EQUAL PARTICIPATION MODEL
POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

FEEDBACK FROM ELC AND SAC SECTOR WORKSHOP DAY 1

APRIL 18TH 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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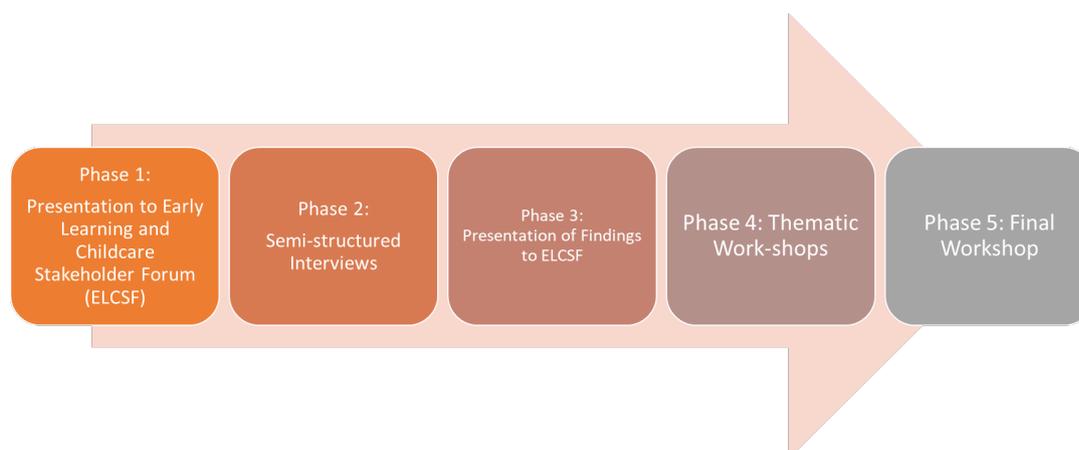
Of the above phases, Phase 4: Thematic Work-shops is relevant to this assignment.

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.

ELC AND SAC SECTOR WORKSHOPS

The second pair of workshops were held on April 18th and April 25th, and were designed to be attended by ELC and SAC providers, educators, practitioners and ELC and SAC representative bodies.

(In addition to the two onsite workshops, two online workshop discussions were held with ELC and SAC educators and practitioners (May 2nd and May 9th), the results of which are included in the feedback represented in this document.)

ELC AND SAC SECTOR WORKSHOPS DAY 1 APRIL 18TH

The first ELC and SAC sector workshop, held on April 18th, 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 two main questions to the participants, encouraging feedback and discussion regarding the barriers to accessing, participating/ learning and enjoying ELC and SAC settings. Limiting the number of questions to two allowed greater discussion within, and among, the tables, focusing on the practical issues faced by ELC and SAC service providers. The two questions posed were:

1. Who has difficulties accessing, participating, learning and enjoying your ELC and SAC services?
2. What are the barriers causing difficulties in accessing, 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 ELC and SAC Workshop Day 1.

WHO HAS DIFFICULTIES ACCESSING, PARTICIPATING, LEARNING AND ENJOYING YOUR ELC AND SAC SERVICES?

The first question put to the tables regarding the Equal Participation Model referred to the range or type of parents, families and children who have difficulties accessing, participating, learning and enjoying the participants' ELC and SAC services (or services in general where appropriate.) Participants were asked to discuss and answer the question based upon the experience of their own services, as well as their direct experience of the sector if they were not directly involved in a service. 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.

CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

This group was mentioned several times, with specific emphasis on the lack of resources and support for their unique needs, particularly for those under 2 years old.

LACK OF SUPPORT

One of the most pressing issues raised was the lack of support for these children, particularly those under 2 years old. Without sufficient support structures, these children tend to face difficulties in accessing and fully participating in ELC and SAC services, while their parents and families will often question the value of the ELC and SAC settings if little to no support is available.

LACK OF SPECIAL EQUIPMENT AND SENSORY ROOMS

The feedback suggested that a lack of special equipment significantly impacts the enjoyment and participation of children with additional needs. The absence of appropriate resources can hamper their learning experience and overall satisfaction. For children with sensory issues, accessing sensory rooms to self-regulate and then participate in and enjoy the learning experience appears to be a challenge. This suggests a need for more tailored facilities and resources within ELC & SAC services – which is also raised in a separate theme later.

LIMITED AVAILABILITY OF AIM SUPPORTS

While some children with additional needs may avail of Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) supports, AIM supports are restricted to certain hours and are not available for full daycare and SAC, which has a direct effect upon these children's ability to access, participate, learn and enjoy the ELC and SAC setting.

NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING FAMILIES/CHILDREN AND PARENTS

Language barriers were frequently mentioned, both for children and parents. This affects both access to services and effective participation in learning.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Non-English speaking children and their parents face considerable challenges due to language barriers. These obstacles impact their ability to access services and participate effectively in learning activities. For parents, this language barrier can also hamper their awareness, and understanding, of the value of ELC and SAC services.

ACCESSING SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Non-English speaking families appear to encounter issues accessing government services, specifically Mygov.ie, due to language barriers. This suggests a need for more comprehensive language support or translated resources. They also face additional difficulties when finding sponsorship for the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), as well as when being made aware of, and understanding, the sponsorship system.

CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

The feedback highlighted potential issues around representation of all nationalities within ELC & SAC services, such as in stories, toys, and staff, which affect non-English speaking families' sense of belonging and engagement with these services.

PARENTS FACING MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION ISSUES

These challenges were frequently brought up, showing that parents struggling with these issues face substantial barriers to engaging with and accessing ELC and SAC services.

ENGAGEMENT WITH SERVICES

The discussions among the tables suggested that these parents struggle to engage with ELC & SAC services. They will often not fully understand the value of these services for their children or will be too overwhelmed by their own challenges to effectively engage.

TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

For parents dealing with mental health and addiction issues, transportation to and from services might pose a significant barrier, especially if they live in remote areas or if their conditions make regular travel difficult.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

These parental challenges appear to impact the children's ability to consistently attend and participate in the ELC and SAC services. Children of parents dealing with these issues might need additional support and resources to help them engage fully in their learning and development.

CHILDREN FROM THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY AND ROMA BACKGROUND

INTERGENERATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

One particular point mentioned several times was the challenge of "intergenerational disadvantage." This could refer to a cycle of lower educational attainment, socio-economic hardship, and limited access to ELC and SAC services, which children from these communities face from generation to generation.

BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION

It was also stated in the discussion that there are instances of bias against certain families, which particularly affect children from the Travelling and Roma communities. This could manifest as unequal access to services, differential treatment, or an unwelcoming environment.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS OR POVERTY

These groups were consistently mentioned as facing substantial challenges. Poverty and homelessness appear to impact both access to services and successful participation.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

The instability often associated with homelessness and poverty impacts children's regular attendance and participation in the ELC & SAC services.

IMPACT ON ENJOYMENT

Homelessness and poverty affects children's ability to enjoy learning. For instance, one basic impact that was raised repeatedly was that the lack of hot meals can affect concentration, hence impacting enjoyment and learning. ELC and SAC services often try to meet these needs themselves, for example by providing meals or subsidising/ paying fees, but this is unsustainable in the long-term.

ACCESS TO SUPPORT

Parents without transport, particularly those experiencing homelessness or poverty, face difficulties accessing services, especially if services are not within walking distance or if public transport options are limited or costly. This has an obvious, and detrimental effect, on the parents' decisions to take up employment, with the cost/ difficulty of accessing ELC and SAC often offsetting completely the potential income to be earned through work.

CHALLENGES WITH GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

Low income families or those experiencing poverty will often have difficulties applying for sponsorship and navigating systems like the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). A number of tables gave examples of low income families that have had no awareness whatsoever of the NCS and the potential supports available for ELC and SAC.

FAMILIES IN REMOTE LOCATIONS

These families were mentioned as having difficulties mainly due to transportation issues, making it hard to access the services. Parents living in rural areas might be forced to make decisions that might not suit them or their children due to lack of options, which impacts upon the child-centric nature of the decisions being made.

STAFF FACING BURN-OUT AND LACK OF TRAINING

During this discussion, a number of the tables referred to the need to acknowledge that ELC and SAC staff themselves face difficulties in both participating and enjoying the ELC and SAC settings.

BURN-OUT

The feedback mentioned staff burn-out, implying that employees in these services often face excessive workloads, stress, or emotional exhaustion, potentially due to high demands, the complex needs of the children and families they serve, and additional tasks such as paperwork.

LACK OF TRAINING

There appears to be concern about the lack of training for staff, particularly around handling trauma and grief, resulting in staff feeling unprepared or unequipped to deal with some of the more complex challenges they encounter in their work, particularly as more and more children and families present with such issues.

CHALLENGES WITH SPECIFIC ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

The feedback suggests that staff members working with children with additional needs (such as those involved with AIM) face particular challenges in terms of their time and the level of care needed. It's also noted that there are high expectations placed on staff, and there might be a lack of recognition for their work compared to other roles such as teachers.

DIVERSE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The participants noted that service managers, who started in the early years out of love for children, are now taking on diverse roles such as accountants, HR experts, family support workers, counsellors, and fee-debt collectors. The diversity and pressure of these roles is contributing to burn-out and job dissatisfaction.

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

In Question 1, the participants identified the groups and people who have difficulties accessing their ELC and SAC services, or these services in general. 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, establishing a base from which to identify possible supports and solutions in the ELC and SAC sector Workshop Day 2. The most prominent barriers identified are listed below.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUREAUCRATIC BARRIERS

These barriers came up most frequently in the discussion. They cover a wide range of issues from the application process to government policies and the impact of parents' status under the NCS.

COMPLEX APPLICATION PROCESS

The administrative procedure for applying to ELC and SAC services was mentioned as a notable obstacle. For some families and parents, the process is complex, time-consuming, or lacks clear guidance, making it a barrier for these parents seeking to enroll their children in these services. Also of note in this regard is the confusion that can be caused by the use of acronyms, as well of the regular use of the term 'disability' for certain programmes that causes a reluctance among some communities to engage.

LACK OF UNDERSTANDING ABOUT ECCE AND SAC

Among communities such as Traveller, Roma, homeless, refugees, migrants and lone parent families, there is often a lack of awareness and understanding about what ELC and SAC services actually entail. This lack of knowledge prevents families from even contemplating about accessing services or supports they are eligible for, or could benefit from.

IDENTITY VERIFICATION

Obtaining a PPS (Personal Public Service) number and accessing the MyGov system were mentioned as administrative hurdles, particularly for those seeking citizenship.

FUNDING AND RESOURCES

Issues related to funding and resources were highly prevalent. They included challenges related to funding disparities, the lack of core and capital funding, issues with funding structures, and unrealistic paperwork and expectations tied to funding. The discussion focused particularly on the need for additional capital funding that could be categorised into two main headings, major capital and smaller capital.

MAJOR CAPITAL FUNDING

Major capital could be used to address barriers such as the accessibility of buildings, and the lack of sensory rooms and multi-disciplinary spaces, all of which were mentioned as significant obstacles to parents, families and children. This would have a direct impact upon the number of places available to meet demand, reducing the waiting lists that are so detrimental to those who cannot readily access ELC and SAC services.

SMALLER CAPITAL FUNDING

Small capital funding could be used to address the need to buy updated equipment, replace equipment that has to be returned through AIM, educational materials, toys, and culturally relevant resources. The smaller capital fund should be made available on an ongoing basis, as opposed to the limited timeframe often linked to major capital funding. Many of the tables mentioned the current need for ELC and SAC services to fundraise for these requirements, a situation that is unstainable and inappropriate for the future development of the sector.

FUNDING STRUCTURE AND PAPERWORK

Concerns were raised about the structure of funding and the associated paperwork required, which often can be considered unrealistic or burdensome. This could potentially deter service providers from accessing necessary funds, preventing expansion and the purchase of higher-quality resources.

STAFFING AND TRAINING ISSUES

Concerns around the availability of qualified and experienced staff, staffing ratios, staff training, and retention were frequently mentioned in terms of their impact upon supporting parents, families and children who would, otherwise, be given additional support to participate, enjoy and learn in the ELC and SAC settings.

SHORTAGE OF QUALIFIED STAFF

One of the most mentioned issues within and among the tables was the shortage of suitable, qualified, experienced, and skilled staff. This extends to the lack of relief staff and the specific need for additional staff to be able to open rooms to meet increasing demand, indicating a general deficiency in the workforce. Additionally, there were specific difficulties in recruiting afternoon staff and staff to support children with additional needs. Staff retention also appears to be a significant problem, with specific mention of difficulties retaining level 8 staff. This was linked in the discussions to issues around staff pay scales and terms and conditions tied to funding.

TRAUMA AND GRIEF TRAINING

The feedback clearly stated a need for meaningful training opportunities for staff, specifically in therapy and trauma-informed care, which also formed a prominent part of the discussion among the NGOs in their two workshops. As with the NGOs, the participants at this workshop emphasised the significant, and increasing, number of parents, families and children that are attending ELC and SAC, with grief and trauma-related issues that staff are not adequately trained or skilled to deal with. This is of major concern to those working directly within ELC and SAC settings, both for the sake of the parents, families and children, as well as ELC and SAC staff.

STAFF TRAINING HOURS AND COSTS

One of the most prominent barriers raised regarding training was the cost and timing of staff training. A recommendation that was consistently proposed was the need for the provision of 'in-service' training days during working hours, and to facilitate this, an allocation of funding towards the cost of training for staff.

RECOGNITION AND VALUE

The workshop highlighted an impression among many of the participants that there seems to be a lack of respect and recognition for ELC and SAC professionals, and the work they do is not sufficiently valued. This was seen as contributing to challenges in staff recruitment, retention, and motivation, with a knock-on effect on access participation and learning in ELC and SAC settings.

AVAILABILITY ISSUES AND WAITING LISTS

Availability of places, and growing waiting lists, were specifically mentioned as a separate issue, as well as being referred to in the themes mentioned above, e.g. staff shortages, difficulties in recruiting, limited physical space, both indoors (access and size) and outdoors (accessibility).

MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES

This theme focused on trauma, generational trauma, family breakdowns/ separations and complex family dynamics, and societal barriers like homelessness. Each of these can separately, and combined, impact upon the parents and families' awareness of ELC and SAC, as well as their willingness to engage with such services.