

EQUAL PARTICIPATION MODEL  
POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

FEEDBACK FROM ELC AND SAC SECTOR  
WORKSHOP DAY 2

APRIL 25<sup>TH</sup> 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.

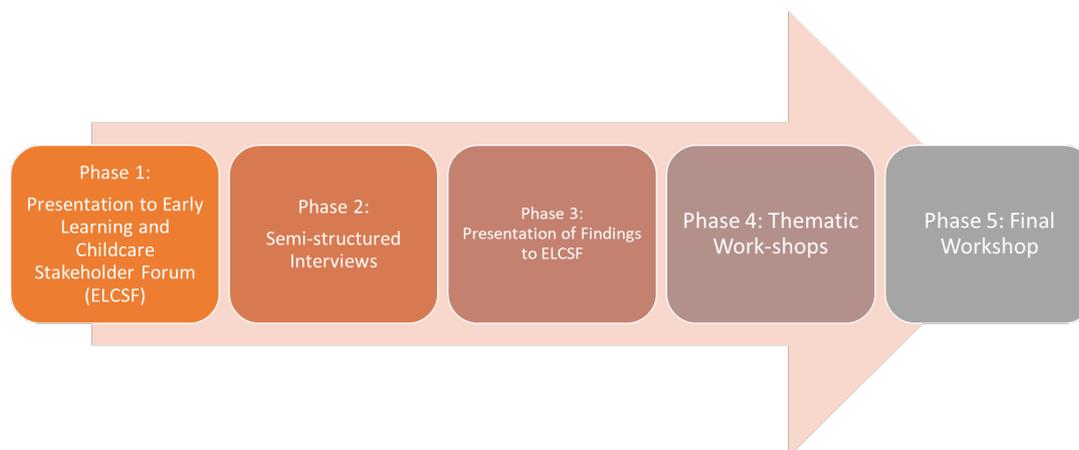
### EPM: COMMUNICATIONS AND CONSULTATION PLAN

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

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### 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

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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

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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 18<sup>th</sup> and April 25<sup>th</sup>, 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 2<sup>nd</sup> and May 9<sup>th</sup>), the results of which are included in the feedback represented in this document.)

### ELC AND SAC SECTOR WORKSHOPS DAY 2 APRIL 25<sup>TH</sup>

The second ELC and SAC sector workshop, held on April 25<sup>th</sup>, posed four main questions to the participants which were:

1. What supports or solutions (help) could be offered to parents and children to help them overcome the barriers to accessing and participating in ELC and SAC?
2. What supports or solutions (help) could be offered to ELC and SAC services to help overcome barriers to access and participation?
3. How will the EPM look and work in practice?
4. Measuring success of the EPM? How would we know if the changes work?

### 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 2.

## WHAT SUPPORTS OR SOLUTIONS (HELP) COULD BE OFFERED TO PARENTS AND CHILDREN TO HELP THEM OVERCOME THE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING AND PARTICIPATING IN ELC AND SAC?

Having identified the main barriers to accessing and participating in ELC and SAC services in the previous workshop, the participants were encouraged to discuss and provide feedback on the supports or solutions (help) that could be offered to parents and children to help them overcome these barriers.

### ENHANCEMENT OF SPACES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The need for more facilities and the improvement of existing ones was one of the most consistently mentioned solutions, with a significant emphasis placed on the need for an increase in available spaces in ELC and SAC services. Sponsorships for large-scale capital projects could support this goal, enabling the development of facilities that can meet specific community needs. Grants for both large and small capital improvements can be made more accessible and quickly delivered to facilitate such expansion.

### IMPROVED PAY AND CONDITIONS FOR STAFF

Calls for increased wages and better working conditions were frequent, signifying the importance of attracting and retaining quality staff. Based on the responses from the participating ELC and SAC providers, this would involve aligning wages with those of primary school teachers and offering more attractive terms and conditions.

### ROBUST INTER-SERVICE COMMUNICATION

The suggestion for better communication with PHNs, schools, support services, FRCs, libraries, and other organisations was mentioned multiple times, indicating the importance of holistic support for families and children. This could be supported by designated staff roles or inter-service liaison positions.

### PARENTING SUPPORT PROGRAMS

There was a notable emphasis on strengthening parenting programs such as Parents Plus and parent & toddler groups, showing a high regard for the role of parents in ELC and SAC services, with an additional importance given to the greater inclusion of fathers. Such programs can provide vital resources for parents, enhancing their ability to support their children's development and engagement with ELC and SAC services.

### FUNDING RESTRUCTURING AND FLEXIBILITY

The suggestion for more flexible funding rules for target groups was frequently mentioned, underscoring the need for more adaptability in resource allocation. This would allow services to adapt to the unique circumstances of the families they serve, and enable more effective allocation of resources.

#### IMPROVED DIGITAL LITERACY AND NCS CHANGES

The call for removing perceived barriers related to the administrative system of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was repeated several times, emphasising the significance of making the scheme and other support services more accessible. Changes could include simplifying the application process, providing support for digital literacy, and reducing bureaucratic hurdles for both parents and services. Funding for dedicated staff to act as NCS family liaisons could also be beneficial.

#### IMPROVED OUTREACH AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

To foster stronger relationships with families, funding for staff training in effective family engagement, difficult conversations handling, and outreach strategies were highlighted. This would also include the explicit inclusion of fathers and minority groups in outreach and engagement efforts.

#### LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS

There is a call for more emphasis on language programs such as Hanen, Lámh, and Talk Boost. Such programs can significantly enhance children's learning experiences and provide them with vital communication tools.

#### TRANSPORTATION SUPPORT

The need for state-funded transportation, to and from ELC and SAC, was mentioned a few times, pointing out the role of transportation in enhancing accessibility as was mentioned in all previous workshops. Providing transport signals a commitment to reaching out and supporting families in their local communities.

#### ENHANCED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND TRAUMA TRAINING

Investment in trauma training for staff was suggested, enabling them to provide essential emotional support to children who have experienced trauma. This could include both training programs and the development of trauma-informed care protocols within services.

#### FLEXIBLE SPONSOR CHECKS

The provision for more flexible sponsor checks was also brought up, showing the need for a more efficient process in identifying and applying for sponsor checks. This would involve granting more autonomy to ELC and SAC service managers to identify and apply for sponsor checks, thereby making the process more efficient and responsive to immediate needs.

## WHAT SUPPORTS OR SOLUTIONS (HELP) COULD BE OFFERED TO ELC AND SAC SERVICES TO HELP OVERCOME BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION?

This question gave participants the opportunity to identify the potential supports or solutions (help) that could be offered to ELC and SAC services to overcome barriers to access and participation. The main issues that were raised are listed below.

### FUNDING AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

This aspect had been cited the most in the discussions within, and among, the tables, covering multiple areas such as staffing, resources, non-contact time, meals, and training. Improved funding models, incorporation of new funding into existing schemes, and the full coverage of child places through NCS sponsorship were notable suggestions. Improved funding models were suggested, with one solution proposing that new funding should be incorporated into existing schemes rather than creating separate or additional ones. There was also a specific mention of the NCS sponsorship covering full costs of child places both in ELC and SAC services.

### STAFF TRAINING AND RECOGNITION

Staff training in diverse areas like trauma, additional needs, and family support was consistently mentioned. Furthermore, there was a call for more in-service days, which should become a standard for all staff. Increasing the frequency of training days would allow staff to stay current with best practices and help them better address the needs of the children they care for. The role of staff recognition and the need for improved wages was also highlighted. Enhanced terms and conditions, linked with professional recognition and a fair wage scale, can significantly contribute to staff retention and service quality.

### SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Another area that garnered attention was the support for children with additional needs. Proposals included the expansion of AIM and greater access to services such as NEPS for early childhood and SAC. Also, more funding was requested for additional staff to accommodate lower child-to-staff ratios when catering to children with additional needs.

### ADMINISTRATIVE SIMPLIFICATION

The need to reduce administrative work, streamline the inspection process, and incorporate compliance requirements into payments was a recurring theme. It is suggested that time spent on required paperwork and supporting parents to access NCS should be included as an increased and more prominent payment in service delivery budgets.

#### INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Inter-agency collaboration and community services were underscored, with suggestions for ELCs to be co-located with other services in 'hubs' to promote wrap-around, inter-agency collaboration. Increased engagement between SAC and schools was recommended, along with a need for a policy on the transition between ELC and primary school. As with the NGO workshops, several examples were given by service providers of the benefits of such a 'hub' when ELC and SAC facilities are located adjacent to Family Resource Centres and/ or similar services.

#### EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND WELLBEING OF STAFF

The emotional wellbeing of staff also featured prominently. Calls for external counselling and support mechanisms highlighted the desire for a more holistic approach to staff wellbeing.

#### INSPECTION PROCESS AND GOVERNANCE

Inspection process and governance were identified as areas needing review and modification. The need for the inspection process to be handled by a single agency was expressed. The Department of Education was suggested as the potential governing body responsible for governance.

#### TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL LITERACY

Issues around IT and digital literacy for staff were pointed out, with a recommendation for increased investment in this area. HIVE's parent portals were mentioned as needing improvements to ensure seamless communication.

## HOW WILL THE EPM LOOK AND WORK IN PRACTICE?

Participants were asked to discuss the potential structure of the new model, in terms of how it would look and work in practice. The responses were focused on the practical implications of the EPM, giving a larger number of shorter recommendations than arose in other questions to date in the workshops.

### CLEAR GUIDELINES

The most prominent recommendation was the need for transparent instructions on what universal access entails and who qualifies for extra funding.

### CHILD-CENTRIC APPROACH

Participants strongly advocated for a model that puts the child at the center, with all actions, decisions, and procedures revolving around the child's best interests.

### FUNDING MECHANISMS

The proposed EPM should include extra funding for several areas including reduced rations, home liaison personnel, staff training, food provision (school meals), and sensory resources. There was a consensus that there should not be profit from this funding, and that the unused funding should be allowed to roll over to the following year, thereby facilitating a more strategic approach, rather than one that focuses upon retrospective use of funds. The idea that "money follows the child" was also emphasised, with funding adjusted based on the specific needs of each child. There was also the suggestion that additional capitation be available for children from minority groups, although there was concern among some that this could lead to 'pigeon-holing' and the potential for some to 'fall between the cracks.'

### TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Regular training for staff and provisions for parent meetings, CPD closures, in-service days, and sick days cover were significantly highlighted.

### TRUST AND AUTONOMY

There were calls for increased trust in service providers, reducing administrative burdens, and granting them autonomy, particularly regarding sponsor referrals.

### UNIVERSAL DATA SYSTEM

The participants expressed the need for a universal data system with a single online system accessible to both parents and providers, without having to liaise with another third-party organisation.

### INCLUSIVE AND EXPANDED SUPPORT

Suggestions to extend AIM across all age groups, including pre-Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and SAC, and to provide trauma and emotional support were prominent.

## IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Participants suggested that the model should incorporate a system for identifying the needs of children and providing local access to necessary support, i.e. adapting the model to the circumstances being faced by services.

## INTEGRATION OF SERVICES

Integration of services and establishing a closer link with Public Health Nurses (PHN) was suggested. Some participants suggested extending the DEIS model to not-for-profit organisations.

## EQUAL FUNDING MODEL

The funding model should be equitable across all childcare services, irrespective of whether they are under TUSLA, FRC, or standalone entities.

## ONE OVERARCHING BODY

The proposal for a single department or body overseeing the process was mentioned on several occasions.

## HIGH-QUALITY CHILDCARE

This was a prominent theme, although this is a broad suggestion, it's a fundamental one that underpins all others.

## MEASURING SUCCESS OF THE EPM? HOW WOULD WE KNOW IF THE CHANGES WORK?

### IMPROVED CHILD OUTCOMES AND ACCESS

The prominent theme referred to children receiving necessary services and support promptly. This includes 100% ECCE attendance (in terms of actual access as opposed to daily attendance), no reduced timetables, and the importance of early identification and intervention. This point was stressed in various ways, such as timely child assessments, every child reaching their full potential, and increased attendance and participation rates.

### REMOVAL OF FINANCIAL BURDENS

One of the foremost suggestions given by the providers was the removal of any financial burden on families to access the services they need, such as Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) services, meals and play therapy. This would also remove the need for unsustainable informal financial and meal supports being provided by ELC and SAC services to families.

### ENHANCED STAFF RETENTION AND SUPPORT

It was frequently suggested that the model's success could be indicated by higher staff retention rates, staff feeling supported, and receiving necessary training without financial or additional time commitment. This also includes increased staff morale and reduced stress levels.

### RIGHTS-BASED, EQUITY & EQUAL ACCESS

A rights-based model was given prominence, focusing on children's rights, attendance and enjoyment of services. A strong emphasis was placed on the removal of barriers to ensure equity and access to services, and for all children, regardless of their background or additional needs, to receive consistent support. There should be equity of opportunity across all ages, including ECCE/SAC/Pre ECCE.

### INCREASED PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parent participation and partnerships from underrepresented groups should be increased. Parents should have greater access to local purpose-built services, whether run by community or private entities.

### PUBLICLY FUNDED & RUN EARLY YEARS SECTOR

The ultimate vision suggested is a publicly funded and run ELC and SAC, where early childhood access is a right.

### BETTER INFRASTRUCTURE & UNIFIED CONTROL BODY

A successful model would have a unified control body for the sector and purpose-built services accessible to parents and children. There would be capacity building to ensure access and affordability is sustainable.

### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT & SUPPORT

Success should be measured through the development of stronger relationships between ELC, SAC and families, therapeutic services, PHNs, and other community resources.