Uniting Voices For Children

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ALLIANCE

Report on the needs of parents with experience of Early Learning and Care and School Age Care services

April 2023

Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 140 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

Accompaniment Support Service for Children (A.S.S.C.)
Alcohol Action Ireland
Amnesty International Ireland
An Cosán
Anew
Aoibhneas
Archways
AsIAm
Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI)
Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI)
ATD Fourth World – Ireland Ltd
Atheist Ireland
Barnardos
Barretstown Camp
Bedford Row Family Project
BeLonG To Youth Services
Bodywhys
Catholic Guides of Ireland
Child Law Project
Childhood Development Initiative
Children in Hospital Ireland
Children's Books Ireland
Children's Grief Centre
Clarecare
COPE Galway
Cork Life Centre
Cork Migrant Centre
Crann Centre
Crosscare
CyberSafeKids
Cycle Against Suicide
Dalkey School Project National School
Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service
Dental Health Foundation of Ireland
Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, UCC
Disability Federation of Ireland
Doras
Down Syndrome Ireland
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre
Dyslexia Association of Ireland
Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland
Early Childhood Ireland
Early Learning Initiative (National College of Ireland)
Educate Together
EPIC
Equality for Children
Extern Ireland
FamiliBase
Féach
Focus Ireland
Foróige
Gaeleoideachas
Galway Traveller Movement
Good Shepherd Cork
Grow It Yourself
Helium Arts
Immigrant Council of Ireland
Inclusion Ireland
Institute of Guidance Counsellors
Irish Aftercare Network
Irish Association for Infant Mental Health
Irish Association of Social Workers
Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)
Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL)
Irish Foster Care Association
Irish Girl Guides
Irish Heart Foundation
Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)
Irish Penal Reform Trust
Irish Primary Principals' Network
Irish Refugee Council
Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU)
Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Irish Traveller Movement
Irish Youth Foundation
iScoil
Jack and Jill Children's Foundation
Jigsaw
Katharine Howard Foundation
Kerry Diocesan Youth Service
Kids' Own Publishing Partnership
Kinship Care
Leap Ireland
Let's Grow Together! Infant and Childhood Partnerships CLG.
LGBT Ireland
Mecpaths
Mental Health Reform
Mercy Law Resource Centre
Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
Mothers' Union
My Mind
My Project Minding You
Museum of Childhood Ireland
Music Generation
New Directions
National Childhood Network
National Council for the Blind of Ireland
National Forum of Family Resource Centres
National Parents Council Post Primary
National Parents Council Primary
National Youth Council of Ireland
Novas
One Family
One in Four
Parents Plus
Pavee Point
Peter McVerry Trust
Prevention and Early Intervention Network
Psychological Society of Ireland
Rainbow Club Cork
Rainbows Ireland
Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)
Realt Beag/Ballyfermot Star
Respond Housing
SAFE Ireland
Saoirse Housing Association
SAOL Beag Children's Centre
Scouting Ireland
School of Education UCD
Sexual Violence Centre Cork
SIPTU
Simon Communities of Ireland
Social Care Ireland
Society of St. Vincent de Paul
SPHE Network
SpunOut.ie
St. Nicholas Montessori College
St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers' Association
St. Patrick's Mental Health Services
TASC
Teachers' Union of Ireland
Terenure College Rugby Football Club
Transgender Equality Network Ireland
The Anne Sullivan Foundation
The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children
The Irish Red Cross
The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway
Traveller Visibility Group Ltd
Treoir
UNICEF Ireland
Variety – the Children's Charity of Ireland
Women's Aid
Youngballymun
Young Social Innovators
Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP)
Youth Work Ireland

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1. Introduction

The Equal Participation Model (EPM) is a strategic policy currently under development by the Access and Inclusion Unit, in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) Division of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

The Equal Participation Model will seek to promote equitable participation for all children in ELC and SAC. With a particular focus on children experiencing different forms of disadvantage, the EPM will promote inclusion and provide supports to enhance belongingness, engagement, care, and learning equitably in ELC and SAC settings. The Equal Participation Model will aim to provide universal supports to children all over the country, and targeted supports to address the needs of children in areas of concentrated disadvantage.

To progress this work, the Access and Inclusion Unit in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth are currently undertaking a consultation and engagement exercise with key stakeholders. Parents, particularly parents of children experiencing different forms of disadvantage have been identified as an essential stakeholder whose voice must inform the development of the Equal Participation Model. The DCEDIY have requested the Children's Rights Alliance collect the views of approximately 100 parents from families experiencing different forms of disadvantage.

2. Methodology

During the period 6 April to 25 April the Alliance engaged in consultations with parents with experience of ELC and SAC settings.

There were two elements of the consultation, an online survey and focus groups.

Online Survey

The online survey, developed in consultation with the DCEDIY had a total of 28 questions, 14 of which focused on early learning and care and 14 of which focused on school aged childcare. The questions looked at the access and engagement with ELC and SAC as well as what services parents would like to see as part of the new model being developed. The survey was promoted through the Alliance network of over 140 members and on social media with a focus on marginalised groups such as Traveller Parents, Refugee Parents, Migrant Parents, Parents with a Disability, Parents of a child with a disability and One Parent Families. In total we had 156 responses.

Focus Groups

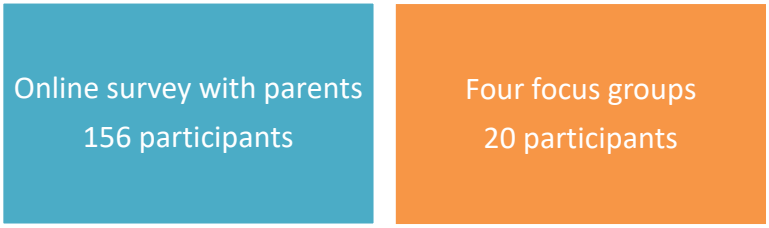
We held four focus groups with 20 participants. The parents for the focus groups were recruited from our member organisations and again we placed a specific focus on recruiting parents from marginalised groups such as Traveller Parents, Refugee Parents, Migrant Parents, Parents with a Disability, Parents of a child with a disability and One Parent Families. The questions looked at the access and engagement with ELC and SAC as well as what services parents would like to see as part

of the new model being developed. The focus group consultations took place over zoom and were an hour in duration.

Profile of parents who took part in focus groups:

- Three self-identified as Ukrainian refugee parents
- Ten self-identified as Traveller parents
- Seven self-identified as having a child with a disability
- Four self-identified as a one parent family

A number of those consulted represented an intersectional group identifying with more than one of the groups above.



3. Findings from focus groups

Early Learning and Care

Overview

A number of barriers to access and participation appeared across all demographics. Most notably these included: the lack of availability of early learning and care (ELC) spaces, a lack of information on services and general awareness of what's available to parents, a lack of representation in setting of certain demographic groups, the cost of ELC services, and the knock-on impacts of staffing issues in centres.

Having members of the Traveller community in the classrom serving as professional role models is important for representation and outcomes. Before a Traveller child goes out to school or crèche they could have dealt with up to five probelms already that morning - finding clean water to wash their face, crossing a dangerous halting site.

Access to ELC places: Parents described trying to access a placement in ELC as 'impossible at the moment' with waiting lists of over a year at least. Many parents spoke about signing their children up for ELC before their due date or at three months and consistently having to wait at least one year or being told that there are no spaces for children under two and a half in their local area. Most parents tried signing up to services outside of their locality for this reason and were met with the same issues. The entire group explained that staffing issues have led to ELC centres closing in their locality or their children being placed on shorter hours which has a knock-on impact for those who are working or trying to access work.

Waiting lists for what are perceived to be the 'most inclusive' ELC centres are even longer, leading parents to access other options that are not always the most suitable for their particular demographic needs or where unconscious discrimination is present. The prevalence of waiting lists has led a number of parents to seek out private childminders who remain unregulated which was of great concern to many of the parents we spoke with. However despite the extreme cost and other factors they felt as though they had no other option. The system was described frequently as set up to accommodate families that were on a higher income where one parent either does not work and is available for pick-ups, or they are able to afford childminding.

Lack of Information: A complete lack of information or a singular site or place to find information on ELC services was highlighted by all the parents consulted. They spoke of the difficulty of navigating the system particularly if you have not been through it before or do not have family or friends who have been through it to alert you to the waitlists and timelines involved. A lack of accessible and tailored methods of communicating information on ELC services came up across specific cohorts also.

Traveller parents

Those that self-identified as Traveller parents illuminated several key issues that are acutely felt by their community and act as major barriers to both access and participation in ELC services. These specific barriers fell into the following categories: a lack of representation of Traveller culture and Traveller role models working in ELC services, intergenerational trauma, unconscious bias, lower expectations for educational outcomes of Traveller children, lack of staff awareness and cultural training, literacy and IT literacy as a barrier to participation, and a lack of transportation to services.

Traveller Representation in the Workforce: Parents highlighted the lack of professionals from the Traveller community working in ELC services and stated that they would feel a lot more comfortable sending their children to a service where they know the staff would have a greater understanding and awareness of their child's background. The parents consulted gave an example of a creche in Coolock where they and their children feel welcome because it has a number of Traveller women on staff. Parents also expressed that representation should be targeted through the celebration of the Traveller culture in ELC settings in the same way that other diverse cultures are celebrated.

Intergenerational trauma: Intergenerational trauma and staff awareness of this issue for Traveller parents in the education setting was noted as a major barrier to parents feeling welcome and confident to participate and engage with ELC settings fully. One parent described his experience of being asked by an ELC staff member if his daughter could be put into a special class for 'extra help'. He noted how this experience transported him back to his own childhood education where he had been segregated due to being part of the Traveller community. Greater awareness of the cultural nuances and experiences present in a diverse classroom is needed through cultural awareness training for staff in order to overcome such barriers. Similarly, parents described historical bias and unconscious bias as a barrier to participation in services. Parents experienced lower expectations being placed on their children than their peers, with Traveller children being permitted to miss more days than those from other backgrounds. They were particularly concerned about this entrenching a pattern of lower expectations at an early age for their children and affecting their educational outcomes as they transition to primary and secondary school. Many parents spoke of being told that their children were not ready to progress to primary school while their peers were without further explanation. Parents in this situation felt that they were being unfairly blamed and held accountable for this while in reality a deeper pattern of lower expectations being placed on their children due to their background led to worse outcomes and a developmental gap for their children versus others at this young age.

> We *[the parents]* got a booklet with policies but not every Traveller is able to read and not everyone would be comfortable saying they don't know how to read. There needs to be funding in place that would enable someone to come out to Traveller communities and inform them about ELC services and when in services to explain the policies in person to parents.

Transportation: Transportation poses a significant barrier to access for Traveller communities. We heard from parents that it can be very dangerous for Traveller children commuting to and from school from rural areas, across dangerous halting sites. In Kilkenny there is a bus that goes straight to the Traveller community for after school services which has greatly increased participation in that area for those children. If a similar approach were to be adopted in more places participation rates would increase.

Access to Information: Traveller parents explained the challenge literary and IT literacy can pose to participation in ELC services. Communications around children needing to be picked up early from the service, letters sent out with key information, policy booklets and other key communications are often missed due to either digital illiteracy, illiteracy, or both. This presents a major communication gap and barrier to Traveller parents getting the information needed to ensure their children can fully participate in the service. As an initial barrier, before their children are part of ELC services parents from the Traveller community also face extreme difficulties in accessing information about ELC services and how to sign up as most of this information is only accessible online. Parents explained that lots of Travellers do not have the information available or experience to fully understand the education system. One parent shared that he had thought that creche and preschool were the same

thing and this resulted in his daughter being less advanced than other children when she transitioned to primary school. Similarly, parents noted that when their children are being referred for assessments while attending ELC, for diagnoses such as ADHD, autism etc. they don't always understand what their child is being referred for and this creates a great deal of overwhelm. Therefore adapting communication methods in order to meet the specific needs of each demographic in ELC services is incredibly important.

Parents with a Child with a Disability

Access: The parents that we spoke with who have a child with a disability highlighted particular pressure points in the ELC system around AIM support and the lack of suitable placements for children with profound physical disabilities who are mentally very advanced. Parents spoke of every one of their friends that have kids with profound disabilities experiencing the same difficulty in accessing creche spaces before eventually being asked to leave the service given capacity constraints or a lack of training or resources to support their needs. One parent noted that the only reason she believed she managed to secure a placement for her child after being turned away by five previous providers was because the owner of the service was a family friend and took pity on her. Another thread which ran throughout the feedback given by parents was that before they were able to access AIM support many had to take time off and become a full-time carer to their children.

It's easier to accomodate a neuro typical child so it is easy to understand why they are preferred by ELC settings.

All parents in this cohort spoke of having to sacrifice their chosen careers, sacrifice being able to buy a house, and on some occasions having difficulty meeting other bills or costs due to the knock on financial impact of accessing ELC having a child with a high need. Additionally, all parents we spoke with this in cohort noted the mental and emotional impact the 'uphill battle' of trying to secure an ELC place for their child and continued insecurity even when a placement is found and AIM support is provided. Parents described the inherent insecurity in the AIM provision system stating that once you secure AIM support it is not guaranteed that it will continue if you have a child with high care needs. This is the case if another child comes to the service also needing AIM support then parents described having had their child asked to leave the service, being told there was no longer capacity to support them any more or having their hours significantly reduced which had further knock on impacts on their ability to work and support their families. In one particular case a parent described their situation whereby their child only qualified for three ECCE hours per day and couldn't access longer hours because there was a child from the other class who was in all day that needed to be supported through AIM also.

Physical accessibility: Physical accessibility of ELC buildings also poses a major barrier to accessibility. Parents described being turned away repeatedly by different services because buildings were too small to cater for a walking aid, lips on doorways and heavy doors created obstacles for the walker and services expressed that they did not have the funding to modernise the building to make it disability friendly. One parent who had secured a placement which was inclusive and accessible noted the transformative impact an inclusive, purpose built or modernised centre makes with access to 1 to 1 AIM support. The only way

Only one AIM support worker is allocated per class so if there is more than one child with a high level of need you are likely to be kicked out of the service or have reduced hours

she was able to secure this placement however was to pay one thousand euro one year in advance and this is not accessible for most parents.

Lack of Information: In terms of funding, parents highlighted that most parents of children with disabilities are still unaware of AIM funding. Those in the cohort that were aware or accessing AIM support had done so through 'trial and error.'

> Hidden ELC service fees have made it difficult to pay ESB bills or put food on the table some weeks

Staff training: Staff training was a key area highlighted by this cohort that acted as a barrier to access and participation. One parent described having to 'source her own training for the ELC centre' as they had had no formal training around management of G tubes or other complex care needs. Other parents similarly expressed a lack of training and understanding around autism as a barrier to their child fully participating in the service.

Parents we spoke to explained that many ELC managers regard taking on children with extra needs as 'just another headache' and it gets to the point where they no longer have the energy to keep on fighting to be treated equally. One parent described how her son is accommodated in a mainstream setting one day per week and a disability setting on the other side of the city two days per week which makes balancing work and other commitments incredibly difficult. Parents who also had children attending disability specific services noted the lack of representation among the staff with no one on staff themselves presenting with a disability.

> My son is completely blind. The nearest ELC service that were willing to take him on are an hour drive away. I work part time and make the two hour round trip 3 days per week. There is a complete lack of spaces made available for children with disabilities in their locality.

Appropriate Supports and Activities: In terms of appropriate activities and sensory toys and rooms, parents noted that it was highly dependent on the individual service and there were major discrepancies between individual services.

<u>One Parent Families</u>

From consulting with one parent families, there is a clear sentiment that the ELC system is set up to accommodate two parent, dual income families. The key findings from consultations with one parent families were: cost, transportation, and availability of places pose the greatest barriers to access and participation. Parents described how the hidden costs of ELC services such as non-mandatory classes which although non mandatory your child would be the only one left out if they didn't do them or administrative costs can add up to a significant financial burden on one parent families. One parent described how a 40 euro fee for an app her ELC centre were using to communicate with parents meant that she was unable to do the grocery shop that week and prioritised feeding her daughter over herself. A further hidden cost of services are penalty fees for late pick ups. Lone parents can struggle to make pick ups on time given work commitments, a lack of support, and transportation issues. Such fees further penalise a group that is already experiencing high levels of financial strain.

> The system is built for two parent families where one has the luxury of being able to afford to stay at home, first language English, and educated.

Hot Meals: Similarly, one parent families highlighted the benefit of services offering hot meals to their children as it 'takes some pressure off financially.' One parent families highlighted that while means testing is in place, they are given no indication of how much it will cost for their children to remain in ELC services after ECCE hours. Paying for additional hours while a huge financial burden is often necessary for this cohort in order to enable parents to continue working. Transparency around pricing and access to information in an accessible and timely manner would make it easier for this cohort to plan accordingly.

Refugee parents

Notably in the refugee cohort, parents reported having a complete lack of information and support around ELC services. This cohort were unaware of ECCE, early learning and care services and the supports and hours available to children. Parents stated that they are unsure where to find this information and have difficulties connecting in with services in particular where there are intersectionalities at play such as being a migrant parent of a child experiencing a disability. It is clear that this is an area where a huge gap exists in terms of integration and reaching this specific cohort.

Parents Views on what is needed

General:

- Mentorship networks. Parents suggested that having a peer-to-peer network set up would be a great asset to bridge the information gap for those accessing ELC services for the first time and struggling to find the information needed to access services. This could also be expanded to cater to specific groups so that those with a similar background or experience are connected with people from their community who have gone through the process and can give individualised advice.
- There needs to be a mixture of online and in person ways to access information about ELC services. Parents suggested a 'one stop shop' website that provides a standardised overview of ELC services and how to access them. However, importantly parents from the Traveller cohort also noted the need for methods of communicating information that are tailored to specific communities that may experience digital illiteracy or illiteracy.
- Lower service costs without hidden fees and additional targeted funding supports for particularly disadvantaged groups.
- Parents recommended that parents have a specific education officer similar to the public health nurse model whereby if you're new to the area or have had your first child they can connect in and provide this information around ELC services and what is available.
- Greater guidance and transparency around the cost of additional hours outside of ECCE hours from either the government or individual service providers.

Traveller Parents:

- Targeted communication and outreach supports for Traveller parents on ELC services acknowledging and accommodating literacy and digital literacy concerns.
- Cultural awareness training for all staff.
- Trauma informed training for all staff.
- Traveller parents noted that there should be a designated representative on behalf of Traveller parents in services who takes a role in policy and communication for the wider group of parents as well as representing and advocating for greater inclusion in the service. They envisioned that this would be a parent voluntarily taking on this role.
- A government funding scheme to enable and encourage young Travellers to train as ELC staff to encourage greater levels of participation and outcomes long term.

- Parents identified a dedicated Traveller access programme from early years as something which would aid participation and long-term engagement greatly. Examples of what this could encompass included targeted additional supports for Traveller parents and children both in terms of access and participating in ELC services.
- There is a need for thought out pathways for transport and access from Traveller communities to ELC services.

Parents with a Child with a Disability:

- There needs to be minimum standards put in place in terms of the accessibility of all ELC centre buildings and funding provided to centres to meet such requirements.
- If you have a child that has known quite complex medical challenges, there should be more access and the ability to have more than one staff member assigned to them.
- The expansion of AIM support is essential to ensure equal access and participation. In particular where a child has a known complex need, there should be more than one staff member assigned to them and no insecurity around whether they will lose AIM support based on the needs of others also accessing the service.
- Longer and more flexible services hours offered to parents.
- Staff training and awareness of disability and in particular autism awareness, and g tube training.
- Packages of support should be allocated per child rather than school/class so that each child gets what they need and doesn't get it taken away.
- Children with disabilities should have ELC services available to them in their communities, they shouldn't have to travel somewhere else to find them.
- Targeted communications and support with parents of children with disabilities to raise awareness of the AIM program and the supports that are available.

One Parent Families:

- Highly subsidised ELC services and no fee where possible.
- Greater flexibility of hours of service and no penalties fees imposed for late pick-ups.
- Greater transparency around the cost of additional hours outside of ECCE hours.
- Greater availability of ELC places in local areas.

Refugee Parents:

- Significant outreach is needed to make this group aware of ELC services, how they operate and the supports available. This will become more important as work begins on the longer term integration piece with Ukrainian refugees in particular.
- Cultural awareness training for all staff.
- Trauma informed training for all staff.

School Age Care

Across both the focus group consultations and online survey it was much more difficult to recruit parents to speak to their experience of school age care (SAC). Two main reasons emerged for this reduced response:

1. Parents who had accessed SAC tended to explain the unregulated and more disjointed nature of SAC service provision nationally compared to ELC services;

2. The majority of parents in both the in person focus groups and the online survey were unable to access SAC services in their local area, expressing that there were much fewer SAC centres in operation than ELC services.

With these caveats in mind, one of the twenty people consulted during the focus groups gave feedback on SAC services though as an aside to talking predominantly about ELC services. This parent explained that the SAC service they have experience of only runs private activities for a fee that last for one hour after school. They noted that the cost of the service is extremely onerous. Another parent mentioned that they were aware of a bus that goes straight from a Traveller community in Kilkenny to an afterschool setting which has greatly increased participation.

Parents Views on what is needed

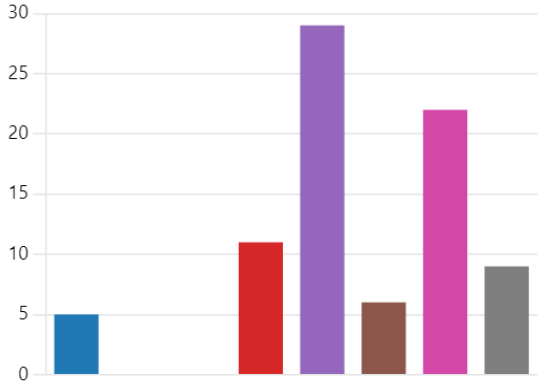
- Greater availability of SAC places.
- A number of Traveller parents noted that homework clubs increase participation and are an important link in for students and parents.

3. Findings from online survey

Early Learning and Care

Profile of parents who responded to the online survey:

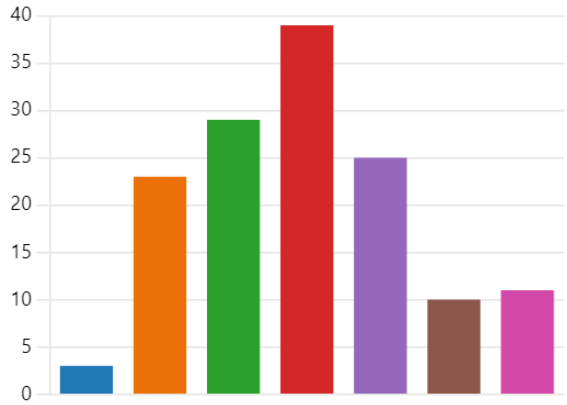
Traveller parent	5
Roma parent	0
Refugee parent	0
Migrant parent	11
One parent family	29
Have a disability	6
Your child has a disability	22
Prefer not to say	9



The majority of parents who completed the survey chose to not to answer this question, 89 respondents, while nine respondents preferred not to say amounting to 62 per cent of respondents overall. Four per cent of respondents self-identified as a Traveller parent, seven per cent self-identified as a migrant parent, four per cent self-identified as having a disability, 14 per cent self-identified as having a child with a disability, and 19 per cent self-identified as a one parent family. A number of respondents self-identified as being a member of several groups and the intersectionality of the group where relevant is reflected in the findings below.

Age range of children of those surveyed:

Under 1 year	3
1	23
2	29
3	39
4	25
5	10
6	11



The majority of survey respondents have a child aged between 1-4 years old. Of the 156 survey respondents, 90 per cent have a child aged between 0-6 years.

Of the 151 respondents who answered the question as to whether they have a child accessing early learning and care (ELC), 66 per cent have a child accessing ELC services with the majority, 79 per cent attending 5 days per week. Of those that responded to the question addressing their overall experience of ELC 87 per cent reported having either a positive or very positive experience overall.

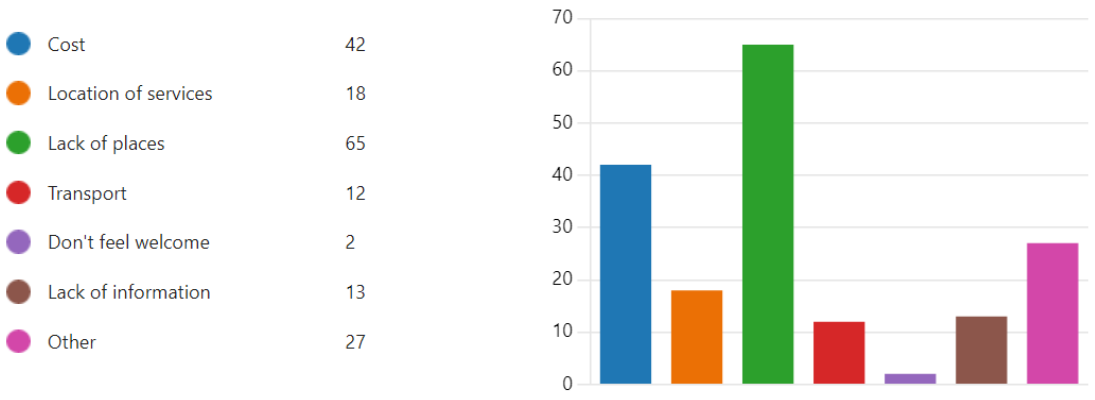
The Crèche only takes full time places so it will force me to either send my second child into creche five days or to quit my job and mind them full time which is very restrictive. I am a single parent I need to work.

Lack of staff means lack of spaces. I live 3 mins from a crèche and I'm unable to access more than 1 day a week for my child. He attends a crèche 20 mins away for the second day. He has been on the list in our local creche for over 16 months and still can only get 1 day due to staff shortages. I and my husband work full time and are left relying on family for the remaining 3 days.

Barriers to access

Is there anything that prevents you from accessing early learning and care services for your child? Choose all that apply

More Details



The most significant barriers to access identified across the entire group were a lack of available places (42 per cent), cost (27 per cent), and other (17 per cent). There were no distinctions across any cohort of parents (e.g. one parent families or those with a disability). Specific barriers that were cited in the other category notably included services only taking full time places or having inflexible hours that meant some parents would have to give up full time employment in order to make the hours given that the cost of additional hours or care were too high.

In the parents of a child with a disability cohort, a diagnosis of autism and a lack of disability supports were identified as some of the most significant barriers to access with 27 per cent responding that they have prevented access to services. This was linked closely with the location of services and lack of spaces readily available to cater to their children's needs in services that were geographically proximate.

Other barriers to access which were highlighted include:

- A lack of ECCE places locally
- A lack of spaces for younger children under two years
- Not enough hours provided on NCS to make working part time feasible
- A lack of transportation to services in rural areas
- Inconsistent staffing leading to reduced hours and days, and closure of local services
- A lack of AIM support

There is very little help for children with autism.

There is no AIM support for children not in the ECCE scheme. I have a child who is completely blind and has no additional support in the setting.

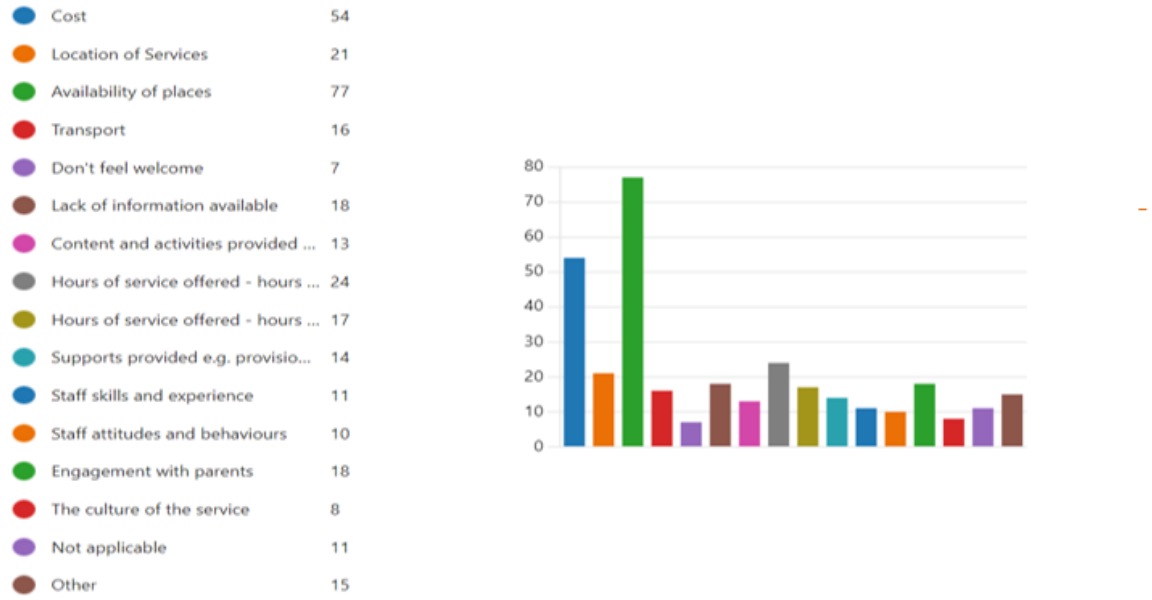
My child is autistic and we had to take him out of preschool after 3 months as he found it too difficult to attend with so many kids in the class and a lack of one to one support. He will be starting in a private autism pre school in September that we had to fund ourselves.

Participation in ELC

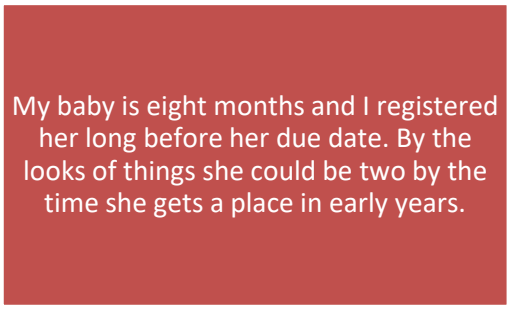
When asked what is working well in ELC services, the majority of respondents cited staff skills and experience (47 per cent), content and activities provided (46 per cent), staff attitudes and behaviours (45 per cent), and feeling welcome at the service (43 per cent).

When asked what is not working well in ELC services, the majority of respondents cited availability of places (49 per cent), cost (35 per cent), hours of service offered – hours offered to your family are not suitable (15 per cent), and the location of services (13 per cent).

12. What is not working well in Early Learning and Care? Choose all that apply



Long waiting lists and the lack of available places in respondents' geographic area were noted with several parents citing that they put their child on a waiting list over a year in advance. The cost of services both in terms of paying for additional hours, or one or both parents choosing to work part time to accommodate picking their child up from services due to what were routinely termed 'inflexible hours' pose a huge access issue across all cohorts.



Specific needs and issues in participation arose in the various demographic cohorts. The migrant parent cohort highlighted a lack of integration supports and engagement needed for parents in this group in order to enable the full participation of their children. Members of intersectional cohorts such as migrant parents who have a child with a disability identified the lack of AIM support provided outside the hours of the formal ECCE scheme as a particular barrier.

The hours of the service offered to parents poses a particular barrier to one parent families with 31 per cent of this group stating that the hours offered were unsuitable. Staff skills and experience as well as staff attitudes and behaviours were cited more often for the parents of a child with a disability cohort than any other cohort as not working well. Of that cohort, 32 per cent said that this posed an issue and identified the problem as pertaining to a lack of appropriate disability training for staff. Parents of children with a complex or high need disability were more likely to state that they did not feel welcome at their service which mirrors the findings of the in person focus groups also.

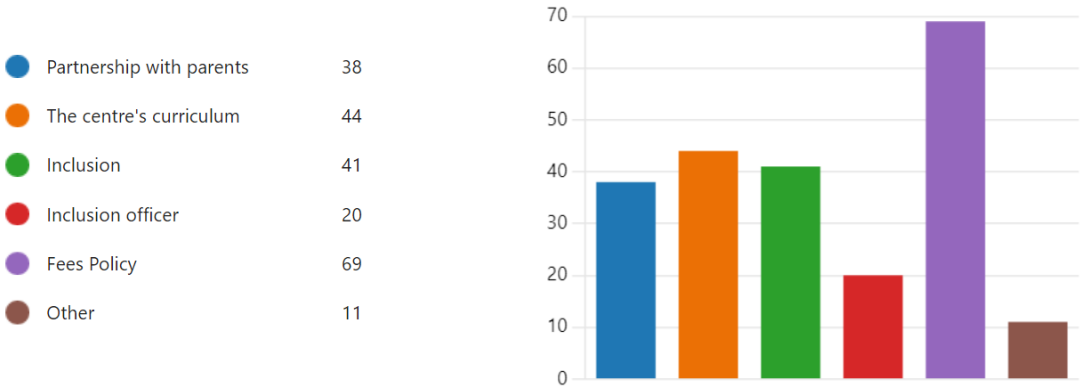
Other barriers to participation which were highlighted include:

- A lack of wraparound supports including speech and language therapy
- A lack of engagement with parents around how their child is progressing in the service
- A lack of early intervention supports
- A lack of AIM support

Tied to issues of lack of opportunities for parents to engage t and involvement in services, 34 per cent of respondents did not receive a parent's handbook on the policies and procedures of their service. Only 24 per cent were familiar with the partnership with parents policy and 26 per cent with their service's inclusion policy. In specific cohorts these numbers were lower still with 60 per cent of the traveller parent cohort being unaware of their centre's inclusion policy. Amongst the migrant cohort, 91 per cent were unaware of any of the policies listed apart from the fees policy of which 50 per cent were aware.

17. Are you aware of the following service policies in your early learning and care centre? Choose all that apply

More Details

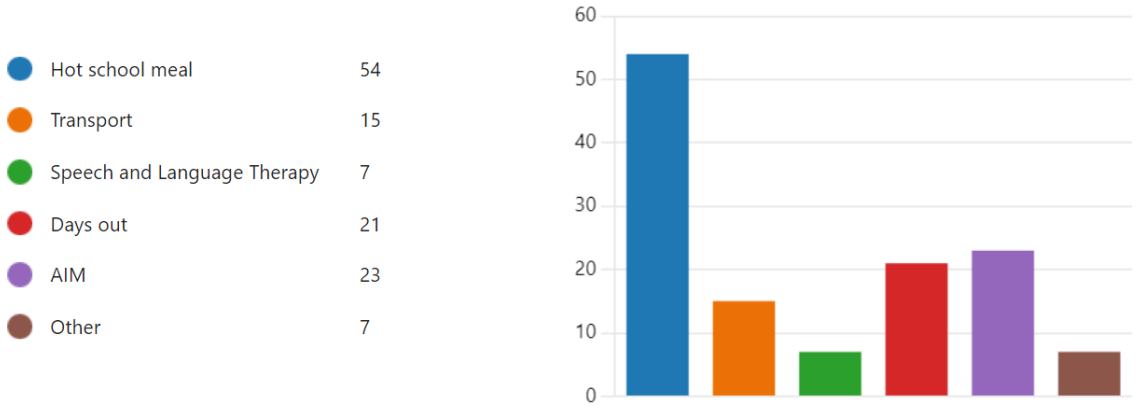


Supports in ELC

In terms of the supports provided in ELC services, 85 per cent of respondents stated that their early learning centre does not provide access to wraparound services such as speech and language therapy while 89 per cent of respondents said that there child does not have access to such services where needed. A number of parents when asked about what supports could be provided to support participation specifically noted wraparound services and speech and language therapy.

10. What type of school supports are provided? Choose all that apply

More Details

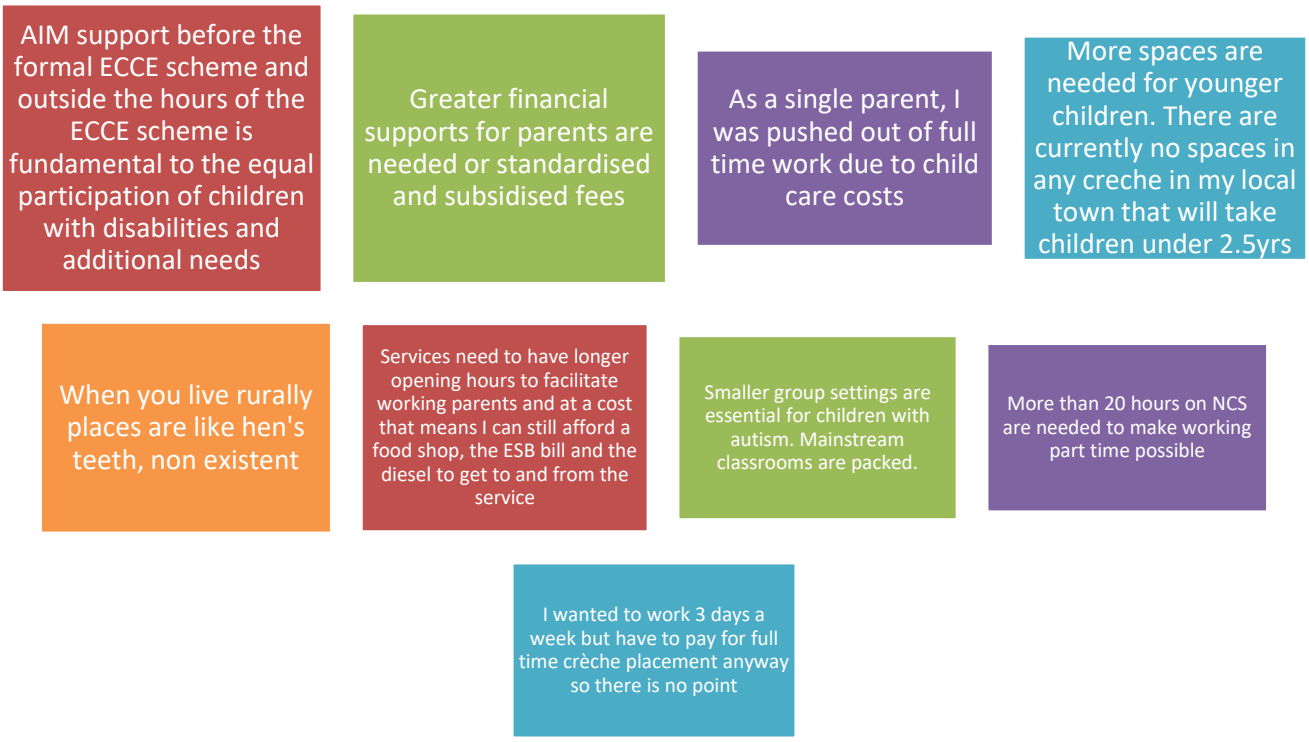


Of those surveyed, 34 per cent stated that their ELC service provides a hot school meal. This was highlighted as an important support both in the online survey and in the focus groups for one parent families in particular. Only 14 per cent of those surveyed said that AIM support is available at their ELC centre if needed which also mirrors feedback from both the online survey and focus groups that AIM provision is not sufficient or consistent across services and requires expansion.

What is needed

A number of supports were identified as necessary to ameliorate access and participation in ELC services. Of the 73 parents who responded to this question, 27 per cent stressed the need for more

places to be made available and the need for places to be opened up for younger children under 2 years as this was noted as an area of particular need. A further 26 per cent noted the need for a significant reduction in cost of services to parents as well as increase funding in the sector to prevent local services closing due to staff shortages. 14 per cent highlighted the need for a greater availability of places in their local area. Many parents explained both in the online survey and in focus groups that services that have a place for their child are typically the second or third service they have contacted and are outside their locality. This issue was found to be particularly acute for those who had children with disabilities. The expansion of the AIM program was highlighted as a key need by 9 per cent of respondents, while 7 per cent noted that wraparound services such as speech and language therapy would greatly improve their child's participation in services. The provision of a hot meal and diversity in the food offering was expressed as a key support by 7 per cent of respondents.



Other supports highlighted included:

- All staff as well as AIM support workers having more of an understanding of autism and other disabilities.
- More hours given per day.
- If preschool ECCE were to run all year it would enable parents to remain in part time an full time work

Activities highlighted which parents would like their child to be able to access in their ELC included:

- Physical development and exercises.
- Non team-based sports e.g. gymnastics.
- Wraparound supports.
- Outdoor nurseries.

- More outdoor activities in nature/outdoor exploring.
- Days out.
- Trips to the library.
- Child led learning.
- Swimming.
- Sensory toys and classes.

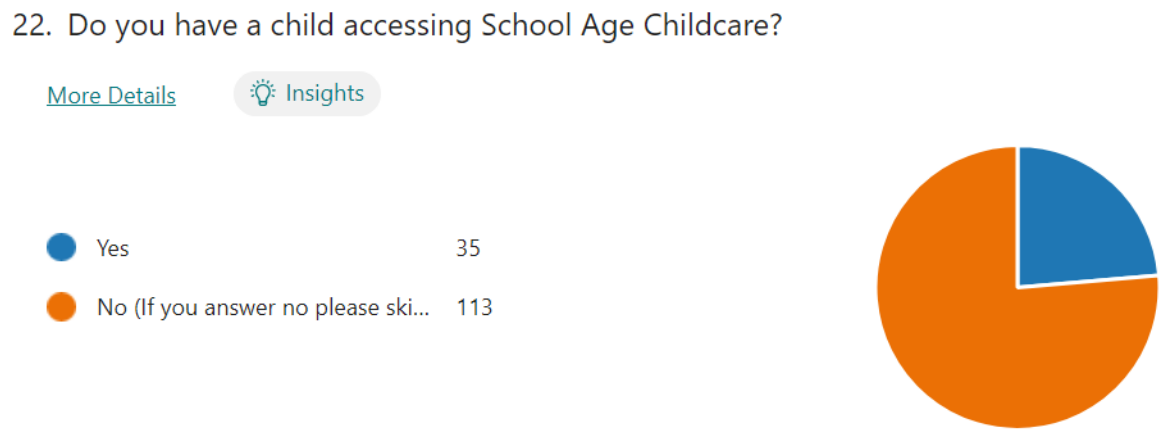
School Age Care

Across both the focus group consultations and online survey it was much more difficult to recruit parents to speak to their experience of school age care (SAC). Two main reasons emerged for this reduced response:

1. Parents who had accessed SAC tended to explain the unregulated and more disjointed nature of SAC service provision nationally compared to ELC services;
2. The majority of parents in both the in person focus groups and the online survey were unable to access SAC services in their local area, expressing that there were much fewer SAC centres in operation than ELC services.
3. There appeared to be a lack of understanding what SAC is.

A much smaller number of the total group surveyed responded on school age care. A significant number who answered that they do not have access to SAC answered this not as a barrier to access but rather in error at the end of answering questions on ELC services and so provided no further details of their experience. This skews the results slightly however, we have tried to address this error below.

Number who answered this part of the survey:

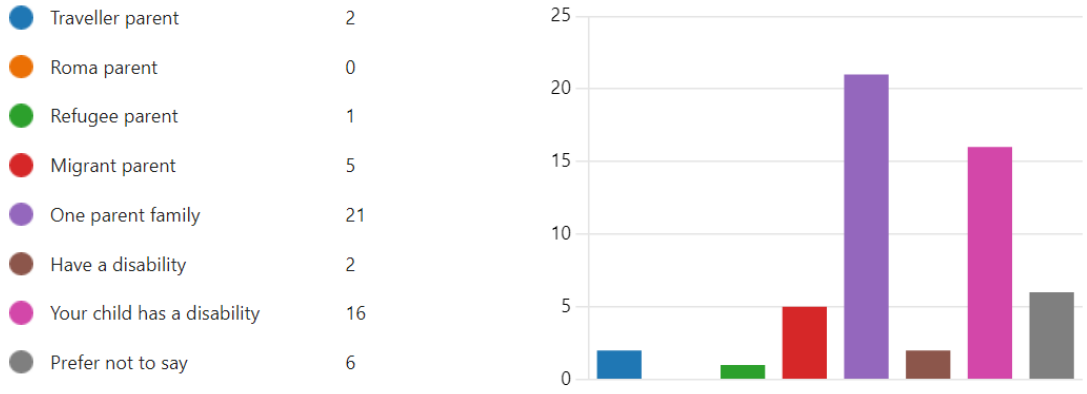


A total of 148 parents answered this portion of the survey. Of the 113 respondents who answered that their child does not have access to SAC, it is estimated that 78 answered in error. It would appear that parents didn't know what SAC is and then when they saw the rest of the questions they realised they could respond, therefore there the data is skewed slightly.

Profile of parents who responded to the online survey:

41. Do you identify as a member of any of the following groups? Choose all that apply

More Details



The majority of respondents were either a one parent family or the parent of a child with a disability.

Barriers to access

Of the 35 respondents who answered that their child does not have access to SAC services, 57 per cent stated that this was due to a lack of available places, 40 per cent stated that this was due to the cost of SAC services, 14 per cent stated that there was a lack of information available on these services or they were unaware of such services in their area. A further 14 per cent noted the location of services as one of the main barriers to access. A lack of transportation and the 'poor quality of SAC services offered' were also indicated by parents as some of the key barriers to access.

Of the respondents who answered that their child does have access to SAC services, 34 per cent identified a lack of places as a barrier to access, 29 per cent identified cost as a barrier, 14 per cent noted the location of services as a barrier, while 11 per cent stated that both a lack of information and lack of transportation posed barriers to access. Parents described SAC places as being so few they are almost non existent.

> I badly need SAC services but there are no options that pick up from my son's school.

Of the respondents who answered that their child does have access to SAC services, the majority, 60 per cent are offered as part of a ELC service, while 34 per cent are offered as a standalone SAC service. Of those who have a child attending SAC services, 49 per cent had attended ELC services previously. In the majority of cases children attend SAC for 15-20 hours per week, with 82 per cent attending after school and 23 per cent attending both before and after school. 5 per cent did not respond. The majority, 54 per cent attend SAC service 5 days per week, while 51 per cent attend 2-3 days per week. 5 per cent did not respond.

Services and Supports

Of those who responded that their child accesses SAC services, 77 per cent of centres provide care during the school holiday period, 42 per cent provide access to and from school and provide a breakfast club. A hot meal was provided by 66 per cent of SAC services and noted as one of the main benefit of the service to users. Other supports that parents highlighted that would ameliorate access and participation and access to SAC services included:

- Hot meals outside term for working parents
- Activities that are age appropriate. Many parents noted that activities in SAC services are not adapted from ELC services and described them as 'baby activities.'
- SNA support
- The celebration and representation of Traveller culture
- Age-appropriate spaces and facilities for older children
- Structured homework clubs suitable to the needs of older primary school age child
- More structured after school programmes
- More places available in rural Ireland

Twenty-five per cent of those accessing SAC services felt that staff behaviours and attitudes, the content of activities provided, and staff skills and experience were lacking. A further 31 per cent felt that there was not enough engagement with parents.

> The centre my child is in will stop providing afterschool at the end of this school year and I cannot find another afterschool place in my area. All schools should be supported to provide an afterschool service that meets demand. My kids would love to go 5 days per week.

> -Cost is a huge issue. We have to pay even if our child doesn't attend e.g.holidays etc.

> This should be offered as standard for all children, perhaps by providers using the school facilities after hours. Childcare is required for families where both parents work full time outside the home but places are limited. Unfortunately this results in parents being forced to leave paid work or reduce working hours, usually the mother due to the gender pay gap.

> -When the after school closes for school holidays, I cannot find suitable childcare to suit my child. As I am doing a CE scheme I cannot afford a large additional cost, I do not have transport and unfortunately it looks like I will have to give up my CE scheme due to these issues

Parents Views on what is needed

- A major increase in the availability of SAC setting and places.
- Transportation to and from services.
- Age-appropriate activities
- Hot meals during holiday periods
- A rethink of the NCS model as it is not fit for purpose. Parents overwhelmingly said that an hourly rate does not make sense based on how days are allocated.
- More structured after school programmes

- Significantly reduced or subsidised costs.