teachers in US settings.

A systematic review of the evidence-base for professional learning in ELC, the Pleye Review (Rogers, Brown and Poblete, 2017) found that the most effective professional development and learning programmes provide opportunities for reflection, peer group discussion, and regular feedback on learning and performance, often through an element of coaching. Development programmes that convey research-based evidence in accessible and encouraging ways can also be effective in engendering long-lasting changes in practices, especially if they are incremental, offered at relatively frequent intervals, and allow for revisiting concepts. Tailored programmes that combine new, research-based evidence with participants' local and contextual knowledge have been shown to have a positive impact on children's outcomes, especially when combined with coaching and peer-to-peer feedback. Duration, frequency, and intensity of professional development are also important factors, but there is little agreement in relation to the most effective intensity, and this is likely to vary dependent on programme type.

The European Framework of Quality and Wellbeing Indicators (Moser et al., 2016) recommends a well-defined CPD system, which should be aligned with pre-service education and include mandatory paid time for regular CPD. The Framework recommends a minimum of one hour of mandatory CPD per week, as well as individual coaching or mentoring. Professional Development should be supported by regular team meetings to reflect on practice, develop and evaluate curriculum activities, and discuss and reflect on relevant research or other professional information. Successful CPD could be supported through partnerships with recognised centres of expertise.

A European Commission (2021a) report also highlights that high-quality initial education and training and CPD are key to improving quality in ELC. It adds that improvements in professional development opportunities can also have a positive impact on recruitment and staff retention.

Efforts are being made to develop the ELC workforce, with a view to raising standards. First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and their Families for the years 2019 to 2028 (Government of Ireland, 2018), includes plans for a "skilled and sustainable workforce" as a building block for moving towards "an effective early childhood system" (Goal D). Strategic actions focus on improving access to high-quality initial training and CPD, raising the professional status of the workforce, and supporting employers to offer better working conditions which would help attract and retain better-qualified staff. Following on from First 5, Nurturing Skills, a Workforce Plan for the ELC and SAC sector 2021 – 2028, was published in 2021 (DCEDIY, 2021a). This plan aims to raise the profile of ELC careers and achieve a graduate-led workforce by 2028. A new funding model launched in September 2022 includes additional funding aimed at improving working conditions and attracting graduate staff.

A range of incentives have been developed to encourage workforce development and recruitment of better-qualified staff. For example, from its inception, the ECCE programme has offered a higher capitation rate for services with better-qualified room leaders, and requirements for this incentive have been raised over the years. A Focused Policy Assessment of the ECCE Higher Capitation Payment (DCYA, 2020) found that the policy had been successful in incentivising recruitment of graduate ECCE room leaders, but that its impact on staff remuneration had been marginal. Likewise, uptake of the higher capitation payment varied broadly between counties (although not between urban/rural areas or based on an area's level of affluence or local access to third level ELC courses), affecting equality of access to graduate-led services. The assessment also found that further structural and process quality measures were required to ensure that recruitment of graduate staff reliably improved ECCE

programme quality. An OECD (2021c) review on sector quality furthermore found that the financial incentives concentrated on the ECCE programme have had a detrimental impact on provision for children under the age of 3, including a reduction in services targeted at this age group and a concentration of better-educated staff in ECCE rooms.

In response to these issues, the Higher Capitation payment was replaced by the Graduate Premium in Core Funding in September 2022. This is available to non-ECCE programme services as well as ECCE, and is tied to higher pay for lead educators with graduate qualifications, thus addressing some of the limitations of the Higher Capitation Payment.

An additional capitation of €2 per child per week is available to services that employ an Inclusion Coordinator who has completed Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) training, a Level 6 (higher education) special purpose award developed as part of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM).

Several training, mentoring and advisory services, including Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service and National Síolta Aistear Initiative, as well as the AIM Hanen Teacher Talk and Lámh training programmes, are available to support professional development in the sector. Better Start provides quality support services for the sector, including mentoring, coaching, and CPD. Compensation for CPD participation was piloted for specific training programmes in 2018 and 2019 and funding for CPD has now been incorporated under Core Funding. A review of Level 5 and 6 qualifications was carried out in 2019 and new criteria and guidelines for Levels 5 and higher have been developed. The Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB) was jointly instituted by the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth to review Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care Sector, and there is now a requirement for degree level qualifications to be QAB approved in order to meet DCEDIY funding requirements. Funded supports to individuals wishing to pursue a qualification are available.
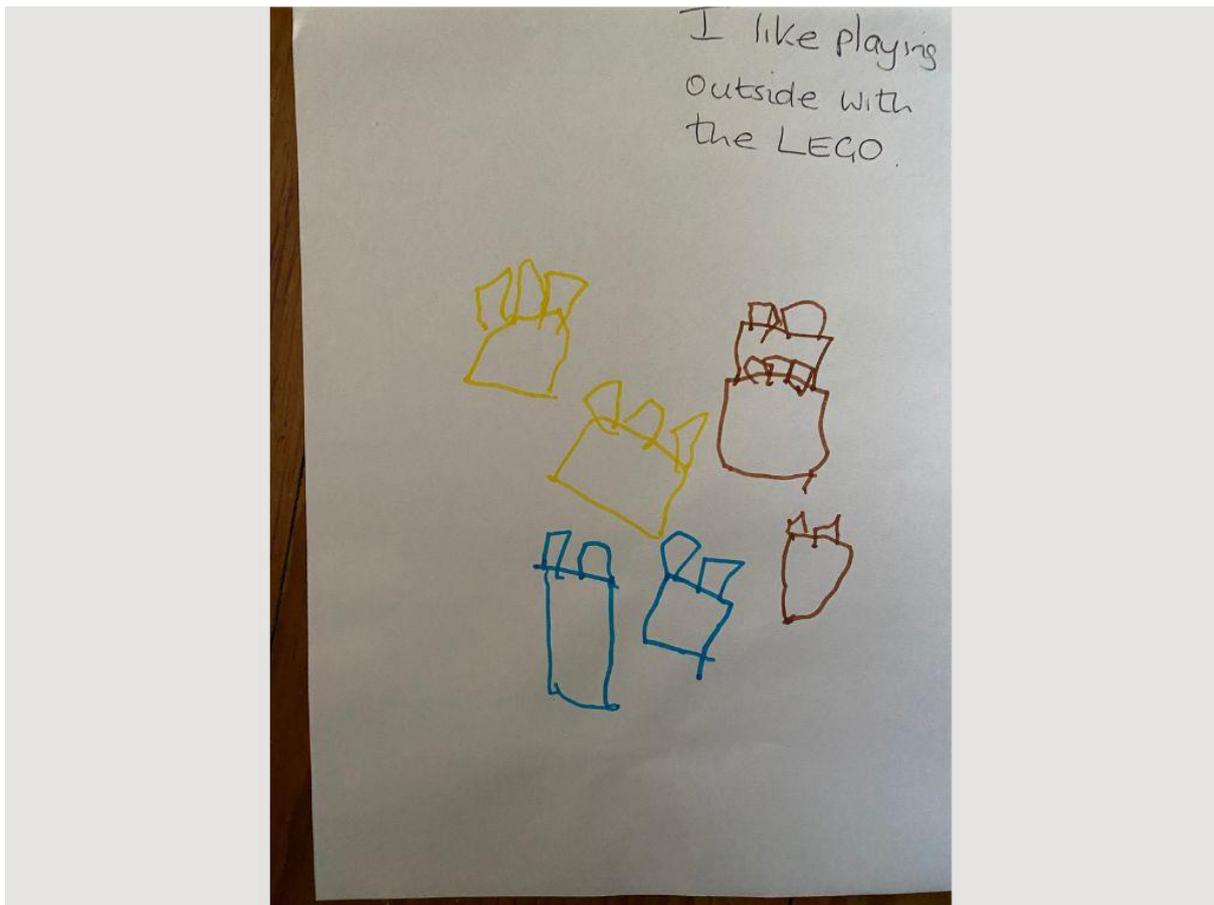
Governance and quality control

Improving the quality of ELC is an important goal of Irish and EU policy. The EU Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems highlights that in order to deliver benefits and avoid harm, it is essential that ELC services are "of high quality, accessible, affordable and inclusive. (…) Policy measures and reforms need to give priority to quality considerations". This emphasis reflects substantial evidence that high quality ELC arrangements consistently produce more favourable outcomes across outcome domains and regardless of how quality is measured (van Huizen and Plantenga, 2018). An EU Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care was developed as part of the Council Recommendation, covering five areas of quality: Access, Staff, Curriculum, Monitoring and Evaluation, and Governance and Funding. Member States were encouraged to develop national Quality Frameworks in line with this framework.

Governance

A number of organisations are involved in governance of the ELC sector in Ireland. Tusla registers providers and assesses regulatory compliance across a range of areas; the Department of Education Inspectorate conducts education-focused inspections of the ECCE programme and beyond; and Pobal is responsible for monitoring administrative and financial information (OECD 2021b). Inspections and compliance visits are carried out, independently of each other, by all three of these bodies. Feedback from ELC services highlights the substantial administrative burden associated with three separate inspection processes and a need to streamline evaluation and monitoring processes in the sector (Department of Education and Skills – Inspectorate, 2018). There are plans to integrate and coordinate inspection and quality supports to improve efficiency (DCEDIY, 2021c), as well as a new Action Plan

for Administrative and Regulatory Simplification. An independent Review of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) Operating Model in Ireland found that a dedicated state agency is the optimal operating model for the ELC sector, a finding which was accepted by the Government. It is envisaged that such an agency shall be created and shall undertake the functions currently carried out by Pobal Early Years (including Better Start), the CCCs, as well as operational functions currently undertaken by DCEDIY.

Department of Education Inspectorate – Early Years Education-Focused Inspections

The Early Years Education-Focused Inspection (EYEI) model was introduced and implemented for all ECCE programme providers in 2016, and the Department of Education Inspectorate has been carrying out short-notice inspections based on this model. EYEI evaluates quality of provision across the following four areas of practice:

- The context to support children's learning and development
- Processes to support children's learning and development
- Children's learning experiences and achievements
- Management and leadership for learning

The most recent Chief Inspector's report (Department of Education – Inspectorate, 2022: 87) found that overall quality of provision is "good or better" in almost all ECCE programme settings, but identified a "need to embed internal review and self-reflection in all ELC settings". This finding reflects the substantial challenges associated with introducing professional management practices and processes to a sector where qualification to practice was only recently regulated and minimum qualification levels are low, and where "engagement in higher order professional activities such as reflection in practice and reflection on practice is not well established" (Department of Education – Inspectorate, 2022: 97). Support and investment are needed to develop the necessary skills and competences in relation to leadership of learning, which are currently underdeveloped. This is also highlighted as a key priority in First 5 and in Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028.

Tusla Early Years Inspectorate – compliance visits and inspections

Tusla is the independent statutory regulator of early years services in Ireland. It carries out unannounced compliance visits/inspections which are focused on regulatory compliance and based on the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016.

The Tusla inspection process has undergone significant changes over recent years. A new Quality and Regulatory Framework (Tusla, 2018), including a specific framework for sessional preschool services, was developed and published in 2018. Under this framework, compliance is assessed in relation to the following areas (Tusla, 2018: xix):

- Governance;
- Health, welfare and development of the child;
- Safety; and
- Premises and facilities.

Following a successful pilot, inspections based on this format were rolled out in 2019 and 2020, alongside an eLearning programme to help providers prepare for inspection (Government of Ireland, 2020). A model was also developed to engage parents and children in the inspection process and gain

their views (Government of Ireland, 2020: 167). First 5 included a commitment to a new self-evaluation framework for ELC settings, which would replace the existing Síolta Quality Assurance Programme.

In 2019, in the wake of alleged regulatory compliance breaches in ELC services, plans were introduced to give additional powers to Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate (Government of Ireland 2020, 57). These plans require legislative change and the General Scheme for the legislation has recently undergone Pre-Legislative Scrutiny. Qualification requirements for Tusla Early Years Inspectors were also widened to allow for recruitment of inspectors from a wider range of backgrounds, including ELC. A new cohort was recruited in 2019 based on the revised requirements (Government of Ireland, 2020: 166).

Pobal – Compliance, Audit and Risk Directorate
Pobal's Compliance, Audit and Risk Directorate carries out unannounced compliance visits to childcare providers contracted by DCEDIY to deliver ECCE and/or other funding programmes. It monitors adherence to key programme rules and funding agreement conditions.

Practice frameworks
Ireland has two national quality and curriculum frameworks for ELC, Síolta and Aistear, which are important documents supporting the development of quality in ELC. Síolta and Aistear are intended to be used together and ECCE programme providers must provide a preschool programme which adheres to the principles and standards of both frameworks.

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, was published in 2006 following an extensive process of research and stakeholder consultations. Its purpose is to improve the overall quality of ELC services, and its focus is on all aspects of quality in ELC. Síolta is composed of three interrelated elements: 12 Principles, 16 Standards, and 75 Components of Quality. "Signposts for Reflection" and "Think-abouts" are also included, to encourage practitioners to develop a critical awareness of their practice.

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, published in 2009, focuses specifically on curriculum quality. Its purpose is to provide "information and practical ideas to help practitioners plan and build a curriculum that supports children to develop positive dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, as well as knowledge and understanding" (NCCA, 2019: 7). It comprises Principles, Themes and Guidelines for Good Practice. Aistear is widely used to at least some degree in the sector (Department of Education – Inspectorate, 2022). It is currently being reviewed and it is intended that an updated Aistear will be published in 2024.

A Practice Guide was developed in 2015 to support educators to engage with the two frameworks and critically reflect on their practice and there are plans to develop a coherent single quality framework.

Interface with other programmes and initiatives
In addition to government programmes mentioned throughout this research paper, there are important links to a number of schemes, initiatives and processes which interact with the ECCE programme in different ways. These include key government strategies; other government-funded childcare programmes; specialist preschool and early-intervention programmes; the DEIS scheme and the role of the HSCL coordinator; and arrangements around transition to primary school.

Government strategies

[First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028](#)

First 5 is a whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. As a ten-year plan (2018-2028), the strategy aims to support all children to have positive experiences in their formative years. A reform of the ELC system is prioritised in Goals C and D. This reform builds on recent achievements in ELC and SAC, including policies that focus on high quality provision, accessibility for all, and improved affordability. Significant measures include the National Childcare Scheme; a movement towards a graduate-led workforce with a target of 100% graduate managers and lead educators and a 50% target for all staff working with children by 2028; extending regulations and support to all paid childminders and school-age childcare services; as well as a new funding model for ELC (introduced in 2022) and a commitment to double the level of public expenditure on ELC by 2028, which equates to an additional €485m of funding (which was exceeded in 2023) (GoI, 2018). There are measures designed to strengthen the governance structure at national and local level and to further improve access to the ECCE programme for children with additional needs through AIM, CPD for ELC staff and accessible design guidelines for ELC settings. As part of the new funding model, employers will also be supported to provide better working conditions that will appeal to staff and contribute to staff retention. There are also incentives for high-quality provision and enhanced funding for services operating in areas of disadvantage.

First 5 also includes plans for a number of reforms aimed at poverty reduction which are relevant in relation to the ECCE programme. These include expanded access to free and subsidised ELC, the introduction of a free-school-meals programme to some ELC settings, and the EPM (a DEIS-type model for ELC settings). An intensive Hot Meals pilot is currently underway with nine ELC services engaged in offering a range of meals and additional nutritional options. This pilot is being evaluated by Pobal and the evaluation report was due in July 2023.

A First 5 Implementation Plan 2023 – 2025 was published in November 2023 and many of the commitments made in First 5 have already been achieved.

[National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy](#)

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, NTRIS, was published in 2017 (a new strategy is currently under development). NTRIS' details measures to improve access, participation and outcomes for Travellers and Roma in education, including three measures that are relevant to ECCE:

- There is a commitment that all relevant Departments and agencies should promote the ECCE programme and AIM within the Traveller and Roma communities;
- The Department of Education, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and TUSLA should implement good practice initiatives to support parental engagement in education and increase school readiness among Roma and Traveller children;
- The Department of Education will support the development by the higher education sector of positive action measures to encourage and support Travellers and Roma to become teachers. The Department of Education will work with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to support those wishing to enter the workforce as early years educators.

Under the new NTRIS, a Traveller Education Strategy is in development, led by the Department of Education.

The National Action Plan for Childminding may potentially affect ECCE programme delivery by increasing the number of childminders eligible to deliver the programme. The Action Plan aims to extend regulation to all childminders and open all State funding schemes and supports to childminders by 2028. While the ECCE programme is already in principle open to childminders, scheme rules (a minimum number of 5 ECCE-eligible children and a relevant Level 6 NFQ qualification) and a Tusla registration requirement mean that very few childminders currently have access to it. At the time of writing, only 47 childminders were contracted to deliver the ECCE programme. As part of the Action Plan, supports will be available to childminders wishing to upskill and achieve the necessary qualifications to deliver the programme. This may result in an increase in the number of childminders contracted to deliver the programme, which would increase parental choice but is unlikely to have a significant impact on uptake among eligible children, which is already very high.

Government-funded childcare

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was introduced in 2019, replacing a number of legacy schemes. NCS provides both income-assessed and universal subsidies to support parents of children aged between 6 months and 15 years to meet childcare costs. The subsidy is paid directly to providers who subtract it from the applicant's bill.

The National Childcare Scheme is particularly relevant in relation to the ECCE programme as it covers the time before children become eligible for the ECCE programme and helps cover the cost of wrap-around care for children attending ELC settings or school. The scheme thus helps make ELC more affordable for lower-income families and contributes to addressing the "childcare gap" – the "period in which families with young children are unable to benefit from well-compensated childcare leave or a guaranteed (or otherwise state-supported) place in Early Childhood Education and Care" (European Commission, 2020: 2). Due to its low intensity of 3 hours/day, provision under the ECCE programme alone is insufficient to support the main carer's return to paid employment. However, access to adequate wrap-around care may remain complicated for some families, including cases where children attend an ECCE programme setting that offers sessional services only.

Specialist provision and early intervention

Early Start is a one-year, early-intervention programme funded by the Department of Education. It was established in 1994 and implemented at 40 primary schools in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Louth, Limerick, Waterford, and Wicklow. Most Early Start schools are located in Dublin. The objective of the Early Start programme is to tackle educational disadvantage by targeting children who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. Where applications exceed the number of available places, children from the most disadvantaged families are given priority. Children with special needs may be enrolled providing they meet the criteria in respect of age limit and social disadvantage. However, a focussed policy assessment (Department of Education and Skills, 2014) has shown that during the period of review the majority of schools did not use indicators of disadvantage as the first criteria in practice. Early Start classes employ fully qualified primary school teachers and childcare workers. The role of the childcare workers is to meet the care needs of all children enrolled, including those with special educational needs. Early Start sessions are 2.5 hours long and are delivered over the course of one year. At 2:15, the adult-child ratio is lower than the standard ECCE ratio of 1:11. Children can either attend the ECCE programme or Early Start, but not both. Early Start

has capacity for 1,620 children across the 40 units, but participation rates have fallen in recent years as more children participate in the ECCE programme.

A small number of specialist preschools also exist for children with complex needs. Some of these are funded through the Home Tuition Grant. Furthermore, there are approximately 130 Early Intervention ASD units operating in primary schools across the country under the remit of the Department of Education.

The DEIS scheme and the HSCL Co-ordinator

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme is a Department of Education initiative to tackle educational disadvantage. Under the scheme, additional funding and staff is available to primary and secondary schools in areas with high levels of disadvantage. The Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator (HSCLC) is a key figure within the DEIS scheme and acts as a link between parents and schools. The Department's DEIS Plan 2017 aims to strengthening links between ELC settings and primary schools and reinstates the HSCLC's role in supporting successful transitions between ELC settings and primary school.

In addition to this, First 5 included plans for a DEIS-type model for ELC settings in disadvantaged areas. These plans were to form part of the new funding model for ELC and SAC, Together for Better, and should take the form of "additional funding for high-quality ELC settings in communities of concentrated disadvantage (DEIS-type model). Such a model may include additional funding for smaller [sic.] staff:child ratios, family liaison staff, additional parent supports, and provision of food" (Government of Ireland, 2018:175). At the time of writing, these funding elements are yet to be realised, though funding was secured in Budget 2024 for phased introduction of such a model (the EPM) from September 2024.

Transition arrangements

Finally, transition arrangements are an important consideration. Based on qualitative and quantitative data from the longitudinal Children's School Lives (CSL) study, a recent report by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Sloan et al., 2022) draws on the "Five Bridges of Transition" framework to assess activities to support the transition from ELC settings to primary school. The study found that while links between educational settings and parents were strong and there were opportunities for children to meet their new teacher, co-operation between ELC settings and primary schools was in need of development. In particular, curricular and pedagogical bridges required strengthening, with barely any ELC settings exchanging information on curricular and pedagogical approaches with their local primary schools. As a result, there was evidence of curricular discontinuity on the one hand, and a mismatch of expectations regarding necessary skills for starting school. Likewise, information about individual children and their needs was not always shared between ELC settings and primary schools.

As an example of good practice, one primary school involved in the NCCA study employed an "Early Years Co-ordinator", whose role it was to "[facilitate] communication around all aspects of the children's needs: social, emotional, and academic, in addition to communication about any additional support needs" (NCCA, 2022:31). NCCA has also developed reporting templates (Mo Scéal (My Story)) for primary school teachers, early years educators and parents to improve communication and information sharing between ELC settings and primary schools.

The latest Chief Inspector's Report (Department of Education – Inspectorate, 2022) also found a need for further action to support children's transition to primary school. Similar to the NCCA study, the report argues that professional links between ELC settings and primary schools are often lacking. Inspectors advised ELC services to "develop formal links with the local primary school/s to promote the sharing of information and the sensitive management of the children's transition from the setting to primary school" (Department of Education – Inspectorate, 2022: 98).

First 5 pledged to develop a national transitions policy and this work is now underway. In addition, Let's Get Ready and My Little Library are DCEDIY initiatives designed to support children's transition to primary school. Let's Get Ready is a campaign that provides information to help parents support their child through transitions into preschool and primary school. My Little Library provides free books and resources to all children starting primary school and encourages library membership. Children are invited through their ELC service to visit their local library, collect a book bag, and join the library. Children who don't avail of the ECCE programme can also take part.

A recent meta-analysis (OECD, 2018) found consistent evidence that physical closeness between preschool settings and primary schools had a positive impact on adult-child interactions, likely in part due to increased contact with primary-school staff. Such increased contact would also benefit transition processes. However, the same review found that play-based approaches in ELC settings may be weakened by physical closeness to a primary school.

Part II: International obligations and the ECCE programme's contributions to meeting targets

Treaties and conventions

Ireland has obligations in relation to ELC under several international treaties and conventions relating to universal human rights, children's rights, the rights of the disabled, gender equality, and labour-market participation. These treaties recognise that access to affordable and high-quality ELC is essential to achieving a range of policy goals, including boosting gender equality and female labour participation, developing children's cognitive and social abilities, and strengthening social inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (European Commission, 2018).

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union recognises education as a universal right, while the European Pillar of Social Rights states that all children have the right to affordable ELC of good quality. The right of the child to education is also enshrined in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. The EU strategy on the rights of the child and the European Child Guarantee aim to ensure that children at risk of poverty or social exclusion have free and effective access to key services, including to ELC, in all regions, including remote and rural areas (European Commission, 2022b: 16-17). Member States are required to draw up national action plans to put these aims into practice.

Ireland also has obligations to provide inclusive ELC under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, while the importance of high-quality ELC for female labour force participation has been recognised by the 2002 Barcelona European Council, the European Pact for Gender Equality, the Commission's Work-Life Balance Communication adopted on 26 April 2017, and the European Care Strategy (2022).

Targets and goals

Relevant targets from a children's rights perspective include the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4.2, which demands that all girls and boys should have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education by 2030. In the European Education Area Framework, EU Member States agreed a target of 96% of children between 3 years of age and the starting age of compulsory primary education participating in ELC by 2030, while also improving the quality of staff and curricula. ELC services are also relevant for meeting commitments made in the European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage and the 2013 European Council Recommendation of Effective Roma Integration Measures in the Member States.

From a gender equality and labour participation perspective, EU targets on ELC participation rates were first agreed at the 2002 Barcelona European Council. These so-called Barcelona Objectives stipulated that Member States should provide childcare by 2010 to 90% of children from age 3 until mandatory school age, and to 33% of children under 3 years of age. A majority of Member States, Ireland included, failed to meet these targets by 2010, and accessibility, affordability and quality of available ELC remained an issue. The Barcelona Objectives and associated targets were therefore restated in the European Pact for Gender Equality (2011-2020) and referred to in the Europe 2020 Strategy (see European Commission, 2018). A revised recommendation was adopted by the Council in

December 2022, containing new targets, whereby member states should increase their ELC participation rate for children below the age of 3:

- by at least 90% for Member States whose participation rate is lower than 20%; or
- by at least 45%, or until at least reaching a participation rate of 45%, for Member States whose participation rate is between 20 % and 33%.

The revised Barcelona target for participation of under 3s for Ireland is 35% by 2030. Ireland currently falls short of this. One of the new targets as part of First 5 is the provision of 60,000 childcare places for children under 3, which would provide sufficient places for 35% of children under 3.

A 96% target for children between the age of three and the starting age for compulsory primary school entry was restated. It was also recommended that member states should ensure availability to allow children to participate for at least 25 hours a week, including outside regular working hours.

The recommendation also included measures to increase participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and with disabilities or additional needs, to ensure high quality and sufficient territorial coverage of provision, and improve affordability and accessibility, among other recommendations.

The ECCE programme's contribution to meeting international obligations

The high ECCE participation rates among children over the age of three make an important contribution to meeting UN and EU targets and goals in relation to this age group and place Ireland at the forefront with regard to achieving universal access.

Due to its eligibility rules, ECCE alone cannot deliver the 35% participation rates for children under the age of 3 stipulated by the country-specific revised Barcelona Target for Ireland, even though it is important to note that 1/3 of each first-year ECCE cohort will fall into this age group for up to four months. Nevertheless, as most children under the age of three are not yet eligible for ECCE, the programme can only ever be expected to make a limited (but still noteworthy) contribution to targets in relation to under-3s.

At 25.5 hours/week, the average time children above 3 years of age spend in formal ELC (including state-funded and privately funded care) is well below the EU average of 29.5 hours (European Commission, 2021b) but meets the requirements of the revised Barcelona Targets. The ECCE programme contributes 15 hours to this target, while the National Childcare Scheme goes some way towards addressing the difference between ECCE hours and target intensity.

Disability is a risk factor in relation to both poverty and social exclusion in Ireland (Hammersley, 2020), and the Access and Inclusion Model has improved access for children in this particular group, although limited capacity means that supports can take a long time to become available. This affects level 7 supports in particular, which are reliant upon availability of suitably qualified ELC and nursing staff. Availability and uptake of the Access and Inclusion model increased considerably in the years following the introduction of the model, but a recent report (Whelan et al. 2021: 31) found "stark regional variation in the proportion of children with disabilities supported by AIM". In order to realise the full potential of this policy, it is important to address these problems insofar as they impact on children's access to or enjoyment of the ECCE programme. Traveller/Roma participation rates for the ECCE programme remain substantially lower than those of children of White Irish ethnic background (Pobal, 2022). One of the objectives of this review is to investigate the underlying reasons and a new funding model (EPM) designed to support participation in ELC and SAC for disadvantaged groups is in development.

Part III: International trends and case studies

International trends in ELC

This section draws on international comparative data from the EU, UNESCO, and OECD to provide a comparative focus on key indicators and an overview of current policy trends in ELC, and to assess how the ECCE programme in Ireland compares with ELC provision in other countries.

Intensity

Funded ELC in hours per week varies between OECD countries with universal free access "entitlement"[8] and ranges from 15 hours at the lower end (Switzerland, Sweden, Mexico, Ireland, and Australia) to 50 hours at the higher end (Greece). The mean "entitlement" is 24.5 free hours per week, and half of the countries offer between 20 and 26 free hours per week to children within the eligible age group. The current eligibility for 15h/week in Ireland is low in comparison to other OECD countries with a universal legal "entitlement".
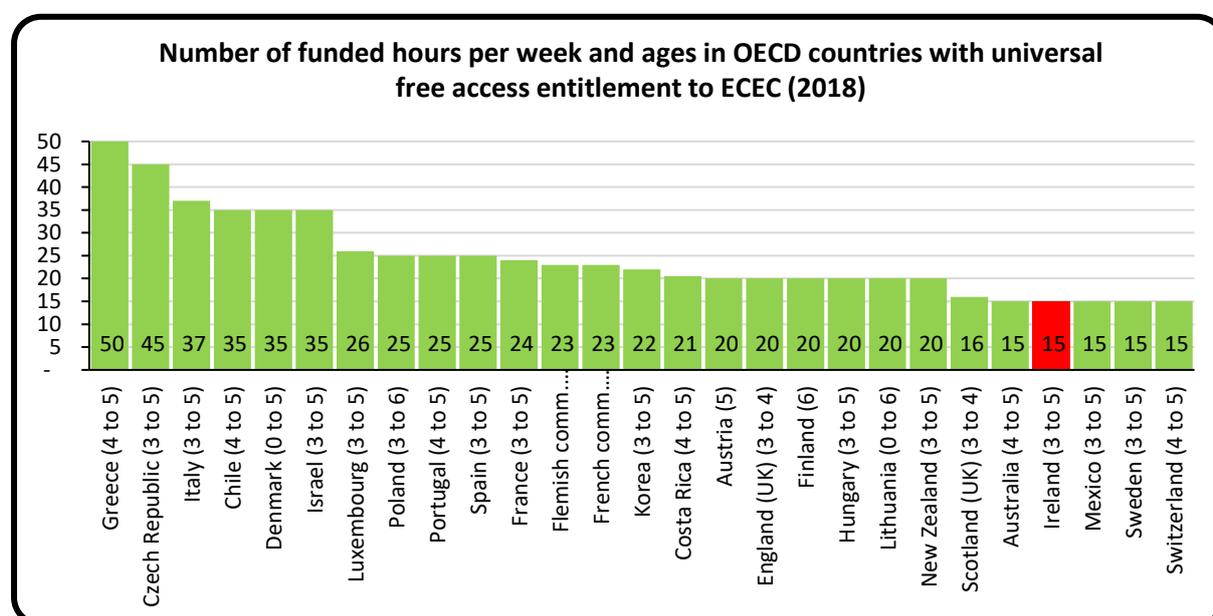
Figure 5 - Number of funded hours per week and ages in OECD countries (OECD, 2020)

Ratios

Child-staff ratios vary widely across different countries. Data is available on adult-child ratios in EU and OECD countries (OECD, 2022), although it is not clear whether this data refers to minimum ratios or average de facto ratios and how these were calculated[9]. The mean ratio across countries is reported as 1:10 in both the EU and the OECD, with ratios in ISCED 02 ranging from 1:4 in the UK to 1:20 in Mexico. At 1:11 and approximately 1:9, the minimum and average de facto adult-child ratios for the ECCE programme are approximately in keeping with these averages. Data is also available on the ratio of children to teaching staff. However, this data is less instructive and harder to compare, as teaching staff qualifications differ substantially between countries.

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[8] The OECD report uses the term "entitlement" – it is important to note, however, that while all children in Ireland are "eligible" for ECCE, a legal "entitlement" does not currently exist here.

[9] The ratio of children to contact staff (including teachers and teachers' aides) in ISCED 01 and ISCED 02 in Ireland is reported as 3:1, which is neither the minimum nor the average ratio in the ECCE programme.

Legal provision for free and compulsory ELC

A universal legal entitlement to ELC is in place in 17 out of 37 (46%) European countries or regions monitored in a recent Eurydice (2022) report, but the age at which children become entitled varies across the region, ranging from six months in Denmark to four years in Liechtenstein. In most of these 17 European countries (n=11), legal entitlement begins either at 1 or at 3 years of age.

Starting age of legal entitlement to ECCE in Europe
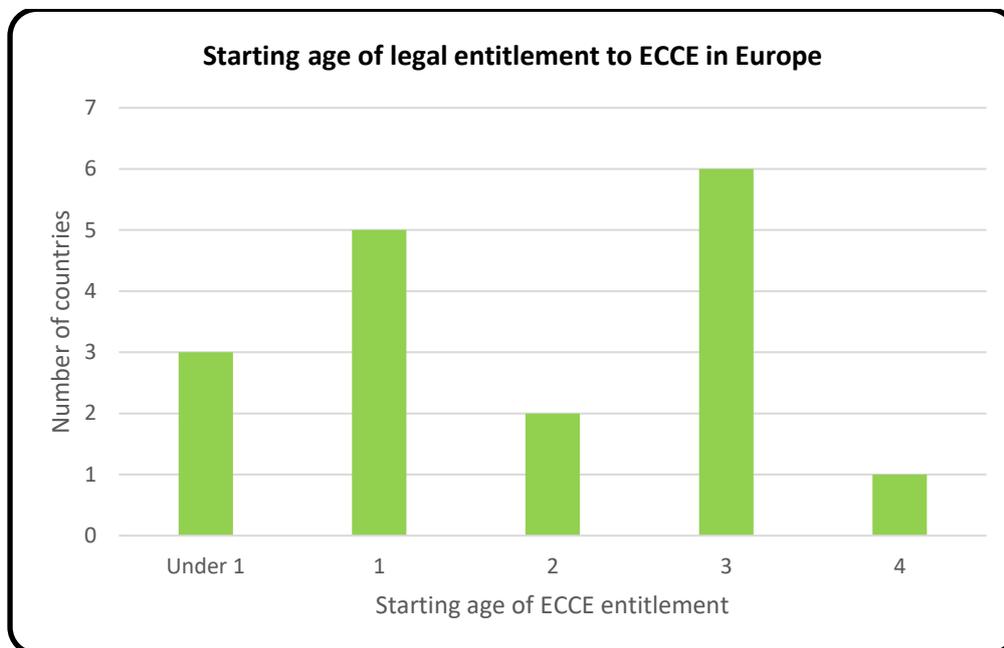
Figure 6 - Starting age of legal entitlement to ELC in Europe (Eurydice, 2022)

There is currently also a moderate to strong trend in Europe towards compulsory ELC. According to a Eurydice (2022) report, 22 out of the 37 European countries or regions monitored (59%) had made ELC attendance mandatory to some degree (e.g. from a certain age or for a certain number of hours), although starting age and duration of compulsory ELC vary across the region. The most common starting age of compulsory ELC is 5 (n=12, incl. Serbia at 5y6m), followed by 6 (n=5). Only five European countries have a compulsory ELC starting age under 5 (4: n=3, 3: n=2). Compulsory ELC in other European countries thus usually starts at approximately the same age as compulsory primary schooling in Ireland.

Worldwide, 61 countries currently have some legal provision for compulsory ELC and this is most common in middle- and high-income countries (UNESCO, 2021). In Europe and North America, close to half of all countries require ELC attendance to some degree. However, compulsory ELC is not always free. Among the 46 countries where ELC is both compulsory and free, approximately 54% require and offer one year of attendance, while 46% offer and require between two and three or more years of ELC attendance. In eight countries, the right to free ELC exceeds the period where ELC is compulsory, by up to three years.

The UNICEF (2021) report used the Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI) to measure the impact of legal provision for free and/or compulsory ELC on the developmental status of children across four developmental domains. The ECDI measures the percentage of children who are developmentally on track in at least three out of the four domains. Their analysis found that legal provision for free ELC was associated with a substantially higher median score on the ECDI (83%) than not having a statutory right to free ELC (66.3%), while the spread of ECDI scores was also narrower. Likewise, compulsory ELC

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(84%) was also associated with a higher median ECDI score than non-compulsory ELC. The greatest difference, of 17.7 percentage points, was observed between the median ECDI score in countries with no legal provision for free or compulsory ELC, and in those with legal provision for free and compulsory education. At one percentage point, the difference between the median score for countries with legal provision for free ELC and for those where ELC was free and compulsory by law was much smaller, suggesting that a legal right to free ELC is the key factor, although the data cannot offer proof of a causal relationship.

Ireland does not currently have legal provision for free or compulsory ELC, although a move to a statutory entitlement is envisaged for the future. The case for compulsory ELC is less strong. In Ireland, attendance is near universal in the general population, while children from Traveller and Roma communities and those with disabilities and additional needs are less likely to attend. Making ELC attendance compulsory cannot address the underlying reasons for this difference but would risk criminalising an already marginalised sector of the population.

ELC and school starting ages
While compulsory school starting age is beyond the scope of this review, its relationship with policy and practice in ELC is important. Across the OECD, by far the most common age to start compulsory education is 6 years (OECD, 2022). However, statistics on compulsory school starting age tend to mask a significant degree of variation. For example, the compulsory school starting age in Ireland is often reported as 6, in the same category as Germany. However, children in Germany usually start school on their 6th birthday *at the earliest*, while children in Ireland must have started school *by* their 6th birthday. As a result, there can be up to a full year's difference between the start of compulsory schooling between the two countries. In addition, many countries operate a cohort system, whereby the age at which a child starts school is fixed based on their birthday. This is different from the Irish system, where children may start school between the ages of 4 and 6 and within these boundaries it is up to parents to decide when to enrol their child.

The ECCE programme eligibility rules also mean that there is a gap between the end of ECCE programme entitlement and the start of compulsory schooling, even for the oldest children in each ECCE programme cohort, who will be 5 years and 6 months when their entitlement ends. The youngest children in each ECCE programme cohort run out of ECCE entitlement aged 4 years and 6 months. This misalignment between ECCE programme entitlement and the start of compulsory schooling creates a financial incentive for parents of September-December-born children to enrol their child into primary school before they are legally obliged to. OECD (2022) data shows that the typical primary school starting age in Ireland is in line with practice in most English-speaking OECD countries, but low compared to the vast majority of OECD countries:

Typical primary school starting age in OECD countries (2020)
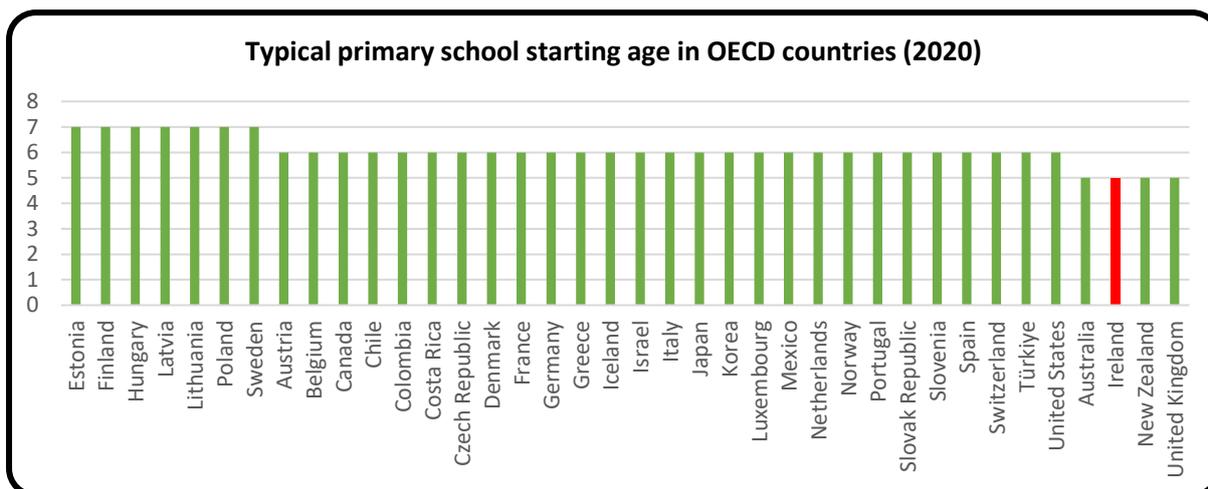
Figure 7 -Typical primary school starting age in OECD countries, (OECD, 2022)

The relatively young age at which children in Ireland usually start school explains the comparatively low percentage (61%) of children enrolled in ELC in Ireland between ages 3 and 5 in the face of near-universal ECCE programme uptake, as many 5-year-olds in Ireland have already moved on to primary school while some 3-year-olds are yet to start the ECCE programme.

Children enrolling in ECEC between ages 3 and 5 (ISCED 0) (2020)

Ireland	61.3%
EU23 average	90.0%
OECD average	83.3%
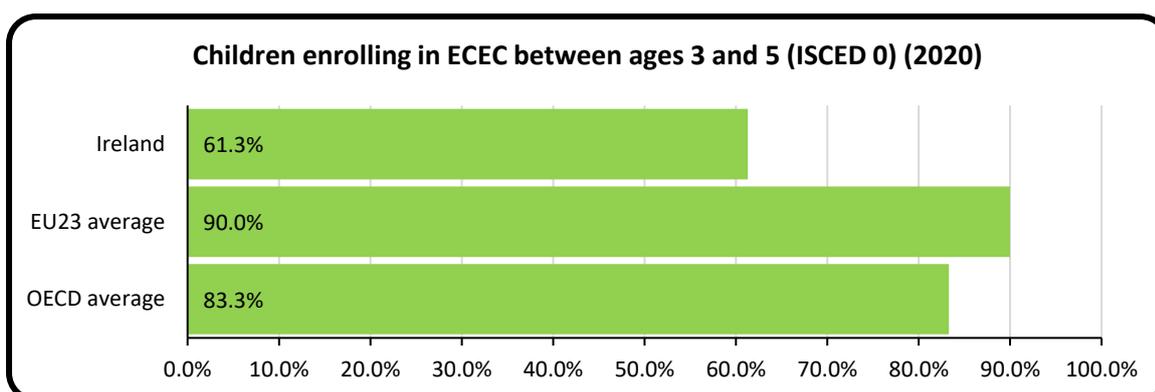
Figure 8 - Children enrolling in ELC between ages 3 and 5 years (OECD, 2022)

Staff qualifications and CPD

Structural reforms on staff qualifications and CPD are being introduced in many European countries, including Ireland (Eurydice, 2022). These reforms include requirements for minimum qualifications and the development of CPD systems – both to allow the existing workforce to acquire the necessary minimum qualifications and to support ongoing professional development for qualified staff.

Available data on minimum qualifications required to enter the ELC profession across OECD and EU member states is incomplete. The OECD (2022) report *Education at a Glance* reports minimum qualifications for teachers and/or teachers' aides in ELC for 24 countries. The term "teachers" refers to lead educators. In 14 of these countries, a Bachelor's degree (ISCED level 6) is required to work as an ELC teacher, while a qualification at ISCED level 5 (short-cycle tertiary education) is sufficient in six countries. The Slovak Republic only requires an upper secondary degree. In contrast, three countries require a postgraduate degree (ISCED level 7). For teachers' aides, most countries for which a minimum level is given in the OECD dataset require at least a degree at ISCED level 3. The Irish

minimum requirement of ISCED level 5 for room leaders is comparatively low, while the requirement of a qualification at ISCED level 4 for other staff working directly with children is comparatively high.
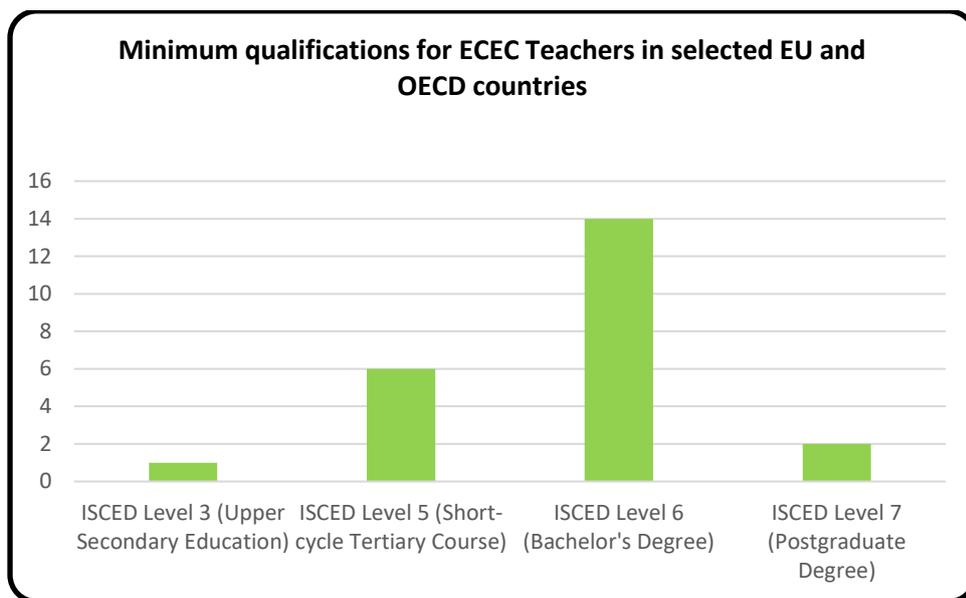
Figure 9 - Minimum qualifications for ELC teachers in selected EU and OECD countries (OECD, 2022)

CPD is a professional duty or a requirement for promotion in the majority of the European countries and regions monitored in the Eurydice (2022) report. However, in some countries, this requirement only applies to staff working with children aged three years and above. There is currently no such requirement in Ireland.

International case studies

Over the following pages, two international case studies of ELC delivery are described and discussed: Scotland and New Zealand. The case studies were chosen with several considerations in mind: ELC systems in both countries are widely recognised as regional and international examples of best practice and share some important structural elements with Ireland. New Zealand was also influential in the Irish journey towards quality in ELC, especially in the development of Aistear. Finally, availability of country-specific information also played a role, as up-to-date, in-depth and comprehensive descriptive accounts of individual international ELC systems are not widely available.

Not every aspect of each case study is immediately relevant to policy development for the ECCE programme, but rather speaks to the review's wider focus on quality (both structural and process) in ELC. The main purpose is to offer inspiration and provide leads towards ways in which the ECCE programme might be further enhanced in the longer term.

Scotland

<u>Structural parameters</u>

Funded ELC was first introduced in Scotland in 2002, when 3- and 4-year-olds became eligible for 412.5h/year of free provision. The entitlement is provided by local councils and delivered through a mix of private, voluntary, and council-operated providers. The Government extended eligibility to certain 2-year-olds and increased funded hours through a number of expansions over the years, aiming to:

- improve children's development and narrow the attainment gap;
- increase parents' opportunities to take up work, training or study;
- and improve family wellbeing through enhanced nurture and support.

Currently (as of August 2021), all 3-and 4-year-olds and approximately one quarter of all 2-year-olds (including looked-after children, children whose families are in receipt of a qualifying benefit, and children of a care-experienced parent) are eligible for 1140h/year of free provision. This equates to 30h/week during term-time. Local authorities have discretion to offer free ELC provision to other disadvantaged families who do not meet the current eligibility criteria. Preschool children spending 2 hours or more in the care of a regulated provider who has registered for the Scottish Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme are also entitled to a free daily serving of cow's milk or a milk alternative and healthy snack.

The impact of the recent expansion is currently being assessed through the Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare. At the time of writing, baseline data has been collected, but post-intervention data is yet to be gathered.

<u>Addressing low uptake among disadvantaged groups</u>

In 2021, 97% of eligible three- and four-year-olds were registered for funded ELC provision. However, at only 13% (approximately half of all eligible 2-year-olds), uptake among of 2-year-olds has been lower than expected. In some local authorities, as few as 5% of all 2-year-olds are registered for free ELC (Scottish Government, 2021).

In the face of low uptake among eligible 2-year-olds, the Scottish Government commissioned a study of drivers and barriers to uptake of ELC among this group of children (Scottish Government, 2017a). While there are unique factors explaining low uptake among 2-year-olds, some of the findings may be directly relevant to tackling low uptake of the ECCE programme among certain groups in Ireland. The qualitative, non-representative study found a lack of awareness to be the most significant factor explaining low uptake. Stakeholder interviews with local authority staff also suggested that, among those who were aware of the offer but didn't use it, "a lack of confidence to apply for and attend mainstream services" (Scottish Government, 2017a: 14) was an important factor. Cultural reasons were also mentioned, especially in relation to Roma communities, where attending ELC services may not be the norm.

The study further found that poster campaigns were not an effective way of targeting disadvantaged families. Instead, word of mouth and established relationships with trusted professionals (such as health visitors, ELC workers, social workers, nursery staff and primary staff, local parent and toddler groups, local Job Centre and housing association staff, among others) could be used more successfully to raise awareness, work with parents, and offer practical support around the application process. Stakeholders also emphasised that it was important to stress the benefits of ELC for two-year-olds and avoid stigmatising language, such as "vulnerable" or "disadvantaged", when promoting the offer. Furthermore, regular contact and close partnership working between professionals involved with eligible families were identified as key measures to "ensure that all staff were advocates of free ELC and that momentum was kept up in terms of promotion" (Scottish Government, 2017a: 11).

As the ECCE programme is a universal programme, stigma is less likely to be a significant factor explaining low uptake among disadvantaged groups than in Scotland (although data is not currently available to confirm this with certainty). However, close partnership working between professionals involved with families might be relevant to the Irish context.

Primary 1 deferral and additional ELC entitlement

Parents and carers in Scotland may defer their child's entry to primary school if the child is not yet 5 years old at the start of the school year. Deferral can include additional ELC entitlement. Currently, 4-year-old children born in January or February are automatically entitled to an additional funded preschool year if they defer their primary-one start. Furthermore, children born between August and December can apply for deferral and an additional funded preschool year, which may be granted at the discretion of their local authority.

From August 2023, all deferring children will be automatically entitled to an additional funded preschool year, so that parents can "make decisions for their children, based on what they feel is in the best interests of the child, without the financial barrier of additional ELC costs" (Scottish Government, 2020a: 1). A pilot was carried out in 2021/2022 to test this expansion and it is expected to be fully implemented by August 2023.

Government research (Scottish Government 2020b) conducted in 2018 found that deferral rates had increased over time. Children born in January and February (those with an automatic entitlement to an additional year of funded ELC) were much more likely to defer than those born between August and December (44% vs. 4% in 2018). Deferral rates were also negatively associated with age on a month-to-month basis. Boys, children with additional support needs or disabilities, White-Scottish and White-British children, and January-February-born children in less deprived areas were more likely to defer primary-1 entry than their peers. There was considerable variation in rates of deferral across local authorities. The campaign group Give Them Time (no date) published council responses to Freedom-of-Information requests indicating that, in recent years, the vast majority of requests for an additional year of funded ELC for children born between August and December were approved by councils across the country.

While primary school deferral is beyond the scope of this review, the Scottish approach to additional ELC entitlement for children who delay entry to primary school beyond the main ELC funding period is immediately relevant for Ireland – especially in relation to September-December-born children, who could legally defer their primary school entry by a year beyond the end of their ECCE programme eligibility under current rules.

Equity and Excellence Leads

As part of the Early Learning and Childcare Expansion, the Scottish Government pledged to supply 435 additional teachers or early-years graduate staff – known as Equity and Excellence Leads – to nurseries in the most deprived areas of Scotland. By 2021, 356 of these posts had been filled (Scottish Government 2021). Equity and Excellence Leads have two key responsibilities: working directly with children, and leading, supporting, and upskilling their colleagues on pedagogical practice. The role does not count into a setting's adult-child ratio and has no managerial responsibilities. As a result, Equity and Excellence Leads benefit from greater flexibility and more time for professional reflection than other staff.

Ireland has a similar role in the LINC Inclusion Coordinator, although the Equity and Excellence Lead has a broader focus on quality in pedagogical practice, while the Inclusion Coordinator is specifically concerned with matters of inclusion. Experiences from Scotland could inform future development of the Inclusion Coordinator's role.

Over the past 15 years, outdoor learning has come to play an important part in Scottish ELC policy and practice, prompted by concerns over child obesity rates, the extent of inactive time children spent indoors, and the attainment gap between disadvantaged and better-off children. Scotland's "Curriculum for Excellence" stands out in its strong emphasis on outdoor learning, which includes an extensive "Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning" (Scottish Government, 2010). A National Outdoor Play & Learning Position Paper (Scottish Government, 2022) describes playing and learning outdoors "a fundamental part of growing up in Scotland" and promises to make it an everyday activity in Scottish ELC. Outdoor learning is also integral to the Early Learning and Childcare Expansion, where £860,000 were made available to expand outdoor learning spaces for children in ELC. Policy on outdoor learning overlaps significantly with policy on play, indicating that outdoor-learning in Scotland is conceptualised as a form of play-based learning, including an important element of risky play.

Henry Mathias, the Care Inspectorate's NCS Strategic Lead, reports that a regulatory shift from a risk-averse, rules-based approach to one focused on risk-benefit analysis was instrumental in facilitating the move towards more outdoor learning in Scottish ELC (Mathias, 2018). Changes in inspection methods included a reduced emphasis on compliance with specified rules; a greater focus on observing children at play outdoors and assessing how they were benefitting; more encouragement and positive engagement with providers; and reassurances that risk assessments were not expected for everyday activities. These measures helped bring about cultural change and give providers confidence to embrace outdoor learning.

Perlman, Howe, and Bergeron (2020) report that the expansion of free ELC entitlement was also an important enabling factor, as (part-time) outdoor learning can often be facilitated in existing green spaces (such as parks and forests) with minimal additional investment in infrastructure. Barriers included parental and staff attitudes and skills, including parental attitudes to risk and inclement weather, and a lack of relevant experience and training among educators. The authors argue that when offered as a "choice" (e.g. a specialist forest nursery), children from less disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to access outdoor learning than more disadvantaged children. Outdoor learning therefore needs to be a universal part of provision in all ELC settings and not a "choice" for parents to make. Some settings secured funding to purchase outdoor clothing and boots for children and staff, which can be key to enabling children from disadvantaged backgrounds to fully participate in outdoor learning.

To support practitioners, the Scottish Government has published guidance covering advice on integrating the outdoors into learning (Education Scotland, 2009), accessing outdoor spaces (Scottish Government, 2020c) and designing high-quality outdoor ELC spaces (Scottish Government, 2017b).

Both outdoor learning and risky play are already supported through Aistear and Síolta. In addition, Tusla (2023) recently published guidance for providers of early years settings operating outdoors and the new First 5 Implementation Plan 2023-2023 includes a commitment to "develop a national policy statement on outdoor learning and play" by 2025. In this context and in light of the increased interest and focus on outdoor play in settings across Ireland since the COVID-19 pandemic (Early Childhood Ireland, 2023), perhaps some learnings from the Scottish model might be welcome. The Scottish experience shows that Governments can take steps to actively promote outdoor play in mixed-market contexts similar to the Irish system by developing special curricula and guidance, providing dedicated funding for high-quality outdoor spaces and equipment, and ensuring that approaches to inspection and compliance encourage rather than hinder outdoor and risky play.

New Zealand

<u>Structural Parameters</u>

The ELC sector in New Zealand is structurally similar to the Irish ELC sector, consisting of a diverse range of centre- and home-based settings, which are mostly operated by private providers (including community and commercial providers). All 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds are entitled to up to 6 hours of funded ELC provision per day or up to 20 hours a week, although most children start school on or shortly after their 5th birthday. (Some schools operate a cohort system, while other schools operate continuous entry where children can be enrolled on their fifth birthday or any subsequent day up to their 6th birthday, when schooling becomes compulsory). Participation among 3- and 4-year-olds is near universal. However, Māori, Pacific, and refugee children, as well as children with disabilities, are disadvantaged groups in New Zealand society, are more likely to experience hardship, and less likely to participate in ELC than Pākehā (European New Zealand) children (Te One and Ewens, 2019). Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds also tend to spend fewer hours in ELC than their better-off peers. The current adult-child ratio for children over 2 years of age is 1:10. However, the Government's Early Learning Action Plan for 2019-2029 (Ministry of Education (New Zealand), 2019) contains plans to reduce the minimum ratio to 1:5. Teacher-led services are subject to minimum qualification requirements. At least 50% of the required staff must be registered, early childhood education qualified teachers. A funding incentive has been put in place to increase the proportion of qualified teaching staff to 80% or more. In 2019, 96% of services had achieved this goal. In addition, there is a current policy shift toward teacher-led services employing 100 percent of staff with this qualification (Mitchell, 2021). Approximately 10% of all ELC services operate through the medium of te reo Māori for more than 50% of the time. A smaller number of settings operate through languages other than English or te reo Māori, most commonly Tongan, Samoan, and Mandarin.

<u>Te Whāriki (2017)</u>

New Zealand's early childhood curriculum framework, Te Whāriki, was introduced in 1996 and updated in 2017. At the time of its introduction, it was considered internationally ground-breaking, and the development of Ireland's Early Years Curricular Framework, Aistear, was strongly informed by it. Te Whāriki is non-prescriptive in relation to activities and contents, and its main focus is on learning dispositions and broad competencies. Settings are expected to develop their own curriculum in agreement with the principles, strands and goals of Te Whāriki and in accordance with the socio-cultural context of each setting and the priorities and values of the families using it. Bi-culturalism is an important aspect of Te Whāriki and all settings are expected to integrate Māori language and culture in their curriculum.

A review of Te Whāriki was carried out in 2016 (Education Review Office, 2016), in response to concerns about the effectiveness of its implementation, in recognition of the changing socio-economic, cultural, demographic, and educational context in the country (Te One and Ewens, 2019). The review found that the degree of understanding and implementation of Te Whāriki varied across the sector, and that engagement with Māori language and culture was often basic and tokenistic.

As a result, a revised Te Whāriki was developed and published in April 2017. In the new version, the original principles, strands, and goals were retained. However, learning outcomes were condensed into 20 broadened outcomes (down from 118) and practitioners were encouraged to focus more on the local context of their setting and the priorities of the children and families using it when designing their setting's curriculum. The bicultural framing of the curriculum framework was also strengthened and links were made with New Zealand's national curriculum, including the (English medium) New Zealand Curriculum and the (Maori medium) Te Marautanga o Aotearoa. Examples and implementation advice were added to strengthen the quality of implementation.

While Aistear is the curriculum framework for the Irish Early Childhood sector in its entirety, it is an important influence on quality in ECCE programme delivery. As Aistear is being reviewed, learnings from New Zealand's revised curriculum may be of interest in the Irish context – especially in relation to promoting a more holistic understanding and implementation of the curriculum framework among educators and providers of the ECCE programme.

Visiting Teachers Supporting Home-Based Providers

Home-based ELC providers in New Zealand receive support from a visiting teacher, who visits each child once per month. Although visits are based on the number of children, the visiting teacher's primary role is to provide the home-based educator with adult instruction, mentoring and review. A review of home-based Early Childhood Education (Ministry of Education (New Zealand), 2018) therefore recommended strengthening the role of the visiting teacher by requiring visiting teachers to have experience teaching adults. It also recommended that a particular visiting teacher should be allocated to each educator to ensure consistency and provide effective oversight.

Currently, approximately 4% (n=168) of ECCE programme providers in Ireland operate alone, according to information from the Core Funding application. The new registration requirement for childminders included in the National Action Plan for Childminding will increase the number of childminders who are eligible to provide the ECCE programme, which might lead to an increase in the number of providers operating alone. New Zealand's approach constitutes an interesting example of a policy that can help support skills development and quality provision among this group of providers.

Supply Management

In order to address demand and supply problems and ensure parental choice, the Government has committed to taking a more active role in managing supply in the sector through a managed network approach, both in relation to over-supply threatening sustainability, and to under-supply in certain areas of the country. Options considered in the Government's Early Learning Action Plan (Ministry of Education (New Zealand), 2019) in relation to increasing provision in under-served areas include setting up state-owned services, offering funding incentives, approaching preferred providers, and calling for expressions of interest. Over-supply may be managed by introducing stricter licencing procedures which take into account existing services in the area. Specific supports have been proposed to ensure that community-run services that arose "to reflect specific community, language and cultural aspirations" (Ministry of Education (New Zealand), 2019:35) are able to develop the necessary management skills to stay viable, thereby protecting "an option that is valued by parents".

As discussed above, there is currently an oversupply of ECCE programme providers in certain areas of Ireland, while other areas are underserved. Active supply management is a feature of ELC systems in other jurisdictions, including New Zealand. The ELC system in New Zealand is structurally similar to Ireland in many respects and learnings from the country's experiences in supply management may be relevant to tackling supply-related issues in Ireland.

Summary and key findings of the evidence review

This evidence review examined the ECCE programme in relation to international best practice, drawing on the latest research-based evidence in the field. It also appraised the ECCE programme's contribution to meeting Ireland's international obligations. Finally, it provided a comparative analysis of trends in ELC across Europe and the OECD. By way of conclusion, key findings are summarised below:

Eligibility and uptake

- The evidence review identified several challenges in relation to the current eligibility rules, especially in relation to the rigidity of these rules which contrasts with the emphasis on parental choice in school starting age.
- Uptake of the first and second ECCE programme years varies by birth month. Children born in January and February are least likely to avail of both programme years and are more likely to be skip the second ECCE programme year than to avail of it.

Intensity

- There was mixed evidence on the impact of ELC intensity on different outcomes, including some evidence that more years and more regular attendance had a positive impact on a range of outcomes. It is unclear whether and how the number of hours per week impacts on outcomes, but some evidence suggested that longer hours can be beneficial in some regards and do not increase negative outcomes.

Adult-child ratio and group size

- The evidence on ratios and group sizes is generally weak and recommended ratios and group sizes for two- to three-year-olds are often different from those for three- to five-year-olds. These groups are often catered for together in ECCE programme settings.
- Several studies found that lower adult-child ratios than the ratio provided in the ECCE programme tend to be associated with higher quality, and that low adult-child ratios and small group sizes can impact positively on process quality. One study identified an optimum adult-child ratio of 1:7.5 and group size of 15.
- There was no evidence for or against any particular minimum group size. Considering the evidence in favour of small group sizes, there are no significant concerns that the current permitted group size for registered childminders would necessarily be inadequate for ECCE programme provision.

Accessibility

- ECCE programme provision is not distributed evenly across the country, but is concentrated in areas classified as "marginally below" or "marginally above average" on the Pobal HP Deprivation Index to an extent that is disproportionate to the percentage of the population residing in these areas. "Very" and "extremely disadvantaged" areas are particularly underserved compared to the share of the overall population resident in these areas.
- Programme rules allowing part-time and full-time providers to prioritise paying children may also affect availability of ECCE-only provision in areas where demand exceeds supply, affecting the free and universal character of the ECCE programme.

- Planning controls are used in other countries and recommended in the literature to ensure a minimum level of coverage in underserved areas. There are currently no safeguards in place to ensure that every child in Ireland can avail of a free ECCE programme place in practice.
- Under the current application process, parents are responsible for finding a place. There is little transparency on admission criteria and few safeguards against discrimination. Coordinated application systems are used in some jurisdictions with a statutory entitlement to improve access for vulnerable groups and help guarantee a place for each child.

Inclusivity

- ECCE programme uptake is uneven. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Traveller and Roma children, and children with disabilities are least likely to avail of the ECCE programme. Evidence has shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds stand to benefit the most from ELC and there is some evidence to suggest that this effect is increased by universal provision.
- AIM is enjoying increasing uptake across the country and is improving access to the ECCE programme for children with disabilities and additional needs regardless of diagnostic status, but large variations in uptake remain between counties.
- There is no tailored programme in place to increase ECCE programme uptake among Roma and Traveller communities though work is underway to introduce the EPM.
- Optional extras and booking deposits may affect affordability in some cases.

Providers, workforce, and working conditions

- The ECCE programme is delivered by a diverse range of private providers within a market-based model, including services operating for profit as well as community providers.
- International evidence has shown that quality tends to vary substantially within market-based ELC systems across socio-geographic lines and equal access is often compromised.
- Adequate funding and strong regulatory measures help mediate these risks. Increased public engagement with planning and provision, including targeted government provision in areas with market failure, has also be helpful in other countries.
- Minimum qualification requirements for lead educators delivering the ECCE programme are low compared to other countries, while minimum qualification requirements for Early Years educators are comparatively high. Many educators already exceed these requirements.
- Several studies have shown a positive association between managers' and educators' initial training and certain quality indicators and child outcomes, but other studies have found only a very small effect.
- CPD has been identified as a key predictor of quality interactions, child development and learning and can be a powerful tool to increase quality if done well. A well-defined, evidence based CPD system can help raise quality in the sector.
- Poor working conditions affect staff turnover rates and services are experiencing challenges in relation to staff recruitment and retention. This has an immediate impact on the quality and availability of provision.
- Working conditions in the sector do not yet match current efforts to advance professionalisation and to raise educator qualification levels.

Governance and quality control

- Tusla, the Department of Education Inspectorate, and Pobal carry out inspection or compliance visits within their respective remits.
- Feedback from ELC services highlights the substantial administrative burden associated with these visits and a need to streamline evaluation and monitoring processes, though work to address this is underway.

Interface with other programmes and initiatives

- There are important interactions between the ECCE programme and a number of schemes, initiatives, and processes, including key government strategies, funding programmes, specialist provision, the DEIS scheme, and arrangements around transition to primary school.
- Research has shown that co-operation between ELC settings and primary schools is in need of development, especially in relation to curricular and pedagogical approaches and sharing information about individual children's needs.
- The Mo Scéal template (NCCA) can play an important role in this regard. Plans to develop a national transitions policy and national model of implementation in practice, pledged in First 5, are also promising.

Contribution to meeting international obligations

- The ECCE programme is making a significant contribution to meeting Ireland's obligations in relation to key UN and EU targets and goals on participation rates for children over the age of 3, notably the Barcelona target of 96% participation for 3-5-year-olds.
- To a lesser extent (due to the boundaries of its age-based eligibility rules), the ECCE programme also contributes to the 45% increase in the participation rate for children under the age of 3 stipulated in Ireland's country-specific Barcelona target for this age group.
- The ECCE programme also makes a partial contribution to reaching the revised Barcelona Targets on intensity of participation.
- Recommendations in relation to participation from children from disadvantaged backgrounds and with disabilities, quality provision, territorial coverage, affordability and accessibility still pose challenges to varying degrees.

International trends in ELC

- The current eligibility for 15 hours per week is low in international comparison. The mean entitlement in OECD countries with universal free legal entitlement is 24.5 hours per week.
- Ratios in ELC vary widely across different countries. Minimum and de facto average ratios in the ECCE programme are approximately in keeping with reported OECD and EU averages.
- In Europe, there is currently a moderate trend towards legal provision for free ELC (46% of countries) and a moderate to strong trend towards compulsory ELC (59%), but age ranges and duration vary substantially. The most common starting age of compulsory ELC in Europe is 5.
- Legal provision for compulsory ELC is associated with better developmental outcomes compared to no legal provision for free or compulsory ELC, but the difference between countries with free ELC and those with free and compulsory ELC is much smaller.
- At 5, the typical primary school starting age in Ireland is low compared to most other OECD countries (OECD, 2022). In most of these countries, children typically start school aged 6. In a minority of (mostly Nordic and Baltic) countries, children typically start school aged 7.

- Structural reforms on staff qualifications and CPD are being introduced in many European countries, including Ireland. The current minimum qualification level for room leaders delivering the ECCE programme is comparatively low, while the minimum requirements for other staff working with children are comparatively high. However, in 2021, 42.6% of all ECCE room leaders were educated to NFQ Level 7 or higher.

International case studies

- Scotland is notable for its innovative approach to addressing low uptake among disadvantaged groups; policies on primary 1 deferral with additional ELC entitlement; promoting excellence through highly-qualified, specialist staff; and strong record of outdoor learning and play.
- New Zealand recently revised its influential early childhood curriculum framework, Te Whāriki, which informed the development of Aistear. The revised version hopes to achieve more effective implementation and help improve quality. New Zealand is also pursuing a more active approach to supply management and has developed an innovative approach to supporting home-based ELC providers through visiting teachers, which may be of interest if the number of childminders registered to deliver the ECCE programme increases following the National Action Plan for Childminding.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

A range of methods was employed to gather and analyse the views of key stakeholders, including ECCE programme providers, educators, parents and children, and experts, throughout the review process. These methods, and the children's rights informed approach guiding the review, are described below.

Children's rights informed approach

This research adopted a children's rights informed approach. In particular, work was guided by Article 12 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which stipulates that children have the right to be involved in all matters affecting them and their input be given due weight, as well as Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of Article 12 which advises that 'voice is not enough'. Lundy (2007) argues that it is important that: children are provided with a safe and inclusive 'space' to form and express their views; they must be facilitated to 'voice' their views; their views must be listened to by the appropriate 'audience'; and these views must be acted upon ('influence'), as appropriate.

As such, the research team employed a co-produced and children's rights informed methodology, involving a Children's, Parents' and Educators' Advisory Group (CPEAG), an Oversight Group comprising representatives of relevant Government Departments and arms-length bodies, and a Designated Listener. The research team spent an entire morning in the CPEAG setting, talking with children, educators and parents and trialing qualitative and quantitative instruments. A dissemination visit to the CPEAG service will take place after the publication of the report. The Oversight Group also advised on research processes, including survey and interview schedule design, literature review remit, interpretation and reporting in regular meetings (approximately monthly) and scrutinised draft versions of the interim and final reports.

The co-produced nature of the research design, including input from children, facilitated meaningful and relevant data collection processes. Additionally, during data collection, the research team were equipped with a range of different creative and arts-based resources to meaningfully engage children in playful conversations. Furthermore, in order to address the 'audience' and 'influence' aspects of the Lundy model (2007), a Designated Listener was established to ensure that the findings emerging from this project and the voices of those children involved are heard by the appropriate 'audience' and acted upon ('influence'), as appropriate. The Minister for Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth acted in the capacity of the Designated Listener and provided a commitment (which was communicated to participants through an online video) to ensure that the findings and views are given due weight and acted upon, as appropriate.

Methods: Work Package 2

Work Package 2 adopted a mixed-methods design, involving quantitative online surveys and qualitative case studies.

Quantitative methods: online surveys

Two bespoke online surveys were developed in partnership with the research Oversight Group, addressing core issues regarding accessibility, adherence, intensity, responsiveness, quality of delivery, ethos, pedagogical approach and curriculum, parental involvement and managing transitions etc. One survey was targeted at parents and the other was targeted at service providers. (See Appendix 1 for details of survey instruments).

Participants, recruitment and sampling

With regard to the parent survey, all parents and carers of children enrolled in the ECCE programme at the time of the survey were eligible to complete the survey (these were the only inclusion criteria). For the providers, all services contracted to deliver the ECCE programme at the time of the survey were eligible to complete the provider survey (these were the only inclusion criteria). Services were invited to participate via email, using contact details available in the public domain. Each service was issued with a personal, single-use link, to ensure that each setting could participate only once. Parent survey participants were recruited via contracted ECCE programme services, as the research team did not have access to parents' contact details. In total, n=1,320 services completed the provider survey (after merging with administrative data and cleaning, a dataset of 1291 services remained). A total of n=910 parents completed the parent survey[1].

Procedure

Participation in both surveys was completely voluntary. The surveys were hosted online using 'Smart Survey' and were available for a period of 7 weeks, from 18th April to 7th June 2023. The provider survey was available in English and Irish and the parent survey in English, Irish, Polish and Ukrainian. Surveys could be accessed from desktop and mobile devices.

With regard to making contact with participants, a database of contact details for all ECCE programme services was compiled from data available on the NCS website and the Tulsa Register of Early Years Services. Survey invitations for both provider and parent surveys were sent directly to all contracted services. ECCE providers were asked to distribute the parent survey invitation amongst their registered parents. A response maximisation strategy was employed to follow up with services who had yet to complete the survey and to increase the number of parent survey responses. The parent survey was completely anonymous. For the provider survey, respondents were required to input a unique identifier, which allowed existing setting-specific administrative data held by Pobal to be linked with new data gathered through the provider survey. The merged dataset was subsequently anonymised.

Analysis

Survey data was exported from Smart Survey to an Excel file. The data was then analysed using a range of descriptive and inferential statistics. Chi-squared tests were carried out to identify significant associations between variables (for example, between parental satisfaction and whether the child had a disability/additional needs or not).

Composition of the provider survey sample

In total, 39.6% (n=511) of respondents to the provider survey were "owner-managers (in adult-child ratio)", followed by "owner-manager (not in adult-child ratio)" (24.1%, n=311), "manager employed by the setting (not in adult-child ratio)" (18.3%, n=236) and "manager employed by the setting (in adult-child ratio)" (11.9%, n=154). A small number of survey responses were completed by a lead educator, educator, or other member of staff. Most respondents (62.6%) were educated to degree level (NFQ Level 7 or above) and had more than 10 years of experience, both in the sector (88.3%, n=1139) and in their role (60.2%, n=776).
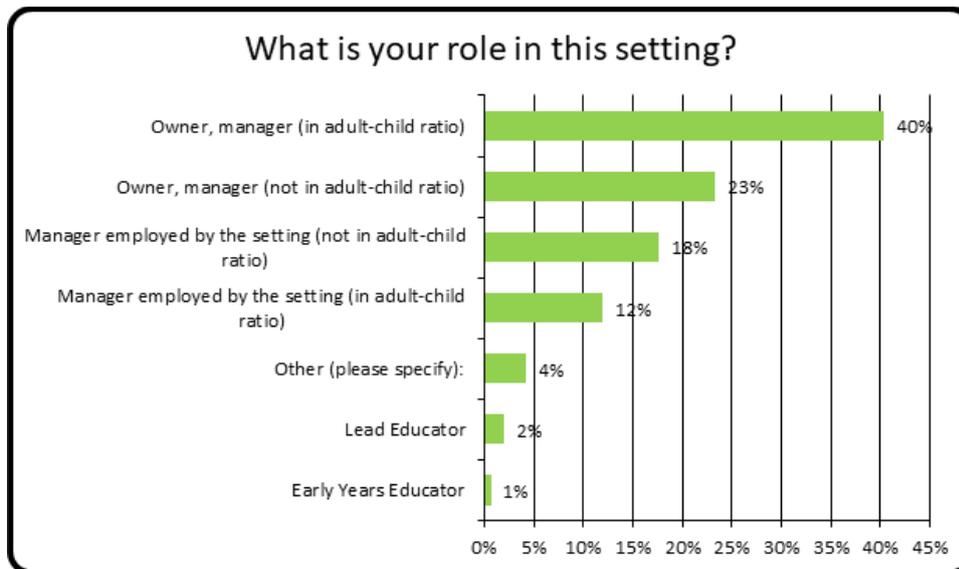
Figure 10 - Respondent's role in the service – provider survey
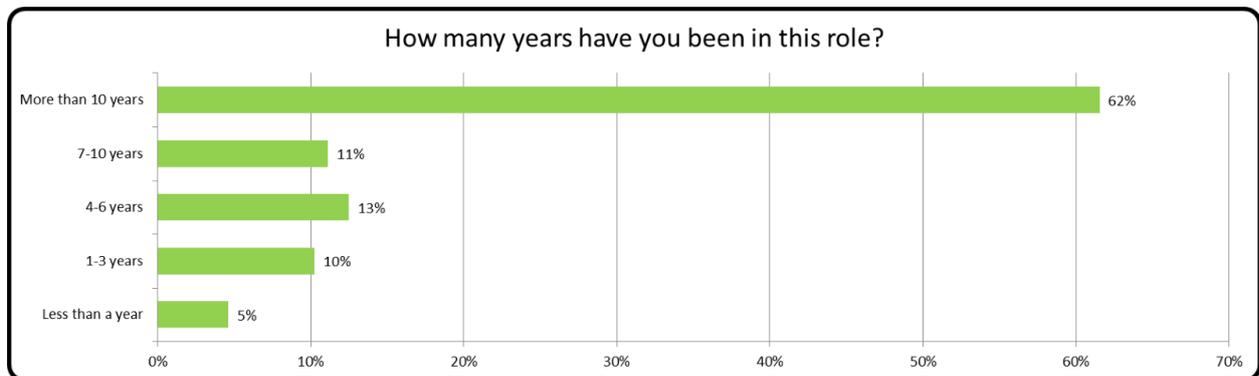
Figure 11 - Respondent's number of years in role
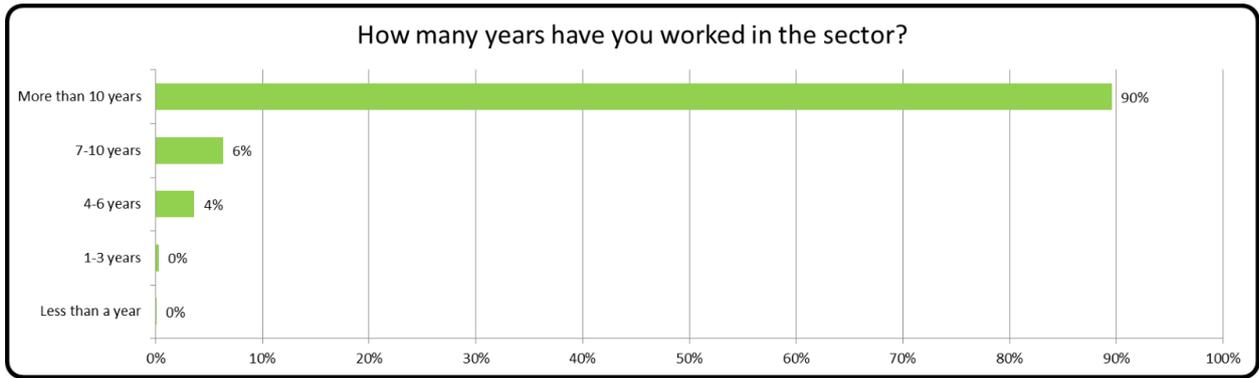
Figure 12 - Respondent's number of years working in ELC sector
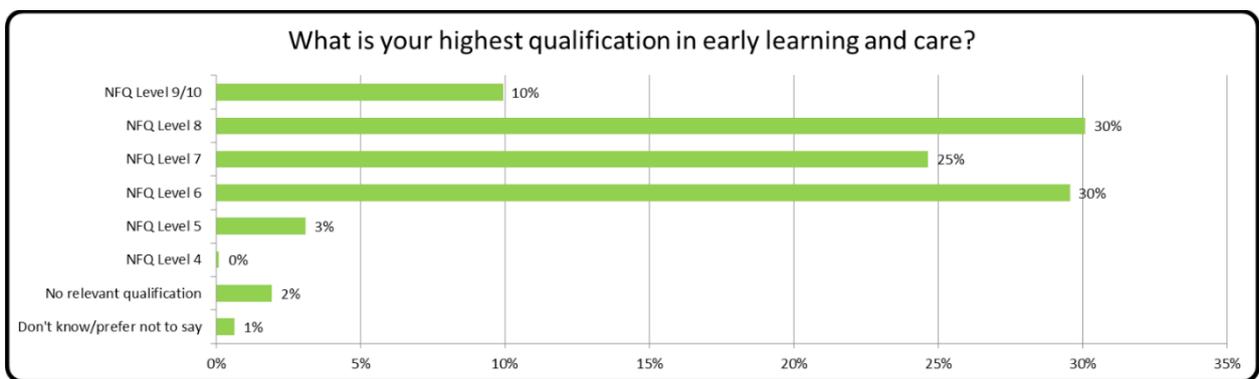
Figure 13 - Respondent's highest qualification in ELC

Just under a third (29.5%, n=381) of services taking part in the provider survey were community-led, while 70.5% (n=910) were private businesses. Community services are thus slightly over-represented in the survey sample, compared to the general population of ECCE programme providers (25.9% Community vs. 74.1% Private). 6.7% operated through the medium of Irish, compared to 7% of the overall population.

36.8% (n=475) of provider survey respondents were located in a rural setting, compared to 36.3% of the overall population. As shown in the graphics below, (see figure 15) the geographic distribution of the provider survey sample across different counties was very similar to the overall population of ECCE programme services, with no county particularly over- or underrepresented. The same is the case for areas with different ratings on the Pobal HP Deprivation index.
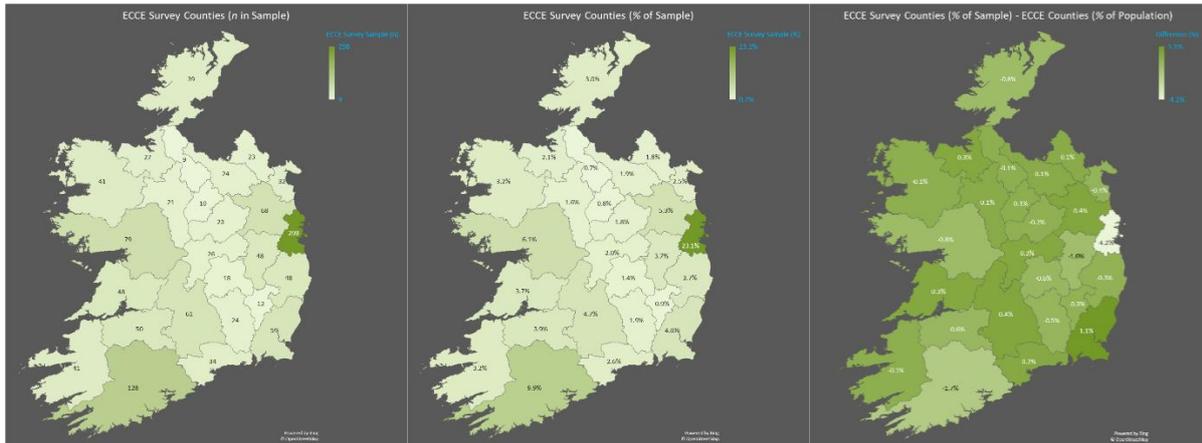
Figure 14 - Geographic distribution of provider survey sample

Composition of the parent survey sample

The vast majority of respondents to the parent survey were female (92.5%, n=755) and the most common age group was 31-40 (62.9%, n=508), followed by 41-50 (26.9%, n=217), and 21-30 (8.7%, n=70). Most respondents described their ethnicity as "White–Irish" (82.8%, n=676), followed by "any other white background" (9.7%, n=79). Three respondents (0.4%) identified as "White – Irish Traveller or Roma" and a larger minority identified as "Asian or Asian Irish" (n=30, 3.7%), "Black or Black Irish" (n=12, 1.5%) or "Other" (n=12, 1.5%). 19.4% (n=158) of respondents reported use of a language other than English or Irish at home.
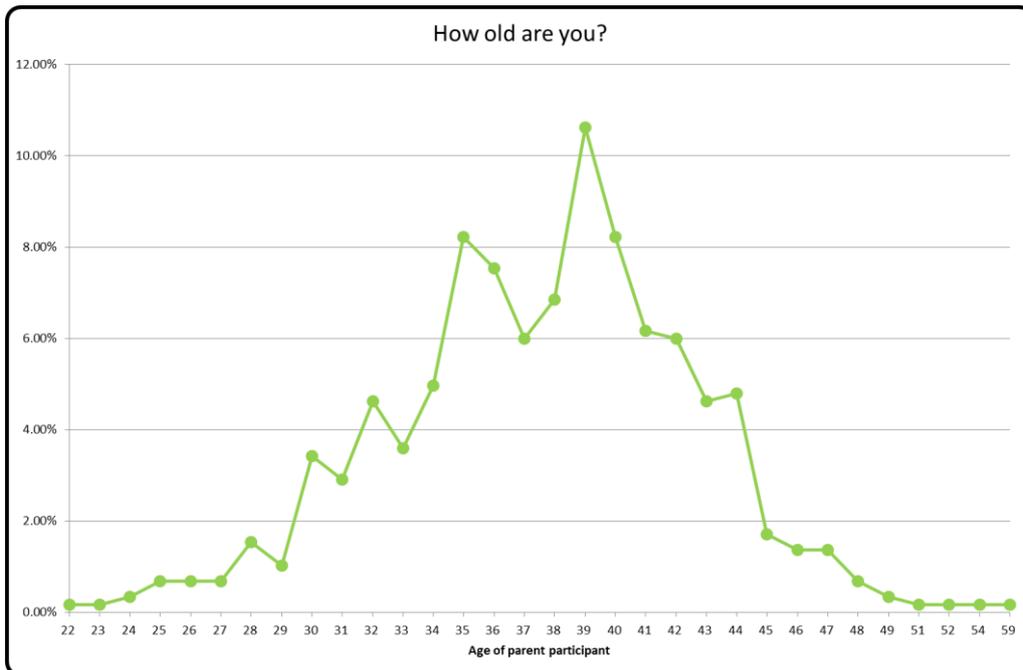
Figure 15 - Parent survey respondents' age range
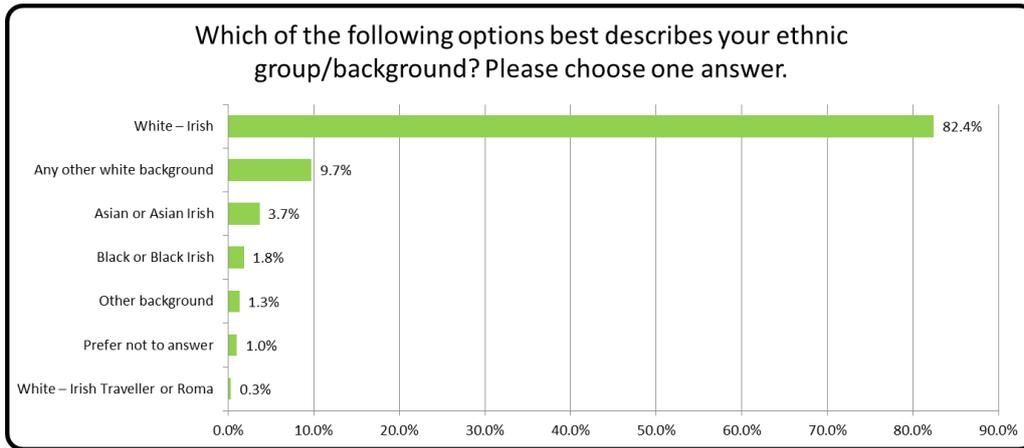
Figure 16 - Parent survey respondents' ethnic background

Most respondents were in full-time (52.4%, n=427) or part-time work (24.8%, n=202). In addition, 9.6% (n=78) of respondents were unemployed. The majority of respondents were educated to degree level (NFQ Levels 7-9, 64.2%, n=523), while 21.7% were educated to NFQ Levels 4–6, and 10.4% had primary- or secondary-school education only. Most respondents shared their home with one or more other adults (91.5%, n=745), in most cases (96.0%, n=713) a spouse or partner. Spouses or partners were most likely to work full-time (87.9%, n=626) and 51.3% (n=365) of spouses or partners were educated to NFQ Level 7 or higher. The distribution of household income levels was fairly uniform. 43.3% (n=352) of parent survey respondents indicated that they lived in a village, open country, or rural County Dublin, while 32% (n=260) lived in a town, 14.5% (N=118) in Dublin City and Dun Laoghaire, and the remainder (10.2%, n=83) in Waterford, Galway, Limerick, and Cork City.
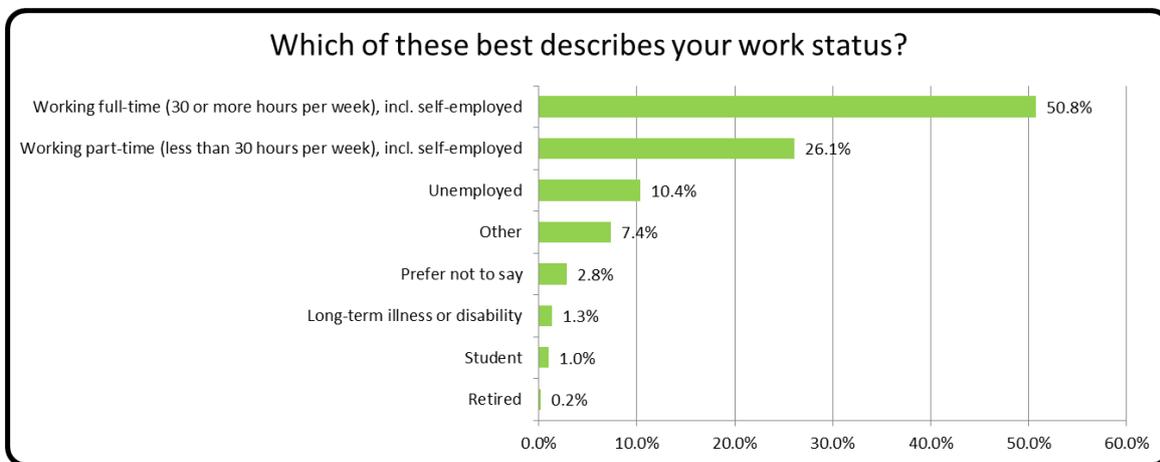
Figure 17 - Parent survey respondents' work status
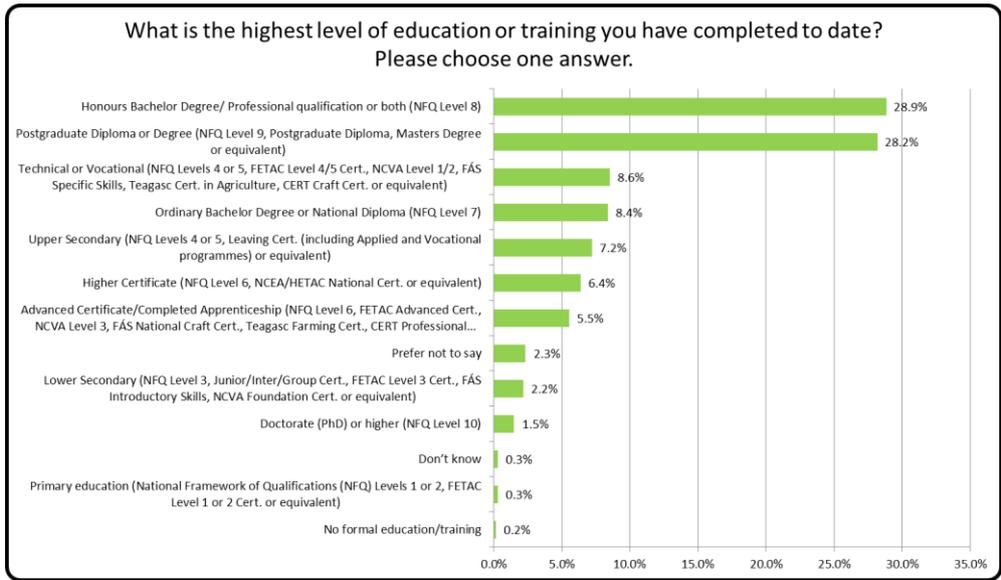
Figure 18 -Highest level of education of parent survey respondents
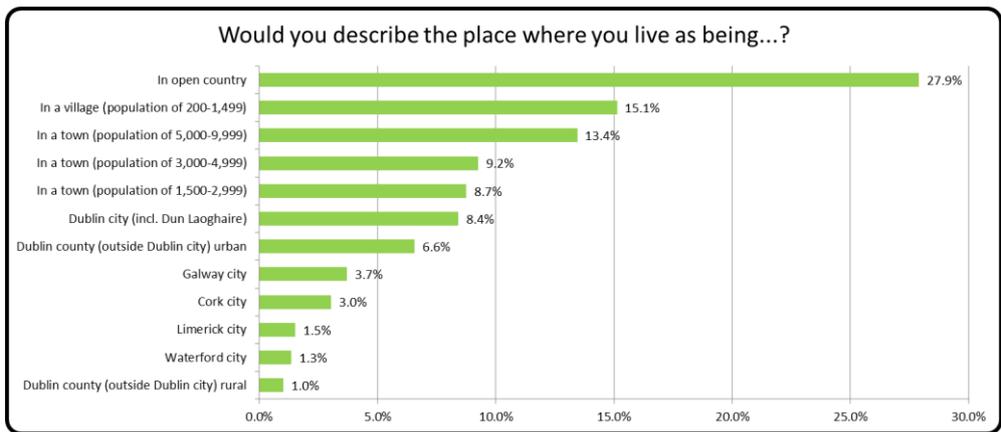
Figure 19 -Where do parent survey respondents live?
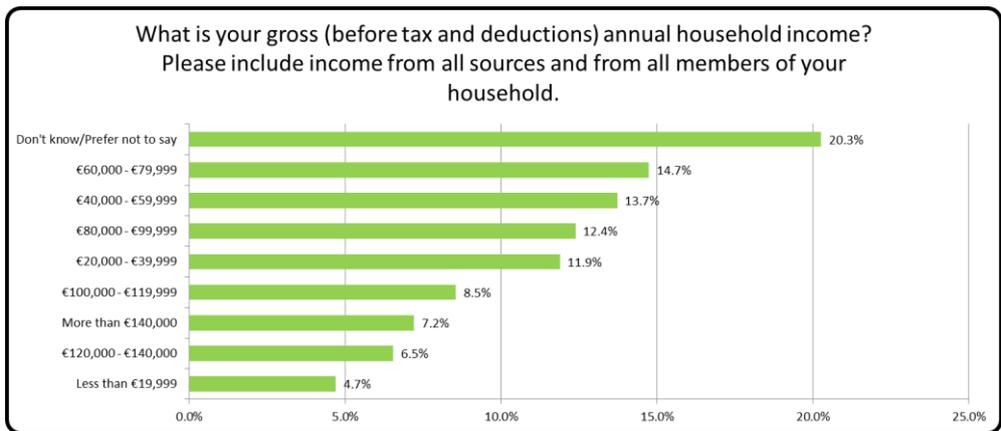
Figure 20 - Parent survey respondents' gross annual household income

The majority of respondents had a 4-year-old child (n=424, 52%) availing of the ECCE programme, while 34.7% (n=283) of the children were 3 years old and a minority of 13.0% (n=106) were 5 years old. A small number of six-year-olds were also represented in the sample.

Birth months were relatively uniformly distributed, but respondents' children were least likely to have a January birthday. This is in keeping with the decreased probability, at population level, that a January-born child will avail of the second ECCE programme year. 7.1% (n=58) of respondents reported that their child had a longstanding illness, condition, or disability.

Qualitative methods: case studies

In-depth qualitative case studies were carried out across 30 ECCE settings. The research team worked with each setting to establish a suitable date and time for the visit. Across each setting, a range of different methods were employed. This included qualitative interviews and focus groups, playful conversations with children, and practice-based observations. Detail on each of these methods is presented below.

The format of each visit varied slightly as the research team adapted their approach to best suit the flow and needs of each setting. For example, in some services, conversations with children were carried out with all children during circle time. Other services did not normally practise circle time and, in these cases, conversations with children were integrated into children's play and carried out in small groups or individually. In naíonraí, participants were given the option to conduct interviews *as Gaeilge* (in Irish) and these visits were conducted by bi-lingual staff.

Participants, recruitment and sampling

Thirty ECCE settings were selected to take part in the qualitative case studies. Across each setting, a range of participants were invited to take part in various aspects of the research. Setting leaders, managers, educators, and parents were invited to participate in interviews and focus groups. Children were invited to engage in playful conversations and classroom practice was also observed.

Procedure: Practice-based Observations

Practice-based observations were carried out at each of the 30 participating settings. These observations explored: delivery in terms of curricular and pedagogical approach, the learning environment, participant responsiveness, i.e., children's enjoyment and engagement with the programme; and programme differentiation, i.e., how "ECCE programme time" differs from "non-ECCE programme time" in part-time and full-time services.

Instruments

These observations were guided using the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) (Walsh & Gardner, 2005) (see Appendix 2). This instrument, developed by the research team lead, Dr Glenda Walsh, provides a structured framework for observing the quality of the learning experience in practice, from perspectives of nine quality indicators (motivation, concentration, Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), Multiple Skills Acquisition (MSA,) confidence, well-being, independence, social Interaction and respect), across each aspect of the triangle of interaction, namely the children's actions, the teaching strategies and the role of the environment. The triangle of interaction offers a second level of analysis and structures the data by introducing the main contexts in which the quality indicators can be observed, i.e. the children, the adults and their physical environment. This acknowledges the complexity of measuring quality in an early years setting and helps to ensure a true assessment of the quality of the learning experience is captured by taking account of both the quality indicator and the

context in which that indicator is observed (i.e. the components of the triangle of interaction) (Walsh and Gardner, 2005). The QLI uses a rating system of 1-6, with 1 indicating low quality, 2 indicating low-satisfactory, 3 indicating satisfactory, 4 satisfactory- high, 5 high and 6 very high.

During the observation study, each quality indicator was assigned three scores, one relating to children's actions, one relating to teaching strategies and one relating to the role of the environment. As each element of the triangle of interaction is evenly weighted, the overall score for each quality indicator is determined by calculating the mean of those three scores. A qualitative description accompanied each score, reporting what was observed in the setting at the time of the observation, as it pertained to the nine quality indicators across each element of the triangle of interaction.

The QLI thus provides a structured framework for observing the quality of the learning experience in practice from several perspectives. It has been shown to be a valid and reliable instrument to use in ELC settings (see Walsh & Gardner, 2005).

Reliability and validity
All research team members involved in the visits received in-depth training in QLI administration in December 2022. This involved classroom-based training on the content and procedures of the QLI, followed by 'hands-on' training in an ELC setting in Belfast where all researchers applied the QLI in practice and scored the setting accordingly.

Subsequent to this practical training, all researchers engaged in an inter-reliability 'calibration' test, whereby scores across all aspects of the QLI were assessed, discussed and compared in order to attend to any instances of rater bias. No systematic differences between raters were noted. Differences between ratings did not exceed one point on any of the quality indicators across each aspect of the triangle of interaction. In addition, when observations for Work Package 2 (WP2) commenced in the settings, every team member, at least on their initial visit, was accompanied by an early years expert to further ensure consistency of approach and reliability of the ratings.

Procedure: Interviews and Focus Groups
In addition to the observations, one-to-one interviews and focus groups were conducted with a range of stakeholders during each visit. The stakeholders included the setting owner or manager, setting educator/s, and a selection of parents whose children availed of the ECCE programme at the time of the visit (n= 1-6 participants per parent focus group). For the majority, interviews and focus groups were conducted face-to-face on the day, however, in some instances, follow up phone interviews were conducted with parents who were unavailable on the day. Interviews were guided by semi-structured interview protocols, designed in consultation with the Oversight Group. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. (See Appendix 3 for details of manager, educator and parents' interview schedules).

Procedure: Playful conversations with children
Playful conversations with children were designed to elicit children's views of the ECCE programme in practice, including its strengths and opportunities for development. Depending on the circumstances in each setting and on individual children's abilities and responses, a range of child-friendly play- and arts-based methods and resources were used to facilitate whole-group and small-group discussions, conversations with individual children, and artistic expression of children's preferences. (See Appendix 4 for children's interview schedule).

Composition of the 30 settings

Visits to all 30 settings were completed by early June, 2023. Table 3, below, details the overall composition of the 30 settings compared to the overall population of services contracted to deliver the ECCE programme (as of June, 2023).

Table 3 - 30 settings sample compared with overall population of ECCE programme services

30 Settings sample compared with the overall population of services contracted to deliver the ECCE programme		
Category	Overall Population of ECCE Services	Sample
Service Type		
Private	75%	67%
Community	25%	33%
Location		
Urban	64%	40%
Rural	36%	60%
Pobal HP Deprivation Index (2016 – by Small Area)		
Very/extremely disadvantaged	0.4%	3%
Disadvantaged	7%	17%
Marginally below average	42%	30%
Marginally above average	42%	43%
Affluent/Very affluent	9%	7%
Service size (capacity)		
Up to 20 places	17%	10%
21-40 places	42%	27%
41-60 places	20%	23%
61-80 places	10%	23%
81-100 places	5%	13%
101-120 places	3%	3%
121-140 places	1%	0%
Over 140 places	1%	0%

It shows that the sample of 30 settings is reasonably similar to the overall population of services contracted to deliver the ECCE programme with regard to service type and service size. The sample differs from the overall population with regard to location and Pobal HP Deprivation Index. It comprises a greater number of rural settings than urban, whereas the converse is true of services contracted to deliver the ECCE programme in general. Likewise, the sample includes more services located in small areas rated "disadvantaged" on the Pobal HP Deprivation Index and fewer in areas rated "marginally below average" than the general population. However, the overall split between services in areas rated below average and those above average is in accordance with the general population.

Service Type

Figure 21 details the composition of the sample of 30 settings in terms of service type as compared with the sample described in the Pobal Early Years Sector Report 2020/2021. The sample is generally in accordance with the general population with regards to service type, including relatively more private than community settings.
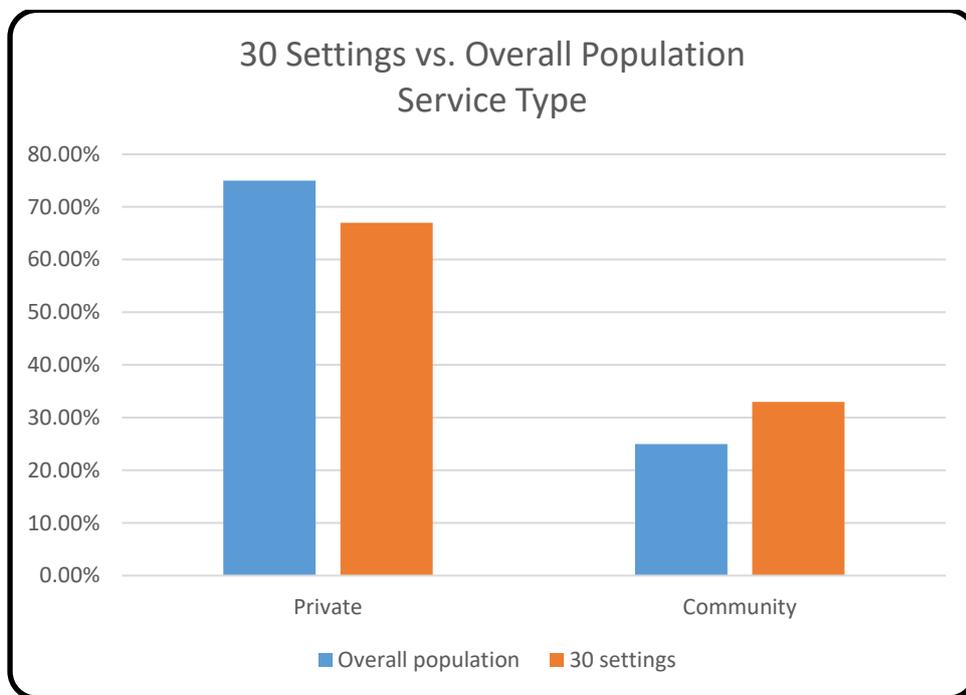
Figure 21 - 30 settings vs. overall population - service type

Service Capacity

Figure 22 compares the sample with the overall population in terms of service capacity. The 30-settings sample comprises the full range of small (up to 20 places) to large settings (over 140 places) and follows a similar distribution to the general population.
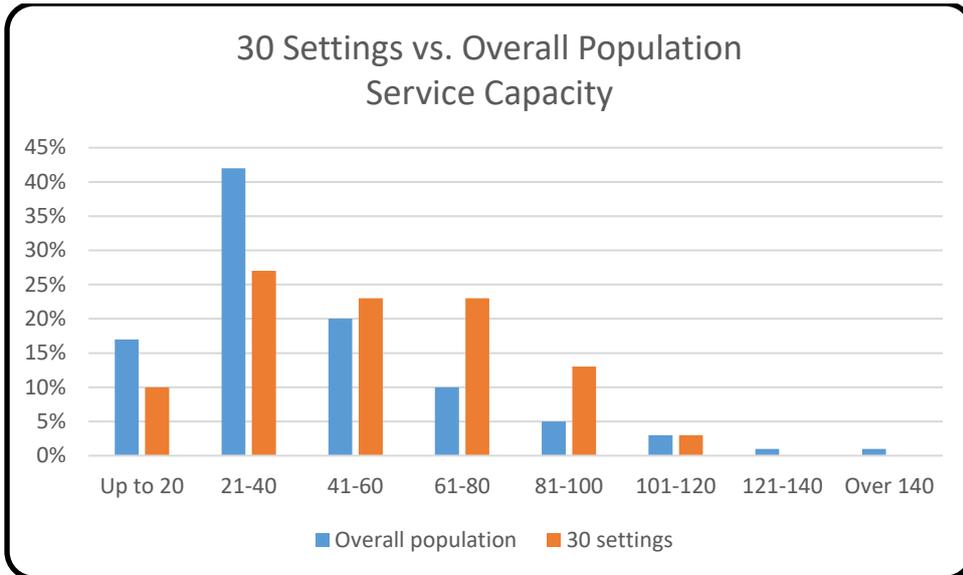
Figure 22 - 30 settings vs. overall population - service capacity

Deprivation Index

Figure 23 compares the sample with the general population in relation to the Pobal Deprivation Index (2016, by Small Area). Within the sample of 30 settings a good spread is in evidence across the range of areas. The sample and the general population follow a similar distribution, with minor differences in relation to services in disadvantaged areas and areas rated marginally below average.
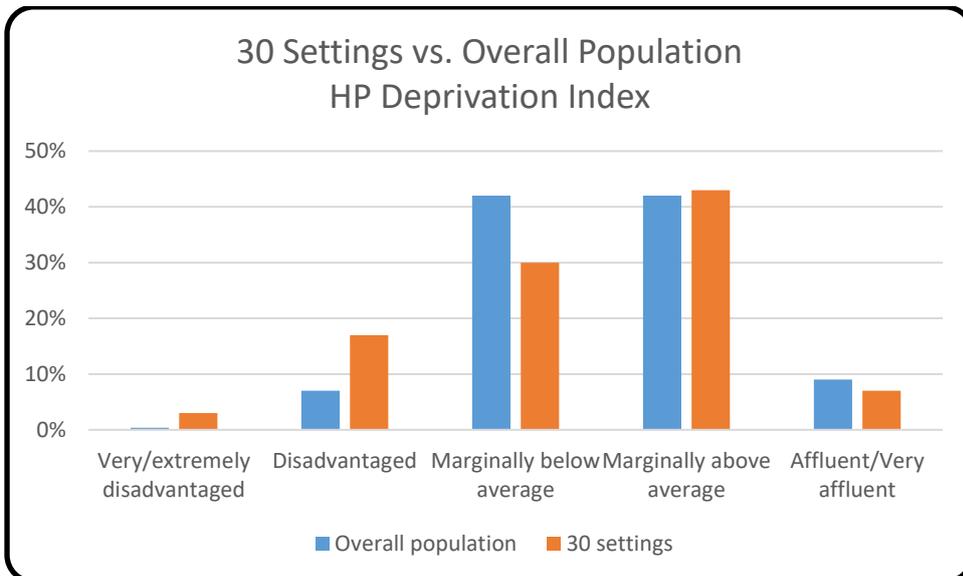
Figure 23 - 30 settings vs. overall population - HP deprivation index

Location

The sample of 30 settings is slightly less representative of the general population with regard to location, where proportions of urban and rural settings are reversed, as detailed in figure 24.
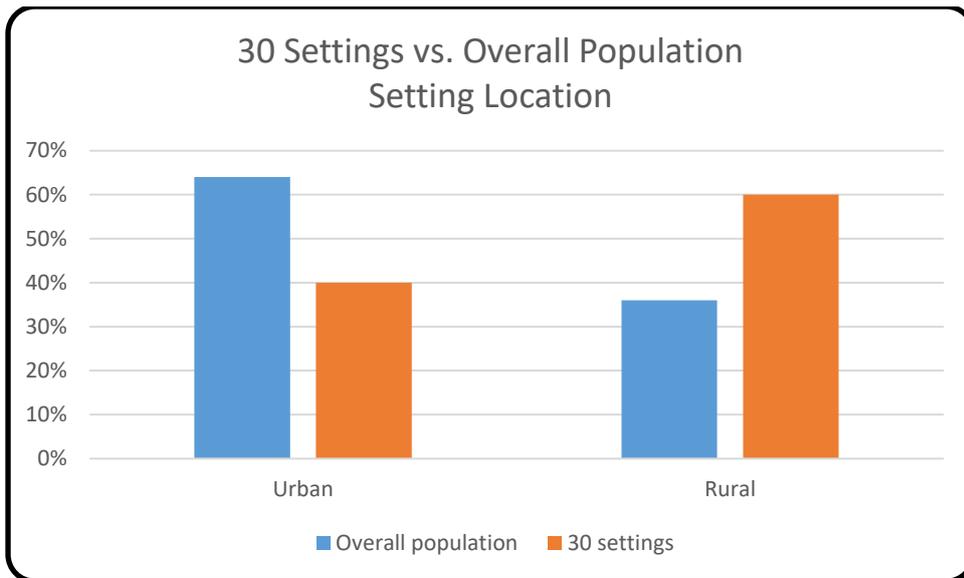
Figure 24 - 30 settings vs. overall population - service location

Figure 25 provides an insight into the geographical spread of the sample of 30 settings across Ireland.
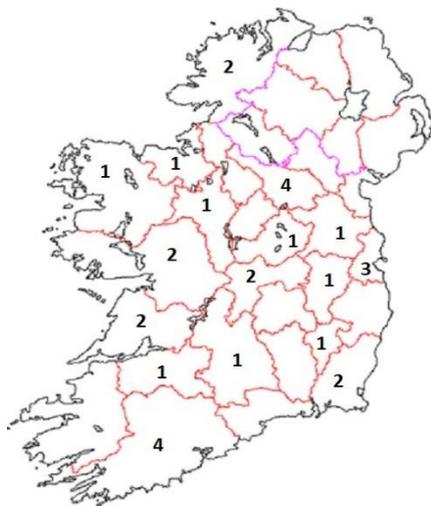
Figure 25 - 30 settings sample - geographical spread across counties

Analysis

Interviews and focus groups: All interview and focus group data was transcribed verbatim. Working off the transcriptions, the research team employed thematic analysis to develop themes as informed by the rigorous and deliberate approach reported by Braun and Clarke (2006).

QLI: Quantitative data from the QLIs (i.e., raw scores) was entered into Excel and mean values across each quality indicator (of the QLI) were calculated for each setting and aspect of the triangle of interaction. This quantitative data was further complemented and contextualised by the qualitative descriptors recorded within the QLI. Whilst the sample size (n=30 settings) is substantial for a qualitative case study approach, only tentative conclusions can be drawn from quantitative analysis. As such, where descriptive differences and trends are highlighted, they should be interpreted with caution and with full consideration of the limited sample size employed.

Methods: Work Package 3

For Work Package 3, the perspectives of a range of international and national experts were gathered via online interviews.

Participants, recruitment and sampling

Relevant stakeholders were identified in consultation with the Oversight Group. Both national and international stakeholders across the fields of policy, practice, government, advocacy, and academia were identified and contacted via email with an invitation for participation. In total, 17 different individuals from 16 different organisations responded (see Table 4). 16 participants were interviewed, while one completed a written response. Each of the participants held a senior role in their organisation. Figure 26 demonstrates the range of jurisdictions represented.

Table 4 - Work package 3 - participant groups

National government bodies	Advocacy and interest groups	International Expertise	International organisations
DCEDIY	National Parents' Council	Academic from the University of Oxford	United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
Better Start	Children's Rights Alliance	Academic from the University of East London	Ministry of Education and Research, Norway
Pobal	Quality and Qualifications Ireland QQI		The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)
Department of Education	Further Education		
Department of Education Inspectorate	Early Childhood Ireland		
The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (two participants)			
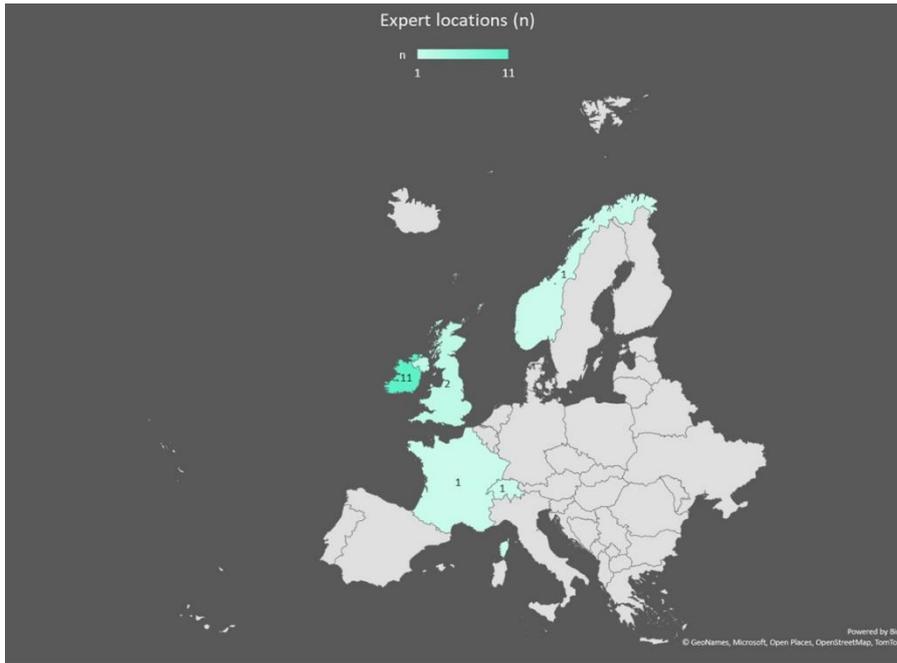
Figure 26 - Geographical location of experts

Procedure

All interviews were scheduled for a time suitable to the participant. They were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. Interviews were guided by semi-structured interview protocols, designed in consultation with the Oversight Group. (See Appendix 5 for details of national and international expert interview schedules). Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Additionally, one participant (unable to take part in an interview) provided a written response via a bespoke online survey designed to ask similar questions to those posed in the interview. Full written responses were provided by the one participating respondent. These data was then merged with the interview data during analysis and reporting.

Analysis

All interview and focus group data was transcribed verbatim by an external transcription service. Working off the transcriptions, the research team undertook a grounded approach to qualitative analysis, employing thematic analysis as informed by the rigorous and deliberate thematic analysis approach reported by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Methods: Work Package 4

Work Package 4 engaged 'harder-to-reach' stakeholders in qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Participants, recruitment and sampling

A range of different 'hard-to-reach' groups were identified via the literature and in consultation with the Oversight Group. A range of individual and focus group interviews were conducted directly with families, including Traveller and Roma families; families impacted by poverty; families experiencing homelessness; refugee and newcomer families; one-parent families; parents of children with additional needs; and parents who decided not to avail of the ECCE programme. Several measures were put in place to ensure that these focus group interviews were conducted in a meaningful, culturally inclusive way (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017); focus groups were organised in settings familiar to families, at a time chosen by them; the researcher endeavoured to build a rapport with families, and families were encouraged to lead the conversations. In some instances, where families were living in emergency accommodation, their caseworker accompanied the researcher to gather data in a setting familiar to them.

Additionally, representatives of organisations which are affiliated with or provide support to groups experiencing various forms of disadvantage were interviewed, including representatives of Barnardos, Cork Traveller Visibility Group, the NTRIS Oversight Committee, Focus Ireland, St Vincent de Paul, and One Family. An infant teacher and ECCE programme providers catering for children from low uptake groups were also consulted. In total, 19 interviews and focus groups with over 40 parents and experts were conducted across Ireland.

Finally, site visits were also completed to Early Learning and Care settings and primary schools that cater for hard-to-reach families.

Procedure

Data collection in WP4 took place over a two-month period. Interviews and focus groups were conducted face-to-face or by phone in a setting suitable to the participant. Interviews were guided by semi-structured interview protocols, designed in consultation with the Oversight Group. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. (See Appendix 6 for interview schedules relating to Work Package 4).

Analysis

All interview and focus group data was transcribed verbatim. Working off the transcripts, the research team undertook a grounded approach to qualitative analysis, employing thematic analysis as informed by the rigorous and deliberate thematic analysis approach reported by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Ethics

This research was conducted within stringent ethical practices in line with BERA (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research and the EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2015).

Voluntary participation: All participants were advised that participation in the research was voluntary, and they were made aware of the right to withdraw at any stage of the study. There were no withdrawals throughout the study.

Informed consent: All participants were provided with full information prior to taking part in this research, and as such, full and informed consent was obtained. Information sheets wolleere accessible and tailored to each audience. All participants had the opportunity to seek further clarity prior to taking part in the research, if required. As young children were active participants in this study, a relational approach to ethics was sought (Arnott et al., 2020) whereby consent was negotiated on an on-going basis. In this way, written informed consent was not only sought from the children's parents but also from the children by way of a picture-based assent form. However, the research team were also aware, that when working with young children, there is a need for consent on a moment-to-moment basis, where they tuned in respectfully and responsively to children's often subtle and unique modes of communication, expressing their assent and dissent (Skånfors, 2009). (See Appendix 7 for details of all participant information sheets and consent forms, including those for the young children).

Data management: All data was held securely on a shared password protected site, within the guiding principle of GDPR regulations, and only accessible by the research team.

Ethical review: Prior to commencing, the research protocol, comprising two separate applications, one focusing on work package two and the second focusing directly on work packages three and four went under the scrutiny of Stranmillis University College's Research and Ethics Committee, accompanied by an institutional letter of agreement from the other participating university. Data collection only began upon receipt of full ethical approval and ethical oversight continued throughout the project whereby the principal investigator continued to liaise with the Research and Ethics Committee if amendments/revisions to research methodologies/data collection methods were required. (See Appendix 8 for letters of approval from the Research and Ethics Committee at Stranmillis University College).

Chapter 3: Children's perspectives

As part of the 30 in-depth setting visits, a key aspect involved gaining the perspectives of the children who had real lived experience of the ECCE programme on a daily basis. During each setting visit, the research team took time to build relationships with the ECCE children and employed a range of child-friendly methods and resources (such as artwork, images, and puppets) to facilitate whole-group and small-group discussions, conversations with individual children, and artistic expression of children's preferences. As presented below, this approach gleaned valuable insight into the children's views of the ECCE programme in practice, as well as their thoughts on its strengths and weaknesses.

Children's reports on the ECCE programme in practice – 'A typical day in preschool'

In response to the conversational prompt, *"Tell me about your day in preschool. What types of things do you do?"*, in the main, children were very knowledgeable about the ECCE programme, and comfortably articulated an extensive and varied range of play activities and experiences as making up their day in preschool. Where children were unable to verbally express their views, observational data was used to gain insight into their perspectives. During the setting visits, children frequently took the researcher on a tour of their setting, to show them the environment, and their typical play activities.

The following table provides an overview of the typical play/experiences offered in the ECCE programme across the 30 settings, from the children's point of view. Underpinning the children's responses, broad categories regarding the 'types of play/experiences' were identified, and are offered for ease of interpretation, where it is understood that children often engage in more than one type of play simultaneously.   The following table also includes examples of play activities/experiences (reported directly by the children) and quotes from their conversations with the researcher.

Table 5 - Children's reports on the types of play/experiences available in a typical ECCE programme day

Type of Play/ Experience:	Examples reported by the Children:	Sample Quotes:
Construction Play	Play with Lego, Build Towers, Building Blocks	"Play with Lego" "I like playing with Lego." "…the blocks"
Creative and Expressive Play	Play Music, Drawing, Making Cards, Cutting and Pasting, Playdough, Paint, Dance	"I like to dance and sing." "Making things and building things" "I make houses." "I like to paint, I paint stuff. We put on a paint jacket." "We get to dance in the hall."
Early Literacy/ Numeracy	Reading books, Story Time, Puzzles	"Reading books" "Listening to stories" "We do circle time and story time." "Story time!" "The book room" "We do our puzzles."

Imaginative Play	Cook things in the kitchen, Play with dolls/babies, Hairdressers, Home Area, Beauty Salon, Play with costumes, e.g. Builders, Hulk, Captain America	"We made a village with the tents." "We dress up." "Cook things in the kitchen" "We dress up in the kitchen and play pretend."
Nature Play	Garden, Growing Sunflowers, Playing with little chicks, Watching the fish	"We go to the garden." "We made sunflowers the other day. We put seeds in the mud, dirt and soil and they grew into sunflowers." "We get to see the chicks." "I like to see the baby chicks; they are so cute!" "We get to see the little fish(es) in the tank." "We look for worms."
Physical Play (incl.: fine and gross motor; indoor and outdoor)	Play with pegs, Play inside, Play outside, Risky Play, Slides, Swings, Climbing Frame, Bikes, Trampoline, Sandpit, Climbing Tyres, Treehouse, Ladders, Yoga	"We go outside to do risky play. That's where you climb the ladders and walls and you can swing!" "We have to put on our wet gear for outdoor play." "I love doing Yoga and Gymboree!"
Sensory Play/ Experiences	Sand Play, Water Play, Playdough	"We go outside to the sand." "The sand tray and the water tray are the most fun."
Small World Play (incl.: Toys/ Resources)	Play with Cars, Trucks, Hot Wheels, Play with Tool Box, Dino Toys, House Toys, Pirate ship, Aeroplane	"Hot wheel cars, play, sea creatures, play lots of stuff…" "Play with cars and tool box"
Social Experiences/ Games with Rules	Play with friends, Circle Time, Show and Tell, Hide and Seek, Ball games, 'Farmer in the Den'	"Be with friends" "Being with my friends/see my friends" "We play with friends." "We do circle time." "We do show and tell." "….and we play hide and seek."

Children's favourite aspects of the ECCE programme

Further conversational prompts were successful in gleaning deeper insight into children's favourite aspects of the ECCE programme. Such prompts included; *"What is your favourite thing that you do in preschool? Who do you do that with?"* and *"Have you a favourite space in the room? What do you do there?"* In addition, children were invited to artistically express their preferences via drawings.

Collectively, the conversation transcripts and drawings were analysed to reveal four key themes underpinning children's perspectives on the ECCE programme as a whole, and in regard to their favourite aspects, where these themes include;

- Children's Overall Positive Evaluation of the ECCE Programme;
- The Importance of Play;
- The Importance of Outdoor Experiences; and
- The Importance of Friendships and Social Experiences.

For ease of interpretation, each theme is presented in turn below, including a brief outline of the key findings; sample quotes / excerpts from the children's conversations; and children's drawings pertaining to the theme.

Theme 1: Children's overall positive evaluation of the ECCE programme

Key findings
Research data (principally from the children's conversations with the research team) revealed that children were overwhelmingly positive about their preschool experience in the ECCE programme.

The research evidence – children's conversations:
Such positive views were evident in response to the question "*What is your favourite thing that you do in preschool?".* The following graphic highlights direct quotes from the children's conversations, alongside a longer excerpt from one child illustrating their strong enthusiasm and positive regard for the whole ECCE experience. Such views were common within the children's data across the 30 ECCE settings visited.

"I love every single toy"
"Really like everything"
"All of it"
"Everything"
"Yes, like everything"
"Don't know, love it all"
"I love everything at school"

"I like playing with the blocks. I love everything at school. I like playing in the kitchen. I like making things. I like playing games. I love doing that …(points to the picture of the lego). I like playing with everything. I like going outdoors and playing with the outside toys. I like going up and down the slide. I like saying "bye-bye". I like playing with my IPad. Mummy doesn't allow me the IPad unless I am very good. I like listening to stories, but sometimes I read books myself. I love writing. I love tractors and the fire engine. Love playing with everything. (…) I love every single toy."
ECCE Child, Age 4 years

Figure 27 - Children's favourite aspects of the ECCE programme

Theme 2: The importance of play

Key findings
The central importance of play was found to be a defining characteristic of children's favourite aspects of the ECCE programme.

Children's high regard for play was evidenced across the 30 ECCE settings, both within the conversation transcripts and within the children's drawings of their preferred activities.

On further analysis of the data, it was apparent that four types of play experiences tended to feature prominently in children's responses, perhaps highlighting these as the most highly prioritised features of the ECCE programme from the children's perspective. These included:

- construction play (e.g. Lego, block play);
- creative and expressive play (e.g. drawing, colouring, painting, dancing and singing);
- imaginative play (e.g. role play, house play, dressing up); and
- physical play (e.g. climbing, crawling, sliding, swinging, riding bikes/quads, risky play).

The research evidence – children's conversations and drawings:

The following quotes and illustrations by children taking part in the ECCE programme exemplify the children's overall preference for an active, play-based experience (within the ECCE programme) with examples specifically chosen to illustrate their enjoyment and preference for construction play, creative and expressive play, imaginative play and physical play.

Figure 28 - Construction play – "I like playing with the Lego"

Figure 31 - Children's quotes - "My favourite activity"

Figure 29 - Creative and expressive play - "I love making creations"

Figure 30 - Physical play - "I love the slide and the swing"

Theme 3: The importance of outdoor experiences

Figure 32 - Imaginative play - "I like playing with the kitchen"

Key findings
Whilst children reported enjoyment of indoor and outdoor play experiences, on balance, evidence from the children's conversations and drawings highlighted the critical importance of outdoor experiences as a key feature of the ECCE Programme from the children's perspectives.

The research evidence – children's conversations and drawings
Multiple comments from the children's conversations illustrated their enjoyment of outdoor experiences, evidenced where children stated…

- "We go outside whenever we want to."
- "I like playing outside."
- "I like to be outside."

Children also offered deeper explanation of the importance of the outdoors in the ECCE programme, sharing that they particularly enjoyed the physical opportunities that the outdoor environment provides, including; opportunities for freedom of expression; whole body movement; and risky play (e.g. running fast, climbing high, hiding and so on). Such preferences are exemplified in the comments….

- "I like the climbing frame"
- "I can go really high on the climbing frame."
- "I climb the tyres."
- "Really like everything and going outside, like to climb trees…"
- "Outside best of all because I can play with my friends and run very fast."
- "We run around and play hide and seek…and bikes….and cartwheels…."
- "The best bit is the bikes."
- "I like to do risky play."

Aspects related to nature (e.g. playing with chicks, play in the garden) and the weather (e.g. sun, snow and rainbows) also emerged as valued features of children's outdoor experiences.

In turn, children's drawings also confirmed the importance of outdoor experiences as a favourite feature of the ECCE programme from the children's perspectives.
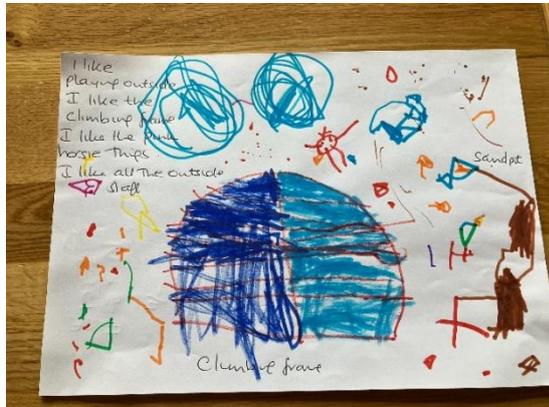
Figure 33 - Outdoor play: "I like playing outdoors. I like the climbing frames, I like the pink horsie things. I like all the outside stuff." (Drawing shows children playing, a climbing frame and sand pit)
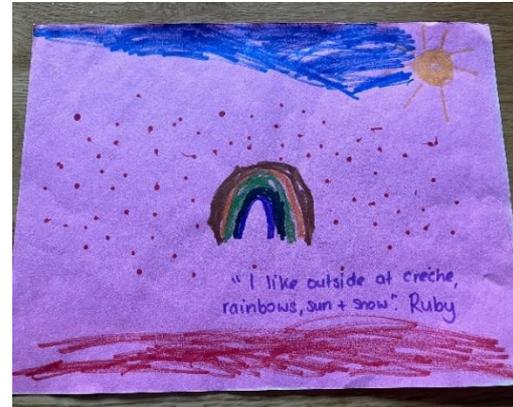
Figure 34 - Outdoor play: "I like outside at crèche, rainbows, sun and snow."

Theme 4: The importance of friendships and social experiences

Key findings
The importance of friendships and social experiences emerged as a key theme in regard to children's favourite aspects of the ECCE programme. Indeed, this theme permeated many of the children's conversations and drawings, showing how highly children valued playing with their friends in preschool.

The research evidence – children's conversations and drawings
Children's conversations consistently highlighted friendships as a favourite aspect of their ECCE experience, where in response to '*What is your favourite thing that you do in preschool?', children reported…*

"I like to play with friends." / "Being with my friends…"

"I like chasing and catching my friends."

"We get to see our friends who will be in school with us next year."

Similarly, children also expressed that they valued the interactions and relationships they had developed with their early years educator, commenting;

- "I like helping Suzanne*." (The Early Years Educator)
- "I like playing with the teachers."

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Children also placed high value on experiences where they joined with their peers and/or the early years educator during the ECCE session (e.g. during circle time; show and tell; group reading time; group games; snack time; social outings to the park/library). This was evident in the children's comments, where when asked about their favourite aspects, children responded…

- "I like snack."
- "We eat lunch."
- "We do circle time."
- "Show and Tell"
- "Story Time"
- "We go to the park."
- "We go to the leabharlann/ library."

As with previous themes, children's preferences for friendships and social experiences featured highly in their drawings, as illustrated below.

Figure 36 - Friendship: "I am playing with my friends"

Figure 35 - Friendship (no words)
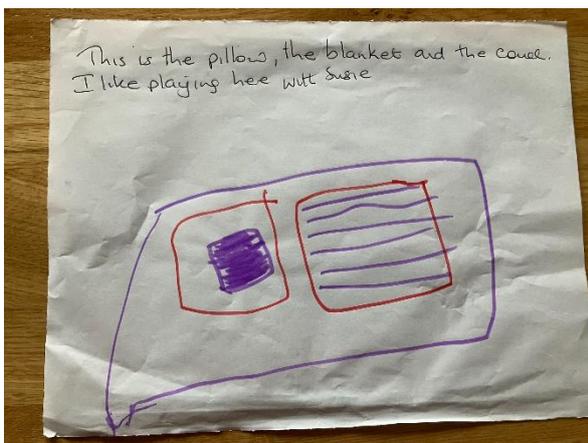
Figure 38 - Friendship: "This is the pillow, the blanket and the couch. I like playing here with Susie."
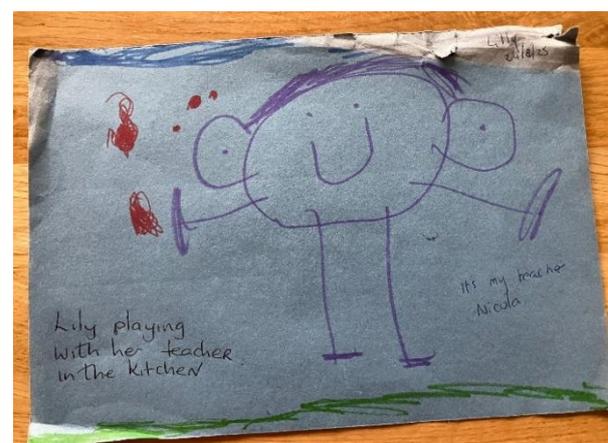
Figure 37 - Positive relationships with adults: "It's my teacher, Nicola" (Picture shows Lily playing with her teacher in the kitchen)

Children's least favourite aspects of the ECCE programme and suggestions for change

During conversations with the researcher, children were also invited to share their views on any aspects of the ECCE programme that they did not like, and to make suggestions for change / improvement. Conversational prompts supported this aspect of data collection, including, *"What do you like about preschool? Is there anything you do not like?"* and *"If you were the preschool teacher, is there anything that you would change? Or do differently?"*

In regard to aspects that they do not like, a very small number of children commented, mainly highlighting their personal dislike for some aspects of their ECCE experience (e.g. in regard to getting messy, dislike for climbing trees). In the main, children did not comment frequently on aspects of the programme they did not like, again suggesting their overall positive regard for their ECCE preschool experience.

Analysis of children's conversation transcripts revealed three themes underpinning their responses on suggestions for the ECCE programme going forward. These themes related to:

- More ECCE Time;
- The Environment and Play Resources; and
- The Pedagogical Approach.

Theme 1: More ECCE time

When asked about aspects they did not like/suggestions for change, some children reiterated their positive regard for the ECCE programme, stating there was "nothing" they would change, "it is all great." Building further on the positive regard for ECCE programme, some children suggested that they would like "more" of the ECCE programme, with comments such as; "More Time"; "Maybe More!" (preschool); illustrating children's positive views in this regard.

Theme 2: The environment and play resources

Children's conversations gave helpful insight into their lived experience within the ECCE programme, including their suggestions for change. Such suggestions for change related predominantly to the preschool environment and resources.   these issues, children's comments suggested:

The need for more resources:

- "Even more toys and more books."
- "More Cars. Loads of hot wheel cars, tricks and magic."
- "I would love to have a water table."
- "We don't have a sand-pit – maybe come out in the summer time when we go outside."

The need for replenishment of resources:

- "More sand, there is not much left!"
- "We used to have a wooden kitchen, but it was thrown away."

The need to ensure the quality / appropriateness of resources:

- "Sometimes the Duplo is broken."
- "He (Percy the Puppet) might not like the broken stuff."
- "He (Percy the Puppet) might not like the bikes because some of them are really big."

Theme 3: The pedagogical approach

Children's suggestions for change were found to closely align with those areas previously identified as their 'favourite aspects' of the ECCE programme, particularly their preference for a play-based pedagogy and outdoor experiences. These aspects were exemplified where children commented:

- "More Play"
- "I don't like doing the numbers…. because it's boring" (Child points to the flashcards which were used by the adult in an earlier adult led/whole group game).
- "More Outside, we don't really go outside- only when the sun is out."

Such comments reinforce children's support for a play-based pedagogical approach with frequent access to the outdoor environment across all ECCE settings.

Summary and key findings on children's perspectives on the ECCE programme

Overall, it can be concluded that the child-friendly methodological approach employed was successful in bringing the children's voices to the fore in the research process and findings. In this regard, the children brought an invaluable perspective on their daily lived experience of the ECCE programme, providing insight that is arguably unobtainable from any other stakeholder group.

In this regard, key findings on the children's perspectives included that;

- Children were very knowledgeable and gave excellent insight into daily practice, where they reported an extensive and varied range of play and experiences within the ECCE programme;
- Children held the overall ECCE programme in high regard;
- Children's favourite aspects of the ECCE programme included: a high priority for play; outdoor experiences; friendships and social Experiences;
- Children's dislikes within the programme were few; and where they were expressed, related to children's personal preferences, indicating the importance of respecting difference within the programme;
- Children's suggestions for the programme moving forward pointed to their desire for more ECCE time; available, quality, appropriate resources; and a play-based pedagogy with plentiful outdoor experiences; all of which should be consistently provided across all ECCE settings.

Chapter 4: Parents', providers', and educators' views

Work Package 2 aims to deliver a robust, evidence-based assessment of the ECCE programme, with consideration paid to its strengths, challenges and opportunities for learning. This work package engaged children, parents, service managers and educators, using quantitative and qualitative methods. Findings from this work package directly address all three research questions:

- Is the ECCE programme being implemented as intended, i.e. is it a universal programme available free to all children within the eligible age range, providing them with their first formal experience of early learning for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week for 38 weeks of the year for two years?
- Is it meeting its core objectives, i.e. to promote better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children, and to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children?
- Are there enhancements that can be made based on international evidence and experience to date?

Work Package 2 thus identifies key programme strengths, challenges and opportunities for learning and explores a range of key implementation criteria, chosen in accordance with the implementation science literature (see for example, Carroll et al., 2007), as well as additional factors specific to the particular needs of this evaluation.

Key programme strengths and challenges

The ECCE programme is highly valued by the children, parents, managers, educators and other professional stakeholders who took part in the review process. A majority of respondents to the provider survey rated their overall experience of implementing the ECCE programme as "generally positive" (54.1%, n=686) or "very positive" (34.5%, n=437).

Most parents taking part in the parent survey were overall "very satisfied" (75.0%, n=609) or "satisfied" (22.7%, n=184) with the ECCE programme. Parents also reported that their children enjoyed attending the ECCE programme (81.5% "Strongly Agree"/15.9% "Agree") and playing with their friends (81.1% "Strongly Agree"/16.6% "Agree"), and that their children were "happy, motivated and enthusiastic about all of the playful activities he/she experiences during the ECCE programme" (78.2% "Strongly Agree"/18.3% "Agree").

> "I think the judge is the happiness of the child and Aoife[10] is always very happy to go in." (Parent, Private service, Co. Sligo)

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[10] All names have been changed to protect participant confidentiality. As a reminder, asterisks are used throughout the document to indicate that a name has been changed.
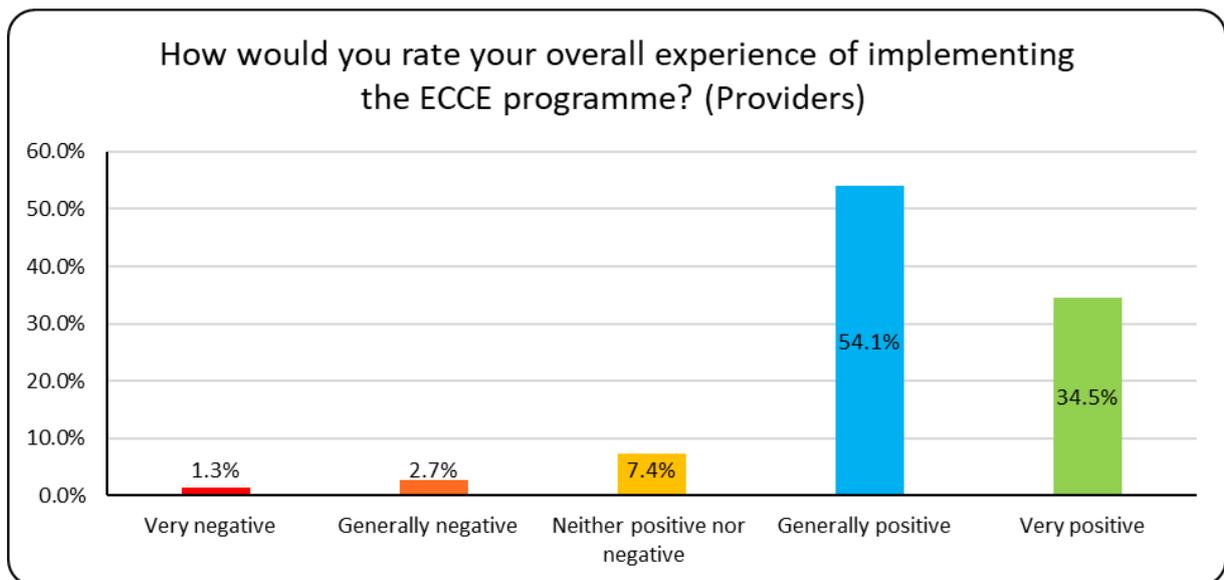
Figure 39 - Providers' overall experience of implementing the ECCE programme
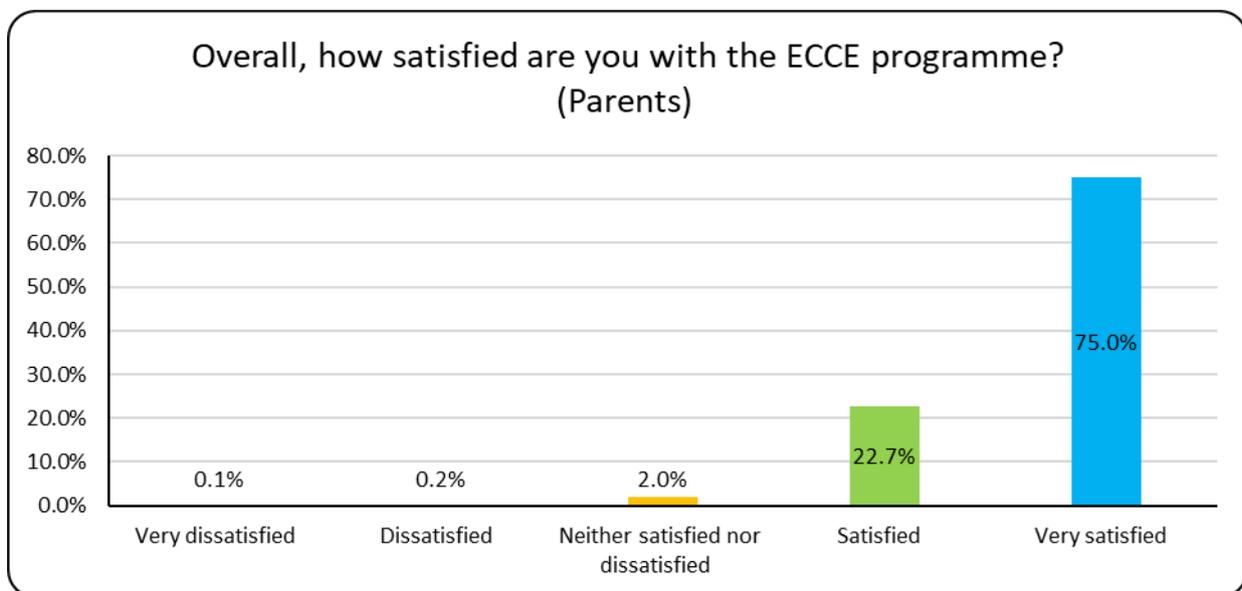
Figure 40 - Parents' overall satisfaction with the ECCE programme

A number of key programme strengths and benefits emerged from the survey and interview data. The free and universal character stood out as the main strength of the ECCE programme in interviews with managers, educators, and parents. Managers and educators also praised the second ECCE year, its impact on the average school-starting age and on children's overall development and school readiness, as major programme strengths.

> *"What I will say, first of all, when they only had the one year, it was very rushed. I felt that it was – it nearly felt frantic in the rooms because they were trying to do so much. Now, they know that, actually, in that first year, the children (…) can just learn at their own speed and they can feel away, they can get a sense of belonging over a longer time. Rather than going, 'Come on, we need to start doing something' (…). So, it just makes it so much nicer for the children. In that second year then, you can see the difference. The children blossom into these people that are ready. (…) They're ready for big adventures, they've got this confidence built, it's not rushed or forced or*

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*anything like that. It's a wonderful, natural progression. It's amazing because some
children in the first year are so shy! And the minute they step in here in their second
year, it's like, 'Listen, I was here before, and I know everything.'"
(Manager, Community service, Co. Westmeath)*

Key benefits of the ECCE programme for children identified in both surveys included a positive impact on children's learning and development (providers: 92.2%, n=1189; parents: 74.4%, n=604), opportunities for social interactions (providers: 71.5%, n=922; parents: 53.9%, n=438), benefits to children's emotional health and well-being (providers: 62.3%, n=804; parents: 37.9%, n=308), and preparation for primary school (providers: 35.5%, n=458; parents: 57.8%, n=469).
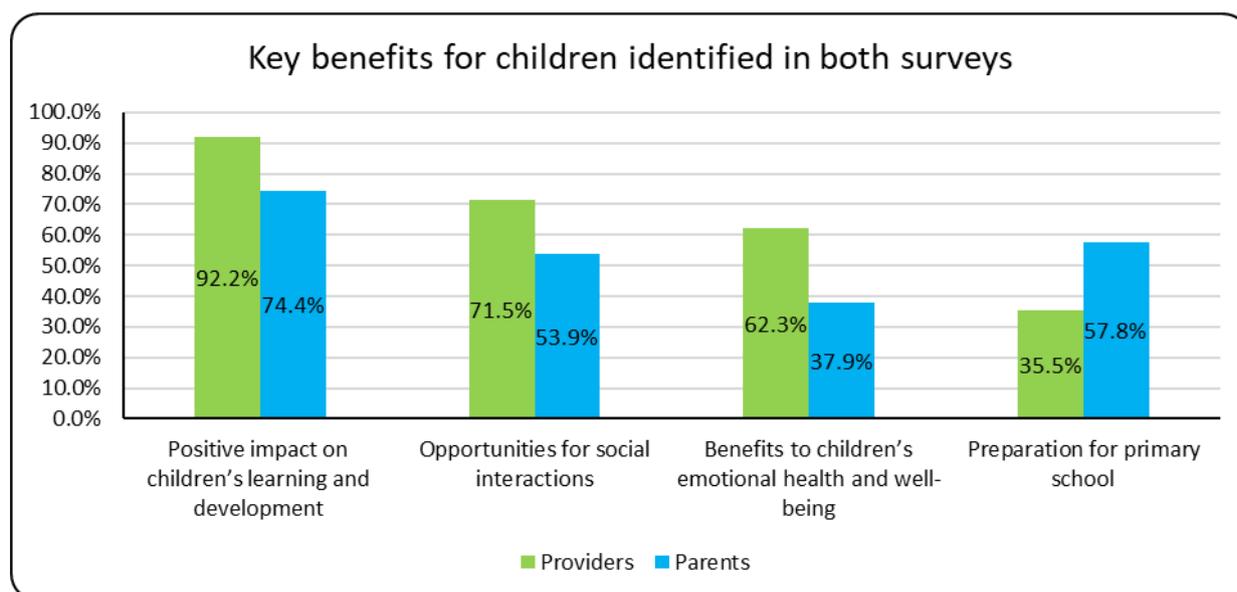
Figure 41 - Key benefits for children identified in both surveys (parents and providers)

The overwhelming majority (98.3%, n=396) of parents with older children who had previously availed of the ECCE programme felt that the impact on their older child had been broadly positive.

These benefits were echoed in interviews with managers, educators, and parents. Managers and educators listed a wide range of benefits, in particular a positive impact on social skills, self-care and independence, confidence, and emotional development. All these skills were considered key indicators of "school readiness" by review participants.

Parents participating in focus groups and individual interviews reported that their children enjoyed taking part in the ECCE programme, had developed friendships, and were generally thriving. They, too, reported progress in a wide range of developmental areas. In particular, parents had noticed improvements in their child's confidence, speech and language development, social and self-care skills, and independence.

Most parents taking part in the parent survey felt that their child had become more confident and independent (78.8% "Strongly Agree"/18.6% Agree), was developing socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually (79.7% "Strongly Agree"/17.2% Agree) and had developed their language skills (75.6% "Strongly Agree"/18.1% "Agree") since starting the ECCE programme. While the study design cannot establish a causal relationship between reported developmental progress and the ECCE programme, these are nevertheless encouraging findings.
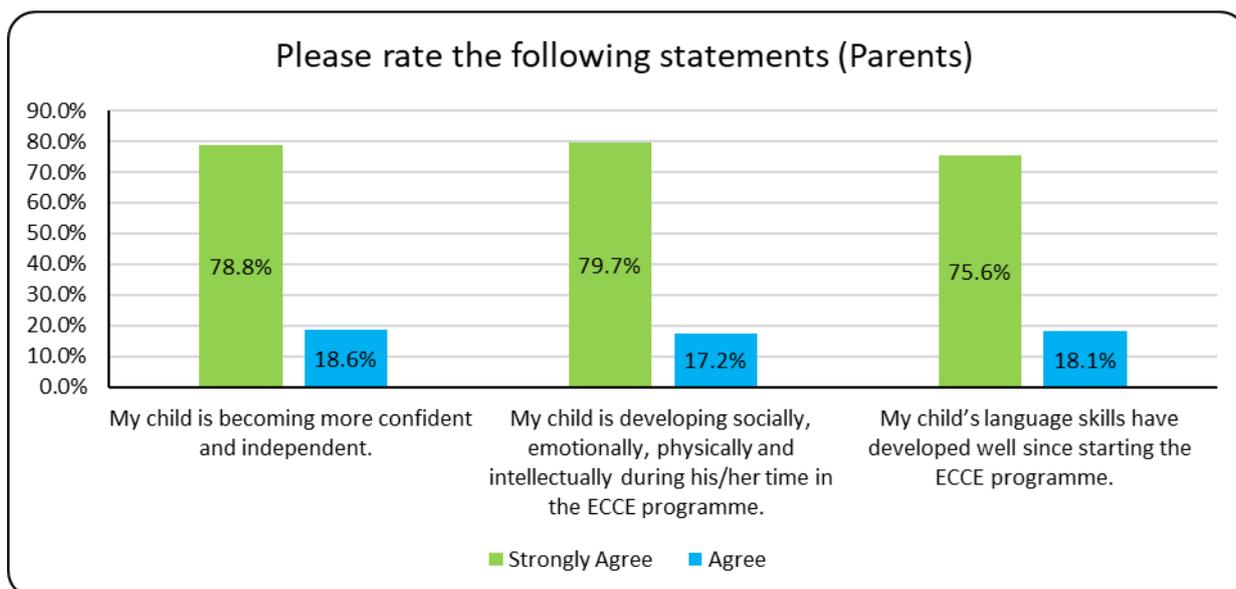
Figure 42 - ECCE programme impact on children – parents' perspectives

Most respondents to the provider survey strongly agreed or agreed that the stated objectives of the ECCE programme were being met. 95.7% agreed or strongly agreed that the ECCE programme "provides children with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school". 94% strongly agreed or agreed that the programme "promotes optimal development for all children". The provider and parent perspectives on the programme's impact on child outcomes, reported above, also support the view that the ECCE programme meets this objective. 89.9% of providers strongly agreed or agreed that it "narrows the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children", while 7.8% responded "neither agree nor disagree" to this item. It is worth highlighting that providers had least confidence in this third programme objective, indicating that important challenges remain.

Several key programme challenges emerged from the survey and interview data, which can be roughly organised into four main clusters:

- Challenges in relation to eligibility rules and ratios
- Challenges in relation to working conditions, staff recruitment, and retention
- Challenges in relation to funding, and, in some areas,
- Challenges in relation to availability and waiting lists

Data collected throughout this review also shows that these are complex challenges, which often interact with one another and with the broader system – for example, eligibility rules have an impact on the ratios at which ECCE programme providers operate, while funding impacts on working conditions, which in turn affect recruitment and retention. Recruitment, retention, and ratios all impact on availability and quality, and so on. Over the course of this chapter, these challenges will be discussed in greater detail in relation to relevant implementation criteria.

Key implementation criteria

Over the following pages, findings from the two surveys and the 30 setting visits are discussed in relation to key implementation criteria.

Adult-child ratio

The minimum adult-child ratio defined in the ECCE programme rules is 1:11. However, evidence from the provider survey shows that only 35% of ECCE programme providers (n=456) operate at this ratio. 41% (n=536) operate at a lower adult-child ratio (fewer children per adult) with AIM Level 7 support, while 30.7% (n=395) operate a lower ratio without AIM Level 7.

The most common reason given by respondents who operated at a lower ratio without AIM support was "to provide a higher quality of provision" (n=190, 48.0%), followed by "to accommodate children with disability/additional needs that were not approved for AIM Level 7 support" (n=99, 25.0%), and "insufficient demand for the ECCE programme in the area (e.g. remote areas with few children) (n=67, 16.9%). "High levels of disadvantage in the area" (n=40, 10.1%) and "an oversupply of places on the ECCE programme in the area" (n=31, 7.8%) were chosen by fewer respondents.

39% (n=154) of respondents also indicated other reasons in an open-ended question. The most common reason cited in these comments related to floor area capacity (18.7%, n=74). Other reasons included year-to-year fluctuation and children dropping out (n=11), afternoon sessions attracting lower demand (n=8), full- and part-time services operating at the ratios required outside ECCE hours (n=7), and childminders operating at a lower adult-child ratio as per regulations (n=7).

Providers' views on ratios are not entirely clear, but the most likely estimate is that 43.1% ($\hat{n}$=556)[11] of providers feel that an adult-child ratio of 1:11 is too high[12]. 311 respondents gave reasons in open-ended replies. The needs of children aged two years and eight months were mentioned by 94 respondents (35.9%), while 61 (23.3%) mentioned toilet training, 44 (16.8%) raised the ability to give children individual attention, and 43 (16.4%) mentioned children with additional needs or behavioural challenges, who had not been approved for AIM Level 7 support. Staff wellbeing (n=20, 7.6%) and safety concerns (n=21, 8.0%, e.g. where one educator needed to leave the room to assist with toileting, leaving the other looking after 21 children) were mentioned by a smaller number of respondents.

A small number of providers ($\hat{n}$=38.2, 3.0%) felt that the minimum adult-child ratio was too low, especially in the second year. Three of these respondents argued that there were many more pupils per teacher in Junior Infant classrooms, while one mentioned high demand for ECCE programme places and one stated that allowing each adult to care for more than 11 children would provide additional income for providers. Optimum ratios suggested ranged from 1:5 to 1:15. The most commonly suggested optimum ratio was 1:8 (n=34). 30 respondents suggested ratios of fewer than eight children per adult, while 20 suggested ratios of more than eight children per adult.

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[11] The "hat" on $\hat{n}$ indicates that this number is an estimate.

[12] Many providers misinterpreted the wording of the survey question, which asked whether they considered the minimum statutory ratio of 1:11 or 2:22 "too low", "about right", or "too high". While the "about right" responses are reliable, qualitative comments show that the "too high" and "too low" ratings are not. Using qualitative comments, it was possible to identify the intended meaning of 311 out of 594 entries that had rated the ratio as either "too high" or "too low". In 291 (93.6%) of these cases, the intended meaning was that there should be fewer than 11 children per adult, while in 20 cases (6.4%), the intended meaning was that there should be more than 11 children per adult. The estimates above were extrapolated from these percentages.
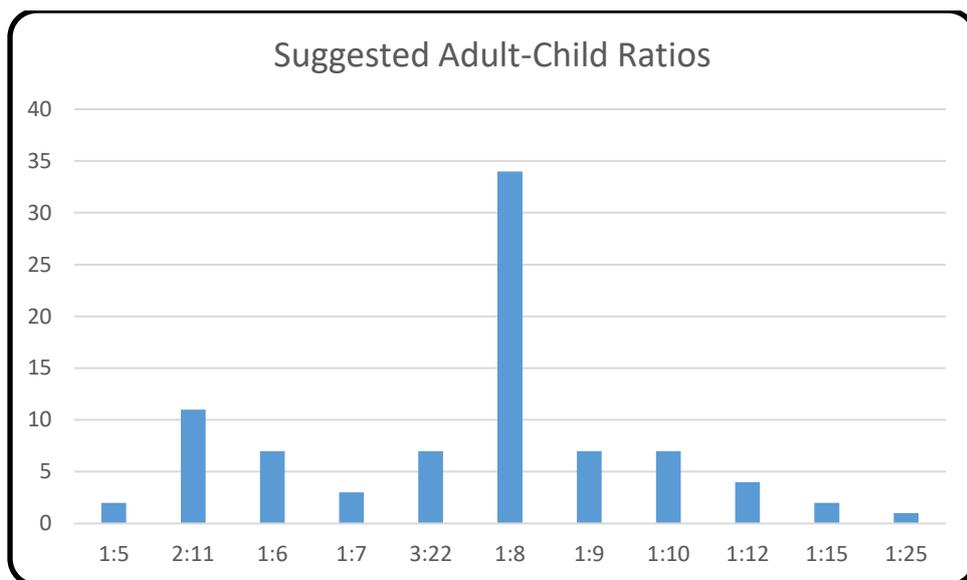
Figure 43 - Suggested adult-child ratios (providers' perspectives)

Furthermore, 12.2% of providers (n=158) felt that the minimum ratio should be different in year one and year two of the ECCE programme. 88 respondents commented in greater detail on different ratios for year one and year two. The most common ratio suggested for year one was 1:8 (n=34). The most common reason given stated that children in year one had high social, emotional, care and toileting needs, and that attending to these needs under a 1:11 ratio impacted on children's learning experience.

> *"A lower ratio to support the younger children, those with more needs and that require more attention, those still in nappies/pull ups and those who don't speak English as a first language is really needed. In a room with just two teachers, it is very difficult to support this. I have often had to pay a third teacher myself in these circumstances, which is a real added financial pressure with what, in my experience, is already insufficient funding." (Owner-manager, Private service, Co. Kildare)*

> *"[In] year 1, the children are still in nappies so need lower ratio as 1:11 means an adult always has 21 children while the 2nd person is gone to do a nappy and if 22 nappies that means all 3hrs that 1 adult is alone with 21 children while 2nd adult does 22 nappies. No learning goes on in that group." (Owner-manager, Private service, Co. Tipperary)*

A smaller number of respondents (n=8) suggested a different ratio for year two in preparation for primary school. Suggested ratios for the second ECCE programme year ranged from 1:12 to 1:15. It is important to note that many services operate mixed rooms where children of both ECCE programme years attend together, and it is not clear how different ratios for year 1 and year 2 could be implemented in these situations.

In interviews with managers and educators, ratios were often discussed in relation to four groups of children who require additional support: the youngest eligible children (often referred to as children "aged two years and eight months"), children with additional needs, children displaying challenging behaviour, and children who had suffered adverse and/or traumatic childhood experiences. A recurrent theme in interviews with managers and educators was that the existing minimum ratio did not allow for individualised attention if any child who did not qualify for AIM Level 7 support required additional support, and that meeting every child's need was a constant balancing act. Several

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managers and educators felt that other children were "losing out" while educators were supporting individual children:

> *Respondent 1: Children with additional needs. It's a constant battle (…). At one stage, we had six children in one session that really needed support. We got an AIM worker for the room, which is not – physically, we couldn't manage. It's 11 children to one adult. To give the children what they deserve and what they need and support the family and the same time.*
> *Respondent 2: And the other children.*
> *Respondent 1: And the other children, that they weren't – 'Oh okay, well, you can do that yourself. So, leave them be.' They would get left behind. It wasn't true [to] what we were trying to do, it was because we felt we were left high and dry. [Respondent 2] is, as I said, working as the LINC coordinator now and she's working with a little boy [with additional needs] now (…) but we would have other children in the room.*
> *Respondent 2: I still have a table of five, so there's four other children on my table that need my support as well, and I can't be leaving them behind, but I feel so focused on him because he needs it.*
> *Respondent 1: That's not including our children that are struggling with transitions, coming in and falling and peeling them off mum, and settling them. So, if you take me settling one and somebody else has an accident…*
> *Respondent 2: You're done.*
> *(Educators, Private service, Co. Meath)*

> *"Staffing, if you're only to have two staff in the room, it's not enough. It's just not enough. We're finding that we have more and more children coming in with additional needs, every single year. To the point where we think, 'Are we going to do the best for these children?' because even if we have three staff in the room, but if you have three or four children with additional needs, or extra needs or a challenge or a support that they really need, it's very, very difficult and then you can also have – you might have a child that doesn't have anything diagnosed at all, but just maybe behavioural issues, or just a challenge. That is really, really hard because sometimes the other children could lose out a little bit because you can't follow their interest as much as you'd like to."*
> *(Manager, Community service, Co. Westmeath)*

> *"I do [feel that the programme rules meet the needs of the children in my care], (…) as long as we have that AIM person. If you didn't, we're looking in September at possibly having one but possibly not and it will be a different scenario. You know you won't have the same time to give to each child and children. There're so many children with speech delays, there's so many children with other issues, there's children with anger issues. There's children with anxiety. You have a child that comes in the morning and is upset, and you really need to give them time. You're totally taken out of – they're completely different when they go to school. You cannot even – you could say 'but a primary school has 20 children on her own'. You go, they're totally different. We have them ready to go at that stage. They can sit, they can do everything themselves. At this stage, it's the first time away from mum and dad, mostly. And they have needs that are way above a primary school child. So, yeah, right now, we can. But we only have 18 [children with three adults], we don't even have the full 20 children. It depends on the children too. If you have two or three particular children who are more challenging than others, it can be a totally different story. It can upset the whole class, and you need to have somebody on them. (…) A lot of the time, you*

will have a child who will actually be harmful to other children. There's nothing particularly wrong, they're just extremely impulsive. (…) If you have a child who will pick up this and whack another child with it over the head, you can't leave that child unattended. No matter how child-friendly your service is, you could hurt a child with absolutely anything. So, there's a lot of that you need to watch, and I don't know where people find children that don't have that, but we always have children who are very impulsive, especially in their first year, but then they wouldn't fall under AIM at the same time. (…) They need a lot of support. So, the ratios are very difficult to work with. (Manager, Private service, Co. Tipperary)

Eligibility rules and age range

The majority of providers felt that the minimum (64%, n=828) and maximum age (81%, n=1048) were "about right". This percentage is higher for the upper age limit than for the lower one, and it is worth noting that 26% (n=333) of respondents felt that the minimum age was too low. Reasons given in open-ended comments often referred to the level of care and support required by very young children, especially in relation to toileting. As the following comments show, challenges in relation to the lower age limit are also closely related to ratios:

"Children, in my opinion, need to be at least 3 years of age to start in an ECCE setting. The ratio of 1-11 is extremely difficult to manage children younger than 3 years. A lot of the children are just recently toilet trained so there are daily accidents. When a child has a toilet accident, they need to be cleaned & changed, this can take 10-15 mins., leaving one educator with the remaining 10 or 21 Children. From September to the end of December minimum I have 3 educators. Some children may take weeks or even months to settle, this can be the 1st time they've been separated from their parents, they may need a lot of one to one from the educator, this unfortunately is impossible with a ratio of 1-11 which has an adverse effect on the child." (Manager employed by setting, Community service, Co. Mayo)

"The children are too young at the beginning. 2 teachers x 22 children, there may be one or two children with special needs among them. A few children needed to be brought to the toilets at the same time to be changed after having toileting accidents. This happened a few times during the session. The other teacher was left alone with the other children. Children's safety is very important. I think 2 years and eight months is too low. [Children should be] 3 years old. Children so young [should be] with 3 teachers." (Lead educator, Naíonra, Co. Donegal – translated from Irish)

Parents were also broadly in agreement with the current age limits, with 67.3% (n=545) considering the lower age limit "about right" and 76.3% (n=617) the upper age limit. The remaining respondents were split about equally between considering the lower age limit "too low" (13.6%, n=110) and "too high" (14.7%, n=119). Furthermore, 5% (n=46) felt that the maximum age of 5 years and 6 months on the 30th of June was too low.

More than one in five (21.8%, n=24) parents who considered the lower age limit "too low" had a child born in November or December (while only 15.6% of all parents taking part in the survey had children born in these two months). In contrast, nearly one in four parents (24.3%, n=29) who thought that the lower age limit was "too high" had a child born between January and March (while 20.1% of survey respondents had a child born in the first quarter of the year).

In comments, parents who felt that the lower age limit was too high often referred to a child born shortly after the cut-off point who "missed out" by a few days. Some of these parents also pointed out that children born early in the year were more likely to avail of the first ECCE year only, rather than starting primary school aged 5 years 8 months. Some parents expressed a preference for a school starting age of 4 and argued that greater flexibility at the lower end would encourage all parents to avail of the full two ECCE programme years. Parents who felt that the lower age limit was too low often referred to December-born children and cited general development and toileting as reasons.

Among parents and providers, there was support for greater flexibility at either end of the eligible age range. Parents felt that some flexibility would leave more room for parental choice and accommodate the different rate at which individual children develop. Providers argued that greater flexibility at the lower end of the eligibility range could improve year 2 uptake among children born towards the start of the year. Currently, providers observe that these children sometimes start the ECCE-programme early (on a self-funded basis or through NCS), thereby de facto lowering the ECCE programme starting age, or enrol at the correct age but leave after their first ECCE programme year. This experience suggests that the lower eligibility bounds limit the amount of ECCE programme provision some children receive in practice.

Providers who supported greater flexibility at the upper end of the eligibility range argued that some children are "not ready" and would benefit from staying in a preschool setting for longer. These respondents either argued that parents should be allowed to choose when to avail of their child's ECCE programme eligibility (rather than being tied to specific years), or that one or more additional years should be made available on an optional basis.

In the past, the ECCE programme operated three enrolment points – September, January and April. Children were first able to enrol at the enrolment point following their third birthday and could remain in the ECCE programme until they transitioned to primary school. The programme reverted to a single enrolment point in September 2018. Children who haven't reached two years and eight months by September become eligible the following September. The parent and provider surveys asked whether the ECCE programme should continue to operate a single enrolment point. Respondents to the provider survey were divided on this matter – while 57.5% supported a single enrolment point, 38% felt that additional enrolment points would be beneficial. In contrast, 26.2% (n=238) of parents supported additional enrolment points, with 49.7% (n=452) preferring a single enrolment point and the remaining 24.2% (n=220) being undecided or skipping the question. Parents of children born early or late in the year were most likely to support additional enrolment points.
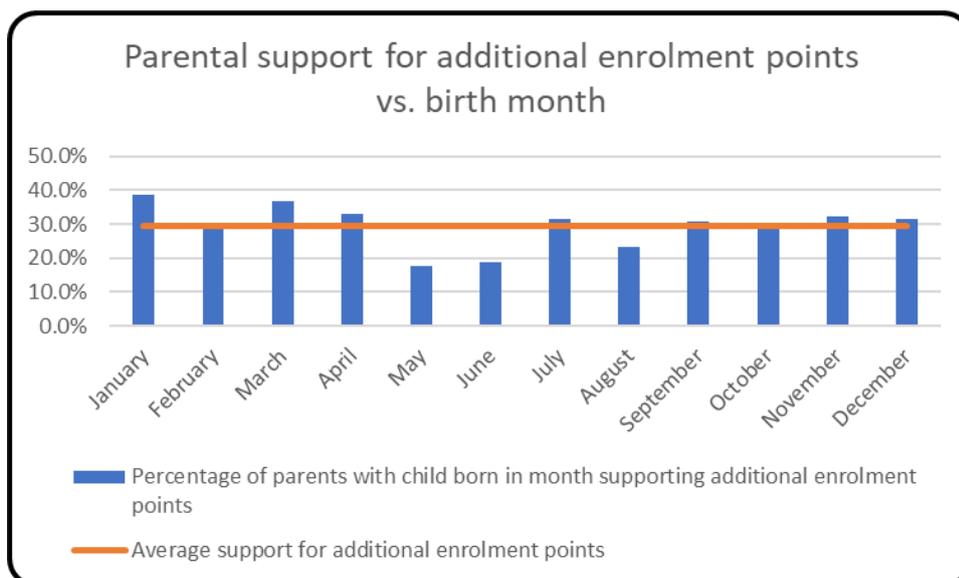
Figure 44 - Parental support for additional enrolment points, by child's birth month

Finally, 61.5% of provider survey respondents rated the overage exemption as "very important", although it is not often used: 31% stated that their setting "never" made use of the overage exemption, while 35.7% did so "rarely". 28.1% applied for an overage exemption "sometimes" and 4.8% did so "often".

ECCE programme providers interviewed as part of the in-depth service visits also felt that parents should be given greater flexibility on when to make use of the two ECCE programme years to encourage all parents to avail of their child's full eligibility to two ECCE programme years, regardless of their birth month. This was considered particularly important for children born towards the start or end of the year, premature children, and children with additional needs. The following excerpt from a manager interview illustrates the impact the current rules can have:

> **Respondent:** *When the children had to be three, it was a lot easier to facilitate the preschool year. Now, it's hard. We have children moving up from the toddler room. There are five out of 11 who were born in December. Some of them had literally just moved up from the wobbler room because that's the way it flies. People put so much onus on it then. The ECCE scheme; parents have an expectation for it. But look, we can adapt management, but I do think the two years eight months is just a little bit stretching the limit.*
> *We were disappointed this year because we have a [child] who has profound needs and was [extremely premature] and was born [in December] and not [in April]. So, this is [the child's] ECCE year, because it's [their] birth year.*
> **Interviewer:** *But [the child] really isn't even two years eight months old.*
> **Respondent:** *No. I did email the department (…) and my request was really could they not postpone [the child's] time because they're not guaranteed that the extension will happen at the end and you don't get that (…) ratified until the end of the second year (…) and that's no good to the parent when they're starting them off. Now, we have AIM support for [the child] and everything. (…) That is the key problem and people feel pressurised because it's financial also, it's money off their full day care fees (…). We've had one mum this year saying she wouldn't take the first preschool year for her [child]. Now, [the child] is just moving from wobblers at the moment, and her*

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friends said, 'Are you crazy? What are you doing not taking the first year?' And she will take it but her first thought was she didn't want her child to go to preschool (…). There should be a little bit of flexibility on judgement by the individual needs of the child. The child is not the centre of the policy around when they should take it. [The premature child] is an example of that because [this child] was born four months early. [The child] is a little miracle, to tell you the truth. (…). [But this child] shouldn't be taking the free preschool year this year. [They] should be taking it starting next year. [This child] was two days a week to start off with. We've extended to three days a week now since Easter because [the child is] coming along. But it's not beneficial to [this child].
(Manager, Private service, Co. Roscommon)

Programme intensity and adherence

The term 'programme intensity' describes the amount of provision provided under ECCE programme policy (i.e. funded daily, weekly, and annual hours, as well as number of years), while 'adherence' refers to the extent to which providers actually make these hours available and children avail of them. The parent and provider surveys asked respondents about their views on the currently funded programme intensity, as well as their experience in relation to providers' and children's adherence to the funded hours.

Parent and provider views on programme intensity

The majority of provider survey respondents felt that the current daily (71%), weekly (70%), and annual (79%) intensity, as well as the maximum eligibility of two years (83%) was "about right". The remaining respondents, with very few exceptions (around 1-2%), felt that the intensity was too low.

In total, 249 provider survey respondents referred to daily or weekly intensity in qualitative comments. With one exception, all of these comments supported a higher daily or weekly intensity, either for the second ECCE programme year or for both programme years. Out of these, n=151 suggested a specific number of hours per day or week. The most commonly suggested daily intensity was 4 hours (56.2%, n=68), followed by 5 hours (20.7%, n=25) and 3.5 hours (16.5%, n=20). There was also substantial support among provider survey respondents for increasing the daily (46.9%) and weekly (41.5%) intensity in the second ECCE year.

In addition, n=83 providers commented on annual intensity. All of these comments supported a higher annual intensity and n=40 suggested a specific number of weeks. The most frequently suggested annual intensity was "year-round" or "52 weeks" (n=25), followed by 42 weeks (n=7). Support for a higher annual intensity was greatest among providers in very disadvantaged (50%, n=3), affluent (24%, n=26) and disadvantaged areas (22%, n=76). Overall, support for an increased annual intensity was slightly higher in areas rated below average on the HP deprivation index (20%) than those rated above average (18%).

The most common reasons given for a higher daily or weekly intensity were parental preferences and/or need to facilitate paid employment (27.8%, n=70), children's learning needs (21.4%, n=54), the pace of provision and/or difficulty of delivering a comprehensive curriculum in three hours (17.5%, n=44), and working conditions for staff and/or difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff (9.5%, n=24). Those advocating for a longer annual intensity also pointed to the benefits of continuity and routine, especially for disadvantaged children, the administrative load created by different funding schemes, the financial viability of sessional services, and the impact of term-time work on recruitment and retention.

Finally, 87 providers commented on the maximum eligibility of two years. Providers who supported greater flexibility at the upper end of the eligibility range argued that some children are "not ready" and would benefit from staying in a preschool setting for longer. These respondents either argued that parents should be allowed to choose when to avail of their child's ECCE programme eligibility (rather than being tied to specific years), or that one or more additional years should be made available on an optional basis. The latter solution would allow parents to make decisions about their child's school-starting age closer to the date of primary school enrolment, rather than two years in advance.

46 respondents expressed support for a three-year programme (n=46), while a further nine stated that "more" than two years' eligibility would be beneficial without specifying a certain number of years. Three respondents felt that children should be eligible for four, five or "unlimited" years on the ECCE programme. Providers disagreed over the ideal starting age, with some advocating an earlier starting age and others a later age in combination with changes to regulations on school starting age.

> *"Children who are born opposite ends of the calendar year lose out massively and often transition both into ECCE and PS not ready just because it is the time." (Owner-Manager, Private service, Co. Cork)*

> *"An over-rigid application of rules and dates is not in the children's best interest. For example, I have a child with additional needs whose birthday falls in December. A child whose birthday falls in January. The January child is eligible for a second year but parents sending to National School. e December child is ineligible for an extra year but would benefit from an extra year. The rules and the application of the rules in a stringent manner does not support all children/families. There should be flexibility within the rules." (Owner-Manager, Private service, Co. Mayo)*

Parents were less likely to be satisfied with the current daily (56.5%, n=459), weekly (56.5%, n=459), or annual (73.8%, n=598) intensity than providers. Parents who disagreed with the current intensity levels generally considered them "too low". Key reasons mentioned in qualitative comments included supporting working parents, the cost of childcare, and meeting children's learning needs. 31% of parents also felt that the daily intensity should be different in year one and year two in order to prepare children for longer hours in primary school. Parents were also less likely than providers to feel that the maximum eligibility of two years was right (78.7%, n=639). In comments, the main argument in relation to the maximum duration referred to children's individual development, and parents felt that greater flexibility should be provided.

Parent and provider experiences of adherence to funded hours
58.5% of provider survey respondents stated that all children availing of the ECCE programme in their service routinely attended for the full 15 hours per week, while 31.7% stated that a small minority of up to 10% of ECCE children routinely attended for less than the full 15 hours per week. The most common reason cited was "parental choice" (46.6%, n=247), followed by "special needs, disability, or ill health" (14%, n=74) and "family circumstances" (13.6%, n=72). Parental work patterns (8.5%, n=45), service capacity (3.6%, n=19) and split provision (2.8%, n=15) accounted for a minority of cases. 10.9% of respondents indicated "other" reasons. Among these, the most frequent reason was illness or appointments (n=25), followed by children easing into the ECCE routine by attending fewer days during the first programme year (n=9). It is worth noting that a small number of respondents also mentioned children who did not meet the eligibility rules and were taking part in the ECCE programme on a self-funded basis, but whose parents could not afford to pay for the full intensity. This suggests that children whose parents choose to enrol them outside the funded age range may, on average,

avail of fewer hours than those who participate in the funded programme. Family circumstances and term-time holidays were mentioned by five respondents, respectively.

In interviews, several managers and educators explained that a minority of children would initially attend for fewer than five days a week and would gradually increase their attendance, either in the course of the first year or when moving on to the second year, out of parental choice.

> ***Interviewer:*** *Do they all attend three hours a day, five days a week for the entire time?*
> ***Respondent***: *No, because I have two that don't come Fridays.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *Two just four days. Why would that be?*
> ***Respondent***: *It's parental choice. Both parents have parental leave on a Friday. So, it just works out.*
> *(Lead Educator, Community service, Co. Cork)*

Capacity reasons can play a role in some oversubsubed services, where managers decide to offer fewer hours to more children, rather than turning applicants away, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> ***Respondent:*** *There's about three that might – there's two that does three days, and two that does four days.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *And what's the rationale for that?*
> ***Respondent:*** *Just we having space to try and give everybody a few days. (…) We just haven't places for everybody, so we were trying to split the last few places up. (…) So, we asked who was willing to lose a day to get somebody else.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *So, it's more capacity rather than parental choice?*
> ***Respondent:*** *Yes.*
> *(Manager, Private service, Co. Kildare)*

> *"Like [I have] 24 already registered for next year, and this is the thing, I had to – so, I'm giving my second years five days and I'm only able to give the first years three days. (…) You see, I wouldn't have taken 24 and I never like to fill, I've never filled, because I always feel that there's a child out there that needs to come here. But these are all siblings of everybody that I've had and that's why I can't say – I can't say no to them."*
> *(Manager, Private service, Co. Cork)*

In the parent survey, 14% (129) of parents reported that their child routinely attended for fewer than the full 15 hours a week. A Chi-Squared test showed no significant relationship between a parent's work status and the probability that the child would routinely attend the ECCE programme for less than 15 hours per week ($X2$ (6, N = 810) = 0.9993, p = 0.337).

The parent survey and interviews/focus groups with parents provide further insight into the reasons why some children regularly avail of less than their full eligibility. In the parent survey, the most common reason given was "I feel my child is too young/ not yet ready for 15 hours per week" (33%, n=34), while a minority indicated an illness, condition or disability (7.8%, n=8) or "my preferred setting does not have a place for 15 hours per week" (8.7%, n=9). 50.5% (n=52) furthermore indicated "Other" reasons, including preferring to spend time with the child at home (n=8), problems with transport (n=4), and alternative childcare arrangements, such as grandparents or childminders (n=4). In

interviews and focus groups, seven parents reported regularly sending their child for fewer than five days a week, citing a range of reasons, as illustrated by the following comments:

> *Respondent: (…) I have two children, Caoimhe*, who will be six next week, and James*, who is four and a half. So Caoimhe just did one free preschool year and then James is in his second year there now. (…)*
> *Interviewer: Very good, and you said Caoimhe only did one year. Why was that?*
> *Respondent: I suppose it was the COVID. And then (…) she actually [sustained an injury]. So that was the reason why we didn't make it. So she just did the one year last year. Yeah.*
> *Interviewer: And were they both attending for the full three hours, five days a week?*
> *Respondent: Initially, last year, no. We gradually increased it. Alright? I just felt it was probably too much too soon at the very start. And then, I would say after probably the Christmas term, we did the five days for the three hours. Yeah.*
> *(Parent Interview, private setting, Co. Tipperary)*

> *Respondent: I have two, a boy and a girl, Brendan* and Erin*. They are four and five. So they're both in the preschool programme. (…)*
> *Interviewer: Okay. And, and are they both attending for the full three hours, five days a week?*
> *Respondent: Yes, this year. So last year, Brendan, it was Brendan's first year, but there wasn't space. And so he only got the three days. But this year, now both of them have the five days. (…) So there wasn't space.*
> *(Parent Interview, Community service, Co. Galway)*

It is important to mention that participants working with vulnerable children stressed that strict rules on irregular attendance can be counter-productive and constitute a barrier for vulnerable children who struggle with regular attendance for various reasons – including children with disabilities or chronic conditions, Traveller and newcomer children, and children experiencing homelessness, among others. Withdrawing funding from services where a child doesn't meet the minimum attendance requirements can also encourage discrimination against vulnerable groups if providers feel that admitting a vulnerable child poses a financial risk to the service. Chapter 7 addresses some of the barriers to regular attendance in more detail.

55.1% (n=707) of providers furthermore indicated that up to 10% of ECCE children at their service attended for one year only, followed by all children attending for the full two years (24.4% n=313) and 11%-30% attending for only one year (12.7%, n=163). Only a small minority of respondents indicated that more than 30% of children attending their ECCE programme availed of less than the full two years. Most parents taking part in interviews and focus groups were availing of both ECCE years. Only one father intended to send his child to National School after the first ECCE year:

> *Respondent: They kind of advised that maybe if we wanted to keep him here for a second year? It would be an idea. But myself and the wife thought that maybe it would be better for him to go off to school perhaps.*
> *Interviewer: He might be ready.*
> *Respondent: Throw him in at the deep end.*
> *(Parent, Community service, Co. Wicklow)*

The main reason given by provider survey respondents was "Parents feel their child was ready for school" (82.7%, n=801), followed by "Child started ECCE at age 4 and so is not eligible for a second year because of the ECCE upper age limit (44.4%, n=430), and "Parents were offered a primary school

place in the school of their preference" (36.7%, n=356). A minority of respondents indicated that parents felt their child would be "bored in year 2" (12.9%, n=125). In qualitative comments, 72 respondents made reference to children born early in the year availing only of their first funded ECCE programme year, sometimes in combination with an NCS- or parent-funded "early ECCE year" (n=13). Furthermore, frequently mentioned reasons included a parental preference for starting primary school aged 4 (n=48), and longer hours offered by primary schools (n=34). 14 respondents reported that primary schools in the area put pressure on parents to enrol their child early in order to maintain their own pupil numbers, sometimes suggesting that a place might not be available the next year. A majority (84.3%, n=1082) of providers indicated that parents typically talk to them about their decision to avail of one or two years of the ECCE programme.

In the parent survey, 86.9% (n=703) of parents responded that their child was enrolled in the September of their first eligible programme year, while 9.3% (n=75) deferred their child's enrolment until later in the first eligible programme year. A minority of 3.8% (n=31) did not enrol their child until his or her second eligible programme year. The main reason for deferring the child's enrolment beyond September of the first eligible programme year was "I felt my child was too young/ not yet ready for the ECCE programme" (47.3%, n=52). 9.1% (n=10) stated that their child was not toilet trained when this was a requirement of the service, while 8.2% (n=9) could not get a place in their preferred service. Only four respondents (3.6%) deferred due to a longstanding illness, condition or disability. Other comments included Covid-19 related reasons (n=6) or relocating to Ireland from another country (n=8).

Furthermore, 90.1% (n=730) of parents responded that they intended to use their child's full eligibility to two years of the ECCE programme, while 7.7% (n=62) did not and 2.2% (n=18) were undecided. The main reason given for not availing of the second ECCE programme year or being undecided was "I feel my child is ready to start school" (60.8%, n=48), followed by having been offered a primary school place in the school of preference (13.9%, n=11) and not being eligible for a second year due to deferred enrolment in the first year (10.1%, n=8). Open-ended responses (n=12) referred to January-born children who availed of a self-funded first year (n=3) or were moving on to primary school after their first eligible year aged 4 years 7 months. It is noteworthy that one of the comments suggests a misunderstanding that January-born children are not eligible for two years:

> "Child was born early January and so only missed eligibility for 2 years by a few days"
> (Parent survey)

Parents in part-time work were more likely to state that they intended to avail of the full two years than parents in full-time work (95.5% vs. 89.7%) or unemployed parents (88.3%). A Chi-Squared test showed a significant relationship between a parent's work status and the probability that they planned to use their child's full eligibility to two years of the ECCE programme ($X2$ (14, N = 809) = 1, p = 0.0004). A possible explanation might be that the cost of full-time childcare and the longer primary school hours provide an incentive to working parents to enrol their child in primary school early. This incentive is less strong for parents in part-time work, who may only need to "top up" a few hours. WP4 discusses reasons why disadvantaged parents are more likely to choose early primary school enrolment.

As mentioned above, ECCE programme managers and educators highly value the second programme year and, in interviews, highlighted its beneficial impact on the average school-starting age, children's social and emotional development, as well as their independence and school readiness as major programme strengths. They cited cultural and childcare reasons why parents chose not to avail of the

second programme year. Managers and educators also reported that National Schools sometimes put pressure on parents to enrol their child early.

> **Respondent 1:** *"We do have issues with schools offering places to children who are too young and who we recommend not to go to school. (…) Every year there is children who go into primary school that are not ready. (…)*
> **Interviewer:** *And why do you think that [happens]? What do you think are the reasons why parents choose…?*
> **Respondent 1:** *Longer time?*
> **Respondent 2:** *One huge thing is longer time.*
> **Respondent 1:** *Historically children in Ireland go to school [aged 4].*
> **Respondent 2**: *But also (…) sometimes they listen to the primary school teacher than the teacher here, they're like, "Oh, the place is becoming available. I think they'll be fine" (…) Otherwise the main reasons are, they've other kids in school, it's easier. You can drop them off, schools are saying, "oh well, we'll support them", depending on the numbers and schools are under pressure too with numbers. I would love it to be like England, where the year you turn four/ Or here it's obviously five or six, that's the year you go to school. (…) Because then you have to avail of your two years of preschool, or you don't have to but you have the opportunity. I think there's a bit of competitiveness at times. And I it's hard on schools because they're trying to get numbers. But it puts pressure on the children.*
> *(Managers, Community service, Cork City)*

Interviews show that in many cases, managers and educators disagree with parents' decision to skip the second ECCE year and often make every effort to convince parents to avail of their child's full eligibility, although it is important to note that primary schools may have a different perspective that is not reflected here.

> *"Sometimes with the kids who do one year, they're not ready, and they're still getting sent to school. So we are having that kind of argument. You know, we've one that's [turned four] in January, mum wants to attend school in September. And we, you know, had to be like, Look, she's not socially, you know, socially you may be but not emotionally ready for school. And then obviously, you know, what happens when they go to school, and they usually have to be pulled back a year. So we try to … promote a second year, if we can get a second year, we'll promote a second year." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)*

> *"It would be most of them, but you're going to have one every couple of years that, despite advice, would still send their child on regardless and that would be with a huge amount of effort on my part showing them that the child shouldn't go. So, anybody that I have recommended, anyone that was in doubt, at the end of the second year that they were not going to do will always come back and say it was the right decision, and I would still have people coming to me that their child did it and maybe they'd be in first or second class, and they'd still come back and say that second year stood to them." (Manager, Private service, Co. Cavan)*

Availability

71.1% (n=916) of providers stated that all children applying for an ECCE programme place were usually offered a place, with 28.9% (n=372) reporting that they could not usually offer a place to every child. These numbers give a rough indication of supply and demand of ECCE places – however, it is important to keep in mind that they are an imperfect proxy of availability as other reasons may affect the decision

whether a place is offered or not (e.g. the service's ability to accommodate additional needs, parents applying to several services, etc.).

Overall, the probability of all children being offered a place decreased significantly with greater service size, standing at 73.5% for services with Tusla capacity 0-49 and at 58.3% for services with Tusla capacity greater than 150 (X^2 (4, N = 1284) = 0.999, p = 0.011). Services employing an AIM Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) were less likely to offer all children a place (69.1%, n=633) than those without an INCO (76.0%, n=282). Private services (69.1%, n=627) were also less likely to offer all children a place than community services (76.0%, n=288). Sessional services (76.2%, n=426) were more likely to offer all children a place than non-sessional services (66.9%, n=484). This is likely a reflection of shortages in full- and part-time daycare spaces. Finally, rural services (82.7%, n=392) were more likely to offer all children a place than urban services (64.2%, n=520).

Comparing the probability of securing a place by service type in combination with deprivation classification, community services in disadvantaged areas were most likely to offer a place (85.4%, n=41), while private services in affluent areas were least likely (45.4%, n=44).

A multivariate analysis of service type, rural/urban location and probability of being offered a place furthermore showed that community services in rural areas were most likely to offer all children a place (87.6%, n=149), while private services in urban areas were least likely (63.4%, n=381).

There were also large differences between counties, with providers in Dublin and surrounding counties, as well as Cork (County and City), Louth, Roscommon and Carlow being particularly likely to turn children away, as shown in the chart below. It is important to stress that this chart does not measure the extent to which children in different counties secure a place on the ECCE programme. Parents are free to apply to more than one service and overall enrolment numbers show that most children do eventually find a place in an ECCE service. Many of the counties with high probability of turning children away (p>30%) also had lower than average (12%) vacancy rates for non-school going children aged 3-6 years old in 2022/23 (Pobal – Annual Early Years Sector Profile). However, exceptions to this rule are Co. Carlow (vacancy rate 18%), Co. Cork (13%), Co. Roscommon (21%), and Co. Wicklow (14%). It is possible that pockets of oversupply coexist with pockets of undersupply in these counties.
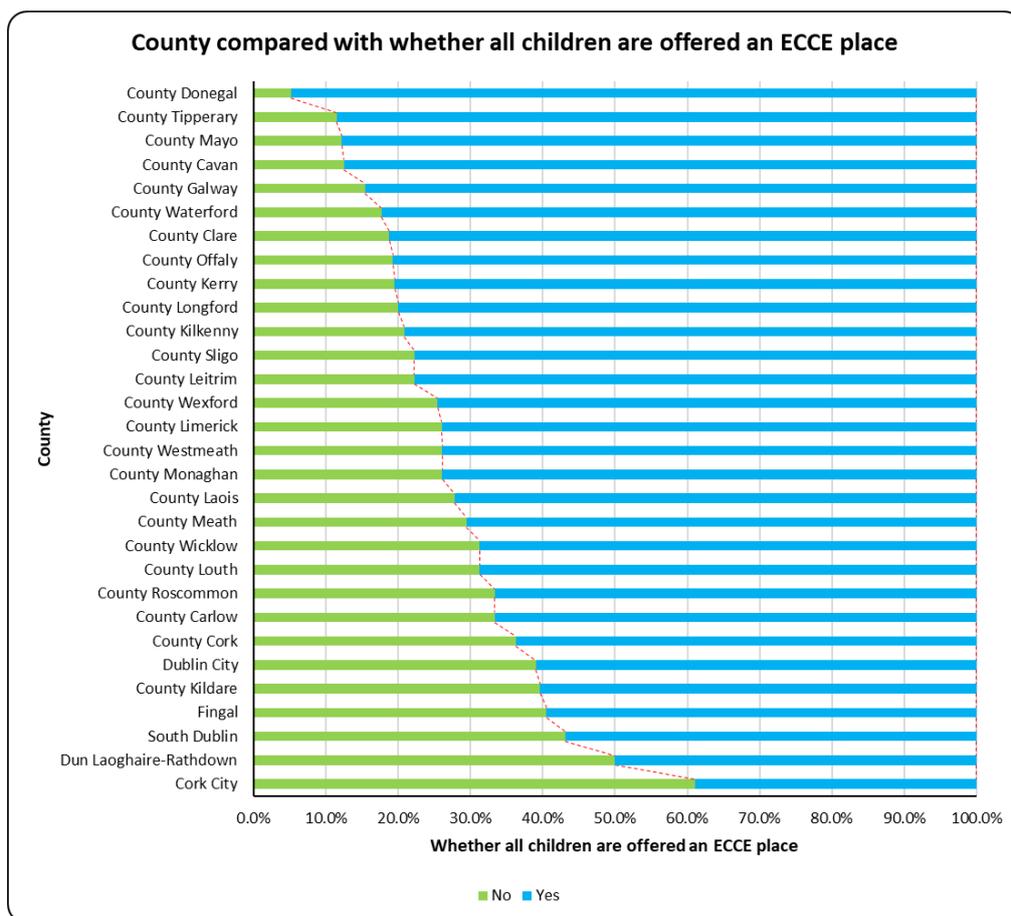
Figure 45 - County compared with whether all children applying are offered a place

Most services which do not usually offer all children a place operate a waiting list (97.1%, n=362). The most common criteria used to allocate places in all oversubscribed services were "date of application" (75.5%), having a sibling in the same setting (55%), and the child living locally (20.5%). Among over-subscribed non-sessional services, 53.9% (n=129) of providers indicated that they prioritise children who are already in the service and will avail of additional hours, while 16.7% (n=40) prioritise children who are new to the service but will avail of additional hours.

Services also reported on the usual timing of ECCE programme applications. A majority of services taking part in the provider survey stated that they accept applications for the ECCE programme "at any time" (59.3%), while most of the remaining services accept applications 13-24 months before the start of the programme (17.6%) or 4-12 months before the start of the programme (16.4%). A minority (2.4%) accept applications 1-3 months before the start of the programme. A majority of providers furthermore reported that most parents typically apply between 13 and 24 months ahead of the programme start data (50.5%), while 31.5% reported that parents did so between 0 and 12 months in advance. 18% of respondents left qualitative comments, which typically referred to parents applying years in advance (in some cases before the child was born). Some comments referred to "natural progression" from toddler rooms in the same service.

Most parent survey respondents applied the year of enrolment (51.5%, n=418), or the year before (35.5%, n=288). A further 5% (n=37) applied at birth or during the new-born stage, while 5% (n=36) applied later in the child's first year of life. Seven respondents stated that they applied during pregnancy. Furthermore, most parents found the application very easy or easy (63.0% and 26.8%, respectively) and experienced no barriers (91.4%, n=735). 95.7% (n=774) of parents secured a place

in their preferred setting. However, it is important to keep in mind that the survey targeted parents of children currently availing of the ECCE programme – where parents may have been unable to secure any place, these parents are not represented in the survey sample.

77.6% (n=628) of parents taking part in the parent survey felt that they had a choice of setting, while 22.4% (n=181) reported that they did not. When choosing a setting, most respondents stated that having a general good impression of the setting or a good reputation was very important to them (92.1%). Convenience of location (70.7%) and the language used in the setting (54.3%) were also important to parents.

Accessibility

78.8% (n=1017) of services taking part in the provider survey are wheelchair accessible. Overall, community services (86.9%, n=331) are significantly more likely to be wheelchair accessible than private services (75.5%, n=687) ($X2$ (1, N = 1291) = 0.993, p = 0.00009). The probability of wheelchair accessibility also generally decreases with increasing area affluence (89.5% in "disadvantaged" areas vs. 73.6% in "affluent" areas), but a Chi-Squared test showed no significant relationship between 'deprivation classification' and 'wheelchair accessibility' ($X2$ (5, N = 1290) = 0.999, p = 0.194).

Provider survey respondents were asked to estimate approximately what percentage of children in their service had disabilities or additional needs. Community services were more likely to indicate a relatively high percentage of children with disabilities or additional needs than private services: while 69% (n=480) of private services gave a low percentage of between 1% and 10% of children availing of ECCE at their service, this was the case for only 63.1% (n=207) of community services. In turn, 10.1% (n=33) of community services indicated that a high percentage between 31% and 60% of their ECCE children had a disability or additional needs, while such a high percentage could only be found in a small minority of private services (3.9%, n=27). A Chi-Squared test showed a significant relationship between service type (Community/Private) and the approximate percentage of children with disability or additional needs attending the service ($X2$ (4, N = 1018) = 0.999, p = 0.0003).

The reported approximate percentage of children with disabilities and additional needs attending the ECCE programme is also associated with area deprivation index rating, whereby higher percentages are more likely in disadvantaged areas than in affluent areas.

Service policies on toilet training can have an impact on accessibility, especially for the youngest children availing of the ECCE programme and for children with disabilities and additional needs. 30.3% (n=391) of services taking part in the provider survey stated that children must be fully toilet-trained at the start of the ECCE programme year in order to be admitted.

Services in affluent areas (51.8%, n=57) were more likely to have a strict policy on toilet training than those in less affluent areas. Services in areas rated "marginally below average" were least likely to require toilet training (23.7%). A Chi-Squared test showed a significant relationship between 'deprivation classification' and 'policy on toilet training' ($X2$ (5, N = 1288) = 1, p = 4.8E-08). Services employing an AIM Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) (73.3%, n=671) were significantly more likely to enrol children who are not fully toilet trained than services without INCO (60.9%, n=227) ($X2$ (1, N = 1289) = 0.997, p = 0.00001). There appears to be no clear relationship between toilet training policies and a service's maximum floor-space capacity as registered with Tusla, and while community services (28.9%) were slightly less likely to make toilet training a requirement than private services (30.9%), this difference was not statistically significant ($X2$ (1, N = 1289) = 0.487, p = 0.484).

It is noteworthy that only a minority of services appear to actually enforce their toilet training requirement. 84.7% (n=331) of those who had indicated that they operated a toilet training

requirement had never declined to enrol a child based on this rule. Smaller services appear to be more lenient in this regard than larger services (Tusla capacity 0-49, 85.9% "No" vs. Tusla capacity 100-149, 61.5% "No").

Access to transport can be a barrier for some children and several service managers, educators, experts and parents discussed challenges in relation to transport in interviews carried out for work packages 2 and 4, especially in relation to homeless children in temporary accommodation, refugee children living in accommodation centres, Traveller children on remote halting sites, and other disadvantaged families who don't have access to cars. This is discussed in greater detail in Work Package 4.

Costs to parents

The ECCE programme is available free of charge to all children within the eligible age range, and this has greatly improved accessibility of preschool education for children in Ireland. 40.3% (n=327) of parents taking part in the parent survey stated that they would not have been able to send their child to preschool had the ECCE programme not been available. As shown in Figure 46, below, there is a clear relationship between household income and parents' ability to afford a preschool place without the ECCE programme.
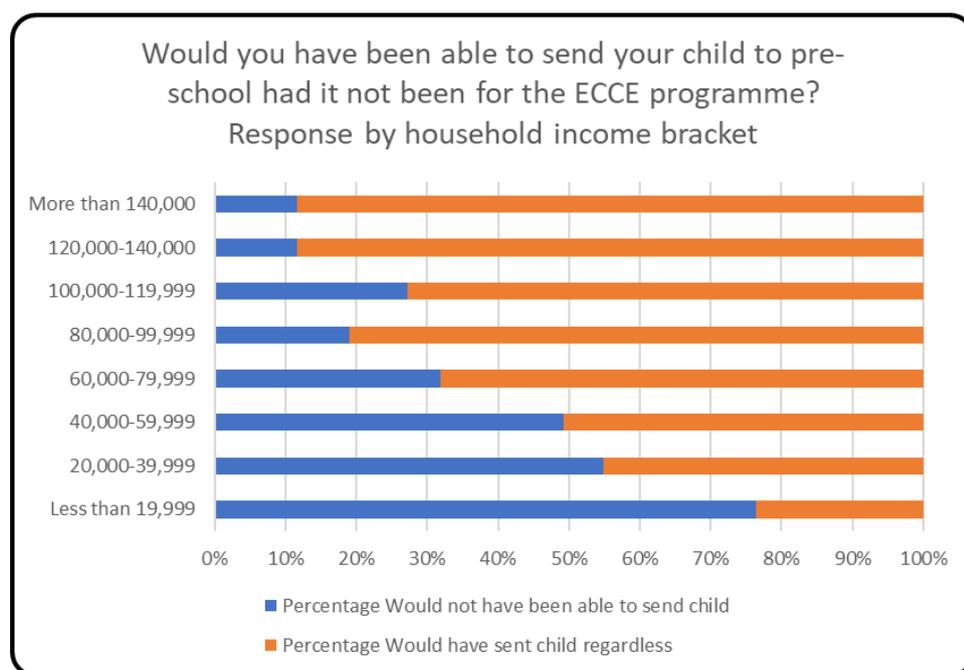
Figure 46 - Parents' ability to send child to preschool without ECCE programme, by household income bracket

41.6% (n=536) of respondents taking part in the provider survey stated that their service requires a booking deposit to secure a place on the ECCE programme. Booking deposits are significantly more common in private (50.1%, n=455) than community services (21.4%, n=81) (X^2 (1, N = 1287) = 1, p = 2.35E-21), and in urban (50.9%, n=413) than rural (25.6%, n=121) services (X^2 (1, N = 1284) = 0.999, p = 6.24E-19). The probability of taking a booking deposit increases steadily, and significantly, with increasing area affluence (very disadvantaged: 16.7%, n=1, affluent: 70.0%, n=77) (X^2 (5, N = 1286) = 1, p = 4.09E-19).

The amount charged usually ranges from €51 to €100 (44.8%, n=242) or less (36.5%, n=197). A minority charges between €101 and €200 (12.8%, n=69). Only a small number of services charge a higher amount up to €276 (4.3%, n=23). It is noteworthy that nine respondents stated that the booking

deposit exceeds €276, which is in breach of ECCE rules. These were private services in urban areas with deprivation index ratings "marginally above average" (n=3) and "affluent" (n=6).

Based on the provider survey, higher booking deposits (above €100) appear to be more common in urban (21.2%, n=88) than in rural (9.9%, n=12) areas, while small deposits (up to €50) are more common in rural (42.6%, n=52) than urban (34.9%, n=145) areas. The approximate amount charged as a booking deposit also increases with increasing area affluence: while the vast majority (86.7%, n=13) of booking deposits charged in disadvantaged areas are under €51, only 6.4% of booking deposits in affluent areas are similarly small. Conversely, 50% of services in affluent areas charge a booking deposit of more than €100, while none do so in disadvantaged areas. It is also noteworthy that twelve services (2.2%) stated that booking deposits are not refunded after a child formally registers on the ECCE programme, while 14 services (2.6%) only refunded part of the booking deposit.

Booking deposits were also explored in the parent survey, and 29.8% (n=241) of respondents reported that they had provided a booking deposit to secure an ECCE place. Parents with higher household incomes were generally more likely to report providing a booking deposit, ranging from 21.1% of respondents with a gross household income under €20,000 to 46.3% of respondents with a gross household income between €100,000 and €140,000. Most reported that the amount was up to €50 (45.9%, n=112), followed by €51–€100 (27.5%, n=67), and €101–€200 (16.8%, n=41). A minority reported providing a booking deposit of more than €200 (4.1%, n=10), including six respondents who reported being charged more than the maximum permissible amount of €276. 20.6% (n=49) of parents who had paid a booking deposit stated that this had not been returned to them.

Holding charges, where a child is not eligible to immediately take up a place or defers taking up a place on becoming eligible, are overall rare (4.9%, n=63), but their probability increases with increasing area affluence (very disadvantaged: 0.0%., n=0; affluent/very affluent: 11%, n=12).

More than half of all services (58.6%, n=756) offer at least one optional extra. Additional ECCE minutes are offered by 32.6% of services taking part in the provider survey, either at a charge (25.0%, n=321) or for free (7.6%, n=98). A range of optional extras are available at a charge in some services: 5.1% (n=64) apply a charge for food, while 12.3% (n=154) offer "Gymboree" type events at a charge, and 38.3% (n=477) charge extra for school trips. 54.0% (n=673) of respondents stated that food, "Gymboree" type events and school trips are included at no additional charge. 38.4% of respondents whose service charge for these optional extras stated that they allowed children to participate at the service's cost if parents chose not to purchase the optional extra, while 36% provided an alternative activity. In addition, in open-ended comments, 49 providers stated that no parents had ever opted out of an optional extra. Out of these, 10 stated that the service would cover the cost of the child's participation if the situation arose. Eight respondents stated that children who opted out of school trips stayed at home for the day, while three respondents would cancel activities for all children if any opted out.

The parent survey also addressed optional extras. The most common optional extras on offer, as reported by parents taking part in the provider survey, were school trips (30.4%, n=239) and additional ECCE minutes or hours (21.5%, n=169). In addition, optional extras frequently mentioned by parents in qualitative comments included snacks and nappies. Several parents mentioned optional extras that are explicitly disallowed under ECCE programme rules, including an extra educator (n=1), art supplies (n=3), books and reading materials (n=1), and "general upkeep" and admin charges (n=3). Other disallowed extras mentioned included cooking, baking and gardening (n=5), aprons (n=1) and even balance bikes (n=1). In an extreme case, one parent reported paying €100/month to cover "baking, [an] extra teacher, art supplies, Christmas presents, [and] Easter eggs" and stated that none of these

costs "felt optional". In another case, a parent reported being charged €2,500/year for 45 minutes/day of additional ECCE time. This parent reported that the additional minutes were "very difficult" to afford, did not "feel optional" and that they would feel "very uncomfortable" opting out. However, 45.7% (n=359) reported that the service their child attended did not offer or charge for any optional extras.

A total of 44% (n=183) of respondents reported paying for school trips, while 27.6% (n=115) did not pay for any optional extras. Additional ECCE minutes (17.3%, n=72), "Gymboree" type activities (16.1%, n=67), food (13.0%, n=54) and nappies or pull-ups (4.8%, n=20) were purchased by a minority of respondents. Most respondents stated that they found covering the cost of optional extras "very easy" (21.0%, n=63), "easy" (34.7%, n=104) or "neither easy nor difficult" (34.3%, n=103). However, a minority found the cost of optional extras "difficult" (8.3%, n=25) or "very difficult" (1.7%, n=5) to afford.

In addition, 65.3% (n=271) of parents who had been offered optional extras said that these charges "felt optional" to them. However, 19.3% (n=80) felt that only some of the optional extras they were offered "felt optional", while 15.4% (n=64) responded that "none of them felt optional". More than half of respondents said that they would feel "uncomfortable" (26%, n=77) or "very uncomfortable" (27%, n=81) not paying, and 74.7% (n=319) did not know if their setting provided any financial reduction or assistance to cover the cost of optional extras if a family was unable to afford them. In contrast, 16.6% of respondents (n=71) reported that the ECCE service would "sometimes", "usually" or "always" provide such assistance.

Parent interviews provided anecdotal evidence of permitted optional extras being priced to fund other costs, such as materials, and possibly staff wages, which should be provided for free under current rules:

> *Respondent: So, they informed us that there will be (…) a weekly €10 charge to cover the costs of the snack. (…) And then also (…) they were quite open and said, like, you know, that not every penny of that goes to cover the staff cost, but in funding, you know, the actual, you know, centre itself. (…) I'm not 100% sure did they say to the staff or just materials but definitely towards the running of the centre. (…) I'm happy enough to pay that.*
> *Interviewer: Yes. That's what I was going to ask, if there's any costs that you find quite burdensome?*
> *Respondent: (…) No, I mean, [sighs] do you know, obviously, do you know, if the government was to pay the staff better? Do you know? (…) I suppose maybe we'd have to pay less, just five Euros towards a snack or something? (…) I mean, the snacks she gets are nice (…), it's, you know, fruit, veg and fruit and cheese and crackers and things like that. (…) So, I guess, when you break it down? How does that [add up to] €2.50 [sic.] a day? But look, yeah, it's, it's, it's fine. It's not a DEIS area [sic.][13], I guess, either. It's not a disadvantaged area. So. (Parent, Community service, Co. Westmeath)*

5.3% (n=69) of provider survey respondents stated that they had, in the past, requested voluntary contributions from parents, although it is not clear whether these requests were made before or after voluntary contributions were banned. While voluntary contributions are overall relatively rare, it is noteworthy that their probability is slightly increased in disadvantaged and very disadvantaged areas,

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[13] DEIS is a status awarded to schools in disadvantaged areas. However, areas themselves are not allocated DEIS status.

and that they are more than twice as likely in community (8.7%, n=33) as in private services (4.0%, n=36).

35.1%, (n=27) stated that these contributions were requested to enhance the quality of provision, while 10.4% (n=8) responded that the service would struggle without voluntary contributions and 19.5% (n=15) indicated that these were essential and that the service could not operate without them. A majority of services furthermore reported that all or most parents gave the full amount requested (75.4%, n=52), while 11.6% (n=8) received a smaller amount than requested from all or most parents, and 13% (n=9) stated that all or most parents declined to contribute at all.

6.5% (n=52) of respondents to the parent survey reported being asked for voluntary contributions. Of these, 64.7% (n=33) gave the full amount requested, 29.4% (n=15) gave some of the amount requested, and 5.9% (n=3) gave none of the amount requested (Table 83.).

Quality of delivery

Quality of delivery is addressed in detail in Chapter 5, based on practice observations conducted in the 30 settings. At this point, we report on interview and survey data in relation to quality, including outdoor play.

A wide range of curricula and curriculum and quality frameworks are used by services taking part in the provider survey and many services indicated that their practice was informed by more than one curriculum or framework. Aistear and Síolta (91.2%) are widely used among services taking part in the provider survey. However, considering that all ECCE programme providers are contractually obliged to implement a curriculum that is underpinned by the principles of Aistear and Síolta, the 8.8% of respondents who didn't indicate using Aistear and/or Síolta are notable. Furthermore, large majorities indicated using play-based curricula (82.0%). Montessori (41.6%) is also a common point of reference used in ECCE programme rooms. A smaller percentage of respondents also indicated using High Scope (12.2%) or Reggio Emilia (6.7%). Qualitative comments and material from interviews furthermore show that child-led approaches and emergent curricula are widely practiced. Material from interviews also shows that, where used, the Montessori method is often found alongside other curricula and adapted to make it more child-led.

> *"It's a home from home and it's a Montessori school. We started out life as a Montessori school. We're all Montessori trained, but over the years with the Aistear programme, we have had a look at the play base, incorporating that into Montessori, and it has worked really well. Now, it took us a while, because we are so used to doing things the way we always did, to suddenly bring in the extra elements of play, to try and see how that would work with Montessori. So, then the main classroom is the Montessori but there's plenty of toys in there also that would never have been before." (Manager, Private service, Dublin)*

Providers were also asked to rate (on a scale of 1=very important to 5=not important at all) how important it was, in their opinion, for children to develop a range of specified abilities and skills. A majority of respondents rated developing oral language skills (92.0%), physical and motor skills (e.g. physical exercises, dancing, playing musical instruments) (91.0%) and the ability to inquire and explore based on one's own curiosity (91.1%) as "very important". Developing children's ability to cooperate easily with others (86.5%), to think creatively (75.4%) and critically (66.5%) and to reason logically (66.1%) were also seen as important by a majority of respondents. Developing these skills was also a regular part of the curriculum in a majority of the services surveyed. Reading and writing skills and ICT

skills were seen as least important, with only 15.9% and 7%, respectively, rating them as "very important".
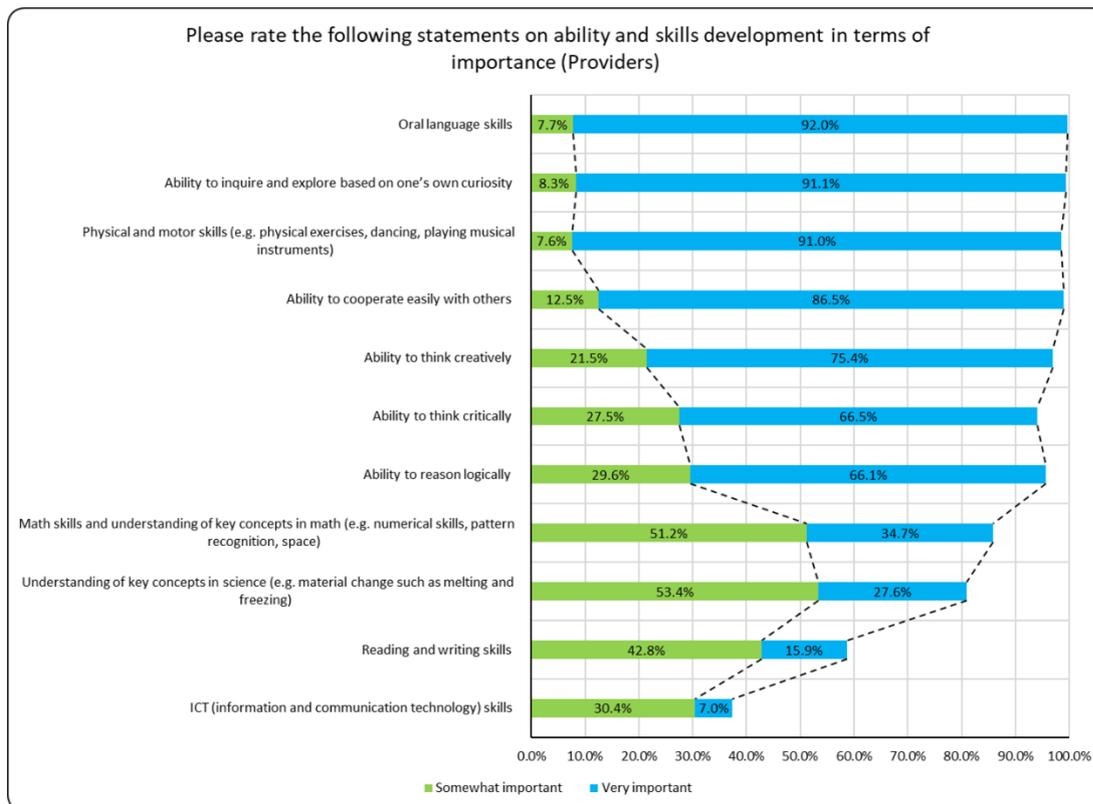
Figure 47 - Statements on ability and skills development in terms of importance (providers' perspective)

Interview data from the 30 settings shows that many services follow a child-led approach, which is expressed in a range of practices across the areas of curricular planning, playful activities, and educators' engagement with children. For example, child-led approaches were evident in managers' and educators' narratives of curricular planning, which frequently referenced themes such as "emerging interests", "flexible planning" and "adapting and adjusting to children's needs". A small number of educators described established procedures for consulting with children and involving them in decision making:

> "So, we come in at the morning as a group. We do our rollcall; we do our songs. We do our dance and then we speak to the children what they choose. Everything is the voice of the child. So, they could say, "Let's look for snails today," as quite a few brought in snails. Their parents don't like them in the car, but they're there and they're pets. So, snails seem to be the thing today." (Manager, Private service, Co. Clare)

> "Some weeks here's not a whole lot coming out and we might suggest things, and other times, we'll have a children's meeting and we'll say, "Guys, we're wondering, what would you like to do? What are you interested in?" They'll come up with all sorts of ideas. Or if it is coming up to Mother's Day or something like that? What would you like to do?" (Manager, Private service, Dublin)

> "We would also get the children to reflect every week on the theme that we have done. So, (…) the way they would do it, is they have a five-star rating. (…) And we will literally jot that down that it's giving them their voice to reflect. 'I actually hated that',

or 'I absolutely loved it'. And sometimes that can get quite passionate between them, and all that kind of stuff. But it's really, really nice. So, I suppose we want them to be involved, that their voice is really central to everything – central to everything we do. And like that, even if it came down to changing the room around changing books, that they would have a choice in what happens within their setting as well. That it's not just the teachers dictating this is what's happening." (Manager, Naíonra, Co. Limerick)

In relation to playful activities, managers and educators spoke about giving children choice, promoting independence, ensuring free access to resources, encouraging peer learning, giving children jobs and involving them in lunch routines. Educators and managers' descriptions of their own engagement with children also often expressed a child-led ethos. For example, managers and educators often used expressions such as "following children's lead".

Outdoor play is an important element of high-quality provision in ELC and the provider survey included questions designed to measure the extent to which children can access outdoor play as part of the ECCE programme. In about a third of services, children "access the outdoors for a time-tabled period every day" (32.1%), while children in another third of services have "free-flow access to the outdoors where they can engage in a full range of planned learning activities" (29.1%). The remaining third reported less frequent access to outdoor play, reporting "regular" (17.3%) planned learning activities outdoors or going outside "when the weather allows" (17.1%). Very small minorities reported having only limited use of the outdoors due to location, availability, or lack of resources (2.7%) or providing all learning activities outside (1.7%).

As the graphic below shows, daily access to outdoor play[14] is approximately equally common in rural and urban services. However, high-intensity access (including "all activities" and "free flow") is more common in rural than urban settings, while urban settings are more likely to access the outdoors for a time-tabled period every day. High-intensity access is also disproportionately more common in private than community services: 90% of services providing all activities outdoors and 75.8% of services providing free-flow access to the outdoors were private businesses, while only 70.5% of all services taking part in the provider survey were private businesses.

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[14] Including "All learning activities take place outdoors", "Free-flow access" and "Time-tabled access"
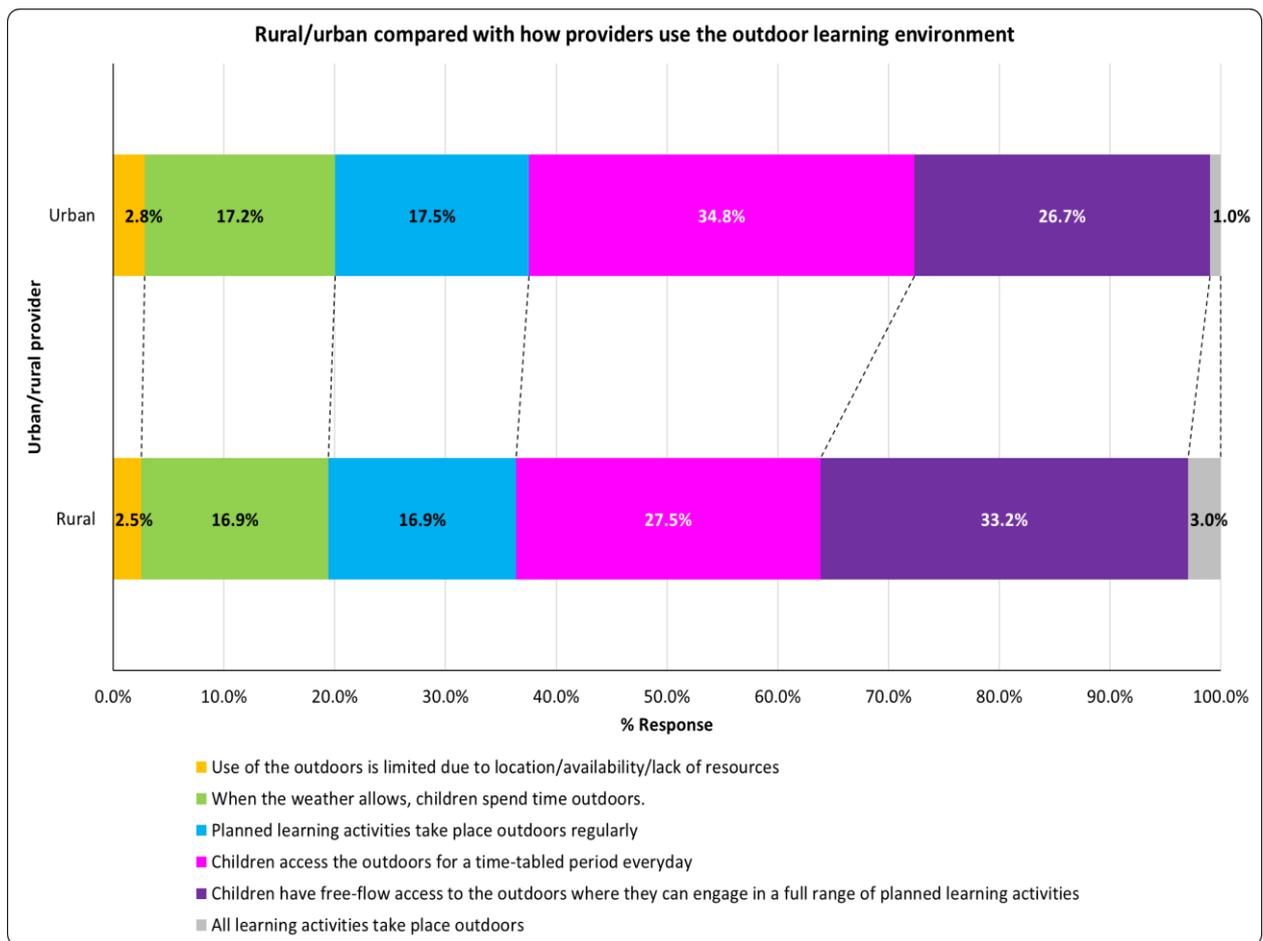
Figure 48 - Use of the outdoor learning environment, by rural or urban location

Anecdotal evidence from interviews suggests that in some part-time and full-day services, structured learning activities compete with outdoor play during ECCE hours, while outdoor play is intensive outside ECCE hours, as in the following examples:

> **Interviewer**: *How are ECCE hours different from non-ECCE time at this setting for the children who stay on after? What changes, if anything?*
> **Respondent:** *No, there would be changes. (…) They would spend a good bit of the time outside because you find, in ECCE, you have to cover little bits of things. You have to cover this area, that area, and whatever. So, you're kind of with a programme (…). But in the all-day children, there's more freedom, you don't have to be in all day, or you can get out and the outdoor area is yours. It doesn't matter. (…) [ECCE time isn't] over-structured, but there has to be some to cover all our goals, I suppose.*
> **Interviewer:** *The afternoon is just…*
> **Respondent:** *It's a free for all, supervised and controlled. I suppose the only thing that we probably do differently, maybe the toys outside, you could set different programs, and set an obstacle course up or whatever, and just take the stuff out from the boxes or whatever from out there, but there's no time limit on the thing. So, yeah.*
> *(Manager, Private service, Co. Offaly)*

Programme differentiation

Differentiation between the ECCE programme and other programmes

Programme differentiation varies between different ECCE programme providers. 41.7% (n=302) of part-time and full-day services had a dedicated ECCE room, which was used by ECCE programme

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children only during ECCE hours, while 47.6% (n=345) also catered for non-ECCE programme children between the ages of 2.5 and 6 years in the same room. Anecdotal evidence from parent and manager interviews suggests that these are likely children who are not yet or no longer eligible to avail of the ECCE programme for free but participate on a self-funded basis. A minority of services also catered for children aged under 2.5 years (5.1%, n=37) or between 0 and 14 years (5.7%, n=41) in the same room.

ECCE programme children who avail of additional hours stay in the same room outside ECCE programme hours in most services (74.8%, n=505). In 97.4% (n=661) of full- and part-time services, all or some ECCE programme staff also look after ECCE programme children outside ECCE programme hours.

ECCE programme activities are clearly distinct from activities offered at other times of the day in 37.5% (n=254) of services, while 50.5% (n=342) also offer all ECCE programme activities at other times of the day. In qualitative comments, the most frequently mentioned activity unique to ECCE programme hours was Montessori work.

In interviews with educators and managers, ECCE time was sometimes described as more structured than non-ECCE time, while "free play" was dominant in non-ECCE time. As mentioned above, children in indoor services also appear to spend more time playing outdoors outside of ECCE hours.

> *"Okay, well, in the morning, it's structured. It's very structured, and obviously it's still child-led, but this is where they are learning, because of their attention span and of the programme and stuff like that, and it would be in line or equivalent to if they were in primary school and they're age appropriate. (…) Then they'll have their lunch, then have some more of an easier downtime while the girls are having lunch between 12:00 and 14:00 and then they're outside again. We're outside as much – today we would be out, and then they'll have their snack and this afternoon, they'll do their arts and crafts, or they'll have their board games or whatever.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *Whatever they want to do. Certainly.*
> ***Respondent:*** *Yeah.*
> *(Manager, Private service, Co. Galway)*
>
> ***Respondent:*** *Yeah, there is a wee kind of plan we do kind of follow, at their lead for day care. So it could be quite unstructured. It could be like today oh, I want to do playdoh, or I want to do painting, want to play outside. So we kind of go with the flow. It's quite flexible. And then we will kind of have our days where we have things planned, and it's quite structured. And then there's days, it's just, what do you want to do? What would you like to do? Because they've had that kind of structure in the morning. It's nice to give them that wee bit of…*
> ***Interviewer:*** *Do you think they feel the difference between-*
> ***Respondent:*** *Oh I would say so, yeah.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *What do you think they would notice?*
> ***Respondent:*** *They are outside.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *They go outside more?*
> ***Respondent:*** *Yeah, that's them out, they know they are out till dinnertime, they are coming in, they are having their dinner, and then they're back out again, you know?*
> *(Lead educator, Community service, Co. Cavan)*

Certain structured activities, such as Montessori work or circle time, as well as observations and learning logs might be limited to ECCE hours only:

> *"You're not as focused on them, like observing them, or trying to make wee mental notes, oh, they are doing this, because it's obviously not ECCE."* (Lead educator, Community Service, Co. Cavan)

> *"When they're finished, they get up and they go off and play, and then we have different toys that we take out. So, they might be Stickle Brick, dinosaurs. Now, some children will still go back to the Montessori and they'll start gluing or colouring and that's perfect. But we would never sit and do a lesson with them and we'd say, 'Well, I'll show you that tomorrow', because the girls might be doing a little bit of paperwork and things because it's much more free play."*
> *(Manager, Private service, Co. Cavan)*

However, evidence from educator and manager interviews shows that in some full-day services, there is little difference between ECCE time and non-ECCE time, and in some cases, the boundaries of the ECCE session appear to have little practical relevance:

> *"Well, I suppose, as you say, you're focusing only on the ECCE part of it and it's hard because the kids generally were coming in and having their breakfast and all that kind of – there's that wee bit of settling in and stuff that would sort of happen before the actual ECCE. Also, I think because it's a full day care setting as well, not all the kids would be in at 09:00. Like the other preschool is 09:00 to 12:00 and it's drop off at 09:00 and pick up at 12:00 whereas here, because its full day care some parents are dropping off at 09:30 or whatever time they're going to work. So, you don't necessarily have them all."*
> *(Manager, Community service, Co. Cavan)*

> ***Respondent:*** *It's all the same. They move rooms. So, that room closes. That becomes an after-school room in the afternoon as they move down to the other two rooms then. But they stay with their own groups. It just happens the numbers are perfect. But it's still the same – it's very much identical in the morning.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *There's nothing specific to ECCE that wouldn't happen at other times?*
> ***Respondent:*** *No.*
> *(Manager, Private service, Co. Roscommon)*

> *"A lot of it is child-led. So, we would have a very rough idea of how the day's going to be. So, they would come in and have their free time, and then because the room that you were in today was a full-day, they kind of do a lot of stuff in the afternoons and a lot of the children would be there all day. So, they kind of spread it. So, they don't seem to have a particular ECCE time there, whereas upstairs in the other sessional service they probably would do."*
> *(Manager, Community Service, Co. Carlow)*

Differentiation between Year 1 and Year 2

The provider survey did not ask about differentiation between year 1 and year 2 of the ECCE programme. However, some of the services visited operated mixed rooms where year 1 and year 2 children played and learned together, while separate rooms, sometimes with distinct curricula or different ratios and group sizes, were maintained in other services. A third group operated both types of rooms.

> *"Well, we have Montessori and play school. So, for the first year, it's slightly different – it's all centre based but it is all through learning for the first year through fun. The*

process is much more structured in preparation for the school year." (Manager, Private service, Co. Galway)

"We try to mix or divide them into year 1 and year 2, so we have a bigger room which takes 22 children. So, we tend to put the older ones in there who are moving down to school. We try to put them into the bigger group, to get them more used to the bigger rooms, and then the smaller group will be mixed. It will be ECCE and pre-ECCE; those who don't qualify for that year. But they're all over 2.5." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)

"The division of the rooms, we have one room say they would take the children predominately for the first year. The other room takes the children again normally for the second year, and there's a room in the middle. That is a bit of a mix of both, obviously, because we couldn't fit all of them into two rooms. They're divided among three, but we kind of use that middler room for a child let's say who might need additional support, who might have additional need. And so the ratios are lower. It could be that it's cousins that want to be together. So yeah, we've progressed from the toddler room into the first year of the ECCE. And then the mix room and onwards." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)

Different curricula are also sometimes implemented in mixed rooms, while in other cases, managers and educators felt that mixed-age rooms allowed for greater differentiation based on the individual child's needs and abilities and encouraged peer learning:

"We have insets for design on our Montessori shelf. That is for the year twos to use. The year ones would do that next year. Our year ones are only using the practical life shelf. They're intrigued watching the year twos. But we kind of save that for next year for them. And they know that and they understand that. We have just started going to the library. We're on our sixth week and we're almost finished actually, this will be our last week where we walk to our local library on a Wednesday with the second year." (Educator, Private service, Co. Sligo)

"So, we would mix our ages. So, we have first- and second-year children mixed together. And again, sometimes parents would say, 'Oh, why do you do that?' Or, 'Is there a second-year programme?' Or, 'Is there that?' But the way I would explain it is, again, that we feel and in our experience, and from research, that that mixing of age is beneficial for everybody, that regardless of whether you're first or second year, your needs are all different, regardless. So, if it was a class of first years, their needs are all different within that. So, it's up to the teachers to provide different levels. So, it might be the same theme but it's within that the different levels of where a child needs extra support, or where a child needs to be challenged a little bit more, it's the teachers that need to be able to provide and plan for all of that as well." (Manager, Naíonra, Co. Limerick)

"The first-years learn off the second-years. So, they follow. So, they tend to be my mediators in a sense that you'd have a second-year say to a child in first year, 'You shouldn't do that', or, 'Don't do that here. This is what we do here', or whatever and you find that the learning comes between the children as opposed to me saying, 'This is the rule for here', or, 'This is what we do here'. And that stops me from having to say anything. So, it's not Sinéad* all the time saying 'you shouldn't do this', or 'you

shouldn't do that'. And then when they do follow up, right, you can praise it and say, 'Well done, you've done that really well'. So, I like the mix of the two years because I think it's beneficial for both sets of children and it also means then up in [the local] Primary School here, junior and senior infants are mixed." (Manager, Private service, Co. Cavan)

Transitions

ECCE programme providers offer a wide range of activities designed to support children's transitions into the ECCE programme, throughout ECCE programme sessions, between ECCE programme years, and on to formal education.

Transitions into the ECCE programme

Many services taking part in the provider survey reported providing information to families about the ethos, curriculum and routine of the ECCE programme (81.0%, n=1043) to support children as they first make the transition into the ECCE programme, and 77.6% (n=1000) offer an induction morning in the setting to meet with the new children and their families. A system of staggered entry that builds up time at preschool over a period of time is in place in just under half (46.0%, n=593) of the services taking part in the survey. Only a small number of services carry out home visits to meet with the new child and his/her family (2.8%, n=36).

67% (n=503) of parents taking part in the parent survey reported attending an induction morning in the setting, while (43% (n=323) received information about the ethos, curriculum, and routine of the programme and (33.2%, n=249) reported that their child experienced a system of staggered entry that built up attendance over time.

Transitions into the ECCE programme were not discussed in detail in interviews. However, the survey results presented in this chapter suggest that, overall, less emphasis is placed on supporting transitions into the ECCE programme prior to the start of the programme year than transitions to primary school. This is notable, because several educators and managers discussed the often difficult first months of the first ECCE programme year and the challenges around helping children settle into the ECCE routine.

Horizontal transitions

Horizontal transitions are transitions happening throughout the ECCE programme session and between the ECCE programme session and any wrap-around care. Data from the provider survey shows that services use a range of techniques to support children's horizontal transitions during the ECCE session. Most settings stated that parents are always welcome in the setting (85.4%, n=1103) and reported meeting and greeting parents, carers or educators from a different session and asking how the child is at the beginning of each session (75.5%, n=975), as well as passing on any necessary information to parents, carers, or educators at the end of the session (73.1%, n=944).

Most services also reported using countdowns, timers, songs, and rhymes to ease transitions between activities (83.0%, n=1072) and trying to keep the same educators with the same group of children as much as possible (80.4%, n=1038). Fewer services operate a key person approach (61.0%, n=788) and a minority attempt to limit the number of transitions any child experiences within the ECCE programme (35.9%, n=463).

In addition to the measures reported in the provider survey, arrival routines were in place in many of the services visited, which often incorporated activities that help develop children's independence (e.g. putting away coats and lunch boxes):

"They come in the morning, and we meet and greet them at the door. They hang up their own coats, take their lunch bags out, they bring them in, put them into the fridge. They wash their hands, and we have an apple tree, that is green on top, it has the tree and the trunk is brown. So in the mornings, they take their picture from the trunk and put it onto the tree. And when they're going home, they can take it off and do the opposite." (Educator, Community service, Dublin)

"So, we start at 09:00 and we welcome the kids and then we check (…), we've got a list here of all the children and their symbols, and they check whose day it is to jobs. And then we ring the bell. We usually bring everybody in then and we'd have a little chat about the day of the week, the usual, have you any news" (Educator, Private service, Co. Cork)

A smaller number of participants also described closing routines, as in the following example:

"We start tidying up around quarter to 12 and we bring them inside. They get their own bags, they put on their own coats. Some children stay on for the after-school programme, while some kids go home at noon. So during that time we sit down and we have a we tell stories, or I read a story and then we go over the story like an oral comprehension. So we go over to see what they remember, what they liked, what they didn't like. And then we kind of have like a transition game that we play it's kind of like a review of what we've learned. And it's like a quiz. It's like a quiz if anybody wants to participate, they're welcome to, so that we kind of run down about what they've learned or so yeah. That's typically our day." (Educator, Private service, Co. Offaly)

Transition from Year 1 to Year 2 of the ECCE programme

Services taking part in the provider survey reported supporting progression in children's learning, e.g. from year 1 to year 2 of the ECCE programme, in a variety of ways. The most common practices included observation and assessment of children's learning (95.8%, n=1237), documenting children's interests, learning and achievements (94.4%, n=1219), and creation of short, medium and long term plans based on children's emergent interests (84.9%, n=1069).

Sharing information about children's learning with other relevant staff (82.6%, n=1066), regular planning and review meetings (79.6%, n=1027), maintaining children's friendship groups from year 1 to year 2 where possible (70.6%, n=912), and supporting children to reflect, review and comment on their own learning (68.3%, n=882) were also frequent replies. However, parents were less frequently included in planning and review processes (58.2%, n=752).

Transition to Primary School

Services taking part in the provider survey reported using a range of activities to support children making the transition from the ECCE programme into primary school. The most common activities were talking and reading with children about starting primary school (96.3%, n=1241), supporting the development of positive learning dispositions and skills e.g. independence, communication, problem solving, early numeracy and literacy (88.9%, n=1146), sharing information about each child's learning and development with the associated primary school (74.2%, n=956), and providing families with basic information about activities they can do at home to prepare their child for the transition to primary school (70.9%, n=914). Many services also add "starting school" resources, such as school bags, school uniforms, etc. to children's play (66.8%, n=861) and provide families with basic information about local primary schools (65.5%, n=844). A minority of services (33.9%, n=437) visit local primary schools with children and parents.

In addition to these activities, managers and educators at the 30 settings visited also reported using photos of local schools (and sometimes even of teachers) to familiarise children with their primary school, and inviting primary school teachers or principals to visit children in the ECCE programme setting.

Managers, educators and parents often spoke about the beneficial impact friendships built during the ECCE programme had on children's transition to primary school. Managers and educators in services located on or near primary school grounds also highlighted that this close proximity helped children become familiar with the school, teachers, and older children in a natural way.

> *"Right beside the school, it's, again, it's ideal, and it's great for them, because James actually knows a lot of the children now from big school, as we call it, because they play right beside them. So he'll say, oh, that's Sean* or that's Amy*, yeah, so it's lovely for him because I think, again, the transition will be so much easier because he knows the children and they know him. And I think that's a big thing as well, because, you know, that's his next big milestone. So, to have that as well. It's just the setting is in the perfect location."*
> *(Parent Interview, private setting, Co. Tipperary)*
>
> *"So, at Christmas time, (…) the Principal, invited us up to watch the junior infants play. So, that was nice. The children get to go up and they see the school, they see the other children, some of them have siblings in the classes above and things like that. They get to meet some of the teachers in the yard as well, because we're based on the primary school grounds. We meet [the Principal] often when we're out in the yard, or different teachers, different students, so they're getting to see teachers and students, the uniforms and their bags. They're getting to see everything." (Lead educator, Community service, Co. Cork)*

55.3% (n=713) of services taking part in the provider survey reported using the Mo Scéal transition template, while 30.7% (n=396) were aware of it but did not use it. 14% (n=181) of respondents stated that they were unfamiliar with the template.

Targeted support and inclusivity

Inclusivity of the ECCE programme and targeted support for low-uptake groups, including Traveller, Roma, and newcomer children, as well as vulnerable children, will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7. However, relevant material from the parent and provider surveys and from visits to ECCE services are presented and discussed at this point.

The provider survey shows that the majority of provider survey respondents currently have children with disabilities or additional needs (79.3%, n=1022), children from one-parent families (78.6%, n=1013) and children who speak a different language at home (75.7%, n=975) enrolled in the ECCE programme.

Just under half of respondents (48.8%, n=629) also stated that children from families experiencing social and/or economic disadvantage attended the ECCE programme at their service. 19.8% (n=255) of respondents reported having Traveller children currently enrolled in the ECCE programme, while 9.5% (n=122) did so for Roma children.

A majority of providers who had children from low-uptake groups at their service reported that no more than 10% of ECCE children belonged to each of these cohorts. The percentage of providers reporting a low proportion was highest for Roma children (94.1%, n=112) and lowest for children speaking a different language at home (53.3%, n=519). However, it is important to keep in mind that

all of these cohorts are minorities in Irish society and are not uniformly distributed across socio-geographic areas.

Providers are generally confident in their ability to meet the needs of one-parent families ("very well: 82%, n=829; "well: 13.9%, n=141, mean rating 1.2 on a scale of 1 = very well to 5 = not well at all), Traveller ("very well: 72.5%, n=185; "well: 21.2%, n=54, mean score 1.3) or Roma children ("very well: 59.3%, n=70; "well: 25.4%, n=30, mean score 1.6), and children from families experiencing social and/or economic disadvantage ("very well: 48.5%, n=302; "well: 34.5%, n=215, mean score 1.7). However, providers were least confident in their ability to meet the needs of children with disabilities or additional needs ("very well: 43.0%, n=438; "well: 35.4%, n=361, mean score 1.8) and those of children who speak a different language at home ("very well: 47.1%, n=456; "well: 34.9%, n=338).

Children with disabilities and/or additional needs
Providers' experiences

Providers were also most likely to rate their ability to meet the needs of children with disabilities and/or additional needs as "not very well" or "not well at all" (3.4%, n=35). There was also a strong negative association between providers' reported ability to meet the needs of children with a disability or additional needs and the approximate percentage of such children availing of ECCE in the service: while 80.1% of services with up to 10% of children with additional needs rated their ability to meet their needs as "good" or "very good", only 51.7% of services with 30%-60% of children with additional needs did so. Services in this latter group were also much more likely to rate their ability to meet these children's needs "not very good" or "not good at all" (14.7%) than those with a low percentage of children with additional needs (2.7%).

In qualitative comments, providers who had indicated a high percentage of children with additional needs and adequate or poor ability to meet these needs raised a number of contributing factors, including limitations of AIM (staff, scope and appropriateness for complex needs); recruitment challenges; lack of targeted intervention, training and specialist support; access to funding; and inadequate ratios given the children's needs, among others.

> "In relation to children with additional needs, I feel that lack of training for staff in targeted areas affects this greatly, also lack of places in ASD preschools for children leaves parents with no option but to send their child to us. Therefore, I feel the basic needs of the child are only being met, progress is not possible for the child." (Owner-Manager, Private service, Co. Laois)

> "We have four children sharing one AIM support and an extra two children showing a definite need, also we have four children in afterschool with needs and no help whatsoever, very stressful trying to meet the children's needs." (Owner-Manager, Private service, Co. Cavan)

> "High percentage of children presenting with behaviours consistent with ADHD; ASD; Sensory Needs; Language Delay and while we use a variety of strategies etc. we also need professional support from OT; Psychologists, SLT, etc. These should be assigned to Early Years settings who identify this specific need. While AIM Level 7 offers additional adult support, this is sometimes not what is needed but more targeted specialism." (Owner-Manager, Private service, Co. Meath)

"We feel that for children with additional needs or disabilities, we are unable to adequately meet the needs for some due to the lack of supports, staffing levels and resources needed to meet the needs of some of the children (…). We do our utmost with the supports of the Access and Inclusion Model and our very best for all the children in our care. However, (…) the number of children with additional needs has grown significantly over the last few years and our staff team has been on several occasion dealing with difficult situations, (…) putting our service under immense pressure. This is compounded by the delays in HSE support and diagnosis, the limit of only one level 7 AIM worker regardless of the number of level 7 children in a room and the lack of provision that we are able to have in our service, for example, sensory spaces, differing child-adult ratios or lack of viability to reduce ratio if require by the children in our care. This whole area is probably our area of biggest concern for our sector's future viability at this time." (Manager employed by the service, Community service, Co. Tipperary)

Providers taking part in qualitative interviews also raised the existing limit on the number of AIM Level 7 staff a service can avail of may play a role as an important factor:

"They're only willing to give up to maybe two extra adults in the room. To be honest with you, this year, we have three. We need three extra adults in the room. I do one-on-one support with one little fellow and he needs that one-on-one because they could swallow something, they could climb something, he's not aggressive. He's not a danger to anyone, but you couldn't just leave him." (Educator, Private service, Co. Kildare)

"The early intervention teams are recommending our service because they know how inclusive we are. They know that children will they get the support they want, which is lovely to be recognised, but frustrating that nobody is saying wait a minute, you actually need quite a lot of support. Because you're supporting so many children. We have an AIM specialist who's wonderful (...), but it's often not enough. It's not enough. She has told me herself that she is getting questioned, 'Why does [this service] need so much support? Why?' And she will say, 'I have observed these children, they need the support.' (...) And she's saying we need to look at this like several separate preschools. And they don't. They still keep saying they shouldn't be getting that much support. She has seen the support is there. It's been put in place. It's been used. It frustrates me so much (…). And why should I have to fight for something that's clearly obvious that this child needs? Or why should a family lose out because other children are getting support here? Something needs to happen there in relation to services not taking children with additional needs and services that are so open." (Manager, service details withheld)

These findings indicate that services catering for large numbers of children with disabilities, childhood trauma, or additional needs may require additional support beyond what they are currently able to access through AIM.

13.3% (n=171) of services taking part in the provider survey reported having turned down an application to the ECCE programme from a child because staff felt unable to meet their needs (for reasons other than toilet training) after the introduction of AIM[15]. In addition, a smaller number of

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[15] Includes "Yes, after AIM was introduced" and "Yes, before and after AIM was introduced"

services (5.3%, n=67) had asked a parent to defer their child's ECCE place after the start of the ECCE programme year (for reasons other than toilet training) because staff felt unable to meet their needs.

Private services (14.4%, n=131) were more likely not to have offered an ECCE place to a child with additional needs than community services (10.5%, n=40) after the introduction of AIM. Private services were also more likely to have ever turned down an application for a child with additional needs (19.3%, n=175[16]) than community services (15.8%, n=60).

There was also a clear positive relationship between service size and probability of not offering a place to a child with additional needs, with small services (Tusla capacity 0-49) being least likely to report that they had not offered a place to every child applying following the introduction of AIM and most likely to report that they had never done so. There is no obvious relationship between Tusla capacity and the impact AIM has had on the probability of turning down an application from a child with additional needs.

Figure 49 - Probability of turning down a child's application for reasons other than toilet training, by Tusla capacity

Finally, part-time and full-time services were significantly more likely to have turned down an application for an ECCE place for reasons other than toilet training than sessional services, both before and after the introduction of AIM (X2 (3, N = 1281) = 0.999, p = 0.001). While the introduction of AIM reduced the probability that a service of either service type would turn down an application from a child with disabilities or additional needs, this effect was stronger for sessional services (5.7 percentage points) than for non-sessional services (4.4 percentage points).

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[16] Includes "Yes, before AIM was introduced" and "Yes, before and after AIM was introduced"
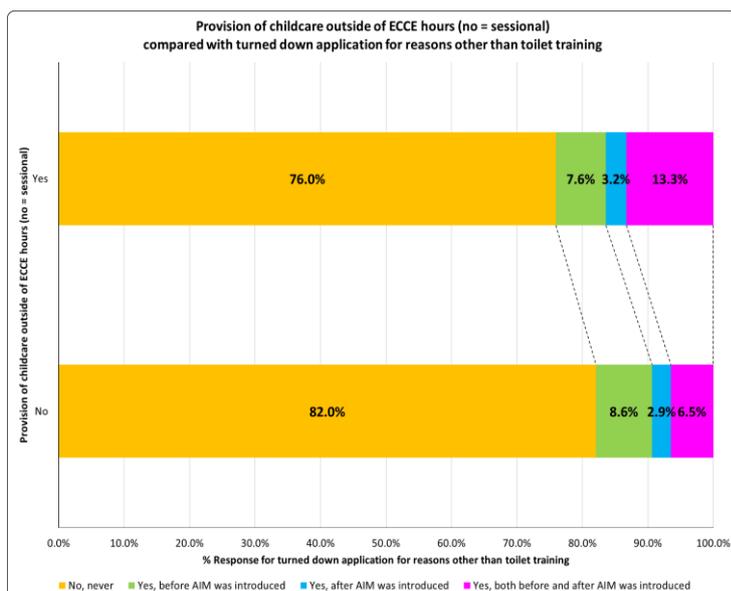
Figure 50 - Probability of turning down a child's application for reasons other than toilet training, by sessional/non-sessional service type

The most common reason given for not offering a place to a child with a disability or additional needs after the introduction of AIM was that the service "could not provide an appropriate adult-child ratio given the child's disability" (52.3%, n=146), followed by behavioural difficulties that were "too challenging" (45.5%, n=127). Lack of training to support the child's disability (26.3%, n=73), lack of nursing support for complex medical needs (22.9%, n=64), and inability to accommodate a physical disability on the premises (20.8%, n=58) were also stated by substantial minorities of respondents. Nine respondents stated that the child could not speak the language of the setting. Additional reasons mentioned in qualitative comments included difficulty recruiting AIM staff, a limit to the number of children with AIM Level 7 the service could support, complex needs better accommodated in specialist settings, and inability to offer wrap-around care without additional support outside ECCE hours. Reasons for asking a parent to defer were similarly distributed.

Most services rarely (less than monthly) or never cooperate or collaborate with child, family, or social services (83.8%, n=1074) or with health-related services (e.g. child health services providing screening and support regarding child or family health) (82%, n=1051).

During observations, researchers witnessed many examples where children with disabilities and/or additional needs were well integrated and experienced positive, caring relationships with staff. However, in a small number of situations, educators responded in ways that were inappropriate and did not afford children the dignity and respect they deserve.

Three key themes emerged from the qualitative interviews with managers and educators in relation to children with disabilities and/or additional needs. The first theme is that educators feel that additional training would help them support children with disabilities, additional needs, and children experiencing childhood trauma better than they are currently able to. In particular, educators felt that additional training in areas such as speech and language therapy would allow them to support children who were on a waiting list for early intervention services, while taking advantage of the trusting relationship and bond they have with the children in their care. Other areas mentioned included training to identify potential developmental delays early, training around discussing potential delays with parents, and general training on supporting children with additional needs.

"I suppose children with additional needs, I would love to see more training for us. There are the odd haphazard ones that come up now and again that you might miss, that they come up and say, 'Oh, this is on'. But I feel there's so much more. I mean, we can't diagnose children, obviously. But there's so much more that we need to know about additional needs to help us spot things and also be able to carefully speak to parents, it's very – some parents are open, and they're wanting to discuss issues, and we can say things like your child is struggling with X or Y, but with just the language you use, we just could get more support around training for additional needs. (…) Just to be, I suppose, more confident. When parents come to us, or how are you on neurodiversity? And you kind of go, well, we feel around in the dark. We're doing our best, but are we trained? No, we're not. And I think that's really important. I think maybe colleges now will provide more of that, when you're going to do your degree, but we didn't do it. So, we're kind of catching up a bit but that's definitely something. Yeah." (Manager, Private service, Dublin)

"I wish I could help more. You know, oh, obviously we've got training. And (…) I did a LINC course. You know, so there's courses that link into our, you know, our CPD. (…) But I'd love to do a little bit more on speech and language or, you know, if we had the training, that would kind of key into certain things so the children wouldn't have that gap between their appointments. Yeah. So, you know, it's, there's that gap. So I think it's, it literally relies upon the experience and the knowledge that the teachers have that work with the children on a daily basis. I'm very lucky. And, you know, because the girls that I work with are so knowledgeable, they're always doing courses, you know, they're they, they take time out of work to, you know, and they, they have that partnership with the parents as well, which is key. Whereas I find, you know, we're dealing with the kids on a daily basis, whereas sometimes, a child with special needs will go to a specialist, and obviously they don't know that person, so they might not be as comfortable, whereas we see them on a daily routine, we build up that rapport, so we might be able to help them a little bit more?" (Educator, Private service, Co. Offaly)

The second theme relates to the integrative model of AIM. While managers and educators were generally positive about AIM, several expressed doubts that the ECCE programme was the best place for all children, especially for children with complex needs who needed one-on-one support or would benefit from an increased Early Intervention element.

***Interviewer:** Do you feel that the programme rules meet the needs of the children in your care?*
***Respondent:** Yeah, I do. (…) But maybe not the children with additional needs and we are genuinely concerned that a child that is nonverbal and is very immobile – we were not sure what's best for those children and we're not convinced that giving them less resources is better. So, maybe it is. Maybe inclusion is that powerful. And certainly, for one of our other children, it has been incredibly powerful. So, our jury is out, but we do feel, well, one child has convinced us that it's more powerful than we felt, or what we do here is more powerful than what we believed, and that has really made us very – it's so heart-warming and encouraging. The other child, we're not so sure about and we feel maybe she would be better served in early intervention, and maybe if she was – I don't know. She's non-Irish, she doesn't speak English and her family doesn't speak English and we're not sure what's going on. Would she get more if (…)*

her family was able to shout louder? That's a terrible position to be in and we do not want to be the ones who are/ – we're doing our very best for her, but I'm not convinced that by her coming here that she wouldn't be able to access somewhere that would serve her needs better. Nobody has convinced us of that. Now, like I said, I know there's only so much resources and inclusion is the way forward, that's what is happening but, yeah, there have been days where we're just so worried that she wasn't able to access enough things to meet her needs, that our goodwill and our intention and our resources weren't enough. So, yeah, I'd just be worried – it's worked this year because the mother came in. Her mother came in for eight weeks. Not all families can do that. And if that couldn't have happened, she couldn't have come. So, yeah, that's a concern for those children with really, really high needs, and they are welcome here. But we're very concerned that they may be coming here and not accessing something that's more appropriate. There needs to be some kind of transparency about the allocation of supports. Yeah. Because we don't want to be the sticky plaster. That's not fair. (Manager, Private service, Co. Wexford)

In practice, observations revealed that where children have very high needs, AIM sometimes de facto operates as a one-on-one model although it is not designed to do so. It is important that AIM staff in such situations are experienced and appropriately trained to offer the best possible support to the child. Anecdotal evidence from parent interviews also suggests that the integration-based model of AIM sometimes clashes with parental expectations on the support their child with additional needs should receive.

"It's very hard. It's very difficult to get [AIM staff] – it's the qualification. It's one thing to say they need a Level 5 qualification, but when it comes to special needs children, you need a lot more than that. We're incredibly thankful that we have Brenda*. It's the experience that comes with it. It's the personality that comes with it. So, yes, it's not as simple as saying, yes, they can just have [Level 5]– because I have Level 8. I'm not able to do it. I could not apply for AIM. I wouldn't be able for it. It's definitely a personality. So, I think yes, it's invaluable." (Owner/Lead educator, Private service, Co. Clare)

"So, there was extra support planted here, for the AIM programme, so we wouldn't have been very satisfied with that. Because to the best of my knowledge, it was just one extra childcare provider, not specifically for his needs, which was fine. It was for everybody else, probably, in the group as well. But I don't think it led to any one-on-one attention or care. And we never got to meet that person. We never got to communicate with that person, we asked to do that quite a lot. And we were told no. And, again, COVID was the excuse. It wasn't okay, because he didn't ever bond with that person. He didn't get to know them. And I think that was maybe a wasted opportunity." (Parent, Private service, Co. Clare)

Finally, the third theme relates to a lack of support for additional needs outside ECCE hours. While this issue is tangential to the scope of this review, it is relevant where it impacts on children's access to or experience of the ECCE programme. As discussed above, data from the provider survey shows that part-time and full-time providers remain more likely to turn down an application from a child with disabilities and/or additional needs than sessional services. While other reasons may play a role, it is possible that their ability to care for the child outside ECCE hours impacts on their decision to offer an ECCE place to a child with additional needs. Evidence from interviews furthermore suggests that limiting AIM to ECCE hours can have a negative impact on children's transition from year one to year

two and can be difficult to manage for part-time and full-day services and sessional services offering summer schemes, who face the choice to fund additional support outside ECCE hours themselves, manage without additional support, or limit access for children with additional needs.

> *"I think with the AIM children, it's quite hard that they only get the AIM support for the three hours a day, in particular when we have the children for eight hours a day at minimum. We have two children with quite profound needs and both parents are asking me, can they come in in the summer when the ECCE ends, and I don't think it's fair to my employer that she should have to fund extra support and whatever and it's hard for me to say no to these people. In the past, we probably would have said yes, we'll take them. But they really do need support if they're going to be here outside of the ECCE. So, mainly I think that is challenging." (Manager, Private service, Co. Roscommon)*

> *"I think because we're in a DEIS area [sic., see footnote 13], we see an awful lot more children with complex needs. And the AIM is great. But the way it's structured at the moment, it is now forcing us to discriminate against children with additional needs, we can't offer them the extra NCS hours, we can't offer them summer provision, Easter provision, midterm provision, and we're having to sit and explain to those parents that your child can't have that place, because they have additional needs, and that is so unjust. And you're also seeing that big summer break, they come back in September, and we're starting all over again. We're back to square one with them on their second year of ECCE, the continuity isn't there." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)*

> *"Extra hours for our AIM workers. That is something we really could do with. The three hours is not enough for parents who need extra time and especially during the summer when parents still have to work, and we don't have a one-to-one and we don't have enough staff and I have to tell those children, 'I'm sorry, I can't take you for the summer'. I hate it. I hate June because of that because I know I'll have to tell parents your child has been here all year but now I can't (…). Well, I think they tell us that children with autism thrive on continuity and doing the same thing, and we can't provide that for them all the time." (Manager, Community service, Co. Galway)*

Parents' experiences

7.1% (n=58) of parent survey respondents stated that their child has a longstanding illness, condition, or disability. Psychological, behavioural, or emotional conditions (29.8%, n=17), difficulties with pain, breathing, or any other chronic illness or condition (26.3%, n=15), intellectual disabilities (19.3%, n=11) and difficulties with learning, remembering or concentrating (15.8%, n=9) were most common in this sample.

On average, parents of children with longstanding illnesses, conditions, or disabilities reported visiting or contacting more settings (Mean=1.6) than other survey respondent (Mean=1.1) before enrolling their child and a Chi-Squared test showed that this relationship was significant ($X2$ (6, N = 810) = 0.999, p = 0.044). They also applied to significantly more settings on average (Mean=1.72) than other parents (Mean=1.39) ($X2$ (5, N = 786) = 0.999, p = 0.009.) and were less likely to have applied to only one setting (63.2% vs. 77.3%) or to be offered a place at their preferred setting (89.7% vs. 96.5%). Parent survey respondents with children with longstanding illnesses, conditions, or disabilities were significantly less likely to feel that they had a choice of setting (65.5%) than other parents (79.0%) ($X2$ (1, N = 809) = 0.896, p = 0.017).

While most parents taking part in the parent survey were overall satisfied or very satisfied with the ECCE programme, parents of children with longstanding illnesses, conditions, or disabilities rated their satisfaction with the ECCE programme slightly but significantly lower than other parents (Mean rating 4.55 vs. 4.74 on a scale of 1=very dissatisfied to 5=very satisfied) (X2 (4, N = 812) = 0.999, p = 0.00007). They were also substantially less likely than other parents to "strongly agree" with a range of statements designed to measure the inclusiveness and accessibility of the preschool environment, as shown in the table below, and were more likely to "disagree" that the setting met their child's individual needs and took their family's needs and concern into account.

Table 6 - Perceived inclusiveness and accessibility of the preschool environment, by whether the child has a disability/additional needs

The ECCE programme aims to create a more inclusive, accessible preschool environment, so that all children can benefit from quality, meaningful early learning experiences. Please rate the following statements.			
	Strongly agree (Other respondents)	Strongly agree (Disability/additional needs)	Disagree (Other respondents)	Disagree (Disability/Additional needs)
The setting treats me and my child fairly	84.1%	77.6%	0.3%	0%
The setting respects my family's cultural background	80.9%	72.4%	0.3%	0%
The setting supports the use of our preferred language	73.9%	69.0%	0.7%	0%
The setting is welcoming to me and my child	85.5%	79.3%	0.1%	0%
The setting meets my child's individual needs	78.4%	70.7%	0.3%	3.4%
The setting takes my family's needs and concerns into account	74.7%	69.0%	0.9%	3.4%

On a set of statements designed to measure children's experience of the ECCE programme, parents of children with disabilities and/or additional needs tended to give less favourable ratings. They were less likely to "strongly agree" or "agree" (93.1% vs. 97.3%) and more likely to "disagree" or "strongly disagree" (1.7% vs. 0.8%) that their child had "settled well into the ECCE programme" than other parents. They were also less likely to "agree" or "strongly agree" that their child enjoys attending the ECCE programme (91.2% vs. 98.0%), or that their child enjoys playing with his/her friends in the ECCE programme (91.4% vs. 98.3%). A large difference was observed between parental ratings of children's happiness, motivation, and enthusiasm in relation to "all of the playful activities he/she experiences during the ECCE programme", with parents of children with disabilities and/or additional needs being substantially less positive than other parents (82.8% "agree/strongly agree" vs. 97.9% "agree/strongly agree"). Parents of children with disabilities or additional needs were also less likely to agree or strongly agree that their child was "developing socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually during his/her time in the ECCE programme" (89.7% vs. 97.7%), had "developed their language skills" (79.3% vs. 95.0%), was "becoming more confident and independent" (91.2% vs. 97.8%), felt "included in the setting" (87.9% vs. 98.3%), or was "well respected and valued in the setting" (96.6% vs. 98.3%) than other parents.

Differences, in the same direction, were also observed in relation to whether parents felt that their child "engages with a variety of rich, stimulating and high quality resources" (87.7% vs. 95.8% "strongly agree"), "experiences warm and responsive relationships within the setting" (94.8% vs. 98.3%), gets the "opportunity to engage in learning experiences that are highly playful" (86.2% vs. 97.7%), or "feels included in the setting at all times and his/her sense of identity and belonging is being nurtured" (86.2% vs. 97.3%). Differences in relation to children's relationship with staff in the setting were less pronounced: 96.6% of parents of children with disabilities or additional needs felt that their child had developed good relationships with all staff in the setting, while 98.3% of other parents felt the same.

Finally, parents of disabled children were more likely to report that they have had to raise an issue or problem with the service than parents whose child did not have a disability or condition (22%, n=13 vs. 10%, n=74). On average, they found this slightly more difficult (Mean=2.08 vs. 1.96 on a scale of 1=very easy to 5=very difficult) and were slightly less satisfied with the outcome (Mean=2.23 vs. 1.96 on a scale of 1=very satisfied to 5=very dissatisfied). They were also more likely to be dissatisfied with the outcome than parents of non-disabled children (23% vs. 11%).

Ethnic minorities and Newcomers
On average, parents from ethnic minorities visited 1.3 services before applying for a place and applied to 1.6 services before securing a place – slightly more than other parents, but these differences were not statistically significant (Number of visits: X2 (6, N = 810) = 0.999, p = 0.175; Number of applications: X2 (5, N = 786) = 0.997, p = 0.337).

However, parents from ethnic minorities were significantly less likely to feel that they had a choice of setting (71.2%) than White Irish parents (79.0%) (X2 (4, N = 1284) = 0.999, p = 0.011). On a 5-point scale (1=very dissatisfied to 5=very satisfied), parents from ethnic minorities gave a mean satisfaction rating of 4.5 (compared to 4.8 among White Irish parents). A Chi-Squared test showed that the difference in overall satisfaction between White Irish parents and parents from ethnic minorities was statistically significant (X2 (4, N = 812) = 1, p = 1.08E-09).

Parents from ethnic minorities responded, on average, less favourably to a set of questions designed to measure the inclusiveness of preschool environments than other parents, including parents of children with disabilities and/or additional needs (see Table 7).

Differences were particularly pronounced on supporting the use of the family's preferred language and taking the family's needs and concerns into account.

Parents from ethnic minorities were also much less likely to "strongly agree" with a set of statements designed to measure children's experience of the ECCE environment than White Irish parents, with an average difference of 20.6 percentage points), although they were similarly likely to "disagree". They were also substantially less likely to "strongly agree" with these statements than parents of children with disabilities and/or additional needs (presented above). These differences were particularly pronounced for the seven statements shown in Figure 51.

8.1% of parents from ethnic minorities reported having to raise an issue or problem with the service, compared to 11.5% of White Irish parents. On a 5-point scale (1=very easy to 5=very difficult), they found raising the issue on average "easy" (mean rating 1.5, compared to 2.0 among White Irish parents) and were, on average, "satisfied" with the outcome (mean rating 1.9, compared to 2.0 among White Irish parents, on a scale from 1=very satisfied to 5=very dissatisfied).

Table 7 - Perceived inclusiveness and accessibility of the preschool environment, by parent's ethnicity

The ECCE programme aims to create a more inclusive, accessible preschool environment, so that all children can benefit from quality, meaningful early learning experiences. Please rate the following statements.				
	Strongly agree (White Irish)	Strongly agree (Ethnic minorities)	Disagree (White Irish)	Disagree (Ethnic minorities)
The setting treats me and my child fairly	86.1%	71.9%	0.3% (+ 0.1% strongly disagree)	0%
The setting respects my family's cultural background	81.9%	71.9%	0.1%	0.7%
The setting supports the use of our preferred language	77.2%	56.1%	0.1%	2.9% (+ 0.7 Strongly disagree)
The setting is welcoming to me and my child	86.8%	76.3%	0.1% (+ 0.1% strongly disagree)	0%
The setting meets my child's individual needs	80.2%	66.7%	0.4% (+ 0.1% strongly disagree)	0.7%
The setting takes my family's needs and concerns into account	77.4%	57.6%	1.0% (+0.1% strongly disagree)	1.4%
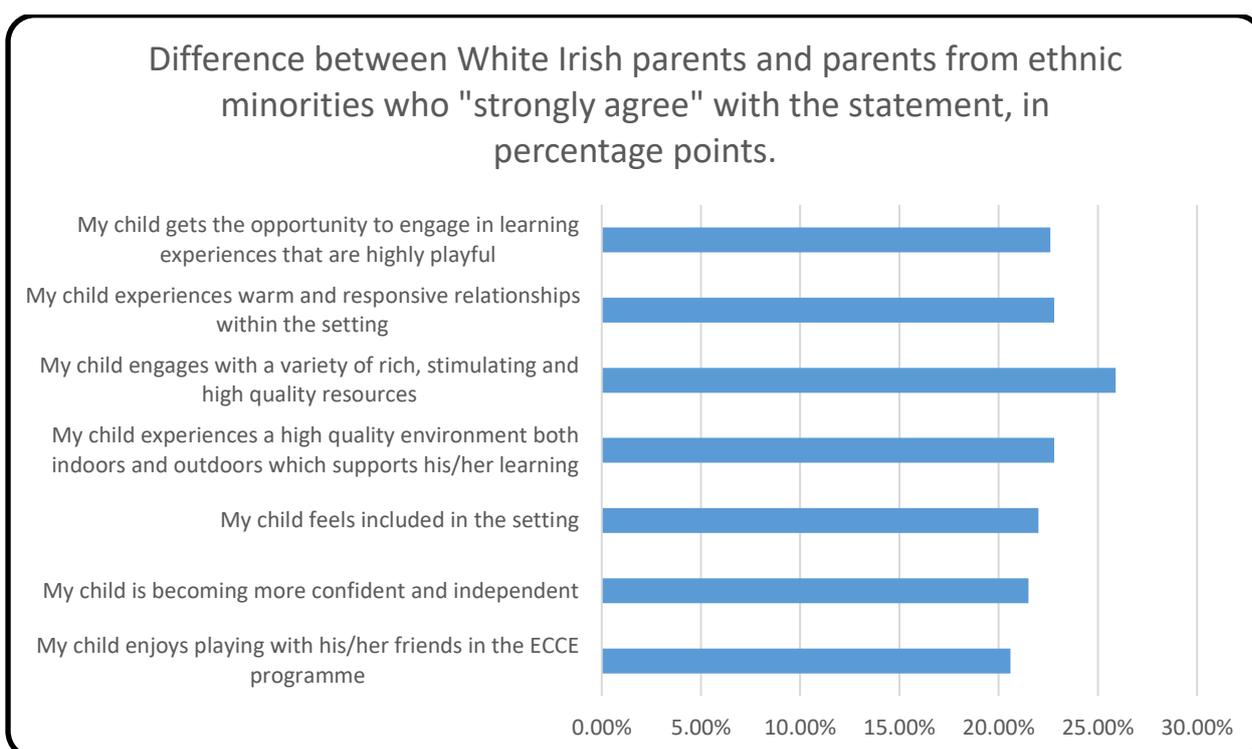
Figure 51 - Differences in children's experience of the ECCE programme environment, by parent's ethnicity

In interviews, managers and educators described a range of efforts to create a culturally inclusive environment in the ECCE classroom, for example by incorporating elements of Traveller culture in themes and other resources, or by encouraging children's use of their home language:

> *"We had one [Traveller child] in the ECCE room and after-schools room. So we used to put like pictures of say different homes and houses in our home area. And then before we had actually never put up a picture of say, a caravan, or anything like that. Whereas now, all of the home areas have a picture of a caravan. When we're doing*

means of transport like the Traveller children would love to talk about it, and the horses and stuff like that. And so actually, one year we made little sulkies out of lollipop sticks. And he loved it. He ran out and he was like, "Nan look what I made. I made a sulky" and yeah, he really enjoyed it. And then obviously, all the other kids were able to go and be like, "Oh, well, he likes the sulky" and we made sulkies and horses. And so it was like a new interest for everybody." (Educator, Community service, Co. Carlow).

"Yeah, we have a couple of children in the morning and they would have a dual language. Mum might be Spanish or that, but that's fine. We have a good – we work together, again, and we try to encourage them. The parents, years ago, we would have been encouraging them to speak English because that's what they were hearing. Now, we know how important it is that they're seen within their environment. Then we get the parents, obviously, not this year, coming in and reading stories in their language and stuff like that." (Educator, Private service, Co. Cavan)

In a few cases, managers and educators described well-meant efforts to include ethnic minorities that, in the observer's view, were nevertheless inappropriate and risked imposing a stereotypical image onto a child's identity or objectifying children from ethnic minorities. This suggests that services might benefit from further training and support on cultural inclusivity.

Several educators reported learning key terms in a child's home language to aid communication. They also expressed a need for more language support and resources to better support bi-lingual language development.

"The [unclear] a long time ago, did a beautiful kind of booklet, but it's gone. Now I hadn't been able to access in years. They did a kind of a really hard back, laminated booklet, where there was all the basic words and emotions done in all the different languages. And that was beautiful. We have to tap into that." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)

"If there was, I don't know, a resource library that services could come to if they had a child maybe coming from – (…) If there were more resources available, or a resource library that we had a child coming from Poland that we could get Polish books, that we could get more jigsaws or games that had the Polish language, teddy bears that had the Polish, that said Polish words, different things like that; it would be very, very beneficial." (Manager, Naíonra, Co. Limerick)

Funding, training and programme resources

The provider survey asked respondents to indicate whether their service had appropriate access to a range of resources along a three-point scale (1=Yes, 2=To some extent, 3=No). Resources with appropriate access (mean rating 1.0-1.7) included play or learning materials (mean rating 1.5), qualified educators (1.5), indoor space (1.2) and outdoor play space (1.3). Resources with intermediate access ratings (mean rating 1.7 – 2.3) included funding (2.0), educators with competence in working with children with a disability or additional needs (1.7) or with children speaking a different language (2.0), internet access (1.9), time for parental involvement and support (1.8), and professional development for educators (1.8). Access to digital technology for play and learning (e.g. computers, tablets, or smart boards) was rated lowest (mean rating 2.4).

Ratings for the appropriateness of funding were split fairly evenly (28% "Yes", 38% "To some extent", 32% "No", 1% "Don't know"). Further analysis shows that urban services were more likely to consider

their access to funding "appropriate" than rural services, but equally as likely to consider their access to funding "not appropriate". Furthermore, private services and sessional services were more likely than community services and non-sessional services to consider their access to funding "not appropriate" and less likely to consider it "appropriate".
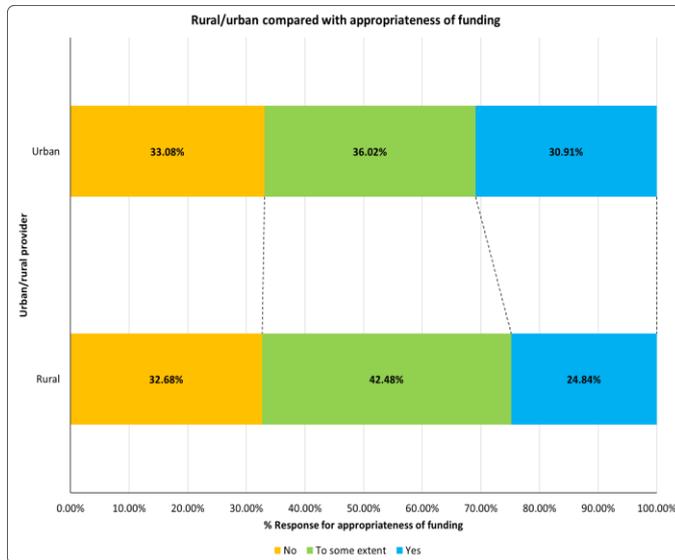
Figure 52 - Appropriateness of funding, by rural/urban location
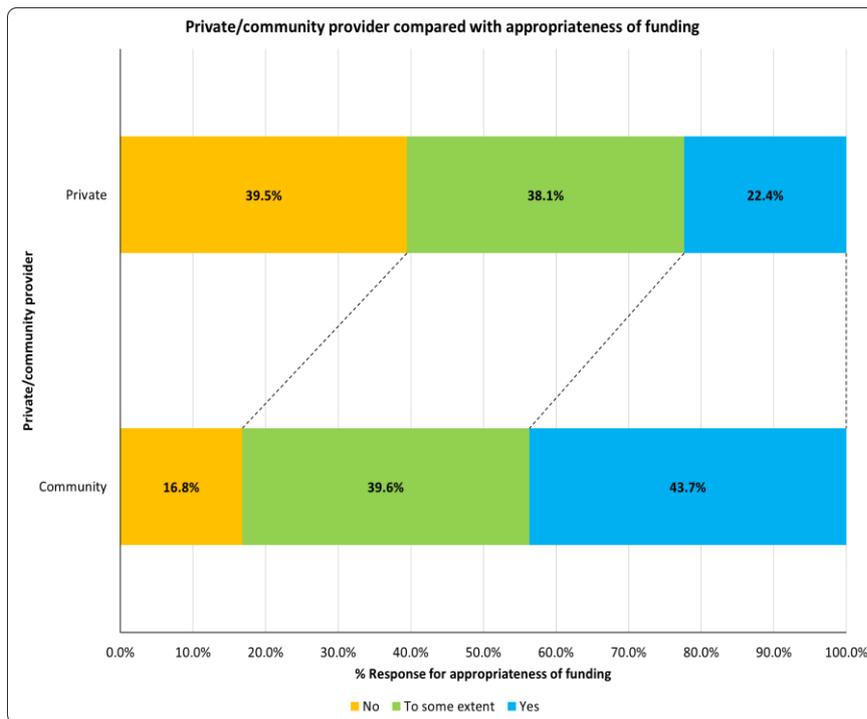
Figure 53 - Appropriateness of funding, by private/community sector
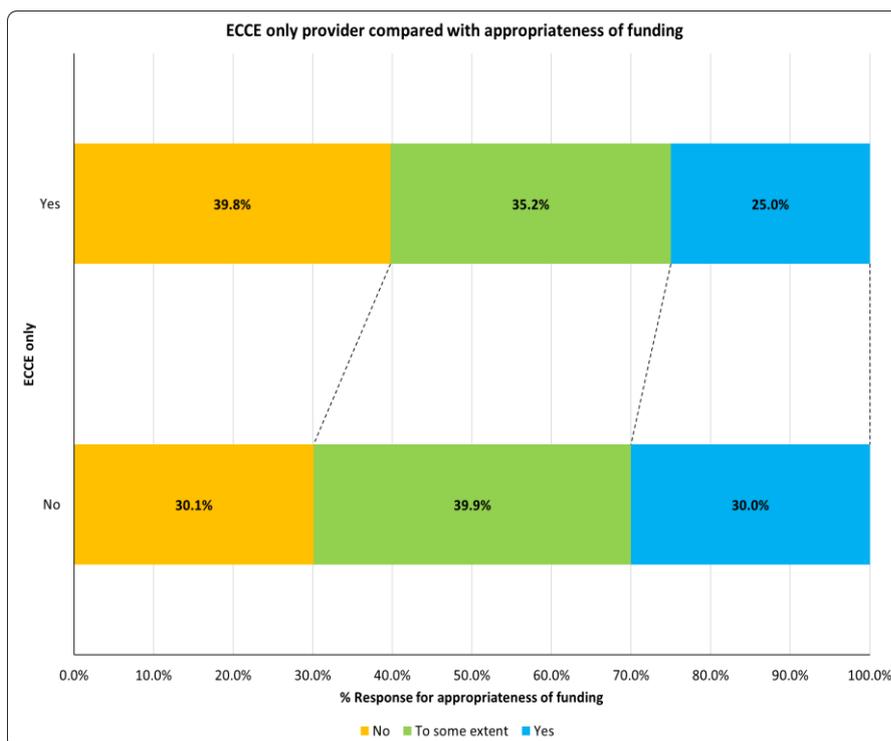
Figure 54 - Appropriateness of funding, by sessional/non-sessional service type

Key issues raised in qualitative provider survey responses in relation to Core Funding included the financial impact on sessional services, the impact of removing the higher capitation for graduate staff and the Programme Support Payment (PSP) (which were subsumed into Core Funding), and a need for an increase in the value of the basic capitation payment in addition to Core Funding supports. In closing comments, 16 providers mentioned that they were considering or planning to close their service due to financial pressures.

Respondents furthermore reported making use of a range of support organisations, in particular the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) (95.2%), Better Start (68.4%), Pobal (64.3%), and Tusla (62.4%). Support from the Department of Education (27.5%) and from voluntary and community organisations, such as ECI, NCN, Childminding Ireland, Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, Gaeloideachas etc. (26.7%) was accessed by a minority of participating services. Most services taking part in the provider survey rated the level of support available to them as "sufficient" (73.8%).

Workforce, working conditions, recruitment and retention

Data from the provider survey shows that minimum qualification requirements for Early Years educators and lead educators are exceeded in many services: 92.9% (n=1199) of respondents stated that at least one of their Early Years educators had a qualification above the required NFQ Level 5 and 73.7% (n=952) indicated that at least one lead educator had a qualification above the required NFQ Level 6. Many of the participating services also employed graduate staff, with 47.2% (n=609) of providers indicating having at least one graduate Early Years educator (NFQ Level 7+) and 73.7% (n=952) at least one graduate lead educator (NFQ Level 7+). Approximately 7% (n=90) of providers indicated having at least one lead educator with a post-graduate qualification in early learning and care (NFQ Levels 9/10).

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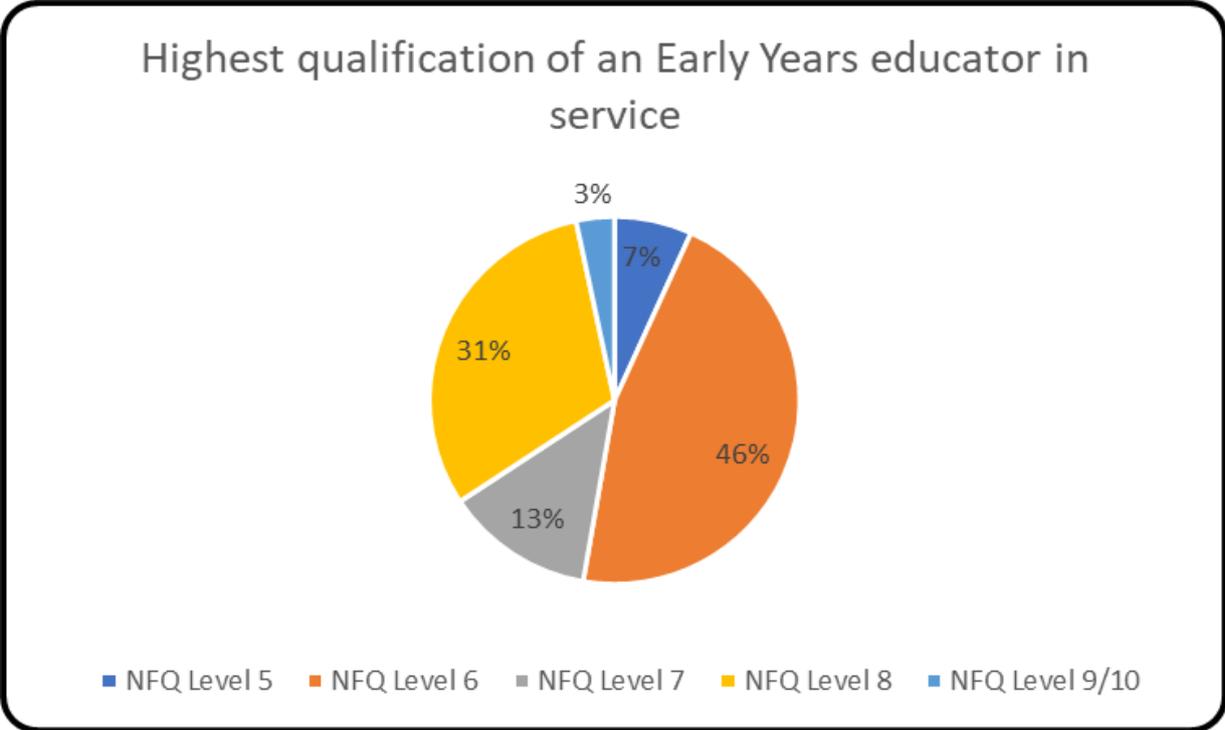
Figure 55 - Highest qualification of an ECCE programme educator in the service
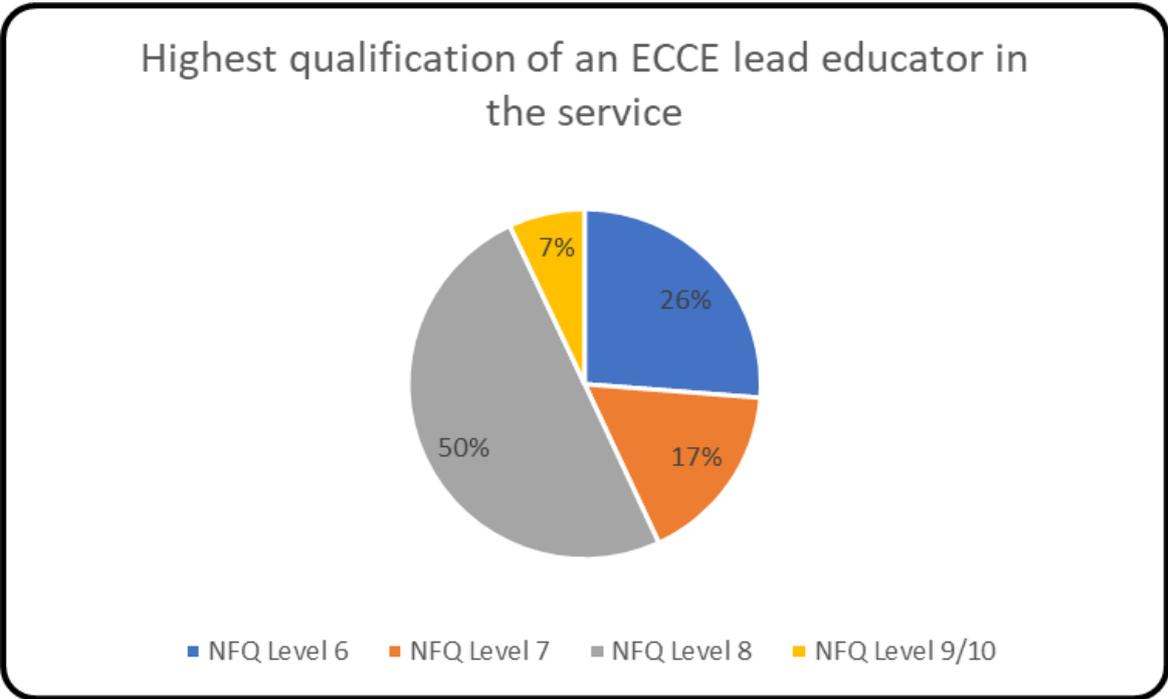
Figure 56 - Highest qualification of an ECCE programme lead educator in the service

The majority of providers were in agreement with the current minimum qualification requirements of NFQ Level 6 for lead educators (79.5%) and NFQ Level 5 for Early Years educators (75.7%). However, 18.9% felt that the minimum qualification requirement for educators should be raised.

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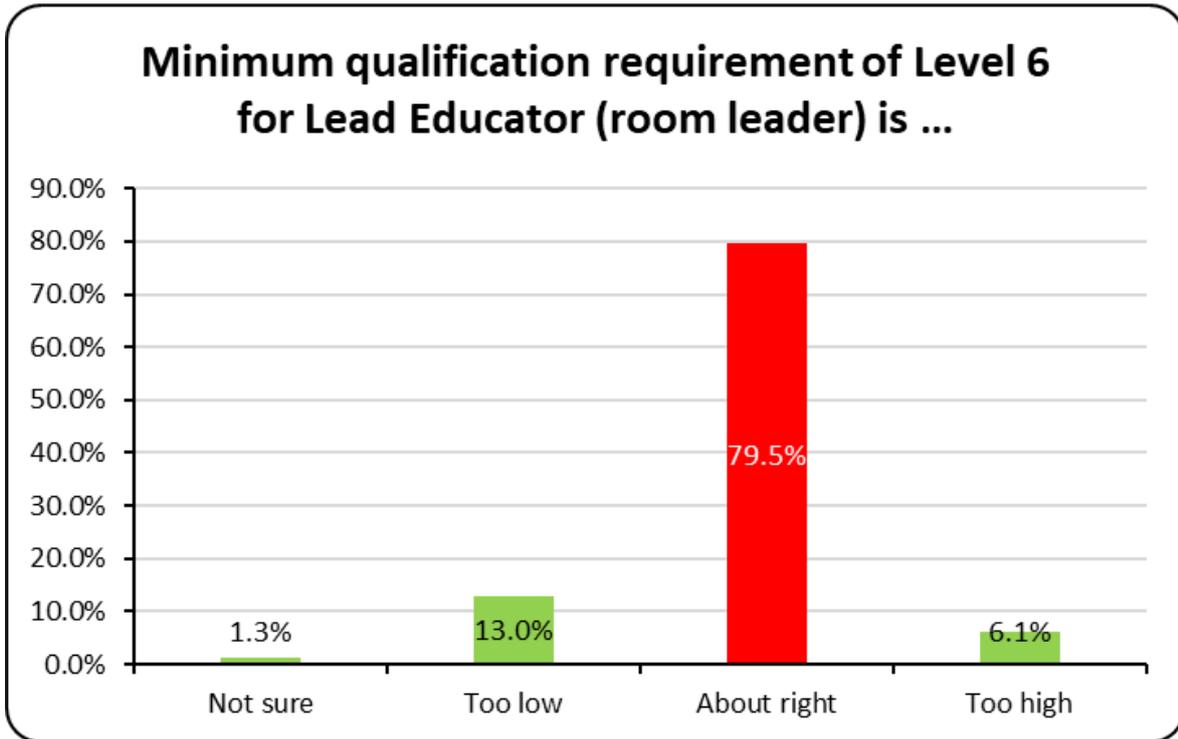
Figure 57 - Appropriateness of minimum qualification requirements for lead educators
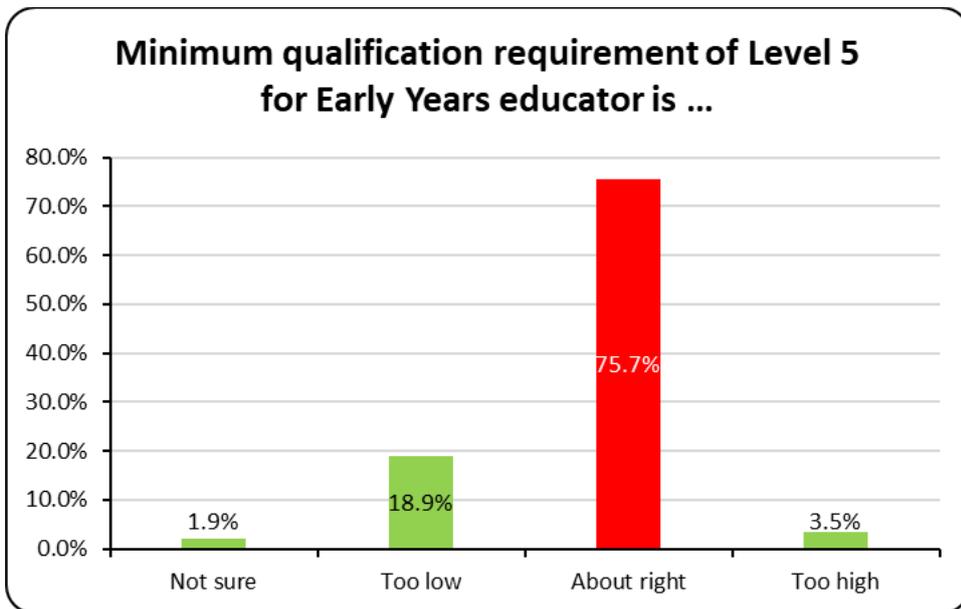
Figure 58 - Appropriateness of minimum qualification requirements for Early Years educators

While services taking part in the provider survey rated their access to qualified educators, on average, as "appropriate", there are differences between different kinds of services. Sessional services were slightly less likely to consider their access to qualified educators "appropriate" than non-sessional services (63.6% vs. 66.0%). However, this difference was not statistically significant (X2 (5, N = 1286) = 1, p = 4.09E-19). Services offering both morning and afternoon sessions had better access than those offering only one session time (Sessional: 67.2% morning and afternoon vs. 61.8% morning only; Non-sessional: 70.6% morning and afternoon vs. 64.8% morning only). Furthermore, private services were

less likely to respond that they had appropriate access to qualified educators than community services (62.7% vs. 72.1%), and more likely to state that their access to qualified educators was not at an appropriate level (11.9% vs. 5.4%). This relationship was statistically significant ($X2$ (2, N = 1270) = 0.999, p = 0.0004).

This general pattern also applied to educators with competence in working with children with disabilities/additional needs (Yes: Community=54.0% vs. Private=43.6%; No: Community=7.7% vs. Private=17.3%) and, to a lesser degree, to educators with competence in working with children speaking a language other than the language(s) used in the setting (Yes: Community= 30.8% vs. Private=27.5%; No: Community=30.6% vs. Private=33.0%). Rural services (48.9%) were significantly more likely to respond that they had appropriate access to educators with competence in working with children with additional needs than urban services (44.7%) ($X2$ (3, N = 1281) = 0.998, p = 0.037).

This finding ties in with evidence from our qualitative interviews with managers and educators, who highlighted the difficult working conditions in the sector and their impact on recruitment and staff retention. Many of the services visited struggled with recruitment, in some cases experiencing serious difficulties. Several respondents discussed a lack of graduates entering the sector due to poor working conditions. Some services found themselves in financial difficulty because they could not recruit graduate staff and were thus losing out on additional funding.

> *"There's no one applying. Nobody is applying. We don't even get CVs now. When I first came, we would get one or two CVs when I ran a recruitment ad. Now, we don't get any CVs. None at all. And we definitely cannot find any graduates. So, the newest member of staff that I just took on is a Level 5. We cannot find anymore above a Level 5. Funding is a big issue, because we can't avail of maximising our Core Funding because we don't have graduates. So, we are struggling now. It's starting to hit us now that we're dipping into our resources now. How long we are sustainable – I don't know. It's worrying." (Manager, Community service, Co. Carlow)*

> *"I need to recruit two staff members at the moment. I've been trying for the last six months to recruit two staff members. I've recruited one and one is still outstanding, but to recruit those staff members has cost me over €2,000 in advertisement. So, Facebook advertisements, Indeed advertisements, the local papers here that cost over €2,000, and I only got one staff member out of it. So, people are not coming in. So, when you go to the colleges, (…) out of a class of 30 students, nearly 26 of them will say that they're going on to a new year to do additional training to go into Special Ed, SNA, in the schools, or they're going to do teaching or it's the first year for teaching programmes or whatever. And then of the final, say, four people, some will go out of childcare all together and not do it because they find it too difficult. And then someone will just decide to do it in their own home where they'll just say, well, I'll take on five or six children. I've got a qualification and do have my own home and reap the benefits (…). So, there is not people leaving the courses to come into childcare and all of the above reasons are why." (Manager, Private service, Co. Cavan)*

In the services visited, staffing pressures impacted on the quality of delivery, availability of ECCE programme places, intensity and continuity of delivery, and access for children with disabilities and/or additional needs.

"So, we actually plan to get staff, and if we don't get staffed, then we have to, we've been told by our AIM coordinator from Head Office that we need to use our AIM funding to reduce our current capacity. You know, and that's obviously something you don't want to know, because we don't want to say, we don't want to go to our list and go, Okay, well, look, we can take two off, because we've already children with additional needs coming in. (…) We've two kids that have already had their diagnosis and coming in September, so I can't go to them, 'I can't take you now in September'. And so she said that is our worst case scenario, if we don't have an AIM worker, is to reduce our capacity. Because we can't then give the level of care to the children, and we can't give the level of care to the children that need support. And they do need support. We even have kids that are one-on-one, and they don't get one-on-one, but it's, they're not super-not benefiting from it, because they're still getting that, you know, that group kind of environment and stuff, but the likes of using our sensory area that needs to be one-on-one and we need to have qualified staff in that area. You know, so that's kind of our main issue." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)

"I'm the youngest [member of staff], but I have a five-year-old (…), we are kind of a parent-based age group. So we're, you know, like that, God forbid if [my daughter] is sick, I have to go for weeks closed because we have no staff. And I'm a single parent. (…) Even the stress of like me and Tara*, you know, especially four- and five-year-olds, they get sick. So you have to close but then you're running into your – If you're closed, you have to do a certain amount of days a year for the ECCE calendar." (Educator, Community service, Dublin)

Participants identified working conditions in the sector as a key reason for staffing pressures. In particular, they raised sessional or part-time hours, term-time contracts, and low pay as major barriers to recruitment and retention of ECCE programme staff. Working conditions for AIM workers are even more precarious:

"Now, new contracts, I suppose, will be coming out but they'd want to have a lot more in it for the staff because we are losing. I'm advertising over a year now because of maternity leaves and whatever. I would never have a problem trying to get staff. Now, an awful lot of staff want full time work, and the ones I had – I've taken two new staff full time. I didn't need two full time staff. I needed one, definitely one- and two-part timers, but I couldn't get part timers, so I employed two full time. So, you're taking that hit as well." (Manager, Private service, Co. Offaly)

"And that also goes back to what we were talking about a few minutes ago, (…) trying to get people to work those jobs. That's what kind of is the struggle as well, that people don't want to work three hours a day, and then have to be off for the summer, be off for this. It's not feasible for a lot of people. So, finding people to work those positions is very, very hard because it's not really something that's – you know if you want a full-time job for however many weeks in the year, is more feasible, attractive than that. So, I think that's why also settings are finding it hard to find people to work." (Lead educator, Naíonra, Co. Limerick)

Respondent 1: *I think AIM is brilliant, (…) but it's a zero-hour contract. Its horrific for staff. Like I won't even start on that, because we don't hire under AIM contracts anymore. We got rid of AIM. We use the funding to hire early years assistants who get paid for the holidays and get sick leave. Because we want to keep [them], because*

that's how we keep our staff. (…) We keep hiring them into limited full-time positions. But AIM is a zero-hour contract. It's like working for Just Eat, one of them, you know, it's awful. And you've no job security, you've no–
Respondent 2: And for the work that you're doing.
Respondent 1: It's going to be a crisis in AIM for it to get any support. So it's going to be an absolute crisis. And hiring staff who may not be appropriate. (…) Like, imagine working 15 hours a week, or, or 30 hours a week, you're paid so much an hour, (…) 38 weeks of the year, but if your child leaves in the middle of it, you're gone. If you're sick, God forbid, you got sick, you've no payment. You don't get paid for any holidays. Like, who would want that job?! A student. That's it!
(Managers, Community service, Cork City)

Educators also explained the impact term-time contracts, sessional hours, and low wages had on their own quality of life:

Respondent 1: Well, definitely a big challenge for me and you, Orla*, would be our wage? Yeah, (…) that's a very negative thing at the minute hanging over us. (…) It doesn't come anywhere near the cost of living.
Respondent 2: And because of that, like, I'm working three jobs at the moment. So, just to try [to keep afloat].
Respondent 1: Because it is only four hours, you're not going to be able to get/ and then the wages, as you know yourself, (…) and it's not workable at the minute, really, for a lot of people, which is a pity. Yeah. Just now we're kind of in another stage of crisis, aren't we? Yeah. Cost of living at the minute.
Respondent 2: That's the biggest thing.
Respondent 1: (…) Yeah, it's like, the only thing, really, that we really, yeah, we really have at the moment on our minds.
Interviewer: And in terms of like, how that could be enhanced in your perspective, would that be just like an increased wage? Or would it be kind of like being paid for 52 weeks? Or what would be? That'd be the kind of ideal?
Respondent 1: Oh, that would be ideal, but I mean, Yeah.
Respondent 2: Like, [having to sign on every holiday] (…), definitely, being paid for the 52 weeks would be fantastic. Yeah.
Interviewer: Okay. How are you managing three jobs?
Respondent 1: Difficult, very difficult.
Respondent 2: Yeah, I'm childminding a couple of days a week and I work in the leisure centre as well most evenings.
Respondent 1: It's really difficult. [You are finishing] maybe 10 at night and you've been in here from before 9.
Respondent 2: It's very busy.
(Educators, Naíonra, Co. Offaly)

In addition, our qualitative interviews suggest that in many services, educators still receive very limited or no paid non-contact time. While we did not specifically ask about non-contact time, managers and staff in more than half (n=16) of the services visited spontaneously raised the issue in interviews. Services whose staff mentioned benefitting from paid non-contact time were nearly always Community services. The amount and distribution of paid non-contact time varies widely and can range from "stolen minutes" wherever workload allows to regular time added to each ECCE session, training days and several weeks of paid planning and training time during the summer.

"What we've done here is – so I bring my staff back a week and a half – my team leaders are back two and a half weeks before children and parents start back in September. My staff are back a week and a half. So, we put time in for – if training needs to be updated and first aid and stuff like that. (…) But we're also getting someone in to do work on boundaries. (…) Next year, we would have more time, so we would do a lot of work on what we need to update in our curriculum, what's worked well, where are gaps? So, we would have then two days at Christmas before the kids are back, we would have two days at Easter before the kids are back so we can all look at the curriculum together and what needs to change or what needs to be put in place, what are we missing. (…) Just to flag up, we're in a lucky position. We prioritise our staff. We have them in two weeks beforehand. We set out planning days for them throughout the year, so they don't feel overwhelmed and they have a chance to look at their programme and what kid needs an individual plan? Let's put that together and two staff will work on that and that can be implemented. Same with their learning journals. We give staff time out. Michelle will step in and the key workers can do the learning journals with the kids so we're not under pressure. [Staff get a 45-minute break between sessions and are here for another 30 minutes to plan and tidy]. So, we're in that luckier position but it's needed everywhere." (Manager, Community service, Co. Wicklow)

"Frontline services, like after every session, they have a review. So every session that we have in [the service], they have 10-15-minute review after to see what [did and] didn't go well, which the whole staff take part in. The staff are given time off the floor. So they have time for paperwork, time to catch up on all that time to actually engage with that. So all our supervisors get a full day, and all our assistants always get half a day. And then the early years assistants also get time off the floor." (Manager, Community service, Cork City)

Based on interviews, it appears that educators in some services complete tasks such as learning journals, documenting observations etc. during the ECCE programme session, taking away from the time they spend working directly with children. In some cases, educators were carrying out key parts of their role unpaid in their own time, as discussed in the comments below. This aspect was not covered in the provider survey and it is not possible to determine how widespread this practice is.

Respondent: I find time constraints [are an issue], we don't have enough time to sit. If we had half an hour, even 15 minutes on a Friday, to sit and say, "Well, look, I know it was this this week, have you noticed it?" or, "Could you go forward doing this for next week?" Then we're given the time to plan together. Whereas I do that at home.
Interviewer: So, there's no non-contact time.
Respondent: No. None of it.
Interviewer: And you're having to take that away and do that at home.
Respondent: Yeah, and the observations.
Interviewer: At home?
Respondent: Yeah.
Interviewer: Not being paid for then?
Respondent: Nope
Interviewer: Time in lieu?
Respondent: No
Interviewer: Just out of the goodness of your heart?
Respondent: Yeah.

(Educator, Private service, Co. Cavan)

"We actually spend probably half the summer planning for coming back in September, doing up plans, making sure the class is all set, we have all the toys ready. Everything is done. All those things even just for the kids coming back out, we have our name tags made. Like all those things. We spend a good, I'd say, four weeks in here in the summer that, again, we don't get paid for." (Educator, Naíonra, Co. Limerick)

Several managers mentioned the need for additional funded staff hours to facilitate the work that goes into planning, preparing and managing an ECCE programme session, undertaking CPD and documenting observations. It is worth mentioning that this is in spite of the recent changes introduced as part of Core Funding, which appear to have had a limited impact on non-contact time arrangements in some of the services visited.

"For me, it's the lack of, I suppose, recognition (…). I have three teachers, (…) two of them have their degree. And the third one is in the process of getting her degree. So, they are experienced, qualified, passionate early years educators, but they are trying to, on top of filling in plans, carry out learning journeys, observations, plans, meet with parents, chat with parents, support children, support children with additional needs, all within three hours. All within three hours, and it's so frustrating to see that it's not recognised. We need more non-contact time. We need time that we can – when we're with our children, we are with them 100%. And we don't have to think about our plan and observation because we have time, non-contact time, to do all that. Rather than being stretched and pulled. And the job is – I won't say it's stressful. But it's pressurised. (…) Because you're busy, you're going all the time. And they want to give 100%. They want to, but sometimes they're torn between 'Okay, so what is the priority here? What do you want from me? Because you're telling me how to do all these things. But equally, your expectation is that the children are getting 100% of my attention. But when do you want me to fill in these? When do you want me to do that?' So, I see their frustration. But it's very hard to facilitate because we don't get non-contact time." (Manager, Naíonra, Co. Limerick).

"I just wish we had a little bit more – [having] been to Reggio, their teachers, they work 36 hours of which 30 are with the children and six are planning and observation. That's a luxury I'd love to see come in, even three hours a week or two hours a week – it's just acknowledgement of the time that's required to set up a quality preschool session outside of three hours – that would be the top of my wish list." (Manager, Private service, Co. Roscommon)

"The hours, if you consider AIM is three hours, the ECCE room is three hours. The staff are not done in three hours. Then you have to meet and then you have to document and then you have to upload photos and then you have to prepare and plan. That's where it's not funded enough." (Manager, Private service, Co. Cork)

Summary and key findings on parents', providers', and educators' perspectives

Key findings on programme strengths and challenges
- The ECCE programme is highly valued by all key stakeholders
- Key programme strengths include the free and universal character and the second ECCE programme year
- The ECCE programme is seen as beneficial for children's learning, social development, emotional health and well-being, independence and confidence, and preparation for primary school.
- Parents report that children enjoy taking part in the ECCE programme
- Most providers agree that the ECCE programme is meeting its objectives
- Key programme challenges emerged in relation to eligibility rules, ratios, working conditions, staff recruitment and retention, funding, availability, and waiting lists.

Key findings on adult-child ratios
- The minimum adult-child ratio of 1:11 is practiced in a minority of services (35%). One in three services operate a lower ratio without AIM Level 7 support.
- Key reasons include a higher quality of provision, accommodating children with additional needs not approved for AIM Level 7 support, and limited floor-area capacity.
- More than two in five providers feel that there should be fewer than 11 children per adult.
- Key reasons include high needs among the youngest children, toileting support, time for individual attention, and accommodating additional needs or behavioural challenges not approved for AIM Level 7 support.
- The most commonly suggested optimum ratio was 1:8.

Key findings on eligibility rules and age range
- Most providers and parents agree with the current minimum and maximum eligibility ages.
- One in four providers consider the minimum age of two years eight months too young due to the high level of care required.
- More than one in four parents felt that the lower age limit was either too young or too old. Parents whose children were born in the first or last quarter of the year were disproportionately likely to disagree with the current age limits.
- Nearly two in five providers and one in four parents supported a return to additional enrolment points. Parents with children born early or late in the year were most likely to support additional enrolment points.
- A majority of providers consider the overage exemption very important, although it is rarely used in most services.
- Overall, there was support for greater flexibility at either end of the eligibility age range among all stakeholders, especially among parents most affected by the current rules.

Key findings on programme intensity and adherence
- The majority of providers agree with the current daily, weekly, and annual intensity, as well as the maximum eligibility of two years.
- About one in three providers support a higher daily or weekly intensity. The most commonly suggested daily intensity is 4 hours.
- One in two providers support a higher daily intensity in the second programme year.

- One in five providers support a longer programme year. The most commonly suggested annual intensity is year-round.
- There is support among parents and providers for some flexibility on the maximum eligibility of two years.
- Nearly one in two parents would prefer an increased daily and weekly intensity.
- One in three parents support a higher daily intensity in the second ECCE programme year.
- One in five parents support a longer maximum eligibility.
- Some children routinely attend for less than the full 15 hours a week in four out of ten services.
- One in seven parents reported routinely sending their child for less than 15 hours a week and 13% skipped all or part of the first programme year. The main reason for fewer hours and late enrolment is feeling that the child is too young.
- In more than one in two services, some children attend for one ECCE programme year only. Nine out of ten parents intend to avail of the full two programme years.

Key findings on availability

- Seven in ten services usually offer an ECCE programme place to all children who apply.
- Large services, services employing an INCO, private services, urban services, and non-sessional services are less likely to offer all children a place than their counterparts.
- Services in Dublin and surrounding counties, as well as Cork (County and City), Louth, Roscommon and Carlow were least likely to respond that all children applying were offered a place
- Most of these services operate a waiting list, often on a "first-come, first served" basis. Siblings attending the service and purchasing wrap-around care are also a consideration in many services.
- The majority of services accept applications for the ECCE programme at any time or more than a year in advance.
- Nearly every other parent reported applying more than one year in advance, sometimes as early as pregnancy or birth.
- Most parents felt that they had a choice of setting and most parents secured a place in their preferred setting. A good impression, reputation, convenience of location, and the language used in the setting are important to parents.
- Most parents found the application process easy and experienced no barriers.

Key findings on accessibility

- Most services are wheelchair accessible.
- In the majority of services, fewer than 10% of all children have a disability or additional needs.
- Community services are more likely to cater for a relatively high percentage of children with disabilities or additional needs than private services.
- Higher percentages of children with disabilities or additional needs are more common in services in disadvantaged than affluent areas.
- One in three services require children to be toilet trained at the start of the ECCE year, although this is rarely enforced. Toilet training is more commonly required in affluent than disadvantaged areas, and in services without an INCO.
- Access to transport can be a barrier for some children, especially for homeless children in temporary accommodation, refugee children living in accommodation centres, Traveller children on remote halting sites, and other disadvantaged families who don't have access to cars.

Key findings on costs to parents

- The free and universal character of the ECCE programme has greatly improved accessibility of preschool education for children in Ireland.
- 40% of parents said they would not have been able to send their child to preschool without the ECCE programme.
- 41% of providers charge a booking deposit. Booking deposits are more common in private services, in urban areas, and in affluent areas. In most cases, the booking deposit does not exceed €100. Holding charges are rare.
- One in three parents reported paying a booking deposit to secure an ECCE place.
- Optional extras are offered by more than half of all services. Services most commonly charge extra for additional ECCE minutes and school trips. Services are equally likely to allow children to participate at the service's cost or to provide an alternative activity.
- One in ten parents found the cost of optional extras "difficult" or "very difficult" to afford and one in three parents reported that the optional extras did not feel "optional" to them. More than one in two parents would feel "uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable" declining to pay, and three in four did not know if their setting would provide support.
- Voluntary contributions are overall rare but are slightly more likely in disadvantaged areas and twice as likely in community as in private services. Most parents who were asked for voluntary contributions gave the full or some of the amount requested.

Key findings on quality of delivery

- Services employ a wide range of curricula and curriculum and quality frameworks, including Aistear and Síolta, play-based curricula, and Montessori, among others. Child-led approaches and emergent curricula are also widely practiced.
- Although services are contractually obliged to implement a curriculum that is underpinned by the principles of Aistear and Síolta, 8.9% of respondents did not indicate using either of them.
- Most providers found it "very important" to develop children's oral language skills, physical and motor skills, and ability to inquire and explore based on their own curiosity. Developing children's ability to cooperate easily with others, to think creatively and critically and to reason logically were also seen as important by most providers.
- Developing these skills is a regular part of the curriculum in most services.
- Most children have access to outdoor play during ECCE programme time, but the extent of outdoor play varies.
- High-intensity access to outdoor play is more common in rural than urban settings and in private than community services.

Key findings on programme differentiation

- Four in ten part-time and full-time services operate a dedicated ECCE programme room, while the remaining services cater for ECCE-programme children together with other children in the same room.
- ECCE programme children who avail of additional hours stay in the same room outside ECCE programme hours in most services. In nearly all services, there is also some continuity in staffing.
- ECCE programme activities are clearly distinct from activities offered at other times of the day just over a third of services. The most frequently mentioned activity unique to ECCE programme hours is Montessori work.
- There is some qualitative evidence that free play and outdoor play may be more dominant in non-ECCE time.

- In some full-day and part-time services, there is little difference between ECCE-programme time and non-ECCE programme time.
- Some services operate separate rooms for year one and year two of the ECCE programme, while others cater for both together. Some services operate distinct curricula for year one and year two, while others differentiate based on the needs of the individual child within a single curriculum.

Key findings on transitions
- ECCE programme providers offer a wide range of activities designed to support children's transitions into the ECCE programme, throughout ECCE programme session, between ECCE programme years, and on to formal education.
- Less emphasis is placed on supporting transitions into the ECCE programme prior to the start of the programme year than transitions to primary school.
- Most services report using a range of techniques and practices to support horizontal transitions at the session start, session end, and throughout the ECCE programme session, such as arrival and closing routines, timers, songs etc.
- A key person approach is used in six out of every ten services, and one in three services actively try to limit transitions within the programme session.
- Services support progression between programme years through observation and assessment, documentation and planning based on children's emergent interests, among other practices.
- Parents are included in planning and review processes in just over half of the services surveyed.
- Services use a range of activities to support children's transition into primary school.
- Managers, educators and parents felt that the friendships made through the ECCE programme helped children transition successfully.
- Approximately half of the services surveyed use the Mo Scéal transition template, while one in three are aware of it but don't use it.

Key findings on targeted support and inclusivity
Access
- Children with disabilities or additional needs, children from one-parent families and children who speak a different language at home are enrolled in the majority of ECCE programme services.
- Children from families experiencing social and/or economic disadvantage, Traveller children, and Roma children are enrolled in fewer than half of the services surveyed.
- In most services, no more than 10% of ECCE children belong to any one of these cohorts.

Meeting children's needs
- Providers are generally confident in their ability to meet the needs of one-parent families, Traveller and Roma children, and children from families experiencing social and/or economic disadvantage
- Providers are less confident in their ability to meet the needs of children with disabilities or additional needs and of children who speak a different language at home.
- Services with large percentages of children with additional needs were least confident in their ability to meet these needs.
- Most services rarely cooperate or collaborate with child-, family-, or social services or with health-related services.

- During observations, researchers witnessed many examples where children with disabilities and/or additional needs were well integrated and experienced positive, caring relationships with staff. However, in a small number of situations, educators responded in ways that were inappropriate and did not afford children the dignity and respect they deserve.
- In qualitative interviews, educators and managers noted a need for additional training on supporting children with additional needs and children affected by childhood trauma.

AIM

- Contributing factors include limitations of AIM, recruitment challenges, lack of targeted intervention, training and specialist support, access to funding, and inadequate ratios given the children's needs.
- One in eight services has turned down an application due to feeling unable to meet the child's needs (for reasons other than toilet training) after the introduction of AIM. This is more common in private than community services, in larger than smaller services, and in non-sessional than sessional services.
- AIM has had a stronger impact on access for children with additional needs in sessional than non-sessional services.
- An inadequate adult-child ratio and challenging behavioural difficulties were key reasons for turning a child away after the introduction of AIM.
- Educators and managers also expressed doubts that the integrative model of AIM met the needs of children with complex needs who needed one-on-one support or would benefit from a greater Early Intervention element.
- In practice, where children have very high needs, AIM sometimes operates as a one-on-one model, and it is important that AIM staff in such situations are experienced and appropriately trained to offer the best possible support to the child.
- Lack of support for additional needs outside ECCE hours impacts on children's access to and experience of the ECCE programme and can have a negative impact on children's transition between programme years. It can also be difficult to manage for part-time, full-day, and sessional services offering summer schemes.

Parents' and children's experiences (additional needs)

- On average, parents of children with longstanding illnesses, conditions, or disabilities contacted and applied to more settings than other parents and were less likely to be offered a place at their preferred setting or feel that they had a choice of setting.
- Parents of children with longstanding illnesses, conditions, or disabilities were overall satisfied with the ECCE programme, but rated their satisfaction lower than other parents and were less likely to rate inclusiveness and accessibility of the preschool environment highly.
- Parents of children with longstanding illnesses, conditions, or disabilities also gave less favourable ratings of their children's experience of the ECCE programme
- Parents of children with longstanding illnesses, conditions, or disabilities were more likely to have encountered an issue or problem with the service, found this slightly more difficult to raise and were, on average, slightly less satisfied with the outcome than other parents.

Parents' and children's experiences (ethnic minorities)

- On average, parents from ethnic minorities contacted and applied to more settings than other parents and were less likely to be offered a place at their preferred setting or feel that they had a choice of setting.

- Parents from ethnic minorities were overall satisfied with the ECCE programme but rated their satisfaction lower than other parents and tended to rate the inclusiveness of preschool environments less favourably than White Irish parents.
- Parents from ethnic minorities also rated their children's experience of the ECCE environment less favourably than White Irish parents.
- Parents from ethnic minorities were less likely to have encountered an issue or problem with the service, found this slightly easier to raise and were, on average, slightly more satisfied with the outcome than White Irish parents.
- In interviews, managers and educators described a range of efforts to create a culturally inclusive environment in the ECCE classroom.
- Educators expressed a need for more language support and resources to better support bi-lingual language development.

Key findings on funding, training, and programme resources
- On average, providers indicated that they had appropriate access to play and learning materials, qualified educators, indoor space, and outdoor play space.
- On average, providers gave an intermediate rating in relation to their access to funding, educators with competence in working with children with a disability or additional needs and children speaking a different language, the internet, time for parental involvement and support, and professional development for educators.
- Access to digital technology for play and learning was rated lowest.
- Ratings for the appropriateness of funding were split fairly evenly, with the largest group indicating that access to funding was "appropriate to some extent".
- Private services and sessional services were more likely than community services and non-sessional services to consider their access to funding "inappropriate" and less likely to consider it "appropriate".
- Most providers access support from the CCCs, Better Start, Pobal, and Tusla.
- Most services rated the level of support available to them as "sufficient".

Key findings on workforce, working conditions, recruitment and retention
- Sessional services and private services rated their access to qualified educators less favourably than their counterparts. This pattern also applies to educators with competence in working with children with disabilities or additional needs and to educators with competence in working with children speaking a different language.
- In qualitative interviews, managers and educators highlighted the difficult working conditions in the sector and their impact on recruitment and staff retention, especially of graduate staff.
- Managers and educators reported that staff pressures impacted on the quality of delivery, availability of ECCE programme places, intensity and continuity of delivery, and access for children with disabilities and/or additional needs.
- Managers and educators identified sessional or part-time hours, term-time contracts and low pay as key barriers to recruitment and retention of qualified ECCE programme staff, and precarious AIM contracts as barriers to recruitment of AIM staff.
- Qualitative interviews suggest that in many services, educators still receive very limited or no paid non-contact time.
- Educators who did not receive paid non-contact time reported completing tasks such as admin work, session preparation, and observations during the ECCE session or unpaid in their own time.

Chapter 5: ECCE in action – practice-based observations

Practice-based observations were carried out at each of the 30 participating settings. These observations explored: delivery in terms of curricular and pedagogical approach, the learning environment and participant responsiveness, i.e., children's enjoyment and engagement with the programme. During these observations, a member of the research team visited the setting to observe the ECCE programme in practice. As outlined in Chapter 2, the observations were guided using the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) (Walsh & Gardner, 2005) (see Appendix 2).

Results on overall quality

With regard to the QLI scores for the sample as a whole (which can range from 1-6), in general, scores were high or satisfactory. As shown below in Figure 59, just over a third of settings, 37% (n=11), had a satisfactory mean score (between 3.0 and 3.9), 53% (n=16) had a satisfactory-high mean score (between 4.0 and 4.9) and 10% (n=3) had a high mean score (between 5.0 and 5.9). None of the settings had a mean score below 3.0, indicating low- satisfactory (2.0-2.9) or low quality (0.0-1.9).
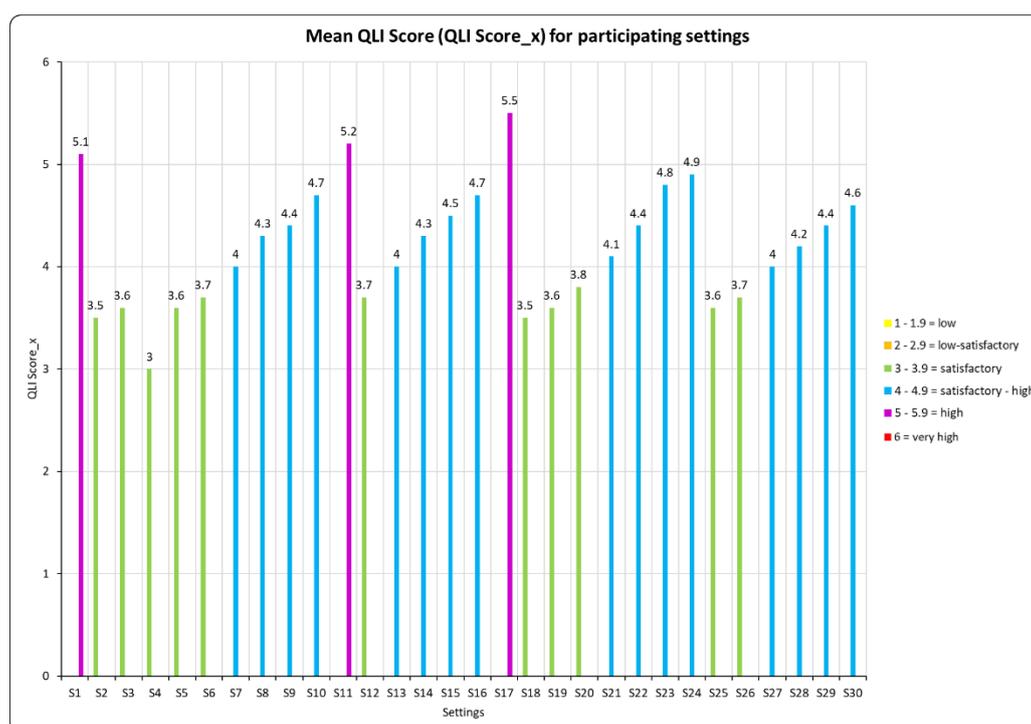
Figure 59 - Mean QLI score for each participating setting

Across each of the nine quality indicators (for the full sample of settings), there was little variation, see Figure 60. Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and Multiple Skills Acquisition (MSA) had the lowest mean scores, 3.8 and 3.9 respectively. Whereas Well-being and Respect received the highest scores (m=4.5 and 4.6 respectively).

Figure 60 - Overall mean QLI score by quality indicator

Results by each of the quality indicators

Further information pertaining to each of the nine quality indicators will now be considered in turn.

Motivation

Motivation refers to the degree to which children are actively interested in their learning. As per the QLI framework, a high degree of motivation is characterised by children who are eager, inquisitive, and excited to engage and participate in activities; interested and enthusiastic teachers who offer a variety of stimulating and age-appropriate activities that are frequently changed in accordance with children's interests; and an environment that is colourful, bright and aesthetically pleasing with a variety of areas available, including stimulating outdoor equipment. In contrast, indicators of low motivation include children who are apathetic and unenthusiastic, appear bored, and engage in activities out of obligation rather than interest; teachers who offer limited engagement in uninteresting activities that are rarely changed; and an environment that is dull and unattractive with no outdoor facilities (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Crew, Rafferty and Sheehy, 2006).

Overall and across all the settings, there were satisfactory-high degrees of motivation observed across each of the three dimensions of the triangle of interaction (mean values ranged from 4.1-4.6, out of a possible total score of 6). Figure 61 demonstrates the mean score for children's actions in relation to motivation was 4.6 and the mean score for both teaching strategies and the role of the environment with regards to motivation was 4.1. This indicates that, on average, the participating settings demonstrate a satisfactory-high degree of quality with regards to motivation.
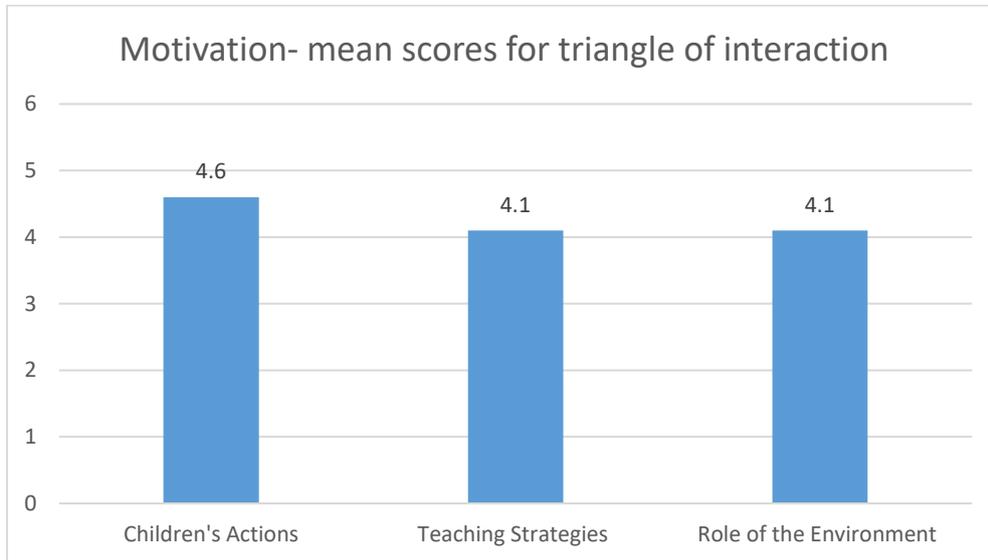
Figure 61 - Mean scores for triangle of interaction with regards to motivation

Across setting types (in terms of type, size, deprivation index and location of settings), there was little variation in mean scores. Interesting to note, however, is that the setting in a very disadvantaged area and those in satellite urban towns scored the lowest mean values for motivation (m=3.7 for both), see Table 8 below.

		Number of Settings	Mean Motivation Score
Setting Type	Community	11	4.1
	Private	19	4.4
Setting Size	Small	3	4.4
	Medium	12	4.5
	Large	15	4.1
Deprivation Index	Affluent	2	4.0
	Marginally above average	12	4.5
	Marginally below average	10	4.2
	Disadvantaged	5	4.3
	Very Disadvantaged	1	3.7
Setting Location	City	5	4.1
	Independent Urban Town	4	4.3
	Satellite Urban Town	4	3.7
	Rural with High Urban Influence	3	4.4
	Rural with Moderate Urban Influence	9	4.7
	Highly Rural	5	4.1

Some variation in mean motivation scores was evident across each of the 30 settings. Settings 11 and 17 scored the highest in terms of motivation (m= 6.0), indicating a very high degree of quality. Whereas settings 2, 3, 12, 19 and 25 scored the lowest (m = 3.3), indicating a satisfactory level of quality in relation to motivation, as seen in Figure 62.
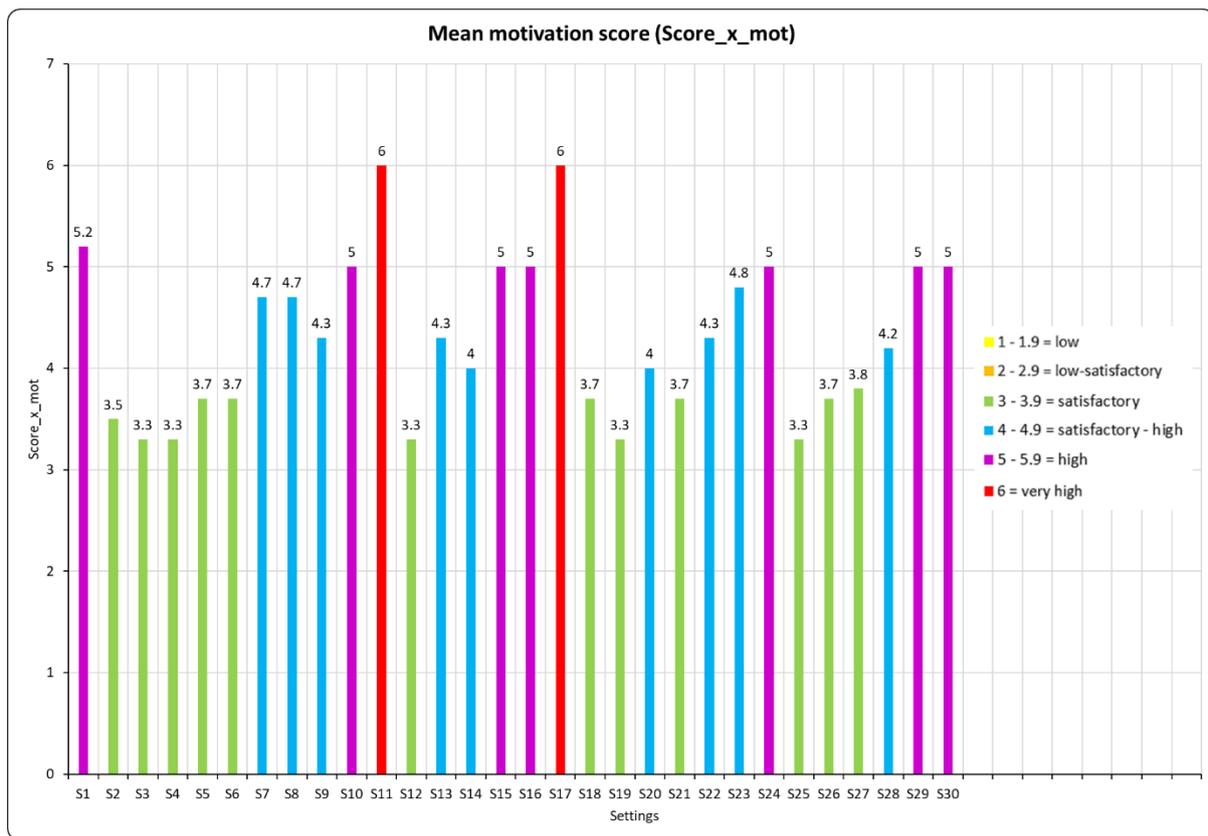
Figure 62 - Mean motivation score for each participating setting

The qualitative descriptions captured during the setting observations provide rich insights into what higher and lower practice environments looked like. For example, those settings scoring the highest for motivation were described as having children who were "eager to participate and inquisitive" and adults who were "cheerful and enthusiastic" and "show interest in children's learning, participate and extend learning". In terms of the role of the environment, setting 11 was described as "colourful, bright, attractive" with "exciting areas and some room for privacy outside". Setting 17 was described as "wonderful and homely" with "many different areas available, very stimulating outdoor environment, incl. exciting wild spaces." Whereas the five settings that had the lowest mean score in relation to motivation were found to have children who displayed "some signs of enthusiasm, some enthusiastic gestures" and who were "eager to participate in free play, but bored and distracted during adult-led circle time" (setting 19). With regards to teaching strategies, setting 3 was observed to have adults who "whilst outdoors, appear to provide more of a supervisory role". In setting 19 "adults tended to take control when participating in learning situations. Learning process rarely extended. Adults tend to be friendly, but some harshness and some lack of enthusiasm". Considering the role of the environment, setting 25 was described as having "bright décor but little space" and "some nice displays, poor outdoor facilities". Similarly, setting 12 was observed to have "bright décor and nice resources, nice displays at children's eye level" but "children didn't access many of the resources throughout the day" and the "outdoor space was very small and very limited".

Concentration

Concentration refers to the degree to which children are persistent in their engagement with their learning. The QLI considers children to be displaying a high degree of concentration when they are attentive, deliberate and 'lost' in what they are doing. Teaching strategies are determined to support

a high degree of concentration if they allow for appropriate amounts of time to complete an activity, ensure activities are age appropriate and have an adult available for intervention as required. The environment supports a high degree of concentration when adequate space is provided, limiting distraction and disturbances and when consideration has been given to aiding concentration when laying out the space. In contrast, children who are inactive, distracted and move quickly from one activity to another; adults who ignore, over supervise or interrupt the learning process; and an environment with little space and many distractions indicate a low degree of quality with regards to concentration (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Crew, Rafferty and Sheehy, 2006).

Across all the settings, there were a satisfactory-high degrees of concentration observed across each of the three dimensions of the triangle of interaction. Figure 63 demonstrates the mean score for children's actions, teaching strategies and the role of the environment with regards to concentration was 4.1. This suggests, on average, the participating settings displayed a satisfactory-high degree of quality with regards to concentration.
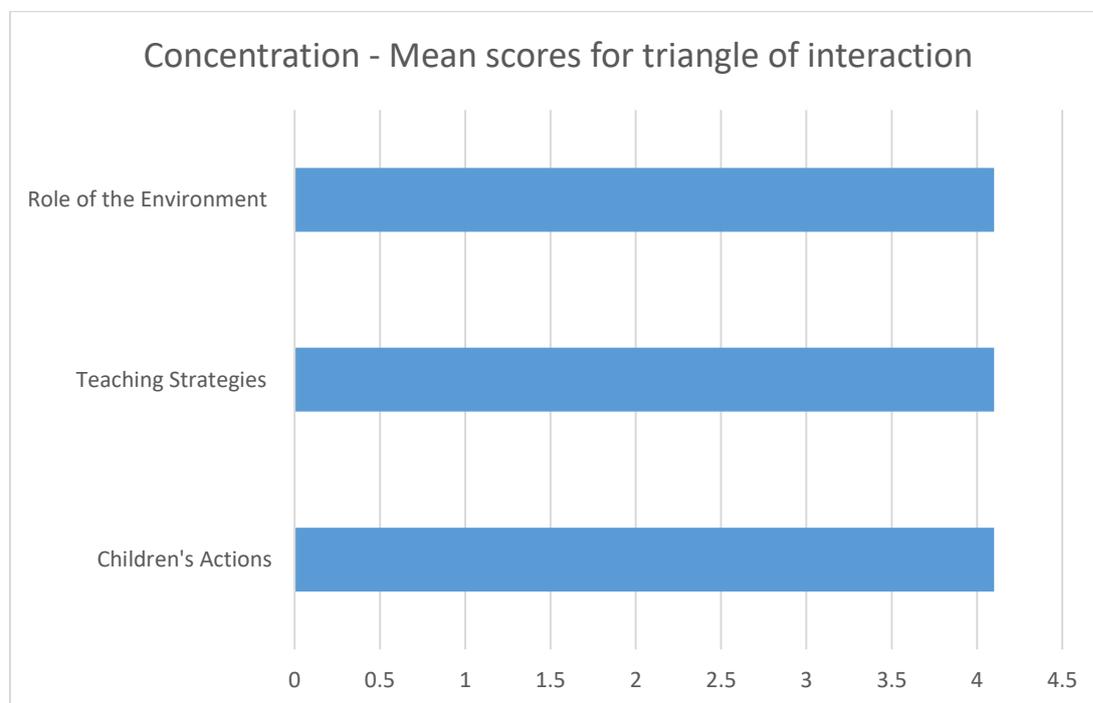

Figure 63 - Mean scores for triangle of interaction with regards to concentration

The observation study found limited variation in mean scores between settings with regards to concentration across setting type (in terms of type, size, deprivation index and location). Table 9 demonstrates private and small and medium settings, on average, were observed as displaying a satisfactory- high degree of quality in relation to concentration. This was also the case for all settings when considered by deprivation index and location, with the exception of the very disadvantaged setting, settings in cities and in satellite urban towns, where a satisfactory degree of quality in relation to concentration was found.

Table 9 - Mean concentration scores by setting type, size, deprivation index and location

		Number of Settings	Mean Concentration Score
Setting Type	Community	11	3.9
	Private	19	4.3
Setting Size	Small	3	4.6
	Medium	12	4.2
	Large	15	3.9
Deprivation Index	Affluent	2	4.2
	Marginally above average	12	4.1
	Marginally below average	10	4.0
	Disadvantaged	5	4.2
	Very Disadvantaged	1	3.3
Setting Location	City	5	3.9
	Independent Urban Town	4	4.4
	Satellite Urban Town	4	3.3
	Rural with High Urban Influence	3	4.0
	Rural with Moderate Urban Influence	9	4.5
	Highly Rural	5	4.0

Considering individual settings, some variation in mean concentration scores was observed. As seen in Figure 64, setting 17 scored the highest (m=5.3), indicating a high degree of quality in relation to concentration. Setting 4 scored the lowest (m=2.3), indicating a satisfactory- low degree of quality in relation concentration.
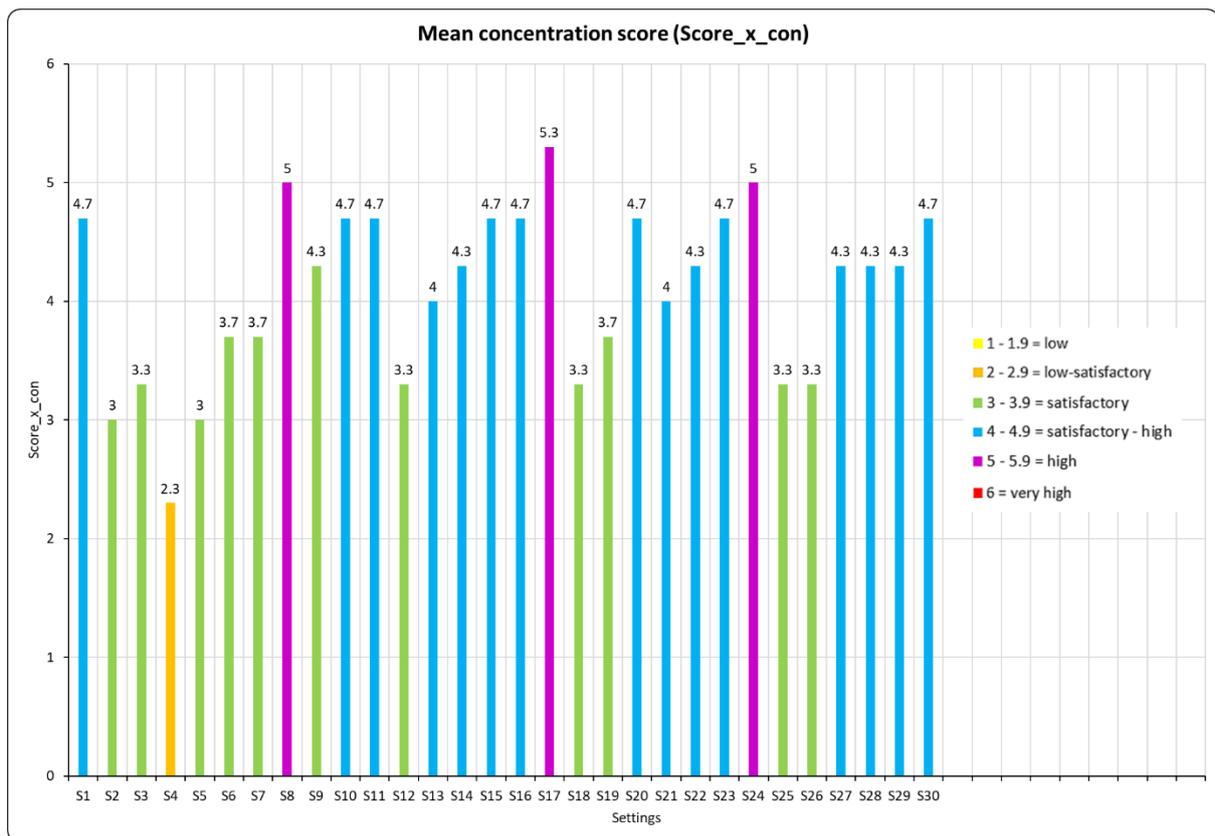
Figure 64 - Mean concentration score for each participating setting

The setting in this observation study with the highest score in relation to concentration (setting 17) was described as having children who were "attentive at story time" and "persevered with challenges in outdoor play". The adults provided "appropriate time for completing tasks, different types of risky outdoor play and unobtrusive support where needed" and the environment had "plenty of space for different activities and designated areas for quiet group activities, eating, playing…"

In the setting with the lowest score with regards to concentration, setting 4, "some children remained at activities until completed, with some signs of deliberation and mental engagement" but others were "very distracted". With regards to teaching strategies, some activities were deemed to be "too long" and adults were observed as "not always being available when required", contributing to an "overall feeling of chaos". This was also commented on in relation to the environment, that was observed as being "quite chaotic and untidy".

Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)

Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) refers to children's metacognitive thinking skills. According to the QLI, a high degree of HOTS is evidenced through children who have a plan of action, the opportunity to reflect on work, show signs of creativity and use thinking language throughout their learning. With regards to teaching strategies, high quality HOTS are evidenced through play-based learning experiences, use of open questions and thinking language and providing opportunities for reflection on previous learning. High quality HOTS can also be evidenced in an environment that is flexible and well-resourced with appropriate resources and visible thinking aids. Unfinished tasks, lack of originality and not asking questions or offering commentary are indicators of a low degree of quality

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with regards to HOTS. Similarly, adults who offer activities that lack challenge and an environment that restricts exploration and investigation also indicate a low degree of quality in relation to HOTS (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Crew, Rafferty and Sheehy, 2006).

As noted previously, HOTS was the quality indicator with the lowest mean score across the 30 settings. On average the settings were deemed to display a satisfactory degree of quality in relation to HOTS across each aspect of the triangle of interaction. Figure 65 demonstrates the mean score for children's actions in relation to HOTS was 3.7, for teaching strategies was 3.4 and for the role of the environment was 3.8. This indicates that, on average, the participating settings displayed a satisfactory degree of quality with regards to HOTS.

Figure 65 - Mean scores for triangle of interaction with regards to HOTS

Table 10 indicates this continues to be the case for settings regardless of type, size, deprivation index or location, with the exception of the very disadvantaged setting – observed as being low-satisfactory in quality as it relates to HOTS – and the settings in a rural location with moderate urban influence, that were observed as being satisfactory- high in quality in relation to HOTS.

Table 10 - Mean HOTS scores by setting type, size, deprivation index and location

		Number of Settings	Mean HOTS Score
Setting Type	Community	11	3.4
	Private	19	3.8
Setting Size	Small	3	3.8
	Medium	12	3.7
	Large	15	3.6
Deprivation Index	Affluent	2	3.5
	Marginally above average	12	3.8

	Marginally below average	10	3.6
	Disadvantaged	5	3.5
	Very Disadvantaged	1	2.3
Setting Location	City	5	3.2
	Independent Urban Town	4	3.6
	Satellite Urban Town	4	3.3
	Rural with High Urban Influence	3	3.9
	Rural with Moderate Urban Influence	9	4.1
	Highly Rural	5	3.5

Some variation in mean HOTS scores was evident across the participating settings. As seen in Figure 66, setting 24 scored the highest in terms of HOTS (m=5.0), indicating a high degree of quality in relation to HOTS. Setting 26 scored the lowest (m=2.3), indicating a low-satisfactory degree of quality with regards to HOTS.
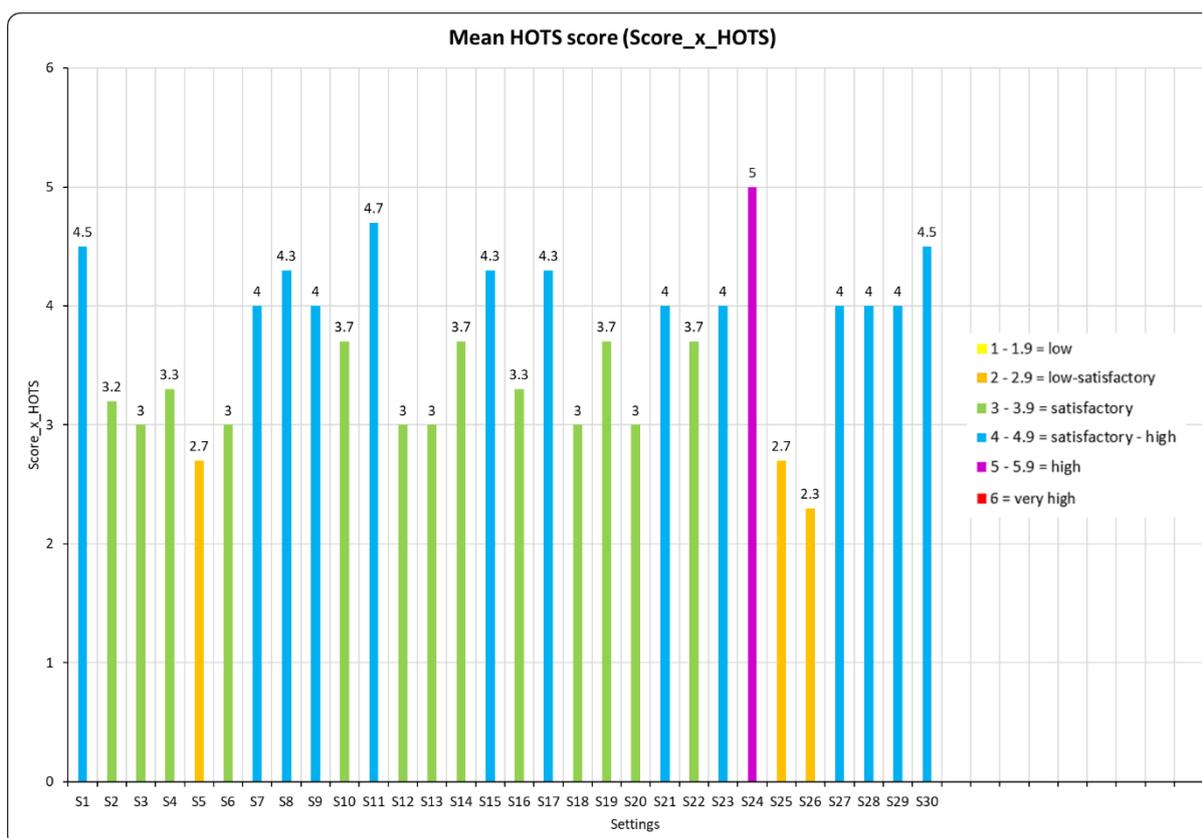
Figure 66 - Mean HOTS score for each participating setting

Considering the setting with the highest score in relation to HOTS, setting 24, children were observed "suggesting how the fruit/veg should be handled and watered (in polytunnel), which were suitable for eating and which were for the birds." The observer noted, "the adult did a great job at scaffolding the

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learning. She managed to maintain interest and engagement whilst probing and extending learning throughout". The environment in this setting had "wonderful resources" with "thinking, memory and word/number aids on display."

In setting 26 the children demonstrated "limited higher order thinking and language". With regards to teaching strategies "activities were not pitched appropriately", questions and instructions were "closed" and there was "no evidence of scaffolding." In terms of the environment, "materials were available but not used to full potential" and "organisation was satisfactory".

Consistent with HOTS being the overall lowest scoring quality indicator in this observational study, Walsh, McGuinness and Sproule (2017) found limited evidence of extension and challenge in a range of early years settings, resulting in lower QLI scores in relation to HOTS than the other quality indicators. This was the case in both non-participatory settings that held a developmental perspective towards children's learning, viewing learning through play as something that happened 'naturally', and in over-participatory settings that placed greatest value on academic achievement and adopted more formal approaches to learning. These findings indicate a high level of skill is required to ensure an appropriate and effective pedagogical approach that promotes and extends children's higher order thinking skills, alongside the other quality indicators.

Multiple Skill Acquisition (MSA)

Multiple skill acquisition (MSA) refers to learning that is holistic and covers a variety of skills and knowledge. According to the QLI, a high degree of quality in relation to MSA is characterised by children who engage in and demonstrate understanding of a breadth of learning areas, such as mathematics, science, language and literacy, physical learning and creativity; adults who offer a broad and balanced curriculum, understand the importance of developing the whole child and are aware of the importance of scaffolding; and an organised environment that offers an array of materials to support learning for a broad range of curriculum areas. In contrast, a low degree of quality in relation to MSA is associated with children who evidence little skill acquisition and limited understanding of concepts across a range of learning areas; adults who offer a narrow curriculum and demonstrate limited planning and observation; and an environment with few materials that allow for the development of cognitive or creative skills (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Crew, Rafferty and Sheehy, 2006).

Overall and across all the settings, as shown in Figure 67, there was a satisfactory-high degree of quality with regards to MSA in relation to children's actions (m=4.0) and a satisfactory degree of quality in relation to teaching strategies and the role of the environment (m=3.8). As seen in Table 11, there was limited variation in the mean MSA score of the settings when setting type, size, deprivation index and location were considered. In general, the subgroups of settings were found to be of satisfactory quality in relation to MSA. Medium and affluent settings were found to display a satisfactory-high degree of quality, as were settings marginally above average in relation to deprivation index and settings in a rural location with a high or moderate urban influence.
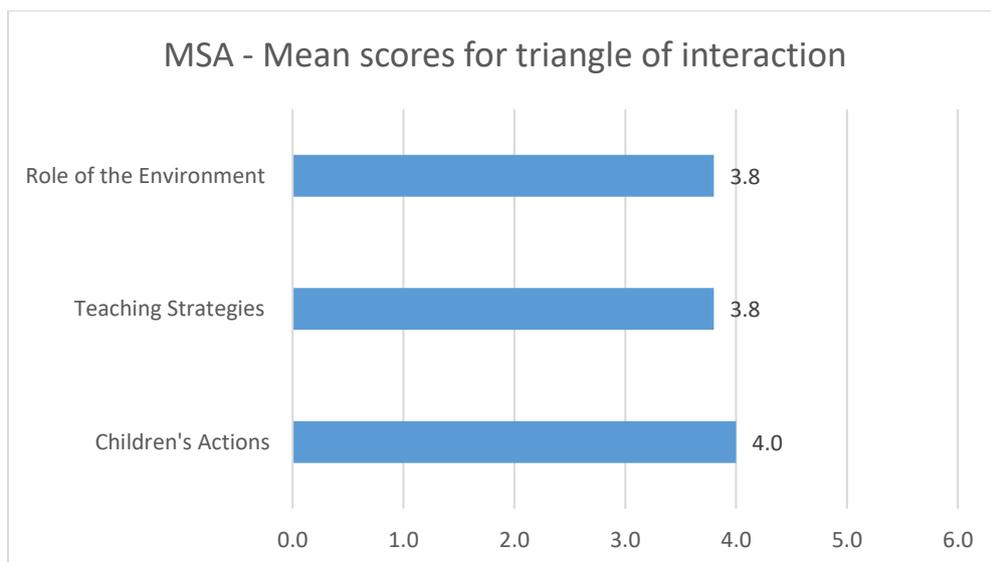
Figure 67 - Mean scores for triangle of interaction with regards to MSA

Table 11 - Mean MSA scores by setting type, size, deprivation index and location

		Number of Settings	Mean MSA Score
Setting Type	Community	11	3.7
	Private	19	3.9
Setting Size	Small	3	3.9
	Medium	12	4.1
	Large	15	3.6
Deprivation Index	Affluent	2	4.0
	Marginally above average	12	4.1
	Marginally below average	10	3.6
	Disadvantaged	5	3.9
	Very Disadvantaged	1	3.3
Setting Location	City	5	3.5
	Independent Urban Town	4	3.8
	Satellite Urban Town	4	3.3
	Rural with High Urban Influence	3	4.0
	Rural with Moderate Urban Influence	9	4.3
	Highly Rural	5	3.7

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Across the 30 settings, Figure 68 indicates there was some variation in mean MSA scores. Setting 16 had the highest mean MSA score (m=5.7), indicating a high degree of quality in relation to MSA. Whereas setting 4 scored the lowest (m=2.7), indicating a low-satisfactory level of quality in relation to MSA.
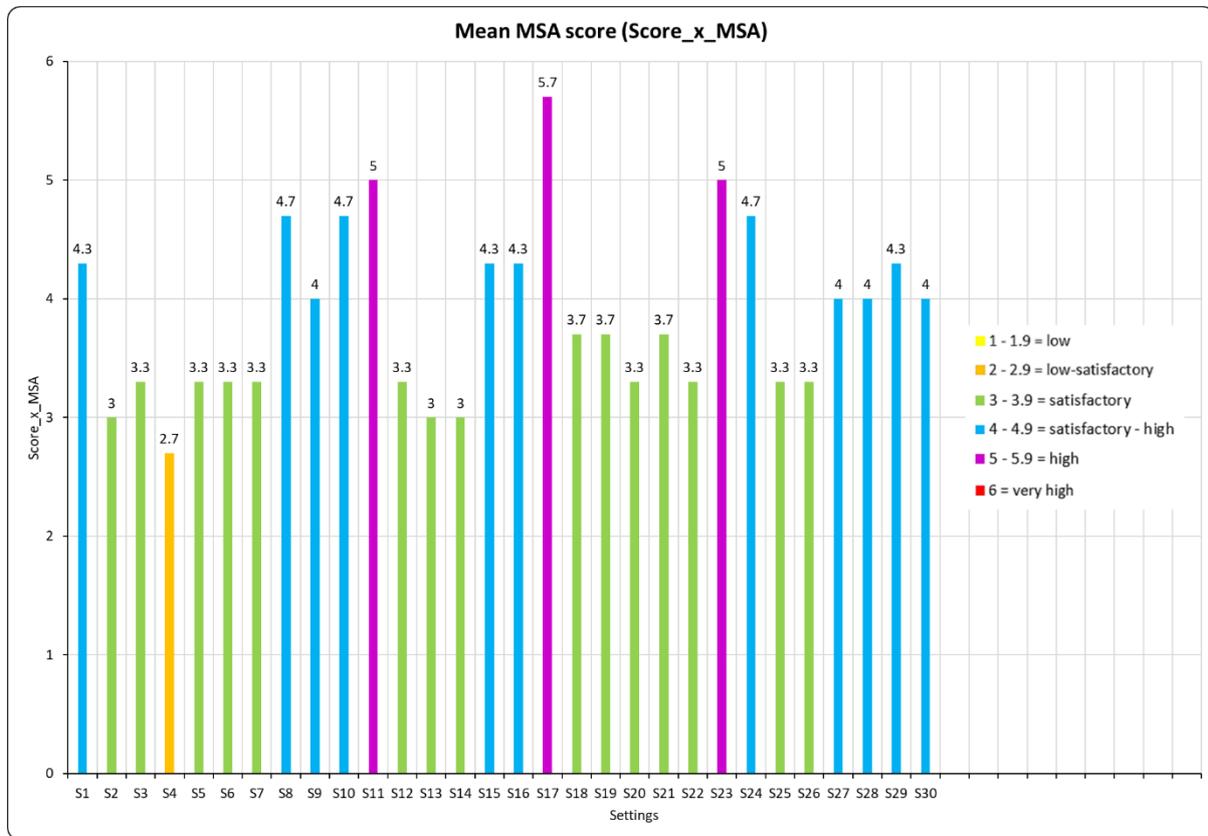

Figure 68 - Mean MSA score for each participating setting

In the highest scoring setting, setting 17, children were exposed to a "wide array of different activities, science, literacy, art" and displayed "interest in written word/reading and the world around them (snails, birds, plants), creative self-expression". The adults offered a "broad, balanced curriculum addressing all areas of learning" and demonstrated "understanding of the whole child" and the environment had a "wide array of materials for all areas of learning" and was "well organised".

In the setting with the lowest score in relation to MSA, setting 4, there was "evidence that children touch upon some areas of learning in the course of a day" however this was "not observed on the day (of the observation study)". In relation to teaching strategies there was "little differentiation and effort" but "planning did address the interests of the children to some extent. In terms of the environment, it was described as being somewhat "chaotic". However, "some materials that allow for the development of cognitive or creative skills" were available.

Confidence

Confidence refers to children's feeling of security in their learning environment. The QLI suggests a high degree of confidence is characterised by children who tackle activities without hesitation, express emotions, and opinions freely and are not afraid of failure. In relation to teaching strategies, a high degree of confidence is evidenced by warm, secure relationships, sensitive responses, and appropriate and effective encouragement. With regards to the role of the environment, a high degree of confidence is seen when the environment is arranged for the children's needs and interests, the décor is friendly and welcoming and when there is a balance between organisation and flexibility. Comparatively, a low degree of confidence is in evidence when children require constant adult reassurance, rely on adult direction and are overly shy and reserved. Limited praise from adults and a sense of inferiority being instilled in children is also indicative of low quality in relation to confidence, as is an environment that is not appropriate to the needs and interests of children (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Crew, Rafferty and Sheehy, 2006).

The settings overall were found to demonstrate a high-satisfactory degree of quality in relation to confidence across all aspects of the triangle of interaction, as displayed in Figure 69. The mean score with regards to children's actions was 4.7 and for teaching strategies, the mean score was 4.6. The mean score for the role of the environment in relation to confidence was 4.0.
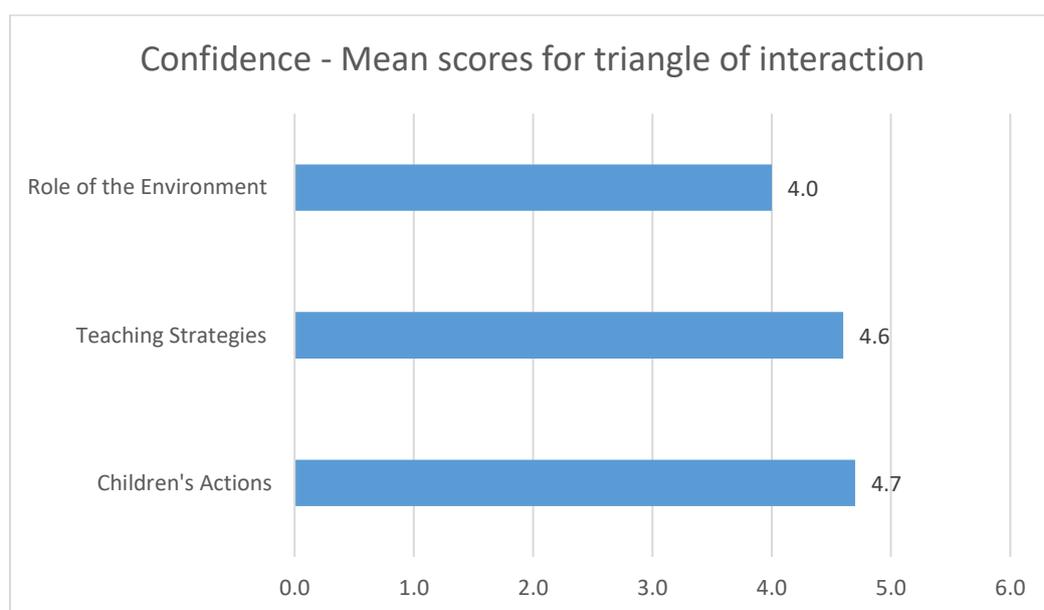
Figure 69 - Mean scores for triangle of interaction with regards to confidence

Table 12 indicates there was limited variation in mean scores across various subgroups of settings, in terms of type, size, deprivation index and location. With regards to deprivation index, the very disadvantaged setting was found to have a satisfactory degree of quality in relation to confidence. This was also the case for settings in cities and in satellite urban towns. Settings in rural areas with a moderate urban influence were found to demonstrate a high degree of quality in relation to confidence.

Table 12 - Mean confidence scores by setting type, size, deprivation index and location

		Number of Settings	Mean Confidence Score
Setting Type	Community	11	4.2
	Private	19	4.5
Setting Size	Small	3	4.8
	Medium	12	4.5
	Large	15	4.3
Deprivation Index	Affluent	2	4.2
	Marginally above average	12	4.4
	Marginally below average	10	4.3
	Disadvantaged	5	4.7
	Very Disadvantaged	1	3.7
Setting Location	City	5	3.9
	Independent Urban Town	4	4.5
	Satellite Urban Town	4	3.8
	Rural with High Urban Influence	3	4.2
	Rural with Moderate Urban Influence	9	5.0
	Highly Rural	5	4.4

Some variation in mean confidence scores across the 30 settings can be seen in Figure 70. Setting 1 had the highest mean score (m=6.0), indicating a very high degree of quality in relation to confidence. Setting 4 had the lowest mean score (m=3.0), indicating a satisfactory degree of quality with regards to confidence.
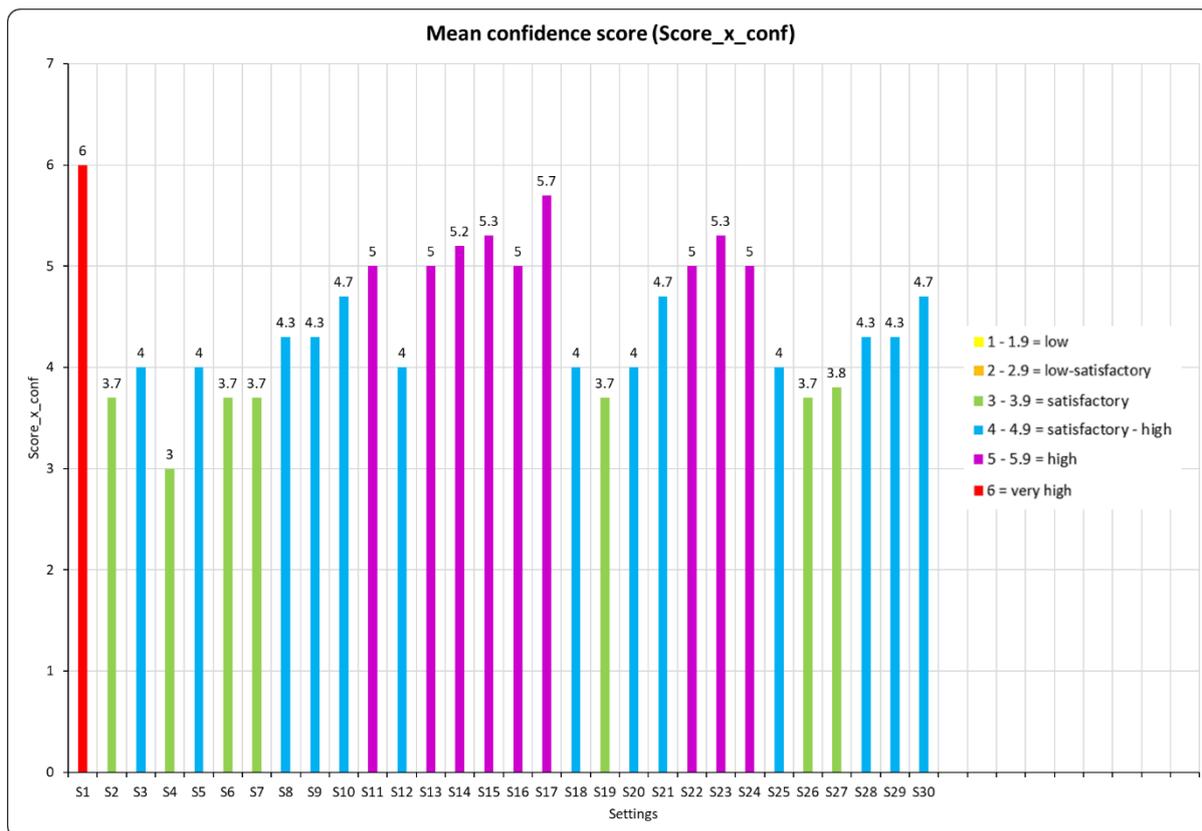
Figure 70 - Mean confidence score for each participating setting

Setting 1 was found to have the highest score in relation to confidence. Here, the children were observed as being "highly confident". They "tackled activities without hesitation and expressed their emotions and interacted with others, in particular adults very easily and naturally." Children were "very capable of expressing their own opinions on what they want to do or not – staying outdoors for longer etc.". With regards to teaching strategies, adults were "extremely warm"'. "Secure relationships were in evidence and adults interact with children freely in a non-judgmental and sensitive manner." There was "lots of hugging and sitting on knees and genuine care and affection shown". The adults "value all children's contributions and give children a voice and take it on board". The environment provided a "relaxed atmosphere and warm ethos" it was a "homely, caring experience where the environment definitely belongs to the children and not the adults – very comfortable and very aesthetically pleasing from a child's perspective indoors and out.

Setting 4 was found to have the lowest score in relation to confidence. Despite this, the children "tackled activities without hesitation". Some children were observed to "volunteer and express own opinions" but "others were very quiet". With regards to teaching strategies, "adults tend to respond in a non-judgmental fashion, but not always" and "children have some say but not very much". With regards to the role of the environment, "little organisation" was observed and the children were described as having "little say in the arrangement of the environment".

Well-being

Like confidence, well-being refers to children's feeling of security in their learning environment. The QLI indicates a high degree of well-being is in evidence when children are comfortable, frequently smiling/laughing and eat healthily; adults develop a strong rapport with the children, demonstrate

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warmth and affection and show awareness of children's safety at all times; and the environment is safe and reflects a cosy, warm and calm atmosphere. A low degree of well-being is evidenced by subdued, tearful, unhappy children; impatient, unfair adults; and a dull or unsafe environment (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Crew, Rafferty and Sheehy, 2006).

Overall, the settings were found to display a high- satisfactory degree of quality in relation to well-being. This can be seen in Figure 71, were children's actions had a mean score of 4.7 for well-being, teaching strategies had a mean score of 4.8 and the role of the environment had a mean score of 4.0.
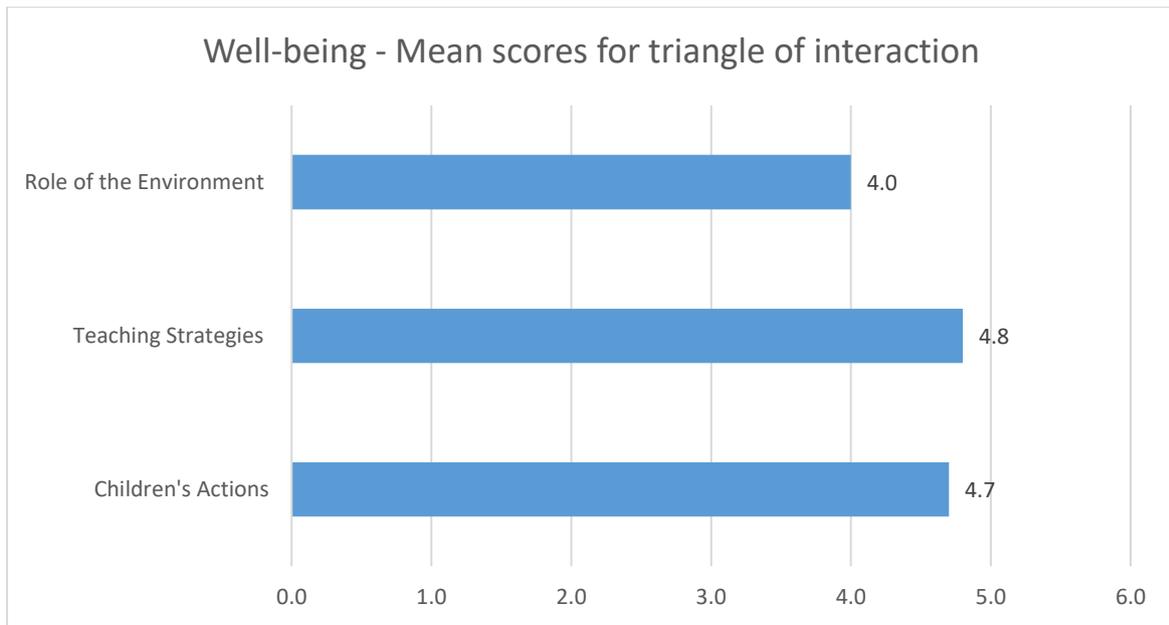
Figure 71 - Mean scores for triangle of interaction with regards to well-being

Furthermore, Table 13 demonstrates the settings continue to display, on average, a high- satisfactory degree of quality in relation to wellbeing, regardless of setting type, size, deprivation index or setting location.

		Number of Settings	Mean Wellbeing Score
Setting Type	Community	11	4.2
	Private	19	4.7
Setting Size	Small	3	4.7
	Medium	12	4.7
	Large	15	4.3
Deprivation Index	Affluent	2	4.2
	Marginally above average	12	4.6
	Marginally below average	10	4.4
	Disadvantaged	5	4.7
	Very Disadvantaged	1	4.3
Setting Location	City	5	4.3
	Independent Urban Town	4	4.7
	Satellite Urban Town	4	4.0
	Rural with High Urban Influence	3	4.5
	Rural with Moderate Urban Influence	9	4.9
	Highly Rural	5	4.3

Considering individual settings, the mean score with regards to wellbeing varied from 2.7 (setting 4) to 6.0 (setting 17), see Figure 72 below.
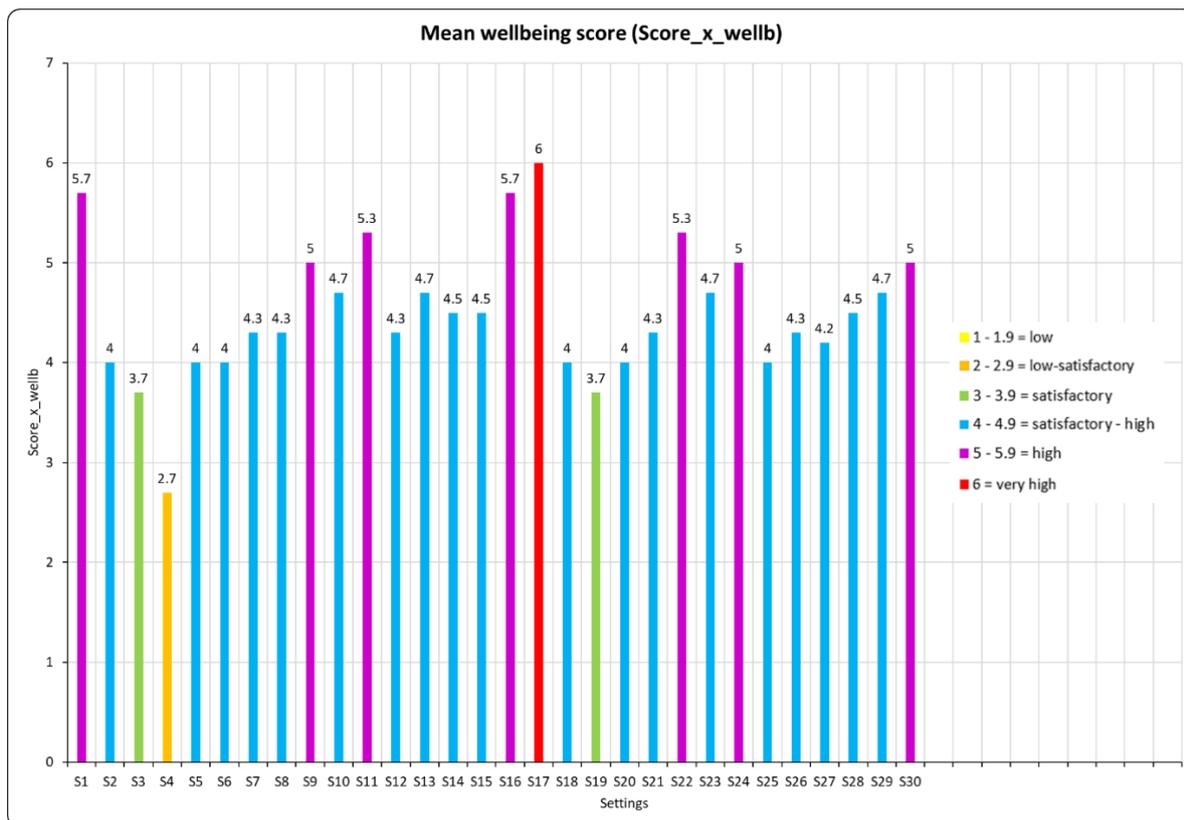
Figure 72 - Mean motivation score for each participating setting

In setting 17, the setting with the highest quality score with regards to wellbeing, children appeared "happy and active". The adults displayed a "strong rapport". They were "warm and kind" and provided opportunity for "plenty of physical exercise" and ensured "safety in risky outdoor play" by "monitoring appropriately without being intrusive". The environment was a "very warm, homely space". Safety was "managed appropriately within risky play".

Setting 4 had the lowest quality score in relation to wellbeing. Here, "some children were crying but others were happy". The adults were described as "generally warm but not always patient". According to the observer, "health and safety was affected by chaos and inadequate outdoor facilities" and the environment was described as "not very comfortable and school like".

Independence

Independence refers to the measure of control children have over their own learning. According to the QLI, a high degree of independence is characterised by children who can use their own initiative, help with daily routines and make attempts at solving their own problems; adults who offer children a sense of ownership over their learning, encourage children to do things for themselves and arrange the setting to facilitate choice; and an environment with low shelves, easily accessible materials and toilets and ample space for children's personal items. In contrast, a low degree of quality in relation to independence can be observed when children show little initiative and are overly dependent on adults. Likewise, dictatorial and authoritarian teaching strategies and an inaccessible environment indicate low quality in relation to independence (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Crew, Rafferty and Sheehy, 2006).

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Across all settings, a high-satisfactory degree of quality in relation to independence was observed with regards to children's actions and the role of the environment (m= 4.2 and 4.1 respectively). With regards to teaching strategies, a satisfactory degree of quality in relation to independence was observed (m=3.9), as demonstrated in Figure 73, below.

Independence - Mean scores for triangle of interaction

Category	Score
Role of the Environment	4.1
Teaching Strategies	3.9
Children's Actions	4.2
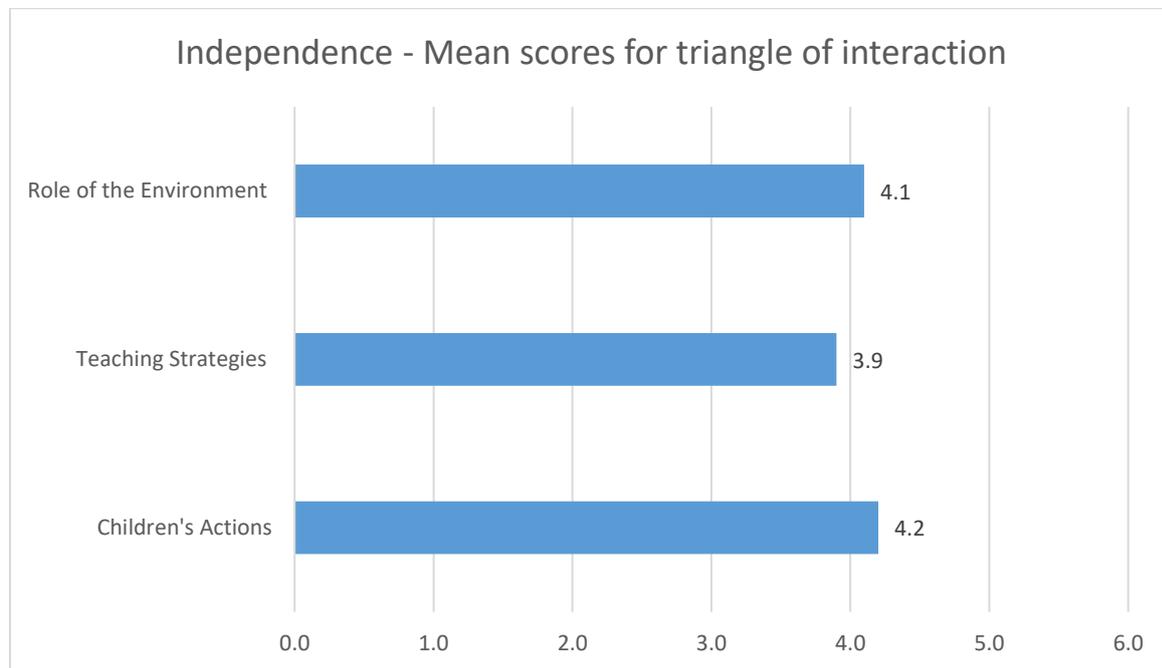
Figure 73 - Mean scores for triangle of interaction with regards to independence

Table 14 indicates private settings had a slightly higher mean score in relation to independence than community settings. This was also the case in relation to small, and particularly medium settings, when compared to large settings. In relation to deprivation index, marginally above and below settings and disadvantaged settings were found to have a high-satisfactory mean score and the affluent and very disadvantaged settings were found to have a satisfactory mean score in relation to independence. City and highly rural settings were also observed to display a satisfactory degree of quality in relation to independence, whereas settings in the other location types were found to be high-satisfactory in quality with regards to this indicator.

Table 14 - Mean independence scores by setting type, size, deprivation index and location

		Number of Settings	Mean Independence Score
Setting Type	Community	11	3.8
	Private	19	4.2
Setting Size	Small	3	4.0
	Medium	12	4.5
	Large	15	3.7
Deprivation Index	Affluent	2	3.0
	Marginally above average	12	4.2
	Marginally below average	10	4.1
	Disadvantaged	5	4.1
	Very Disadvantaged	1	3.7
Setting Location	City	5	3.5
	Independent Urban Town	4	4.0
	Satellite Urban Town	4	4.0
	Rural with High Urban Influence	3	4.1
	Rural with Moderate Urban Influence	9	4.7
	Highly Rural	5	3.5

Considering individual settings, the highest scoring setting in relation to independence was setting 11 (m=5.7) and the lowest scoring settings were setting 2 and 13 (m=2.7), as shown in Figure 74.
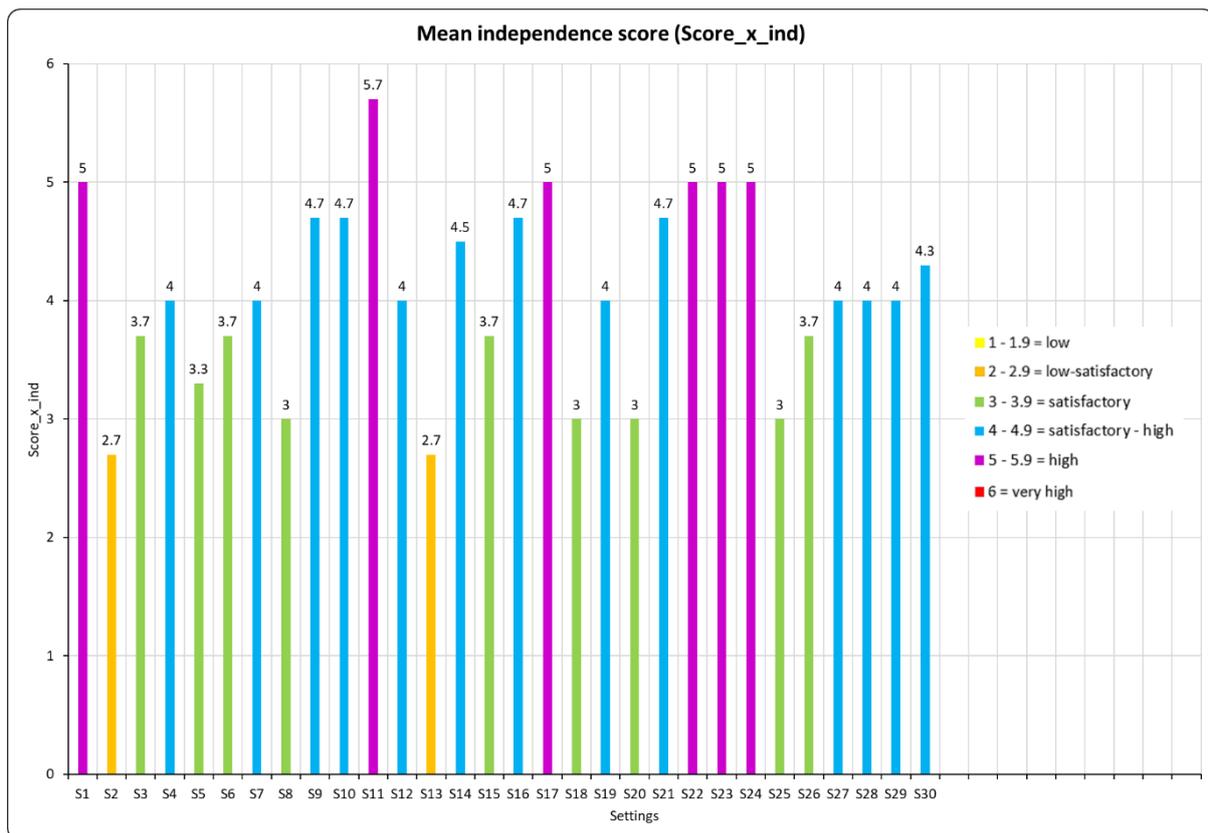
Figure 74 - Mean independence score for each participating setting

In setting 11, children could "use own initiative and generally do simple things for themselves". They got "snacks independently as and when" and "made own decisions". Children generally used adults "for support/advice rather than direction" and "attempted to solve problems". Likewise, adults encouraged children to have "ownership and autonomy of learning" and ensured the "setting was arranged to facilitate choice". The environment was an "autonomous learning environment" with "low-level shelves to encourage independent choices". "Toilets were easy access" and there was "space for children's personal items".

In setting 13, "children tended to operate on adult instruction" and "did not take up a significant role in tidying up or in the snack routine". However, "children did display more independence in the outdoor environment, when activities were not so adult-directed". The teaching strategies were described as being "quite adult-directed in nature", "dominating the lunch time activity" and tidying up without asking the children to help. The environment was viewed as being satisfactory in relation to independence with "low level play areas and accessible toilets".

Social interaction

Social interaction refers to children learning in the company of others. The QLI suggests a high degree of quality in relation to social interaction can be seen when children interact confidently with adults and peers, share and take turns and participate well in parallel and group activities; adults are approachable, provide opportunities for working in groups and pairs and interact appropriately with one another; and the environment is organised to allow for group participation, with resources that stimulate group activity being available. A low degree of quality in relation to social interaction can be observed when children tend to play solitarily and/or much aggression is noted; adults control the

conversation or fail to intervene and do not appear to work well as a team; and the environment does not offer the opportunity for peer interaction and group participation (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Crew, Rafferty and Sheehy, 2006).

The mean score for children's actions in relation to social interaction was 4.6 and the mean score for teaching strategies was 4.1, indicating a high-satisfactory degree of quality. The mean score for the role of the environment with regards to social interaction was 3.9, indicating a satisfactory level of quality in relation to social interaction (see Figure 75).
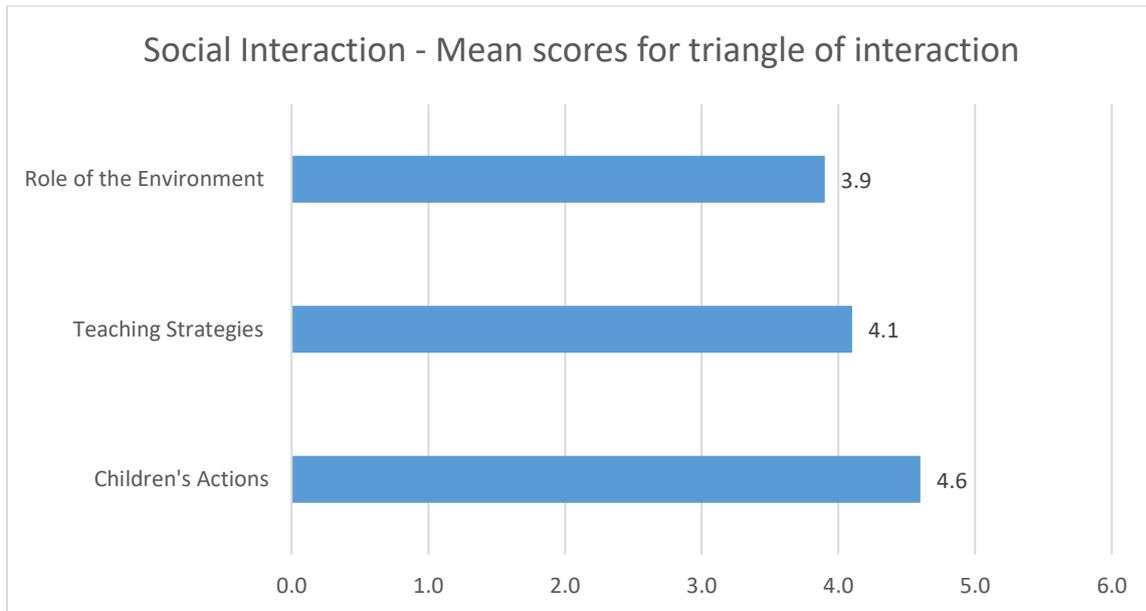
Figure 75 - Mean scores for triangle of interaction with regards to social interaction

A high- satisfactory degree of quality in relation to social interaction was observed across settings, for the most part regardless of size, deprivation index or location (see Table 15). The observed affluent settings, settings in satellite urban towns and highly rural settings were found to display a satisfactory degree of quality in relation to social interaction. This was also the case for community settings.

Table 15 - Mean social interaction scores by setting type, size, deprivation index and location

		Number of Settings	Mean Social Interaction Score
Setting Type	Community	11	3.9
	Private	19	4.4
Setting Size	Small	3	4.4
	Medium	12	4.4
	Large	15	4.0
Deprivation Index	Affluent	2	3.7
	Marginally above average	12	4.3
	Marginally below average	10	4.1
	Disadvantaged	5	4.5
	Very Disadvantaged	1	4.3
Setting Location	City	5	4.1
	Independent Urban Town	4	4.3
	Satellite Urban Town	4	3.7
	Rural with High Urban Influence	3	4.2
	Rural with Moderate Urban Influence	9	4.6
	Highly Rural	5	3.9

Some variation in mean social interaction scores was evident across each of the 30 settings. Setting 17 had the highest mean score in this regard (m=5.7). Whereas settings 4 and 18 had the lowest mean scores (m=2.7) (see Figure 76).
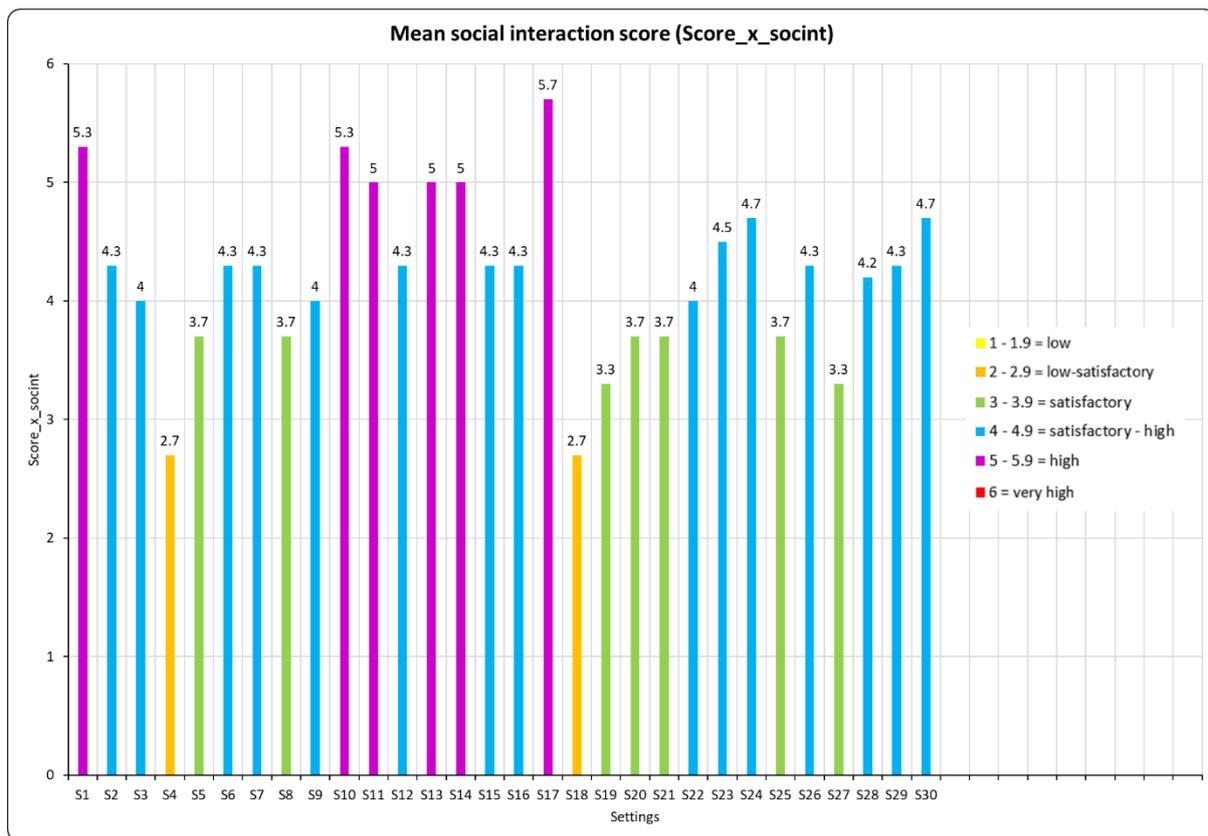
Figure 76 - Mean social interaction score for each participating setting

In setting 17, the highest scoring setting in relation to social interaction, children were seen to "interact confidently and freely with adults and peers, sharing and taking turns well, participating well in parallel and group activity" and "no aggression or misbehaviour was noted". Adults were "approachable and have ample time" and provided "opportunities for working in groups, group discussion and participation". "Empathy and consideration fostered" and "appropriate interaction between adults" was observed. The environment "stimulated group and linguistic activity" and had an "outstanding choice of high-quality books that foster discussion and interaction" and a "layout that allows for group participation". There was a "lack of private places indoors, but plenty outdoors".

In setting 18, one of the lowest scoring setting in relation to social interaction, "children played happily together and interacted with one another during play. Indoors there was more evidence of parallel play, whist outdoors there was greater opportunities for further self-directed social interaction". The adults "appeared encouraging and positive towards the children". The observer noted "The observation felt a little unnatural, perhaps the researcher's presence inhibited slightly". In terms of the environment, the size and shape of the room "is set up more to facilitate children sitting at tables rather than roaming freely and socialising".

Respect

Like social interaction, respect refers to children's learning in the company of others. According to the QLI, a high degree of quality in relation to respect can be observed when children display good manners and show respect for adults, equipment and one another; adults cater for children's needs and interests, consider all children equally and display children's work according to effort rather than content; and an environment that offers a wide range of materials. In comparison, a low degree of

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quality in relation to respect is in evidence when children tend to be rude and disrespectful; adults show poor regard for children's work and create a competitive atmosphere; and an environment that has a poor selection of materials, with little consideration of gender and culture (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Crew, Rafferty and Sheehy, 2006).

Overall, as displayed earlier, respect had the highest mean score across the 30 settings. All aspects of the triangle of interaction were deemed to be of a high-satisfactory degree of quality, as displayed in Figure 77.
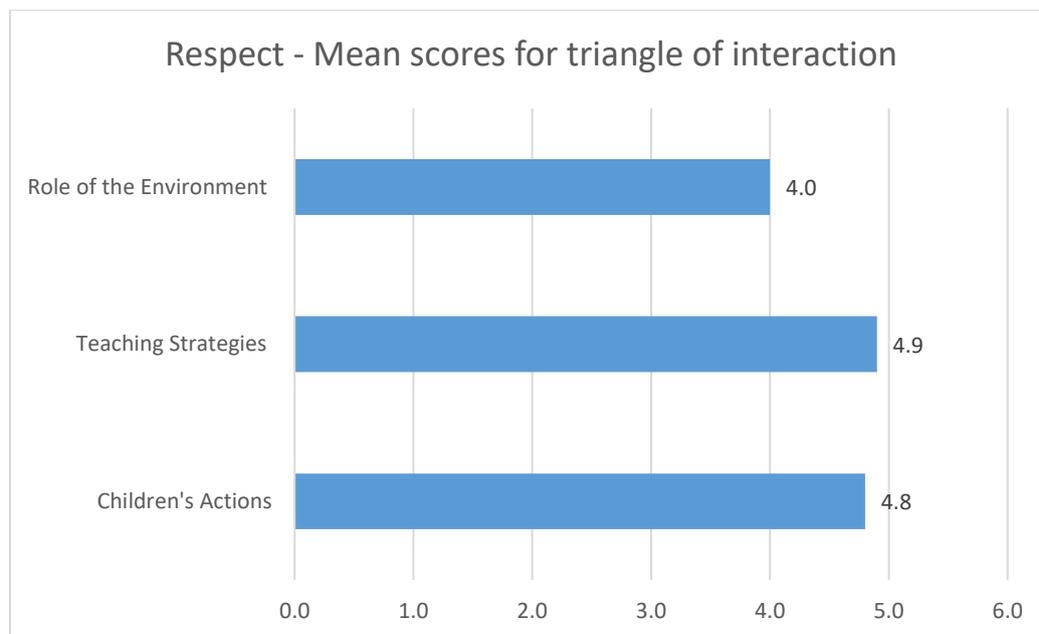
Figure 77 - Mean scores for triangle of interaction with regards to respect

Settings, on average, continued to demonstrate a high-satisfactory level of quality in relation to respect, regardless of setting type, size, deprivation index and location, as demonstrated in Table 16.

Table 16 - Mean respect scores by setting type, size, deprivation index and location

		Number of Settings	Mean Respect Score
Setting Type	Community	11	4.4
	Private	19	4.7
Setting Size	Small	3	4.7
	Medium	12	4.8
	Large	15	4.3
Deprivation Index	Affluent	2	4.7
	Marginally above average	12	4.6
	Marginally below average	10	4.3
	Disadvantaged	5	4.8
	Very Disadvantaged	1	4.7
Setting Location	City	5	4.5
	Independent Urban Town	4	4.8
	Satellite Urban Town	4	4.1
	Rural with High Urban Influence	3	4.2
	Rural with Moderate Urban Influence	9	4.8
	Highly Rural	5	4.3

Some variation in mean respect scores was evident across each of the 30 settings. Settings 16 and 17 had the highest mean score (m=5.7). As presented in Figure 78, setting 4 had the lowest mean score in relation to respect (m=3.0).
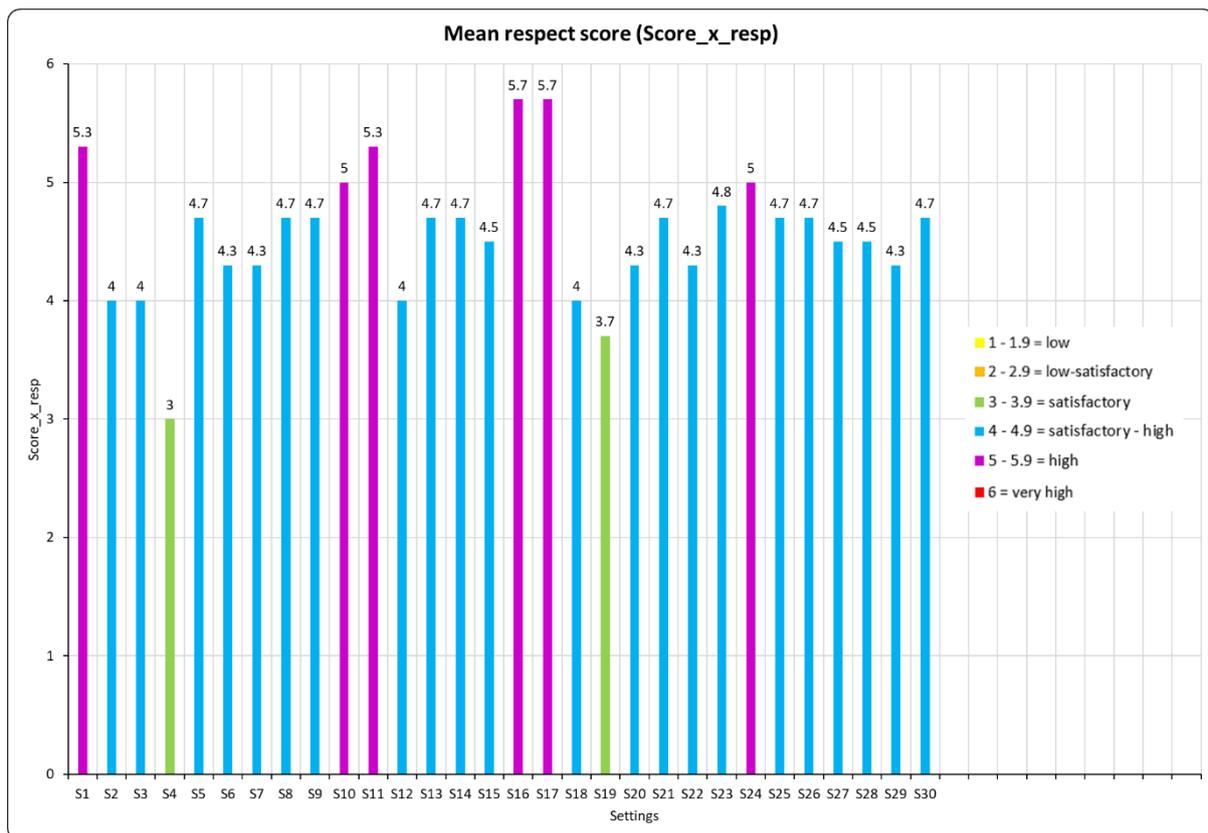
Figure 78 - Mean respect score for each participating setting

In setting 16, children had "good manners, generally respect adults, materials and their peers" and adults *"*cater for all children's needs and interests, all children considered equally. All children's work respected and displayed". The environment had a "wide range of materials, space for all children, opportunity to let off steam, emphasis strongly on child rather than content".

In setting 18, children and adults appeared to be respectful of one another but the "hilltop position and narrow classroom" in the setting would "struggle to accommodate certain physical needs".

Summary of findings from practice-based observations

In summary, the observational study found the 30 participating ECCE settings displayed a satisfactory to high degree of quality, across the nine quality indicators (motivation, concentration, higher order thinking skills (HOTS), Multiple Skills Acquisition (MSA,) confidence, well-being, independence, social Interaction and respect). On average, they demonstrated particular strength with regards to respect and well-being. Whereas HOTS and MSA had the lowest mean scores across the settings, when compared to the other quality indicators. Some variation in quality between settings was observed, however this appeared to be a result of individual setting differences, rather than differences in setting type, size, deprivation index or location.

Chapter 6: Insights from policy makers and experts

Work Package 3 focused on accessing the views and perspectives of key experts both nationally and internationally on the ECCE programme, with consideration paid to its strengths, challenges and opportunities for learning. Findings from this work package therefore directly address all three research questions:

- Is the ECCE programme being implemented as intended, i.e. is it a universal programme available free to all children within the eligible age range, providing them with their first formal experience of early learning for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week for 38 weeks of the year for two years?
- Is it meetings its core objectives i.e. to promote better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children; and to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children?
- Are there enhancements that can be made based on international evidence and experience to date?

This chapter is structured under three main headings namely:

- Key strengths and benefits
- Key challenges
- Potential opportunities for learning

Key strengths and benefits

The national and international experts identified a number of key strengths and benefits associated with the ECCE programme which can be roughly organised into five main clusters:

- The ECCE programme as beneficial for children, families and wider society
- The ECCE programme as universal and free
- The ECCE programme as inclusive (AIM)
- The ECCE programme as quality
- The ECCE programme as a model of good practice

ECCE as beneficial for children, families and wider society

The benefits associated with the ECCE programme, not only for children, but for families and society more generally, were clearly indicated by several of the experts both nationally and internationally.

The key benefits of the ECCE programme for children focused principally on the learning gleaned as exemplified in the following comments:

> "I think we don't just appreciate the impact it has on children and their learning experiences." (International Expert 4)

> "I think it's, you know, …enabling children to begin that early learning, engaged in learning and engaged in like a curriculum early on … in childhood. I think that's really good." (National expert 8)

> "I mean, all the evidence shows that when children have exposure to quality early learning and play and stimulation and care, you know, they have much better long-term outcomes." (International expert 3)

> *"It's about developing their sense of self, developing their independence, developing, you know, their skills, their fine motor skills, their speech and language, their social interactions?" (National expert 2)*

Some, more specifically, referred to its social benefit for young children as detailed below:

> *"And the social element…. because family sizes are getting smaller … somewhere where children can mix socially in safe environment, and engage that way, I think is very helpful and significant … it's not just somewhere where kids are minded, it's now a learning and development space." (National expert 9)*

Others emphasised the value of the ECCE programme in terms of how it provides an equal opportunity for all young children and their families:

> *"It's a two-year programme that's very beneficial to children...it's free of charge so there's obviously a benefit too for affordability for all children and their families." (National expert 7)*

> *"… an equal playing pitch for children." (National expert 9)*

Experts also saw the benefit of the ECCE programme in terms of how it has delayed the school starting age:

> *"I sometimes joke privately that it's, you know, caused the biggest social change we've had in Ireland without any debate, which is children are starting school later… I think most educators in early years and in primary and in academia would agree that this a good thing for children." (National expert 2).*

> *"The second year has again added to children's outcomes and improved their outcomes. And we see that now even in the data in relation to school starting age. So, you know, the programme itself has delayed entry into school, which is no bad thing. It's kind of bringing those closer to what we know to be good practice, you know, for children to have, different learning experiences and opportunities in in their earliest years." (National expert 12)*

The experts also emphasised how the ECCE programme is beneficial for families as summed up in the following comment:

> *"Because it's that early step. Early first step, we've been able to wrap in some additional supports for families in there." (National expert 1)*

Its main benefits for parents tended to be financial in terms of how it reduced costs for families and allowed parents to return to the workforce (even though the ECCE programme is not designed to support labour participation):

> *"I would absolutely agree that the ECCE scheme is absolutely brilliant for parents … for two reasons: It did prepare my children for primary school but also, it did cut down on the childcare costs." (National expert 3)*

> *"It's obviously, of course, important in terms of workforce participation and the ability for both parents to work and so on." (International expert 3)*

There was also an educational benefit identified, as it familiarises families with the 'school' experience before primary school commences:

> *"Parents don't have the same anxieties about sending their children to school any longer as they are now familiar with the ECCE experience where the transition tends to be very smooth and friendly." (National Expert 10).*

But one international expert was keen to accentuate the continued need for flexibility in the ECCE programme:

> *"Because you also want parents to have time and opportunities to parent and be engaged, especially with their younger children." (International expert 3)*

The benefits of the ECCE programme extended beyond the children and families, according to the experts, to include the wider society as detailed below:

> *"So, I think in terms of kind of human capital development and for the well-being of the individual and socialisation, socio-emotional development, all of that, it's hugely important." (International expert 3)*

> *"There's a lot of attitudinal change and recognition of how great it is." (National expert 2)*

> *"It's of primary importance for that age range and is part of the infrastructure for good social and economic development of the whole population and will help the future of the country both in economic terms and in social terms. So, it should be regarded as that, as an essential. It's one of the essential public services that should be available to all children and to be maintained at the highest quality that's practical." (International expert 5)*

ECCE as universal and free

The universal and free nature of the ECCE programme stood out perhaps as its main strength as indicated in the following comments from the national and international experts:

> *"[Before the ECCE programme], participation in preschool was really, you know, for kind of very affluent children or very, very disadvantaged children. But this universal approach opened the doors for every child and [this was] fully embraced from the get-go, participation rates [were] at 95% in the very early days. (…) We know that disadvantaged children would not have those opportunities had it not been for this preschool programme and the fact that it's free, and we've managed to hold on to that, that it is free." (National expert 12)*

> *"Main strength is its universal appeal. I think the fact that it has attracted and recruited the vast majority of children is a huge strength." (National expert 10)*

> *"I think the fact that it is universal is great." (International expert 1)*

> *"So, I do think that the universal element is really critical and connecting it really with the child's right to participate is really good." (National expert 8)*

> *"Because of its universality, and that's just such a positive piece for all families, regardless of the money they have available to pay for these things, you know the fact that it is free and you can walk in the door in September and get the access to it, it's amazing." (National expert 1)*

Experts praised the ECCE programme for normalising preschool as a key milestone in all children's educational journey.

> *"The universal milestone is now introduced before children go to school, for 95/96% of the nation's population. I think that's just enormous. I don't think we celebrate that enough."* (National expert 2).

> *"It has changed the conversation about how we think about early childhood and what children do before they go to school, and it has opened up opportunities for all children."* (National expert 12)

A Government representative also highlighted that the ECCE programme provided the conditions for an expansion of the ELC sector, which was necessary to make preschool provision accessible for all children:

> *"Money was put in from the State to offer this preschool programme and the sector responded, and what we saw is quite a growth in in provision for children under six. (…) The sector responded really well to this investment (…), which was really great, and when we looked to expand the programme, in 2016, to children under three, I think we went from a situation where 60,000 children were in this programme to at a peak up to 118,000, and in the space of a year. People were saying, how are we going to do this? And there was some capital funding, but the sector responded. So, you know, I suppose the programme itself did kind of give rise to a growth, and the infrastructure as well. It took us to a new place."* (National expert 12)

ECCE as inclusive

The inclusivity that the ECCE programme affords was also commented upon by the national and international experts. In particular, the value of the AIM programme within ECCE was highlighted:

> *"And I think the AIM programme works. It works really well…It's a good support for children."* (National expert 4)

> *"It tends to be a good way to do it, to have, as much as possible, all children in the mainstream…I mean, I think the AIM programme (…) is really best practice."* (International expert 1)

In addition, the experts also stressed the ECCE programme's inclusivity in the way that it is open to all children irrespective of their race, status, gender, disability or religious belief:

> *"It's universal, and having the idea that all children should have the availability and accessibility to something that is a good early childhood education and care provision and that includes all types of children within the same kind of settings so that you will have that kind of diversity of children."* (International expert 2).

ECCE as quality

The quality of the ECCE programme was also raised by the experts, particularly in the way that it is informed by relevant and meaningful frameworks, such as Aistear and Síolta, which are play-based and child-friendly, and is subjected to a rigorous system of monitoring and evaluation. The following comments by the national and international experts help to illustrate this thinking more fully:

> *"I think there's a nice combination (In Aistear and Siolta) of having internal reflections and trying to promote this culture of the educators really thinking about the child and thinking about their own practice …a focus on process quality while also having a little bit of external evaluation."* (International expert 3)

> *"I think there is some brilliant practice and I think ECCE and the nature of valuing the Aistear curriculum both in schools and preschools is so positive." (National expert 1)*

> *"So, the play-based learning is quality early years learning and it is one of the strengths (of ECCE)." (National expert 4)*

> *"We would see it (ECCE) as being one of the key components of quality early years and certainly a very positive development when it first came in a number of years ago." (National expert 8)*

> *"It is absolutely important that the quality assurance programme and the curriculum are there and thought through and that the learning through play is really understood by the providers and by all staff." (National expert 2).*

Experts also highlighted that the ECCE programme raised the profile of Early Learning and Care and contributed to the professionalisation of the sector, thereby raising quality:

> *"If you think back, when the programme was introduced, there was no qualification requirement and again I think through that programme, you know, we started to kind of find a lever to professionalise the sector as well." (National expert 12)*

ECCE as a model of good practice

Some of the international experts' opinions on the ECCE programme, and indeed ELC in Ireland more widely, are so positive that they consider it a model of good practice, not only nationally but across the globe:

> *"It's one of the essential public services that should be available to all children and to be maintained at the highest quality that's practical." (International expert 5)*

> *"…we are looking at Ireland a lot in terms of good practice for other countries to model, especially in terms of really looking at system reform (…). It's very promising practice in terms of how many reforms have been put in place, how systematic it is…" (International expert 3)*

> *"I'm encouraging other countries to consider, and even if they have mixed provision, to look at trying to develop a similar relationship with the private providers as Ireland has with theirs…One of the things that's and again it's like I think we see Ireland as a good practice because it's how do you realistically go from a situation that wasn't ideal and knowing that you had some of the most expensive childcare in Europe and so on and so on and make, you know, really impactful changes and steady progress in a short amount of time." (International expert 3).*

Key challenges

However, as with any system, despite its numerous strength and benefits, the experts were of the opinion that some further improvements could be made. While the majority of these focus specifically on the ECCE programme, some refer more generally to the wider ELC sector in Ireland as it is sometimes quite difficult to disentangle one from the other. Those areas which still require further thought, according to the experts, centred around the following key themes namely:

- Workforce: Attraction, Recruitment and Retention
- Workforce: Professionalisation and Prestige

- Workforce: A Suitably Qualified Workforce
- Implementation: Intensity, Availability, Accessibility and Adult-Child Ratios
- Implementation: Public Versus Private
- Transitions/Connections with Primary
- Inclusion and Diversity
- Funding

Workforce: Attraction, recruitment and retention

One of the most salient issues, according to the experts, that acted as a key challenge to the ECCE programme being implemented as intended, centred around workforce issues. The experts were very much of the opinion that the move towards a graduate-led workforce is certainly a step in the right direction for the ECCE programme: "Having the qualifications is very, very important" (International Expert, 2). However, they argued that issues around attracting, recruiting and retaining a highly educated workforce, in spite of the graduate premium, still remained problematical as summed up in the following comments:

> "Well, attracting staff? You know of any calibre. Because the wages are so low … and for the last number of years, there's been a shortage of staff available to work in ECCE. … We have a lot of people from Spain working here at the moment." (National expert 9)

> "The question is whether they (graduates) will come to this type of job and stay in this type of job which I think is not the case because the wages do not follow." (International expert 1)

> "Ireland has done very well in terms of graduate workers, higher qualifications but the key issue becomes money. You know whether you can pay the workforce properly because otherwise there'll be high staff turnover." (International expert 4)

> "It's still not a graduate led workforce here, because what's happening is the students are going into it with their degrees …., and then they're getting out of it pretty sharpish as well." (National expert 3)

> "We are bleeding them out into primary school teaching, you know and more would go if they could. And because they are not getting a handle on it, …on parity you know, not parity in pay which is always important, but not just parity but also prestige, they not getting it and they're not staying in … the government just needs to make a decision. Is it actually going to invest in it (a graduate-led workforce) or not." (National expert 4)

Workforce: Professionalisation and status

Indeed, several of the experts, both national and international, drew attention to the need for greater status and prestige to be attributed to the ECCE educators and in so doing, to enhance the professionalisation of the workforce as a whole.

> "And the workforce, the workforce needs to be recognised, valued, rewarded. We need to be able to retain these highly qualified people…You need a highly skilled professional to really deliver a high-quality programme for very young children. If we could retain qualified staff, they do such hard work, they really work above and beyond what they are paid to do… they're responsible for the majority of success you see, the good quality to date… investing in the workforce would see an awful

lot of other issues resolved …it's like any education policy, it is only as good as the person who implements it." (National expert 10)

"I also recommend having some condition on the type of contract because at the moment I mean it seems that some staff some teachers are just hired for the school year and then unemployment. So that's another area." (International expert 1)

"I think there are sessional only services, and they are struggling not just from a financial point of view but are probably struggling in terms of a bit like getting to grips with the quality agenda. Getting to grips with their administration, you know, making sure they've good governance when there might be only them and one other staff member …. I think the service is going to view the fact that it's only 38 weeks and you know that nobody gets paid for the summer and those things are really stressful and … it isn't conducive to retaining staff, to supporting staff, to allowing your staff to go and do further education because you know as soon as they do that and they're supported to do that, they'll probably get a job in the school next door." (National expert 1)

Workforce: A suitably qualified workforce

Some of the experts went on to articulate the type of education that ECCE educators required, not in terms of level, as they all appreciated the importance of a graduate-led workforce, but rather in terms of content and variety to ensure highly competent educators and in turn high quality practice:

"Having the qualifications is very, very important. We have been looking into the quality issues, so what is the most important in order to produce quality for children. And yeah, (...) it is the staff. It's the staff, how the staff approach the child and work with the child. Quality is the most important. This quality is influenced by the competence of the staff and the leader, good leadership." (International expert 2).

"I think the issue of the composition of the team has been under researched. The different roles and the different skills that is brought to the team by graduates and other workers because wherever you go, you'll have a mix. Even the countries that are very well supplied with graduates like the Nordic countries, Germany, you know still have a mix of workers. So that's something that you need to look at and in terms of the graduates, again, I think in the Republic of Ireland that will be better than over here (England). Any attempt to get graduates ready very quickly in 12 months or so to take on a senior role in an early years setting is doomed to failure in the execution... So yes, graduates, as long as they've had the appropriate training, which has a big practice component." (International expert 4)

"You have the staff who are there, and you will need to increase their qualification to be able perhaps to stay in the system. And if I remember correctly, I mean I think we said, it's not so easy to gain higher qualifications through experience on the job in Ireland, which is a bit of a problem. So …the objective is good in itself, but it has created duality and then it's more how you ensure that you achieve this vision and to achieve that you need more professional development for those who are in the programme and the ability to undertake real professional development not a couple of hours but professional development that will lead to a qualification recognition of the experience on the job." (International expert 1)

"And I think what is extremely important and what often countries miss is that relationship between the theory and the practice… So often we have a lot of people

who have only had practical experience and they lack the theory…Or you see people that have to have a masters and a bachelor, but they have almost no practical time and they don't know how to apply it… So I think moving towards more of a bachelor or more skilled people in the classroom is good, but … having that strong practice component in the training is, will be very important, yeah." (International expert 1)

Implementation: Eligibility rules, intensity, age range and adult-child ratios

As the following comments illustrate, experts believe that the implementation of the ECCE programme continues to pose challenges in terms of availability, accessibility and adult-child ratios.

In terms of availability and accessibility, the experts, both national and international, indicated that the limited intensity, the eligibility rules and entry points, and shortages of places in some areas still require some further attention:

"The limited hours and the limited weeks has a particular impact on children with additional needs both while they're attending and then over the summer and when they can't participate in the programme….so that's really difficult." (National expert 2)

"The number of hours is still quite low… t's still going to be costly to parents… and when you have a higher number of hours, it's especially beneficial for the more vulnerable families… so the more availability and flexibility and the longer the hours, the better." (International expert 3)

"It (the one entry point) seems a bit rigid. It's important to give a bit of choice to parents …so a system that would, at least for… disadvantaged families propose to parents the possibility to enrol children from an early age in high quality early education would be best practice, yeah." (International expert 1)

"[Wherever] eligibility is determined by age there are people who feel that they're missing out. (…) There are some people who feel that the criteria that we set disadvantage their children or, you know, remove the choice that parents have. And I think that's something that I'm keen to look at, particularly when we see the low uptake rates for the second year for the spring babies (…) and obviously then issues around very young children transitioning into early learning and care (...) and barriers to access just by virtue of their developmental stage, this is something that we need to look at as well." (National expert 12)

"From a planning point of view, there is huge shortage of ECCE places in some locations ….and it's very much been left to the market to kind of expand as needed." (National expert 1)

With regard to the specified age range of the ECCE programme (2 years 8 months to 5 years 6 months), the experts were of the opinion that this was a definite step in the right direction, and the fact that children are now eligible to two years of funded preschool under the ECCE programme, was seen by the experts as "very promising" (International Expert 3). However, some of the experts emphasised the advantage of extending the ECCE programme downwards to counteract issues such as educational disadvantage and inequality as illustrated below[17]:

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[17] While there are also divergent opinions on the merits of lowering the lower age limit, these were not raised by any of the experts consulted in this review.

> *"Children develop very quickly from a very early age. So, if you want to tackle the inequalities, I mean, it makes sense to have children benefit from early childhood education and care of high quality from as early as possible…. so starting at the age of two years, and some months might be already a bit late for some children." (International expert 1)* *"I think disadvantage should also be a criterion. We found in the same study that extending it down to two years of age, the second birthday for disadvantaged children, was beneficial for the child. So, I would recommend that change be made in Ireland." (International expert 5)*

> *"I think we could take the best of ECCE and you know, develop that wider system where the state is saying, we will fund from birth to one, we will make sure in a two parent situation, one parent can stay at home and they can swap that and all that stuff from the age of 1 to 2 1/2. And then from two years, eight months or two years, six months or three years, whatever, it's going to be until school which we don't think should happen before a child turns 4 years, …we will provide x funding." (National expert 2).*

As for the adult-child ratios, while some of the experts emphasised that 1:11 is effective for children aged three and above, others believed that a higher number of staff is requisite at least for the initial 3 months of the programme in year 1:

> *"11:1 works quite well with 3 year olds and upwards if that room is led by a graduate trained member with sufficient assistance to cope with the group. Below 3, you need a higher, better ratio." (International expert, 5)*

> *"I'm afraid my mantra is the more staff, the better." (International Expert 4).*

Experts did not discuss potential issues around too many adults in the room, but one of the international experts argued that ratios are more to do with quality than quantity as detailed below:

> *"Yes, it's important that the ratios are reasonable …and I think 11-1 seems to me not particularly favourable…. but there are perhaps ways to look at the ratio in a better way, not only the pure ratio but also the composition of the team, the stability of the team." (International Expert 1).*

Implementation: Public versus private

There was a lack of consensus amongst the experts on the issue of public versus private provision with two schools of thought principally emerging:

> *I think when you have private providers and parental choice that is kind of one way of trying to bring in another level of quality control when the parents have a choice to be able to move their kids." (International expert 1)*

> *"So when you have a lot of private providers for the early years, then making sure that the funding is producing what you need, what is good for the child is the most important factor and the way it now has developed, there's a lot of different schemes which might be a bit challenging for the providers to sort of manage." (International expert 2)*

Some of the experts believed that a mix of approaches is best as summed up below:

> *"There are many countries which have a mixed economy that is a mixture of private, voluntary and state funded provision. We've often found that state funded provision tends to have higher quality facilities and often a lot more qualified staff*

than private and voluntary sectors. Although in the private sector you can get good quality as well. You need to ensure good quality regulations in a private sector, or else the pressure towards reducing costs will lead to a lower level of qualifications of staff because that costs less, and that that will therefore reduce the quality of the provision. So you need to maintain good quality standards if you're going to rely heavily on the private provision." (International expert 5)

While others argued that the type of setting i.e. whether private or public was insignificant and:

"As long as the providers, regardless of their ownership, whether they are private, for profit, not for profit, can receive public funding and deliver on behalf of the children that is linked to the regulation, and how that ensures the quality, then that is all we can ask for." (International expert 2).

Transitions/connections with primary school

While the experts, in the main, were of the opinion that the ECCE programme is certainly ensuring a more positive transition into primary school for most children, they stressed that there is still much more work to be done in this field:

"There's a really big difference between primary school and preschool and I would often hear things about 'schoolification', you know, it's a different set of skills really that a child is developing." (National expert 7).

"There are goals to have a relatively smooth transition from ECCE to primary but still there is room to improve." (International expert 1)

"So, it's (ECCE) been a huge benefit in bridging the gap. But we need to do an awful lot more if we are to have children experiencing a seamless continuum of education from the beginning, right the way through and I'm talking primary to post primary as well… And we really should be trying to set systems and processes and practices more to the point in place that make that continuum seamless … So that's a huge challenge." (National expert 10).

"The transition from preschool to primary school is recognised as a very important time in children's lives and there can be challenges to this where relationships between primary schools and preschools have not been established." (National expert 11)

Inclusion and diversity

Regarding the issue of inclusion, the national experts, in particular, stressed that there is still further work to be done in spite of all the good work done thus far. One pertinent issue that arose was the need for a much more comprehensive definition of inclusion as detailed below:

"I think the inclusion model still has a way to go, it does manage and support a lot of engagement from children who otherwise wouldn't engage but I think that could be much broader as well in in terms of that shouldn't just be about children with additional needs." (National expert 1).

Experts also raised the fact that participation rates were lower for some disadvantaged groups, in particular Traveller and Roma children. Ensuring that Traveller and Roma families felt more included was particularly emphasised:

"The very high overall participation rates (…) kind of mask differences across different cohorts of children. So we know that there are cohorts who are not engaging at those

levels, and particularly Traveller or Roma children (…) so that is a big challenge. I think we do need to find ways to ensure that children take up this opportunity, that parents feel that this is the right choice for them and their child, that they're encouraged, that they're supported and that we take steps to improve those enrolment rates at the outset." (National expert 12)

"I suppose it is that Traveller and Roma families and others, you know, don't know that there's a free, universal preschool programme or is it that they know and they don't feel that it's for them, is it that they know, but they don't feel welcome walking in the door, you know? Are they fearful? Do they have cause for concern?" (National expert 2)

"We would definitely hear from our members, certainly participation from the Traveller community is probably not as high. There are barriers to participation there. So I suppose we would maybe see that there may be a bit of a gap there that needs to be tackled…members would say that there will be a lower level of participation amongst Traveller families, or those coming from an ethnic minority." (National expert 8)

But as one national expert indicated, however, attracting a more diverse community isn't enough. There is a need to ensure that a highly qualified workforce is in place to embrace the differing needs and interests of all the children concerned:

"The other challenge, I think, is that, you know, we have attracted and retained a lot of children from very diverse backgrounds. But it is becoming apparent that some of those children need very, very highly qualified staff. So the workforce issue around valuing and retaining a highly qualified workforce, to work with very diverse children at a very critical stage in their education journey is a huge challenge, especially when the salary scales are still really not at equally those that people can earn never mind in the education system, you know, in the local supermarket sometimes." (National expert 10)

Potential opportunities for learning

During the interviews/written response, several of the experts, both national and international, referred to some potential learning opportunities, based on their own expertise, that they believed might enhance the quality of the ECCE programme in practice. As aforementioned, due to the challenge in disentangling the ECCE programme from the wider ELC system, some of the potential opportunities for learning extend beyond the specific remit of the ECCE programme.

Some of the experts alluded to the need for a more joined up approach in ELC in Ireland of which the ECCE programme is a part as detailed below:

"We would love to see one programme, one source of funding, and the amalgamation of the three programmes (…) based on the principles underneath Core Funding." (National expert 2)

"If you stand back and look at the whole system, including ECCE, we've ended up with essentially 3 different programmes: ECCE, the National Childcare Scheme, and Core Funding, all of which operate differently in terms of what's allowed, what's not allowed for attendance capacity, and so on. And you know, two of which run through the year, one of which doesn't, and it feels very disjointed. And now that's

not the fault of the ECCE scheme, but certainly, given that it's the backbone and very much regarded as the backbone, …, we feel it needs to move on and become a yearlong programme." (National expert 6)

"The need to prioritise investment in the whole sector, including the ECCE… I suppose kind of knitting that together with the longer periods of time children may be experiencing in Early Years settings. So, whether it is reduction in fees or increased in investments, so the parents aren't paying as much." (National expert 8)

Others emphasised the need to extend the AIM programme beyond the three hours per day, a policy change that is currently underway and will become effective in September 2024:

"Broadening the scope of AIM would allow access to universal and targeted supports for children with a much wider range of needs. Scaling AIM up to meet a wider range of needs to allow a more diverse group of children aged 3 to 5 years to access supports in the ECCE Scheme. Provision of additional funding was mentioned as an important support to services supporting children experiencing disadvantage. Addressing other sources of disadvantage in ECCE that prevent children accessing and participating." (National expert 11)

"Absolutely love to see the Access Inclusion Model extended. I think that the Government has dropped many, many hints that will happen. It absolutely needs to happen, and it's not in the interests of children that you can have additional supports for, you know, a few hours a day and then they stop." (National expert 2)

In terms of quality assurance, some international examples were recommended as models of good practice:

"We did a review of Luxembourg and I mean that they're very strong on the professional development because I think we said it is a bit lacking (in Ireland). I mean there is a strong inspection process in Ireland, but I mean if the centre doesn't really comply then what do you do? Just saying, okay, you close isn't an option. You want that centre to improve. So that's what they focus on in Luxembourg, to have some agent, some regional agent that works with a certain number of centres to improve quality and to see what is not working, providing very strong professional training to staff, to teams, to leaders, to improve the quality." (International expert 1)

"Finland (…), their systems have been established in such a way they also have these very nice monitoring systems… They have a lot of focus on self-reflection and self-evaluation and so on… They have these parallel processes from the Ministry of Education that monitor it and also, it's deeply ingrained within the communities and within the kind of culture about what quality looks like (…). So, there's kind of all these different layers of quality assurance and quality control." (International expert 3)

Suggestions about how the continuity between the ECCE programme and the primary phase of education might be enhanced were also alluded to:

"I know that there's now some municipalities that have some piloting and what they have put in place is that they have staff that work in the last year in kindergarten and then they go over and then they work in the schools. So there are

specific staff that work both in the kindergarten and follow the group over to the schools.” (International expert 2)

“Co-location is a crucial issue. I did some work in Hungary and in those systems, co-location of the school and the early years setting was very actively pursued, so that the children were very familiar with all the siblings being in the place next door and also visiting and all that, and very much, I think, in terms of preparing children who need additional support when they go to the primary school, and that should really be identified as early as possible.” (International expert 4).

In terms of targeting hard-to-reach children and their families into the ECCE programme, one expert recommended exploring more flexible types of provision. Experts also mentioned the EPM as a route for better inclusion of disadvantaged groups:

“But one of the things that we've also had is a kind of an open kindergarten. We call it …a ‘playgroup’ where you come together with your guardian or parent or your daughter/son, and you play with the pedagogue leading the open kindergarten group… and then this arena is the kind of the world where you can get the information about what is there.” (International expert 2)

“I think that something that will be worth considering is to how the ECCE might interact with that new Equal Participation Model. So that model is going to look at tackling, you know, supporting children living in disadvantaged areas, and also children who are disadvantaged, who may not be in disadvantaged areas, but really trying to support those children in early year settings, so these are things that ECCE, additional things that ECCE might provide for those children? I think that might be interesting.” (National expert 8).

"[AIM] has given rise to enormous differences in uptake rates among children with disabilities, and I think, you know, hopefully with the Equal Participation Model that's in in preparation that, you know, we'll see those kinds of gains for children from Traveller and Roma communities in particular.” (National expert 12)

With regard to tackling educational disadvantage and inequality with the system, experts purported the need to ensure more opportunities for integration and outreach and better recognition of culture within the settings as a whole. Suggestions as to how this might be facilitated are detailed below:

“So, I would recommend that change be made in Ireland…. we found that where children from disadvantaged backgrounds mixed with children from more advantaged backgrounds, they generally do better. So, if you have settings which have a mixture of socio-economic backgrounds, the children who are the disadvantaged children will do better than if you have a setting which is overwhelmingly of disadvantaged children. (…) So, you need to try to arrange your settings and your geographical distribution so that, as far as possible, disadvantaged children are attending settings which are also attended by children from more advantaged backgrounds as well.” (International expert 5)

“Information about the quality of early childhood education and care, the importance, and that this can start from a very early age with involving also social services, we need to build awareness. Awareness of the importance of putting the children in these centres, even if the mother or the father are not working. So, information, really that's key.” (International expert 1)

> *"…a setting that recognises their culture, that celebrates their culture…. where they recognise, you know, the teachers coming from their culture... the early years workers coming from their culture…I think in the North, in Northern Ireland, there has been a programme whereabouts they've trained members of the Traveller community to be early years workers, so trying to maybe think about things like that can we model, you know, that the child is coming into a session where they can see their culture." (National expert 8)*

While the experts, in general, were very complementary about the quality of the ECCE programme in terms of curriculum and pedagogy, suggestions were made about the need to prioritise creativity and playing in the outdoors more fully:

> *"I don't think any setting should be allowed to open which does not have its own outdoor space. I don't know about the situation in Ireland. I mean, certainly in London and many places, they don't have to have outdoor space." (International expert 4)*

> *"There's one curriculum that I saw in Zambia …beautiful component that's around building the child's artistic appreciation and building the child's appreciation for beauty, which I just thought was amazing." (International expert 3)*

Reference was also made to:

> *"helping parents understand the value of play, and the value of allowing their children, you know, learning dispositions to develop learning, you know, communication skills to develop. Not rushing children through that really important foundational stage of developing those core skills and competencies and dispositions. We've a lot of communicating to parents to do." (National expert 5)*

The importance of the ECCE programme for young children's learning and development, and its success to date, was stressed by several of the experts both national and international, but in terms of maintaining that educational focus, one of the experts articulated that:

> *"I actually think that the ECCE programme (…) should move to the Department of Education, (…) because it's a universal programme for children in the same way that primary or post primary education is. And I think that if we really believe that education is a continuum from birth to 18, then it should sit together in the Department of Education. And I am not saying this because I don't think the Department of Children have done a good job. No, I believe that they have done an amazing job (…). But I just think for the future development of it, it needs to move out of the Department of Children because (…) it's just not going to be fully evolved into a continuum of education for children if it's there separate into the long term." (National expert 10)*

Summary and key findings on insights from policy makers and experts

Strengths and benefits

As perceived by the experts, the ECCE programme is doing many things well and has many key strengths:

- It has many benefits for children in terms of their holistic learning – cognitive, social, emotional and physical;
- It provides an equal opportunity for all children and their families;
- It has gone some way to delay the school starting age;
- The ECCE programme has many benefits for families in terms of reduced costs and affording parents the opportunity to return to work;
- It also prepares the family for the world of formal education;
- It is also beneficial for society in terms of human capital development and for the good of society more generally;
- The ECCE programme is universal, providing all children from 2 years and 8 months to 5 years and 6 months with three hours of free provision, five days a week for 38 weeks of the year for two years if availed of;
- The value of AIM within the ECCE programme was identified as a key strength
- The ECCE programme, in principle, is available to all children irrespective of race, status, gender, disability or religious belief;
- It is perceived as providing a quality experience, informed by appropriate frameworks and a rigorous monitoring system;
- The ECCE programme and the Irish ELC sector more widely is envisaged as a model of good practice for other countries to learn from.

Challenges

As perceived by the experts, there are still some areas within the ECCE programme and indeed the ELC sector more generally that could be developed:

- More attention should be paid to attracting, recruiting and retaining a well-educated workforce who are appropriately salaried in accordance with other professionals;
- Educators need to receive greater status and prestige and be treated as professionals;
- while experts agreed with a highly qualified workforce, they also stressed the need for getting the education right with an equal balance of theory and practice;
- In terms of implementation, the number of hours, the one entry point and the shortage of ECCE places require further consideration;
- Adult-child ratios could also be lowered, particularly for the younger children, but rather than focusing only on numbers, the need to consider the quality and stability of the staff was raised as a priority;
- While there was a degree of dissensus around the public/private debate, quality was deemed to be more important where all settings, irrespective of their type, received public funding and are appropriately regulated;
- The ECCE programme has gone some way to improve the transition to primary schools, but work remains to be done;
- While progress has been made in terms of attracting a more diverse population of children and families, more still needs to be done particularly for the Traveller and Roma communities.

Opportunities for learning

The experts, both national and international, raised some ideas from their own experience in terms of opportunities for learning which tend to be directed towards the ECCE programme but in some occasions extend into the wider ELC system:

- A more joined up approach between the ECCE programme, NCS and Core Funding to support families and providers. Together for Better, the new funding model for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare, is going some way to address this point;
- AIM should be extended beyond the three hours of the ECCE programme;
- Professional development opportunities should be integrated into the monitoring and evaluation system for the ECCE programme;
- Greater continuity between the ECCE programme and Junior Infants, through the swapping of staff and the development of the co-location model;
- As a means of attracting more hard-to-reach children and their families, it can be helpful to offer an 'open playgroup' model in their own community where children can play together, and families can come together and in so doing learn about programmes such as ECCE;
- As a means of tackling educational disadvantage and inequalities, greater opportunities for disadvantaged children to integrate with socio-economically diverse groups, more active outreach and greater recognition of culture within the individual ECCE settings are needed;
- Greater priority should be given to creativity and outdoor play within the learning experience in the ECCE settings; and
- An educational focus within the ECCE programme should be maintained, as it is the first formal experience of learning for children in Ireland.

Chapter 7: Perspectives of "hard-to-reach" families

Work Package 4 (WP4) was designed to engage with families from groups and communities who are less likely to avail of the ECCE programme. It seeks the views, opinions and experiences of these families, as well as organisations and expert groups that support this cohort. The aim of WP4 is to gain a richer, deeper understanding of the everyday lived experiences of the ECCE programme for families from low-uptake groups. It also seeks to identify barriers to uptake and participation, as well as possible programme enhancements that could help address any such barriers.

As part of this work package, interviews were carried out with Traveller and Roma families, families impacted by poverty, families experiencing homelessness, refugee and newcomer families, one-parent families, parents of children with additional needs, and parents who decided not to avail of the ECCE programme. In addition, representatives of Barnardos, Cork Traveller Visibility Group, the NTRIS Oversight Committee, Focus Ireland, St Vincent de Paul, and One Family, as well as representatives of primary schools and ECCE programme providers catering for children from low uptake groups were also consulted. In total, 19 interviews and focus groups were conducted across Ireland.

Key programme strengths and benefits

Experts consulted as part of WP4 valued the ECCE programme and highlighted the free and universal character as a key programme strength that helped support children from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds by making preschool education more accessible to all. Managers and educators consulted throughout the review also praised the programme's inclusive character, facilitated by AIM, and acknowledged that the integrative ethos of AIM benefitted children with additional needs and typical children alike.

Experts identified a wide range of benefits children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds gained from taking part in the ECCE programme. Some benefits were highlighted explicitly in relation to children from specific disadvantaged groups, while others were general benefits that apply to children from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds. General benefits included:

- Safe, positive, and nurturing relationships with adults and peers outside the home
- A protective environment for vulnerable children and an opportunity to spot safeguarding concerns
- Stability and consistency
- Positive childhood experiences
- Opportunities and safe spaces for play
- Access to healthy snacks
- Creating a "level playing field"

Experts also reported that families benefitted by gaining access to wider family support services and developing a routine before the child starts primary school:

> "For a huge number of the families that we're working with, it is more about the parental work than the child's work. (…) All of the educators here would see the importance of linking in with parents every day and building them up. (…) The benefits are hugely in favour of the parents' capacity to manage schools and getting up in the morning and doing all those bits for their children. (…) We probably use the ECCE programme to assist our family work, rather than the other way around." (Third-sector representative 1)

Families could also benefit by developing a trusting relationship with an education provider in a non-threatening space and developing their capacity and confidence to support their child's education:

> "We would have such a different relationship with parents and families than they would have in the schools. I think it's such a lovely, lovely way to start a child's educational journey, and not so much the child, even more so the parent, that they feel comfortable and empowered to come in and speak to me or speak to a teacher as a human being That would be a big part of our transition to school, you know, we'd be there for parents, [we would tell them] you know, this is your child, you are first, you know more. Educating the parents in that way is very, very powerful." (Third sector representative 1)

Parents also identified a number of general benefits for children and families, which were similar to the benefits identified by parents in WP2 and included offering a link to and connection with the local community, helping children develop their speech and language, confidence and social skills.

> "My boy was starting to talk when he came here. He was just talking at home really. But then with kids talking his skills improved."

> "My little fella was, you know, going social when COVID hit…Everything was closed. So he only had adults around him. So he wasn't used to the kids, small kids. So he needed that kind of social awareness."

> "She was so shy before she started over there. I didn't think she was ever going to improve. But like it's completely changed around."

> "Then when she started to go to play school. I could see like that she started coming out (of) this shell… Even her confidence over there is huge."

Benefits for homeless children

Representatives of a Third-sector organisation reported that the ECCE programme offered positive experiences and a stable environment for children experiencing homelessness and the unpredictability and instability associated with their circumstances. A report by the Ombudsman for Children (2019) raised a range of challenges for families and children living in Family Hubs, including a lack of space, exposure to inappropriate behaviour by other residents, difficulties with parenting and maintaining routines and discipline, and the impact the family's living conditions had on children's emotional and social development, mental health, and ability to form friendships. Against this backdrop, experts and educators pointed out that the ECCE programme provided children in temporary accommodation with a stable environment and a child-friendly place where they could play freely:

> "It's definitely, for the children who are enrolled in a place, a positive experience of a time in their lives when other, you know, home life might be a little bit chaotic and stressful. (…) It's the same concrete things every day, whereas (…) they may have friends in the hotel and then they might be gone. Whereas preschool I suppose [gives them] that little safe space." (Third sector representative 2)

> "You know, there are so many of our families, unfortunately, in homeless accommodation and [who] are coming from kind of hard-to-reach communities. And it's a place for them to come and play and just let children be children." (Educator, Community service, Dublin)

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Benefits for newcomer children

Educators and parents mentioned that newcomer children benefitted from interactions with adults and peers, which helped develop their English language skills. This also applied to other groups experiencing social isolation.

> "Also, for children who have English as a second language, it's very helpful for them to learn the language early and for them to make friends and socialise with other children of their age. It's very important." (Lead educator, Community service, Co. Cork)

> "She's very happy. I can feel, I can see she is learning a lot, because my main language is Chinese. And see, we didn't talk English at home. We always talk in Chinese at home. So, I was so excited. After she [goes] to the school, she can talk English. And the first time it's one word, [then it's] a whole sentence. It is very good, too. So exciting, because [we] can't talk at home. But when she comes back, she'd say 'Oh, that word means this word'. (…) And they can transport, they can transport from English to our language, no problem. I'm so happy. Because first, when I [brought] my children [to] the school, I [talked] to an attendee, 'My daughter, she can't speak any English'. She [told] me, 'Don't worry. She will learn'. And after that I [had] no worries. She is learning a lot. (…) She's listening. And she understands everything when the teacher [is] talking [about] something." (Mother, Community service, Dublin)

Benefits for Traveller children

In relation to children and families from the Traveller community, experts mentioned that, where delivered respectfully and positively, the ECCE programme could contribute to healing educational trauma and help communities embrace education.

> "We want to start finding ways for Traveller children's experience of education to be more useful to them and more accessible to them from day one, and also for them to see the kind of benefits for their children as well. And I would see the ECCE and crèche as really good spaces for that, especially for the Traveller community. (…) We're seeing that children are getting into secondary school with no literacy skills. So, it's all very low skills, and it's that piece around trying to instil education as a right and as an accessible right for all people. And I think that it'd be great to see something along those lines in the ECCE programme." (Traveller Community Representative 1)

> "[My colleague] always says, even if you don't want a handout, you want a handbook. And I always see a programme like this as a handbook. It's that support, that accessible space, that can make a huge difference then in terms of helping to heal that intergenerational trauma and get the child off on a solid footing and embracing education. And then the whole family embracing education, it's not just, you know, one or two, it's trying to get it so that it's much more holistic." (Traveller Community Representative 1)

Representatives of Traveller community organisations also highlighted the positive impact on maternal mental health and maternal capacity building:

> "It frees up a lot of the mummies to have a bit of time for themselves, you know, which is absolutely massive, because we are still in the gender division of childcare. It is the mummies. And some of the dads are great but the mummies are doing an awful

lot of working around them, that's just the reality on the ground. And so in that sense, the other impact of that is it's given them, the women, the space to then work around capacity building to find opportunities for themselves. And then it's the old [unknown], if you support the women you support the village." (Traveller Community Representative 1)

"I think, as you can imagine, a lot of [my sisters and sisters in law] would have five, six children. And I think there's always been a baby at home for a lot of them. (…) So for what I see, it's actually giving women time to themselves, which they would have never had before. And I know people that make comments, it's great just to get the food shop done in peace, that kind of thing. Or it's great to be able to go for a coffee and meet somebody. And I think all those things, and I know it might be just time to themselves. But for a community that has high levels of mental health and suicide, I think that's so important for women, to be able to feel like, it's okay for me to have this time to myself. And I think the women that do have access to the ECCE course, they now have that, I see that they have that, and they use that time for themselves." (Traveller Community Representative 2)

In its report on the living conditions of children on a local authority halting site, the Ombudsman for Children (2021) found that no safe play areas for children were available on the site. Traveller community representatives taking part in the ECCE programme review appreciated that the ECCE programme offered Traveller children a safe place to play:

"The ECCE has hugely impacted on children of the Travelling Community, like some of their parents have expressed, like, a lot of children live in halting sites. So they've expressed it's not really a great safe place sometimes to be able to freely play and mix with the other children of their own age as well, so settings like this are becoming [more important], particularly if they have their free play. (…) Now they wouldn't have many opportunities like that at home. Like a huge amount of our children wouldn't be. So it's very challenging, as well. The dangers at home [are a challenge]. They can't really play between cars coming in and traffic. And again, like machinery and horses and animals." (Traveller Community Representative 1)

Benefits for children with additional needs

Managers, educators, and parents participating in the review process also highlighted benefits for children with disabilities and/or additional needs. A key benefit that was repeatedly mentioned was that the ECCE programme offered an opportunity to spot potential developmental delays early, allowing children to be assessed and gain access to early intervention before they started school.

"I would know a lot of Traveller kids that may have speech therapy issues and things like that. So they're not recognised then until they start school. You know what I mean, whereas if they're actually in preschool or crèche, on any scheme, it could potentially be identified at a much earlier stage. And then those systems and those processes can be commenced at an earlier point as well. You know, they're all linked." (Traveller Community Representative 2)

"We have so many children starting with us, and you know, you're looking at a form, everything is fine. And they get in the door and the emotional needs and behavioural needs can be really quite unmanageable, sometimes, actually. So that will be another area that's a huge benefit to try and get that family on that journey to begin the

referral process and to begin the support process, really. That's another huge benefit of getting children into services." (Third-sector representative 1)

Educators and managers also reported that taking part in the ECCE programme had had a positive impact on the confidence and general development of children with additional needs who had attended their service.

"So, he'd be an example where from the beginning, he was just so quiet and shut off and he'd come, no bother, and the three hours and then he'd be gone home. But now, he's more involved with us and sometimes with the other children, and he's just more – even though still non-verbal, God love him, but he's so much more confident."
(Educator, Community service, Co. Cavan)

"Aidan* every day changes a bit. (…) He's changing, and changing for the better. Oh, for the better, he's able to communicate more so they understand you more."
(AIM worker, Private service, Co. Galway)

The integrative ethos of AIM was praised and recognised as benefitting children with additional needs and typical children alike:

"They're integrated together, there's no segregation. They all get the one-on-one time with an adult. So, it's not like we're separating anyone with an additional need, you're over here for the day and everyone else just – no. Everyone is mingled in together because I think children, they learn best from each other. They bring each other along with language and social skills and everything really." (Educator, Private service, Co. Kildare)

"This year we have a child with Down syndrome in our group. (…) And it's brilliant for her, because she only got into [a specialist preschool] for three days a week. So the rest of her time, she can come up here and she engages in an inclusive way. So she engages with all the other children, like she's not treated any differently. Well, the kids tried to baby her to make sure she's okay all the time. And so, ways like that. It's great. Like the kids all get together to see people are different. They look different. They come from different backgrounds." (Manager, Community service, County withheld)

Barriers and enablers of uptake and participation

In interviews, ECCE programme managers, educators, experts and parents identified a range of challenges and barriers that affect uptake of and regular participation in the ECCE programme among disadvantaged groups. Many of these challenges and barriers affect more than one group. Therefore, barriers and enablers are presented thematically and reference is made to specific groups affected where appropriate. Participants also described innovative solutions currently practiced in ECCE programme settings serving disadvantaged groups, and suggested possible adaptations to ECCE programme policy that could help address barriers and make the ECCE programme more accessible.

Much of this chapter focuses on barriers to uptake and participation, but it is important to keep in mind that not availing of the ECCE programme can be an active parental choice. This was the case for one mother who took part in the review as part of WP4. Mary*, who was from a Traveller background, had an older child, who had availed of preschool provision before the ECCE programme was introduced, but chose to keep her two youngest children at home. Her son, Ronan*, became eligible during the Covid-19 pandemic. As Ronan suffers from a respiratory condition, Mary decided to keep him at home and limit contact with other people. Mary felt that Ronan was "a little bit awkward at first" when he started primary school, taking "a while to get used to sitting down and listening to the teacher". She attributed this to the fact that he "hadn't really got the opportunity to be around his cousins or be around lots of people or go to lots of places and mix with other children due to Covid". However, Ronan had since settled well into his new routine and enjoyed attending primary school.

Mary also had a daughter, Caitlin*, who also didn't avail of the ECCE programme. Mary explained that this was her daughter's choice: "She just didn't want to. She just wanted to be at home with me." Mary taught Caitlin "her shapes, her numbers, her colours and everything. So she had all that. I just didn't teach her how to write. Each teacher has their own way of teaching that." Caitlin also got "plenty of socialisation with her cousins, and everybody and all, because there was no Covid that time. So children were used to playing with other children. She had lots of socialisation that way." Mary found that Caitlin transitioned into primary school without any difficulty.

Information and awareness

Accessibility starts with parental awareness. Lack of awareness can affect access, especially in areas of high demand, if it prevents families from applying in time to secure an ECCE programme place. Parents taking part in the review reported that word-of-mouth and ELC providers are key sources of information on the ECCE programme. This means that parents who are isolated from other parents and do not avail of professional childcare are less likely to hear about the ECCE programme.

> *"I just don't think it's a well-known thing unless you have a friend that has a child in service or their family are aware of it. It's just it's not really advertised to be perfectly honest. Like even, I've never really seen that anywhere. It's just through working in the field." (Third-sector representative 2)*

For example, representatives of a Third-sector organisation reported that teenage mothers living in homeless accommodation hubs were often unaware of the free preschool scheme and did not enquire because they assumed they would be unable to afford any kind of early years provision. This was also the experience of one mother participating in WP4:

> *"I know I didn't have a clue about it, I don't think Cara* started until she was maybe four, like, I think Cara done a year and two or three months, because by the time I found out about it, the first year was nearly gone. And obviously as a first-time parent, like, you know. (…) I can't even remember [how I found out]. I think we were living in homeless accommodation at the time. I think it was one of the girls in the place that actually said it to me, 'Is she not in school?' I was like, 'No, no.' I'm nearly sure that's what happened, but yeah, I hadn't a clue with Cara. And I wouldn't have known unless someone else had said." (Mother, WP4)*

Due to frequent moves, families experiencing homelessness also change their health and social care providers often, making it less likely that they will receive key information when they need it.

A manager of a community service in Co. Wicklow felt that the service was well known within the local community, but that newcomers and families living at the local direct provision centre sometimes "don't fully understand what the programme is or they don't fully understand how preschool kind of works here in Ireland, and then you've also got that language barrier then too". This manager recalled that information used to be available in a variety of languages, but that the information on these leaflets was out of date.

A Third-sector representative pointed out that newcomer populations had grown significantly since the ECCE programme was introduced but had not witnessed the advertising campaigns carried out at the time and might therefore be less aware of its existence. She suggested that a multi-lingual advertising campaign could help raise awareness of the ECCE programme among newcomers.

Access to the internet is also a barrier for some disadvantaged groups. A representative of the Traveller community pointed out that information online is "not accessible, because at some of the [halting] sites, broadband is non-existent. You know, then with technology, the know-how, the digital literacy, these are all very practical barriers to participation" (Traveller Community representative 1). An educator at a community service catering for disadvantaged children in Dublin also cautioned that families living in homeless accommodation often do not have access to the internet. Members of marginalised communities sometimes lack access to online information for other reasons as well:

> "One of my mums, she has no English at all. And she has no access to email. She says she doesn't know how to use technology. So again, it's coming through myself. So if I'm not there, she doesn't know what to do." (Third-sector representative 2)

For parents who have limited access to the internet and little contact to other parents, hard-copy leaflets can be a useful source of information about the ECCE programme, according to a representative of a Third-sector organisation.

A representative of the Traveller community recalled receiving automatic annual reminders to apply for the Back-to-School Clothing Allowance and suggested exploring similar solutions to distribute timely information to parents of ECCE-eligible children. As the Department of Social Protection holds details of families in receipt of Child Benefit, including children's birth dates, cooperation with it might be one possible route for distributing targeted information to all parents of eligible children.

Community organisations, charities, and health and social care providers can also play an important role as providers of information about the ECCE programme. For relatively well-organised communities, such as the Traveller community, cooperation with community organisations can be helpful. One representative of the Traveller community suggested working with Traveller organisations, which exist in every county, to organise information sessions for prospective ECCE parents:

"What I think [would work well] is if you were to work with each organisation, and maybe set up an information morning, and then it would be the organisation's job to get families to come. So they normally do lots of things like that, they will get them together for different events and different information sessions and mornings. So I think that would be really good. Definitely so that people could maybe ask questions. (…) So having an information session where you could say, this is what the application form looks like, this is how you fill it out. This is who you can ring to speak to, this is when you need to do it to try and secure a place, you know, those kinds of things. I think that would be really good information sessions like that." (Traveller Community representative 2)

Regular community outreach and long-term engagement with marginalised communities is also an important route for building awareness over time. This can best be facilitated on a local level by community providers with existing links to the local community.

A Third-sector representative also highlighted that strong parental engagement could have a positive impact on parental attitudes to preschool education and education in general. She reported that sharing children's work, pointing out progress and stressing the parent's contribution to their child's success helped parents develop parents' appreciation of preschool education, as well as their confidence, and led to improved attendance rates:

"There's also the parental education level themselves that they're not necessarily seeing and value or an importance of it. And I think as the year progresses, that generally improves as we're starting to show them more and more of what their child has done and what they have said. When we can show them how they're growing through the year that does tend to improve. And we introduced during COVID, actually, parent teacher meetings (…) and now we do we do one before Christmas, and another one around Easter, and it really is just a chance for us to sit down one to one with a parent and go 'Your child is amazing. You're amazing, we can't believe that you're living where you're living, and you're doing this, this and this! And look', and we bring the journal with them, and we show them everything. Parents usually walk out 10 feet tall, but we find that our attendance rates tend to improve after that. It is that education piece." (Third-sector representative 1)

Discrimination and lack of trust

Discrimination and lack of trust are key barriers for families from disadvantaged communities, who may have negative experiences of formal education and who frequently suffer discrimination. Traveller representatives reported that the widespread discrimination Traveller and Roma families experience in everyday life can also be felt in relation to the ECCE programme.

"In terms of a lot of the feedback that we get from the Traveller and Roma community, there is a lot of overt and covert racism, some of it is quite in your face and then others are more subliminal, like under the surface. It's more felt. You hear that from families quite a lot." (Traveller Community representative 1)

"I think this one would speak more to feedback from Travellers using services elsewhere. And the feedback from other services can be that the level of support and welcome and sense of belonging maybe that Traveller families don't particularly feel when they go into certain services." (Traveller Community representative 1)

Negative experiences affect trust in ECCE programme services, especially if these are run by members of the settled community.

> *"Then the trust issue as well, in terms of who you're handing your child over to, which is massive particularly because of the residual trauma in terms of experiences in education for generations. So that can be quite difficult as well for a Traveller person say for example, that may have had a really difficult experience of education. And then you're being pressured socially, to hand your child over to a settled person in crèche, and the disconnect and the distance that creates for people can be massive."* (Traveller Community representative 1)

> *"Many parents have had very, very poor experiences of the school system and of the wider settled community and mistrust. Day to day racism is such an issue for young children up to grandparents age, so to trust that their child is safe and treated fairly and given the same opportunities as the rest of the children is a very big ask for that community. And it's one thing maybe being in the city, and you know, knowing that there's a maybe a big mix of cultures or that there's easy access maybe to get to our service. But if you were a Traveller family on the side of the road in a rural setting, would you want to send your child to the local ECCE programme? I'm not sure. And I can understand why there might be a block there."* (Traveller Community representative 1)

Experts stressed the importance of community outreach and long-term engagement to building trust among marginalised communities. The TVG Goras Community Childcare Centre in Cork provides an example of good practice. The service is staffed by members of the local Traveller community and makes outreach visits to the local halting site at least once a week. Their close personal and professional links with the local Traveller community have helped overcome barriers related to trust and experiences of discrimination and provided "contagious" positive experiences:

> *"That's a huge piece of trust there, they know that their kids are going to be welcomed, and that they're going to be treated lovingly with love and care when they come through the door just like every other parent. Very different space than going into a place you don't know, with people you don't know, to a community that basically for the most part seem to turn their back on you."* (Traveller Community representative 1)

Traveller Community representatives also felt that a dedicated Traveller education worker, attached to Traveller community development organisations, could act as a "go-to person" and provide practical support to parents. They highlighted that, to build the necessary trust over time, this role would require multiannual funding and should be carried out by a person from the Traveller community.

> **Vignette: Traveller Visibility in Information Materials**
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> *In 2022, Wexford County Childcare Committee developed an information booklet about the ECCE programme, targeted at Traveller families. Childcare Committee staff spent a day at a local Community service and, with parents' permission, took photographs of the ECCE group and in particular of Traveller children within it. The pictures were used to illustrate the information booklet, which was distributed to families both directly and via the local Family Resource Centre. The manager of the service where the pictures were taken reported that the families involved "loved having it done. They felt really part of the community."*

"And also the proactive approaches in terms of Traveller visibility on the curriculum, on the walls when the children are being dropped off. So that they can see their own, it's mirrored back, they know it's a safe space, they know that it's culturally diverse, they know that it's about inclusion, and that recognising that all children are welcome, regardless of their ethnicity, regardless of their race, gender, whatever is going on, in terms of the wrong kind of identity politics." (Traveller Community representative 1)

"When my child started crèche, they sent out, you know, getting to know your child documents and you needed to fill that out. And on it, they were like, is there any day in the year that is culturally important to your family? And should we celebrate this? And if so, how should we do this, and I had filled it out. And one of the main things for me was in and around the house and the home, and kind of clearly stating, at home doesn't have to be four concrete walls. And that's kind of what I had said. And I thought no more about it. And a couple months later, when the kids were finishing up, and they brought home all their mound of artwork, there was this white sheet of paper with a pencil drawing of a rectangle. And it was only when I read a little note, it says this is Jack's* mobile home. And so they had obviously done it in school, which was fine. (…) So I think something like that is quite nice." (Traveller Community representative 2)

Availability

In some areas with high demand, access for newcomer children and children experiencing homelessness can be affected by a lack of mid-term availability. One case was reported by a representative of a Third-sector organisation, and a similar case is described in the vignette below:

"I had a family where the young child was attending her ECCE here. So you would think it would be a straightforward process just to move into the other area. But they couldn't they weren't able to take her because of the lack of numbers and they weren't able to facilitate her finishing her ECCE year. So she started going out in September, and she's missed out on basically the entire year." (Third-sector representative 2)

Samira*, her husband and three young children (all under school age) were living in temporary accommodation in a suburban town in North County Dublin. Her husband had secured a job, locally. Their daughter, Mira*, was attending a local ECCE programme and while she had additional needs, she had settled well and Samira was happy with her daughter's progress. Mid-way through the year and without warning, their accommodation was cut, and they were moved to a hotel over 50 kilometres away, in a different county. Samira's husband had to give up his job due to the move. Despite their child-care worker contacting over 30 settings that offered the ECCE programme, no spaces could be found for their daughter in their new location. Undeterred by this, Samira's husband decided to gain his taxi licence so that he could drive the often one-hour journey (each way) so Mira could continue to attend her original setting in Dublin. This was an arduous task, spending two hours travelling for a 3-hour ECCE session. While Mira was attending the ECCE programme, her Dad worked as a taxi driver. Mira is due to start Junior Infants in September 2023 and her younger brother, Wei* is due to attend his first year of ECCE. Despite concerted efforts from their child-care worker, again contacting over 30 preschool settings in their new town, they were unable to secure an ECCE place for Wei. Samira's family will have to continue this onerous task for the foreseeable future and this has had several adverse, negative implications for the entire family.

As discussed in WP2, many services accept applications for the ECCE programme long before the start of the programme year and spaces are sometimes fully booked years in advance. Limited start-of-term availability of ECCE programme spaces and long application windows (where families are allowed to book years in advance) can also affect newcomers, refugees, and mobile Travellers, who may arrive in a new area too late to secure a place, as described by a service manager in the excerpt below:

> *"We just have some refugees in the area at the minute, but we had no extra spaces and no extra staff to take some of them in. So, we would have two or three that are on our waiting list, so hopefully we may get them in in September, but that's a staffing issue and a ratio issue again. We were full in September. The two rooms were full in September. (…) So, you see them out walking, and you see them looking in, and you kind of feel so bad that they can't come in." (Manager, Community service, Co. Galway)*

In order to address this challenge, some services retain emergency spaces to accommodate children arriving throughout the programme year, but funding is required to enable providers to keep emergency places available:

> ***Respondent 1:*** *I am aware of one or two services that [reserve emergency places] in the community, (…), more so in kind of like the DEIS community. But it's definitely not common.*
> ***Respondent 2:*** *I used to work in a preschool. So from that side of things they can't afford to keep places aside So those spaces are a lack of funding, like they're not getting that, if they leave like two or three places aside they're down funding because they're not filling the rooms.*
> *(Educators, Community service, Dublin)*

The Traveller Visibility Group (TVG) in Cork runs a preschool, TVG Goras Community Childcare Centre, which caters for children from the Traveller and settled communities. For many years, the service kept ten reserved emergency spaces available to ensure that Traveller children would always be able to access the service. Uptake of the ECCE programme at service has increased so much in recent years that emergency spaces are now no longer needed.

Other services reported prioritising vulnerable children (e.g. children referred to the service by a health or social care professional) and experts stressed that prioritising vulnerable children was necessary to ensure access to the ECCE programme for families experiencing extraordinarily difficult living conditions.

> *"We would always prioritise children who were referred to us. (…) We accept referrals, referrals coming in from schools, probation services, psychologists, multidisciplinary teams, you name it, we get referrals from them, and that would always prioritise the family." (Third-sector representative 1)*

> *"It needs to be flexible to make accommodations on maybe criteria that would be strict on location, or taking into account long waiting times, for people who are in more stressful circumstances, like in emergency accommodation, and maybe see what could be done there to expedite, you know, their time on a waiting list or, you know, to prioritise, prioritise them really, because I suppose the children who are in those circumstances, you could say they have the most to gain from a place like this, because it's providing a stable environment to their lives when home life is maybe not so stable for a period of time." (Third-sector representative 2)*

Programme registration

Many parents and providers taking part in the review appreciated the accessibility of the ECCE programme registration process, which requires relatively little input from parents. However, experts raised a number of key barriers in relation to the registration process.

Application forms can present a barrier to parents with poor reading ability. Providers reported that in-person registration can be helpful to support parents in the registration process.

> *"For all of those different communities, it's there for them. It's inclusive for them. They're entitled [sic.] to it. We have found that a lot of the people who have come maybe wouldn't understand what we're talking about. So, we're really trying to explain it but some people might not be able to read and write and fill out the forms and things. So, we always make sure we give that time and sit down and go through it with them to make sure that they're completely in the knowledge of it." (Manager, Naíonra, Co. Limerick)*

Some services require proof of address to register a child, even though this is not a programme requirement. Where proof of address is requested, this can present a barrier to families in emergency accommodation. A PPS number is a programme requirement and can be a barrier for newcomers (a PPS number is not currently required to apply for a primary school place, although many schools do request it). As one of the following excerpts shows, long processing times mean that providers can be left to cover the cost of a child's preschool place for a prolonged period.

> *"It's very, very difficult for children living in hubs to access services, because the services require a permanent address, utility bills, stuff that's just not really applicable*

to these families. And so the best we can do is provide supporting letters in that sense. But I mean, sometimes the services aren't even accepting those from us. So you're kind of in limbo." (Third-sector representative 2)

"And PPS numbers is another one. (…) [They have to have this to] register or there's no funding. The Hive will backdate an application when you get the PPS number. So, I mean, I had one child here. I got his PPS number about a month ago. He's been attending since September. It was backdated, but I have another child who has been here since September and still no sign of a PPS number. I probably won't get a penny for him now for the year. (…) It will be the newcomer families in particular. Ukrainian immigrants, they were all given PPS numbers within a week or two of them arriving, whereas other families are waiting a year or more with the back-up. (…) We've been funding these two children all year, and one of them was refunded. And I'm not sure because it's never happened to me that we finished the programme year and I still didn't have the PPS number. So I'm just waiting to see what will happen. Yeah, if this number doesn't arrive before the end of June, we'll be out of contract with ECCE, will I be able to appeal it or not? [I also] couldn't apply for AIM support for [a child without a PPS number because] I couldn't register them on the Hive." (Third-sector representative 1)

For newcomer families, language barriers can affect registration. A Third-sector representative reported that mothers from the Roma community often struggled with filling in enrolment forms if an interpreter wasn't available. A representative of another Third-sector organisation made similar observations in relation to Romanian families accessing their support:

"I find that members from the Roma community, they really struggle, particularly the women don't tend to have very good English, even to fill in, you know, the enrolment form for here. And that's a huge challenge. Most of that community that we see they come through [charities] and stuff where they get an interpreter to do those forms. Yeah, we're still seeing so many of them sitting in the park with children who are of ECCE age and they should be in a setting." (Third-sector representative 1)

"And then language barriers, as well, I don't think the services are quite equipped for the families that we have nowadays, like we have a lot of Romanian families that have no English at all. And it's down to us to organise translation services for them. And even for a simple bit of paperwork to be filled out. It's taken phone calls from myself, a translator, the service, and then the service actually want the family to present in person when they haven't organised any translation services. So, it's labour intensive and time intensive. And actually when English isn't your first language, it's quite scary for them, because they don't know what's going on, why they have to have all these appointments just to give a simple signature. And so they're quite reluctant actually to access the services also, because they don't know what it exactly entails." (Third-sector representative 2)

Employing multi-lingual staff and providing application forms and information leaflets in a range of languages can help address some of these issues:

And I think for us, we have a number of staff from different countries as well. So I do have somebody here who can speak Romanian, somebody else that can speak Russian, somebody, you know, yes, that's huge. It really is just to try and explain, so

much is lost in translation and Google Translate only goes so far. So yeah, that's a big, big deal. (Third-sector representative 1)

Experts also raised issues around parental awareness, capacity, and timing of ECCE programme registration, especially in areas with high demand and long waiting lists. These experts explained that parents experiencing disadvantage may not always be able to apply in time to secure a place and that the current application system places too much responsibility for securing a place on parents. One mother taking part in WP4 was helped by her family support worker, who took care of finding a place.

"It's really down to the parents, you know, that they're, they're the main vehicle for the child to fit into an early-years setting. And obviously, when they're going through maybe more chaotic circumstances, like being homeless, in emergency accommodation, you know, they've got a lot of urgent concerns at that time. And it's, it's just a lot of, you know, responsibilities to take on to fit into one of these schemes. And then the wait list waiting lists, and the time it takes can be a barrier." (Third-sector representative 2)

"You have to get them in the door first. I've been working in this community so long, I'm now very well-known around the streets. And I'd quite often bump into families that I would have worked with 6, 7, 8 years ago, and I'd see them with a three-year-old and a pram. And I'd be like, 'Oh, where does he go to school?' – 'I haven't gotten him in anywhere.' And I'm like, 'What are you doing?!' I'm like, 'Come on, up the road and we'll put you on the waiting list." Because it's that lack of knowledge and value on what's there." (Third-sector representative 1)

"See, obviously because I was homeless for a few years, it's different. It was actually [my family support worker] I asked, I asked [my family support worker] to help me and she literally done everything, yeah." (Mother, WP4)

It was suggested that these challenges around parental capacity could be addressed by establishing a new role – akin to the Education Welfare Officer – with responsibility for supporting families and helping them secure a preschool place.

"It does sound like there could be a need for more resources there. Some kind of scheme officer, or welfare officer for early years settings, (…) I think that would help. You know, just to just really identify those barriers, because it sounds like it would be coming up quite a bit. Regionally and nationally. So I think, maybe possibly, there would be some, some more resources needed there. So, utilising what we already have in place, and then looking at what we what we feel is lacking, I think, and whether that needs to be a new resource or post holder of some kind, just to make sure that things are not ad hoc, and you know, a consistent approach." (Third-sector representative 2)

It was also suggested that a more proactive and targeted approach, possibly supported by community organisations and charities with long-standing links to vulnerable families, might work better for families who are unable to actively pursue an ECCE programme space on their own:

"So for those that aren't availing of it, it needs to be brought to them. And what I have found, (…) unless you bring it to the individual or to the family and have a conversation with them, or bring them some type of information, and create space for them to ask questions, it won't happen. (…) So if somebody was to come to me,

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and let's just say if I wasn't working, and if somebody was to come to me and say, Look, there's a place here for your child, it's three hours a day. Let's start them see how they get on. That would make me try it." (Traveller Community representative 2)

Challenges around attendance

Regular attendance can be a challenge for children from many disadvantaged groups due to the barriers experienced by many of them, including, among others, parental capacity, unstable housing conditions, appointment clashes, and transport, which is discussed in more detail below. As one expert put it, "family circumstances and family difficulties and parental capacity is a big piece." For families living in homeless accommodation and at direct provision centres, access to transport and unstable everyday living conditions were key reasons discussed by experts and providers.

> *"We did [have a child from a Roma background], but they left [in January]. That was just due to the mum was this way, dad was this way, and they just couldn't come frequently. You know. I think they went to Galway, if I'm going to be honest. But they were here, and every day, when they were here, but just unfortunately, circumstances, and mum I think was actually in a hub, and you know, kind of stuff." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)*

Irregular attendance and "dropping out" was also discussed in relation to Traveller children and newcomer children. While these groups may also experience difficult living conditions, in interviews, managers and educators generally linked irregular attendance and "dropping out" among Traveller children to Traveller mobility and "cultural reasons". Practical barriers resulting from disadvantage or barriers related to marginalisation and discrimination were only explored by representatives of the Traveller community. This suggests that despite plentiful goodwill, which was evident in interviews with ECCE programme providers from a settled background, there may be a lack of understanding in relation to the full range of barriers faced by Traveller families and a reluctance to explore more difficult factors beyond cultural difference.

> *"I suppose we could say we've had people from the Traveller group, that they might come for a few weeks and then they moved on, you know, that kind of way, that they don't really stay in the one area too long. (…) It was a couple of years ago now that we did have two sisters and a cousin and, God, they were great, and they were lovey, but then they moved on. Do you know? So, they might be here for three months, if even, and then they move on again. You'd never see them again. I suppose that would be the main one I can think of." (Educator, Private service, Co. Kildare)*

> *"The Traveller community family left, they were Traveller community, they left because they couldn't commit to the 9 to 12, okay, or they couldn't collect at 12 o'clock. (…) They just left, they were not collecting, they were collecting later and later and later. And then they just ended up not bringing the child. We tried to push that that child actually needed to be here. There's only so much you can push the parent, you know, and that again, sadly, it was maybe October they left home, I'd say January, and moved the child within a few weeks of that. There was no consistency with it. (…) We obviously try to link in as much as we can with families, any families that are in slight distress, we link in. I must say we're very, very good here. And yet they just never came back." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)*

> **Respondent 1:** *We have had some children from a Traveller family. Yeah. They come for a little while, and then they kind of– they drop off and they don't come back*

Respondent 2: Maybe they come one day in a week, one day in two weeks and–
Respondent 1: Then it fizzles out completely
Respondent 2: Which is a pity, that is a pity.
Respondent 1: Yeah, sad for the kids, because they were doing so well.
(Educators, Naíonra, Co. Offaly)

"The challenge with the Traveller community is, they love to be here and they're absolutely – I've had a mother and her little girl who had additional needs and I have never seen a parent so capable of working with their child and giving us help with the child. But we find that they start, and they don't continue. (…) They leave, and they might go off for six, eight weeks as part of their culture (…). So, that has happened most of the time with the Traveller families. (…) And I respect that's the way they – that's their life." (Manager, Community service, Co. Donegal)

"Attendance (…) will be a little bit lower for the Traveller families. But that's back to their culture. And that's bound to, you know that if they're going to visit friends or family in a different county, or community, family occasions tend to take them in and out, or travelling takes them in and out. Their [attendance] would be a little bit lower. But that said, it has improved tenfold in the time I've been here. (…) We had actually one boy from the Travelling community this year, and, unfortunately, he left halfway through the year, we still don't know why. We think maybe a family member didn't really want to let him go. And he was getting on brilliantly. (…) He was absolutely brilliant. Like, I have to say, the chat out of those children is unreal. Like, you know, just the things they could tell you. And then the other children are asking where he is, you know." (Educator, Community service, Dublin)

Several experts and service managers taking part in WP2 and WP4 advocated a lenient approach to irregular attendance, highlighting the level of need vulnerable families were experiencing and the highly beneficial impact remaining in the ECCE programme could have on vulnerable children and their families. This view mirrors findings from a recent evaluation of Young Ballymun Infant Mental Health Programmes (Gordon et al., 2022), which points to the value of community-centred services in demonstrating support, generosity and understanding of those harder-to-reach individuals and families, highlighting that it is important for practitioners to be approachable and to meet such individuals 'where they are at'.

"I think a setting like ours would be far more understanding to family circumstances. So, I mean, I've one little boy that I can think of, he's rarely here before 20 to 10 in the morning, rarely. We just open the door and say, 'Hi, Mom, Come on in!' We know she's not going to make it any earlier. I mean, half nine is doing well. I've experienced settings that would just say 'No, if you're not in by five past nine, it's too disruptive to the group, you can't come in'. And I think the session like ours is so important for these families. And for some of them, God only knows what they went through that morning to get here, thank Goodness they are here! And I think that it is improving, but I think that we would probably have lower attendance rates than some settings." (Third-sector representative 1)

"Well, do you know, the one thing about the programme, now, it's a fairly disadvantaged area around here. We have a lot of kids who may not attend very often. I have one child, in particular, who has been here very little of the year. But I

kind of hold the place there because I feel the child needs the place when the parent is ready to bring them." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)

The current funding rules stipulate that funding is withdrawn after four weeks of non-attendance unless special circumstances apply. Recognised special circumstances currently include immediate family bereavement (6 weeks), extended travel to the child's or a parent's birth place once a year (6 weeks), and prolonged illness of the child, the parent, or a sibling (up to 12 weeks).

While educators, managers and experts involved in WP4 recognised the benefits of, and encouraged, regular attendance, they also understood that the families availing of their services often faced very challenging circumstances that made regular attendance difficult. They argued that these children could benefit greatly from any amount of ECCE programme attendance their parents could manage, and that the current funding rules in relation to irregular attendance made it harder to support vulnerable families:

"The funding, I suppose, you know, the way after four weeks or whatever they're cutting the funding for preschools, and when you're not getting funding, you're going to lose your place? That's not feasible for our families. More leeway. You understand the preschool point of it, but I suppose our focus is that they're getting that education. If their days are cut, so if [they have] not turned up every Friday, then they have to declare that, and then they lose their funding and they get cut. In sponsorship programmes, it needs to be a lot more flexible. I think it's eight to 12 weeks or something, is the gap. But like four weeks is very short. Our families are from hotels, get excluded from accommodation, they could literally be thinking about their bed the next night. They're not going to be thinking about preschool. That could go on for weeks. So, obviously, not bringing the child in with them, they lose that place, and they have lost stability again. That has a major impact on them." (Third-sector representative 2)

"We're being penalised for [holding a place] because we have to put them down as a leaver, or we have to reduce the days. I just think that's an awful lot of work. I could spend days here doing that because of the attendance. (…) It's a massive part of my job which I could be doing other things that would be more useful to the children and staff than doing all this paperwork. Why should we be penalised? Mommy came and she put her child's name. If she isn't able, or there's stuff going on that they can't get here– We try and encourage as much as we can. We can't go and hold their hand to bring them. So, I can't see why we're penalised for that, and having to do all this extra work for that. Okay, she's not coming, but what do I do? Give her place away? And she arrives next week? That's my big peeve." (Manager, Community service, Dublin)

The current programme rules on irregular attendance also don't cater for Traveller mobility, leaving providers with the choice of offering the place to a different child or absorb the financial loss themselves – a dilemma that can encourage discrimination, as hinted at in one of the interview excerpts reproduced below.

"If we take on a [Traveller] child and we invest a lot of time and they leave, and they might go off for six, eight weeks as part of their culture, but then we're penalised, our funding is taken from that child and we've given that place up. (…) And we know that then they might come back and then you have to re-enrol them again, but you've lost funding even though you know they're coming back. So, that's a challenge. Or you

might have to fill the place because you're not going to be viable if you don't. So, maybe that's something that should be targeted." (Manager, Community service, Co. Donegal)

Respondent: So, the chances of filling [a place mid-term] is zero because you would be literally taking that child from somebody else. So, I actually don't advertise them. Interviewer: But do you take the hit then financially?
Respondent: I take the hit financially, yeah. And we've had that happen quite a while. So, now you're actually reluctant to take those children in. Do you understand me? Now, I'm not – I haven't done it yet, but it does– (…)
Interviewer: If you were to fix the system, what's the solution there? What do you think… Respondent: The solution is you're funding us for the year, if the child is with you or not. (Manager, Private service, Co. Meath)

While the programme rules currently allow for a certain amount of absence based on illness or travel to a home country, ECCE programme providers and parents don't always appear to be aware of these exceptions:

"Three of my kids now have had their tonsils removed. The girls, (…), when they were in preschool they missed like, a block week of one or a block week of two. One of the girls gets tonsillitis so bad that she gets fluid in her joints and her elbows, and fluid in her knees. She can't walk (…). But thankfully she has had her tonsils removed in November (…). But like that, one of them was sick for a week in hospital, (…) the following week the little one was rushed in because she had viral tonsillitis as well. So we've missed like a two block week of two or three and I was told by the school that I was going to lose my place. Now, I went (…) and obviously said to the girl, like, I can send her in but she's got tonsillitis, so she's in agony. She's fluid on her elbows, she's fluid on her knees, like she's in agony. I was like yeah, she's on antibiotics and all, but like they're telling me not to send them to school, but you're also telling me, oh well, you'll lose the playschool if you don't send them in. I found it really hard to get [an ECCE programme place], I think it was the fourth week of September before they were even offered a place in playschool, so we missed out on a full four weeks at the playschool, then they actually were offered the place, and then I was told that, it was the January of that year, oh well you're going to lose the place soon anyway." (WP4 Parent focus group, Dublin)

"I think another challenge for us is that when a child leaves, so we would have in our locality, we would have quite a large community that are not Irish, who come on contracts for a year or maybe a year and a half and then they go home. So, they sign up with us. The children come for eight months and then they decide they're having a holiday back home for six weeks. They might come back but we're only funded for [four of] it. (…) We don't get paid for two [weeks], and then if they do come back, if they do come back, then they might after another three or four months be done, and you're left with a place."
(Manager, Private service, Co. Meath)

Transport and travel
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

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children who do not have access to transport and live far from their ECCE programme setting. Samira's story, described in a vignette in the section on availability, is a striking example of these challenges.

A representative of the Traveller community relayed the story of a Roma community that had been affected by lack of school transport:

> *"This one I'm going to share with you, but it's specifically in relation to enrolment. And I'm wondering would something similar work for the Travellers. So, I met with a girl recently and she said to me, she's working with the Roma community here in Cork. And she said, they hadn't been attending school but the reason being was because a lot of them didn't have transport. So they weren't making it to the school in time because they were walking. And what ended up happening was the grandfather got a minibus, and the grandfather picks them all up and brings them to school. I thought that's great. So I'm wondering, and I, it just reminded me of something when I was younger. And when I went to primary school, there was a bus that picked us up from the site. And it brought us all to school. So I'm wondering, would something like a bus that picked, now I don't know how that would work because it's all small kids, and you've got car seats and all that to consider. So I don't know would that work."* *(Traveller Community representative 2)*

In one of the services participating in WP2, the manager reported that the service had registered a child who was living at an accommodation centre, and that transport would be a major barrier to the child's attendance:

> ***Respondent:*** *We have our first Ukrainian child looking to start with us in September in preschool but they're living way out in the middle of nowhere and they're going to have to get a bus and the child is only going to be able to get here at 10 o'clock, and I'm like (…) I'm wondering, can I get extra support? Can we get this child picked up? Get this child in for the 09:00 to 12:00.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *Yeah, coming in at 10:00, what's mummy going to do by the time…*
> ***Respondent:*** *They're just going to hang around until the next bus. There's a bus that goes back at 13:00. But that's the only way. They have no transport.*

Transport can also be a barrier for other families who lack access to cars or are unable to drive, and one programme provider pointed out that school transport is provided for primary school children, but not for those attending the ECCE programme:

> ***Respondent:*** *Transport is a cost for them. [Most children get here] by private car. There's a bus stop right outside for primary school. Our kids can't take it.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *That's a school bus?*
> ***Respondent:*** *School bus. And even children with special needs, no transport supports. So, one lives in [village's name], so it's across the bridge. It's a long walk in the rain and if he was in school, he would get transport. Here, he doesn't. His mother is amazing to walk that far. (…) More than two miles both ways, (…) in all weather.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *With a young child as well.*
> ***Respondent:*** *With additional needs.*
> *(Manager, Private service, Co. Wexford)*

A community service catering for disadvantaged children in Cork reported providing transport to support families who could not otherwise reach the service, enabling their children to take part in the ECCE programme:

> *"I've often driven up and collected children myself, perhaps for after-schools and stuff like that (…) and we have taxis. We had one family (…) who we provided taxies for who collect and drop them because the mother was– they were homeless, the mother was disabled, (…) and the child couldn't come in if they had no transport. So I suppose we provide as many supports as we can." (Manager, Community service, Cork)*

Programme intensity

The relatively short daily programme intensity can present barriers to uptake and regular attendance among disadvantaged groups. It is recognised that the ECCE programme is not intended to provide childcare. However, the evidence presented in this section suggests that the short daily intensity can pose practical problems to families which can affect uptake and regular attendance for vulnerable groups – especially where seamless provision of wrap-around care is not available (e.g. in sessional services) or needs to be arranged separately. While the focus of the ECCE programme is the child, it is important to recognise that parents' needs must be taken into account in order to ensure that all children are able to avail of the ECCE programme in practice.

A Third-sector representative reported that the longer hours in primary school were an incentive for disadvantaged families to enrol their child into primary school early instead of availing of the second ECCE programme year.

> *I think that by increasing the hours, and the number of weeks, that will be a big hook for a lot of the parents. (…) We've struggled with the engagement for a year or two of the ECCE programme. Parents are really keen to get their children into school. Now, part of that is cultural, the kid is four and they go to school. But a big part of it is, they know as soon as they go to school, that they're in there till half one or two o'clock in the day. And that is a big piece. And if you've got a family with reduced parental capacity, be it down to addiction or mental health, if they can have their child in school to half one or two o'clock, they're going to take (Third-sector representative 1)*

For families who rely on public transport or are otherwise affected by difficulties around travel and transport, and for one-parent families, the short daily duration can make regular attendance difficult. Representatives of a Third-sector organisation reported that children experiencing homelessness often stop attending the ECCE programme after being moved to a distant accommodation centre because the long travel time becomes unviable in combination with the short programme duration:

> *"I've come across families that maybe have been living in an area for a while, and happily attended services but then due to becoming homeless they're switching areas altogether. (…) So they were attending services there but they've since moved and it's taking almost two hours to get that child into their ECCE programme. And then it's only on for three and a half hours. So they've stopped bringing them. So it's kind of barriers like that, I suppose. Maybe they are enrolled at first, but then the enrolment kind of– they've stopped bringing them and their attendance, it kind of stops, to be*

perfectly honest, because of the travel issues and how far away they are due to not having a permanent address." (Third-sector representative 3)

"I have families living in town and going to school in Swords. Three hours. The mom barely gets to Swords in time. So three hours is just not enough time. (…) [The parents are] standing around for three hours, there's nothing for them to do, especially like that they're going from Kildare to Swords, like, those three hours. Yes. If you live two seconds down the road or like that, in normal circumstances, I suppose that your house, you pick your preschool based on roughly where you're living or working, or whatever, so you have those three hours? It's not possible. Like they can't travel back. So they're stuck, the parents are still just hanging around three hours. And then I suppose they're not as likely to bring them because what are they meant to do during those three hours? And, I suppose, their education may not be the focus, because there's so much other stuff going on. Those three hours of just hanging around, so much other stuff could be getting done, like meetings with the council, and just the time for three hours is very short [and afterschool day-care is] near impossible to find at the moment." (Educator, Community service, Dublin)

This was also mentioned by parents taking part in WP 4 focus groups and individual interviews, as in the following examples:

Respondent 1: *Really, we have only three hours, right, and now, obviously, that sounds like a long time. But if you had to do your running around or whatever you have to do, or you have to go to a doctor's, having to be back for 12 –*
Respondent 2: *Yeah I've had to cancel an appointment. Oh I can't do that time because like*
Respondent 3: *And sometimes, I don't even put the girls in because I needed to go somewhere. Yeah.*
Interviewer: *That's a good point around it. So do you think that their attendance can be impacted because of the timings?*
Respondent 1: *Yeah, I mean I know I have the car. Well, if you didn't have the car, we're talking about an hour and a half to there. That's three hours down and back before you even went to the doctor, do you know what I mean?*
Interviewer: *So on a day like that, for example, would you have to take your child out of the programme?*
Respondent 1: *Oh yeah, because I wouldn't make it back for 12.*
(WP4 Parent focus group, Dublin)

Respondent: *As a parent you need that little break. Because obviously you are, like, trying for balance and you really, really, really need that little break. Especially if you're a parent who's working, maybe you're on your own, because not everyone has that perfect– You know, you need that few hours, like for me like to drop Cara in, like, I don't have enough time to really do anything before I go and collect her. Like, you literally dropped them in, you can get a bit of cleaning done, and then you're back. Back together.*

Interviewer: Yes. So, you think a longer day would be more beneficial for you and for your family?

Respondent: Even an extra hour.

Interviewer: Okay. And would you do the extra hour in the year one or would you kind of introduce it as part of year 2? As soon as they go in, would you do four hours? Or…

Respondent: Yeah, I think as soon as they go in, like, because obviously parents are sending their children for them, but they're also sending them for themselves as well. Sort of for a bit of a break. And I just don't think three hours is long enough. Seems like a long time, but it's really not.

(WP 4 Parent, Dublin)

Several experts raised the need for a more intensive ECCE programme in disadvantaged areas, similar to the DEIS scheme for primary and post-primary schools. A DEIS-type model for the ECCE programme could provide, for example, a better adult-child ratio, longer daily hours, and year-round provision – "ECCE on steroids", as one expert put it.

Managers and educators at a service run by a Third-sector organisation were able to make direct comparisons between children availing of three hours and children attending for five hours. The service runs three ECCE rooms. In two of them, children attend for the three ECCE programme hours only, while in the third room, eight children stay on for an additional two hours and three go home after the three ECCE programme hours. The additional hours are funded through NCS. The split between children who attend for three hours and those who attend for five hours is due to differences in minimum adult-child ratios during ECCE- and non-ECCE hours. The service had also in the past offered a five-hour programme which was funded through the Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) programme. The service manager felt that the additional two hours they were able to provide under CCSP allowed for more intensive work with vulnerable children, as well as ensuring that their basic needs were met:

> *"I would advocate for extending the day. (…) And it's purely down to an hour or two, bringing them to the five hours means we'll provide them with a hot meal every day. (…) But we can't if they're not here long enough. And for a lot of the children living in emergency accommodation it is the only chance to get to sit down with a social group to eat a meal, a hot, nutritious meal, and we can't do that for them. We do it for eight and we don't do it for the other 25. And that's sad." (Third-sector representative 1)*

Managers and educators at the service had also observed big developmental differences between children who attended for the three ECCE hours and others who were able to avail of an additional two hours a day:

> *"The ECCE children here that are able to stay for an extra two hours a day. They are years ahead. Now we're what, the middle of May. And they're just so far ahead of the children that finish at 12. And we can't say it's a different practitioner, because three children in the classroom leave at 12. Yeah, so the extra hours are huge." (Third-sector representative 1)*

> *"Even though the three hours is amazing, for some families, it's not enough. There's a massive difference in the children that are here to two o'clock and the children that*

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are here to 12. It seems like they're years older, would be the best way to describe it. Before we had this conversation, I went up and the room leader in the [upstairs] room, she was having really good conversations with her children and they' really like chatting to her and it's like really good interactions, whereas I feel like mine are babies compared, but it's just because they've had an extra two hours. They've had an extra 10 hours a week for the last year. It's a massive difference. (Educator, Community service, Dublin)

Managers, educators and parents interviewed as part of WP4 were also supportive of a longer programme year, which would help ensure that children's basic needs are met throughout the year and provide continuity, safety and respite from difficult living conditions. Due to financial constraints, parents experiencing economic disadvantage are often unable to afford summer camps and a manager at a Third-sector organisation stated that being able to continue the ECCE programme during the summer, even with reduced hours, "would be a game changer for these children and families". This view was shared by managers and educators in other services:

"Even just three hours. Three hours out of that hotel room. I guess if there was like a model similar to the July provision, for like, ECCE kids who are, you know, maybe in the DEIS areas [sic., see footnote 13], or something? Or if there was some sort of model created, I definitely think it would be beneficial for parents, because there's a lot of stress when kids are–, you know, the summer break kind of holidays. It's a long [time]" (Educator, Community service, Dublin)

"Given the demographics of the families that we have here, particularly for continuity of routine, but also the safety element of it too, sometimes, given that they might be coming from chaotic homes, and the predictability of coming, [I think] that maybe it should be on for longer than 38 weeks. And again, I just think that's just purely again, for families and children who [need this] as a safe space, as a predictable routine for them, you know, they're coming in, they are definitely going to get something to eat, they're definitely going to be getting stimulation, they're going to experience new things. And I think, you know, if they looked at maybe making it longer, and fund it longer– "
(Educator, Community service, Co. Wicklow)

Representatives of the Traveller community felt that optional summer camps would be beneficial, while also allowing families to travel during the summer. A parent interviewed for WP4 made a similar argument, pointing also to the benefits of continuity while allowing for family time off:

"Some of the children will travel over to the UK or maybe other countries if there are family members, but summer camps? I think would be lovely. Even, you know, just to help the parents as well. Because, as you said, Mum still does a lot of the grunt work, you know they're all dressed, the kids, got to get kids to school, and so I think that would make a huge ease. Give the children that extra time out of the house and estates. To be with kids their own age. Because they really do love it, they're really engaged, like things like books and stuff at home can be challenging (…), so that

would give them more opportunities to have that if we did summer camps, Easter camps" (Traveller Community representative 1)

"Obviously, if you have children in school, it would be nice to be able to have a bit of time with them as well. So, I think for maybe an extra two weeks, or even like, week on, week off throughout the summer. (…) And I think it would be good for the children as well, because obviously it's only on two years, having those two months where they've nothing to do (…). And I think that because they're so young, they find it very hard to go back. (…) It took Cara a long time to kind of get back into it. (…) I even think they should go back a week or two before all the other children, especially if like mum's working or like dad has stuff to do and they have to go back. We haven't got a choice. I think they should have a week or two before, just to kind of let them wean them back in before, because obviously it's upsetting. (…) A settling in period." (Mother, WP4)

Increasing daily ECCE programme hours and extending the programme over the summer would also improve access to care for children with additional needs. Several programme providers explained that they were unable to offer additional hours or summer provision to children with additional needs because they could not avail of AIM Level 7 support outside ECCE programme hours. In the light of the difference additional hours could make to children's outcomes, described above, this meant that children with additional needs were at a disadvantage compared to their peers.

"Because we're in a DEIS area [sic., see footnote 13], we see an awful lot more children with complex needs. And the AIM is great. But the way it's structured at the moment, it is now forcing us to discriminate against children with additional needs. We can't offer them the extra NCS hours, we can't offer them summer provision, Easter provision, midterm provision, and we're having to sit and explain to those parents that your child can't have that place, because they have additional needs, and that is so unjust. And, and you're also seeing that big summer break, they come back in September, and we're starting all over again. We're back to square one with them on their second year of ECCE, the continuity isn't there." (Third-sector representative 1)

"The three hours is not enough for parents who need extra time and especially during the summer when parents still have to work, and we don't have a one-to-one and we don't have enough staff and I have to tell those children, "I'm sorry, I can't take you for the summer." I hate it. I hate June because of that because I know I'll have to tell parents your child has been here all summer, all year but now I can't. (…) Well, I think they tell us that children with autism thrive on continuity and doing the same thing, and we can't provide that for them all the time. (Manager, Community service, Co. Galway)

Changes are currently underway to make AIM available outside ECCE programme hours from September 2024, resolving the issues indicated above.

Summary and key findings on the perspectives of "hard-to-reach" families

Programme strengths and benefits

- Work Package 4 was designed to identify barriers to uptake and participation among disadvantaged groups, as well as possible programme enhancements that could help improve access.
- Experts and parents consulted as part of WP4 valued the ECCE programme.
- The free and universal character and the integrative ethos, facilitated by AIM, were considered key programme strengths in relation to access for disadvantaged groups.
- Vulnerable children benefit from the positive relationships and experiences, stable routines, safe spaces for play, and access to healthy snacks provided by the ECCE programme.
- The ECCE programme also helps create a "level playing field" and reduces educational disadvantage.
- Families benefit by gaining access to family support, developing parental capacity and routines, and gaining positive experiences of education.
- Benefits for homeless children include access to a stable environment, stable relationships and routines and access to child-friendly spaces for play.
- Newcomer children benefit from interactions with adults and peers, which help develop their English-language skills.
- Traveller children benefit from access to safe spaces for play. Children and families benefit from positive experiences of education, which can help heal educational trauma and help communities embrace education where practice is inclusive. A positive impact on maternal mental health and maternal capacity was also highlighted.
- Children with disabilities and/or additional needs benefit from additional opportunities for spotting developmental delays early and accessing early intervention, by developing their independence and confidence. Children with additional needs and typical children benefit from the integrative ethos of AIM.

Barriers and enablers

- Barriers and enablers were identified in relation to information and awareness; discrimination and lack of trust; availability of ECCE programme places; programme registration; rules around irregular attendance; transport and travel; and daily programme intensity.

Barriers around information and awareness

- Word of mouth and childcare providers are key sources of information on the ECCE programme. Isolated parents and parents who don't avail of professional childcare are less likely to be aware of the ECCE programme. Families experiencing homelessness accommodation and newcomers were identified as groups who are more likely to miss out on information about the ECCE programme due to isolation.
- Refugees and other newcomers are affected by language barriers, which can impact on awareness of the ECCE programme.
- Newcomers also missed out on advertising campaigns run when the ECCE programme was introduced and are therefore less likely to be aware of it. Information materials in different languages and multi-lingual advertising programmes were suggested as possible solutions.
- Limited access to the internet can be a barrier to awareness among Traveller families living on halting sites and families in homeless accommodation. Some disadvantaged parents also have

limited digital skills. For these groups, printed leaflets remain an important source of information.

- Routes for targeted distribution of information to all parents of eligible children could be explored, e.g. via the Department of Social Protection, which holds contact details for parents and information on children's birth dates.
- Information sessions organised in cooperation with community organisations can be helpful for relatively well-organised communities, such as the Traveller community. Established community organisations are best placed to facilitate these and to build awareness over time.
- Strong parental engagement and sharing children's work can help increase appreciation for the importance of preschool education among disadvantaged groups. One participating organisation found that parental engagement had a positive impact on attendance rates.

Barriers resulting from discrimination and lack of trust

- Discrimination and lack of trust constitute barriers for marginalised communities, in particular Roma and Traveller families.
- Strong community engagement and outreach, as well as community representation within the service, including staff, play resources and activities, decorations, and information materials, can build trust among marginalised communities.
- A dedicated Traveller education worker with multi-annual funding and a Traveller community background could also help improve trust and uptake among Traveller families.

Barriers around availability

- A lack of mid-term availability in areas of high demand can affect access for families experiencing homelessness, who often move between accommodation centres, as well as newcomers.
- In areas of high demand, limited start-of-term availability and long application windows can also affect newcomers, refugees, and mobile Travellers, who may arrive too late to secure a place.
- Some services keep emergency spaces available and/or prioritise vulnerable children who are referred by a professional. Additional funding could ensure availability of emergency spaces in disadvantaged areas.

Barriers around the registration process

- Parents and providers appreciated the easy registration process, which requires little input from parents.
- Application forms can present a barrier to illiterate parents. In-person registration can help address this barrier.
- The requirement of a PPS number, and in some services proof of address, present barriers for homeless families and newcomers, respectively. Delays in obtaining a PPS number can also affect access to AIM support.
- Language barriers can make paperwork challenging for newcomer and Roma families. Employing multi-lingual staff and providing application forms and information leaflets in different languages can help overcome language-related barriers.
- Because responsibility for finding a place lies with the parent, parental capacity can affect uptake and additional support may be required. A role similar to the Education Welfare Officer could support parents struggling to secure a place.

Barriers resulting from rules around irregular attendance and prolonged non-attendance

- Irregular attendance can be a challenge for children from many disadvantaged groups, in particular families experiencing homelessness, reflecting challenging family circumstances.
- Managers and educators discussed irregular attendance and "dropping out" among Traveller children mostly in terms of cultural difference, while reasons related to discrimination and marginalisation were only raised by Traveller representatives, suggesting lack of awareness and/or reluctance to engage with difficult questions among settled ECCE providers.
- The current rules around irregular attendance can act as a barrier to families experiencing difficult circumstances and to mobile Traveller families. The financial impact of losing an ECCE child may encourage discrimination by ECCE programme providers.

Barriers around transport, travel, and programme intensity

- Access to transport can be a barrier for disadvantaged groups, especially for families in homeless accommodation, refugee accommodation centres, and for Traveller and Roma families living on halting sites.
- The relatively short daily programme intensity can make regular attendance difficult for families, especially for those relying on public transport and for homeless families who are frequently moved between accommodation centres, sometimes far from the ECCE programme setting.
- The shorter hours of the ECCE programme (compared with longer primary school hours) act as a disincentive to take up of the second ECCE programme year. Increasing the daily intensity could improve uptake among disadvantaged groups.
- Additional hours could also improve educational and health outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Additional provision during the summer, on an optional basis, could benefit vulnerable children by offering continuity, routine, and regular access to food.
- Additional programme hours and weeks would improve access for children with additional needs, who are often excluded from summer camps and wrap-around care due to the limits of AIM. Changes to AIM, currently underway, are designed to address this from September 2024 in part-time and full-time services.

Chapter 8: Discussion

This rigorous mixed-methods study provides an independent and comprehensive review of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in Ireland for the first time since its inception in 2010. The review, in particular, identifies what has been working well within the ECCE programme over the past decade, what, if any, challenges still exist and what enhancements might be made with a focus specifically on the following research questions:

- Is the ECCE programme being implemented as intended, i.e. is it a universal programme available free to all children within the eligible age range, providing them with their first formal experience of early learning for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week for 38 weeks of the year for two years?
- Is it meetings its core objectives, i.e. to promote better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children; and to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children?
- Are there enhancements that can be made based on international evidence and experience to date?

In this chapter, the main findings gleaned from the four work packages (as presented in detail in Chapters 1-7) will be summarised and discussed in light of the three research questions detailed above.

Is the ECCE programme being implemented as intended?

Universal and free of charge

The free and universal character and the integrative ethos of the ECCE programme, facilitated by AIM, were considered key programme strengths. According to the majority of providers (71%) who responded to the survey, all children applying for an ECCE programme place were usually offered one and the majority of parents (78%) in the parent survey felt that when applying for an ECCE programme place they had a choice of settings from which they could choose. These findings suggest, therefore, that seven in ten services usually offer an ECCE programme place to all children who apply, making preschool education highly accessible for most children in Ireland. The majority of providers who responded to the survey also indicated that they currently have children with disabilities or additional needs (79%), children from one-parent families (79%) and children who speak a different language at home (76%) enrolled in the ECCE programme. Indeed, it is important to note that a sizeable minority of parents (40%) stated that they would not have been able to send their child to preschool had the ECCE programme not been available, and this percentage was higher for families with low household income: according to the parent survey, the majority of parents with a household income under €19,999 (76%) and with a household income between €20,000 and €39,000 (55%) would not have been able to send their child without ECCE, compared to only 12% of families earning over €140,000. This finding was reiterated by experts consulted on behalf of the hard-to-reach families: "Without the free ECCE, they wouldn't come." (Community service, Co. Cavan)

Accessibility and Availability Issues
Yet, despite the progress made to date, there are still some outstanding accessibility and availability issues, according to our findings, that require further consideration before it can be argued that the ECCE programme is, in practice, completely universal and free of charge to all eligible children in

Ireland and their families. The evidence from the provider survey suggests that services in Dublin and surrounding counties, as well as Cork (County and City), Louth, Roscommon and Carlow are most likely not to offer a place to every child applying, a finding that is supported by the national experts in particular:

> "From a planning point of view, there is huge shortage of ECCE places in some locations ….and it's very much been left to the market to kind of expand as needed." (National expert 1)

The evidence from the provider survey data suggests a positive relationship between size of service and not offering a place to every child applying where larger services are more likely to not have offered a place to every child applying than smaller services. Part-time and full-time services are more likely than sessional services not to have offered an ECCE place to every child applying for reasons other than toilet training. Private services in affluent areas, according to the provider survey, are least likely to offer all children a place, particularly in urban areas, and have a lower percentage of children with a disability or additional need.

On average, parents of children with longstanding illnesses, conditions, or disabilities and parents from ethnic minorities contacted and applied to more settings than other parents and were less likely to be offered a place at their preferred setting or feel that they had a choice of setting. In addition, qualitative data gleaned from Work Package 4 indicates that in some areas with high demand, access for newcomer children and children experiencing homelessness, refugees and mobile Travellers can be affected by lack of start and mid-term availability and limited flexibility in availability overall. Furthermore, while many parents and providers appreciated the accessibility of the ECCE programme registration process, some of the experts consulted with on behalf of the hard-to-reach families indicated that PPS numbers continue to present a barrier to vulnerable families e.g., parents with poor literacy skills and those in emergency accommodation.

Costs

While initiatives have been put in place to ensure that the ECCE programme is principally free of charge, some underlying costs still appear to prevail. A sizeable minority of providers (41%), particularly those in private services, in urban areas, and in affluent areas reported charging a booking deposit and one in three parents reported paying a booking deposit to secure an ECCE place. In most cases, the booking deposit does not exceed €100, according to the provider survey. Optional extras for additional ECCE minutes and school trips are offered by more than half of all services. One in ten parents found the cost of optional extras "difficult" or "very difficult" to afford and one in three parents reported that the optional extras did not feel "optional" to them. More than one in two parents would feel "uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable" declining to pay, and three in four did not know if their setting would provide support. Voluntary contributions are overall rare but are slightly more likely in disadvantaged areas and twice as likely in community as in private services. Most parents who were asked for voluntary contributions gave the full or some of the amount requested. However, while there may be some minor costs incurred by individual settings, the fact that the ECCE programme is principally free of charge to all families is something that parents particularly welcome, as evidenced in the following quotation:

> *"I know how big our fees were before three hours were taken out, like we needed full day care five days a week. And it was a lot of money. So, first of all, financially, that those three hours, that chunk was gone out of it, so that's a big plus. And I think it makes it more accessible to everybody, it's nearly becoming a thing now that it's just the done thing."* (Parent, Private service, Co. Roscommon)

Therefore, while some issues in terms of accessibility, availability and underlying costs as outlined above still require attention, in the main, the ECCE programme can be described as being implemented universally and free of charge.

Eligibility rules and age range

Parents, managers/providers and expert stakeholders were broadly in agreement with the established age range of 2 years, 8 months to 5 years, 6 months, and many saw the extension of the programme to a second year of provision as a "real benefit" and "very promising." Several of the experts, both national and international, were of the opinion though that the lower age limit should be reduced to counteract issues of educational disadvantage:

> *"We found in [our] study that extending it down to two years of age, the second birthday for disadvantaged children, was beneficial for the child. So, I would recommend that change be made in Ireland."* (International expert 3)

There is a lack of consensus, however, around enrolment/entry points. While over half (57.5%) of the providers surveyed were in favour of one entry point, principally because "it's easier to manage" and it avoids "interruptions throughout the year", a sizeable minority felt additional enrolment points would be beneficial. Parents of children born early or late in the year were most likely to support additional enrolment points. Several of the expert stakeholders agreed, arguing that the single-entry point "*seems a bit rigid."* (International Expert 1)

Intensity and adherence

The majority of provider survey respondents felt that the current daily (71%), weekly (70%), and annual (79%) intensity, as well as the maximum eligibility of two years (83%) was "about right". However, about one in three providers support a higher daily or weekly intensity, with four hours being the most commonly suggested daily intensity. One in two providers also support a higher daily intensity in the second year of the programme. There were some suggestions by the managers and educators in the qualitative interviews that increased daily and weekly intensity in the second year of the ECCE programme would be beneficial in preparation for primary school.

Parents tended to be less satisfied with the current daily (56.5%), weekly (56.5%) and annual (73.8%) intensity than providers. Nearly one in two parents expressed preference for an increased daily and weekly intensity and one in five parents support a longer maximum eligibility. Those parents who considered the current intensity levels as "too low", did so principally for the following reasons: costs of ELC, supporting working parents and meeting children's learning needs.

However, despite several parents calling for increased intensity levels, it is important to note that in four out of ten services, some children routinely attend for less than the full 15 hours a week. One in seven parents reported routinely sending their child for less than the full 15 hours a week and 13% skipped all or part of the first year of the programme as they felt their child was "*too young*". Interestingly, among parents taking part in the parent survey, those in full-time work were less likely

to reduce their child's ECCE programme hours (13.8%) than those working part-time (17.0%) or not in paid employment (22.5%). However, parents in part-time work were more likely to state that they intended to avail of the full two years than parents in full-time work (95.5% vs. 89.7%) or unemployed parents (88.3%). Experts and practitioners consulted for Work Package 4 (WP4) cautioned that rules on irregular attendance and funding can be counter-productive and constitute a barrier for vulnerable children who struggle with regular attendance for various reasons. Therefore, some re-consideration of the strict attendance rules and funding may be required.

Several of the experts were also keen to see an increase in intensity of the ECCE programme overall. Their reasons provided included alleviating pressure on parents in terms of childcare and supporting vulnerable children and their families, as well as children with additional needs. Even from the children's perspective, some children alluded to wanting "more" of the ECCE programme, with comments such as: *"More time"; "Maybe more"* Also, according to the experts who work closely with hard-to-reach families, the relatively short daily hours can present a challenge to uptake and regular attendance among disadvantaged groups.

Therefore, while there is broad agreement across the stakeholders as a whole with the overall current intensity of the ECCE programme, many providers, managers, parents, experts and children would like even more of the ECCE programme, particularly for children in their second year of the ECCE programme and those children from disadvantaged families.

Towards a graduate-led workforce

At present, all educators working in the ECCE programme must have a minimum NFQ Level 5 and the lead educator must have a minimum NFQ Level 6. While our data does not allow us to establish whether this requirement is being met in every service, our provider survey findings suggest that it is, in many cases, actually exceeded. In the provider survey, almost all of the respondents (93%) stated that at least one of their Early Years educators had a qualification above NFQ5 and 74% indicated that at least one lead educator had a qualification above NFQ6. There is a current commitment to move to a graduate-led workforce in Ireland, which is currently supported by a Graduate Premium under Core Funding. In line with existing administrative data on workforce qualification levels, the provider survey findings confirm that there is a definite movement in the right direction towards ensuring a graduate-led workforce in practice, where the majority of providers (74%) indicated that they had at least one graduate lead educator (NFQ7+) and almost one half of the providers (47%) indicated having at least one graduate Early Years educator (NFQ7+).

While services taking part in the provider survey rated their access to qualified educators as "appropriate", the findings suggest that it is more difficult to access qualified educators in sessional services and in particular those offering morning sessions only, and private settings, it seems, find it more difficult to access qualified educators than community services. Several providers/managers, educators and experts agreed however that recruiting and retaining graduates in the sector was becoming challenging principally due to poor pay and working conditions. As a result, many reported that staff were leaving to go to the primary sector where they will not only earn better salaries, but also higher respect and prestige.

The findings from this review therefore indicate, that while the ECCE programme is certainly meeting its minimum staffing qualifications, and is making a positive move towards a graduate-led workforce,

efforts need to continue in terms of graduate pay and working conditions before real progress can be made in terms of retaining such graduates in practice.

Adult-child ratios

The minimum adult-child ratio defined in the current ECCE programme rules is 1:11. However, findings from the provider survey suggest that most settings appear to operate a lower ratio than 1:11 in practice with AIM Level 7 support (41%) or without (31%). Only 35% of the ECCE programme providers indicated that they currently operate at the stipulated 1:11 adult-child ratio and it was reported by providers that an inadequate adult-child ratio and challenging behavioural difficulties were key reasons for not offering a place to every child applying after the introduction of AIM. Indeed, a sizeable minority of providers expressed in the qualitative comments that the current adult-child ratio is too high, purporting reasons such as high needs among children under 3, toileting support, time for individual attention and accommodating children with additional needs and those with behavioural challenges not supported for AIM Level 7. Several of the experts agreed with this thinking, expressing satisfaction, in the main, with an adult-child ratio of 1:11 for children aged three or above, if suitably qualified, but emphasising the need for a lower ratio for those children under 3.

Is the ECCE programme meeting its core objectives to promote better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children?

Although the research design does not allow direct responses to these questions regarding meeting cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes, reports from providers/managers, parents and experts, as well as the QLI findings, shed some light on these important issues.

Socio-emotional outcomes

The majority of providers and parents were clear in their response that the ECCE programme is benefitting their children in terms of providing opportunities for social interactions (providers: 71.5%, parents: 54%) and several providers and some parents also referred to the emotional health and well-being benefits their children receive as a result of engaging in the ECCE programme (providers: 62%, parents: 38%). Indeed, many managers saw the social and emotional learning that children receive during their time in the ECCE programme as integral to the entire learning experience summed up in the following comment: "*Well, I actually think that probably the social and emotional skills are the two top ones that are built here in those two years because we don't focus on academics here at all. We focus on the dispositions and the skills and all of that.*" (Manager, Community service, Westmeath)

Most parents taking part in the parent survey felt that their child had become more confident and independent (78.8% "Strongly Agree"/18.6% Agree) since starting the ECCE programme. Such thinking was reiterated in the focus groups and individual interviews, where many parents referred to the friendships and interactions with peers that their children had developed as a key positive of the ECCE programme, improving their children's overall social skills and levels of confidence. Children, during the conversations with them, also indicated that they really valued engaging in social experiences and playing with their friends in the ECCE programme, and when drawing pictures of what they enjoy in the ECCE programme, images of playing with their friends appeared very dominant. These positive findings are supported by data from the Quality Learning Instrument where the average mean score for children's actions across the 30 settings fell into the top end of the satisfactory-high rating for social interaction (4.6), respect (4.8), confidence (4.7) and well-being (4.7).

Cognitive outcomes

With regard to cognitive learning, the majority of providers found it "very important" to develop children's ability to inquire and explore based on their own curiosity and "important" to think creatively and critically and to reason logically. Developing such skills, according to the provider survey, is seen as an integral part of the curriculum in most services. Several providers (35.5%) and the majority of parents also saw the ECCE programme as a preparation for primary school. In terms of the impact the ECCE programme had on children's (cognitive) learning and development, the majority of providers (92%) and parents (74%) were positive in their response and 94% of providers strongly agreed or agreed that the ECCE programme "promotes optimal development for all children". Likewise, the experts also were in agreement that the ECCE programme was impactful in terms of children's holistic learning as summed up in the following statement: "*It's good that it's developmental, it's not just somewhere where kids are minded, it's now a learning and development space." (National expert 4)*

Although providers and parents appear to value the cognitive aspect of children's holistic learning and see it as a core component of the ECCE programme, in practice children's cognitive outcomes, according to the Quality Learning Instrument, appear to be slightly lower than their social and emotional learning. The average mean scores across the 30 settings for children's actions on 'Concentration' and 'Multiple Skill Acquisition' were 4.1 and 4.0 respectively i.e. the lower end of the satisfactory to high rating, while the average mean score for children's actions on 'Higher Order Thinking Skills' was 3.7 i.e. the high end of the satisfactory rating. Indeed, the 'Higher Order Thinking Skills' indicator stood out in particular as being lower than the other quality indicators not only with regard to children's actions but on each aspect of the learning triangle, with an average mean score of 3.4 for Teaching Strategies and 3.8 for the environment. In this way, while supporting children's cognitive development as part of their holistic learning appears to be valued by the services, educators' capacity to fully stretch and challenge young children's cognitive learning through the medium of play and playful pedagogies may require some further consideration.

Is the ECCE programme meeting its core objectives to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children?

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds gain key benefits from participating in the ECCE programme according to the experts consulted on behalf of the hard-to-reach families, along with educators and managers. These range from the provision of a positive and stable experience for homeless children, English language skills for newcomer children, the potential identification of development delay and access to early intervention for children with additional needs to providing a safe place to play for Traveller children, and, where practice is inclusive, an opportunity for Traveller families to heal educational trauma and help communities embrace education. Several parents also alluded to the gains that their children experience as a result of attending the ECCE programme including language development, social awareness, confidence, and "*coming out of their shell."*

The positive impact of AIM on meeting the needs of children with disabilities and additional needs was also seen as a key strength of the ECCE programme, yet some challenges still remain.

While the majority of providers were confident that they could meet the needs of children from most minority backgrounds "well" or "very well", sizeable minorities felt that their ability to meet the needs of children with disabilities or additional needs and children who speak a different language at home was, at best, adequate. Experts therefore were keen to point out the high level of skill required on the part of educators to meet the needs of children from diverse backgrounds, emphasising the importance of recruiting and retaining "a very highly qualified staff" which continues to pose difficulties "*when the salary scales are* still *really not equal to those that people can earn, never mind in the education system, you know, in the local supermarket sometimes" (National Expert 10).* Notwithstanding the success of AIM within the ECCE programme to date, others were keen to see an inclusion model that is "much broader" and "that shouldn't just be about children with additional needs" (National Expert 1).

Several experts believe that the ECCE programme is providing "*an equal playing pitch for children." (National Expert 9).* The data from the Quality Learning Instrument supports this finding, showcasing little pronounced difference in the quality of the overall learning experience provided between those settings in more advantaged areas (average mean score = 4.1) and those in less advantaged settings (average mean score = 4.2) according to the HP deprivation index[18]. Although due to the small sample size these findings must be read with caution, there is a tentative suggestion within the QLI findings that the disadvantaged settings outperformed the advantaged settings on those quality indicators which relate to the social and emotional aspect of learning, e.g. confidence (D = 4.5 versus A = 4.3), well-being (D= 4.6 versus A= 4.4), independence (D= 4.3 versus A= 3.6) and social interaction (D= 4.3 versus A =4.0). On the other hand, the settings in the more advantaged areas appeared to outperform those settings in the disadvantaged areas on the more cognitive quality indicators, i.e. concentration (A= 4.2 versus D= 4.1), Multiple Skill Acquisition (A = 4.1 versus 3.6) and Higher Order Thinking Skills (A = 3.7 and D = 3.6). There was no difference in the scores for motivation and respect where both advantaged and disadvantaged settings scored 4.3 and 4.6 respectively. These findings suggest that children in the more disadvantaged areas may not be as ready as their more affluent peers to engage with the more cognitive aspects of learning and require a greater emphasis to be placed on nurturing social and emotional learning in these early years.

In summation, it is important to note that while a large majority of providers (90%) who responded to the survey strongly agreed or agreed that the ECCE programme goes some way to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children, they expressed least confidence in this third programme objective. Therefore, while the ECCE programme can be described as going some way to narrow this gap, some important challenges remain.

Are there enhancements that can be made?

While the findings from the review certainly portray the ECCE programme in a positive light, there are certain possible opportunities for learning that come to the fore, both from the international and the

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[18] Please note that the one setting in the very disadvantaged area according to the deprivation index was not included in these comparisons as it appeared to be an outlier across the quality indicators with the QLI. Therefore, the advantaged settings comprised those in affluent and marginally above average categories according to the deprivation index i.e. 14 settings in total. The disadvantaged settings, on the other hand, comprised those in the marginally below average, and disadvantaged categories according to the deprivation index i.e. 15 settings in total.

empirical evidence to date, that if implemented, might go some way to enhance the programme for all concerned. These include:

- Increasing the intensity of the programme
- Injecting more flexibility into the system
- Improving adult-child ratios for younger age groups
- Strengthening the professionalisation of the workforce
- Enhancing access to quality professional development opportunities
- Providing greater support for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and families

Increasing the intensity of the programme

The evidence from this review is very clear regarding the importance of retaining the free and universal character of the ECCE programme as well as the second year. Yet, the research participants suggest that some consideration might be given to increasing the daily intensity of the ECCE programme perhaps from 3 hours to 4 hours per day in the second year for all children in preparation for primary schooling and enhancing the daily and annual intensity of the ECCE programme for children from disadvantaged and more vulnerable backgrounds, to ensure availability over the summer months. While the wider evidence base on associations between time intensity and child outcomes is not unanimous, some evidence suggests that longer hours, up to 20 hours per week, can be beneficial, especially for disadvantaged children and their families and do not increase likelihood of negative outcomes, if provision is of high quality (e.g., Melhuish and Gardiner, 2023). Longer hours afford more opportunities for programme development, involving children in the planning of activities, engaging in process-oriented activities, and preparing for the transition to primary school (OECD, 2018).

Injecting more flexibility into the system

While the ECCE programme is highly revered by all concerned, the findings point towards the need for enhanced flexibility and less rigidity in the ECCE programme rules, affording families "a bit of choice" and "more leeway" as recommended by the European Commission (2019:10) more widely:

> "Flexibility in the provision of childcare is considered a quality dimension and specifically a factor contributing to ensure access to ECEC. Flexibility is intended to ensure that ECEC services respond to families' specific needs and circumstances, through adapted opening hours and content of the programme."

In terms of enrolment to the ECCE programme, the findings suggest that a degree of flexibility may be beneficial in particular for those children just missing the cut-off point (who require a lower starting age) and those December born children who require an increased starting age to afford them a little more time to develop. The introduction of the second year of the ECCE programme has resulted in a delayed primary school start for many children in Ireland, a change which is positively supported by the wider evidence base which suggests that an extended period of informal, play-based learning in an ELC setting can foster better child outcomes (Dee and Sievertson, 2015). However, currently parents of the youngest third of each ECCE programme cohort face barriers to delaying their child's primary school enrolment due to strict ECCE programme eligibility rules, and for that reason, some flexibility injected into the ECCE programme, as in the case of Northern Ireland and Scotland, to afford these children such a benefit also should be considered. Likewise, there were calls from parents, particularly of children born in January and March for more enrolment points, other than the single

entry point for the ECCE programme that is currently being practised. Ensuring availability throughout the year (i.e. by funding a certain number of reserved emergency spaces) would also allow children from families experiencing homelessness, newcomers, refugees and mobile Travellers to engage more fully in the ECCE programme. Furthermore, with regard to attracting greater numbers of children from these vulnerable families into the ECCE programme, re-considering the stringent rules on funding and regular attendance may be a useful strategy for going forward. As one owner/manager from a private service in County Mayo indicates: *"An over-rigid application of rules and dates is not in the children's best interest"*.

Improving adult-child ratios for younger age groups

While the findings from this review suggest that the stakeholders were in agreement with the current adult-child ratio of the ECCE programme for older children, there were definite calls for a lower ratio for the youngest children. Educators in particular felt that a lower ratio would benefit the quality of interactions. This thinking corresponds with the wider evidence base. Although the evidence is generally weak and inconclusive with regard to the association between ratios and child outcomes (Daalgard et al., 2022 and Melhuish et al., 2015), one study found that modest improvements in cognitive achievement, and socio-emotional outcomes could be achieved at an adult-child ratio of 1:7.5 as a result of higher-quality interactions (Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017). The evidence in relation to ratios and process quality is much stronger than the evidence on child outcomes, and high process quality is a strong predictor of positive child outcomes. Lower adult-child ratios than the ratio currently provided within the ECCE programme tend to be associated with higher quality interactions (OECD, 2018) and process quality more generally (Daalgard et al., 2022 and Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018). OECD, (2023) agrees, emphasising lower adult-child ratios are particularly critical for high-quality interactions with children under the age of three. It is important to recognise that most children in the ECCE programme are over the age of three and all are at least 2.8 years old when they start. However, children in their first ECCE programme year are only beginning to develop their independence, emotional and social skills and will benefit from additional support compared to children in their second ECCE programme year. In summation, therefore, the findings from this study indicate that providers, educators and experts are calling for some improvements in adult-child ratios, possibly in the first programme year and in deprived areas.

Strengthening the professionalisation of the workforce

This study has found clear evidence that the incentives put in place by the Higher Capitation payments and the Graduate Premium after HC have helped encourage more graduates into the ECCE programme, although it is too early to say whether recent changes introduced under Core Funding will be able to maintain this effect. Many managers and educators we spoke to were still calling for increased salaries and enhanced working conditions. The data from this review suggests that challenges remain within the ECCE programme regarding recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff, a finding which is not particular to the context of Ireland (see e.g. EPI, 2017, Social Mobility Commission, 2020 and Pascal, Bertram and Albäck, 2020). Further efforts to extend funded working hours, in particular for sessional staff and AIM staff within the sector, through increased daily intensity and added non-contact time have been advocated, as has the offering of year-round funding for sessional staff to eliminate term-time contracts (and in the case of AIM staff zero-hour contracts) and avoid them having to "sign on" during the summer months and in so doing improve their overall status and professionalism. A review of provision for non-contact time in the Core Funding has also been called for with further consideration of additional, ring-fenced funding for non-contact hours to

ensure that no member of staff within the ECCE programme is expected to engage in administrative work or session preparation unpaid in their own time. However, recognition must be given to the on-going work of the Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan 2021-2028 (DCEDIY, 2021a), which is currently attempting to address issues on low pay and recruitment, and time permitted to embed, to enable the ECCE programme workforce feel the benefits of these initiatives and recognise their impact in practice.

Enhancing access to quality professional development opportunities

A further finding from this review of the ECCE programme is the need for more professional development opportunities to enhance quality in practice, in addition to the existing professional development opportunities at present (e.g. the National Síolta Aistear Initiative). Such a finding is supported by the wider evidence base where continuous professional development has been identified as a strong predictor of quality (OECD, 2018, Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018) which has an overall positive impact on child outcomes (Jensen and Würtz Rasmussen, 2019 and Egert, Fukkink and Eckhardt, 2018). It is worth noting that the workforce development plan Nurturing Skills includes a commitment to strengthen these opportunities further (Pillar 3 of Nurturing Skills).

With reference to those working in the ECCE programme, there appeared to be a need for more professional development in the field of play and playful pedagogies with particular regard to ensuring higher levels of challenge and rich playful learning opportunities to enable children to engage more fully in Higher Order Thinking. In addition, outdoor play is an area that children, in particular, are requesting more of: *"More Outside, we don't really go outside- only when the sun is out"*, a finding which was, to an extent, reflected in the feedback from providers. Although approximately 1/3 of the settings appear to have free-flow access to outdoors, while a further 1/3 have timetabled access, approximately 1/3 of services, according to the provider survey, only have access to the outdoors when weather is suitable or little access at all due to the unavailability of outdoor resources. More professional development in this field, and grants to support the purchase and development of outdoor space, could help ensure that more children have regular access to outdoor play: "*I don't think any setting should be allowed to open which does not have its own outdoor space"* (International Expert 4). Another area of focus that came to the fore within the study which requires further attention in terms of professional development is that of diversity and inclusion. According to an OECD report (2023) across OECD nations only about one third of early years educators receive training on working with children from diverse backgrounds and such professional development could prove advantageous also for staff within the ECCE programme in terms of building trust among marginalised communities.

In terms of type of professional development engaged in, the wider evidence base deems coaching models to be the most effective (Eadie et al., 2022), a recommendation which closely corresponds with the thinking of one of the international experts:

> "We did a review of Luxembourg and I mean that they're very strong on the professional development because I think we said it is a bit lacking (in Ireland). I mean there is a strong inspection process in Ireland but I mean if the centre doesn't really comply then what do you do? Just saying, okay, you close isn't an option. You want that centre to improve. So that's what they focus on in Luxembourg, to have some agent, some regional agent that works with a certain number of centres to improve

Providing greater support for disadvantaged and marginalised children and their families

Perhaps one of the most significant findings to emerge from this report, is the benefits that the ECCE programme is currently having on children from disadvantaged and marginalised groups, but further supports need to be considered in light of the fact that children from families experiencing social and or economic disadvantage and in particular those from Traveller and Roma communities are still less likely to avail of the ECCE programme than their peers. Lessons learned from the findings of this review point towards the advantage of practical supports in the form of information about the ECCE programme in a range of formats and languages and distribution through a range of channels (e.g. health and social care professionals, charities, and social media), as well as discarding PPS numbers in the enrolment process, to encourage a greater uptake of the ECCE programme among marginalised communities. Extending and broadening the scope of AIM, and the introduction of the Equal Participation Model, as is currently underway, should also be beneficial, according to providers/managers, parents and experts, to improve access and support a wider cohort of children beyond those with special education needs. Other practical developments, according to the experts in Work Package 4, that might be considered to address barriers to participation include funding for travel in disadvantaged areas or improved transport infrastructure and funding for optional summer schemes as well as encouraging representation from minority communities to enter the ECCE workforce through e.g. targeted training grants (as already committed to in NTRIS and Nurturing Skills). As several of the experts consulted on behalf of the hard-to-reach families emphasised, the measures put in place should focus more significantly on providing support to families in these communities in the first instance, in an effort to heal some of the educational trauma and distrust experienced. In this way, some consideration might be given to introducing a fully funded HSCL-type scheme into the ECCE programme in a similar way that it has been introduced into all DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity) Urban primary schools and all DEIS post-primary schools. Similar funding models could be explored to ensure that all ECCE programme services in disadvantaged communities would have access to a role similar to the HSCL Co-ordinator whether independently in the form of full-time provision or in a shared capacity across part-time and sessional services. The EPM could serve this function. Evidence points to the valuable support that such an initiative brings, not only to schools and families but also to children alike (Walsh et al., 2022). The wider evidence base also indicates the importance of high-quality settings for disadvantaged children in particular (van Huizen and Plantenga, 2018) and evidence by Melhuish and Gardiner (2023) emphasises how disadvantaged children's development improved more in more inclusive and 'mixed' settings in terms of culture and socio-economic status and further opportunities for such practices within the ECCE programme should therefore be more fully explored.

Concluding comments

This independent, mixed-methods study has raised some pertinent issues with regard to the ECCE programme in terms of what is working well, the challenges that remain and some possible solutions in terms of moving forward. However, the most important message to emerge strongly from the research is that the ECCE programme has been very positively received and is valued by all concerned i.e. children, parents, providers, managers, educators and a range of expert stakeholders. Almost all

of the providers who responded to the survey reflected upon the ECCE programme in positive terms, with over one third of the providers deeming their experience of implementing the ECCE programme as "very positive". The majority (75%) of parents were "very satisfied" with the ECCE programme with a further 23% expressing satisfaction. The qualitative interviews confirm this overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the ECCE programme expressed by the managers, educators and parents:

> *"I could actually not even imagine sending any of them to primary school without having been through ECCE, I just can't even imagine it – it's such a foundation. It's amazing. I just yeah, I think it's brilliant, very well rounded." (Parent, Private service, Co. Sligo).*

The children's conversations also reflected a hugely positive response towards the ECCE programme experience. Experts consulted on behalf of the hard-to-reach families, and national and international experts consulted as part of Work Package 3, also greatly appreciated the ECCE programme, as reflected in comments such as "hugely important", "of primary importance", "an essential public service" and "the jewel in the crown". Indeed, some of the national and international experts were so positive about the ECCE programme, and indeed the wider ELC system in Ireland as a whole, that they referred to it as a model of good practice from which other countries can learn. The ECCE programme is a definite good news story for ELC in Ireland, and if the considerations for future development are embraced, as clearly outlined within this study, the ECCE programme has certainly the potential to go from strength to strength.

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