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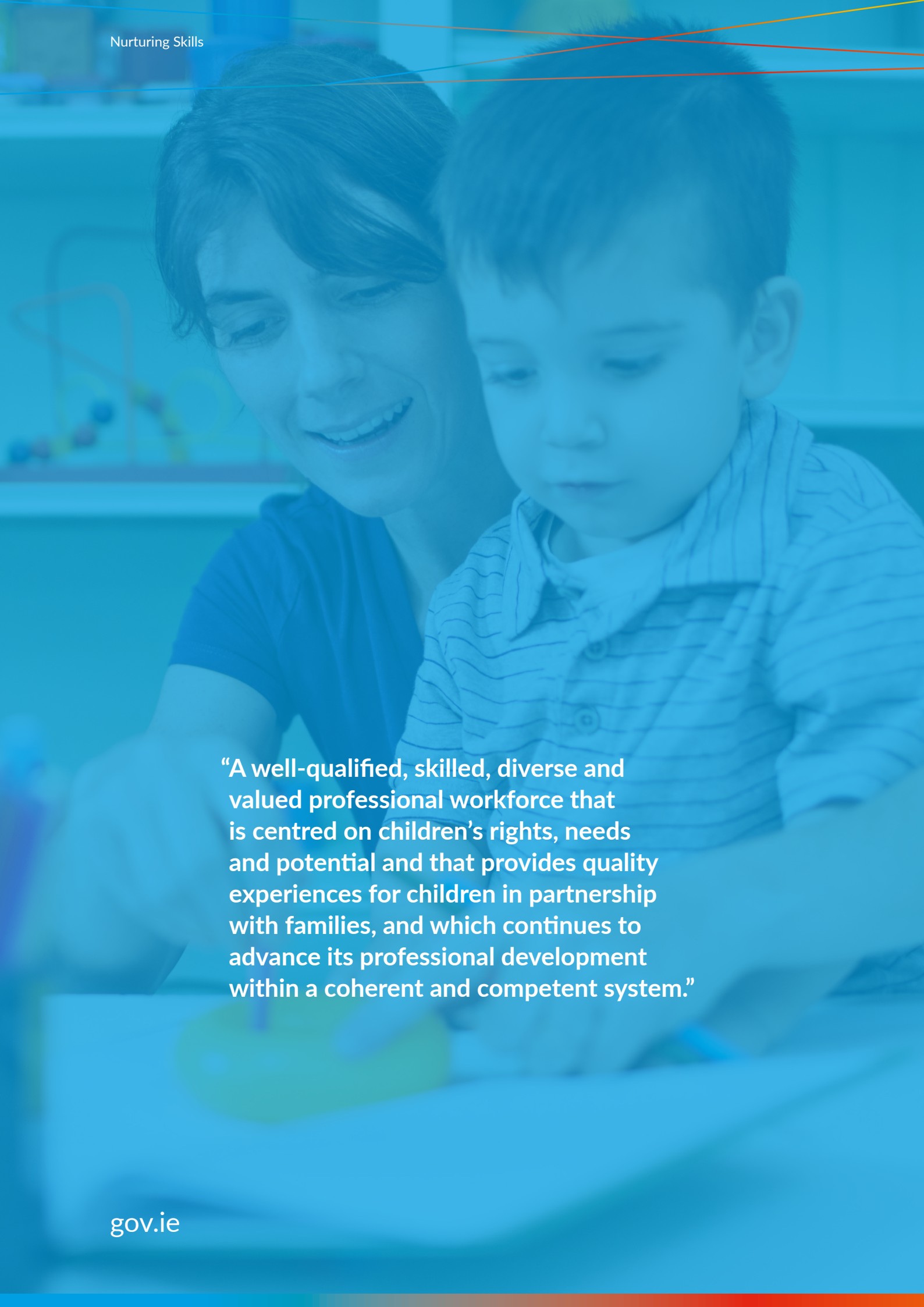
Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028



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First 5 

Delivering on a First 5 Action



“A well-qualified, skilled, diverse and valued professional workforce that is centred on children’s rights, needs and potential and that provides quality experiences for children in partnership with families, and which continues to advance its professional development within a coherent and competent system.”

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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028*. Through the new and enhanced supports it makes available, I am confident that this plan will be a turning-point in the professional development of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) workforce and also in the recognition of the profession's importance in supporting children's development, learning and care.

The ELC and SAC profession has been developing and growing over many years. An ever-increasing proportion of those working in the sector are degree-qualified, large numbers undertake professional development activities every year (often in their own time and at their own expense), and every day those working in the sector demonstrate their professional commitment and expertise in supporting children and families. However, those working in the sector do not receive the recognition they deserve, and every year unfortunately many leave the sector because they do not see a future for themselves within it.

Nurturing Skills aims to continue and further strengthen the ongoing process of professionalisation, and at the same time to give those working in the sector the prospect of career development and professional recognition. Operating side-by-side with the new Core Funding stream announced in October 2021, and supported by the work of the Joint Labour Committee that was recently established, this Workforce Plan offers those working in the sector real hope that their continuing professional development and commitment will be both supported and rewarded over the years ahead.

Nurturing Skills is underpinned by a vision of achieving "a well-qualified, skilled, diverse and valued professional workforce that is centred on children's rights, needs and potential and that provides quality experiences for children in partnership with families, and which continues to advance its professional development within a coherent and competent system."

It is an inspiring vision – one that focuses both on professionalisation and on recognition of the work done by the profession, that places the child at the centre of practice, and that situates workforce development within a wider context of reform.

This Workforce Plan is fundamental to meeting the ambitions of *First 5 – the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families*, including



the *First 5* commitments to a graduate-led workforce, a national programme of CPD opportunities, the introduction of minimum qualifications for SAC and for childminding, and leadership development opportunities.

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of all those who have inputted into the development of this plan over the past two years. I would particularly like to thank the members of the Steering Group, who oversaw its preparation, the members of the Stakeholder Group, who provided invaluable sectoral knowledge and advice to the Steering Group at all stages, and the members of the Working Groups, which worked intensively during Phase 2 of preparation to produce a series of comprehensive and carefully considered proposals. I would like to thank the officials both in my Department and in the Department of Education who collaborated so effectively in the preparation of the plan. And I would like to thank the many people who contributed to the public consultation – Early Years Educators, School-Age Childcare Practitioners, childminders, managers, lecturers, trainers, students, and those working in a range of support organisations – it was invaluable to have the benefit of your views as we prepared the plan.

The work of all the individuals and organisations that have contributed to developing this Plan builds on a long history of passionate commitment by many people working in the sector to the process of professional development. I would like to pay tribute to all they have achieved, in laying the groundwork for the next steps on the journey of professionalisation.

Those working in the sector deserve recognition for their professionalism and for the importance of the work they do for children, for families, for society and for the economy. I look forward to continuing to support their professional development over the coming years as we set out to implement *Nurturing Skills*.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Roderic O'Gorman'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Roderic' and the last name 'O'Gorman' clearly distinguishable.

Roderic O'Gorman, TD

MINISTER FOR CHILDREN, EQUALITY, DISABILITY, INTEGRATION AND YOUTH

Acronyms

CCC	City / County Childcare Committee
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DE	Department of Education
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DTCAGSM	Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ELC	Early Learning and Care
JLC	Joint Labour Committee
NAPC	National Action Plan for Childminding
NCS	National Childcare Scheme
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PACG	Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines
PATD	Professional Award-Type Descriptors
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAC	School-Age Childcare
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey

Overview

The workforce in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) is at a turning-point in its professional development – and in the recognition of its importance. The process of professionalisation has been under way for many years, and understanding of the workforce’s central role in achieving good outcomes for children and families is increasingly widespread, but the workforce remains undervalued and many of those taking up employment in the sector do not see a future for themselves within the profession.

Given the place of ‘an appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce’ as one of the key ‘building blocks’ of an effective early childhood system, *First 5*, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, 2019-2028, committed to key milestones in further professionalisation (including achieving a graduate-led workforce in ELC and introducing minimum qualifications in SAC and in childminding) and also committed to develop mechanisms to raise the professional status of the ELC and SAC workforce and to support employers to offer more favourable working conditions to attract and retain staff.

Over the decade since the last Workforce Plan, there has been a series of major reforms in ELC and SAC, including the introduction of the universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) pre-school programme in 2010, its extension to two years in 2018, a minimum qualification in ELC in 2016, the introduction of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in 2016, publication of *First 5* in 2018, and introduction of the National Childcare Scheme in 2019. The Government is committed to further significant reform over the years ahead, backed by the *First 5* commitment to increase public investment in the sector from €485m in 2018 to at least €970m in 2028.

The workforce will be both a driver of change in the sector – key to ensuring the quality of provision – and will itself be the focus of change. Adopting an integrated approach – bringing together the workforces in ELC and SAC, both centre-based and home-based – the Workforce Plan 2022-2028 sets out plans to raise qualification levels, to create professional development pathways, and to promote careers in the sector. The actions are interlinked. Raising the value placed on the workforce will go hand-in-hand with development of career pathways and progress towards a graduate-led workforce in ELC. Progress will depend on the actions set out in this Plan and also on enabling actions that will take place in parallel, especially through efforts to improve pay and conditions, supported by a new Core Funding stream for services announced in Budget 2022.

Process of preparing the Plan

Work on preparing this Workforce Plan began in 2019, following publication of *First 5*. Preparations took place over a 2-year period. The inter-agency Steering Group has been supported in its work by a Stakeholder Group and a series of working groups, as well as a public consultation process that took place online as a result of public health restrictions.

The development of the Plan was also supported by Ireland's participation in two parallel international projects examining policies to support professionalisation of the workforce, through the EU and the OECD, including an OECD Country Policy Review of Ireland, published in late 2021.

Vision

The vision underpinning this Workforce Plan is of:

'A well-qualified, skilled, diverse and valued professional workforce that is centred on children's rights, needs and potential and that provides quality experiences for children in partnership with families, and which continues to advance its professional development within a coherent and competent system.'

Wherever appropriate, the Workforce Plan adopts an integrated approach to the workforce in ELC and SAC. While the Plan acknowledges the distinctive features of SAC and of childminding, the vision statement and many of the actions apply equally to those working with children aged 0-3 and those working with children aged 3-6, and apply equally to those working in ELC and those in SAC, and many actions will support both staff in centre-based settings and childminders.

The vision and actions in the Plan are in line with the EU Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (which calls on EU Member States to achieve both well-qualified staff with training that enables them to fulfil their professional role and supportive working conditions) and with the commitment in *First 5* to develop an effective early childhood system that will help all babies and young children to have positive early experiences.

The vision and actions in the Plan are also in line with the National Quality Guidelines for SAC, which stress the importance of staff qualifications and training in ensuring quality services for school-age children, and with the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, which commits to extending regulation, training, and supports to childminders over the years ahead.

Pillars and enablers

The interlinked actions set out in the Workforce Plan 2022-2028 are organised under five pillars:

1. *Establishing a career framework*, which includes actions to:
 - > Set out a career framework, with clarity on roles and qualification requirements.
 - > Strengthen leadership development opportunities, including through supports for managers and for distributed leadership responsibilities.
 - > Move incrementally to introduce an induction process to support those entering the profession.
2. *Raising qualification levels*, which includes actions to:
 - > Provide funded places on flexible education programmes at levels 6 to 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) for Early Years Educators and level 5 for SAC Practitioners, supporting staff to upskill while continuing to work.
 - > Provide financial support to service providers to help meet the costs of releasing staff to go on student practice placements and study leave.
 - > Introduce a funded special purpose award for SAC Practitioners who already have related qualifications (including in ELC) to meet a new SAC level 5 qualification requirement.
 - > Finalise Professional Award-Type Descriptors for a level 5 award in SAC, and seek the development of combined level 5 programmes in ELC and SAC that will qualify an individual to work in either or both areas.

- > In line with the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, introduce funded childminder-specific Foundation Training and a Quality Development Programme to support childminders to meet new pre- and post-registration training requirements.
 - > Support the development of initial professional education programmes or modules that are conducted through the medium of Irish (at levels 5-8).
3. *Developing a national Continuing Professional Development (CPD) system, which includes actions to:*
- > Implement a 'whole system' approach to CPD, coordinated by one agency.
 - > Develop a single national gateway for access to quality-assured CPD resources, and to enable the recording and tracking of CPD engagement by services and staff.
 - > Roll out Síolta, Aistear, the National Quality Guidelines for SAC and any future practice frameworks fully, supported by redevelopment of Síolta and Aistear CPD resources into a new blended format.
 - > Introduce resources and training to support reflective practice and a single, national self-evaluation framework.
 - > Embed the Key Person Approach across all ELC and SAC settings.
 - > Strengthen structures and processes for the quality assurance of CPD resources.
 - > Make CPD resources available in both Irish and English.
4. *Supporting recruitment, retention and diversity, which includes actions to:*
- > Develop a central hub or 'one-stop-shop' approach to careers and training opportunities in ELC and SAC.
 - > Promote careers in the sector.

- > Promote gender-balance and diversity in the workforce.
 - > Examine development of a range of entry-routes into the sector, including through work-based learning and access programmes in further and higher education.
 - > Examine the scope for targeting potential Early Years Educators / SAC Practitioners from groups that are less well represented in the workforce.
5. *Moving towards regulation of the profession*, which includes actions to:
- > Continue moving incrementally towards regulation of the profession.
 - > Consider bringing within a single professional standards body the work of the Qualifications Advisory Board and the qualification recognition process.
 - > Introduce a regulatory requirement for English language proficiency for Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners in English-medium settings over an appropriate timescale.

Successful delivery of the commitments in the Workforce Plan will rely on key enablers that lie outside the scope of the Plan but will be shaped by parallel reform processes currently under way:

- A. *Improvement in levels of pay and conditions of employment*, which will rely on the progress of a Joint Labour Committee for Early Years Services that was established in 2021, and will be supported by the introduction of a new Core Funding stream for ELC and SAC services from 2022.
- B. *Greater coordination of the quality support infrastructure*, through reforms to be undertaken on foot of the Review of the ELC and SAC Operating Model.
- C. *On-going engagement with the profession*, including through a stakeholder engagement and communications plan, workforce representation on a Monitoring Committee for the Plan, and ongoing consultation and research involving the workforce.

Monitoring and review

Implementation through to 2028 will be overseen by a Monitoring Committee. The Workforce Plan includes an Implementation Plan for 2022-2024. The Monitoring Committee will carry out a mid-point review by 2025 that will consider possible amendments to the Plan in light of progress made and will inform development of a second implementation plan for 2025-2028. Monitoring will be assisted by Ireland's joining the OECD TALIS Starting Strong survey, which involves surveying a representative sample of Early Years Educators on a periodic basis.

1. Introduction



1. Introduction

First 5, the whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families, set out a transformative vision for early learning and care (ELC) and other policies for young children for the period 2019-2028. It included a range of commitments related to the workforce for ELC and school-age childcare (SAC), including the development of a new Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC, including childminders. This Workforce Plan sets out a series of actions to meet these commitments over the lifetime of *First 5*, and includes an implementation plan for the next three years (2022-2024).

1.1. *First 5* commitments

First 5 sets out how to develop a system of integrated, cross-sectoral and high-quality supports and services – an effective early childhood system – that will help all babies and young children to have positive early experiences. It encompasses nine linked strategic actions across four goals, underpinned by five ‘building blocks’. One of the five building blocks, which aim progressively to strengthen the infrastructure that supports the early childhood system, is a ‘skilled and sustainable professional workforce’. As *First 5* states:

‘Those working with babies, young children and their families are at the very heart of the early childhood system. They are central to delivering high-quality services, and play a crucial role in bringing about the changes necessary to realising the vision for early childhood.’ (p.110)

Specifically in relation to the workforce for ELC and SAC, *First 5* commits to developing:

‘A Workforce Development Plan to ensure the appropriate number of early learning and care and school-age childcare staff at all levels in the sector. The Workforce Development Plan will support the achievement of the above targets [for a graduate-led workforce and for minimum qualifications for childminders and school-age childcare]. The Workforce Development Plan will also set out plans to raise the profile of careers in early learning and care and school-age childcare, establish a career framework and leadership development opportunities and will work towards building a more gender-balanced and diverse workforce. Consideration will also be given to broader early learning and care and school-age childcare workforce, including those in inspection, mentoring and training roles and support for those who facilitate practice placements.’

Other workforce-related commitments in *First 5* include:

- Achieving a graduate-led workforce by 2028.
- All regulated childminders holding a minimum qualification by 2028.
- All regulated school-age childcare staff holding a minimum qualification by 2028.
- Publication of agreed criteria and guidelines for further and higher education early learning and care qualifications, and developing a structure to review and oversee compliance with the new standards and guidelines, moving over time towards a professional standards body.
- Introducing a redeveloped national subsidised fund for further and higher education programmes in ELC and SAC.
- Developing a national programme of CPD opportunities. Over time, this will develop links with the national structure for CPD of primary school teachers. Opportunities for joint delivery of CPD programmes where appropriate will be considered.
- Alongside a new funding model, examining the possible introduction of further quality levers within funding schemes to incentivise the attraction and retention of staff.
- Reviewing favourable working conditions so that employers can attract and retain staff.

In line with these commitments, an inter-agency Steering Group was established in May 2019 – supported by a Stakeholder Group – to lead on this project. The key tasks of the Steering Group, as set out in its Terms of Reference, were to:

- Prepare a core report that sets out a high-level vision for the ELC and SAC workforce for the period 2020-2028, and a pathway for achieving the commitments set out in *First 5* in relation to development of the ELC and SAC workforce.
- Complete a skills forecast setting out the projected demand and supply of ELC and SAC practitioners at different qualification levels over the period 2020-2028, to determine whether supply arrangements are adequate to meet demand.

- Make decisions in relation to occupational roles in the ELC and SAC workforce, qualification requirements for those roles, and terminology to describe the roles.
- Set minimum qualification requirements for childminders and the SAC workforce, to be introduced over the lifetime of the Workforce Plan.
- Develop associated implementation plans.

The Workforce Plan was developed in parallel with development by an Expert Group of recommendations for the introduction of a new funding model for the ELC and SAC sector, and a number of the *First 5* workforce commitments have implications for both the Workforce Plan and the funding model. Additionally, a review of the operating model for the sector is under way. The National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028 was published in April 2021, and took into account proposals developed during Phase 1 of the Workforce Plan.¹

In scope, the Workforce Plan addresses the development of the ELC and SAC workforce, including both registered centre-based provision and registered childminders, over the period to 2028. The Workforce Plan also gives consideration to the broader ELC and SAC workforce, including those in inspection, mentoring and training roles.

While the Workforce Plan takes into consideration commitments in *First 5* in relation to the wider workforce in services for young children and families e.g. in health services (such as the commitment to develop an Early Childhood Workforce Initiative), achievement of such commitments is outside the scope of the Workforce Plan.

1.2. Previous Workforce Plan

In 2010, the then Department of Education and Skills published a Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education sector.² The Plan acknowledged the strong evidence base that early childhood experiences have a critical impact on the well-being, learning and development of children and that the skills, knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes of the workforce delivering early years services was a determining factor in the quality of those experiences.

¹ www.gov.ie/childminding

² Department of Education and Skills (2010) *A Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland*.

The 2010 Workforce Plan included a mapping of the 2002 Model Framework³ – which set out five occupational profiles (from ‘Basic Practitioner’ to ‘Expert Practitioner’) – onto the National Framework of Qualifications from levels 4 to 8/9, and proposed that the occupational profiles should be reviewed regularly. The Plan proposed that all education and training programmes for the sector should be informed by the occupational profiles, by Regulations, and by *Síolta* and *Aistear*, and should be reviewed against award standards. It also proposed that further and higher education providers should plan for course development and implementation, with a particular focus on course quality, flexible delivery, recognition of prior learning, and the qualifications of staff who deliver training.

There has been considerable progress in the period since 2010 in the expansion, validation and further development of relevant education and training programmes from levels 5 through to 9 on the NFQ, particularly through the introduction of Common Award Standards by QQI, development of new courses by further and higher education providers, and the publication in 2019 of Professional Award-Type Descriptors and Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines.⁴

Both the policy context and the sector itself have changed significantly in the 10 years since the last Workforce Plan. Changes are seen in a major expansion of the sector and its workforce, particularly following the introduction of the ECCE programme in 2010 and its later extensions in 2016 and 2018, the formation of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011 (now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth), the introduction of a minimum qualification requirement to work in the sector in 2016, and the publication of *First 5* in 2018.

3 Department of Justice (2002) Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in Early Childhood Care and Education.

4 QQI (2019) Professional Award-Type Descriptors at NFQ Levels 5 to 8: Annotated for QQI Early Learning and Care (ELC) Awards; and Department of Education and Skills (2019) Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland.

2. Terminology



2. Terminology

In the past, a proliferation of terms has been used when describing the ELC and SAC profession and different roles within the sector. Given the objectives of developing a coherent career framework and career development pathways, with a clear definition of different roles within settings, a task for the Workforce Plan was to agree terminology for the profession.

Questions on terminology formed one strand of the public consultation carried out during phase 1 of preparation of the Workforce Plan. However, while there was tentative support for some aspects of terminology, there was disagreement on other aspects, and no clear consensus emerged.

The Steering Group for the Workforce Plan therefore agreed that final decisions on terminology for the profession should be a matter for future decision by a professional body for the sector, whether that is a professional regulator or a professional association. In the interim, working titles have been adopted for the purpose of the Workforce Plan.

On the advice of working groups established during phase 2, the working title chosen to describe those working in centre-based ELC is the term that attracted the greatest support in the public consultation process, which was 'Early Years Educator'. This working title was agreed to be used regardless of career grade or role. The term 'assistant' will not be used, in acknowledgement that each qualified staff member – regardless of grade or qualification – is an Early Years Educator in their own right. The working title for those working in centre-based SAC is 'School-Age Childcare Practitioner'.

An Early Years Educator who leads practice with a group of children will be termed 'Lead Educator'. The term 'Lead Educator' is used to reflect the important pedagogical leadership role played by these individuals with a group of children and with other Early Years Educators who are also working with that group of children. Previously this role was often termed 'room leader'. The term 'Lead Educator' will be relevant to groups of children of all ages in centre-based ELC settings.

The term Manager is used in the Workforce Plan to refer to the person in charge of a setting, as defined in the Early Years Regulations 2016 and SAC Regulations 2018, i.e. 'the person who has day-to-day charge of the service'.⁵ This person may or may not be the Registered Provider. While ELC and SAC services vary considerably in their legal and organisational structures, every service must – as a condition of its registration – have a designated person in charge (here termed the 'Manager') who is responsible for the daily running of the service and – unless deputised by a named person – must be on the premises at all times when the service is being carried on.

5 *Child Care Act (1991) (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, and Child Care Act (1991) (Early Years Services) (Registration of School Age Services) Regulations 2018.*

3. The process of preparing the Plan



3. The process of preparing the Plan

3.1. Steering Group and Stakeholder Group

The Workforce Plan was developed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), in consultation with the Department of Education (DE). Its development was overseen by an inter-agency Steering Group and supported by a Stakeholder Group. The Terms of Reference and membership of the Steering Group and Stakeholder Group are set out in Appendix 1 and 2. The Steering Group met 17 times, while the Stakeholder Group met 13 times.

The Plan was developed in two stages. Phase 1, which began in mid-2019 and was completed in December 2020, involved a public consultation process and development of a high-level approach. A Progress Report was published in early 2021 following the completion of Phase 1, and included the reports on the findings of the two strands of the consultation process.⁶

Phase 2, which took place during the first half of 2021, involved more detailed planning by five working groups, which brought together members of the Steering Group and Stakeholder Group as well as other experts and stakeholders.

During Phase 2, the Steering Group also met with the Expert Group to develop a new funding model to discuss areas of mutual interest.

3.2. Consultation process

Consultation with stakeholder organisations, the ELC and SAC workforce, and the wider public, has been central to preparation of the Workforce Plan. The Stakeholder Group has provided the primary means of ensuring that key stakeholders have had an opportunity to have their voices heard throughout the process of formulating policy proposals. In addition to this engagement with representative bodies, a significant effort was made to engage directly with the workforce through the main consultation process as well as through a direct conversation with Early Years Educators, SAC Practitioners and childminders at a Steering Group meeting. Public health restrictions because of COVID-19 made the public consultation process particularly challenging.

⁶ DCEDIY (2021) *Workforce Development Plan: Phase 1 Progress Report*.

Notwithstanding the public health restrictions and the size of the workforce (45,000, including both staff in centre-based services and childminders), the consultation proved extremely helpful and resulted in valuable insights to inform the Workforce Plan. Section 7.3 considers future engagement and communications with the workforce.

Initial plans for a public consultation were scheduled to involve in-person consultation events, hosted by City and County Childcare Committees (CCC) in every county, in March and April 2020. Due to COVID-19, these events were cancelled, and work on the Workforce Plan was temporarily paused. In July 2020, when work restarted, an alternative, entirely online, consultation process was developed.

Between August and October 2020, DCEDIY carried out the online public consultation on the Workforce Plan in parallel with a public consultation on a new funding model. The process involved two elements: a call for submissions / survey and a series of focussed small-group discussions. Two webinars were also held (in September and December 2020) – one to open the consultation process and the second to share findings emerging from the consultation, progress on the work and next steps.

3.2.1. Call for submissions / survey

The online call for submissions / survey was open between 19 August and 2 October 2020, and was launched simultaneously in Irish and English. It allowed for written input from respondents, and also involved a survey with specific questions that invited short responses from individuals.

There were a total of 602 valid responses to the call for submissions. The majority of participants identified themselves as working in ELC or SAC services.

The analysis found a number of common themes in responses to the call for submissions / survey, in particular the need for: better pay and working conditions; more recognition and respect; more opportunities for training, ongoing professional development and career progression; the development of a graduate-led workforce; and more supports for and less regulation of workers in the sector.

The analysis of responses found that many of the themes were interlinked, for example low pay and poor working conditions were seen to reflect lack of

recognition and respect for the workforce and to act as a barrier to achieving a graduate-led workforce. A range of actions were suggested that would help support development and retention of the workforce, including incentives such as recognition of qualifications and training in pay, a defined pay-scale as well as clearer career progression pathways, funded ongoing professional development and professional job titles. Other initiatives such as streamlining paperwork and inspections and establishing a professional representative body were also seen to be actions that would benefit workers in the sector.

The call for submissions / survey also involved a number of questions on terminology – what terms to use to describe those working in different roles in the sector.

The full report on the findings of the call for submissions / survey, prepared by Sandra Roe, is available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/135093/54a31bf1-e9cd-41dc-8362-a64c1456d1f7.pdf>

3.2.2. Focused small-group discussions

Following the review of issues identified in the call for submissions / survey, and to allow more detailed discussions, a series of focussed consultation discussions were dedicated to addressing three key themes arising:

1. Recruitment and retention
2. Qualifications and initial training
3. Ongoing training and CPD

The focussed discussions also provided an opportunity to discuss terminology further.

All those who responded to the call for submissions / survey were invited to participate in the focused small-group discussions, and all those who indicated they were interested were invited to at least one session on the theme in which they were most interested. Some people who wished to contribute to more than one theme were able to do so. In total, 130 people took part in the focussed discussions across nine sessions, with each of the three themes discussed at three sessions each.

The focussed small-group discussions were designed and facilitated by Change Exploratory. An official from DCEDIY attended each of the discussions.

Key themes emerging from the focused discussions were that:

- Staff turnover is high, morale is low, and recruitment and retention is difficult.
- Low pay and poor terms and conditions exist as a consequence of low funding levels.
- There is a lack of recognition and respect for the sector.
- There is support for the professionalisation of the sector, including the development of a professional body.
- There is a need to reduce administrative requirements and the number of inspectorates that ELC and SAC staff have to deal with.
- There is support for development of mentorship schemes and communities of practice.
- Training should be properly funded, and staff should not be required to do training in their own time.
- Opinions on the potential role of apprenticeship schemes was divided.

The full report on the findings of the focussed small group discussions, prepared by Change Exploratory, is available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/135093/54a31bf1-e9cd-41dc-8362-a64c1456d1f7.pdf>

3.3. Phase 2 working groups

Five working groups were established during Phase 2, the role of which was to develop detailed proposals for consideration by the Steering Group, examining in greater depth policy proposals considered during Phase 1. The Working Groups provided an opportunity for key stakeholders to be actively involved in the development of proposals. In addition, some of the working groups carried out further sectoral consultation.

The working groups addressed the themes of:

- Career framework and career pathways
- Continuing professional development
- Promotion and regulation of the profession
- Qualifications and training for school-age childcare
- Training and supports for childminders

In addition, workshops were organised on three cross-cutting themes:

- Leadership
- Induction into the profession
- School-age childcare

Participants in the working groups are listed in Appendix 2. Participants included members of both the Steering Group and the Stakeholder Group, as well as other key stakeholders who brought specific expertise to each of the working groups.

3.4. Other inputs

To support estimates of the number of staff that will need to be supported to achieve the targets set out in the Workforce Plan, modelling was carried out of supply and demand of staff at different qualification levels over time. In addition, research was carried out for the Workforce Plan by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), analysing employment and educational outcomes from graduates of ELC qualifications at all levels (levels 5 to 8 on the NFQ). A CSO report on the research was published in 2020.⁷

As outlined in section 3.5, the development of the Workforce Plan was also supported by Ireland's participation in two parallel international projects examining policies to support professionalisation of the ELC workforce:

⁷ CSO (2020) *Early Learning and Care Graduate Outcomes 2013-2017*, <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-elco/earlylearningcaregraduateoutcomes2013-2017/introduction/>

- Between 2018 and 2020, the European Commission led an EU (ET2020) working group on ELC with two focuses, one of which was professionalisation of ELC. The group published a report of recommendations in December 2020.⁸
- Between 2018 and 2021, an international project led by the OECD supported OECD countries to understand better the different dimensions of process quality in ELC, with a particular focus on dimensions that can be addressed through policy and that are likely to improve child outcomes. The project focused strongly on policies to support professionalisation, including through CPD, supporting leadership within ELC settings, and improving working conditions. The main report was published in June 2021.⁹ Ireland is one of six countries that had in-depth involvement in the project, which in Ireland's case included a Country Policy Review. The Background Report for the Country Policy Review, prepared by Frontier Economics, was finalised in December 2020.¹⁰ Box 1 presents workforce-related recommendations in the OECD's Country Policy Review of Ireland, published in 2021.

8 EC (2020) *Early Childhood Education and Care: How to Recruit, Train and Motivate Well-Qualified Staff*, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/47ba3c3a-6789-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1>

9 OECD (2021) *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*, <https://www.oecd.org/publications/starting-strong-vi-f47a06ae-en.htm>

10 Frontier Economics (2020) *Early Learning and Care in Ireland: OECD Country Background Report*. Available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9d9ca-early-learning-and-care-in-ireland-oecd-background-report/>

Box 1: OECD (2021) Country Policy Review of ELC in Ireland

Workforce-related recommendations in the OECD's Country Policy Review include:

- 'Make efforts to overcome the duality between provision for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and non-ECCE provision by increasing funding for younger children, aligning incentives to attract qualified staff, and extending education-focused inspections into these rooms, as committed to in *First 5*.'
- 'Advance with plans and commitments in the National Action Plan for Childminding to increase the regulation of the childminding sector and ensure registration, training and funding reflect the nature of childminders' work and involve a minimum of administrative burden for childminders and parents.'
- 'Build on the momentum of newly created standards, criteria and guidelines for qualification programmes to improve their quality. Monitor the impact of recent changes on the experience of students to inform future adjustments.'
- 'Support ECEC centres in offering quality practical placements through adequate resources, guidance/standards and regulations. The government should facilitate partnerships and trust between centres and institutions in co-developing and assessing placements and programmes.'
- 'Build and support a larger ecosystem of formal and informal opportunities for professional development based on an assessment of current staff engagement and needs. Support centre-embedded learning and learning between centres with dedicated strategies (e.g. by creating time in schedules, building team leader capacity).'
- 'Put in place a clear strategy to realise the goals for upskilling the workforce, based on the engagement of employers, staff and government. This should include the recognition of prior learning or skills acquired on the job, flexibility to combine work and study through part-time and blended learning, study leave and funding arrangements.'
- 'Continue efforts and discussions with stakeholders to define ECEC categories of staff, their required competencies/qualifications, as done during preparation of the Workforce Development Plan, and how they can be implemented locally.'
- 'Develop pedagogical leadership capacity in settings. This should include a clearer definition of the role of centre managers and adequate preparation for their role through dedicated leadership training. The role of room leaders should also be rethought and clarified, to include pedagogical leadership in rooms or centres more broadly, including with staff for younger children.'

4. The challenge and the opportunity



4. The challenge and the opportunity

In Ireland and across the globe, ELC and SAC systems have undergone a rapid evolution in the last two decades. In the last 10 years alone, the workforce in centre-based ELC and SAC settings in Ireland has increased from less than 22,000 to more than 32,000, a minimum qualification requirement has been introduced, and the proportion of staff in ELC with a qualification at Level 7 or higher on the National Framework of Qualifications has more than doubled.

Underpinning many of the changes in recent years has been a significant increase in public investment in the sector, which increased more than 140% between 2016 and 2020. The introduction of the ECCE programme in 2010 and its extensions in 2016 and 2018, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in 2016, and the National Childcare Scheme in 2019 have been key milestones in the expansion of public investment.

At the same time, there has been a growing consensus nationally and internationally of what constitutes high quality ELC. This has been set out over the last decade in a number of key national and international reports and communications, including the European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.

Significant challenges remain, however, both in ensuring the workforce is appropriately qualified, skilled and supported for its important role in children's learning and care, and in ensuring the recruitment and retention of qualified staff, key to which are the pay and conditions of employment in the sector.

4.1. The ELC and SAC workforce in Ireland today

According to the Sector Profile,¹¹ it is estimated that 31,500 staff were working in centre-based ELC and SAC services in contract with DCEDIY in mid-2021 of whom more than 26,100 were working directly with children, and 5,300 were working in ancillary roles including management roles. The data in the Sector Profile relates to DCEDIY-funded services, which account for nearly all ELC services but only a proportion of SAC services. In particular, most of the SAC services that are outside the Sector Profile are 'stand-alone' services that provide SAC but not ELC. As of October 2021, there were 600 'stand-alone' SAC services registered with Tusla. With an average of 3.2 staff per stand-alone SAC service (based on a survey carried out for the

¹¹ Profile of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Services 2019/2020

Workforce Plan) it is estimated that the total number of staff working in centre-based ELC and SAC services is approximately 32,600 (including ancillary staff).

In addition, it is estimated that there are approximately 15,000 childminders providing home-based ELC and SAC in the childminder's home.¹² Because most childminders are currently outside the scope of regulation or support, there is little information about them. However, the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028 aims to bring all non-relative childminders within the scope of regulation and supports on a phased, incremental basis.

Data from the Sector Profile for previous years shows that the workforce in centre-based services has been growing steadily for several years from 25,700 in 2016 to 32,600 in 2021. This follows increased investment and development of new and extended ELC and SAC schemes.

In terms of gender, the workforce is overwhelmingly female, as is the case in the sector internationally. Women make up 98% of the centre-based ELC and SAC workforce in Ireland. Although the number of men working in the sector has grown in recent years, their overall percentage in the total workforce stands at 2%. Internationally, on average across OECD countries, around 97% of teachers in pre-primary education are women.¹³

Data from the 2021 Sector Profile indicates that 8% of staff acquired their qualifications outside Ireland, with Spain the largest non-Irish source of qualifications (accounting for 45% of non-Irish qualifications). SOLAS report that 27% of those working in the sector are non-Irish nationals.¹⁴ Data on ethnicity is not available.

4.2. Qualifications

A minimum qualification requirement to practise in ELC services (a major award in ELC at Level 5 on the NFQ) was introduced in 2016. Data from the Sector Profile for 2021 indicates that 97% of those working with children in ELC settings are qualified to Level 5 or higher. The small number who do not have a Level 5 qualification include

¹² DCEDIY (2021) *National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028*.

¹³ OECD (2017) *Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*, p.23.

¹⁴ SOLAS (2021) *National Skills Bulletin 2021*, p.152.

staff who signed the 'Grandfather Declaration' in 2016 (which was extended for a limited number in 2021 in response to the impact of COVID-19), students on practice placements, and volunteers.

The proportion of staff in centre-based ELC services with higher qualifications than the minimum has been steadily increasing, with the proportion of the workforce holding a qualification at level 7 or above on the NFQ estimated at 34% in 2021, up from 12% in 2012.¹⁵ However, the proportion of staff who have a qualification at Level 7 or higher working with groups of 3-5 year olds (40%) is nearly double the proportion working with 1-2 year olds (21%) and nearly three times higher than the proportion working with children under 1 year old (14%).

Table 1: Qualifications of Early Years Educators in centre-based ELC services (2021):

	Children aged up to 1 year	Children aged from 1+ year to 3 years	Children aged from 3+ to 5 years
Lower than level 5	4 %	4 %	2 %
Level 5	39 %	36 %	20 %
Level 6	44 %	39 %	38 %
Level 7 or higher	14 %	21 %	40 %

While there is no minimum qualification to work in SAC, a large proportion of SAC providers also provide ELC and the staff often work across both age groups, resulting in many SAC Practitioners having Level 5 or higher qualifications in ELC. In addition, some SAC services, especially 'standalone' SAC services that do not also offer ELC, have staff with qualifications from a diverse range of disciplines, including youth work, social work, teaching, arts and drama.

The small number of childminders currently registered with Tusla face the same qualification requirement as staff in centre-based services. However, the majority of childminders are outside the scope of regulation, and there is little data on qualification levels.

¹⁵ Whereas 2021 data excludes staff who work only with school-age children, qualification data from the Sector Profile for previous years included some staff who worked with school-age children only and therefore did not have a qualification requirement.

Table 2: Current (2021) qualification levels

Highest relevant (e.g. ELC) qualification level achieved	Proportion of staff working directly with children in centre-based ELC	Proportion of staff working directly with children in centre-based SAC
Less than Level 5 (on NFQ)	3 %	23 – 40 %
Level 5	25 %	60 – 77 % (See section 6.2.2)
Level 6	39 %	
Level 7	13 %	
Level 8	19 %	
Level 9 or 10	1 %	

In addition to the minimum Level 5 requirement, to take part in the ECCE programme, all Lead Educators delivering the ECCE programme must have at least a Level 6 award in ELC. Further funding in the form of higher capitation is currently provided to services delivering the ECCE programme where the Lead Educator has a relevant degree (level 7+).

QQI qualification award trends also show a decline in the number of awards obtained between 2017 and 2020. The number of Level 5 awards fell year on year from 2,296 in 2017 to 1,952 in 2020, while Level 6 awards fell from 1,841 to 1,408 during the same period.¹⁶ However, HEA data suggests an increase in the number of student enrolling in undergraduate degree programmes from 1,758 in 2017/18 to 1,838 in 2019/20 academic year.¹⁷

More than 4,000 Early Years Educators have graduated from the LINC programme (supporting Leadership for Inclusion, as part of AIM) since it began in 2016.¹⁸

There are currently no qualification or training requirements for those specifically in managerial or leadership roles, other than for Lead Educators in the ECCE programme. Similarly, there are no qualification or training requirements for anyone who wishes to set up an ELC or SAC setting, other than the Level 5 minimum requirement if that person is going to work directly with children in ELC.

¹⁶ <https://infographics.qqi.ie/Home/NamedAwards/6M2007>

¹⁷ <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/enrolments/enrolments-detailed-6yeartrend-dashboard/>

¹⁸ <https://lincprogramme.ie/>

4.3. Wages

Centre-based ELC and SAC services are private, with a mixture of privately owned and community-based services, and the State is not the employer. Childminders are self-employed, while many centre-based services also operate single-handed. The average hourly wage of non-managerial staff working in centre-based ELC and SAC services was €12.60 per hour in 2021. However, this figure varies with service type, role, length of service, region and qualification level attained. Average wages by role and qualification are set out in table 3 below.

Table 3: Average wages – 2021 data

Role	Average Hourly Wage
Average for all centre-based staff (ELC and SAC)	€12.60
Educator / Practitioner ('Assistant', ECCE and non-ECCE)	€12.10
Lead Educator ('Room Leader', ECCE and non-ECCE)	€13.39
Employee with Level 5 Qualification	€11.87
Employee with Level 7 Qualification	€13.49
Manager	€17.01

A significant proportion of Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners work part-time or on short-term contracts. Sector Profile data from 2021 shows that 43% of staff have 20 or fewer contact hours per week, and 83% of staff have 5 or fewer non-contact hours per week. In addition, 22% of staff are on temporary contracts and approximately 42% of staff are paid for 38 weeks per year, for the duration of the ECCE programme. It is not known to what extent those working part-time would prefer to work full-time if a full-time contract were available.

The Irish ELC workforce is less well paid than is the ELC workforce in comparable countries, both in absolute terms and when compared to average wages and the national minimum wage, though low wages and recruitment challenges are widely reported across countries. In a study produced by Frontier Economics as part of work on a new funding model, the wages of Irish ELC staff were the second lowest of the eight countries studied. However, it was also noted by Frontier Economics that Ireland does not fare poorly in all aspects of working conditions. For example, adult-child ratios are more favourable in Ireland than in comparable countries.

The staff turnover rate (which includes staff moving between services, as well as staff leaving the sector) over the 12-month period to mid-2021 was 19%, which was similar to the 18% rate in 2020, having previously fallen each year from 2017 (when it was 28%), but may have reflected the impact of COVID-19 and associated supports for ELC and SAC providers. Staff turnover varies significantly between service type and region, with the highest staff turnover rates in full-day services and in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. According to the Sector Profile, almost 49% of managers reported recruitment challenges in the year to mid-2021, an increase from 44% the previous year. At the same time, 49% of staff have been working in the sector for more than 5 years, and 25% for more than 10 years.

Pay and working conditions are key factors explaining the staff turnover rate as well as reported recruitment difficulties. High staff turnover impacts negatively on the consistency of care and on children's experiences and outcomes. It also presents a challenge to employers and makes it harder to achieve targets for increasing qualification levels in the workforce.

4.4. Current policy context

A range of policies have been developed to promote the development of the ELC and SAC workforce in Ireland. The mix of policies reflects the fact that the providers of ELC and SAC are private (with a mix of privately owned and community-based providers) and the State is therefore not the employer. Many of the measures adopted have therefore involved conditions attached to funding contracts and incentive payments, in addition to the regulatory requirements that all ELC and SAC services must meet. These are set out further below.

4.4.1. Regulatory requirements

Regulations for ELC services were introduced in 1996, and were revised in 2006 and 2016. Regulations relate to children's health, safety and welfare and to the promotion of child development. In support of the quality of practice, regulations include minimum adult-child ratios (which determine the number of staff in the sector, given the numbers of children) and requirements in relation to the management of staff. In 2016, a minimum qualification requirement for all staff in ELC services was introduced (at NQF Level 5).

The regulation of SAC was introduced for the first time in 2019, with regulation also through Tusla. The 2019 regulations are limited in scope, with a primary focus on registration requirements (e.g. Garda vetting, insurance, and submission of key policies), as well as a minimum adult-child ratio, but no qualification requirement.

Because of legal exemptions in the Child Care Act 1991, most childminders are exempt from regulation and not permitted to register with Tusla. Registration only applies to childminders who care for seven or more children (or four or more pre-school children) at any one time. Earlier in 2021, DCEDIY published a National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, which sets out a phased approach to extending appropriate regulation and supports to all paid, non-relative childminders over a period of years.

The profession is not yet regulated and there is no register of Educators or Practitioners. Adherence to minimum qualification requirements is monitored through regulation of services, combined with maintenance by DCEDIY of a list of approved qualifications and a process for assessing equivalence of other qualifications. In 2019, the Department of Education in collaboration with DCEDIY published new Criteria and Guidelines for professional award degree programmes (PACG) (to be in place by 2022) and a Qualifications Advisory Board was established in 2020 to assess degree programmes against these Criteria and Guidelines. In parallel, QQI published Professional Award Type Descriptors for awards at Levels 5-6 in 2019, on the basis of which new Level 5 and 6 programmes are being introduced from September 2021.

4.4.2. Contractual requirements

In addition to tying public funding of ELC and SAC services to registration with Tusla, DCEDIY has specified further quality requirements in contracts with service providers for participation in public funding schemes. When the ECCE programme was first introduced in 2010, at a time when there was no minimum qualification for staff, the ECCE contract specified that 'room leaders' in the ECCE programme should have an NFQ Level 5 qualification. When the minimum qualification came into force in 2016, the ECCE contractual requirement was raised to Level 6. There is also a requirement in the ECCE contract that services must provide "an appropriate educational programme" that "adheres to the principles of" *Síolta* and *Aistear*.

4.4.3. Incentivisation

DCEDIY makes higher payments to services that meet additional quality requirements relating to staff professionalisation:

- Since the introduction of the ECCE programme in 2010, a higher rate of capitation has been applicable to services that meet higher qualification requirements. Requirements include that 'room leaders' in the ECCE programme should have a relevant Bachelor's degree (Level 7 or higher) and at least three years' experience. Initially all ECCE room leaders in a setting were required to be graduates to benefit from the incentive, but since 2016 Higher Capitation payments have been calculated on a per-room basis rather than a whole-setting basis. A Focused Policy Assessment of the Higher Capitation found that payment had been effective in incentivising higher qualifications, with the proportion of staff in centre-based ELC with degrees more than doubling from 13% in 2013 to 25% in 2019, but noted the limitation of the payment to the ECCE programme, and difficulty in ensuring that additional payment was passed on to Educators.¹⁹
- The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), which since 2016 has supported participation of children with disabilities in the ECCE programme, includes among its measures the Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) training programme, which is a Level 6 (higher education) special purpose award that qualifies a LINC graduate to be an Inclusion Coordinator. To incentivise services to have an Inclusion Coordinator, an additional capitation of €2 per child per week is provided to services with a qualified Inclusion Coordinator in place who has signed an agreement to carry out the role.

¹⁹ DCYA (2020) *Focused Policy Assessment of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Higher Capitation Payment*.

4.4.4. Funded supports to services

DCEDIY funds a range of mentoring, training, advice and supports for ELC and SAC services, with access free to participants to facilitate participation. Key supports currently in place include:

- Training provided by Better Start, the City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, including the National Síolta Aistear Initiative and a suite of training programmes as part of AIM. Training provided through AIM includes the LINC Leadership for Inclusion programme, which is also fully funded by DCEDIY.
- Mentoring for services through the Better Start Quality Development Service.
- Advice on quality improvements, provided by CCCs, National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, and Better Start AIM specialists (who offer advice on inclusive practice).

Programme Support Payments are currently made to services to compensate for the costs incurred in administration and in non-contact time for staff, including time for reflection, planning, teamwork, recording of observations, as well as administration of funding schemes.

To incentivise and compensate services for enabling their staff to take part in CPD programmes, a pilot payment for CPD participation was introduced in 2018. Initially payments were only made in relation to two training programmes within AIM (Hanen and Lámh). In 2019 the pilot was extended to include the new Aistear and Play CPD programme.

Core Funding

From September 2022, a new funding stream will be introduced for ELC and SAC services, announced in October 2021. Through the new Core Funding, providers will be supported to meet their operating costs, including increased costs related to improved quality measures. The funding will support the quality of services by better enabling providers to support, amongst other things, the terms and conditions that may be set in an Employment Regulation Order as well as to introduce or improve other factors that contribute to high-quality practice, such as non-contact time,

planning, training, and curriculum implementation. The Core Funding will be worth up to €69 million to providers in 2022 (September-December), equivalent to up to €207 million in a full year from 2023.

4.4.5. Funded supports to individuals

Funding is provided to support Educators and Practitioners to cover (either in full or in part) tuition costs for qualifications. In addition to DFHERIS providing funding through the Free Fees Initiative of initial courses in higher education prior to entry into the workforce, DCEDIY has since 2014 provided a number of rounds of funding for existing Early Years Educators through the Learner Fund.

Initial rounds of the Learner Fund focused on NFQ Level 5 and 6 qualifications to enable existing staff to meet the new qualification requirements that came into force in 2016. Through four initial rounds of funding, almost 4,500 ELC staff were approved for funding to support them to raise their qualification levels in ELC.

More recently the Learner Fund has supported participation in Bachelor's Degree programmes, in recognition of the lack of financial support for part-time degrees. In total, 2,761 individuals have received a €750 bursary towards the cost of a Level 7 or 8 degree in ELC since 2017.

The Learner Fund has also extended to support CPD. Between 2019 and 2021, funding was provided for ELC services and childminders to avail of First Aid Responder (FAR) training accredited by the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC), to meet a new regulatory standard.

4.5. International context

4.5.1. European Quality Framework

A central influence on the Workforce Plan is the *European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*. The European Quality Framework, which was endorsed by the Council of Ministers in the EU Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care in 2019, sets out a shared European understanding of the types of policy and institutional arrangements that support the delivery of high quality early learning and care. The workforce is one of the five dimensions of

the European Quality Framework (along with access; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; and governance and funding), and it is also relevant to other dimensions, especially curriculum. The European Quality Framework notes that 'Staff is the most significant factor for children's well-being, learning and developmental outcomes. Therefore staff working conditions and professional development are seen as essential components of quality.'

The EU Quality Framework includes two quality statements relating to the workforce, calling on Member States to achieve:

- 'Well-qualified staff with initial and continuing training that enable them to fulfil their professional role'; and
- 'Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.'

Building on the EU Quality Framework, over the period 2018-2020 – at the same time as the development of the Workforce Plan – an ET2020 EU working group, of which Ireland was a member, examined policies to support professionalisation and inclusion. One of the working group's outputs was a report published in December 2020 on *Early Childhood Education and Care: How to Recruit, Train and Motivate Well-Qualified Staff*, which informed the development of the Workforce Plan. The key conclusions of the report are summarised in Box 2.

Box 2: EU recommendations on how to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff

1. All stakeholders involved in organising and providing ECEC share the responsibility to support the attractiveness of the ECEC sector and the professional development of ECEC staff. This includes national and local decision-makers, employers, ECEC leaders, trade unions, social partners, and education and training institutions.
2. The ECEC sector needs to receive the recognition it deserves, which will have a positive impact on recruitment and staff retention. The sector's recognition can be improved through advocacy / policy work to promote:
 - a) The educational and inclusive value of ECEC; the benefits and impact of good quality ECEC for children, families and society; and the role of well-qualified and motivated staff.
 - b) Improvement in professional development opportunities, career prospects, salaries and working conditions of ECEC staff.
3. The sector can become more attractive when creative strategies are used to support recruitment strategies:
 - a) Increasing the number of the ECEC roles and offering more opportunities helps to recruit staff with different skills and competences.
 - b) Developing new pathways into the profession and diversifying the recruitment methods helps to attract well qualified candidates with a wide range of profiles.
4. Establishing and using a common set of core competences for staff can help to manage expectations and provide greater clarity about the skills and abilities of ECEC staff. ECEC stakeholders can use this set of competences to:
 - a) Develop national / local / setting strategies to improve the competences of individuals and teams.
 - b) Guide the content of initial education and training, and continuing professional development programmes.
5. Participation of all ECEC staff in high quality initial education and training and continuing professional development (CPD) programmes is key to improving the quality in ECEC provision. To achieve this, a number of strategies need to be in place:
 - a) Remove obstacles to staff participation in CPD.
 - b) Increase the range of learning opportunities and recognise the value of work-based learning, team-based learning, coaching and peer support.

4.5.2. OECD Starting Strong VI

The Workforce Plan is also informed by the work of the OECD Network on Early Childhood Education and Care, which – also at the same time as development of the Workforce Plan – between 2018 and 2021 examined issues of professional development and working conditions as part of its research project *Quality Beyond Regulations* exploring the policy tools that are most effective in impacting on process quality (i.e. the aspects of quality that impact most directly on children’s experiences and outcomes). The project culminated in the publication in June 2021 of *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*. A literature review as part of the project highlighted the importance of workforce development in achieving process quality, in particular CPD and leadership.²⁰

Starting Strong VI identifies a number of policy pointers for Governments. In relation to the workforce in ELC, the OECD recommends that Governments:

- ‘Increase the quality standards and improve other features of initial education programmes for ECEC staff.
- Support professional development for all staff.
- Ensure that working conditions help attract and retain high-quality professionals.
- Develop a shared understanding of how leadership can best support quality in ECEC centres and facilitate leaders’ professional development.’

In addition to salary and career progression, the OECD notes that hours worked and time allocation are important elements of staff’s working conditions that impact on process quality, and the OECD highlights the importance of ‘protected time’ for staff.

In addition, in relation to the curriculum and pedagogy, the OECD recommends that Governments:

- ‘Support ECEC staff in implementing curriculum frameworks through pedagogical practices.’

²⁰ OECD (2018) *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*.

As part of the Quality Beyond Regulations project, the OECD carried out a Country Policy Review of Early Learning and Care in Ireland during 2020-2021, which focused particularly on the themes of: workforce development; curriculum and pedagogy; and monitoring and inspections. The Country Policy Review, published in December 2021, also informed the development of the Workforce Plan (see section 3.4).

4.5.3. Ireland in international context

Alongside the international comparisons carried out by the OECD in the *Starting Strong* series of reports, a key data source for placing Ireland in European context is the Eurydice 2019 report, *Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*. In addition, as part of the work undertaken by the Expert Group on the funding model, Frontier Economics in 2020 published a series of research papers summarising research evidence and international comparisons, including a paper on working conditions (paper 3) and a paper on fees, wages and public investment (paper 1).²¹

International comparisons indicate that Ireland is unusual in not having a degree-level qualification requirement for Lead Educators (i.e. 'room leaders'). Three-quarters of European countries require Lead Educators working with children aged 3 and older to have a Bachelor's degree or higher qualification, though only one-third have such a requirement for those working with children under 3 years old (Eurydice p.75).

Ireland is also unusual in having no qualification or training requirements for centre managers. In the majority of European countries, all managers (heads of centres) must be qualified to Bachelor's degree level or higher, and many European countries also have specific requirements for managers to have management training or previous professional experience (Eurydice pp.77-81).

While an induction phase on entering the profession, and CPD once qualified, are mandatory in only a minority of countries, CPD is regarded as a 'professional duty' for Early Years Educators in many more countries (Eurydice pp.83-87).

In relation to working conditions, adult-child ratios in ELC in Ireland compare favourably with other countries. For 2 year olds, in most European countries the maximum number of children per adult varies between 5 and 8 – in Ireland the

21 <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/publications-2/>

maximum is 6. For 4 year olds, in most European countries the maximum number of children per adult is more than 20. Ireland is one of only five European jurisdictions where the maximum is below 10 – for full-day care the maximum number of children per adult in Ireland is 8 (while it is 11 for ‘sessional’ care of up to 3.5 hours per day) (Eurydice pp.89-92).

Cross-country comparisons of pay for Early Years Educators suggest that pay – relative to both the national minimum wage and the average wage – is lower in Ireland than in many jurisdictions, but that Ireland is not alone in Early Years Educators having low pay levels. Hourly pay levels in ELC in Ireland are similar to those in England and Canada (Frontier Economics, paper 3, p.10). In addition, however, a relatively high proportion of Early Years Educators work part-time in Ireland in comparison with other countries (Frontier Economics, paper 3, p.11). Looking at annual salaries for Early Years Educators, Ireland is at the low end in international comparison, particularly when compared with national average earnings across all sectors (Frontier Economics, paper 1, pp. 32, 36).

There is little comparative data on qualifications or working conditions for the workforce in SAC.

5. Vision



5. Vision

The overall vision underpinning *First 5* – the whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families – is that:

‘All babies’ and young children’s early years will be valued as a critical and distinct period which should be enjoyed. Families will be assisted and enabled to nurture babies and young children and support their development, with additional support for those who need it. Those providing services for babies, young children and their families will be equipped to contribute to their learning, development, health and wellbeing. Community contexts will help babies and young children make the most of their early years and fulfil their potential.’

Specifically in relation to the workforce (which in *First 5* includes all those who support young children and their families, not just those working in ELC or SAC), the vision underpinning *First 5* is of:

‘An appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce that is supported and valued and reflects the diversity of babies, young children and their families.’ (p.110)

During the consultation process for the Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC (see section 4.3), respondents were asked what they felt was important to their vision for the workforce. By a considerable margin the two most frequently mentioned themes were: better pay and working conditions; and recognition and respect for the workforce.

Building on the vision and commitments set out in *First 5*, and drawing on the views expressed by participants in the consultation process and by the Stakeholder Group, the following statement describes the vision underpinning the Workforce Plan:

‘A well-qualified, skilled, diverse and valued professional workforce that is centred on children’s rights, needs and potential and that provides quality experiences for children in partnership with families, and which continues to advance its professional development within a coherent and competent system.’

Wherever appropriate, the Workforce Plan adopts an integrated approach to the workforce in ELC and SAC. While the Plan acknowledges the distinctive features of SAC and of childminding, the vision statement and many of the actions apply equally to those working with children aged 0-3 and those working with children aged 3-6, and apply equally to those working in ELC and those in SAC, and many actions will support both staff in centre-based settings and childminders.

6. Pillars of the Workforce Plan



6. Pillars of the Workforce Plan

6.1. Pillar 1: Establishing a career framework

Central to the achievement of the vision for the workforce is clarity on roles within the profession and the development of a clear career framework for Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners. This career framework will bring a number of benefits including:

- Development of career pathways, making it easier for Educators and Practitioners embarking on a career in the sector to see how they can progress their career within the sector, in turn supporting both recruitment and retention of staff;
- Providing a clear basis for linking different qualification levels to different roles;
- Strengthening of leadership development opportunities within centre-based settings;
- Giving clarity on the professional status of different roles, supporting professional recognition of the Educators and Practitioners in those roles;
- Facilitating a shared understanding among employers and employees of what work different roles involve; and
- Providing a basis for the linking of different career roles to different rates of pay.

While there are core expectations of all those who work with children in ELC and SAC, and core competences required of all – see box 3 – there are also different roles within settings, with different competences required of different roles. While recognising the diversity of contexts across Europe and the diversity of settings, the recent (2020) European Commission report, *Early Childhood Education and Care: How to Recruit, Train and Motivate Well-Qualified Staff*, which examines the application of the European Quality Framework for ECEC in relation to the workforce, identifies the competences required of three different roles: ‘assistants’, ‘core practitioners’, and ‘leaders / heads of centres’.

Box 3: Expectations of all staff working with children

- Promote each child's development and learning;
- Work with the local community and within the ECEC system;
- Work as part of a team;
- Keep children safe;
- Support children's transition into and from ECEC settings;
- Be aware of the impact their practice has on children for whom they have responsibility;
- Recognise the different cultural and social backgrounds of children;
- Work with all families including those who may have different values and attitudes; and treat all children and families with respect.

Source: EC (2020) Early Childhood Education and Care: How to Recruit, Train and Motivate Well-Qualified Staff, p.81

While every individual working in an ELC or SAC setting has an important role to play in supporting children's well-being, health, learning and development, those in leadership roles have the opportunity to be key drivers of quality improvement and assurance. As noted in the recent OECD report on policies to improve process quality in ELC: 'Leadership is pivotal for organisations' success and a key driver of potential change and quality improvement.... It is expected that leaders act as the promoters of the quality of ECEC settings, providing resources and conditions for staff to develop high-quality practices'.²²

Leadership responsibilities are not concentrated solely in those who are managers of settings. Where leadership is 'distributed' across staff within a setting, a shared understanding of quality is fostered, staff well-being and staff relationships are stronger, and process quality is likely to be higher (OECD 2021, p.132). The distribution of leadership responsibilities may also support career development and establishment of a career pathway for Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners.

A recent review of research on leadership in ELC, conducted by the OECD,²³ distinguishes two important dimensions of leadership:

- 'Administrative leadership', which might also be described as 'management', and which refers to 'the management of operations

²² OECD (2021) *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*, p.132.

²³ OECD (2019) *Leadership for Quality Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Education Working Paper No.211.

including human resources and finance; strategic functions such as planning, goal setting and quality improvement; and may also include collaborating with community partners and systems’.

- ‘Pedagogical leadership’, which is ‘the leadership needed to support teaching and learning, and is sometimes referred to as instructional leadership. It includes supporting staff professional development and learning, creating trusting relationships with and among staff, facilitating peer learning, promoting the implementation of curriculum and assessment in line with national frameworks, and structuring the work environment to support all of these’.

In Ireland, over the last 20 years there has been increasing clarification of the different roles in services and the competences required for each, but there has not yet been a consistently applied career framework across the ELC and SAC sector. Developments include:

- In 2002, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform published a set of five occupational role profiles (from basic practitioner to expert practitioner) for the ELC sector.
- In 2010, in the previous Workforce Plan, those profiles were mapped onto the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), from Levels 4 through to Levels 8 and 9.
- The role of ‘room leader’ was identified in the ECCE programme (established in 2010) with a specific qualification requirement, and graduate qualifications incentivised through Higher Capitation payments.
- The development of the role of Inclusion Coordinator through AIM, established in 2016, both strengthening inclusive practice and building a model for ‘distributed leadership’.
- The commitment in *First 5* to move towards a ‘graduate-led’ workforce with room leaders and managers to hold relevant degrees.

There is already much excellent practice in leadership (both pedagogical and administrative) within Irish settings, there are several successful initiatives to promote leadership (including the LINC Leadership for Inclusion programme to support Inclusion Coordinator roles, through AIM), and inspection frameworks articulate features of leadership expected in services.²⁴ However, there has been less progress so far in supporting leadership roles, and no national training programmes other than LINC.

During the consultation process, the theme of limited career prospects was raised by many participants. Many expressed the view that the sector is not seen as professional in the way that teaching is, and that staff are not valued or respected by society for the important role they play. It was believed by many that this lack of recognition influenced feelings of low job satisfaction and low morale amongst those working in the sector.

While pay was identified as key to developing career prospects, another theme that emerged in the consultation was the lack of clear role profiles or career pathways. Participants noted the need for Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners to be able to see a pathway for career progression.

Building on previous occupational role profiles for the ELC sector (e.g. as set out in the 2010 Workforce Plan) and the EU approach (see footnote 8), and building on the commitment in *First 5* to achieve a 'graduate-led' ELC workforce by 2028 with all 'room leaders' as well as managers holding a relevant degree, it is proposed that professional roles should be identified in ELC settings and developed over the period to 2028, providing a career framework and career development pathway.

For centre-based ELC, three basic career grades are identified: Early Years Educator, Lead Educator (building on the current 'room leader' role), and Manager. For centre-based SAC, while a Practitioner role and a Manager / leadership role are identified, no group-leader role has yet been identified, which reflects the fact that the SAC sector is at an earlier stage in its development. Role profiles have been developed that set out the competences required of these different roles, presented in Appendix 3.

²⁴ The Quality and Regulatory Framework that underpins the statutory inspections of ELC services carried out by Tusla refers to 'an effective management structure', with clearly defined governance arrangements, a clear understanding among staff of their roles and responsibilities, appropriate policies and procedures, and staff supervision and staff training. The Quality Framework for Early Years Education Inspections carried out by the Department of Education identifies 'the quality of management and leadership for learning' as one of four practice areas considered, including planning and review, effective management, communication with parents, and transitions.

Early Years Educator / SAC Practitioner

An Early Years Educator or SAC Practitioner will have responsibility for their own actions under direction and some responsibility for the quality of the service within established guidelines. All Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners may be 'key persons' within the Key Person Approach, which will in future be recommended or required in all settings, given its benefits for children, for partnership with families, and for Educators and Practitioners.²⁵

In ELC, the minimum entry requirement will remain a level 5 major award in ELC. However, supports will be provided to enable an increasing proportion of Early Years Educators to have a qualification at level 6, recognising the complexity of the role they undertake. While a level 6 award will not be required during the timeframe of this Workforce Plan (to 2028), this Plan sets a target of increasing the proportion of Early Years Educators with a level 6 (or higher) qualification from 72% in 2021 to 85% by 2028, and it is envisaged that movement towards a level 6 minimum requirement may be the focus of a future Workforce Plan.

In SAC, Practitioners will be supported over the course of this Plan to achieve a level 5 major award in SAC or – if they already have a level 5 or higher award in a closely related field (such as ELC) – to complete a short special purpose award that is specific to SAC.

Lead Educator

In ELC, a Lead Educator will have responsibility for the learning and care for a group of children, leading the practice with that group of children. This will become a graduate role over time; *First 5* sets a target that by 2028 all Lead Educators in ELC should have a qualification at Level 7 or higher.

²⁵ Tusla's Quality and Regulatory Framework for ELC settings defines a Key Person approach as 'A method of care approach where each child is assigned a particular educator who will act as their "go to person". This person builds up a friendly attachment with the child so the child feels connected, confident and familiar with that person. The key person will be the main communicator with the parent or guardian.' Similarly, the National Quality Guidelines for SAC (DCEDIY, 2020) recommend the approach as good practice in SAC, noting that 'The key person builds a unique relationship with each child/young person for whom they are responsible, supporting transitions, and is a link between the service, the child/young person and their parents/guardians.'

In future no distinction will be drawn between roles and qualification requirements for the ECCE programme and those for other ELC provision. In line with the approach set out in *First 5*, two key principles underpinning the Workforce Plan are: interconnectedness of learning and care from birth and right through the age-range of early childhood; and the equal importance of high-quality ELC provision for all young children, regardless of age.

As a result the role of the Lead Educator – and the qualification targets and requirements associated with it – will be the same across all ELC provision, equally for under-3s and for over-3s. Similarly, the Higher Capitation payments will be replaced by new financial supports for service providers to employ graduates as Lead Educators with all ages of children in ELC (see section 6.2.1).

Manager

Manager, i.e. the person in charge of a setting. Given the importance of this role across a wide range of areas – including human resources, finance, planning, quality improvement, and collaboration with a wide range of community partners and external agencies – management training will be made widely available. This training will particularly support those Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners who come from a practice background and are seeking a further career development opportunity by moving into a management role within a setting.

Currently there is no regulatory requirement for a manager to have a qualification if the manager does not work directly with children. Over the lifetime of this Workforce Plan, minimum qualification requirements will be introduced for Managers, at Level 6 in ELC and Level 5 in SAC. In line with *First 5*, it will be a target that by 2028 all Managers of ELC services should have a qualification at Level 7 or higher.

Some **leadership responsibilities** are connected with the roles identified above. For example, Lead Educators have key responsibilities for pedagogical leadership with a group of children and staff, while a Manager has a number of leadership responsibilities as the person-in-charge of a setting. Other leadership responsibilities may be distributed across a service in different ways.

Box 4: Distributed leadership responsibilities

Leadership training and supports will be strengthened to support those with leadership responsibilities, including both training in management skills for managers, and training to support those with distributed leadership responsibilities across a setting. In some cases the distribution of leadership functions may allow for the further development of identified roles with additional responsibilities across a setting, building on the model of the 'Inclusion Coordinator' within AIM. Training will support staff in mentoring, coordination, empowering and leading practice with their co-professionals, developing the setting as a professional learning community.

- **Pedagogy**, providing leadership for pedagogical practice within an ELC setting, including implementation of the curriculum in line with Aistear (the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework), mentoring colleagues, and developing and leading effective approaches to support children's learning. All Lead Educators have responsibilities for pedagogical leadership.
- **Diversity and inclusion**, building on the current Inclusion Coordinator role, leading inclusive practice, inclusive pedagogy and an inclusive culture within the setting, and providing support and information to staff and parents on inclusion of all children, as well as supporting development and recognition of diversity in the staff team.
- **Family and community partnership**, leading and supporting partnership and engagement between families and the setting. Supports for these responsibilities will be strengthened in line with *First 5* commitments to develop a DEIS-type model for the delivery of ELC and SAC in the context of concentrated disadvantage, and to pilot the delivery of parenting programmes through ELC and SAC settings.
- **Student placement and induction**, supporting quality learning experiences for students on professional practice placements, engaging with further and higher education institutions, and mentoring Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners going through an induction process.

Some of these responsibilities are relevant in all settings. Student placement will initially only be relevant in those settings that offer student practice placements, though at a later date, following the introduction of an induction process for the profession, this area of responsibility will become more widely relevant.

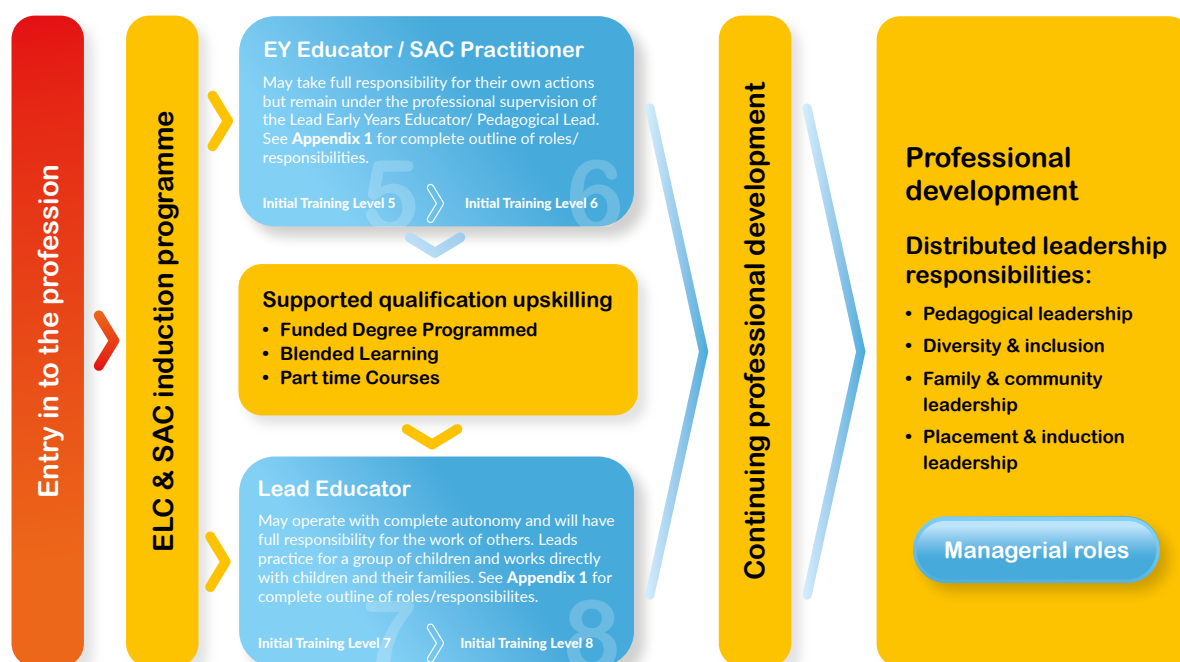
Over the course of the Workforce Plan, training and supports will be developed to support staff and managers to carry out leadership responsibilities. In some cases the distribution of leadership functions may allow for the further development of identified roles of additional responsibility across a setting, building on the existing model of the 'Inclusion Coordinator' established within AIM, and which may include responsibility for mentoring and supporting co-professionals in the setting in an area of practice.

The strengthening of support for leadership – including **distributed leadership responsibilities** (see box 4) – will aim to support the quality of practice within settings, and also help build career development pathways within settings.

An **induction** process will be incrementally introduced for new entrants to the profession beginning their first job in the profession, to help them adjust to their new professional role with the support of experienced colleagues. The need for an induction process reflects the limitations on the responsibilities that are open to a student on a practice placement. It is acknowledged that it will take some years to develop and pilot such a process, and no timeframe is set for its formal introduction. In the short-term, in the absence of either a professional regulator or a professional association, the next steps in initial preparation (e.g. research, consultation) will lie with DCEDIY in consultation with relevant stakeholders. At a later stage, depending on progress towards establishment of a professional regulator or professional association, consideration will be given to the role of such a body in the further development of an induction process (e.g. capacity-building for services in mentoring and leadership, and piloting).

Figure 1 illustrates a future **career pathway** for an Early Years Educator or SAC Practitioner within a setting, indicating the place of induction, entry into the sector at different qualification levels, and supports for staff to upskill and move into roles with greater responsibility while continuing to work within the setting.

Figure 1: Career pathway for Early Years Educators within an ELC and SAC setting



The career framework is intended to be compatible with **settings of different size and organisational structure**, in recognition of the diversity of settings in Ireland. While some settings are large, the majority are relatively small; 64% of services have either 1 or 2 rooms.

The career framework is intended to be compatible with different staffing arrangements within settings. Every setting is required by Regulations to have a person-in-charge, termed here the Manager. Depending on the size of a group of children, there may be one or more Lead Educators with the group of children. Leadership responsibilities may be allocated across staff in a variety of ways.

- In small settings, e.g. those with one or two staff, the Manager may be the Lead Educator and may have specific leadership responsibilities such as being the Inclusion Coordinator within the setting. To help small settings adjust to the career framework incrementally, while there is a target – which will be supported through funded flexible education programmes – that Managers and Lead Educators should have a relevant degree by 2028, this will not be a regulatory requirement.
- In larger settings, there will be more scope for distribution of leadership responsibilities across the setting, with a Lead Educator working with every group of children, and other leadership responsibilities spread across different members of staff.
- In organisations with multiple settings, some management functions may be carried out centrally on behalf of all the settings, but the Manager of each setting will nevertheless have a key role as the person-in-charge of the setting on a daily basis, and for this reason the Manager of each setting will be required to have a relevant qualification (in ELC or SAC) by 2028.

An intended benefit of strengthening leadership within settings is to develop strong career pathways within settings. Moving out of practice and into support roles – such as working in training institutions or the inspectorates – should not be the only way for an individual to advance their career. At the same time, some Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners will wish to pursue their careers in **wider roles across the sector** such as inspectors, trainers, mentors and researchers. It is important that external

support services should increasingly be staffed by individuals who have experience of working in ELC and SAC settings, as well as relevant ELC and SAC qualifications. In further supporting retention of staff in the ELC and SAC sector:

- An increasing proportion of those working in inspection, mentoring and training roles should have significant and varied experience of working in a range of roles within ELC or SAC settings.
- Newly appointed mentors and inspectors who have worked in ELC should have a minimum relevant qualification at least at Level 8, as is already required by both the Tusla and Department of Education Inspectorates as well as Better Start.
- In the case of staff delivering training programmes, trainers should have relevant qualifications and practice experience, and should be qualified to at least one level above that which the participant on the training programme is expected to attain.
- The Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines require that higher education programme staff (lecturers and placement supervisors) should have suitable qualifications with expertise and experience in ELC in delivering Level 7 and Level 8 programmes.

The table sets out key actions over the period to 2028 to support the further development and application of the career framework across the ELC and SAC sector, and to strengthen career pathways and career development opportunities for Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners.

Goal	Objectives
Establishing a career framework	1.1 Continuation of level 5 as the minimum requirement for ELC, but with a target of increasing the proportion of Early Years Educators who have a level 6 (or higher) qualification from 72% in 2021 to 85% by 2028. (For SAC, see section 6.2.2.)
	1.2 A target (but not a regulatory requirement) that all Lead Educators should have a level 7 (or higher) qualification by 2028, up from 43% in 2021. Continue to monitor progress towards achieving the target and consider alternative measures that may be needed to help ensure the target is met.
	1.3 All managers (persons in charge) of ELC settings should by 2028 be required to have at least a level 6 qualification [96% currently do so], with a target that managers should be qualified to Level 7 (or higher). A requirement will be introduced by 2028 for Managers of SAC settings to have a Level 5 award.
	1.4 Training in management skills specific to ELC and SAC settings will be developed and made available to all managers (both ELC and SAC).
	1.5 Training and support will be further developed for managers and staff with leadership responsibilities that may be distributed across a setting, such as leadership in pedagogy, diversity and inclusion, family and community partnership, and student placement and induction. Consideration will be given to the further development of identified roles of additional responsibility across a setting, building on the existing model of the 'Inclusion Coordinator' established within AIM, and which may include responsibility for mentoring and supporting co-professionals in the setting in an area of practice.
	1.6 Work will begin during 2022-2028 on developing and incrementally introducing an induction process, through research, consultation, piloting and review, along with actions to develop services' capacity and external supports for induction. This process will support movement towards a future requirement for all entrants into the profession (other than childminders) at all qualification levels to complete a supported induction period.

6.2. Pillar 2: Raising qualification levels

The European Commission (2020) report *How to Recruit, Train and Motivate Well-Qualified Staff* notes that:

'Alongside the establishment of a set of core competences for ECEC staff, it is important to consider how their initial and continuing education and training prepares them for their role. For most people the journey to professional competence takes time - and skills are acquired through initial training, a period of induction into the profession, and during ongoing professional development, as well as through everyday practice. All staff (assistants, core practitioners and ECEC leaders) need access to, and support, for all aspects of their initial and subsequent education and training.'

The application of the career framework set out in Pillar 1 will involve the raising and wider application of qualification levels associated with the different roles in both ELC and SAC settings.

Pillar 2 involves supports to enable Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners – particularly those who are already working in the sector – to achieve the professional qualifications that will over time become requirements for the roles they are in. While the achievement of the qualifications required for different roles will for new entrants into the sector be a matter for initial professional education, there will be a strong focus during the lifetime of this Workforce Plan on supporting existing Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners to achieve higher qualifications while continuing to work in the sector. This focus on upskilling of the existing workforce is necessary in order to achieve qualifications targets and requirements within a relatively short number of years, but is also important in strengthening career development pathways.

6.2.1. Qualifications for Early Years Educators

Some of the increase in qualification levels in the ELC and SAC workforce has happened organically over many years through the commitment and dedication of Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners to develop themselves as professionals and to raise the quality of practice. Since 2010 there has been increasing support from the State for upskilling of the workforce, including:

- Introduction as part of the ECCE programme in 2010 of qualification requirements for the first time, with a contractual requirement for 'room leaders' in the ECCE programme to have a Level 5 qualification.

- Incentivisation – through the Higher Capitation payments within the ECCE programme – of ELC providers to employ graduates (at Level 7 or higher) as group/room leaders in the ECCE programme. A Focused Policy Assessment of the ECCE Higher Capitation Payment in 2020 noted the impact of financial incentives in promoting professionalisation, but identified as weaknesses of the Higher Capitation payment its limitation to staff delivering the ECCE programme and the extent to which it was passed on to staff.²⁶
- Introduction in 2016 of a regulatory requirement for all employees working with children in centre-based ELC to have at least a Level 5 ELC qualification, and at the same time the raising of the contractual qualification requirement for ‘room leaders’ in the ECCE programme to Level 6.
- Introduction in 2014 of a Learner Fund to support the upskilling of Educators, initially through providing funding to enable Educators to achieve Level 5 and 6 awards and then, since 2017, providing limited (€750) retrospective financial support to Educators completing Level 7 and 8 awards who did not receive financial support from other sources. In total, there have been more than 2,750 recipients of the level 7-8 Learner Fund bursaries and more than 4,400 recipients of the level 5-6 bursaries.

As a result of the combination of the commitment to professional development of those working in the sector and the supports and incentives provided, the qualification levels of the workforce have progressively increased, with the proportion of Early Years Educators with a level 7 or higher qualification more than doubling between 2012 and 2021, and the proportion with a Level 6 or higher award reaching more than two-thirds (72%).

The range of degree programmes in ELC has also expanded significantly in recent years. As of September 2021, 19 degree programmes at Levels 7 and 8 have already been assessed by the Qualifications Advisory Board as meeting the requirements set out in the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines. However, provision of programmes in the medium of Irish is more limited, with a small number of institutions offering optional modules in Irish or on Irish-medium provision.

²⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/827ae-focused-policy-assessment-fpa-of-the-ecce-higher-capitation-payment/>

While the interim target in *First 5* that 30% of ELC staff who work with children should have a degree-level qualification by 2021 has been met (with the proportion at 34%), qualification levels remain some way short of the commitment in *First 5* to a graduate-led workforce by 2028 and the targets and requirements set out Pillar 1. Not only is the proportion of Early Years Educators with a Level 7 or higher qualification well short of 50%, but those with a Bachelor's degree are concentrated in work with children aged 3-5.

Qualification requirements were a key area of focus of both elements of the consultation process. In discussion of the vision for workforce, the second most commonly identified theme – after that of better pay and conditions – was achieving a suitably qualified and ideally graduate-led workforce. Similarly, participants in the focussed discussions were supportive of moves towards a graduate-led workforce, though some participants spoke of difficulties in attracting graduates to work with children under 3 years old. Qualifications were seen as a key driver for moves to professionalise the sector and improve the recognition and status of the profession.

Participants in the consultation process stressed the value of practical experience as part of qualifications and that courses should be relevant and of high quality. The consultation process also found support for paid study leave.

First 5 commits to achieving a graduate-led ELC workforce by 2028. The commitment in *First 5* specifies that at least 50% of staff (i.e. room leaders, assistant managers and managers) working directly with children in centre-based ELC settings and coordinators supporting the work of childminders should hold an appropriate degree-level qualification by 2028.

This graduate leadership target will apply equally to groups of children in ELC of all ages, and will not in future be specific to the ECCE programme. In future, therefore, supports and incentives for upskilling to level 7 and higher qualifications will also relate to those working with young children of all ages from birth to 5. The Higher Capitation payments will be replaced by new financial supports for service providers to employ graduates as Lead Educators (and Managers) working with all ages of children in ELC. In order to support upskilling and the achievement of the graduate qualification target, these supports will focus on the employment of graduates with relevant degrees.

While new entrants into the sector will continue to be important in supporting an increase in the proportion of staff with third-level qualifications, a major focus of the

Workforce Plan will be upskilling existing Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners. This will include supporting participation of Early Years Educators in degree programmes that are possible while continuing to work in the sector, such as part-time and blended degree programmes. Part-time degrees are otherwise unfunded by the State except through a limited bursary (€750) provided by the Learner Fund (see section 4.4.5) and partial tax relief.²⁷

It is also acknowledged, however, that many of those working in the sector who have a level 5 or 6 award will not wish to progress to higher qualifications, and that some of those who do will face significant challenges in undertaking further training while working.

The barriers to undertaking higher qualifications will be minimised through an expanded Learner Fund. The State will fund a number of places each year on designated degree programmes, with funding provided directly to the third-level institutions, and places available free or at low-cost to those studying while working in the sector. Funding will be throughout the course of study, rather than at the end, to reduce the up-front financial barrier to participation.

Funded places on training programmes at levels 5-8 will only be provided where these programmes are recognised by QQI as being in line with the PATD for ELC programmes (for programmes at levels 5-6) or QAB-approved (in the case of programmes at level 7-8).

Given the commitment in Pillar 1 to support the continuing increase in qualification levels for all Early Years Educators – not only Lead Educators – and to move over time towards a future Level 6 minimum entry requirement, financial supports will also be made available to assist Early Years Educators with a Level 5 qualification to achieve a Level 6 award while continuing to work in the sector.

It is provisionally estimated that in order to meet qualification targets set out in this Plan approximately 4,600 Early Years Educators who currently have a Level 5 or 6 qualification will need to be supported to achieve a Level 7 or 8 qualification by 2028, with the number depending on the rate of change in future demand for ELC. However, there are a number of assumptions underpinning this estimate, and the number could be higher or lower. In particular, the greater the improvement in pay and conditions of employment in the sector (see section 7.1 on pay and conditions as a ‘key enabler’ for

²⁷ Tax relief may be claimed on fees including student contribution, subject to a €1,500 disregard for a part-time student and €3,000 for full-time.

the Plan), the further the rate of staff turnover is expected to fall and the higher the rate of new graduate entry is expected to rise. The number also depends on the demand for ELC. While the population of children in both the 0-5 and 6-12 age-groups is forecast to decline over the years to 2028, an increase in parental demand for ELC could result in an increase in the number of staff needed at all qualification levels. Appendix 4 presents further detail on estimates of numbers of participants for upskilling programmes.

Supports for Early Years Educators to achieve level 7 and 8 qualifications will be supported by the ongoing collaboration between higher education institutions to build a consistent and coherent approach to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within and across the public higher education sector, supported by the Human Capital Initiative.

In addition to providing financial support for Early Years Educators to upskill, it is also recognised that employers will need additional support if they are to facilitate their employees to take part in programmes of further and higher education. In particular, requirements that students must undertake practice placements in other settings than the one they work in poses a particular challenge for employers. To help employers accommodate this, a new fund will be developed to support employers to pay for replacement staff while continuing to pay the wages and to assist with the costs of giving staff study leave.

Goal		Objectives
Qualifications for Early Years Educators	2.1	Offer funded places on flexible education programmes at levels 6 to 8 to current Early Years Educators to support upskilling and strengthen career development pathways.
	2.2	Develop and introduce mechanisms for providing financial support to ELC services to help meet the costs of releasing staff to go on student practice placements and study leave.
	2.3	Support further use of mechanisms for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and micro-credentials, including through the outcomes of Human Capital Initiative projects on RPL and micro-credentials.
	2.4	Continue the work of the Qualifications Advisory Board to assess the design and monitor the implementation of ELC degree programmes in line with the PACG.
	2.5	Support the development of initial professional education programmes or modules that are conducted through the medium of Irish (at levels 5-8).

6.2.2. Qualifications for SAC Practitioners

While SAC has much in common with ELC, it also has distinctive features. As with ELC, quality SAC is child-centred, supports children's well-being, participation and holistic development, and provides a broad learning experience with a strong focus on play.²⁸ As with ELC, participation in quality SAC can make a significant positive difference to children's well-being and development. As with Early Years Educators, the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes of SAC Practitioners are key to the quality of practice.

At the same time, SAC provides for a wide age-range of children, whose needs may differ in many ways from those of pre-school children. At the younger end, SAC overlaps with the age-range for ELC, i.e. 4 and 5 year olds. At the older end, while in practice largely limited to primary school children, SAC services may include some post-primary children and may include teenagers up to and including 14 year olds.

While there is much overlap between ELC and SAC in the skills and knowledge needed by staff, and many staff work in both ELC and SAC, the distinctive features of SAC – especially in supporting children at the older end of the age-range – mean that an ELC qualification alone will not prepare a Practitioner fully to provide SAC.

Nevertheless, given the commonalities, and given that many services provide both ELC and SAC and given that there are important benefits of facilitating full-time, full-year contracts for ELC and SAC staff (supporting staff recruitment and retention), it is a policy aim to ensure that staff who provide ELC may also provide SAC, and vice versa, with minimal additional barriers.

Countries have varied in the approach they have taken to qualification requirements for SAC. While some countries have developed qualifications that relate to both ELC and SAC, some countries have developed qualifications that are specific to SAC services or have wider relevance (e.g. PlayWork qualifications in the UK). In many countries (including the UK) there are no minimum qualification requirements for SAC.

In Ireland, until now there has been no qualification requirement for working in SAC. Because of registration requirements for SAC services only came into force recently, there is limited data on the current qualifications of SAC practitioners. Of the 2,086²⁹

²⁸ DCEDIY (2020) *National Quality Guidelines for School-Age Childcare Services*.

²⁹ Tusla data November 2021, Data still unpublished

SAC services registered with Tusla as of November 2021, approximately one-third are 'stand-alone' SAC providers. Among combined ELC and SAC providers, data from the Sector Profile (2021) suggests that as many as 78% of those working in SAC have at least a Level 5 major award in ELC, while 22% do not have a relevant qualification. A 2020 survey of 'stand-alone' SAC services, conducted on behalf of the Workforce Plan Steering Group by CCC and by two major providers that each operate a number of SAC services, found that 74% of those working in 'stand-alone' SAC services, have at least a Level 5 major award: 46% in ELC, and 28% in a related field such as youth work, social work, teaching, arts/drama etc.

During the consultation process, views on appropriate qualifications for SAC varied. Some participants argued that specific SAC qualifications, differing from those required in ELC, should be developed. Others gave their view that there should be an SAC 'add-on' module created to allow those with an ELC qualification to undertake a minor award to allow them to work in both ELC and SAC. Many participants stressed the need for transferability of learning between ELC and SAC qualifications. There was support in the public consultation process on SAC for a range of qualifications to be recognised.

First 5 commits to introduce a minimum qualification requirement for SAC with an appropriate period of time to meet the requirement. Given the current stage of development of the SAC workforce, and recruitment challenges in the sector at present, a minimum qualification requirement at level 5 in SAC will be introduced over a period of years. The requirement will be introduced incrementally. Within 3 years of a level 5 SAC award being introduced, at least half the staff in a service should be qualified, with a view to ensuring that by that date there will be no SAC service in which all staff are unqualified. Within 5 years of the award being introduced, all staff should be qualified.

Rather than developing separate SAC programmes of initial education, given the commonalities between ELC and SAC, and given the importance of facilitating combined ELC and SAC services and employment opportunities that enable staff to work in both ELC and SAC, it is proposed that ELC initial education programmes from Levels 5 through to 8 should progressively be supplemented or adjusted to incorporate professional award standards for SAC.

This process will begin with Level 5 and 6 awards, given the introduction of a Level 5 minimum requirement. Draft SAC Professional Award-Type Descriptors (PATD) have

been developed and will be completed, to support the development of combined level 5 programmes for ELC and SAC. Over time, the incorporation of SAC within Level 7 and 8 awards will allow for further professional development opportunities within SAC.

Development of combined programmes in ELC and SAC at levels 5 to 8 will maximise the number of Early Years Educators / SAC Practitioners who are qualified to practise in SAC and to take on leadership and training roles in SAC, and it will have the same benefit for ELC.

Given the wide practice experience and diverse qualifications of many SAC Practitioners, the further development of mechanisms for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) will be important in the introduction of new awards encompassing SAC.

In the short-term, given the large proportion of staff in SAC who have qualifications in ELC or related disciplines (e.g youth work), a short special purpose award will be developed, aimed at ensuring staff qualified to level 5 or higher in related disciplines (including ELC) are qualified to carry out the roles set out in the role profile for a SAC Practitioner (see Appendix 2). The special purpose SAC award will also be aimed at SAC Practitioners who have a major Level 5 award in a specified list of related fields (such as youth work), enabling SAC services to benefit from having staff drawn from a range of backgrounds and with a range of qualifications.

As with supports for the raising of qualification levels in ELC, so too the raising of qualification levels in SAC will be supported through financial supports both for SAC practitioners to undertake further and higher education qualifications and through financial supports for SAC providers to facilitate the release of staff for student practice placements in other settings and for study leave.

Goal	Objectives
Qualification for SAC Practitioners	2.6 In the short term, an open-access, online introductory training programme on SAC will be developed and rolled out, focused on raising awareness of the content of the National Quality Guidelines for SAC that were published in 2020.
	2.7 A regulatory minimum qualification requirement will be introduced at Level 5, for all practitioners and managers in SAC, with a lead-in time: • At least half of staff in an SAC service who work directly with children (i.e. at least 1 per 24 children) should have a relevant level 5 qualification within 3 years of an SAC level 5 qualification being introduced. • All staff in a SAC service who work directly with children (i.e. at least 1 per 12 children) should have a relevant qualification within 5 years of the new Level 5 SAC qualification being introduced.
	2.8 A number of related disciplines (including ELC) will be recognised as meeting most of the requirements for SAC Practitioners. SAC Practitioners with qualifications in these programmes will only be required to complete a short SAC-specific special purpose award. Further analysis of courses suitable for recognition for this purpose will be undertaken in conjunction with development of the special purpose award.
	2.9 The development of a qualification in SAC at level 5 will take place through finalisation of Professional Award-Type Descriptors for SAC, and the proposed supplementing or adjustment of level 5 programmes in ELC to incorporate SAC also, resulting in combined Level 5 programmes in ELC and SAC that will qualify an individual to work in either or both areas.
	2.10 Funded places on flexible level 5 education programmes will be made available to current SAC Practitioners to help meet the new qualification requirement.
	2.11 The development of a suite of combined ELC and SAC programmes at Levels 6 to 8 will be sought, so that graduates of future education programmes are qualified to practise in both ELC and SAC.
	2.12 Develop and introduce a mechanism for providing financial support to SAC services to help meet the costs of releasing staff to go on student practice placements and study leave.

6.2.3. Qualifications for childminders

First 5 commits to the introduction of a minimum qualification requirement for childminders, with an appropriate period of time to meet this requirement. A minimum requirement – and an approach to supporting the upskilling, regulation and recognition of childminders – was set out in the National Action Plan for Childminding, published in April 2021. The commitments on training set out in the National Action Plan for Childminding were developed in close coordination with Steering Group of the Workforce Plan.

The differences in qualification requirements between childminders and those working in centre-based ELC and SAC reflect the distinctive features of childminding and also differences in its stage of development. Childminding remains largely unregulated in Ireland, and most childminders are unqualified and have not previously engaged with State-provided supports or training opportunities. While current qualification levels among childminders are largely unknown, it is assumed that most childminders do not have specific ELC qualifications.³⁰

While a training requirement will be introduced, its introduction will be phased and incremental:

- Foundation Training before registration with Tusla.
- Following registration, supported participation in a Quality Development Programme over a period of years in order to remain registered with Tusla.
- Development and introduction of staffed local childminding networks to support childminders and to help them undertake training and CPD supports.³¹

This approach reflects the approaches adopted in many other European countries, where training requirements for childminders are generally set at a foundation level, with a limited number of hours of training required.

During preparation of the Workforce Plan, further consideration has been given to content and format of training for childminders, and this preparatory work will support

³⁰ According to QQI, fewer than 50 people per year complete the minor Level 5 award in childminding practice.

³¹ The OECD Country Policy Review (2021) highlights research evidence that professional learning networks for childminders may play an important role in the quality of staff-child interactions in family daycare (childminding) settings.

the development and roll-out of Foundation Training and the Quality Development Programme under the auspices of the Steering Group for the National Action Plan for Childminding.

While respecting the distinctive features of childminding, training programmes will be designed in such a way as to facilitate two-way movement of individuals between childminding and working in centre-based ELC and SAC. It is already the case some childminders previously worked in centre-based services and as a result have ELC qualifications.

Proposals for initial training for childminders, which are reflected in the National Action Plan for Childminding, include:

Goal		Objectives
Qualifications for childminders	2.13	A childminder-specific Foundation Training Programme will be developed and funded, with a view to completion of this foundation training programme being a pre-requirement for childminders to register with Tusla.
	2.14	A childminder-specific Quality Development Programme will be developed and funded. In order to remain registered, a childminder will be required to complete this Quality Development Programme over a period of years. The Quality Development Programme will result in a special purpose award at Level 5 on the NFQ, significantly smaller in scale than a major Level 5 award.
	2.15	Participation in the Quality Development Programme will be supported through the development and progressive rollout of staffed local childminding networks across the country, which will provide local support for childminders.
	2.16	While training will be developed that is specific the purpose of supporting childminders to work in a home environment, it will be modular and structured in such a way as also to facilitate a two-way transferability of training between centre-based provision and childminding.
	2.17	Prior qualifications and learning from experience will be taken into account when determining exemptions from (parts of) the Foundation Training and Quality Development Programme.

6.3. Pillar 3: Developing a national CPD system

Continuing professional development (CPD) for Early Years Educators, SAC Practitioners and childminders who are already qualified and working in the sector is a key factor in ensuring the quality of ELC and SAC provision. The literature review underpinning the OECD international project 'Quality beyond Regulation' concluded that: 'Participation in in-service training (or professional development) is the most consistent predictor of quality staff-child interactions, and also has direct links to child development and learning.'³²

CPD is understood broadly here to include not just formal training courses, but also non-formal and informal CPD. All are important, especially in light of research evidence on the effectiveness in improving ELC quality of 'context-based CPD initiatives combining pedagogy and supervision "on the job"³³ and the benefits of learning in teams:

- Formal CPD involves intentional, structured activities leading to formal recognition, such as professional or academic qualifications.
- 'Non-formal' CPD involves intentional, structured activities without formal certification, such as short courses, webinars, coaching, mentoring, attending conferences and events, and communities of practice.
- 'Informal' CPD involves everyday practices that enhance professional experience, such as job shadowing, team meetings, self-evaluation, informal mentoring, online discussion groups, and professional networks.

CPD matters both for enhancing the quality of practice, and for providing career development opportunities for Educators and Practitioners. Responsibility for CPD is shared between:

- The individual, who is pursuing their own professional journey,
- The service, which is responsible for its staff and its overall quality of service, and
- The State, which oversees and supports system quality.

³² OECD (2018) Engaging with Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, p.79

³³ Peleman, Brecht & Lazzari, Arianna & Budginaite, Irma & Siarova, Hanna & Hauari, Hanan & Peeters, Jan & Cameron, Claire. (2018). Continuous professional development and ECEC quality: Findings from a European systematic literature review. European Journal of Education. 53. 10.1111/ejed.12257.

In an Irish context, Síolta, the National Quality Framework (2006), states that, 'Practising in a professional manner ... requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported, ongoing professional development. A practitioner's capacity to engage in reflective practice can be supported and enhanced by regular and ongoing professional development activities.'³⁴

Similarly, the National Quality Guidelines for SAC (2020) call for SAC services to encourage staff professional development, recommending 'Individual development plans ... to support staff with self-evaluation and reflection, ongoing professional development and continuous improvement'.³⁵

However, the OECD's 2018 TALIS Starting Strong survey of practitioners in nine countries found significant barriers to participation in CPD across countries, including: conflicts with work schedules, the cost of the activity, and lack of incentives for ongoing professional development.³⁶

In describing policies to support 'process quality' in ELC, the OECD note the importance of 'protected time' for staff to engage in CPD: 'Granting time and funding to increase access and staff engagement in professional development can be crucial to ensuring the responsiveness and effectiveness of professional development interventions Likewise, protecting time for activities without children, especially those that involve exchanges with colleagues, can lead to informal learning'.³⁷

The OECD also stress the benefits of a focus on 'centre-embedded learning' (closely linked to the setting in which the Educator or Practitioner works), of building individual feedback and guidance into CPD, and of developing a 'learning log' to enable staff to record their participation in not only formal but also non-formal and informal CPD.³⁸ In addition the OECD Country Policy Review of Ireland notes the scope for greater use of blended and online formats for CPD, building on learning from adjustments in response to COVID-19, but also bringing benefits in terms of greater compatibility with staff working hours and diversity of geographic location.

³⁴ <https://www.siolta.ie/>

³⁵ DCEDIY (2020) p.31.

³⁶ OECD (2019) TALIS - Providing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care – Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018.

³⁷ OECD (2021) *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in ECEC*, p.139.

³⁸ OECD (2021) *Country Policy Review of ELC in Ireland*.

Current CPD requirements in Ireland are set at a service level, and not with the individual Early Years Educator or SAC Practitioner. The Early Years Regulations 2016 require ELC services to have a 'staff training policy' 'specifying the manner in which the registered provider shall identify and address the training needs of employees and unpaid workers'. They also require services to provide appropriate information, and where necessary training, including in relation to the service's policies and procedures and in relation to regulatory requirements.

Extensive CPD activities – formal, non-formal and informal – are already undertaken by services and staff. A wide range of courses, training initiatives and CPD opportunities have been available to ELC and SAC services and their staff, supported by Government, and rolled out through a diverse range of organisations including Better Start, CCCs, National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, and education institutions.

While a degree of coordination in delivery has been achieved through the establishment of Better Start in 2014 and more recently (in 2018/19) the formation of a Learning and Development Unit within Better Start, and through expansion of DCEDIY-funded training through AIM and the National Síolta Aistear Initiative, both the development and the delivery of CPD opportunities have remained fragmented.

In particular, quality assurance processes are varied, and there is no national system for services or individuals to track their participation in CPD activities. In addition, there is little financial support for participation in CPD. While a pilot payment for CPD participation was introduced in 2018 (including participation in the Aistear and Play CPD programme, and the Hanen and Lámh programmes), it was administratively burdensome and it risked displacing participation in other, unfunded CPD activities.

In the consultation process, there were calls for CPD to be supported through financial supports, better access to training, a wider variety of training, and non-contact time so that staff would not need to do training in their own time. There was also support for further development of mentoring programmes, and for development of communities of practice and peer networking opportunities.

Building on the diverse range of CPD opportunities already available, a national approach to CPD will be developed over the course of the Workforce Plan. This national approach will include:

- Developing a single national 'gateway' to access quality-assured CPD resources (both online and face-to-face, including resources to support

informal forms of CPD), with an online portal, and a national, online Learner Management System accessible to all ELC and SAC services and to all Early Years Educators, SAC practitioners, and childminders.

- Developing a national IT system to enable ELC and SAC services, Early Years Educators, SAC practitioners, and childminders, to record and monitor their participation in CPD activities – formal, non-formal and informal.
- The review of *Síolta* and the development of a single, national self-evaluation framework (both of which are commitments in *First 5*), building on the self-assessment tools already developed through the *Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide* and other resources. The development of a suite of resources and training programmes will support service providers and individuals to engage in reflective practice and to evaluate their own CPD needs.
- Strengthening quality-assurance mechanisms for CPD opportunities and resources. While quality assurance of the content of CPD will continue to rely upon a range of structures already in place (e.g. the NSAI is currently responsible for quality assurance of CPD related to *Síolta* and *Aistear*, while the AIM working groups oversee training related to inclusion), a national mechanism will be established to provide oversight and governance of quality assurance processes for CPD for the ELC and SAC workforce and to ensure that all CPD resources accessible through the national CPD 'gateway' are quality-assured.
- Over time, this national structure for CPD for ELC and SAC will develop links with the national structure for CPD of primary school teachers. In line with *First 5*, opportunities for joint delivery of CPD programmes where appropriate will be considered.

To facilitate Early Years Educators, SAC Practitioners and childminders to take part in CPD, and to enable ELC and SAC service providers to have protected (i.e. non-contact) time for CPD activities, the introduction of Core Funding will enable provision of financial support for participation in CPD. This funding will recognise the diverse range of CPD opportunities that may support the quality of ELC and SAC provision – formal, non-formal and informal. (In addition, financial support will be introduced to help ELC and SAC services meet the costs of releasing staff to go on student practice placements and study leave – see objectives 2.2 and 2.12.)

With movement towards regulation of the profession still at an early stage, regulatory requirements will remain at the service level in the short-to-medium term.

Goal	Objectives
Developing a national CPD system	3.1 The further development of CPD will involve a 'whole system' approach, coordinated by one agency, to integrate and align current structures and any newly developed structures.
	3.2 A single national 'gateway' will be developed to facilitate access to quality-assured CPD resources and supports for ELC, SAC and childminding. This will include development of a learner management system to provide a central, online hub for quality-assured CPD activities and resources.
	3.3 An online system will be developed to enable the recording, tracking and viewing of CPD engagement (formal, non-formal and informal) at ELC and SAC service level and at individual Educator / Practitioner / childminder level.
	3.4 The National Síolta Aistear Initiative will be fully rolled out nationally by 2028, supported by the redevelopment of CPD resources into a new blended format, combining online and face-to-face delivery.
	3.5 Síolta will be updated and a single, national self-evaluation framework will be developed, building on the self-assessment tools already developed through the Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide and other resources, and integrated with other established national frameworks e.g. Aistear, the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines, and the National Quality Guidelines for SAC Services. A suite of resources and training programmes to support service providers and individuals to engage in reflective practice and to evaluate their own CPD needs will be developed and rolled out nationally.
	3.6 A national policy to embed the Key Person Approach across all ELC and SAC settings will be developed and rolled out through the further development of information, guidance, resources and CPD. All Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners may be 'key persons' within the Key Person Approach that will be recommended or required in all settings (see section 6.1).

Goal	Objectives
Developing a national CPD system	3.7 Structures and processes for the <i>quality assurance</i> of CPD resources, activities and supports (including in relation to online and blended CPD, and including in relation to Irish-language CPD resources) will be developed, overseen by a central agency at a national level, to guide the development of formal, non-formal and informal CPD, building on existing European and national guidance and on expertise within the sector. Only quality-assured CPD resources will be made available to the sector through the national CPD gateway.
	3.8 Guidance on participation in CPD activities (formal, non-formal and informal) will be developed, including definitions and examples of good practice. Regulatory requirements for CPD will remain at service level in the short-to-medium term.
	3.9 Core Funding, to be introduced from September 2022, will provide financial support for non-contact time, including participation in a diverse range of CPD activities, replacing the more limited CPD payment pilot.
	3.10 National guidance, supports and resources for student professional practice placement, at all qualification levels, will be developed.
	3.11 A national system of establishing, supporting and funding professional learning communities within ELC and SAC will be developed.
	3.12 CPD materials, resources and supports will where possible be made available in both Irish and English.

6.4. Pillar 4: Supporting recruitment, retention and diversity

Ensuring sufficient recruitment and retention of qualified staff is critical to ensuring there are enough qualified staff for all roles in the ELC and SAC workforce. Demand for Early Years Educators, SAC Practitioners and childminders is driven not only by the demand for ELC and SAC provision, but also by quality-related requirements. In addition to changes in the number of children participating in ELC and SAC, the number of Educators, Practitioners and childminders needed is affected by the minimum adult-child ratios prescribed for both ELC and SAC, and the need for service providers to have sufficient staff to provide relief cover for daily breaks, annual leave, sickness, and protected time (for participation in CPD, planning, recording

observations, team meetings, and engagement with families). In addition, the plans set out in Pillars 1 and 2 of this Workforce Plan to establish a career framework and strengthen career pathways, with new roles and rising qualification levels, will also impact on the number of staff needed with different qualifications.

Staff retention is critical not only to ensure sufficient numbers of staff at all qualification levels, but also because continuity and consistency of care is critical to the quality of practice in ELC and SAC, especially for the youngest children.

Diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce – including ethnic diversity, gender-balance and other forms of diversity – is important in providing diverse role-models for children, and in ensuring strong connections between ELC and SAC services and the families and communities that they serve.

The European Commission report, *Early Childhood Education and Care: How to Recruit, Train and Motivate Well-Qualified Staff*, sets out a number of key recommendations on how to improve recruitment and retention of staff in ELC (ECEC), drawing on learning from across Europe:³⁹

1. All stakeholders involved in organising and providing ECEC share the responsibility to support the attractiveness of the ECEC sector and the professional development of ECEC staff. This includes national and local decision-makers, employers, ECEC leaders, trade unions, social partners, and education and training institutions.
2. The ECEC sector needs to receive the recognition it deserves, which will have a positive impact on recruitment and staff retention. The sector's recognition can be improved through advocacy / policy work to promote:
 - a. The educational and inclusive value of ECEC; the benefits and impact of good quality ECEC for children, families and society; and the role of well-qualified and motivated staff.
 - b. Improvement in professional development opportunities, career prospects, salaries and working conditions of ECEC staff.

39 European Commission, *Early Childhood Education and Care, How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff*, 2020, p144

3. The sector can become more attractive when creative strategies are used to support recruitment strategies:
 - a. Increasing the number of the ECEC roles and offering more opportunities helps to recruit staff with different skills and competences.
 - b. Developing new pathways into the profession and diversifying the recruitment methods helps to attract well qualified candidates with a wide range of profiles.

In Ireland, according to the Sector Profile, 49% of services reported having experienced recruitment challenges in the year to May 2021, up 5% on 2020. 29% of services reported having at least one staff vacancy in 2021, up from 19% in 2020. Many services also report significant challenges in retaining staff. In 2021, while 57% of services reported no staff turnover, on aggregate the staff turnover rate in ELC and SAC services was 19% over the 12-month period to mid-2021, similar to the 18% rate the previous year, which may have reflected the impact of COVID-19 and associated supports for ELC and SAC providers. In some services, staff turnover rates are considerably higher. At the same time, 49% of staff have been working in the sector for more than 5 years, and 25% for more than 10 years.

The European Commission notes that ‘because of difficulties in recruiting staff and high staff turnover rates, there are shortages in many ECEC systems Only a minority of European countries report not having ECEC staff shortages.’⁴⁰ Nevertheless, even though the rate of staff turnover in Ireland has been falling in recent years, the rate remains unacceptably high, especially given the negative impact that inconsistency in care can have on young children’s well-being and development.

Not all those completing ELC qualifications enter the ELC sector. Recent research published by the CSO indicates that 83% of students completing a qualification in ELC (at levels 5 through to 8) found substantial employment in the year after graduation, with 73% of these finding employment in the ELC sector.⁴¹

Key factors in recruitment and retention are the level of pay and working conditions in the sector, as well as the number of hours worked per week, and the number of weeks

40 EC (2020) ECEC: How to Recruit, Train and Motivate Well-Qualified Staff, pp.17-18.

41 CSO (2020) Early Learning and Care – Graduate Outcomes 2013-2017.

of work available over the year. The Sector Profile 2021 found the average hourly wage of staff working with children in the ELC and SAC sector is €12.60. 22% of staff are on temporary contracts, and approximately 42% of staff are paid for 38 weeks per year, reflecting the duration of the ECCE programme. (See section 4.3.)

In terms of gender, the workforce is overwhelmingly female. Women make up 98% of those working in centre-based ELC. Although the number of men working in ELC has grown in recent years, their overall percentage in the total workforce stands at 2%. However, there is limited data on gender balance in SAC as most 'stand-alone' SAC providers are not included in the Pobal Sector Profile.

While there is no data on language-proficiency in either English or Irish in the ELC and SAC workforce, anecdotal evidence suggests that not all staff have high levels of proficiency in English, and that proficiency in Irish in services described as naíonraí is varied.

In the consultation, the persistence of high staff turnover rates (particularly amongst new graduates) was pointed to by many participants in both the call for submissions and focused discussions as evidence that new graduates see little in the way of career prospects, and are deterred from staying in the sector by low pay.

Although it was clear from the public consultation that improving pay and conditions is central to improve levels of staff recruitment and retention, pay was not seen as the only means to improve the attractiveness of the sector. Feedback from consultations and surveys of practitioners highlighted a need for stronger recognition and respect for the profession as a valued service to children and families, and there were calls for campaigns to promote the sector and to increase recognition of the educational and caring role of Educators and Practitioners. A reduction in paperwork and streamlining of the inspection system were also seen as factors that would help. There were mixed views on the benefits of an apprenticeship model to support recruitment in the sector – some were in favour while some were opposed.

While the lack of gender balance in the workforce was noted in the consultation process, it is important to acknowledge that there are many who may experience other forms of inequality and exclusion in the workforce including, for example, in relation to ethnicity, cultural or religious background, sexual orientation, or disability.

While the State is not the employer in ELC or SAC and so does not determine wages or working conditions, it is acknowledged that improvement in pay is a critical factor in determining the success of many of the commitments in the Workforce Plan, particularly in ensuring sufficiently high rates of recruitment and retention. The Government has over a number of years carried out a number of actions intended to support pay in the sector, including higher capitation payments in both the ECCE programme and AIM, and Programme Support Payments.

As the State is not the employer, the setting of pay rates and conditions of employment is outside the scope of the Workforce Plan. However, section 6.1 – on Key Enablers – discusses new measures currently under way intended to support improvement in pay and conditions.

In addition to these parallel measures to improve pay in the sector, a number of actions will be undertaken through the Workforce Plan to support recruitment and retention, including:

- Development of a central hub or 'one-stop-shop' approach for career development in the sector, providing information for potential and current Educators and Practitioners about career pathways, training opportunities, and job vacancies, and engaging with career guidance counsellors in schools.
- Promotion of the value of work in the sector and of career opportunities, building on experiences in other countries (e.g. the Scottish Government's recruitment campaign for the sector, www.childcarecareersscotland.scot).

One possible route into the sector is through the development of an apprenticeship programme for ELC and SAC. For an apprenticeship to be developed for the sector, a proposal will need to come from the sector and be developed by a consortium within the sector, bringing together employers with education institutions. A challenge in developing a proposal will be the fact that apprentices are employees and that the Regulations for ELC services require employees already to have at least a Level 5 qualification before taking up employment. Given these constraints, the possibility of an apprenticeship model being developed should not slow down the need to prioritise development of other ways of funding practitioners to reach level 7 degrees, through funded degree programmes.

Although ELC and SAC employers are reporting recruitment and retention difficulties, there are restrictions on recruiting staff from outside the EU/EEA and the UK due to the sector not being eligible for work permits. However, CSO data indicates that each year only a proportion of those graduating with relevant qualifications choose to enter the ELC workforce. This implies there is a pool of appropriately skilled workers in Ireland not working in the sector. Some graduates are likely to be deterred because of the low wages in the sector, but the Joint Labour Committee (JLC) process – supported by the new Core Funding stream announced in Budget 2022 – provide a realistic route through which wages may rise over the coming years. Combined with recruitment actions proposed in this report, there are strategies now being put in place to help reduce the recruitment and retention challenges in the sector.

Limits on the ability of employers to recruit staff from outside the EU/EEA and the UK (through the work permit system) will, however, be kept under review.

Actions to support diversity in the workforce will include:

- Establishing mechanisms to monitor diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce.
- Once baseline data is available, consideration will be given to targets for diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce.
- Review and further roll-out of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training across the ELC and SAC sector.
- Examining development of a range of entry routes into the sector (including apprenticeships or other work-based learning, and access programmes in FE and HE), along with the scope for targeting potential Educators / Practitioners from groups that are less well represented in the workforce.
- Careers actions will have a particular focus on information and supports for potential entrants to the workforce from minority groups and men, as well as Irish-language opportunities (including for those for whom Irish is not their first language).
- When career promotion activities are undertaken, they will clearly profile the potential for men and minority groups to work in the sector, as well as

the opportunities for Irish-language speakers (both those for whom Irish is their first language and those for whom it is their second language).

Actions to support language-proficiency for non-native speakers in both English and Irish will be considered, following initial data-collection on language proficiency of the ELC and SAC workforce, and to support the timeline for introduction of an English language proficiency requirement in English-medium services (see section 6.5). Actions may include promotion of the development of programmes of initial professional education for ELC and SAC conducted through the medium of Irish (at levels 5-8).

Goal	Objectives
Supporting recruitment, retention and diversity	4.1 A central hub or 'one-stop-shop' approach on careers and training opportunities in ELC and SAC will be developed, with information made available for a variety of stakeholders, including careers/guidance counsellors.
	4.2 To reduce staff turnover and to attract graduates to enter and remain in the sector, careers in ELC and SAC will be actively promoted, possibly through a professional body or an agency with responsibility for quality development, building on experiences in other countries.
	4.3 Efforts to promote careers in the sector will initially focus on the value and importance to children and society of high quality ELC and SAC provision. Promotional materials will give visibility to the diversity of people who work in the sector and what they do. At a later stage, promotion activities should turn to promotion of the profession, of careers in the sector, and of recruitment from a diverse population.
	4.4 Alongside the broader promotion of careers in the sector, work will be undertaken to promote gender balance and diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce. Actions will include review and further roll-out of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training across the ELC and SAC sector, and collaboration with representative organisations and diversity networks at both national and local level, including working in partnership with the HEA and ETBs.
	4.5 Data collection and research on diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce will be strengthened. Consideration will be given to including ethnic and other identifiers if a national register of Early Years Educators is established.

Goal		Objectives
Supporting recruitment, retention and diversity	4.6	Once baseline data is available, consideration will be given to targets for diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce and/or in entry onto initial professional education courses at levels 5 to 8.
	4.7	Development of a range of entry-routes into the sector (including apprenticeships or other work-based learning, and access programmes in further and higher education) will be examined.
	4.8	In considering different entry routes into the sector, the scope for targeting potential Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners from groups that are less well represented in the workforce will be examined.
	4.9	Supports for Irish language proficiency for staff working in ELC and SAC services will be considered, following initial data-collection on language proficiency.

6.5. Pillar 5: Moving towards regulation of the profession

First 5 commits to moving incrementally over time towards regulation of the ELC and SAC profession, building on the establishment in 2020 of the Qualifications Advisory Board and future creation of a register of the workforce.

The potential benefits of statutory regulation include protecting the public and giving confidence to employers, through setting and monitoring adherence to minimum standards for entry into a profession. The costs of regulation include the administrative burden on Early Years Educators and SAC practitioners, and significant financial cost, including through fitness-to-practise procedures. In weighing up the costs and benefits, it is important to consider whether the public risks that would be mitigated through regulation could equally be mitigated through regulation of services.

Currently in Ireland there is no regulator for the profession, but some elements of the regulation of the profession are already in place, carried out through other bodies, including:

- Minimum entry requirements into the profession through regulation of services, carried out by Tusla the statutory regulator. The Regulations place a number of requirements on service providers in relation to the recruitment of Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners. These minimum entry requirements include Garda vetting and references. In relation to ELC, there is also a minimum qualification requirement, at Level 5. The entry requirements to work in the sector do not currently include language-proficiency requirements.
- DCEDIY maintains a list of approved qualifications and a process for assessing equivalence of other qualifications, including international qualifications.
- Building on a review of occupation role profiles,⁴² the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) identified the initial education requirements to new professional qualifications at Levels 7 and 8 on the NFQ, to support a graduate role in the ELC sector and to ensure professional leadership in all centre-based rooms. The Qualifications Advisory Board is now reviewing degree programmes for adherence to the PACG.
- It also formed the basis for a review by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) which resulted in the development of Professional Award Type Descriptors (PATD) for new major awards in ELC at Levels 5 and 6 on the NFQ with new programmes commencing from 2021.

However, there is no dedicated register of Early Years Educators or SAC Practitioners in Ireland. There are databases of all service providers registered with Tusla, but this does not contain a list of individual Educators or Practitioners.

Moreover, while service providers can be removed from the Tusla register of services, the absence of a register of Educators / Practitioners means there is no fitness-to-practise mechanism for individuals.

⁴² Urban, M., Robson, S. and Scacchi V. (2017) *Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Ireland in Early Childhood Education and Care*, University of Roehampton.

There is also no professional association in Ireland (i.e. a voluntary association consisting of members of the profession that seeks to represent the profession and works to support standards within it).

During the consultation, participants voiced a concern not to regulate the profession too soon, given the increased burden for the profession that regulation would bring, but spoke of support for the establishment of a representative body for the profession.

There was also support expressed for introduction of requirement for proficiency in English language in English-medium ELC and SAC services. Representatives of Irish-language organisations that took part in the process of preparing of the Plan argued against the introduction of an Irish-language proficiency requirement, calling instead for positive supports (including bursaries, higher capitation incentives, and wider availability of Irish-medium professional education programmes) to encourage greater proficiency in Irish among Educators and Practitioners, including during initial training programmes.

Over the course of this Workforce Plan, incremental movement towards regulation of the profession will continue. Steps to be taken over the coming years will involve:

- Further development of the process of assuring the quality of courses of initial professional education in ELC and SAC, through extension of the Professional Award-Type Descriptors for ELC and the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for higher education awards in ELC to incorporate SAC.
- Consideration of the possibility of merging existing functions into a single professional standards body, bringing together the work of the Qualifications Advisory Board with the qualifications recognition process currently administered by DCEDIY.

While recognising the benefits that second-language speakers can bring to an ELC or SAC setting, the quality of practice in ELC and SAC will be strengthened through the introduction of a language-proficiency requirement to work with children in ELC and SAC, to support communication with children, parents and other staff, to ensure staff can fully understand a service's policies and procedures, and to enable effective

engagement in training and CPD opportunities inside and outside the setting. A working group will be established to progress this action, which will take account of the requirement for individuals undertaking the new Level 5 and 6 awards in ELC to have competency in English at level B2 (on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) in writing, reading, listening and speaking.⁴³ An adequate lead-in time will be given before introduction of a requirement.

While it is not the role of the State to establish a professional association, it is acknowledged that the establishment of such an association could contribute to the promotion and development of the profession and therefore may support the achievement of other objectives under the Workforce Plan. The potential role of a professional association as a key enabler for the Plan is considered further in section 7.3).

Goal		Objectives
Moving towards regulation of the profession	5.1	Incremental movement towards regulation of the profession will continue over the course of the Workforce Plan, but no date is set for completion of this process, given the importance of ensuring that all elements of regulation are robust, ensuring that the sector is ready, and avoiding additional administrative burden on Early Years Educators / SAC Practitioners at this time.
	5.2	The processes currently under way through QQI and the Qualifications Advisory Board to oversee, assess and monitor adherence of qualifications to the new professional award criteria at Levels 5-8 on the NFQ will continue, and will be extended to incorporate SAC.
	5.3	Consideration will be given to bringing together the work of the Qualifications Advisory Board with the qualifications recognition process currently administered by DCEDIY within a single professional standards body.
	5.4	A regulatory requirement for English Language proficiency for Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners working in English-medium settings will be introduced over an appropriate timescale. Data-collection on English language proficiency for non-native speakers working in ELC and SAC services will inform the setting of a timeline.

43 Professional Award-type Descriptors at NFQ levels 5 to 8: Annotated for QQI Early Learning and Care (ELC) Awards.

7. Key enablers



7. Key enablers

Successful delivery of the commitments in the Workforce Plan will rely on key enablers that lie outside the scope of the Plan but will be shaped by parallel reform processes currently under way: firstly, improvement in levels of pay and conditions of employment; secondly, greater coherence in the infrastructure for delivery of the Plan; and thirdly, on-going engagement and communications with the profession during implementation of the Plan.

7.1. Improvement in pay and conditions of employment

Key to the success of many of the actions in the Workforce Plan is improvement in pay and conditions of employment in the ELC and SAC sector. In particular, pay and working conditions are key to encouraging new entrants into the sector and to retaining existing Educators and Practitioners within the sector (Pillar 4). In turn, recruitment and retention are key to the successful implementation of the new career framework and career pathways (Pillar 1) and to the achievement of targets for higher qualifications in ELC and the introduction of a minimum qualification in SAC (Pillar 2).

While wages in ELC and SAC in Ireland are low, Ireland is not alone in seeing low wages in this sector, or in facing recruitment and retention difficulties as a result of pay levels. In the OECD TALIS Starting Strong Survey for 2018, in all countries participating, a majority of ELC staff indicated low satisfaction with the salary they receive for their work.⁴⁴ The OECD note that ‘Low wages and a lack of recognition present a significant challenge for staff retention. Many ECEC workers have opportunities to work elsewhere for higher pay, which leaves providers reliant on the intrinsic motivation of its workers for retention.’⁴⁵

While the Government does not control wages in the sector, it has undertaken a number of measures to support service providers to pay higher wages, including:

- Higher capitation payments for graduate ‘room leaders’ in the ECCE programme.
- Higher capitation payments for qualified Inclusion Coordinators in AIM.

⁴⁴ OECD (2020) *Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018*.

⁴⁵ OECD (2019) *Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care*, p.33.

- Programme Support Payments to service providers to support 'non-contact time' activities.
- A 7% increase in ECCE capitation rates in September 2018 that providers were not required to pass on to parents in reduced fees.
- Facilitating combined ELC and SAC to support full-time contracts for staff.

However, notwithstanding these efforts, wages remain low in the sector. The most recent Sector Profile data indicates the average hourly wage in the sector was €12.60 in 2021, 1% higher than the previous year. While wages are somewhat higher for graduates and for those in leadership and managerial positions, wages across the sector remain low.

The issue of poor pay and conditions of employment in the sector was the most prominent theme in the consultation process and this topic was seen as central to improving staff career prospects in the sector. Many of those who took part in the consultation called for pay to rise, for pay scales to be introduced, and for pay levels to reflect qualifications and training. Lack of permanent contracts, pay increments, pensions, sick pay, maternity pay, or paid non-contact time, were cited as examples of poor conditions of employment.

As the State is not the employer, the State has no direct control over levels of pay and contractual conditions in the sector, other than through legal requirements such as the national minimum wage, minimum leave requirements and possible future requirements in relation to sick pay.⁴⁶ Wages in the sector are determined through the operation of market forces, i.e. the interaction of supply and demand. While market forces could potentially drive wages up, e.g. as a result of recruitment challenges in the sector, wages in the sector are currently low and staffing shortages – even if temporary – could negatively impact on both children and parents, affecting the quality of provision and access to services.

In line with a commitment in the Programme for Government, in December 2020, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth initiated a process with a range of stakeholders to examine the possibility of regulating the pay and conditions of employment of Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners, and to

⁴⁶ In June 2021, the Government announced plans to introduce legislation to give all workers the right to paid sick leave, initially starting with three days per year in 2022, rising to five days payable in 2023 and seven days payable in 2024.

examine the suitability of establishing a Joint Labour Committee (JLC). The process, which was independently chaired by Dr Kevin Duffy, former Chair of the Labour Court, concluded that a JLC is the most appropriate mechanism to improve wages in the sector. As a result of this process, a JLC for the sector was established later in 2021. The JLC will now have the capacity to recommend mandatory minimum rates of pay and terms and conditions of employment for certain workers employed in the sector.

In addition to the legal mechanism for raising wages that may be introduced through a JLC (an Employment Regulation Order), the introduction of a Core Funding stream from September 2022 (announced in Budget 2022) will provide a new mechanism for providing public funding to ELC and SAC service providers to support, amongst other things, the terms and conditions that may be set in an Employment Regulation Order as well as to introduce or improve other factors that contribute to high-quality practice, such as non-contact time, planning, training, and curriculum implementation.

7.2. Coordination of quality support infrastructure

Effective coordination of the infrastructure for delivery of quality supports to the ELC and SAC sector is key in ensuring successful delivery of a range of actions in the Workforce Plan, particularly actions to strengthen the provision of CPD (Pillar 3), promote the profession (Pillar 4), and continue incremental movement towards regulation of the profession (Pillar 5).

The quality support infrastructure remains fragmented, with State-funded supports delivered through a range of organisations including Better Start, 30 City and County Childcare Committees, and a number of national voluntary organisations. The benefits of streamlining the quality support infrastructure were highlighted both in the consultation process and in the OECD Country Policy Review.

DCEDIY commenced a Review of the ELC and SAC Operating Model in Ireland in 2020, with a view to considering whether and what reforms might be needed to ensure the organisational infrastructure for supports to the sector is well-governed and meets standards of effectiveness and efficiency. Given the scale of reform measures planned for the coming years – including this Workforce Plan – the current Operating Model is likely to come under increasing strain without measures to strengthen this infrastructure.

Any reform proposals that arise from the Review of the ELC and SAC Operating Model are likely to take some years to implement in full, and may therefore have only partial impact on the initial actions in the Workforce Plan. In the short term, therefore, it will be important that the existing organisational infrastructure is sufficiently resourced to deliver actions set out in the Plan.

7.3. Ongoing engagement with the profession

The success of many of the actions in the Workforce Plan will depend on the active engagement of those working in the ELC and SAC sector. It is important that the general approach underpinning the Plan should be that actions should as far as possible be carried out 'with and for' the profession.

This approach has already underpinned the preparation of the Workforce Plan, with a Stakeholder Group working alongside the Steering Group at all stages of development, a significant consultation process with the sector, and strong involvement of stakeholders and members of the profession in the five working groups that developed detailed proposals during Phase 2 of preparation of the Plan.

To enable ongoing engagement with the profession throughout implementation of the Workforce Plan, the following steps will be taken:

- **Stakeholder engagement and communications plan:** At the very outset a stakeholder engagement and communications plan will be put in place to ensure the contents of the Workforce Plan are widely understood across the sector and to support ongoing direct engagement with the ELC and SAC workforce throughout implementation of the Plan. This will include:
 - > A diverse range of engagement and communication channels, tailored to different segments of the workforce (including students, Educators/Practitioners, and managers),
 - > Involvement of a wide range of bodies, including sectoral organisations, further and higher education institutions, employer bodies and trade unions,
 - > Development of a dedicated website on workforce development in ELC and SAC,

- > Development of a range of resources (e.g. leaflets, videos) on key aspects of the Plan,
 - > Development of a careers hub approach (see section 6.4), and
 - > Local-level engagement on recruitment, training and professional development issues through the work of the City and County Childcare Committees, as part of a national approach.
- **Monitoring Committee:** The Monitoring Committee to be established (see section 8.1) will include representation of the workforce. Following establishment of a professional association with a sufficient number of members to count as representative, the professional association will be invited to become a member of the Monitoring Committee.
 - **Professional association:** It is acknowledged that the establishment of a professional association (i.e. a voluntary association of members of the profession seeking to take forward the further professionalisation of the ELC and SAC workforce) would support implementation of a range of actions across the Workforce Plan. While the State does not have a role in establishing or overseeing a professional association, it will include such an association – provided it has reached a sufficient organisational scale to carry out the core functions expected of a professional association – within opportunities for engagement and consultation where appropriate.
 - **On-going sectoral consultation:** Throughout the implementation of the Plan, opportunities will be sought for further consultation with sector representatives and the workforce more widely on the design and delivery of specific actions.
 - **OECD TALIS Starting Strong:** A primary tool for monitoring the impact of workforce development will be Ireland's participation in the next round of the OECD's TALIS Starting Strong survey (in 2024). Participation in the OECD TALIS Starting Strong survey, which is a new departure for Ireland, involves regular (6-yearly) surveys of Early Years Educators, including questions on Educators' initial and continuing professional development, working conditions and well-being, leadership and management, and diversity and equal opportunities within the workforce.

8. Implementation plan 2022-2024



8. Implementation plan 2022-2024

While the actions in the implementation plan are grouped according to the five pillars of the Workforce Plan, some of the actions correspond to more than one objective within the five Pillars. The 'objectives' column lists the pillars and objectives to which each action corresponds.

Pillar 1	Objectives	Action	Description	Key Responsibility	Key Milestone
Establishing a career framework	1.1, 1.2, 1.3	1	Link future funding to awards that are in line with the Professional Award Type Descriptors (PATD) and Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG). Holders of prior awards will continue to be recognised for the purpose of funding.	DCEDIY	Commencing 2022
	1.2	2	Continue to monitor progress towards achieving the target of a graduate-led ELC workforce by 2028, and consider alternative measures that may be needed to help ensure the target is met.	DCEDIY	2022-2024
	1.5	3	Strengthen training and supports for managers and staff with leadership responsibilities that may be distributed across a setting, such as leadership in pedagogy, diversity and inclusion, family and community partnership, and student placement and induction.	DCEDIY, DE	2023-2024
	1.4	4	Carry out research on leadership structures, approaches and supports, and identify needs for additional support. Based on this research, commission the development of training in management skills specific to ELC and SAC for managers of ELC and SAC services, and begin roll-out.	DCEDIY	2023-2024
	1.6	5	Commission research into good practice in effective induction processes, including in ELC and SAC contexts internationally.	DCEDIY, DE	2023
	1.6	6	Carry out a public consultation process on the development of an induction process.	DCEDIY, DE	2024

Pillar 2.1	Objectives	Action	Description	Key Responsibility	Key Milestone
Raising qualification levels: ELC	2.1	7	Develop and introduce a mechanism for the funding of Early Years Educators with a Level 5 award to undertake a Level 6 award in line with the PATD.	DCEDIY	2022
	2.1	8	Develop and introduce a mechanism for the funding of Early Years Educators to undertake Level 7/8 programmes in ELC that are in line with the PACG.	DCEDIY	2022
	2.2, 2.12	9	Develop and introduce a mechanism for providing financial support to ELC and SAC services to help meet the costs of releasing staff to go on student practice placements and study leave.	DCEDIY	2022
	1.2	10	Reform service funding to remove the exclusive link between higher capitation payments and the ECCE programme. As part of Core Funding, the Higher Capitation payments will be replaced by new financial supports for service providers to employ graduates as Lead Educators and managers with all ages of children in ELC. In order to support upskilling and the achievement of the graduate qualification target, these supports will focus on the employment of graduates with relevant degrees.	DCEDIY	2022
	2.4	11	Continue the work of Qualifications Advisory Board to assess design and monitor implementation of ELC degree programmes in line with the PACG.	DE, DCEDIY	2022-24
	2.4	12	Amend the qualifications recognition process to bring it in line with the PATD and PACG.	DCEDIY, DE	2022
	2.5	13	Support the development of initial professional education programmes or modules that are conducted through the medium of Irish for Early Years Educators working in naíonraí within and outside the Gaeltacht.	DTCAGSM, DE, DCEDIY	2021-24

Pillar 2.2	Objectives	Action	Description	Key Responsibility	Key Milestone
Raising qualification levels: SAC	2.6	14	Develop and roll out an open-access, online introductory training programme on SAC, focused on raising awareness of the content of the National Quality Guidelines for SAC that were published in 2020.	DCEDIY	2022
	2.9	15	Finalise the development of Professional Award-Type Descriptors for a Level 5 qualification in SAC.	DCEDIY	2022
	2.8	16	Develop a short special purpose SAC award to meet the minimum Level 5 requirement to practise in SAC for Practitioners with qualifications in related disciplines, including ELC.	DCEDIY	2022
	2.9, 2.11	17	Seek to adjust initial professional education programmes at Level 5 and higher to encompass both ELC and SAC.	DE, DCEDIY, QQI	2023-2024
	2.11	18	Extend the remit and membership of the Qualifications Advisory Board to examine combined ELC and SAC awards.	DE, DCEDIY	2023-4
	2.7	19	Incorporate the incremental introduction of a Level 5 minimum qualification requirement into comprehensive Regulations to be introduced for SAC.	DCEDIY	2022
	2.10	20	Develop and introduce a mechanism for the funding of SAC Practitioners to undertake a Level 5 SAC award and a special purpose course that meet the Level 5 requirement.	DCEDIY	2022
	2.9	21	Support the development of initial professional education programmes or modules for SAC that are conducted through the medium of Irish.	DCEDIY, DTCAGSM	2022-24

Pillar 2.3	Objectives	Action	Description	Key Responsibility	Key Milestone
Raising qualification levels: Childminding	2.13	22	Within the framework of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028 (NAPC), develop and commence roll-out of a funded childminder-specific Foundation Training Programme as a pre-requirement for registration with Tusla.	DCEDIY	2022-23
	2.14, 2.16	23	Within the framework of the NAPC, develop a Quality Development Programme for registered childminders.	DCEDIY	2022-23
	2.13, 2.14	24	Develop and implement new childminder-specific Regulations that include training requirements in line with the NAPC.	DCEDIY	2022-23
	2.15	25	Within the framework of the NAPC, research and pilot the introduction of staffed local childminding networks, to inform the development of a new role of local childminding network leader.	DCEDIY	2022-24
	2.17	26	Develop a robust process for recognition of prior qualifications and learning for the Foundation Training and Quality Development Programme.	DCEDIY	2022-23

Pillar 3	Objectives	Action	Description	Key Responsibility	Key Milestone
Developing a national CPD system	3.1	27	Building on the outcome of the Review of the Operating Model, ensure that the further development of the operating model to support the ELC and SAC sector provides a firm basis for development of a single national structure to oversee the development of CPD resources and supports.	DCEDIY	2022-23
	3.2	28	Progress the development of a learner management system to provide a central hub to access quality-assured ELC and SAC CPD activities and resources.	DCEDIY	2022-23
	3.3	29	Commission the development of an online system to enable the recording, tracking and viewing of CPD engagement at ELC and SAC service level and at individual professional level.	DCEDIY	2022-23
	3.4	30	Develop a single, modular, blended training programme to support the roll-out of Síolta and Aistear, with roll-out accelerated to achieve full national coverage, and structured linkages between the training programme and mentoring supports provided by Better Start QDS.	DE, DCEDIY, Better Start	2022
	3.5	31	Establish a working group to oversee the updating of Síolta and the development of a single, national self-evaluation framework, building on the self-assessment tools already developed through the Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide and other resources, and integrated with other established national frameworks e.g. Aistear, the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines, and the National Quality Guidelines for SAC Services.	DCEDIY, DE	2022
	3.6	32	Develop a national policy on the Key Person approach across ELC and SAC settings, and develop training and resources for its initial roll-out.	DCEDIY	2023-24

Pillar 3	Objectives	Action	Description	Key Responsibility	Key Milestone
Developing a national CPD system	3.7	33	Develop structures and processes for the <i>quality assurance</i> of CPD resources, activities and supports (including in relation to online and blended CPD, and including in relation to Irish-language CPD resources), overseen by a central agency at a national level, to guide the development of formal, non-formal and informal CPD, building on existing European and national guidance and on expertise within the sector.	DCEDIY	2023-24
	3.1	34	Examine the scope to use micro-credentials in CPD opportunities in ELC and SAC.	DCEDIY, DE	2023-24
	3.8	35	Develop guidance on participation in CPD activities (formal, non-formal and informal), including definitions and examples of good practice.	DCEDIY	2022-23
	3.9	36	Introduce Core Funding from September 2022 to provide financial support for non-contact time, including participation in a diverse range of CPD activities, replacing the more limited CPD payment pilot.	DCEDIY	2022
	3.10	37	Develop national guidance and resources to support student professional practice placement, at all qualification levels.	DE, DCEDIY	2022
	3.12	38	Where possible, make CPD materials, resources and supports available in both Irish and English.	DCEDIY, DE, Better Start	2022-24
	3.1, 3.2, 3.7	39	Conduct a mapping of existing CPD supports as an initial step to inform further actions, along with a survey of ELC and SAC professionals' and services' engagement in CPD.	DCEDIY	2022

Pillar 4 Supporting recruitment, retention and diversity	Objectives	Action	Description	Key Responsibility	Key Milestone
	4.1	40	Develop a central hub or a one-stop-shop approach on careers and training opportunities in ELC and SAC, building on existing resources, with information made available for a variety of stakeholders including careers/guidance counsellors.	DCEDIY	2022-23
	4.2, 4.3	41	Undertake a campaign to promote careers in ELC and SAC, focusing initially on the value and importance to children and society of high quality ELC and SAC provision. Promotional materials should give visibility to the diversity of people who work in the sector and what they do.	DCEDIY	2022-24
	4.5	42	Carry out research into diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce.	DCEDIY	2024
	4.4	43	Review and further roll out Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training across the ELC and SAC sector, facilitated by developing an online format for the training.	DCEDIY, CCCs	2022
	4.7	44	Examine development of a range of entry routes into the sector, including apprenticeships or other work-based learning, and access programmes in FE and HE.	DCEDIY, DFHERIS	2022-2023
	4.8	45	In considering different entry routes into the sector, examine the scope for targeting potential Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners from groups that are less well represented in the workforce.	DCEDIY	2022-2024
	4.1, 4.4, 4.8	46	Ensure the approach to careers information has a particular focus on information and supports for potential entrants to the workforce from minority groups and men, as well as Irish-language opportunities (including for those for whom Irish is not their first language).	DCEDIY	2022-23
	4.9	47	Commence regular data-gathering on levels of proficiency in the English and Irish languages among Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners.	DCEDIY	2023-24

Pillar 5	Objectives	Action	Description	Key Responsibility	Key Milestone
Moving towards regulation of the profession	5.2	48	Continue the processes currently under way through QQI and the Qualifications Advisory Board to oversee, assess and monitor adherence of qualifications to the new professional award criteria at Levels 5-8 on the NFQ.	DE, DCEDIY, QQI	2022-24
	5.4	49	Establish a language competency working group to advise on a regulatory requirement for language-proficiency.	DCEDIY	2022-23
	5.4	50	Carry out research on language proficiency across the ELC and SAC sector to help determine the timeframe for introduction of a language-proficiency requirement.	DCEDIY	2022-23

Key Enablers and Monitoring Mechanisms

Key enablers	Key enabler	Action	Description	Key Responsibility	Key Milestone
	KE 1	51	Establishment and on-going operation of a Joint Labour Committee for the ELC and SAC sector.	Labour Court	2021-22
	KE 1	52	Develop appropriate funding mechanisms to support ELC and SAC services to meet additional costs arising from an Employment Regulation Order that may come into force as well as to introduce or improve other factors that contribute to high-quality practice, such as non-contact time, planning, training, and curriculum implementation.	DCEDIY	2022-24
	KE 2	53	Strengthen the capacity of the infrastructure for delivery of quality supports, including the development of a national infrastructure for CPD supports.	DCEDIY	2022-24
	KE 3	54	Develop a stakeholder engagement and communications plan to ensure the contents of the Workforce Plan are widely understood across the sector (including development of a website dedicated to the Workforce Plan) and to support ongoing direct engagement with the ELC and SAC workforce.	DCEDIY	2022
	KE 3	55	Should a professional association for Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners be established with sufficient organisational scale to carry out the core functions expected of a professional association, seek appropriate opportunities for engagement and consultation with it.	DCEDIY	2022-24
	MP	56	Develop a core indicator set for monitoring progress of implementation.	Monitoring Committee	2022
	MP	57	Participate in the pilot and 2024 round of the OECD TALIS Starting Strong survey.	DCEDIY	2022, 2024

9. Monitoring progress



9. Monitoring progress

9.1. Oversight

Implementation of the Workforce Plan will be led by DCEDIY, working in collaboration with DE and other Departments and agencies.

Implementation will be overseen by a Monitoring Committee to be established for the Workforce Plan. The Monitoring Committee will be chaired by DCEDIY and will include representatives of relevant Government Departments and agencies. The Monitoring Committee will meet biannually. The Monitoring Committee will develop a core indicator set for monitoring progress, and will submit an annual progress report on implementation to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, which will be published.

The Monitoring Committee will carry out a mid-point review by 2025 that will consider any possible amendments that may be needed to the Workforce Plan in light of the progress of implementation, and will inform the development of a second implementation plan.

The initial implementation plan (set out in section 7) covers the period 2022-2024. Following completion of the mid-point review, a second implementation plan will be published that will cover the period 2025-2028.

A website dedicated to the Workforce Plan will be developed, which will provide information for Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners on the actions set out in the Workforce Plan. The website will be regularly updated with monitoring data (see section 8.2), and annual progress reports on implementation will be published on the website.

9.2. Measuring progress

The Monitoring Committee will in the first year of implementation develop a core indicator set for monitoring progress on the Workforce Plan, in addition to monitoring progress against the targets specified in the Plan.

The primary data sources currently available for measuring progress in development of the ELC and SAC workforce are:

- The Annual Early Years Sector Profile, which includes data on the size of the workforce, their qualification levels, age, gender, length of time working in the sector and in their current employment, pay, and hours of employment.
- QQI and HEA data on numbers of students completing relevant qualifications each year at different levels on the National Framework of Qualifications.

To provide comprehensive data on the workforce, it will be necessary to expand the availability of data on Practitioners working in SAC, given that more than 660 'stand-alone' SAC providers are registered with Tusla, many of which are not currently covered by the Sector Profile as they do not currently receive DCEDIY funding and are therefore not in contract with DCEDIY.

A key new tool for measuring the impact of workforce development actions will be the OECD TALIS Starting Strong survey. The survey involves a representative sample of Early Years Educators on a 6-yearly basis in a number of OECD countries. Ireland recently joined the international project and will for the first time take part in the 2024 survey round. The findings of the 2024 survey will inform the mid-point review of the Workforce Plan.

In addition, the CSO have agreed to repeat their study on graduate outcomes for the sector to inform the mid-point review.

10. Appendices



10. Appendices

10.1. Appendix 1 – Terms of Reference

1. Background and Context

In 2010, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published a Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland.⁴⁷ The Plan acknowledged the strong evidence base that early childhood experiences have a critical impact on the well-being, learning and development of children and that the skills, knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes of the workforce delivering early years services was a determining factor in the quality of those experiences.

At the time of preparing the 2010 report, a comprehensive skills forecasting exercise was not carried out as the desired profile of the workforce in terms of qualification levels was not defined or underpinned by any regulatory requirements.

Since 2010, the policy and practice landscape of early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) in Ireland has changed dramatically. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established in 2011 with overall policy responsibility for ELC and SAC, working in close collaboration with DES. The ECCE Programme, providing free universal pre-school provision, first introduced in 2010, was extended by DCYA in 2016 and again in 2018 and now offers two years of free pre-school provision before children enter primary school. The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced in 2016 to support the meaningful participation of children with a disability in the ECCE Programme. A range of schemes have been put in place to subsidise the cost of ELC and SAC to families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with work well underway to streamline these schemes into a single National Childcare Scheme from November 2019. The number of children benefitting from free or publicly subsidised ELC and SAC has risen sharply.

There has also been an increasing focus on quality, with new regulations introduced in December 2016 introducing a minimum qualification requirement for the ELC workforce for the first time (a Level 5 qualification in Early Childhood Care and Education on the National Framework for Qualifications). A contractual requirement for a higher level of qualification has been introduced into the ECCE Programme (Level 6 on the NFQ for ECCE room-leaders), as has an incentive for the employment of graduates with a relevant qualification at Level 7 or above through a Higher Capitation payment. In addition, a Learner Fund has been introduced to provide financial support

⁴⁷ https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Early-Years/eye_workforce_dev_plan.pdf

for practitioners currently working in the sector to upskill (with funding provided for achievement of Level 5, 6, 7 and 8 qualifications), and a range of actions are under way to develop a national CPD infrastructure (through the Learner Fund as well as the National Síolta Aistear Initiative and AIM).

These changes have significantly altered the qualification and skills profile of the ELC workforce. For example, whereas 71% of practitioners had a qualification equal to or higher than NFQ Level 5 in 2010, by mid-2018 this proportion had risen to 94%. Taking into account the number of individuals who signed a 'grandfathering' declaration at the time the minimum qualification requirement was introduced, as well as students on placement and staff working solely with school-age children,⁴⁸ the proportion of ELC practitioners with at least a Level 5 qualification is now likely to be very close to 100%. There has also been a sharp rise in the proportion of graduates with a relevant degree (level 7 or higher on the NFQ), which has risen from 12% in 2012 to 22% in 2018.

Also since 2010, there has been an emerging focus by DCYA on school-age childcare and on childminding, through for example the publication of the School-Age Childcare Action Plan in 2017,⁴⁹ the publication of the Report of the Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector in 2018,⁵⁰ and the introduction for the first time of SAC Regulations in 2019.

All of these changes have been made possible by an unprecedented 117% increase in State investment in ELC and SAC since 2015, with a further commitment to double current levels of investment by 2028. This commitment is articulated in *First 5*,⁵¹ Ireland's first ever whole-of- Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019-2028).

Nevertheless, the target set in *First 5* of achieving a graduate-led workforce by 2028 is ambitious, particularly in the context of a high turnover rate of practitioners working in the sector. Data from Pobal's 2018 Early Years Sector Profile indicates an annual turnover rate of 25% among staff in ELC and SAC services, of which – based on responses to previous sector profiles – it is estimated that approximately half may have left the ELC and SAC sector in the previous year, with the remainder changing jobs within the sector.

Addressing the terms and conditions of employment for the ELC and SAC workforce,

48 There is not yet a minimum qualification requirement for staff working in SAC.

49 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/89f0b1-action-plan-on-school-age-childcare/>

50 <https://assets.gov.ie/26359/04ec2e05e5284b849ae0894e65d4ce8f.pdf>

51 https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/pdf/5223_4966_DCYA_EarlyYears_INTERACTIVE_Booklet_280x215_v1.pdf

including wage- levels, is likely to be key to reducing the turnover rate and achieving the high qualification levels targeted in *First 5*. However, the Government's capacity to introduce measures to improve terms and conditions of employment is constrained by the fact that the State is not the employer. ELC and SAC services are owned and managed by a combination of independent centre-based providers, of which 74% are private and 26% are community-based (in the 2018 Early Years Sector Profile), and childminders, who may be self-employed or employed by parents. In the absence of measures by which the Government can directly influence wages and working conditions in the sector, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has called for the ELC sector to pursue a Sectoral Employment Order through the Workplace Relations Commission / Labour Court and has signalled her Department's willingness to cooperate with such a process.

It also remains the case that there is no professional regulator for ELC and SAC (equivalent to the Teaching Council or CORÚ). DCYA is responsible for the regulation of services providing ELC and SAC, with Tusla appointed as the statutory regulator under the Child Care Act 1991 (as amended by the Child and Family Agency Act 2013). In the absence of a professional regulator, DCYA maintains a list of approved qualifications for the purposes of compliance with statutory regulations and funding requirements of the ECCE Programme, and oversees a process to validate the qualifications of staff in the sector.

All these developments, and indeed other commitments set out in *First 5*, have and will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC workforce over the next 10 years.

2. Future Direction of ELC and SAC

First 5, A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019-2028) was published by the DCYA in 2018.⁵² One objective of this Strategy is that 'babies and young children have access to safe, high-quality, developmentally-appropriate, integrated ELC (and school-age childcare), which reflects diversity of need'. To meet this objective and building on recent initiatives, the following Strategic Actions have been identified:

- Make high-quality ELC (and school-age childcare) for babies and young children more affordable (through for example continued funding and support for two full years of the ECCE programme, and the introduction

52 https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/pdf/5223_4966_DCYA_EarlyYears_INTERACTIVE_Booklet_280x215_v1.pdf

of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) to publicly subsidise the cost of high-quality regulated ELC (and school-age childcare);

- Maintain and extend the supply of high-quality publicly subsidised ELC (and school-age childcare) to best serve the developmental needs of babies and young children, ensuring that it also reflects the needs and preferences of parents and families (through for example extending regulation to all paid, non-relative childminders) on a phased basis and developing a strategic capital investment plan to deliver large-scale capital investment under Project 2040 with the aim of ensuring that the demand for high-quality ELC and SAC places meets supply; and
- Ensure that ELC and SAC provision promotes participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity through the integration of additional supports and services for children and families with additional needs (through for example continued roll out of AIM to ensure the full inclusion of children with a disability in settings delivering the ECCE programme and possible extensions of AIM to meet the needs of other children).

In parallel, *First 5* includes a range of actions to improve the quality of ELC and SAC. *First 5* recognises that the workforce is at the heart of high-quality ELC and SAC and seeks to build ‘an appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce that is supported and valued and reflects the diversity of babies, young children and their families’. It identifies a range of challenges to be addressed over the coming decade (including the quality of initial and on-going training and workforce supply, recruitment and retention) and signposts major reforms that will build on recent work by DCYA and DES (including the Higher Capitation payment within the ECCE programme, the Learner Fund, a pilot of paid CPD, a review of occupational role profiles,⁵³ the development of criteria and guidelines for relevant higher education qualifications,⁵⁴ and a skills forecasting model commissioned by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs). *First 5* also sets ambitious targets for the ELC and SAC workforce, so that by 2028:

- All regulated childminders will hold a minimum qualification (level to be determined by DCYA by end 2019). An appropriate period of time will be provided to meet this requirement;

53 <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Final-Review-of-Occupational-Role-Profiles-in-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Care.pdf>

54 <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Early-Childhood/early-years-education-policy-consultation-14-december-2017.pdf>; <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Early-Childhood/evaluation-report-consultation-on-draft-criteria-and-guidelines.pdf>

- All regulated school-age childcare staff will hold a minimum qualification (level to be determined by DCYA by end 2019). An appropriate period of time will be provided to meet this requirement; and
- A graduate-led ELC workforce, with at least 50% of staff (i.e. all room leaders, assistant manager and managers) working directly with children in centre-based ELC settings and coordinators supporting the work of childminders to hold an appropriate degree-level qualification (with an initial target of 30% to be reached by 2021).

The Workforce Development Plan will also draw on the EU Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (due to be finalised and agreed by the EU Council of Ministers in May 2019),⁵⁵ which calls for: well-qualified staff with initial and continuing training that enable them to fulfil their professional role; and supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents. Policy learning from international experience will be supported by the work of the EU ET2020 Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (which is working within the context of the EU Quality Framework) and the OECD Network on Early Childhood Education and Care.

3. Purpose of the Workforce Development Plan

First 5 commits to developing 'a Workforce Development Plan to ensure the appropriate number of ELC and SAC staff at all levels in the sector. The Workforce Development Plan will support the achievement of the above targets. The Workforce Development Plan will also set out plans to raise the profile of careers in ELC and SAC, establish a career framework and leadership development opportunities and will work towards building a more gender-balanced and diverse workforce. Consideration will also be given to broader ELC and school-age childcare workforce, including those in inspection, mentoring and training roles and support for those who facilitate practice placements.'

4. Scope of the Workforce Development Plan

The Workforce Development Plan will address the development of the ELC and SAC workforce, including both registered centre-based and registered home-based provision,⁵⁶ over the period to 2028. This workforce includes more than 30,000 staff

⁵⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/experts-groups/2011-2013/ecec/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf

⁵⁶ Registered home-based provision comprises self-employed childminders registered with Tusla, who are currently very low in number. Given

working in centre-based services⁵⁷ and up to 35,000 childminders who will be subject to the phased introduction of regulations over the next decade.⁵⁸

The Workforce Development Plan will also give consideration to the broader ELC and SAC workforce, including those in inspection, mentoring and training roles and support for those who facilitate practice placements.

While ELC and SAC services may cater for children from less than one year of age up to 15 years of age, the majority (59%) of children using centre-based services are three or four years old, and only a small proportion (7%) are 8 years or older. In relative terms, a larger proportion of children using childminders are school-age. While the proportion of pre-school-children using childminders is significantly less than the proportion using centre-based services, among school-age children the proportion of children using childminders (8%, though this figure also includes au pairs and nannies) is the same as the proportion using centre-based services. (According to the most recent CSO data,⁵⁹ about 70% of children aged 0-12 are taken care of by a parent or the partner of a parent.)

While the Workforce Development Plan for the ELC and SAC sector will take into consideration commitments in *First 5* in relation to the wider workforce in services for young children and families e.g. in health services (such as the commitment to develop an Early Childhood Workforce Initiative), achievement of such commitments will not form part of the Workforce Development Plan.

5. Two stages in developing the Workforce Development Plan

The Workforce Development Plan, which will involve close collaboration between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills, will be developed in two stages, both of which will be overseen by the Steering Group.

Stage 1, which is expected to take approximately 12 months, for completion by Q2 of 2020, will involve:

the commitment in *First 5* to extend statutory regulations to cover all paid, non-relative childminders on a phased basis, it is envisaged that registered home-based provision of ELC and SAC will expand significantly during the time-period covered by the Workforce Development Plan. However, it is envisaged that nannies / childminders employed by parents will remain outside the scope of regulation and therefore outside the scope of the Workforce Development Plan

57 According to the 2018 Early Years Sector Profile (Pobal) there are an estimated 29,600 staff working in centre-based services, of which 25,900 are working directly with children. However, the only SAC services included within the Pobal survey are services with which DCYA has a current funding relationship. Following the regulation of SAC services, which came into force in February 2019, it is anticipated that there will be an increase in the number of SAC services falling within the scope of the Workforce Development Plan. <https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/11/Early-Years-Sector-Profile-Report-2017-2018.pdf>

58 The estimate of 35,000 childminders is based on CSO survey data on the proportion of children cared for by childminders and an assumption that each childminder cares for on average 2.5 children. However, introduction of regulations into childminding, as planned in *First 5*, may impact on the number of childminders.

59 CSO (2017) QNHS Module on Childcare, Q3 2016.

- a) Preparation of a core report that sets out: a **high-level vision** for the ELC and SAC workforce for the period 2020-2028, and a pathway for achieving the commitments set out in *First 5* in relation to development of the ELC and SAC workforce. The high-level vision should include the composition of the workforce in registered centre-based and home-based ELC and SAC settings, including composition by both qualification level and gender/diversity. It should also include occupational roles and career pathways for ELC and SAC (centre-based and home-based) practitioners working in the sector and in the support services for the sector (including inspection, mentoring and training roles); and relevant qualifications and knowledge/skills profiles that will achieve optimal ELC and SAC experiences for children.
- b) Completion of a **skills forecast** setting out the projected demand and supply of ELC and SAC practitioners at different qualification levels over the period 2020-2028, to determine whether supply arrangements are adequate to meet demand. The skills forecast will use the model commissioned by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, combined with analysis of future needs of the sector (supply and demand at different qualification levels), taking into account attrition and turnover in the workforce.
- c) Making decisions in relation to: **occupational roles** within the ELC and SAC workforce, including in support services for the sector (e.g. inspection, mentoring and training roles), **qualification requirements** for those roles (over the lifetime of the Workforce Development Plan) and **terminology** to describe the roles; and **minimum qualification requirements** to be introduced (over the lifetime of the Workforce Development Plan) for (i) childminders and (ii) the SAC workforce.
- d) Agreement on Terms of Reference and membership of a small number of working groups that during Stage 2 will develop detailed implementation plans in key areas of workforce development.

Stage 2, which will commence either during or at the end of Stage 1, and should be completed by Q2 of 2021, will involve completion of **implementation plans** by working groups to be specified in Stage

1. The working groups will be tasked with developing implementation plans in a limited number of key areas in which more detailed planning is required. While specification of the working groups will be determined by the Steering Group during Stage 1, the areas of activity in which more detailed implementation plans are likely to be needed include:

- > Initial education / training;
- > CPD infrastructure (including leadership development);
- > Mechanisms for upskilling the workforce (including funding and incentivisation mechanisms);
- > Terms and conditions of employment (recognising that the State is not the employer);
- > Professional and qualifications recognition;
- > Legislative/regulatory implications for change.

Certain work-areas will not require establishment of Stage 2 Working Groups because detailed planning is under way through other channels. For example, a core mechanism for incentivising recruitment of more highly qualified staff and improved working conditions will be a new funding model for the ELC and SAC sector. While the Workforce Development Plan will specify some of the requirements to be achieved through the funding model, the funding model itself will be developed as a separate action under *First 5*. Similarly, a 10-year Childminding Action Plan is due for publication in 2019. While the Workforce Development Plan will involve specification of a minimum qualification requirement for childminders and the skills forecast will include childminders, much of the detailed planning for actions to support childminders will be set out through the Childminding Action Plan and workstreams that will flow from that Plan. On establishment, the Steering Group will be briefed on other major and related projects to be commenced over the next year, for example, a review of the ELC and SAC operating system nationally, and the new funding model for ELC and SAC. Potential synergies with these other groups will be explored.

6. Role of the Steering Group

The Steering Group will report to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, who holds policy responsibility for ELC and SAC, and who will consult with the Minister for Education and Skills in respect of matters relevant to his complementary responsibility in supporting the quality of education provided in the ELC sector and the quality of the education and training programmes available to its workforce.

The role of the steering group will be to:

1. Prepare a report by Q2 of 2020 that sets out: a high-level vision for the ELC and SAC workforce for the period 2020-2028, and a pathway for achieving the related commitments set out in *First 5*; a skills forecast setting out the projected demand and supply of ELC and SAC practitioners at different qualification levels

over the period 2020- 2028, to determine whether supply arrangements are adequate to meet demand; and recommendations in relation to occupational roles within the ELC and SAC workforce, qualification requirements for those roles, terminology to describe the roles, and minimum qualification requirements to be introduced for childminders and for the school-age childcare workforce.

2. Oversee the preparation of detailed implementation plans in key areas of workforce development to support achievement of the high-level vision and pathway set out in the report, including: agreeing Terms of Reference and membership of working groups by Q2 of 2020, which will be chaired by DCYA and DES as per their areas of responsibility; monitoring the work of the working groups; and reviewing and finalising implementation plans developed by the working groups by Q2 of 2021.
3. During preparation of the report, carry out a public consultation – both with the ELC and SAC sector and with wider stakeholders including parents – on the basis of a consultation paper on a high-level vision for the workforce, including on the question of terminology to describe occupational roles within the sector, and consult the Stakeholder Group (see below) at key milestones in preparation of the Workforce Development Plan.
4. Make recommendations on mechanisms to monitor and review implementation of the Workforce Development Plan over the period 2020-2028.

7. Membership of the Steering Group

Membership of the Steering Group will be as follows:

Chair:

- Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Assistant Secretary for the Early Years Division

Members:

- Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Principal Officer, Early Years Quality
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Principal Officer, Early Years Policy, Strategy and Research
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Principal Officer, External Human Resources
- Department of Education and Skills, Principal Officer, Early Years Education Policy Unit
- Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

- Early Childhood Ireland, CEO
- HEA
- Pobal
- QQI
- Solas
- Tusla, National Service Director, Children's Services Regulation
- Chair of Technical Advisory Group
- External expert on workforce planning, Gerry Verschoyle
- External expert on the ELC / SAC workforce, Professor Mathias Urban, DCU

Secretariat:

- Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Early Years Quality Unit and Department of Education and Skills, Early Years Education Policy Unit. The Steering Group may co-opt additional members as required to provide relevant expertise. Alternative members may be nominated to attend meetings, subject to the prior approval of the Chair.

Stakeholder Group

- A Stakeholder Group to feed into the deliberations of the Steering Group will be convened at the request of the Steering Group. The professionalisation sub-group established under the auspices of the Early Learning and Care Forum chaired by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs will form part of this group. The Steering Group will decide whether additional stakeholders, e.g. representing children's and parents' interests, should also be invited to join the Stakeholder Group.

Working Groups

- Membership and Chair of working groups to develop stage 2 action implementation plans will be identified during the course of stage 1, depending on the scope and terms of reference of each working group.

Technical Advisory Group

- A Technical Advisory Group to advise the Steering Group on research/data matters will be convened as appropriate with representation from Departmental statisticians and researchers, Pobal, HEA, QQI and other relevant providers of data that may be identified during the course of stages 1 or 2.

8. Schedule of meetings

A schedule of meetings will be determined by the Chair of the Steering Group, in discussion with the Steering Group. It is expected that the Steering Group will meet approximately 8-10 times per year, with the first meeting to take place in May 2019.

10.2. Appendix 2 – Membership of the Steering, Stakeholder and Working Groups

10.2.1. Steering Group

Chair	Bernie McNally / Anne Marie Brooks	DCEDIY
Organisation	Group Members	
Better Start	Margaret Rogers	
DCEDIY (ELC and SAC Quality)	Toby Wolfe	
DCEDIY (External HR)	Simon Conry	
DCEDIY (Research and Evaluation)	Nicola Tickner	
DE	Philip Crosby / J oanne Tobin	
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Kevin Daly / Marcus Breathnach	
Department Public Expenditure and Reform	Niamh Callaghan / Larry Dunne	
Early Childhood Ireland (ECI)	Teresa Heeney	
External expert on workforce planning	Gerry Verschoyle	
Higher Education Authority	Louise Sherry	
External expert on the ELC and SAC workforce	Mathias Urban	
Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)	Barbara Kelly	
SOLAS	Joan McNaboe	
Tusla	Fiona McDonnell	
Secretariat	Ronan McCabe / Paul Gleeson Scully James	DCEDIY

10.2.2. Stakeholder Group

Chair	Toby Wolfe	DCEDIY
Organisation	Group Members	
Association of Childhood Professionals	Marian Quinn	
Barnardos	Sharon Byrne	
BLÁTHÚ	Ulrike Farnleitner	
CCI	Fiona Healy	
Childcare Committees Ireland	Greta Murphy	
Childminding Ireland	Mairead Hurley Bernadette Orbinski Burke	
Children's Rights Alliance	Mary Nicholson / Tanya Ward	
Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta	Caroline Ní Chualáin	
Conference of Heads of Irish Colleges of Education (CHOICE)	Lisha O'Sullivan	
Early Childhood Ireland	Frances Byrne / Sinead Keenan	
Early Childhood Ireland members' panel	Louise Kilbane	
Education and Training Boards Ireland	Damien Melly	
Gaeiloideachas	Clare Spáinneach	
Higher Education Colleges Association	Nicholas Breakwell	
IBEC / CSI	Darragh Whelan / Kara McGann	
Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) / SIPTU	Darragh O'Connor / Aisling Silke	
Irish Universities Association	Dr Geraldine French	
National Childhood Network	Denise McCormilla	
National Forum for Community Childcare Services	Elaine McQuillan	
National Parents Council Primary	Clare Downey	
PLÉ	Mary Moloney / Sheila Garrity	
QDOSS	Marie Daly	
Seas Suas	Regina Bushell	
Technological Higher Education Association	Justin Kerr	
Secretariat	Jenny Comerford	DE

10.2.3. Working Groups

Career Framework and Career Pathways Working Group

Chair	Eimear Carron / Toby Wolfe	DCEDIY
Rapporteur	Martina Carter	DE
Organisation	Group Members	
Association of Childhood Professionals	Marian Quinn	
Better Start	Laura McNally	
Childcare Committees Ireland	Stacy Forde	
CHOICE	Lisha O'Sullivan	
Early Childhood Ireland	Liz Kerrins	
Early Childhood Ireland - members panel	Louise Kilbane	
IBEC	Meadhbh Costello	
National Childhood Network	Caroline McDonnell	
PLÉ	Sheila Garrity	
QQI	Barbara Kelly	
Seas Suas	Regina Bushell	
SIPTU	Aishling Silke	
Higher Education Colleges Association	Nicholas Breakwell	
Secretariat	Jenny Comerford	DE

Continuing Professional Development Working Group

Chair	Kathryn O'Riordan / Toby Wolfe	DCEDIY
Rapporteur	Mel Duffy	DE
Organisation	Group Members	
Association of Childhood Professionals	Paula Donohue	
Barnardos	Sharon Byrne	
Better Start	Margaret Rogers	
Bláthú	Ulrike Farnleitner	

Childcare Committees Ireland	Rose Murphy	
CHOICE	Lisha O'Sullivan	
Early Childhood Ireland	Milica Atanackovic	
Irish Universities Association	Geraldine French	
National Childhood Network	Michelle Hart	
Seas Suas	Dearbhla Cox Griffin	
Higher Education Colleges Association	Nicholas Breakwell	
Secretariat	Jenny Comerford	DE

Promotion and Regulation of the Profession Working Group

Chair	Kathryn O'Riordan / Paul Gleeson	DCEDIY
Rapporteur	Rita Melia	Tusla

Organisation	Group Members	
Association of Childhood Professionals	Marian Quinn	
Better Start	Catherine Healy	
Childcare Committees Ireland	Sharon Boles	
Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta	Caroline Ní Chualleanáin	
Early Childhood Ireland	Teresa Heeney / Máire Corbett	
EDeNn Project	Colette Murray	
External expert on the ELC and SAC workforce	Mathias Professor Urban	
Men in Childcare	Mick Kenny	
National Parents Council Primary	Clare Downey	
PLÉ	Sheila Garrity	
QQI	Barbara Kelly	
SIPTU	Annette Carpenter	
Tusla	Mike Corcoran	
Secretariat	Barry Tobin	DCEDIY

Qualifications and Training for School Age Childcare Working Group

Chair	Eimear Carron / Paul Gleeson	DCEDIY
Rapporteur	Michele McDermott	Barnardos
Organisation	Group Members	
Association of Childhood Professionals	Marian Quinn	
Better Start	Delia Goodman	
Childcare Committees Ireland	Aileen Kelleher	
Early Childhood Ireland members panel	Louise Kilbane	
National Childhood Network	Denise McCormilla	
Playboard Northern Ireland	Peter McCartney	
QDOSS	Marie Daly	
QQI	Peter Cullen	
Seas Suas	Niamh Leeney	
Sherpa Kids	Anne Marie Hegarty	
Tigers Childcare	Karen Clince	
Tusla	Denise Collins	
Secretariat	Barry Tobin	DCEDIY

Training and Supports for Childminders Working Group

Chair	Karen McCarthy	DCEDIY
Rapporteur	Sarah McKenna	Childminding Development Officer
Organisation	Group Members	
Barnardos	Sharon Byrne	
Better Start	Martina McGovern	
Childcare Committees Ireland	Áine Brummell	
Childminder	Liz Ferry	
Childminder	Hazel Hyman	
Childminding Development Officer	Heather McColl	
Childminding Ireland	Bernadette Orbinski Burke	
Early Childhood Ireland	Fiona Kelleher	
National Parents Council Primary	Clare Downey	
Tusla	Ide Cronin	
Secretariat	James Scully	DCEDIY

10.3. Appendix 3 – Role profiles

10.3.1. Early Years Educator

Key Tasks and Responsibilities:

- Engage in a child-centred approach to early learning and care in partnership with children promoting children's agency and participation at their early learning and care environments.
- Maintain highly reciprocal, responsive and respectful relationships & interactions with babies, toddlers and young children and foster the development of their peer relationships.
- Maintain high quality stimulating learning environments indoors and outdoors for children that ensure their safety and security; promote child centred learning and offer engaging and enriching experiences that support and promote their health, wellbeing, identity and belonging and learning and development.
- Value play as a life enhancing experience for children.
- Contribute to the development of long-term and short-term plans to meet the diverse needs of children both at group and individual level based on observations, experience working with the child and reflection.
- Use a range of appropriate observation strategies to identify babies' and young children's needs.
- Work in partnership with parents, families and guardians in the care and learning of their children.
- Contribute to the maintenance of continuous compliance with statutory regulations, legislation, contractual obligations and practice frameworks relevant in an ELC setting.
- Engage in learning opportunities to improve knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level.
- Maintain effective working relationships with colleagues and actively participate in and contribute to team activities.
- Be aware of anti-bias policies, procedures and practices that adhere to equality legislation.
- Contribute to the maintenance of a comprehensive records management system
- Support children's transitions, into, out of and within the setting.

Skills and knowledge:

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- Knowledge of a range of theories on child development.
- Knowledge of babies' and children's overall holistic needs and development.
- Knowledge of atypical development in babies and children (0-6).
- Understanding of the significance to practice, of family, social, cultural and environmental factors and their impact on child development, well-being, identity and learning.
- Ability to provide for babies and young children's holistic development and learning.
- Ability to carry out and record in-depth observations of babies and children (0-6).

PLAY AND LEARNING

- Ability to engage in enquiry based pedagogical practice.
- Ability to implement a range of play based strategies in the provision of all experiences and activities for babies and young children.
- Knowledge of assessment of learning in early years' education in line with national guidelines.

- Ability to implement pedagogical strategies to support children's emergent language, literacy, (including digital literacy), numeracy, creativity, early science, technology engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM).
- Ability to contribute to the development, implementation and evaluation of an appropriate curriculum for babies and children (0-6).
- Ability to set up and introduce a wide variety of suitable educational/play activities.
- Ability to record and share observations in planning processes for children's future learning.

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

- Knowledge of social and environmental factors and their effect on babies and children (0-6).
- Knowledge of national social policy and current legislation and its implications for ELC.
- Knowledge and understanding of equality issues and different customs, cultures and family structures in society today; and the ability to take account of these when working with babies and young children.

- Knowledge of some of the methods available for improving adverse social and environmental factors for babies and young children, including knowledge of the public services available locally and nationally and the ability to use these appropriately for the benefit of children.
- Knowledge of and ability to implement child protection policy, procedures and practice.
- Ability to perform varied tasks, some complex and non-routine, in the maintenance of the environment (indoors and outdoors) for babies and children (0-6).
- Ability to engage in ethical, rights-based, inclusive and participatory practice ensuring the voice of the child is heard, listened to and acted upon.

SAFETY, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- Ability to undertake activities to support and promote high quality practice in relation to the safety, health and wellbeing of babies, toddlers and young children ensuring knowledge is relevant and current.
- Ability to perform a range of procedures, some complex and non-routine in the care of babies and young children (0-6).

- Knowledge of the nutritional needs of babies and children (0-6).
- Ability to plan and prepare a balanced nutritional diet for babies and children (0-6).
- Ability to perform basic first-aid procedures in an emergency with a child.
- Ability to perform routine tasks in the care of an ill child.
- In-depth knowledge of safety precautions and regulations with regard to ELC services for babies and children (0-6).
- Ability to take responsibility for the enforcement of safety procedures within ELC services for babies and young children and perform competently the tasks to support these procedures.
- Knowledge of child protection policy and procedures.

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Self-awareness and a sensitivity as to how this affects interaction with young children.
- Ability to manage oneself in a working situation with limited autonomy and responsibility.

- Ability to manage continuing personal and professional development.
- Ability to collaborate with others in teamwork.

COMMUNICATION, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

- Ability to engage in high quality interactions with children.
- Ability to communicate effectively with adults and children including barriers to communication & how these might be overcome.
- Ability to communicate using literacy and numeracy skills.
- Ability to contribute effectively to the

implementation and maintenance of the ELC environment.

- Ability to maintain interpersonal, intrapersonal and self-awareness skills in all interactions with a variety of stakeholders. Including parents, staff and children.
- Awareness of a range of methods of technical communication and the ability to use these at a basic level in the operation of an ELC setting.
- Ability to perform varied tasks, some complex and non-routine, in the maintenance of the environment (indoors and outdoors) for babies and children (0-6)

10.3.2. School Age Childcare Practitioner

Key Tasks and Responsibilities:

- Promote a child-centred and play-focused approach to School-Age Childcare in partnership with children, promoting children's agency and participation in their SAC environments.
- Build and maintain highly collaborative responsive and respectful relationships with children and foster the development of their peer relationships.
- Plan create and maintain high quality, stimulating play environments indoors

and outdoors for children that offer engaging and enriching experiences that support children in their holistic development.

- Develop long-term, medium term and short-term plans in consultation with children to meet their diverse needs at both group and individual level based on observations and consultation with all stakeholders working with the child.

- Engage in strategies to support the inclusion of children with additional needs.
- Contribute to the maintenance of a comprehensive records management system.
- Work in collaborative partnership with parents, families, carer's, schools and communities to support the school-age care of children.
- Ensure compliance with statutory regulations, legislation, contractual obligations and national practice guidelines relevant in SAC setting.
- Engage in continuous professional development and learning to improve knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level.
- Maintain effective working relationships with colleagues and

actively participate in and contribute to team activities.

- Promote culturally responsive diversity, equality and inclusion policies, procedures and practices that adhere to legislation.
- Carry out routinely risk/benefit assessment both inside and outside the SAC setting.
- Promote children's emotional and social well-being.
- Contribute to the development of quality improvement strategies within a setting to enhance the quality of experience for all children and staff.
- Collaborate with others to develop the ethos, structure and organisation of the SAC setting to promote and develop positive professional practice by all staff.

Skills and Knowledge:

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- Knowledge of a range of theories on child development and child psychology.
- Knowledge of children's overall holistic development (4-14).
- Understanding of the significance to practice of family, social, cultural and gender identity along with

environmental factors on holistic development.

- Application of theory to practice to provide for children's holistic development and to support them to reach their full potential through play.
- Well-developed observation, planning and consultation with children.

PLAY, RELAXATION AND RECREATION

- Understanding the importance of play, relaxation and recreation to school-age children in line with national guidelines on SAC.
- Ability to apply theories of play to practice.
- Ability to support and facilitate intrinsically motivated, child led play experiences in a richly resourced environment.
- Ability to implement a range of play projects/activities that are inclusive of all children.
- Facilitate play that has the potential to improve all aspects of children's well-being, physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.
- Ability to create an environment, and provide resources and opportunities in which children's interests and learning is fully supported through play.
- Ability to set up and introduce a wide variety of suitable and interesting activities for children.
- Point of discussion: Is there a balance of play, relaxation and recreation and other activities?

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- Ability to engage in ethical, rights-based, inclusive and participatory practice in which the rights of the child is paramount.
- Knowledge of social and environmental factors and their effect on children.
- Knowledge of national social policy and current legislation and its implications for SAC.
- Ability to create an environment, provide resources and opportunities that adhere to legislation in which children's interests and learning is fully supported through play.
- Ability to create an emotionally safe environment where children feel free to play and express themselves.
- Ability to assess risk in a collaborative manner with children to support them to keep themselves safe.
- Knowledge and understanding of inclusive practice: equality issues and different customs, cultures, gender identity and family structures in society today; and the ability to take account of these when working with children. Knowledge of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their impacts and the ability to

respond appropriately for the benefit of children.

- Knowledge of and ability to implement child safeguarding policy, procedures and practice as a mandated person.
- Key knowledge and skills of supportive strategies to develop and enhance self-regulation in children as individuals and in groups.
- Ability to perform varied tasks, some complex and non-routine, in the maintenance of the environment (indoors and outdoors) for children.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING AND SAFETY

- Knowledge of the nutritional needs of children (4-14).
- Ability to perform basic first-aid procedures in an emergency with a child.
- In-depth knowledge of safety precautions and regulations with regard to SAC services.
- Ability to take responsibility for the enforcement of safety procedures within SAC services for children and perform competently the tasks to support these procedures.
- An appropriate level of knowledge of food safety and hygiene.

- Knowledge of and ability to implement child safeguarding policy, procedures and practice as a mandated person.
- Knowledge of risk/benefit assessment and capacity to conduct them routinely.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Ability to reflect on own professional practice.
- Ability to manage oneself in a working situation with limited autonomy and responsibility.
- Ability to manage continuing personal and professional development.
- Ability to collaborate with others in teamwork, professional support and dialogue.

COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

- Ability to maintain interpersonal, intrapersonal and self-awareness skills in all interactions with multidisciplinary agencies, children, young people, parents and staff.
- Ability to communicate effectively with adults and children and understand barriers to communication and how these might be overcome.

- Ability to develop nurturing and respectful relationships with children and adults.
- Ability to support children to form and express their views.

LEADERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

- Ability to contribute effectively to the

implementation and maintenance of the SAC environment.

- Ability to contribute to the maintenance of a comprehensive records management system.
- Knowledge, understanding of, and ability to adhere to setting policies and procedures and contribute to their development.

10.3.3. Lead Educator

Key Tasks and Responsibilities:

- Lead pedagogical practice in a learning room.
- Contribute to the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies and procedures to support quality practice.
- Lead and advocate for inclusive and democratic practice in the context of national guidelines and models.
- Apply a detailed knowledge of early years' curricular approaches and curricular development to practice.
- Lead, develop and evaluate curriculum in line with national guidelines.
- Lead planning and assessment practices to provide quality early education experiences to and for children.
- Maintain awareness of quality ELC provision and practice in the wider local,

national and international context.

- Support the development of quality improvement strategies within a setting to enhance the quality of experience for all children and staff.
- Develop, establish and maintain effective co-professional working relationships with colleagues.
- Promote a child-centred approach to ELC in partnership with children promoting children's agency and participation at their ELC environments.
- Continuously build, maintain & advocate for highly reciprocal, responsive & respectful relationships with babies, toddlers & young children & foster the development of children's peer relationships.
- Create high quality stimulating learning environments indoors and

outdoors for children that ensure their safety and security; promote child centred learning and offer engaging and enriching experiences that support and promote their health, wellbeing, identity and belonging and learning and development. Develop, implement & evaluate specific strategies to support children with a range of communicative needs.

- Develop and implement purposeful strategies that foster children's sense of identity and belonging.
- Take responsibility for leading pedagogical practice through coaching, mentoring, and evaluating.
- Promote the value of play as life enhancing for children.
- Ensure continuous compliance with statutory regulations, legislation, contractual obligations and practice frameworks relevant to ELC setting operation.
- Take responsibility for maintaining relevant records and preparation of reports and other materials to demonstrate accountability.
- Work in partnership with parents, families and guardians in the care and learning of their children.

- Liaise with outside agencies e.g. County Committees, Regulatory Organisations, National Government Organisations and the local community.
- Liaise with other professionals and institutions to inform quality practice.
- Engage in regular continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities to review and improve, knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level including activities such as self-reflection and evaluation.
- Contribute to the development of anti-bias policies, procedures, practices that adhere to equality legislation.
- Plan, create and maintain high quality stimulating environments for children that ensure their safety and security; promote child centred learning and offer engaging and enriching experiences that support and promote their health, wellbeing, learning and development.
- Engage in regular evaluations of children's environments.
- Support children's transitions, into, out of and within the setting.

Skills and knowledge:

Key Tasks and Responsibilities:

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- In-depth knowledge and understanding of a range of child development including e.g. theories related to early learning, the centrality of play; socio-cultural theories to support babies, toddlers and young children to form secure and positive relationships etc.
- Understanding of the significance to practice, of family, social, cultural and environmental factors on child development, well-being, identity and learning.
- Detailed knowledge of the holistic development of children.
- Ability to communicate and demonstrate the links between ELC theory and practice.
- In-depth understanding of the central role of adults in supporting and promoting the holistic development of the child through play.
- Ability to use recorded observations and reflection on practice to develop long-term and short-term objectives and plans for the holistic development of individual children.

PLAY AND LEARNING

- Ability to lead enquiry based pedagogical practice.
- Ability to develop and implement a range of play based strategies in the provision of all experiences and activities for babies, toddlers and young children.
- Understand the importance of assessment of and for learning in early years' education in line with national guidelines.
- Ability to develop tailored strategies underpinned by theory to support the development of key learning dispositions in babies and young children.
- Ability to implement pedagogical strategies to support children's emergent language, literacy, (including digital literacy), numeracy, creativity, early science, technology engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM). Critical awareness of the value of research in ELC practice.
- Ability to co-ordinate the development, implementation and evaluation of an appropriate curriculum for babies + children (0-6).

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

- Knowledge of a range of methods available for improving adverse social environmental factors for babies and young children, including knowledge of the public services available locally and nationally and the ability to use these appropriately for the benefit of children.
- Ability to promote ethical, rights-based, inclusive and participatory practice ensuring the voice of the child is heard, listened to and acted upon.

SAFETY, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- Ability to undertake a range of activities to support and promote high quality practice in relation to the safety, health and wellbeing of babies, toddlers and young children ensuring knowledge is relevant and current.

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Ability to reflect and critically evaluate self in relation to personal and professional development.
- Ability to promote and support professional development of a range of practitioners in ELC settings.
- Critical awareness of the value of research in ELC.

COMMUNICATION, LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

- Engage in high quality interactions with children.
- Ability to lead others.
- Ability to maintain strong interpersonal, intrapersonal and self-awareness skills in all interactions with a variety of stakeholders. Including parents, colleagues and children.

10.3.4. Manager

Key Tasks and Responsibilities:

- Overall “person in charge” as determined by the regulations.
- Have a good understanding of ELC or SAC (as appropriate).
- Lead and be directly accountable for overall operation and organization of an ELC or SAC setting.
- Have overall responsibility for quality practice at the setting.
- Have overall responsibility for health, safety, maintenance & hygiene.
- Manage the formulation, implementation and evaluation of philosophy, policies and procedures to support quality practice.
- Lead and advocate for inclusive and democratic practice in the context of national guidelines and models.
- Ensure curriculum is developed and evaluated in line with national guidelines.
- Ensure that planning and assessment practices provide quality ELC experiences to and for children.
- Continuously develop quality improvement strategies within a setting to enhance the quality of experience for all children and staff.
- Overall leader of staff team developing, establishing and fostering effective working relationships with all staff.
- Consistently promote a child-centred approach to ELC and SAC in partnership with children promoting children’s agency and participation in their ELC or SAC environments.
- Ensure high quality stimulating learning environments indoors & outdoors for children are in place that ensure their safety & security; promote child centred learning & offer engaging and enriching experiences that support and promote their health, wellbeing, identity and belonging & learning & development.
- Lead on building, maintaining and advocate for highly reciprocal, responsive and respectful relationships with babies, toddlers and young children and foster the development of children’s peer relationships.
- Ensure the development, implementation and evaluation of specific strategies that support children with a range of communicative needs are implemented appropriately.

- Have overall responsibility for planning, creating and maintaining high quality stimulating environments for children that ensure their safety and security; promote child centred learning and offer engaging and enriching experiences that support and promote their health, wellbeing, learning and development.
- Lead the engagement in regular evaluations of children's environments.
- Take responsibility for the performance of others, (supporting, delegating, monitoring and evaluating).
- Engage in support and supervision practices.
- Be responsible for continuous compliance with statutory regulations, legislation, contractual obligations and practice frameworks relevant to the operation of an ELC or SAC setting.
- Manage a wide range of reports and documentation / resources in line with regulatory requirements and best practice. Model organisation skills for others.
- Work in ongoing partnership with parents, families and guardians in the care and learning of their children.
- Ensure the development and implementation of purposeful

strategies that foster children's sense of identity and belonging are being fostered and implemented appropriately.

- Maintain involvement with outside agencies e.g. County Committees, Regulatory Organisations, National Government Organisations and the local community.
- Liaise with other professionals and institutions to inform quality practice.
- Ensure that the climate, structure and organization of the ELC setting promotes and develops positive professional practice by all staff and supports their own sense of wellbeing.
- Engage in regular continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities to review and improve, knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level including activities such as self-reflection and evaluation.
- Take responsibility for the mentoring and support of all practitioners engaged in professional development in the absence of a student placement mentor.
- Facilitate and support pre-service and in-service education and training of ELC practitioners.
- Have overall responsibility for the induction and probation of staff.

- Have overall responsibility for adherence with all regulations and legislation relevant to the setting as an employer.

- Depending on organisation size may have additional responsibilities; e.g. (financial, HR, marketing).

Skills and knowledge:

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- Ensure there is at the ELC Centre personnel with an in-depth knowledge and understanding of a range of child development including e.g. theories related to ELC, the centrality of play; socio-cultural theories to support babies, toddlers and young children to form secure and positive relationships etc.
- Ensure there are personnel at the setting with a comprehensive understanding of the significance to practice, of family, social, cultural and environmental factors on child development, well-being, identity and learning.
- Have some knowledge of the holistic development of children.
- Ensure there is at the centre personnel with an in-depth understanding of the central role of adults in supporting and promoting the holistic development of the child through play.

- Ensure there are personnel at the Setting with an ability to employ highly effective systematic assessment and observation methods to evaluate, form opinions, and progress holistic learning and development for children informed by the National Curriculum Framework.

PLAY AND LEARNING

- Ensure there is capacity at the centre to lead enquiry based pedagogical practice.
- Ensure there is capacity at the centre to lead the development and implementation of a range of play based strategies in the provision of all experiences and activities for babies, toddlers and young children.
- Ensure there is an understanding of the importance of assessment of and for learning in early years' education in line with national guidelines.
- Ensure there is capacity and ability to develop tailored strategies underpinned by theory to support

the development of key learning dispositions in babies and young children.

- Ensure pedagogical strategies to support children's emergent language, literacy, (including digital literacy), numeracy, creativity, early science, technology engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) are developed and implemented appropriately.
- Ability to lead a team co-ordinating the development, implementation and evaluation of an appropriate curriculum for babies and children (0-6).

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

- Ensure there is an in-depth knowledge of a range of methods available for improving adverse social environmental factors for babies and young children, including knowledge of the public services available locally and nationally and the ability to use these appropriately for the benefit of children.
- Ensure ethical, rights-based, inclusive and participatory practice are consistently promoted ensuring the voice of the child is heard, listened to and acted upon.

SAFETY, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- Ensure that staff have the ability to develop and evaluate a range of activities to support and promote high quality practice in relation to the safety, health hygiene and wellbeing of babies, toddlers and young children ensuring knowledge is relevant and current.
- Ensure overall compliance at the setting for health, safety and hygiene practices for all.

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Ensure that professional development opportunities are provided to and enacted by the staff team to ensure abilities to critically review, reflect & evaluate.
- Engage in self- reflection relation to one's own personal and professional development.
- Lead and support professional development of a range of practitioners in ELC settings.
- Ensure there is critical awareness of the value of research in ELC at the ELC Centre.

LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, COMMUNICATION AND ADMINISTRATION

- Ability to lead others.
 - Ability to instil a culture of wellbeing across the setting.
 - Ability to provide management and communication leadership.
 - Ability to provide insightful role modelling for staff.
 - Ability to advocate on behalf of others relevant to the ELC context.
 - Ability to co-ordinate the effective operation and management of an ELC setting.
 - Knowledge and understanding of financial, administrative and human resource theory and practice necessary for the effective operation of an ELC setting.
- Ability to manage and resource flexible ELC services for children and families.
 - Ability to develop and implement organisational structures ensuring that lines of authority and accountability are understood by all staff members in a staff team.
 - Ability to maintain strong interpersonal, intrapersonal and self-awareness skills in all interactions with a variety of stakeholders, including families, staff and children.
 - Demonstrate high level supervisory and mentoring skills that empower and motivate staff at all levels.
 - Demonstrate organisational and leadership skills.

10.4. Appendix 4 – Alternative scenarios for numbers undertaking different qualifications

In order to estimate the number of Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners who may need to undertake the different education and training programmes set out in the Workforce Plan, modelling of supply and demand in the workforce was carried out.

While there is extensive data available on the current workforce in ELC services and on the numbers completing awards in ELC at levels of qualification each year, there is less data available on SAC services. The major challenge in modelling workforce supply and demand, however, is uncertainty about future trends. In particular:

- The total size of the workforce depends on changes in population (especially the birth-rate, but also migration in and out of the country), changes in the level of demand for ELC and SAC, and the adult-child ratio. As the ECCE programme is universal with very high coverage, the numbers of children in the ECCE programme are determined almost solely by population change, whereas number of children outside the ECCE programme also reflects demand. CSO forecasts indicate a significant decline in the population of children in both the 0-5 and 6-12 age-groups over the years to 2028. Change in demand for ELC and SAC outside the ECCE programme is much less certain. There are no plans at present to amend the minimum adult-child ratios in either ELC or SAC, but any further expansion of AIM (which provides additional assistance where needed to support participation of children with disabilities in the ECCE programme) or changes in adult-child ratios associated with development of a DEIS-type model in ELC and SAC (in line with commitments in *First 5*) may increase the number of Early Years Educators and/or SAC practitioners needed in the sector.
- If pay and conditions of employment in the sector improve (see section 7.1 on pay and conditions as a 'key enabler' for the Plan), the rate of staff turnover is expected to fall and the rate of graduate entry (i.e. the proportion of students completing a qualification in ELC who choose to work in the ELC sector) is expected to rise. This could significantly reduce the numbers required to upskill in order to achieve a graduate-led workforce.

Given these uncertainties in relation to both demand and supply for the workforce, a number of different scenarios were modelled.

Modelling indicates that, if there is no change in adult-child ratios and if demand follows population trends, there will be more than enough Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners entering the sector each year to meet demand for the ELC and SAC workforce overall through to 2028, but that significant measures will be required to support many Educators who currently have a Level 5 or 6 qualification to achieve a Level 7 or 8 qualification. Reforms to AIM or the development of a DEIS-type model could increase recruitment challenges in the absence of improvements in pay or working conditions that reduce staff turnover or improve graduate entry-rates.

Given current staff turnover rates in the sector, and the current rate of graduate entry into the sector, it is estimated that in order to meet qualification targets set out in this Plan between 2,100 and 7,200 Early Years Educators who currently have a Level 5 or 6 qualification will need to be supported to achieve a Level 7 or 8 qualification by 2028, with the number depending on the rate of change in future demand for ELC and the impact of wage increases on staff recruitment and retention. The lower estimate assumes no change in demand for ELC other than population change, and 10% annual improvements in staff recruitment and retention rates as a result of future wage increases (e.g. lowering the annual exit rate from the sector from 13% to 11.7%). The higher estimate assumes a 5% annual increase in demand for ELC (more than offsetting the forecast decline in population of this age-group), and no change in staff recruitment and retention. The higher estimate would also see a 2,000 shortfall in staff numbers overall in the sector by 2028.

The core scenario used in the report is the mid-point between the lower and higher estimates. In this core scenario, which assumes some improvement in wages, there would be sufficient numbers of staff overall, and 4,600 Early Years Educators who currently have a Level 5 or 6 qualification will need to be supported to achieve a Level 7 or 8 qualification by 2028.

Estimates of the current qualification levels of SAC Practitioners are based on more limited survey data. Assuming no change in demand for SAC other than as a result of population change (with the population of children in the 6-12 age-group forecast to decline over the years to 2028), it is estimated that 3,100 current SAC Practitioners will be required to undertake a special purpose SAC award, while 900 SAC Practitioners will be required to undertake full Level 5 awards in order to meet regulatory requirements by 2028. If there were to be an increase in the demand for SAC of 3% per year (more than offsetting the population decline in this age-group), the number of SAC Practitioners required to undertake a special purpose SAC award would rise to 3,800 and the number required to undertake a full level 5 award would rise to 1,100.



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