

EQUAL PARTICIPATION MODEL
POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

FEEDBACK FROM NGO WORKSHOP DAY 1

MARCH 21ST 2023

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

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

EPM POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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

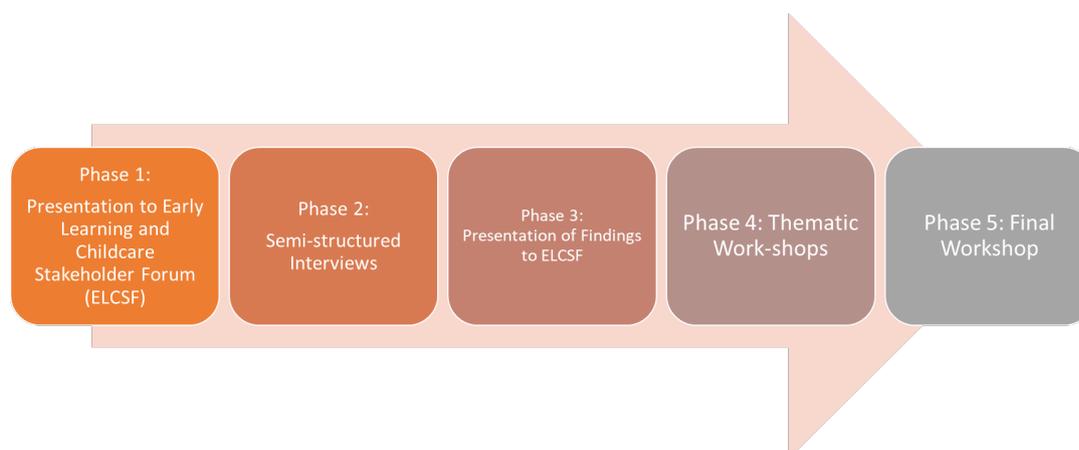
EPM: COMMUNICATIONS AND CONSULTATION PLAN

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

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

STRAND 1: ENGAGEMENT

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



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

FACILITATED WORKSHOPS

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

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

METHODOLOGY

STRUCTURE

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

CAFÉ STYLE DISCUSSION

The methodology can be summarised as follows:

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

REPORT

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

NGO WORKSHOPS

The first pair of workshops were held on March 21st and March 28th, and were designed to be attended by Non-governmental organisations who work with and/ or advocate for, or represent, the different cohorts of children the model will try to reach, including Traveller, Roma, homeless, refugees, migrants, lone parent families.

NGO WORKSHOPS DAY 1 MARCH 21ST

The first NGO workshop, held on March 21st, gave an introduction to the EPM as well as an overview of the entire Phase 4 (thematic workshops.) Specifically, the aim of the workshop was to pose four main questions to the participants, encouraging feedback and discussion regarding the barriers to accessing, participating/ learning and enjoying ELC and SAC settings. The four questions posed were:

1. Who has difficulties accessing ELC and SAC services?
2. Who has difficulties participating/ enjoying and learning in ELC and SAC?
3. What are the barriers causing difficulties in accessing ELC and SAC?
4. What are the barriers causing difficulties participating/ enjoying and learning in ELC and SAC?

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

The remainder of this document provides a summary of the main discussion points and prominent issues raised by the participants in response to the above questions during the course of the NGO Workshop Day 1.

WHO HAS DIFFICULTIES ACCESSING ELC AND SAC SERVICES?

One of the first questions put to the tables regarding the Equal Participation Model referred to the range or type of parents, families and children who have difficulties accessing ELC and SAC services. Participants were asked to discuss and answer the question based upon the experience of their own organisations, as well as their direct experience of the sector from working with other bodies. In this case, all participants were instructed to focus the discussion upon the **people** with difficulties accessing ELC and SAC services, as opposed to discussing the obstacles being faced (which would be discussed later); however, when identifying the people themselves, many of the participants also gave their reasons for inclusion, which are reflected in the narrative below.

ROMA AND TRAVELLER FAMILIES

The most prominent group mentioned during the discussions within, and among, the tables was that of Roma and Traveller families. A recurring reason given among the participants for identifying this group included the above average prevalence of common obstacles faced by other groups, particularly regarding literacy and the resulting difficulties in completing the administrative process for registration for NCS funding, and ELC and SAC services. Also of relevance is the potential for a lack of trust among the Roma and Traveller families of institutions such as Tusla and the HSE, with whom they may often associate access to, and the provision of, ELC and SAC services. It should also be noted that this group were identified as a particular concern regarding equality of access, due to the potential for systematic racism within the ELC and SAC sector against members of Roma and Traveller families, potentially creating additional barriers that are not faced by many other parents, families and children in Ireland.

LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Low-income families are particularly affected by substantial barriers arising from the complexity of the system, cost of services and potential payment issues. Also, as with the Asylum Seekers and Refugees below, there is a general lack of awareness among many parents and families of the range of supports available to facilitate access to ELC and SAC services. In addition to the above were families experiencing homelessness or failing to meet the habitual residency condition, although this was not as prominent an issue as low-income.

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

Asylum seekers and refugees were of particular concern, due to a variety of factors, including language barriers, isolation in direct provision centres and lack of access to digital information regarding NCS and ELC and SAC services. As a result, as stated in the discussions, in many cases, asylum seekers and refugees have very little knowledge or awareness of the ELC and SAC sector, and general NCS supports that are available. Participants also highlighted, on a number of occasions, the impact of constant movement between centres, which leads to a disruption in ELC and SAC services, often causing the families to have to re-start the administration process, from scratch, on numerous occasions.

INTERSECTIONALITY OF DISADVANTAGE

The next most prominent group mentioned was less specific in terms of identity, but regarded as very important by the participating organisations. In this case, the participants were eager to highlight the impact of various intersectional factors that contribute to difficulties experienced by families, across a wide range of socio-economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These factors include additional needs, homelessness and ethnicity, which, when combined, lead to particularly challenging circumstances for parents, families and children trying to access ELC and SAC services.

CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Parents and families of children with additional needs, whether physical, intellectual or emotional, were another prominent group, with the difficulty of accessing ELC and SAC spaces being noted on several occasions.

FAMILIES IN RURAL AREAS

The lack of services in rural areas, coupled with transportation difficulties, further exacerbates accessibility issues for families in these regions. However, these were mentioned less frequently.

MIDDLE-INCOME FAMILIES

Although not given as much prominence as those above, a number of the tables highlighted the need to acknowledge the difficulties faced by middle-income families, who can find themselves unable to meet the financial costs of ELC and SAC services while, at the same time, unable to access specific funding packages tailored for lower-income families.

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

The second question put to the participants referred to the types of parents, families and children who have difficulties participating/ enjoying and learning in ELC and SAC services; after they have accessed the services. As with Question 1, participants were asked to identify the groups of parents, families and children affected, as opposed to discussing the barriers in detail (which was discussed later.) It also should be noted that, on several occasions, the most prominent groups listed below were often identified by the circumstances that they faced within the ELC and SAC services, as opposed to their socio-economic, ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

CHILDREN IN POOR QUALITY AND NON-RESPONSIVE SETTINGS

The most prevalent group identified was defined by attendance in ELC and SAC settings that are not able to address the required needs, due mainly to shortcomings and difficulties within the overall ELC and SAC sector. The category encompasses children in settings where there is a high staff turnover and those who are in poor quality settings due to the lack of experienced staff and/ or the physical limitations of the ELC and SAC premises and equipment. In these cases, most of the participants were eager to state that the shortcomings arose from the resources available to the ELC and SAC services, as opposed to the services themselves.

CHILDREN WHOSE IDENTIFY IS NOT REFLECTED IN THE SETTING

The discussion referred to the need for services, settings and curriculum to reflect the diverse backgrounds of the families and children attending; to encourage participation and facilitate greater enjoyment of the ELC and SAC experience. Particular reference was made to children who do not see their culture reflected in the ELC and SAC services, children and parents who do not have English as their first language, and specific cohorts of children such as asylum seekers, migrants, Travellers and Roma, who may feel invisible and unwelcome.

LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

This is a broad category that includes parents and children who struggle to meet the financial demands associated with participation in ELC and SAC services, including resources, extracurricular activities, and involvement in activities requiring additional financial contributions.

CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS AND SUPPORTS

Children who have additional needs before AIM kicks in, and those with behavioral issues or diagnosed additional needs seem to be a prevalent group facing difficulties in participation, enjoyment, and learning in ELC and SAC services. Also mentioned were children for whom AIM has been secured, but who are using the ELC and SAC services outside of AIM hours, i.e., their additional support ends within the setting but their additional needs continue.

CHILDREN AND PARENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

This includes children who have experienced trauma and parents who are dealing with their children's trauma without adequate guidance or expertise from the services.

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

In Question 1, the participants identified the groups and people who have difficulties accessing ELC and SAC services. As part of their responses, they briefly discussed the barriers that these people face. This question provided the participants with an opportunity to discuss the barriers in greater detail, providing a base from which to identify possible supports and solutions in the NGO Workshop Day 2. The most prominent barriers identified are listed below.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

The cost barrier was explicitly highlighted as a universal issue and was mentioned in multiple contexts throughout the discussion. It is not only a stand-alone issue but also impacts other aspects such as access to work for parents and limits the availability of places due to the high cost of delivery in a for-profit model.

AVAILABILITY AND CAPACITY

One of the most obvious, yet most prevalent, barriers discussed was that relating to availability and capacity, with many parents and families simply unable to find ELC and SAC services with spaces for their child, whether in the immediate vicinity or the surrounding catchment area. Waiting lists are a common feature of the ELC and SAC sector, creating a barrier to access for those that cannot afford to travel to areas where supply can meet demand.

DISCRIMINATION AND RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

Issues around discrimination from services, lack of respect for diversity in society, and specific barriers faced by vulnerable groups such as Travellers, single parents, Roma, migrants, asylum seekers, and homeless families were repeatedly mentioned. In these cases, there was a concern that vulnerable groups were possibly being denied access to ELC and SAC settings, even when there was space available.

TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

Transportation was identified as a barrier to access, particularly in rural areas and in travelling from school to SAC. As a result, some parents were finding it difficult to justify returning to work when the difficulty and cost of transportation to and from ELC and SAC services was overriding the benefit.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND DIGITAL LITERACY

This was highlighted as a significant barrier, especially in terms of understanding subsidies and supports, enrollment procedures, and general rights and responsibilities. The discussion highlighted the lack of awareness among a wide variety of groups of the supports and subsidies available, and even of the actual existence of the ELC and SAC sector itself. Digital literacy poses a problem for those attempting to register on the system, both in terms of use of digital information, and the lack of access to digital systems in premises such as Direct Provision Centres.

IMPACT OF HOUSING STATUS

The transience for homeless children/asylum seekers, and the effect of housing on childcare, were mentioned as barriers. In this case, parents and families, and organisations acting on their behalf, found that they often had to restart the registration process, from scratch, as a family moves from one area to another. This causes significant delays in registration and, in some cases, a reluctance by parents and families to participate in the process, having already submitted the information, on numerous occasions, at a previous time.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ELC AND SAC

Different funding for SAC, lack of curriculum/standards for SAC, lack of qualifications regulation, and SAC not being a core funded programme appear as issues and potential barriers to access.

TOILETING SKILLS

Children with trauma or additional needs are more likely to lack toileting skills, resulting in missing out on ELC/SAC services that only accept those with toileting skills.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS CAUSING DIFFICULTIES PARTICIPATING/ ENJOYING AND LEARNING IN ELC AND SAC?

In Question 2, the participants identified the groups and people who have difficulties participating/ enjoying and learning in ELC and SAC services. As part of their responses, they briefly discussed the barriers that these people face. Question 4 provided the participants with an opportunity to discuss the barriers in greater detail, providing a base from which to identify possible supports and solutions in the NGO Workshop Day 2. The most prominent barriers identified are listed below.

REPRESENTATION AND INCLUSION

This issue was one of the most consistently mentioned, covering a variety of aspects ranging from the lack of visual representation to a lack of celebration of diversity in the learning environment. As a result, many children feel unconnected due to a lack of representation in the services. The absence of elements reflecting children's identities, such as images, stories, toys, and equipment that represent their backgrounds, contributes to feelings of exclusion. Moreover, there seems to be a lack of celebration of diversity, such as Traveller Pride Week, which would promote inclusivity.

RESOURCES

The lack of resources came up frequently in several different contexts, including a lack of physical and therapeutic resources, specialised resources for children with additional needs, and resources for diverse activities. Both physical and therapeutic resources are limited. The physical environments of many services are not always suitable or appropriate for mixed abilities and there's a scarcity of specialised resources like sensory rooms, which are particularly important for children with additional needs. Furthermore, many children requiring therapeutic resources face long waiting lists, indicating a lack of accessibility to essential support.

STAFF AWARENESS AND TRAINING

Staff awareness and training was highlighted not only in terms of the current state of staff awareness but also as a crucial need for the future. There's an apparent need for more training and refresh courses for staff around the topics of diversity and inclusion. Lack of skilled, caring, and confident staff negatively impacts children's sense of security.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Family income appears to significantly influence participation in various activities, leading to a fear of isolation and embarrassment among lower-income families. Deprivation, complex trauma, and social determinants of health play significant roles in affecting children's participation and enjoyment.

STAFFING AND INVESTMENT IN THE WORKFORCE

While not as frequently mentioned as others, this barrier is highlighted as a significant concern affecting the quality of services. Low staffing levels, resulting in a shift from a child-centered approach to a more managerial

one, were highlighted. Moreover, low wages for staff in this sector suggest a lack of investment in, and general commitment towards, the workforce.

LACK OF SPECIALISED STAFF AND SERVICES

This issue came up a few times, particularly in the context of children with additional needs and from migrant communities. There is a deficiency of staff with specialist skills, particularly for children with issues arising from trauma, and who have additional needs.

PARENTAL CONCERNS AND PARTICIPATION

Parents showed hesitation around the benefits of the ELC and SAC services, especially for children with additional needs in mainstream classes. In addition, there seem to be limited opportunities for active parental involvement.

TRANSITION SUPPORT

There's a marked lack of dedicated support around school and family transitions, and this is particularly noticeable for SAC services.

DIFFERENCES IN ELC AND SAC SERVICES

There are disparities between ELC and SAC in terms of funding, the age group of children served, and the absence of a proper framework for SAC. SAC also struggles with limited resources for children with additional needs.

INSURANCE LIMITATIONS

Insurance constraints limit the range of activities and premises available to children, restricting their opportunities for active involvement and learning through play.