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# An Independent Review of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme in Ireland

## Executive Summary | April 2024



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# Executive Summary

## Aims

This mixed methods research study was funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and was conducted by a team of independent researchers from Stranmillis University College, Belfast and a member from Dublin City University.

The project set out to provide a comprehensive review of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in Ireland with the aim of identifying what has been working well over the past decade, what, if any, challenges still exist and what enhancements might be made. In particular, the review focused on the following research questions:

- Is the ECCE programme being implemented as intended, i.e. is it a universal programme available free to all children within the eligible age range, providing them with their first formal experience of early learning for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week for 38 weeks of the year for two years?
- Is it meeting its core objectives, i.e. to promote better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children; and to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children?
- Are there enhancements that can be made based on international evidence and experience to date?

## Methodology

The review was guided by a children's rights informed approach involving a Children's, Parents' and Educators' Advisory Group (CPEAG); an Oversight Group comprising representatives of relevant Government Departments and arms-length bodies, and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth who acted as a Designated Listener, providing a commitment to ensuring that the findings from the review are given due weight and acted upon, as appropriate.

The methodology was both desk-based and empirical in design, comprising quantitative and qualitative elements and including four key work packages.

### Work Package 1

WP1 consists of a robust review of evidence, covering relevant policy documents and existing data in relation to the ECCE programme in Ireland, as well as research-based evidence on international best practice in Early Learning and Care.

### Work Package 2

WP2 is mixed method and multi-source in design, including two bespoke online surveys of ECCE programme providers and parents, as well as in-depth qualitative case studies conducted in 30 settings delivering the ECCE programme across the context of Ireland. In each setting, leaders/ managers, educators, and parents were invited to participate in interviews and/or focus groups. Children were invited to engage in playful conversations and classroom practice was also observed using the Quality Learning Instrument (Walsh and Gardner, 2005). The online surveys (one for providers and the other for parents) were developed in partnership with the research Oversight Group, and were hosted online using 'Smart Survey' for a period of 7 weeks i.e. from 18th April to 7th June 2023. The provider survey was available in English and Irish and the parent survey in English, Irish, Polish and Ukrainian. In total, 1,320 services completed the provider survey (after merging with administrative data and cleaning, a dataset of 1291 services remained) and a total of 910 parents completed the parent survey.

### Work Package 3

For the purpose of WP3, relevant stakeholders were identified in consultation with the Oversight Group. Both national and international stakeholders across the fields of policy, practice, government, advocacy, and academia were identified and contacted via email with an invitation for participation. In total, 17 different individuals from 16 different organisations responded. 16 participants were interviewed, while one completed a written response. Each of the participants held a senior role in their organisation

### Work Package 4

WP4 engaged 'harder-to-reach' stakeholders in qualitative interviews and focus groups. Participants included Traveller and Roma families, families impacted by poverty, families

experiencing homelessness, refugee and newcomer families, one-parent families, parents of children with additional needs and parents who decided not to avail of the ECCE programme. Representatives of organisations which are affiliated with or provide support to groups experiencing various forms of disadvantage were also interviewed either by means of an one-to-one interview or focus groups and these included representatives of Barnardos, Cork Traveller Visibility Group, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion (NTRIS) Oversight Committee, Focus Ireland, St Vincent de Paul, and One Family. Representatives of primary schools and ECCE programme providers catering for children from low uptake groups were also consulted. Site visits were also completed to Early Learning and Care settings and primary schools that cater for hard-to-reach families.

## Key Findings

The main findings gleaned from the four work packages are structured in accordance with the three research questions detailed above.

### Is the ECCE programme being implemented as intended?

#### Finding 1: Universal and free of charge

The free and universal character and the integrative ethos of the ECCE programme, facilitated by the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), are considered key strengths. The majority of providers (71%) who responded to the survey indicated that all children applying for an ECCE programme place were usually offered one and the majority of parents (78%) in the parent survey felt that they had a choice of settings. Most providers also highlighted that they currently have children with disabilities or additional needs (79%), children from one-parent families (79%) and children who speak a different language at home (76%) enrolled in the ECCE programme.

A sizeable minority of parents (40%) stated that they would not have been able to send their child to preschool had the ECCE programme not been available, and this percentage was higher for families with low household income. This finding was reiterated by experts consulted on behalf of the hard-to-reach families: "Without the free ECCE, they wouldn't come." (Community service, Co. Cavan)

## Finding 2: Accessibility and Availability Issues

Despite the progress made to date in relation to universality, some accessibility and availability issues still remain. According to the provider survey, services in Dublin and surrounding counties, as well as Cork (County and City), Louth, Roscommon and Carlow are most likely not to offer a place to every child applying. Larger services, and part-time and full-time services (rather than sessional services) were more likely not to have offered an ECCE place to every child applying for reasons other than toilet training. Private services in affluent areas were least likely to offer all children a place, particularly in urban areas, and have a lower percentage of children with a disability or additional need.

On average, parents of children with longstanding illnesses, conditions, or disabilities and parents from ethnic minorities contacted and applied to more settings than other parents and were less likely to be offered a place at their preferred setting or feel that they had a choice of setting. In addition, the findings suggest that in some areas with high demand, access for newcomer children and children experiencing homelessness, refugees and mobile Travellers can be affected by lack of start and mid-term availability and limited flexibility in availability overall. While many parents and providers praised the accessibility of the ECCE programme registration process, PPS numbers continue to present a barrier to vulnerable families.

## Finding 3: Costs

While initiatives have been put in place to ensure that the ECCE programme is principally free of charge, some underlying costs still appear to prevail. Some ECCE programme services, according to providers, still charge a booking deposit, particularly private services, and services in urban areas, and affluent areas. One in three parents reported paying a booking deposit to secure an ECCE place (usually under €100). Optional extras for additional ECCE minutes and school trips are offered by more than half of all services.

One in ten parents found these “difficult” or “very difficult” to afford and one in three parents reported that the optional extras did not feel “optional” to them. Voluntary contributions are overall rare but are slightly more likely in disadvantaged areas and twice as likely in community as in private services. Yet while there may be some minor costs incurred in some settings, parents particularly welcomed that the ECCE programme is principally free of charge.

## Finding 4: Eligibility rules and age range

Most stakeholders agreed with the ECCE programme’s age range i.e. 2 years, 8 months to 5 years, 6 months. The extension of the programme to a second year of provision was deemed as a “real benefit” and “very promising.” There was a lack of consensus, however, around enrolment/entry points. While over half (57.5%) of the providers surveyed were in favour of one entry point, principally because “it’s easier to manage” and it avoids “interruptions throughout the year”, a sizeable minority felt additional enrolment points would be beneficial.

Parents of children born early or late in the year were most likely to support additional enrolment points and the single-entry point was considered by the international experts “a bit rigid.” (International Expert 1)

## Finding 5: Intensity and Adherence

The majority of provider survey respondents felt that the current daily (71%), weekly (70%), and annual (79%) intensity, as well as the maximum eligibility of two years (83%) was “about right”. However, about one in three providers support a higher daily or weekly intensity, with four hours being the most commonly suggested daily intensity. One in two providers also support a higher daily intensity in the second year of the programme with preparation for primary school being highlighted as a valid reason. Parents tended to be less satisfied with the current daily (56.5%), weekly (56.5%) and annual (73.8%) intensity. Nearly one in two parents expressed preference for an increased daily and weekly intensity and one in five parents support a longer maximum eligibility for reasons such as costs of Early Learning and Care (ELC), supporting working parents and meeting children’s learning needs.

However, it is important to note that, in four out of ten services, some children routinely attend for less than the full 15 hours a week. Experts and practitioners consulted for WP4 cautioned that rules on irregular attendance and funding can be counter-productive and constitute a barrier for vulnerable children who struggle with regular attendance for various reasons. Several of the national and international experts called for an increase in intensity of the ECCE programme, as did several of the children with comments such as: “More time”; “Maybe more”. Experts who work closely with hard-to-reach families indicated the relatively short daily hours can present a challenge to uptake and regular attendance among disadvantaged groups.

## Finding 6: Towards a graduate-led workforce

While there is a commitment in Ireland to move to a graduate-led workforce, supported by the Graduate Premium under Core Funding, all educators currently working in the ECCE programme must have a minimum NQF level 5 and the lead educator must have a minimum NQF level 6. Our findings suggest that in practice, this requirement is often exceeded. In the provider survey, almost all of the respondents (93%) stated that at least one of their Early Years educators had a qualification above NQF5 and 74% indicated that at least one lead educator had a qualification above NQF6. In line with existing administrative data on workforce qualification levels, the provider survey findings show a definite movement towards ensuring a graduate-led workforce in practice.

While many services taking part in the provider survey rated their access to qualified educators as “appropriate”, sessional services (in particular those offering morning sessions only), and private settings found it more difficult to access qualified educators than their counterparts. The findings suggest that recruiting and retaining graduates in the sector remains challenging, principally due to poor pay and working conditions and many are leaving, as a result, to go to the primary sector for higher salaries, respect and prestige.



## Finding 7: Adult-child ratios

The minimum adult-child ratio defined in the current ECCE programme rules is 1:11. However, according to the provider survey, most settings operate a lower ratio either with AIM Level 7 support (41%) or without (31%). Only 35% of the ECCE programme providers indicated that they currently operate at the stipulated 1:11 adult-child ratio. Providers reported that, even after the introduction of AIM, an inadequate adult-child ratio and challenging behavioural difficulties were key reasons for not offering a place to every child applying.

A sizeable minority of providers considered the existing adult-child ratio too high, due to high needs among children under 3 (especially toileting support), children with additional needs and those with behavioural challenges not supported for AIM Level 7 and lack of time for individual attention. Several of the experts agreed with an adult-child ratio of 1:11 for children aged three or above, if suitably qualified, but emphasised the need for a lower ratio for children under 3.

## Is the ECCE programme meeting its core objective to promote better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children?

## Finding 8: Socio-emotional outcomes

The ECCE programme is benefitting children by providing opportunities for social interactions (providers: 71.5%, parents: 54%) and enhancing their emotional health and well-being (providers: 62%, parents: 38%), as summed up in the following citation: "Well, I actually think that probably the social and emotional skills are the two top ones that are built here in those two years because we don't focus on academics here at all. We focus on the dispositions and the skills and all of that." (Manager, Community service, Westmeath)

Most parents taking part in the parent survey felt that their child had become more confident and independent (78.8% "Strongly Agree"/18.6% Agree) since starting the ECCE programme and many parents in the qualitative interviews/focus groups identified friendships and interactions with peers as a key positive of the ECCE programme.

Children also valued social experiences and playing with their friends, and images of playing with their friends appeared dominant in drawings of their favorite aspects of the ECCE programme. These positive findings are supported by data from the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) where the mean score (across the 30 settings) for children's actions in relation to social interaction (4.6), respect (4.8), confidence (4.7) and well-being (4.7) fell into the top end of the satisfactory to high rating.

## Finding 9: Cognitive outcomes

The majority of providers (92%) and parents (74%) reported a positive impact on children's cognitive learning and development, and 94% of providers strongly agreed or agreed that the ECCE programme "promotes optimal development for all children". National and international experts also agreed: "It's good that it's developmental, it's not just somewhere where kids are minded, it's now a learning and development space" (National expert 4). However, in practice, children's cognitive outcomes, appear to be slightly lower than their social and emotional learning.

The average mean scores across the 30 settings for children's actions on 'Concentration' and 'Multiple Skill Acquisition' were 4.1 and 4.0 respectively i.e. the lower end of the satisfactory to high rating, while the average mean score for children's actions on 'Higher Order Thinking Skills' was 3.7 i.e. the high end of the satisfactory rating.

Indeed, the 'Higher Order Thinking Skills' indicator stood out as being lower than the other quality indicators on all aspects of the learning triangle, with an average mean score of 3.4 for Teaching Strategies and 3.8 for the environment. In this way, while services want to support children's cognitive development as part of their holistic learning, educators' capacity to fully stretch and challenge young children's cognitive learning through the medium of play and playful pedagogies may require some further consideration.

## Is the ECCE programme meeting its core objective to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children?

## Finding 10: Narrowing the gap

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds gain key benefits from participating in the ECCE programme according to managers, educators and the experts consulted on behalf of the hard-to-reach families. These benefits range from the provision of a positive and stable experience for homeless children, English language skills for newcomer children, the potential identification of development delay and access to early intervention for children with additional needs to providing a safe place to play for Traveller children, and, where practice is inclusive, an opportunity for Traveller families to heal educational trauma and help communities embrace education. Several parents also reported gains in language development, social awareness, confidence, and "coming out of their shell." The positive impact of AIM on meeting the needs of children with disabilities and additional needs was also seen as a key strength of the ECCE programme.

Several experts believe that the ECCE programme is providing "an equal playing pitch for children." (National Expert 9), a finding which was reflected in the QLI findings. According to the QLI, little pronounced difference was observed in the quality of the overall learning experience provided between those settings in more advantaged areas (average mean score = 4.1) and those settings in less advantaged areas (average mean score = 4.2) according to the HP deprivation index. Although due to the small sample size these findings must be read with caution, there is a tentative suggestion that services in disadvantaged areas outperformed those in more affluent areas on those quality indicators which relate to the social and emotional aspect of learning, e.g. confidence (D = 4.5 versus A = 4.3), well-being (D= 4.6 versus A= 4.4), independence (D= 4.3 versus A= 3.6) and social interaction (D= 4.3 versus A =4.0).

On the other hand, the settings in more advantaged areas appeared to perform better on the more cognitive quality indicators, i.e. concentration (A= 4.2 versus D= 4.1), Multiple Skill Acquisition (A = 4.1 versus 3.6) and Higher Order Thinking Skills (A = 3.7 and D = 3.6). These findings suggest that children in the more disadvantaged areas may require a greater emphasis on nurturing social and emotional learning than in more advantaged areas.

In summation, while a large majority of providers (90%) strongly agreed or agreed that the ECCE programme goes some way to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children, they expressed least confidence in this third programme objective. Therefore, while the ECCE programme can be described as going some way to close this gap, some important challenges remain.

## Are there enhancements that can be made?

While the findings from the review certainly portray the ECCE programme in a positive light, there are certain possible opportunities for learning that come to the fore from the international and the empirical evidence in this review, that if implemented, might go some way to enhance the programme for all concerned.

### Enhancement 1: Increasing the intensity of the programme

The evidence from this review is very clear regarding the importance of retaining the free and universal character of the ECCE programme as well as the second year. Yet, the research participants suggest that some consideration might be given to increasing the daily intensity of the ECCE programme perhaps from 3 hours to 4 hours per day in the second year for all children in preparation for primary schooling and

enhancing the daily and annual intensity of the ECCE programme for children from disadvantaged and more vulnerable backgrounds, to ensure availability over the summer months.

### Enhancement 2: Injecting more flexibility into the system

While the ECCE programme is highly revered by all concerned, the findings point towards the need for more flexible programme rules, affording families “a bit of choice” and “more leeway”. In terms of enrolment to the ECCE programme, the findings suggest that a degree of flexibility may be beneficial in particular for those children born close to the cut-off date, especially those born early in the year who are least likely to avail of two programme years. While the introduction of the second year of the ECCE programme has resulted in a delayed primary school start for many children in Ireland, currently parents of children born late in the year face barriers to delaying their child’s primary school enrolment due to ECCE programme eligibility rules and participants recommended some flexibility in the system for them also.

Likewise, there were calls from parents, particularly of children born in January and March for more enrolment points, other than the single entry point for the ECCE programme that is currently being practised. Ensuring availability throughout the year (i.e. by funding a certain number of reserved emergency spaces) would also allow children from families experiencing homelessness, newcomers, refugees and mobile Travellers to engage more fully in the ECCE programme. Re-considering the rules on funding and regular attendance may also help attract greater numbers of children from vulnerable families into the ECCE programme as: “An over-rigid application of rules and dates is not in the children’s best interest” (Owner/manager, private service, County Mayo).



### Enhancement 3: Improving adult-child ratios for younger age groups

While the findings from this review suggest that stakeholders are in agreement with the current adult-child ratio of the ECCE programme for older children, there are definite calls for a lower ratio for the youngest children. Educators in particular felt that a lower ratio would benefit the quality of interactions, thinking which corresponds with the wider evidence base. Although the evidence is generally weak and inconclusive with regard to the association between ratios and child outcomes (Daalgard et al., 2022 and Melhuish et al., 2015), the evidence in relation to ratios and process quality is much stronger and high process quality is a strong predictor of positive child outcomes.

Lower adult-child ratios than currently provided within the ECCE programme tend to be associated with higher quality interactions (OECD, 2018), process quality more generally (Daalgard et al., 2022 and Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018) and are particularly critical for high-quality interactions with children under the age of three (OECD, 2023). While most children in the ECCE programme are over the age of three and all are at least 2.8 years old when they start, providers, educators and experts are calling for some improvements in adult-child ratios, possibly in the first ECCE programme year, and in deprived areas.

### Enhancement 4: Strengthening the professionalisation of the workforce

Evidence from the study suggests that Higher Capitation payments and the new Graduate Premium after HC have helped encourage more graduates into the ECCE programme, although it is too early to say whether recent changes introduced under Core Funding will be able to maintain this effect. Many managers and educators we spoke to were calling for increased salaries and enhanced working conditions. Challenges remain within the ECCE programme regarding recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff, a finding which is not particular to the context of Ireland (see e.g. EPI, 2017, Social Mobility Commission, 2020 and Pascal, Bertram and Aläck, 2020). Extending funded working hours, (through increased daily intensity and added funded non-contact time) and the offering of year-round funding for sessional staff have been advocated by the participants of this review as a means to improve working conditions for sessional and AIM staff in particular and increase their overall status and professionalism

A review of provision for non-contact time in the Core Funding has also been called for with further consideration of additional, ring-fenced funding for non-contact hours to ensure that no member of staff within the ECCE programme is expected to engage in administrative work or session preparation unpaid in their own time. However, recognition must be given to the on-going work of the Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan 2021-2028 (DCEDIY, 2021), which is currently attempting to address issues on low pay and recruitment, and time permitted to embed, to enable the ECCE programme workforce feel the benefits of these initiatives and recognise their impact in practice.

## Enhancement 5: Enhancing access to quality professional development opportunities

More professional development opportunities to enhance quality in practice have also been called for in addition to the existing professional development opportunities at present (e.g. the National Síolta Aistear Initiative). Such a finding is supported by the wider evidence base where continuous professional development has been identified as a strong predictor of quality (OECD, 2018, Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018) which has an overall positive impact on child outcomes (Jensen and Würtz Rasmussen, 2019 and Egert, Fukkink and Eckhardt, 2018). It is worth noting that the workforce development plan Nurturing Skills includes a commitment to strengthen these opportunities further.

The review identified a need for more professional development in the field of play and playful pedagogies with particular regard to ensuring higher levels of challenge and rich playful learning opportunities to enable children to engage more fully in Higher Order Thinking. The findings also pointed towards the need for further professional development to support outdoor play in practice, and grants for the purchase and development of outdoor space, to help ensure that more children have regular access to outdoor play. Professional development in diversity and inclusion was also recommended by the research participants to help build trust among marginalised communities (OECD, 2023).

## Enhancement 6: Providing greater support for disadvantaged and marginalised children and their families

Although the ECCE programme is impacting positively on many children and families from disadvantaged and marginalised groups, the findings suggest that further support is needed. Children from families experiencing social and or economic disadvantage, in particular those from Traveller and Roma communities are still less likely to avail of the ECCE programme than their peers. Practical measures including information in a range of formats and languages and through a range of channels, as well as discarding PPS numbers in the enrolment process were identified as steps that could be taken to encourage programme uptake among marginalised communities. Current plans to extend the broaden the scope of AIM, and the introduction of the Equal Participation Model (EPM) should also improve access and help support a wider cohort of children. Other practical developments recommended by participants include funding for travel in disadvantaged areas or improved transport infrastructure and funding for optional summer schemes as well as encouraging representation from minority communities to enter the ECCE workforce through e.g. targeted training grants (as already committed to in NTRIS and Nurturing Skills).

In an effort to heal some of the educational trauma and distrust experienced by some of these communities, some participants suggested that consideration might be given to introducing a fully funded HSCL-type scheme into the ECCE programme. Likewise, participants recommended that funding models, similar to the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity) scheme operating in disadvantaged primary and post-primary schools could be explored to ensure that all ECCE programme services in disadvantaged communities would have access to a role similar to the HSCL Co-ordinator full-time or in a shared capacity across part-time and sessional services. It was suggested that the EPM could serve this function. Evidence points to the valuable support that such an initiative brings, not only to schools and families but also to children alike (Walsh et al., 2022). The wider evidence base also indicates the importance of high-quality settings for disadvantaged children in particular (van Huizen and Plantenga, 2018) and shows that disadvantaged children's development is enhanced in more inclusive and 'mixed' settings in terms of culture and socio-economic status (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2023), findings which were reiterated by the research participants in the ECCE review.

## Concluding Comments

This independent review has raised some pertinent issues with regard to the ECCE programme in terms of what is working well, the challenges that remain and some possible solutions moving forward. However, the most important message to emerge strongly from the research is that the ECCE programme has been very positively received and is valued by all concerned i.e. children, parents, providers, managers, educators and a range of expert stakeholders. Almost all of the providers who responded to the survey reflected upon the ECCE programme in positive terms, the majority of parents (75%) were “very satisfied” with the ECCE programme with a further 23% expressing satisfaction.

The children’s conversations also reflected a hugely positive response towards the ECCE programme experience. Experts consulted on behalf of the hard-to-reach families, and national and international experts consulted as part of Work Package 3, also greatly appreciated the ECCE programme, as reflected in comments such as “hugely important”, “of primary importance”, “an essential public service” and “the jewel in the crown”.

Indeed, some of the national and international experts were so positive about the ECCE programme, and indeed the wider ELC system in Ireland as a whole, that they referred to it as a model of good practice from which other countries can learn. The ECCE programme is a definite good news story for ELC in Ireland, and if the considerations for future development, as put forward by the participants in this review, are suitably embraced, the ECCE programme has certainly the potential to go from strength to strength.

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