

Equal Start Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is Equal Start?

A: Equal Start is a funding model and a set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and participation in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) for children and their families who experience disadvantage.

Q: Will all services receive support under Equal Start?

A: Equal Start will be rolled out on a phased basis. Over the course of the rollout all services will receive a level of support relative to the concentration of disadvantage in the communities they serve. In Year One, funding for staffing will be available to Equal Start partner services designated as Tier 1 and Tier 2.

Q: How is it decided who is a designated Equal Start Partner Service to receive targeted supports?

A: To target supports effectively to priority groups, administrative data from the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme (for example, children's Eircode and ethnicity, as well as sponsor referrals) has been combined with Pobal's HP Deprivation Index, and with geocoded lists of homeless accommodation providers, International Protection Accommodation Centres and Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres. Therefore identifying the proportions of children in different ELC and SAC settings who live in disadvantaged communities or are from priority groups. Groups specifically targeted include:

- Children and families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.
- Children from a Traveller or Roma ethnic background.
- Children experiencing homelessness.
- Children from international migrant families including those living in an International Protection Accommodation Centre or Emergency Orientation and Reception Centre.
- Children sponsored through the National Childcare Scheme.

Q: How do I apply to be an Equal Start targeted service?

A: You do not need to apply. The Equal Start Identification Model will identify partner services that will be designated as targeted based on information you have already provided. Services will be notified by the Department of Children/Pobal if they are a designated Equal Start partner service and may if they so choose opt out. You don't need to opt in.

Q: My service caters for disadvantaged children but I am not Equal Start targeted service?

A: Equal Start includes provision for child-centred funding and supports, and universal funding supports which will be available to all services. These measures will be rolled out on a phased basis between 2025 and 2028.

Q: If my service is awarded Equal Start status, can I opt out?

A: Yes, participation in the Equal Start is not mandatory. You will contract for Equal Start when you contract for Core Funding. If you are designated as an Equal Start targeted service, you will receive a letter notifying you that you have been designated as such. You can respond to that letter letting us know you wish to opt out.

Q: What is the purpose of the funding to my service?

A: The funding is to support you as a service to support the access and inclusion of children who are more likely to experience non-financial impediments to access and full participation in early learning and childcare. Groups specifically targeted include:

- Children and families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.
- Children from a Traveller or Roma ethnic background.
- Children experiencing homelessness.
- Children from international migrant families including those living in an International Protection Accommodation Centre or Emergency Orientation and Reception Centre.
- Children sponsored through the National Childcare Scheme.

Q: How will Equal Start be delivered?

A: Equal Start will be implemented from September 2024 to December 2028. It is envisaged that full implementation of all initial Equal Start actions will be within the lifetime of this Strategy – by 2028 – with three distinct phases:

- **Phase 1 (2024-2025).** Setting-level targeted funding will be prioritised, commencing with the introduction of staffing supports from September 2024. Preparatory work will be undertaken on a range of other Equal Start actions, including engagement with stakeholders.
- **Phase 2 (2026-2027).** Initial child-level targeted funding will be introduced, and new and updated training programmes will commence.
- **Phase 3 (2028).** Full roll-out of other Equal Start measures in Strands 1, 2 and 3.

Q: My service was not awarded Equal Start status, will my service receive any supports?

A: Yes. Services who do not have Equal Start status will receive supports under the Universal measures (Strand 1) – Every child and every setting and many services will receive Child-targeted measures (Strand 2) – Every child with a priority designation. These measures will be rolled out on a phased basis. The provisions within these elements are documented in the Equal Start Model

Q: What happens if my service has a higher concentration of disadvantage in future?

A: Equal Start Targeted services can receive funding for at least two years. Partner services who do not retain Equal Start status (because the profile of children in their service changes) will be given a year of reduced Equal Start supports. For Tier 1 services they will be moved to Tier 2 for a year. Further details will be contained in the rules document to be published in the coming weeks.

Q: Will there be additional administration work for partner services with equal start status?

A: Equal Start is part of the wider Core Funding contract. The Department is committed to administrative minimisation.

Q: How will the additional staffing hours be used?

A: The rules associated with the Equal Start additional staffing provision will be published in the coming weeks. There will be considerable latitude for providers to deploy hours once they are in line with objectives of Equal Start and consistent with the services Tackling Disadvantage Plan. As well being available to provide additional in-room supports, they can be used to support certain training engagement with collaborative responses such as Meitheal and other outreach measures.

Q: What is the Tackling Disadvantage Plan?

A: The Tackling Disadvantage Plan forms part of the Quality Action Planning process. It will be a requirement for Equal Start targeted services. The plan will enable services identify actions through a variety of options in a similar way to the Quality Action Plan to enhance their provision with regard to supporting children and families affected by disadvantage.