

Policy Proposal



A Single Agency for Early Years and School Age Care

January 2024

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Introduction

About Early Childhood Ireland

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading children's advocacy and membership organisation. We work in partnership with our members to achieve quality experiences for every child in Early Years, School Age Care settings and Childminders homes. We advocate for an effective and inclusive Early Years and School Age Care system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children and services.

Background

In Early Childhood Ireland's Budget 2020 Submission [*Rising to the Challenge: Early Years and School Age Childcare Agency*](#), we called for the government to establish a Single Agency for the Early Years and School Age Care (EY and SAC) sector. The organisation argued that this would realise the ambition set out in [*First 5, the National Early Years Strategy*](#), to ensure that babies and children have positive experiences and the best start in life. This agency would *"draw together all the disparate strands currently responsible for oversight and planning in the early years and school age sector under one roof. This new agency would align and integrate all functions relating to quality, planning, administration, and funding. The agency would act as a "one-stop shop" for parents and providers, whether centre- or home-based"* (Early Childhood Ireland, 2019).

Ahead of the 2020 General Election, we renewed our call and the subsequent [*Programme For Government, Our Shared Future*](#), committed to establishing an agency, named Childcare Ireland, that would assist in the expansion of high-quality EY and SAC, spearheading leadership, best practice and innovation, and professional development in community and private settings. The agency would also be tasked with developing career paths and expanding Siolta, the national curriculum framework for Early Years. In 2021, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) commissioned a [*review of the EY and SAC operating model*](#) which was undertaken by Indecon. The report found that the Early Years and School Age Care (EY and SAC) sector in Ireland *is characterised by a complex and fragmented landscape of stakeholders, often with competing and overlapping functions. This complexity has given rise to issues such as duplication, inefficiencies, and challenges of accountability* (Indecon, 2021).

In 2023, a Programme Board to oversee the formation of a Single Agency was appointed by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, marking another milestone towards the realisation of this goal. A response to a [*Parliamentary Question in November 2023*](#), confirms this:

“My Department has commenced a comprehensive planning and analysis phase which will include robust stakeholder consultation, an examination of all legal requirements, transition and continuity planning, risk management, and a comprehensive evidence-based cost projection for the establishment and annual running costs of the new agency. This work will culminate in a full agency design and implementation plan which will be presented to Government for approval.”

As this work gets underway, this Policy Proposal seeks to review our original rationale in the context of relevant developments since 2019.

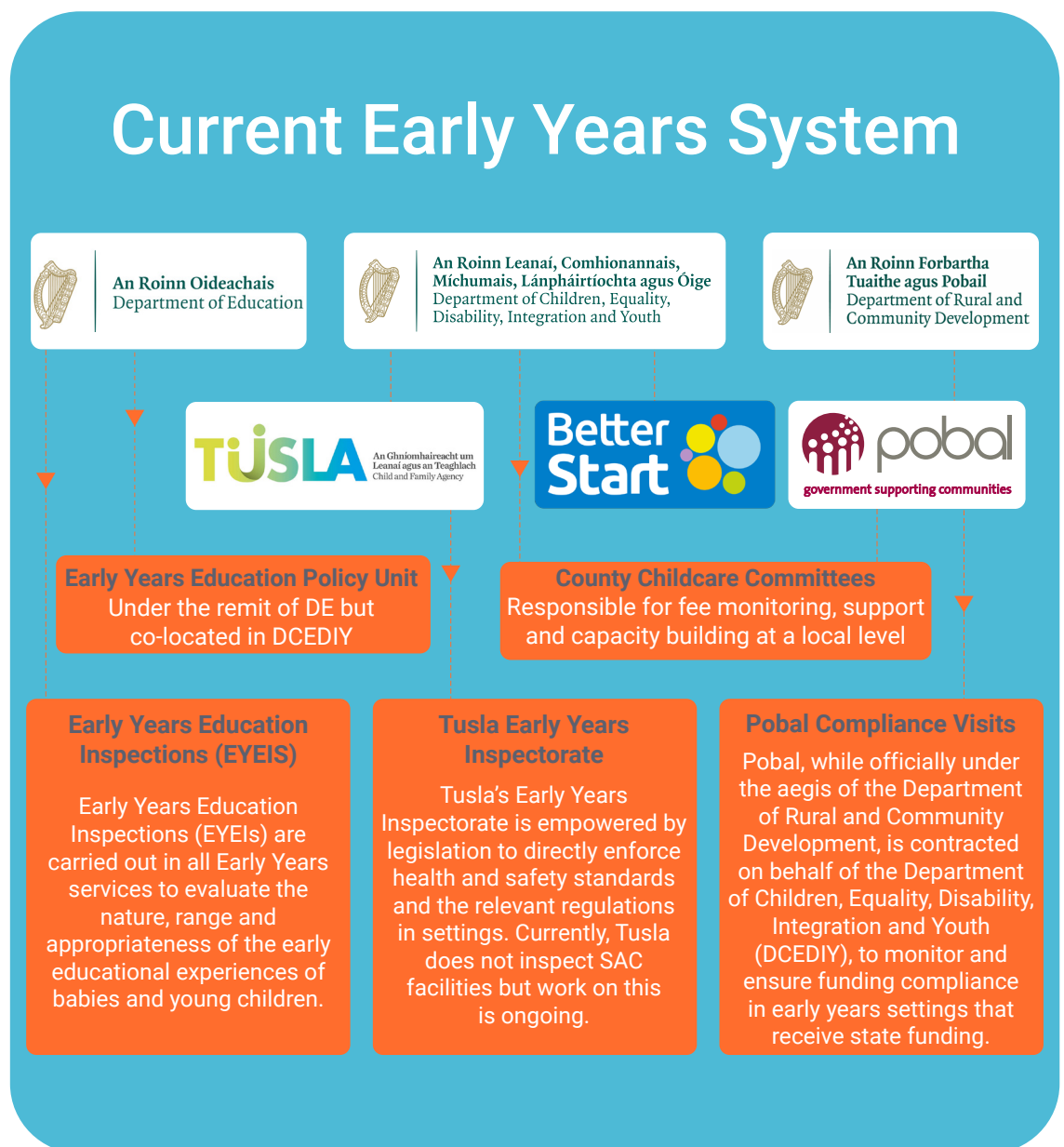
The Importance of a Single Agency

Early Childhood Ireland believes that Early Years and School Age Care settings should be properly publicly funded and operate within an effective system. We propose that settings have robust in-setting leadership and regulatory practice, as well as a well-qualified workforce, with sustained access to opportunities for reflective practice and professional learning and development. In addition, the child safeguarding system needs to be effective and with all settings supporting positive, effective safeguarding culture and practice. These factors together will provide an enabling environment to achieve universal access to and consistently high-quality experiences for every child in Early Years and School Age care settings.

Our current EY and SAC system is fragmented. There is currently no central body responsible for planning capacity, for monitoring quality, or financial management oversight.

A Single Agency should reduce fragmentation and promote cost effectiveness as it would align work and create efficiencies. With promised increased investment, which can help to provide the best outcomes for children, a Single Agency should also give a clear line of sight for tracking public funding. [Indecon](#) (2021) projects the number of children in the sector to increase to more than 300,000 by 2028, and 2020 Census figures show that currently there are over 200,000 children currently enrolled in EY and SAC services. A Single Agency is needed to ensure that the expansion of EY and SAC is carefully managed. This will have the benefit of safeguarding children, ensuring an effective and well-resourced publicly model of EY and SAC and empowering our members to deliver the highest standards of care possible. In addition, with further regulation and funding of childminders, a DCEDIY priority in the [next phase of First 5](#), it is important that these functions are under one roof. A full explanation of the rationale for a Single Agency is outlined further in this paper.

Current Context



(Early Childhood Ireland, 2019)

As illustrated, the overseeing functions of the Early Years and School Age Care sector are divided among several differing and overlapping bodies. These functions include funding, policy, support, and communications. Inspections are undertaken by both Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate and the Department of Education Early Years Inspectors, neither of which is included in the scope of this Proposal, but the upcoming consolidation of inspections frameworks is welcome. In the recent [First 5 Implementation Plan 2023-2025](#) it is noted that the ambition of DCEDIY is to bring together the functions carried out by Tusla's Early Years

Inspectorate and the Department of Education (DE) Inspectorate's Early Years team into a single body that provides integrated care and education inspections (Government of Ireland, 2023). It will be vital that this unified inspectorate links in closely with the Single Agency, to ensure that quality is maintained, fragmentation does not reoccur and that the health, safety and well-being of children is safeguarded.

It is necessary to examine the roles of each stakeholder, as they fulfil several functions. This section outlines the roles of each stakeholder in the sector that will be consolidated and reconfigured by the formation of a Single Agency.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, or DCEDIY, oversees the EY and SAC sector, formulates and drives policy and delegates roles to other stakeholders in the sector. The DCEDIY outlines their mission as being to enhance the lives of children, young people, adults, families, and communities while recognising diversity and promoting equality of opportunity. To oversee their role, DCEDIY is split into nine sections. This includes the Office of the Secretary-General, the Ukraine Management Office, and the Ukraine Operations section. There are also six divisions: the Adoption, Mother and Baby Homes and Research Division, the Disability and Youth Division, the Child Policy and Tusla Governance Division, the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Division, the Corporate and Business Support Division, and the International Protection and Equality Division. DCEDIY is responsible for consultation, development and implementation of strategy for children and young people and is responsible for the implementation of [First 5](#) and [Young Ireland](#).

Within DCEDIY, the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Division is responsible for ensuring access to high-quality and affordable EY and SAC provision. This involves the development of policy and legislation, the administration of a range of schemes and the associated budgetary, governance, and compliance functions, the regulation of the Early Years and School Age Care sector, and several initiatives to develop the workforce and improve the quality of services.

Pobal

Pobal is an organisation that supports community development initiatives across Ireland, particularly by way of disbursing grants and funding. Its role in the Early Years and School Age Care sector is to manage EY and SAC funding programmes, capital funding and gather data from settings. The funding programmes include the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), Better Start, the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS), Core Funding, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme, Early Learning and Care and school-Age Capital Programmes, the Learner Fund, the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programmes and Voluntary Childcare Organisations (VCOs). As part of these duties, Pobal also

administers the Early Years Hive, undertakes inspections as part of the compliance process for the various funding schemes, and provides supports to providers regarding their contractual obligations regarding these schemes.

Better Start

The Better Start National Early Years Quality Development is hosted in Pobal. It promotes and enhances inclusive high-quality Early Years care for children from birth to six years of age in Ireland. Better Start provides mentoring and coaching on the curriculum framework and, continuous professional development and further supports for providers. The initiative provides this by employing Early Years Specialists who liaise with educators and providers on an ongoing basis. Better Start is also central to the administration of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) on behalf of DCEDIY.

Childcare Committees

The City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) support and help families, and EY and SAC providers at local level. CCCs are funded by the DCEDIY and are located throughout the country. Each CCC corresponds with the local authority in the area, and they are run by voluntary boards with professional support staff. They coordinate the national early years policy and programmes at a local level on behalf of the DCEDIY. CCCs can supply services with information on government care subsidies, sustainability, and governance. CCCs also offer support to those that want to set up their own early years or school age care service as well as offering advice regarding inspections and regulations. In recent years the CCCs have provided contact functions on behalf of other stakeholders such as Tusla and Pobal and have provided liaison with providers on sustainability funding schemes and issues. The CCCs have taken a key role in the development of childminding, which is achieved through the employment of childminding development officers in each local authority. Through the National Child Safeguarding Programme, the CCCs also deliver sector-specific Child Safeguarding training to educators working in EY and SAC services.

International Context

When considering the establishment of a Single Agency to oversee the EY and SAC sector in Ireland, the international context and how sectoral governance is structured elsewhere is of interest.

France

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the responsibilities for Early Childhood Education and Care (Early Years) are split between the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (Ministère des Affaires sociales et de la Santé) for children in Early Years up until the age of 3 years (or 2 in schools belonging to a priority area), and the Ministry of National Education (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale) for children in pre-primary education aged between 2-3 and 6 years. Licensing of day care services is undertaken by the Child and Maternal Protection Agency (Protection Maternelle et Infantile or PMI), while the national government accredits and licenses pre-primary schools in collaboration with local authorities.

French Early Years settings for children under pre-primary school age are led by the *Orientations du code de la santé publique et les projets d'établissements* (guidelines of public health and facilities) which ensures a good and equal level of sanitary, health, hygiene and safety across settings; and the *Orientations générales pour les crèches* (general guidelines for crèches) which shapes a general framework for the childcare system in France. Early Years education is guided by a national curriculum, *L'école maternelle: un cycle unique, fondamental pour la réussite de tous* (Kindergarten: a single cycle, fundamental to the success of all), which sets out the objectives for, as well as the foundations of, pre-primary education and its general orientations and expectations regarding subjects and skills to be taught in preschool (OECD, 2016).

Nordic States

Denmark

According to the OECD (2020a) Early Years in Denmark is primarily overseen by the Ministry of Children and Education. The ministry is responsible for the overall policies and regulations related to education, including Early Years. Additionally, municipalities play a significant role in the implementation and delivery of Early Years services. They are responsible for managing and organizing local Early Years facilities, ensuring that they meet the national standards set by the state.

Finland

The OECD (2016) reports that the Ministry of Education and Culture (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö) is the national authority responsible for Early Years in Finland. Further inputs are provided by the National Board of Education (Opetushallitus) for curriculum development in Early Years services. Furthermore, licensing, approval and monitoring of Early Years services and preschool education settings is done by local (municipal) authorities.

In Finland, regional state administrative agencies and local municipalities are responsible for monitoring Early Years settings and pre-primary education settings. As a result, monitoring practices differ between regions and municipalities. Minimum standards regarding staff-child ratios, health, hygiene and safety regulations, and staff qualifications are monitored and inspected at the municipal level. Inspections address staff quality and focus on the overall quality of the staff, use of materials, planning and time management, implementation of the curriculum, staff qualifications, teamwork and communication among staff and management, working conditions, and professional development opportunities.

While Finland implements a wide range of practices to monitor quality in Early Years, several challenges remain. Firstly, there is no shared perspective for quality in Early Years. Setting out clear quality goals in a framework can overcome this. Secondly, Finland has no national monitoring system. Developing a national quality framework and standardising certain monitoring tools can create greater coherence in Finland's monitoring system. And thirdly, there is limited training on this monitoring available which indicates a need for more in-service or on-the-job training (OECD, 2016).

Norway

In Norway, there is an integrated responsibility for Early Years provision and schooling under the Ministry of Education and Research since 2006 and, from 2012, certain tasks were delegated to its subsidiary Directorate for Education and Training, which facilitates smoother transitions of children across different levels of education, and more coherent governance. Ultimately, the Directorate for Education and Training is responsible for the development of kindergartens, with the Framework Plan for Kindergartens setting learning content and curricula (Angel, Barnett, Anders and Taguma, 2015).

Municipalities play a key role in Early Years governance, and funding and stakeholders are involved in key decisions. For instance, in 2010 a national parents' committee for kindergarten was established. Since 2011, kindergartens were included in the block grants transferred to municipalities, replacing the earmarked grants used for the expansion. Municipalities own half of Norway's kindergartens and oversee all public and private kindergartens in their districts. This allows local authorities to adapt kindergarten provision and other services to local needs. At the same time, it also makes it difficult for the national government to ensure that policies are adequately implemented across the country, especially since incentives through earmarked grants have been phased out (Engel, Barnett, Anders and Taguma, 2015).

Sweden

In Sweden, the responsibility for Early Childhood Education and Care (Early Years) oversight primarily lies with the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket). It plays a crucial role in setting guidelines, regulations, and ensuring the quality of education in Sweden, including Early Years. Local municipalities (kommuner) are responsible for organising preschool (forskola) and preschool class (forskoleklass) education. Quality assurance for forskola is undertaken by an independent body, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen), that has inspected preschools since 2008 (European Commission, 2023).

United Kingdom

Within the United Kingdom, the constituent jurisdictions of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland each have a different structure and operating model.

England

The governance of the Early Years sector is made up of separate bodies with different reporting structures. The Department for Education (DfE) allocates entitlement funding to Local Authorities (LAs) so that every three- and four-year-old – as well as eligible two-year-olds – is entitled to a part-time place (the equivalent of 15 hours a week for 38 weeks a year) in an Early Years setting, this will rise to 30 hours in 2024. LAs then allocate funding, in compliance with regulations set by the DfE, to an estimated 70 000 providers who offer the free universal and extended entitlements.

Under the English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, there is a legal requirement to monitor the quality of Early Years settings. As such, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and inspectorates of independent schools carry out inspections and report on the quality of provision based on the principles and requirements of the EYFS. Independent of the DfE, Ofsted is a non-ministerial government department that inspects registered early years providers and schools, whether they be public providers, independent for-profit or non-profit providers and home-based childcare. It reports directly to a parliamentary select committee made up of members of parliament from different political parties. Settings that wish to provide childcare – including childminder agencies – must register with Ofsted under sections 49 and 50 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Scotland

The oversight of the Scottish Early Years sector is divided amongst several entities. The Scottish Government by way of the Early Learning and Care Directorate takes a central role in formulating policies and allocating funding to ensure widespread access to high-quality early learning experiences. The Care Inspectorate, as the national regulatory body, conducts inspections and regulates Early Years services to ensure compliance with established standards. Inspection reports are published to inform parents and the public. Education Scotland, an executive agency of the Scottish Government, provides guidance and support to ELC providers, contributing to the enhancement of educational outcomes. Some 32 local authorities are involved in planning and delivering ELC services within their areas.

Furthermore, the Early Years Collaborative is a national initiative fostering collaboration among different stakeholders, such as health boards and local authorities, to improve outcomes for young children through shared best practices. National standards and frameworks exist to set expectations for ELC service quality, with providers expected to adhere to these standards to maintain consistency and uphold quality.

Northern Ireland

It is noted by Perry (2013) that EY and SAC provision in Northern Ireland is fragmented and spread across several departments and arm's length bodies. While the main policy responsibility for childcare provision, and the development of a new childcare strategy, rests with the Department of Education, the Northern Ireland Department of Health has policy responsibility for childcare regulation in private and voluntary settings. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland is required to maintain a register of approved childcare providers (both group settings and childminders) and have them inspected at least on an annual basis. They produce minimum standards, which are used by Health and Social Care Trust Early Years Teams for the purpose of registration and inspection of childcare settings.

Wales

Early Years lies at the intersection of several Welsh Government departments (Health & Social Services, Education, Economy, Welsh Language) with a broad range of policy drivers and rationales in place. In addition, there are further layers of governance including national regulators and local authorities as well as a range of providers and interest groups. It is noted that coordinating different government departments, local authority departments and diverse providers and stakeholders is a major challenge for the delivery of coherent and consistent services (Dallimore, 2019).

Analysis

From international comparisons, it can be noted that having a central and Single Agency responsible for EY and SAC can be an indicator of a high-quality system, that has a singular purpose in providing the best experiences for children. Janta, van Belle and Stewart (2016) note that in 'split' systems, as opposed to centralised systems, the focus is either on 'education' or 'care' and can 'lead to incoherent objectives, operational procedures, regulation, staff training and requirements'. As such, it is notable that in jurisdictions generally held up as models of high-quality provision, that there is integrated and centralised decision and policy making structures. In Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, there is a single agency with centralised oversight of the EY and SAC sectors in these countries, with centralised and unified quality structures. This allows for consistent policies and regulations, which translates to a more comprehensive and coherent approach. Moreover, a centralised body allows for more effective monitoring of indicators of quality; something that is seen across other jurisdictions. There is a centralised definition of quality, which prevents localised definitions forming, and is more easily guided by strategy and policy.

Rationale for a Single Agency in Ireland

The establishment of a Single Agency to oversee the functions of Pobal, the CCCs, Better Start, and the DCEDIY in the Early Years sector can significantly enhance the quality and effectiveness of EY and SAC. The following section outlines the key arguments in favour of this change.

Resolve Fragmentation

The current operating model, according to Indecon (2021), is characterised by a fragmented system with multiple intermediary bodies, many of which are very small in scale and have voluntary part-time boards. This does not appear to be aligned with the principles for effective sector management and is reported to have implications for the accountability of public funds. Fragmentation can result in administrative burdens on providers and result in confusion for parents, providers and other stakeholders, something which has been reported to Early Childhood Ireland by members regarding a number of State agencies. With the introduction of Core Funding, increases to the National Childcare Scheme, and further pledges to increase investment, this fragmentation becomes an increased risk to this funding.

Child Safeguarding

The fragmentation between different bodies has implications for Child Safeguarding. Each body currently retains their own child safeguarding procedures, policies, designated liaison persons and culture. By resolving fragmentation between bodies means that there can be a unity of purpose when it comes to child safeguarding, with a centralised system for reporting concerns should they arise throughout the course of work. More so considering the child safeguarding training functions currently held by the CCCs will be folded into the body.

Quality Improvement

The Indecon (2021) report notes that the main weaknesses of the current model for the EY and SAC system leads to difficulties in inputs to programme design, for quality development and improvement, and Continuous Professional Development. The establishment of a Single Agency will bring data collection, programme design, and quality improvement under one roof. At the moment these are spread across DCEDIY for programme development and design, Pobal and Better Start for programme design and improvement, and the CCCs and Better Start for the actual implementation of training and continuous professional development. Under one roof and coupled with a data-intensive approach which will be discussed further, more coherence and smoother implementation of programmes will follow. Moreover, the issue of quality will not be interpreted differently by differing bodies each with separate aims and purposes. A Single Agency will have the opportunity to present and uphold a singular definition of quality, rather than definitions of quality being contested between bodies such as DCEDIY, Better Start, the CCCs and Pobal.

Role of the Local Authorities

Although not in the current structures, given the role played by Local Authorities in planning, the Single Agency will need to establish a strategic relationship with them, either directly or via the City and County Childcare Committees. Planning and delivery of settings will need to include both access to outdoors spaces for children of all ages and abilities, as well as the Universal Design Guidelines which have been developed for settings. As seen, local municipalities and authorities in Nordic states have key responsibilities in implementing early years systems. It will be necessary for the Single Agency to create a strategy to replicate this and create unity of purpose with local authorities.

Increased Efficiency and Accountability

Duplication has been noted by Indecon (2021) as a resultant weakness of the current EY and SAC operating system, with multiple overlapping roles between Pobal, DCEDIY and the CCCs. As a result of this there is confusion among EY and SAC providers, inefficiencies due to overlapping remits, and weaknesses of accountability. This can all lead to wasting human and financial resources. A Single Agency, of unified purpose and vision, could serve to increase efficiencies by eliminating the overlap, fragmentation, and duplication of work. This in turn would have clear benefits for stakeholders, providers, and children through redirecting resources to parts of the sector where they are most.

Early Childhood Ireland believes that the means to assess future efficiencies and reductions in fragmentation will need to be carefully considered by the Programme Board which has been appointed to establish the proposed Agency. The Board will need to identify which criteria will need to be in place to measure these outcomes.

Improved Data Collection and Analysis

A Single Agency will facilitate and coordinate the collection and analysis of data related to EY and SAC development. This data-driven approach can lead to more evidence-based decision-making, allowing for the continuous improvement of functions. Moreover, with the centralisation of decision-making, funding and data collection functions, interventions can be timely and data-driven, leading to quicker responses to crises, capacity shortages and specific needs of children experiencing disadvantage. A Single Agency will be better placed to implement the Better Data recommendations as outlined in [Partnership for the Public Good](#) (2021). These recommendations call for a sophisticated monitoring and evaluation framework to be designed and implemented. A Single Agency will be optimally placed to formulate, communicate and execute plans for the development of the sector. This view is shared by the Minister of Children, Roderic O’Gorman TD, who is quoted in response to a [Parliamentary Question](#) regarding sector infrastructure in November 2023:

“In terms of the wider infrastructure, as the Deputies know, we are doing a bigger piece of work in terms of looking at, potentially, a childcare agency which may involve an amalgamation of some of the existing infrastructure, including Pobal, the county childcare committees, CCCs, and other relevant organisations and certainly the powers that exist will be part of that discussion.”

Stakeholder Response Team

In a concurrent [Policy Proposal](#), Early Childhood Ireland has recommended the establishment of a Stakeholder Response Team, whose purpose is to manage setting closures by responding in a timely manner and to examine a range of options, focussed on the best interests of children. The functions of this Team will be subsumed into the Single Agency once established.

Conclusion

As noted by Early Childhood Ireland [since 2019](#) and outlined in the Indecon [Operating Model Review](#) (2021), the EY and SAC sector in Ireland is characterised by a complex landscape of stakeholders and functions, which has led to fragmentation, duplication, and inefficiencies. The proposal to establish a Single Agency to absorb the functions of various stakeholders in this sector holds significant promise for addressing these challenges and bringing about positive change. The rationale for this change is compelling. A Single Agency would serve to resolve fragmentation, eliminate duplication, and streamline operations. This would not only improve efficiency but also enhance accountability and governance, ultimately ensuring better value for public funds. Public funds which can be spent on quality provision and outcomes for children.

By coordinating efforts and resources and eliminating overlap, it can focus on raising the standards of EY and SAC provision, providing a more consistent and high-quality experience for children. Moreover, with data-collection and implementation functions centralised, interventions and investment can be data driven meaning that gaps in provision can be challenged.

Early Childhood Ireland believes that the proposed Single Agency will complement increases in public funding in the sector, along with a long-term plan for this investment. The creation of a Single Agency has the potential to expertly guide the EY and SAC sector in Ireland, reduce fragmentation, waste, and inefficiencies and would go some way to paving a road to a more efficient, accountable, and high-quality system that benefits children, families, providers, and stakeholders alike. The establishment of a Single Agency will help to ensure that all children have equitable access to and meaningful participation in an effective, world-leading Early Years and School Age Care system.

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Early Childhood Ireland

Hainault House
Belgard Square South
off Belgard Road
Tallaght, Dublin
D24 RFV0

Tel: 01 405 7100

Email: info@earlychildhoodireland.ie

www.earlychildhoodireland.ie



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