



Funding

Early Childhood Ireland Explainers

Early Years and School Age Care (SAC) settings are funded via a combination of public investment and parental fees. Public investment schemes include Core Funding, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and the National Childcare Scheme (NCS).

There are also what the government calls 'legacy schemes' that preceded the NCS, including the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) and the Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) Programmes, for low-income families. Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programmes continue to support a small number of parents who are studying, training or on Community Employment schemes. All three programmes were closed to new applicants in October 2019.

In December 2021, Partnership for the [Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Aged Children](#) was published, which put forward a new funding model. It comprises four elements: Core Funding, Tackling Disadvantage funding, the NCS and ECCE.

Core Funding

Core Funding is intended to support quality, sustainability, and enhanced public management with associated conditions such as fees and cost transparency. The main aim of Core Funding is to allow providers' income to increase and to improve quality for children while ensuring that costs are not passed on to parents. Core Funding also aims to make services more sustainable.

Most of the Core Funding will be allocated to service providers based on capacity. Capacity refers to the number of places provided by a service under the regulations for age ranges, session types, space, and ratios. Allocations will be based on places instead of attendance levels. From 2022, access to other funding streams such as capital and sustainability funding will be restricted to those taking part in Core Funding. Services with ELC graduate Lead Educators and/or managers will receive extra funding through the Graduate Lead Educator Premium or the Graduate Manager Premium. The Graduate Lead Educator Premium is replacing the ECCE Higher Capitation. Providers who offer the ECCE scheme but who have not signed up for Core Funding will no longer be able to access higher capitation funding.

Extra funding to support administration costs is also included in Core Funding. This replaces the Programme Support Payments (PSP) which will no longer be available from 2022.

There are several stipulations that come with Core Funding. To access the funding, settings must agree to a fee freeze in line with what was charged in September 2021, except in cases where a fee increase has been approved by the DCEDIY where criteria has been met, in line with a new fee management system that began in July 2024. Settings must also offer ECCE and NCS to parents. The only exception to this is sessional settings as they do not have to offer NCS. Core Funding is also linked with the delivery of a pay scale for the Early Years sector.

For more information please read our [Explainer on Core Funding](#).

ECCE

ECCE provides early childhood care and education for children of preschool age. The State pays participating settings a set amount per eligible child. This is known as capitation. The services provide a free preschool service to all children in the scheme. The programme is provided for three hours a day, five days a week, for 38 weeks per year. The programme runs from September to June.

Children can enter the programme at any point in the year. The scheme is available to all children who are two years and eight months old before 1 September. Children can avail of the scheme for up to two years.

Settings that take part in the scheme must provide an appropriate preschool programme that follows the national practice frameworks: Síolta and Aistear.

4,022 services were contracted to deliver the ECCE programme in 2020/2021. This 4% decrease compared to the previous year. The number of children benefitting from the programme fell by 1% in 2020/2021. The number of children taking part in the first year of ECCE fell by 3% but those participating in the second year increased by 1%.

For more information, please read our [Explainer on ECCE](#).

NCS

NCS provides financial support to help parents meet the costs of Early Years and School Age Care. To avail of the NCS, Early Years settings, School Age Care (SAC) services and childminders must be registered with Tusla and have an NCS contract with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

NCS provides two types of subsidies for children over six months: a universal subsidy and an income-assessed subsidy. The universal subsidy is not means-tested and, from September 2022, is available for children up to the age of 15. The income-assessed subsidy is means-tested and is also for children up to the age of 15.

The NCS replaced TEC programmes. TEC programmes cover the After-School Childcare

Scheme, the Community Employment Childcare programme (CEC) and the Childcare Education & Training Support (CETS). NCS also aims to replace the CCS and CCSP. From August 2020 to August 2021, 60,628 children from 48,254 households received subsidies. 43,317 children received income-assessed subsidies and 1,730 children received universal subsidies. The average weekly value per claim for income-assessed subsidies was €70.40 and for universal subsidies was €18.09. 18,372 children with an approved 2019/2020 CCSP and/or TEC also had an NCS 2020/2021 claim. This shows the transfer of children from legacy schemes to the NCS between the programme years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021.

For more information, please visit our [Explainer on NCS](#).

Parental Fees

These statistics were taken from the [Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020/2021](#), published by Pobal.

Early Years care is split up into sessional care, part-time care and full day care. A sessional care service offers less than three and a half hours of care per day. A part-time care service offers more than three and a half hours of care per day but less than five hours. A full day care service offers more than 5 hours of care per day.

The national average weekly fee for full day care was €186.84 in 2020/21. For part-time care, it was €110.92 and for sessional, it was €74.20. The average weekly fee has risen by 0.39% (Full day), 0.15% (Part-time) and 0.41% (Sessional). For full-day and part-time care, fees were lowest for children between the ages of five and six. For sessional care, fees were lowest for children between the ages of four and five.

The level of fees varies across the country. Prices vary between counties as well as within counties. In 2020/2021, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown had the highest fees for all types of provision. Full day care fees were 60% higher than Carlow, which had the lowest full day care fees. Part-time fees were 58% higher in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown than the Monaghan, which had the lowest. Sessional fees were 29% in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown than in Monaghan.

Full time and part-time fees slightly decreased from the year before in urban areas, whereas in rural areas they rose. Sessional fees increased across all locations. Urban areas, on average, have higher childcare fees than rural areas.

Fees charged by private services are, on average, higher than community-based services. Community-based services have seen greater increases than private services in full-day and part-time fees.

For SAC, the national average hourly fee in term was €5.25. 65% of SAC providers charged €5 per hour or less. 3% charged €10 per hour or more. Out of term, the national average weekly fee was €168.56, which reflects an 11% increase from the previous year.

Equal Start

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. Equal Start supports all settings that are Partner Services in Core Funding – both ELC and SAC.

Equal Start comprises of three strands:

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

Universal measures will be available in all settings and will support positive experiences and outcomes for all children.

2. 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.

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

Strand 3 of Equal Start will provide 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.

