

PRESS RELEASE



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais, Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

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Minister O’Gorman announces details of €13.5 million in additional funding to ensure children experiencing disadvantage can access early learning and childcare

Roderic O’Gorman, T.D., Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has today announced details of €13.5 million in additional funding for Equal Start - the major new model of Government-funded supports to ensure children experiencing disadvantage can access and meaningfully participate in early learning and childcare.

Equal Start will include a suite of universal supports, child-targeted supports and setting-targeted supports to ensure every child and every early learning and childcare setting will benefit from a continuum of supports that reflects a continuum of need.

Children to benefit from child-targeted supports will include children living in disadvantaged areas, Traveller children, Roma children, children availing of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor body, children experiencing homelessness and children in the International Protection system.

Settings to benefit from setting-targeted supports – approximately 750 are settings, which have been objectively identified as operating in the context of the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage.

The majority of additional funding for Equal Start for the first programme year - over €11 million – will be allocated to these targeted settings to fund additional staff hours that can be used to support engagement between the settings and families, engagement between the settings and other child and family support services, training in inclusive practices and to support other educators and practitioners in the provision of early learning and childcare to children with higher levels of need.

There will be two tiers of support depending on the levels of disadvantage within the setting:

- around 300 “Tier 1” settings serving 12,500 children will receive funding to support a 15% increase staffing hours
- around 450 “Tier 2” settings serving 22,000 children will receive funding to support an 8% increase staffing hours

The settings that have been objectively identified as operating in the context of the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage will be notified in the coming weeks if they have been designated as Tier 1 or Tier 2 settings. Settings must be in contract for Core Funding in the coming programme year to benefit from these setting-targeted supports.

The remaining funding available for Equal Start in the first programme year will support the following:

- Appointment of six Family Link Workers to support the full roll out of the Traveller Parenting Support Programme to all 17 Tusla areas, with new responsibilities on Family Link Workers to engage with Traveller parents of children aged 1-5 years, supporting them to attend and participate in early learning and childcare, avail of the ECCE programme and where applicable applying for the NCS.
- Appointment of a Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists to work in Better Start
- Review and updating of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines and associated training
- Review of the current Inclusion Co-ordinator role and updating of Leadership for Inclusion Programme
- Development of a new Family Community Liaison role and development and rollout of associated training programme
- Roll-out of Early Talk Boost to Equal Start target settings
- Roll-out of Meitheal training and engagement by early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners in Meitheal
- Development and roll out of Communications and Engagement Plan
- Development of a new strand of funding under the existing Case Management Process for critical incidents
- Roll-out Equal Start literacy and numeracy initiatives under the National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy.

Commenting on today's announcement, Minister O'Gorman said:

"This is the first step towards major enhancements to how we support children and families experiencing disadvantage and the settings that serve them. I am committed, as is this Government, to alleviating child poverty and breaking cycles of disadvantage and this is a key component of our response to that commitment".

-ENDS-

Note for Editors:

Overview

Equal Start is a funding model and a set of universal and targeted measures to support access and full participation in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) for children and their families who experience disadvantage. In support of this overarching objective, Equal Start consists of a series of actions – 17 in total – to support children and families as well as educators, practitioners and settings. The goals of Equal Start are that:

- **All children**, in particular children experiencing disadvantage, have equitable access and participation in ELC and SAC settings.

- **All ELC and SAC settings**, in particular settings operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage, equitably promote the learning and care of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Parents and families**, in particular parents and families experiencing disadvantage, are empowered with the knowledge, tools and supports necessary for children to have equitable access and participation in ELC and SAC.

Equal Start constitutes the fourth strand of Together for Better, the funding model for early learning and care and school-age childcare and complements the Early Childhood Care and Education programme, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), and Core Funding as well as other key policies that also support disadvantaged children within early learning and care and school-age childcare.

Equal Start has been developed on foot of extensive consultation with parents, educators and practitioners, providers and representative groups, is informed by national and international evidence and experience, including the DEIS model in schools.

Strands of the Equal Start

Universal measures (Strand 1) – Every child and every setting

Strand 1 of Equal start will provide universal measures – measures that are available in all settings and that will support positive experiences and outcomes for all children. Through their universal reach, these measures will support children from disadvantaged backgrounds in whatever ELC or SAC setting they attend. In addition, some of the measures here will prioritise Equal Start targeted settings and target groups in their initial roll-out but with the aim ultimately of universal roll-out to all ELC and SAC settings. Measures under Strand 1 fall into three areas:

- A. Empowering parents** – communications initiatives to support parents (in particular parents from disadvantaged communities) to know about what services are available to them (both ELC and SAC settings and parenting supports), how to access them, and what financial supports can help them.
- B. Embedding inclusion in settings** – supporting ELC and SAC settings to be more inclusive through reviewing and extending Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years (LINC) training, reviewing support for the Inclusion Coordinator role, strengthening admissions policies, and supporting settings’ engagement in inter-agency cooperation for child welfare and protection.
- C. Supporting partnership between settings, families and communities** – developing a new role in ELC and SAC settings of Family and Community Partnership Coordinator, introducing training to support the new role, extending the Better Start advisory role to support Equal Start and supporting parents’ involvement in settings.

Child-targeted measures (Strand 2) – Every child with a priority designation

Strand 2 of Equal Start will provide child-targeted measures – measures that are available in all settings and that will focus additional supports on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and priority groups, including:

- children living in a small area assigned as deprived under the Pobal HP Deprivation Index,
- children from a Traveller or Roma ethnic background,
- children availing of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor referral,
- children living in homeless accommodation, and
- children living in an International Protection Accommodation Centre or Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres.

Measures under Strand 2 fall into two areas:

- D. Meeting practical needs** – additional, semi-flexible funding to support access and participation of children from priority groups, in all settings.
- E. Developing tailored responses** – working with representative organisations of target groups to co-create effective solutions to address barriers to access and participation in ELC and SAC for children from those target groups.

Setting-targeted measures (Strand 3) – Every setting with a priority designation

Strand 3 of the Equal Start will provide setting-targeted measures – measures that specifically target settings that have been identified through the Equal Start identification model as settings with high concentrations of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Strand 3 will provide:

- F. Additional funding for settings in areas of concentrated disadvantage** – flexible funding for additional staff time to assist settings in supporting children in the most disadvantaged communities, as well as funding for additional meals in targeted settings to help address food poverty and the provision of targeted interventions for children experiencing language delay. The Equal Start identification model will also be used in other areas of ELC and SAC policy to support the further development of the progressive universal approach to policy set out in *First 5*.

Identification Model

Children and settings to benefit from targeted supports have been identified through the Equal Start identification model, which uses administrative data from the National Childcare Scheme and the ECCE programme (e.g. children's Eircode and ethnicity, as well as sponsor referrals) combined with Pobal's HP Deprivation Index and geocoded lists of homeless accommodation providers, International Protection Accommodation Centres and Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres. No application process will be required for targeted supports.

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