

Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) Rules 2019-2020

Contents

Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) Rules 2019-2020	1
Contents.....	1
1 Overview of AIM	6
2 Eligibility for AIM and definitions.....	6
2.1 Registration on ECCE programme or other eligible DCYA programme	6
2.2 Age of eligible child	6
2.3 Diagnosis of disability.....	6
2.4 Definition of disability	7
2.5 Eligibility for targeted supports under AIM Levels 5, 6 and 7.....	7
2.6 Definition of critical to participation.....	7
3 Availing of other State supports	7
3.1 Supports provided by the Department of Education and Skills.....	7
3.1.1 Home Tuition Grant Scheme.....	8
3.2 HSE-funded supports in mainstream preschool	8
4 AIM Level 1: Inclusion Coordinators	8
4.1 Eligibility to participate in the LINC Programme.....	8
4.2 Eligibility to be an Inclusion Coordinator.....	8
4.3 Rate of additional capitation payable to services with an Inclusion Coordinator	9
4.4 Application for additional capitation for services with an Inclusion Coordinator	9
4.4.1 Date of eligibility to apply for additional capitation	9
4.4.2 How to apply for additional capitation	9
4.4.3 When to apply for additional capitation.....	9
4.4.4 Verification procedures.....	10
4.4.5 Payment of additional capitation for services with an Inclusion Coordinator	10
4.5 Change of circumstances	10
4.5.1 Definition of change of circumstances.....	10
4.5.2 Definition of extended absence from work.....	10
4.5.3 Notification of change of circumstances	10
5 Application process for targeted supports under AIM Levels 4, 6 and 7.....	11
5.1 Access and Inclusion Profile.....	11
5.1.1 Information gathered when applying for targeted supports under AIM	11

5.2	Consent of both parties	11
5.2.1	Informed consent.....	12
5.2.2	Withdrawal of consent.....	12
5.2.3	When to apply.....	12
5.2.4	Availing of AIM Level 4 support prior to application for AIM Levels 6 and 7	12
5.2.5	Purpose of observation visit by Better Start Early Years Specialist	12
5.2.6	Access and Inclusion Plan.....	13
6	AIM Level 4: Expert educational advice, mentoring and support	13
6.1	AIM Level 4 support by telephone.....	13
6.2	Online application for AIM Level 4 support	13
7	AIM Level 5: Grants for equipment, appliances and minor building alterations.....	14
7.1	Categories of Level 5 Applications	14
7.2	Applications for minor alterations	14
7.2.1	Application requirements	14
7.2.2	Categories of designated professional for minor alterations applications.....	14
7.2.3	Contribution towards professional fees	14
7.2.4	Procurement guidelines	15
7.2.5	Definition of valid quotation for minor alterations	15
7.2.6	Eligibility of expenditure on minor alterations	15
7.2.7	Eligibility of applications for grants towards minor alterations.....	15
7.2.8	Eligible amount of grant payable towards minor alterations.....	15
7.2.9	Installation and cost of permanent fixed equipment	16
7.2.10	Payments and Expenditure Reporting	16
7.3	Applications for equipment in respect of a visual or hearing impairment.....	16
7.3.1	Application requirements	16
7.3.2	Categories of designated professional.....	16
7.3.3	Eligibility of applications for equipment in respect of visual or hearing impairment ..	16
7.4	Applications for equipment in respect of all other types of disability.....	17
7.4.1	Application requirements	17
7.4.2	Categories of designated professional.....	17
7.4.3	Eligibility of applications for equipment in respect of all other types of disability	17
7.5	Eligibility of equipment	17
7.6	Eligibility of portable equipment and appliances	17
7.7	Duplicate equipment for two different ECCE services.....	17

7.8	Categories of eligible equipment.....	18
7.9	Value of eligible equipment and appliances.....	18
7.10	Applications for multiple AIM Level 5 supports.....	18
7.11	Decision making process.....	18
7.12	Incomplete applications.....	18
7.13	Ineligible applications	19
7.14	Communication of decision	19
7.15	Review of decision where the decision is to decline an application	19
7.15.1	Membership of review team	19
7.15.2	Review process.....	19
7.15.3	Decision on outcome of review	19
7.16	Requesting a second stage review.....	19
7.16.1	Membership of second stage review team	19
7.16.2	Second stage review process	19
7.16.3	Decision on outcome of second stage review	20
7.17	Provision of equipment and appliances.....	20
7.18	Duration of procurement and delivery process for equipment	20
7.19	Training in use of equipment	20
7.20	Disposal or transfer of equipment at the end of the child’s participation in the ECCE programme	20
7.21	Ownership of equipment and insurance	21
7.22	Transportation of equipment after transfer of ownership.....	21
7.23	Recycling of equipment	21
8	AIM Level 6: Therapy supports	21
8.1	Application process for therapy supports.....	21
8.1.1	Access and Inclusion Profile.....	21
8.1.2	Where the child is already known by the relevant healthcare service.....	21
8.1.3	Where the child is not yet known by the health service relevant to the child’s participation in ECCE.....	21
8.1.4	Information shared during referral process.....	22
8.1.5	Diagnosis of disability.....	22
8.1.6	Model of service delivery – stepped care approach.....	22
9	AIM Level 7: Additional capitation.....	22
9.1	Applications for AIM Level 7 - Additional capitation	22

9.2	Eligibility requirements	23
9.3	Decision making process.....	23
9.3.1	Role of Better Start Early Years Specialist Service	23
9.3.2	Basis for recommendation by Better Start Early Years Specialist.....	23
9.3.3	Degree of support to be granted	23
9.3.4	Review by Appraisal Officer	24
9.3.5	Final decision by Deciding Officer	24
9.3.6	Decision on degree of AIM Level 7 support to be granted	24
9.4	Communication of decision	24
9.5	Requesting a review of an AIM Level 7 application	25
9.5.1	Review of decision where the decision is to decline application	25
9.5.2	Membership of review team	25
9.5.3	Review process.....	25
9.5.4	Decision on outcome of review	25
9.6	Requesting a second stage review.....	25
9.6.1	Membership of second stage review team	25
9.6.2	Second stage review process	25
9.6.3	Decision on outcome of second stage review	25
9.7	Uses of AIM Level 7 additional capitation	25
9.7.1	Use of additional capitation to reduce adult-to-child ratio in the preschool room	26
9.7.2	AIM Level 7 additional assistance staff as a shared resource for the service.....	26
9.7.3	AIM Level 7 additional assistance staff and the child-to-adult ratio in the preschool room	26
9.8	AIM Level 7: moving to a different session and/or a different preschool room	26
9.9	Rates of additional capitation.....	26
9.10	Recruitment of staff under AIM Level 7.....	26
9.11	Employer of staff under AIM Level 7	27
9.12	Qualification requirements for staff hired under AIM Level 7	27
9.13	Grandfathering.....	27
9.14	Staff to support children with medically complex needs availing of AIM	27
9.15	Payment of AIM Level 7 additional capitation.....	27
9.16	Backdating of AIM Level 7 payments.....	27
10	Attendance of children in receipt of AIM supports	28
10.1	Notification of non-attendance to Pobal	28

10.2	Non-attendance of child in receipt of AIM targeted supports	28
10.3	Reduction in attendance.....	28
11	Moving services.....	28
11.1	Notice when moving a child to another service	28
11.2	Moving services: continuing to access AIM supports	28
12	Carrying AIM supports forward into the next ECCE year.....	29
12.1	Carrying AIM supports forward into the next ECCE year in the same service.....	29
12.2	Carrying AIM supports forward into the next ECCE year (moving services).....	29
13	Complaints procedures	29
13.1	Complaints about an application for AIM targeted supports.....	29
13.2	Complaints about the running of a preschool service	29
13.3	Complaints relating to employment under AIM Level 7.....	29

1 Overview of AIM

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. Its goal is to empower Early Learning and Care (ELC) providers to deliver an inclusive preschool experience, ensuring that every eligible child can meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme and reap the benefits of quality early years care and education.

AIM is a child-centred model, involving seven levels of progressive support, moving from the universal to the targeted, based on the needs of the child and the preschool service. It offers tailored, practical supports based on need and does not require a formal diagnosis of disability.

2 Eligibility for AIM and definitions

2.1 Registration on ECCE programme or other eligible DCYA programme

AIM is designed to ensure that children with disabilities can participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. As such, in order for a child to access AIM supports, s/he must be registered on the **ECCE programme** in an ECCE-registered preschool service **or** be eligible to avail of the ECCE programme and be registered and approved on the **Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP)** scheme or the **Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) Scheme**. In either case, the maximum number of hours of support available in the case of AIM Level 7 additional assistance is 15 per week, in line with full time attendance in ECCE.

Both CCSP and TEC will be replaced by the National Childcare Scheme in October 2019 and no new registrations for these schemes will be accepted after that launch. However, the CCSP and TEC schemes will remain running in a limited capacity for parents or providers who choose not to transfer to NCS for the 2019/2020 programme year.

The NCS is designed to 'wrap around' ECCE and there is therefore no rule providing for AIM during hours subsidised by NCS.

Where a child avails of the National Childcare Scheme as well as ECCE, it is permitted for her or him to avail of AIM during the hours she or he takes part in ECCE, up to a maximum of fifteen hours per week.

2.2 Age of eligible child

Eligibility for AIM supports depends on the ECCE Programme rules. For eligibility, including age criteria, please refer to the ECCE Programme rules.

For the 2019-2020 programme year, in exceptional circumstances, exemptions to the upper age limit for the ECCE programme **may** be granted where a child has special/additional needs. Applications for such exemptions must be submitted in writing to eyqueries@dcya.gov.ie and must include a letter of recommendation from a medical specialist (not a GP/Public Health Nurse) stating that it is in the best interest of the child to avail of a further year of pre-school. For further information, please refer to the DCYA Rules for ECCE Programme 2019-2020 document.

2.3 Diagnosis of disability

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a needs-based model and, as such, **does not require a formal diagnosis of disability**. Where a child does have a formal diagnosis of disability, this should be included in his or her Access and Inclusion Profile (the application form for accessing targeted AIM supports – see 5.1). However, a formal diagnosis of disability does not guarantee

additional supports under AIM, as it may be found that existing supports are sufficient to ensure a child's meaningful participation in the ECCE programme.

2.4 Definition of disability

For the purposes of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), disability is defined as 'a long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder a child's full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'. This definition is broad and should ensure that children with needs arising from a long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment will be supported by AIM, even where the particular impairment may not be traditionally recognised as a disability. 'Long-term' should be understood as referring to an impairment which is enduring and permanent or likely to be permanent.

2.5 Eligibility for targeted supports under AIM Levels 5, 6 and 7

In order to qualify for targeted supports under AIM Levels 5, 6 and 7, these supports must be found to be **critical to the child's participation in the ECCE programme**.

2.6 Definition of critical to participation

Supports are considered **critical to participation** in the ECCE programme where it is reasonably agreed that a child, in the absence of those supports and taking into account other existing or available supports:

- i. is unable to access the preschool service due to environmental barriers,
- ii. is unable to commence the ECCE programme,
- iii. is unable to remain on the ECCE programme, or
- iv. is unable to meaningfully participate in the activities provided as part of the ECCE programme,

and it is further agreed that the provision of the particular supports will help to ensure that the child can access and meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme.

3 Availing of other State supports

When applying for targeted AIM supports, parents are requested to inform Better Start of any other supports already in place for the child. This may include supports provided by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (e.g. Home Tuition Grant Scheme) or supports or grants provided by the HSE (either directly or by voluntary agencies on behalf of the HSE).

3.1 Supports provided by the Department of Education and Skills

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) supports a limited range of other preschool provision, including:

- Autism/ASD Early Intervention classes in mainstream and special schools
- The Home Tuition Grant Scheme
- Early Start
- The Rutland Street Preschool Project

Children availing of ECCE are not eligible to access other preschool provision funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) at the same time. In certain circumstances, children availing of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Home Tuition Grant Scheme may also access a preschool service supported by the ECCE programme. Further detail is set out at 3.1.1 below.

In order to ensure compliance with this rule, parents applying for ECCE or DES preschool provision must supply their child's Personal Public Services Number (PPSN). The Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) will cross reference the PPS numbers of children enrolled in DES preschool schemes, including the Home Tuition Grant Scheme, Early Start and the Rutland Street Preschool Project, with those enrolled in ECCE.

3.1.1 Home Tuition Grant Scheme

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) administers the Home Tuition Grant Scheme, which provides funding towards the provision of a compensatory educational service for children who, for a number of specific reasons, are unable to attend preschool and primary school. This includes early educational intervention for children with autism who meet the scheme's eligibility criteria.

In certain circumstances, children availing of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Home Tuition Grant scheme may also access a preschool service supported by the ECCE programme. In such circumstances, the number of tuition hours funded under the DES Home Tuition Grant scheme will be reduced to reflect hours of attendance in ECCE.

Please contact the DES Home Tuition Section for further information.

Telephone: 090 648 4187

Email address: special_education@education.gov.ie

3.2 HSE-funded supports in mainstream preschool

Where HSE or HSE-funded services provide a grant directly to the service provider to bring in additional assistance in relation to a child attending the preschool session and the grant is lower than that paid through AIM, a top up may be applied for through AIM to cover the difference.

4 AIM Level 1: Inclusion Coordinators

4.1 Eligibility to participate in the LINC Programme

Full information on eligibility criteria to participate in the LINC Programme, including frequently asked questions, can be found on the programme's website, www.lincprogramme.ie.

4.2 Eligibility to be an Inclusion Coordinator

The following eligibility criteria apply to the role of Inclusion Coordinator.

The **staff member who wishes to become an Inclusion Coordinator** must:

- have a LINC Graduate ID (previously their LINC student ID) issued by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, that allows for verification by Pobal that they have successfully completed the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Level 6 Special Purpose Award;
- be working in the service to which the increased capitation rate applies;
- complete and sign the Inclusion Coordinator declaration; and
- be appointed as Inclusion Coordinator in one service only.

The **service provider** must:

- be a registered service under active DCYA contract to deliver the ECCE programme, CCSP or TEC.
- ensure that the child or children to whom the increased capitation relates are registered on the ECCE programme **or** are eligible for ECCE and registered on either CCSP or one of the TEC schemes, and are in a preschool room.

- be tax compliant with a Tax Clearance Access Number (TCAN) and Tax Registration Number (TRN).
- fully complete the application form on PIP, including a signed Inclusion Coordinator declaration and consent form, whereby the Inclusion Coordinator agrees to take on the role and responsibilities associated with the post.

4.3 Rate of additional capitation payable to services with an Inclusion Coordinator

Where a service provider is a fully qualified Inclusion Coordinator **or** employs a fully qualified Inclusion Coordinator in their preschool service, that provider will qualify for:

- An increase in the rate of capitation payable to the service of €2 (pro-rata), per ECCE-eligible registered child, per week over 38 weeks.
- or**
- An increase in the rate of ECCE capitation payable to the service of €1.85 (pro-rata), per ECCE-eligible registered child, per week over 41 weeks, where the service is approved to run for 41 weeks per year.

This allowance will be paid according to the number of ECCE-eligible registered children attending the service in a preschool room, with no upper limit on the number of children. Where an ECCE-eligible registered child increases or decreases their level of attendance, the capitation will adjust to reflect this.

The additional capitation will only be payable in relation to one Inclusion Coordinator per service, even if more than one LINC graduate is employed in that service.

4.4 Application for additional capitation for services with an Inclusion Coordinator

4.4.1 Date of eligibility to apply for additional capitation

A preschool service employing a LINC graduate can apply for additional capitation on the completion of a signed agreement by the LINC graduate that they will take on the role and responsibilities associated with the post of Inclusion Coordinator and submission of same by the preschool provider.

4.4.2 How to apply for additional capitation

The application for additional capitation must be made electronically via the Programmes Implementation Platform (PIP). Applications must be completed in full and include the following:

- the applicant's unique graduate ID number (previously student ID number) issued by Mary Immaculate College
- a signed Inclusion Coordinator Declaration and Consent Form (available from the AIM website, www.aim.gov.ie, or from PIP Resources)

Postal or email applications will not be accepted.

4.4.3 When to apply for additional capitation

To avail of increased capitation, eligible service providers must apply each year. It is also necessary to apply when a new Inclusion Coordinator commences this role in the service. Entitlement to the increased capitation does not 'roll over' from one programme year to the next. Therefore, service providers who employ an existing Inclusion Coordinator should apply at the beginning of each programme year.

4.4.4 Verification procedures

Applications for additional capitation will be verified against the eligibility criteria outlined in 4.2. Additional information, including proof of identity or employment, may be sought as part of this process. The Pobal AIM team must be notified immediately of changes to the Inclusion Coordinator's employment.

4.4.5 Payment of additional capitation for services with an Inclusion Coordinator

Additional capitation for services with an Inclusion Coordinator is paid to the service as a Special Allocation via PIP. For ECCE-contracted services, additional capitation is paid in line with the ECCE payment schedule. The increased capitation payment is **not** included in the ECCE advance payment. Payments in relation to children who are eligible for the ECCE programme but are registered on either CCSP or one of the TEC schemes are paid later in the programme year.

Payment of the additional capitation will start and cease as per the employment dates of the Inclusion Coordinator and the start and end dates of the approved child registrations. The 'employment dates of the Inclusion Coordinator' refers to the period of time during which the person is employed and working as the service provider's Inclusion Coordinator, following submission on PIP and approval by Pobal of the Inclusion Coordinator Declaration and Consent Form.

In general, therefore, it is **not possible to backdate payments** of additional capitation for service providers with an Inclusion Coordinator to before the date of approval by Pobal of the Inclusion Coordinator Declaration and Consent Form. To support services to adjust to this rule, and to facilitate applications in relation to newly qualified LINC graduates, in the Programme Year 2019-2020 such payments may be backdated to the beginning of the Programme Year if the Inclusion Coordination declaration is received by Pobal **by 31st October 2019**.

4.5 Change of circumstances

4.5.1 Definition of change of circumstances

A requirement of funding is that changes in the employment of the Inclusion Coordinator must be notified immediately to the Pobal AIM Team. The types of changes that require notification are:

1. Inclusion Coordinator ceases employment in the service
2. Inclusion Coordinator changes their employment conditions, e.g. extended absence from work

4.5.2 Definition of extended absence from work

For this purpose, an extended absence is defined as four or more consecutive preschool weeks and includes maternity leave, sickness and career breaks, etc. The service will cease to be eligible for additional capitation in respect of employing an Inclusion Coordinator in the service after the Inclusion Coordinator has been absent for four consecutive preschool weeks.

4.5.3 Notification of change of circumstances

Changes of circumstances must be reported to the Pobal AIM Team immediately. The service provider should complete the notification of change form available on the PIP Portal and email it to aimteam@pobal.ie.

A notification of change can also be reported by the Inclusion Coordinator, e.g. if the Inclusion Coordinator changes employer. An offline notification form may be downloaded from the AIM website, www.aim.gov.ie, to facilitate Inclusion Coordinators who wish to notify Pobal AIM team directly via post, or email to aimteam@pobal.ie

5 Application process for targeted supports under AIM Levels 4, 6 and 7

AIM applications are administered by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Applications should be made by the provider, in partnership with the parent, on the Programmes Implementation Platform (PIP). To apply for targeted supports under AIM Levels 4, 6 or 7, providers, in partnership with parents, should in the first instance complete an Access and Inclusion Profile for the child.

5.1 Access and Inclusion Profile

The Access and Inclusion Profile looks at the strengths, abilities and needs of the child, as well as the strengths and needs of the preschool service. The Access and Inclusion Profile seeks information on the child under the headings of physical abilities, communication abilities, social skills, behaviour and health.

5.1.1 Information gathered when applying for targeted supports under AIM

Where the parent(s) or guardian(s), in partnership with the preschool provider, choose to apply for AIM, the information collected about their child **will** include:

- the child's personal information, including name, address, PPSN, date of birth and sex
- name(s) and contact details of parent(s) or guardian(s)
- information gathered through the Access and Inclusion Profile and/or Capital Application (AIM Level 5)
- HSE or HSE-funded healthcare professional or DES Visiting Teacher AIM Capital Report Form for the preschool service and/or capital and equipment applications

The information collected **may** include:

- any relevant health service assessment and report
- information gathered through observation of the child in the preschool service
- details of relevant health professionals involved with the child, e.g. GP or family doctor, occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, physiotherapist, psychologist, paediatrician, audiologist or other health professional.

The AIM privacy statement outlines the reasons for the gathering of the above information and assists parents or guardians to understand how AIM gathers and uses the information about their child. The AIM privacy statement is available at www.aim.gov.ie and can also be viewed as part of the Access and Inclusion Profile under AIM Level 4.

5.2 Consent of both parties

Applications for AIM targeted supports may only be made with the consent of both the preschool provider and the child's parent or guardian.

Where a parent or guardian wishes to make an application for AIM targeted supports, but the preschool provider does not consent to the application being made, the parent or guardian should consult their local City or County Childcare Committee (CCC), who will advise them and may recommend an alternative provider, if appropriate. Contact details for all CCCs can be found on www.myccc.ie.

Where a preschool provider wishes to make an application for AIM targeted supports for a child, but the child's parent or guardian does not consent to the application being made, the application cannot proceed.

5.2.1 Informed consent

Applications can only be made with the full consent of the parent or guardian. The parental consent form should be printed and signed by the parent or guardian and should then be uploaded and submitted with the completed online application on PIP. In providing consent for an application to be made, the parent or guardian is also providing consent for information on the application to be shared with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Health, HSE and HSE-funded voluntary organisations and the National Council for Special Education.

5.2.2 Withdrawal of consent

A parent or guardian can withdraw consent for their child to be involved in AIM at any time without giving any reason. Withdrawal of consent for the child to be involved in AIM does not impact on the child's entitlement to the ECCE programme. Parents or guardians may withdraw their consent by telling their preschool service that they wish to do so and by emailing aimteam@pobal.ie stating their wish to withdraw consent. Parents or guardians may also indicate their wish to withdraw consent to Pobal by writing to Pobal AIM team at the following address: Access and Inclusion Model, Pobal, Holbrook House, Holles Street, Dublin 2. Where consent is withdrawn, the application for supports or any supports already in place for their child will be withdrawn.

Where the preschool service ceases to be provided to a child because the parent has exercised the right to remove the child from the preschool service for any reason, monies paid in excess of the monies due in respect of that child by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to that provider for the provision of the preschool service shall be returned to the Minister in accordance with the 'DCYA Rules for ECCE Programme 2019-2020' document available on Pobal's website (www.pobal.ie) and also in accordance with the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) Rules available on the AIM website (www.aim.gov.ie).

5.2.3 When to apply

The application process for AIM targeted supports opens in May each year in advance of the new preschool year in September. The application process remains open year round. Providers and parents are advised to apply at least three months before the child's planned start date in ECCE in order to ensure that the application can be processed in a timely manner.

5.2.4 Availing of AIM Level 4 support prior to application for AIM Levels 6 and 7

On receipt of a completed Access and Inclusion Profile, a Better Start Early Years Specialist (EYS) will contact the service provider by phone to discuss and agree what level of support is required. Where the Specialist determines that telephone support is sufficient, support at that level will be provided. Where the Specialist determines that more support may be required, a visit to the service will be arranged with the service provider. It is the responsibility of the service provider to advise parents when an appointment has been made for the EYS to visit the service. Applicants must avail of AIM Level 4 support before availing of AIM Levels 6 or 7.

5.2.5 Purpose of observation visit by Better Start Early Years Specialist

The purpose of the observation visit is for the Better Start Early Years Specialist to observe the child in the preschool service in order to determine the level of extra support (if any) required for the child to be able to meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme in that particular service. The child must be present in the service during the observation visit (except in the circumstances noted below). To allow the Better Start Early Years Specialist to gain an accurate impression of the level of support required, providers should endeavour to

ensure that the observation visit is representative of a typical day for the child in the preschool. For example, the adult-to-child ratio should be the same as on a typical day.

The observation visit may occur either before enrolment or after the child has started in the preschool, depending on when the application is submitted. The Specialist will review the profile with the provider, make further observations and provide advice and support.

Where a child has additionally complex needs or complex medical needs such that he or she could not reasonably be expected to attend the preschool service for an observation visit without AIM targeted supports, the observation visit may be delayed until after the supports are in place at the discretion of the Better Start Early Years Specialist Service. In such situations, targeted supports can be approved prior to an observation visit, but approval by the Better Start Early Years Specialist Service is required and payment in relation to targeted supports cannot be backdated to a date before the date on which approval is given.

5.2.6 Access and Inclusion Plan

Based on the child's Access and Inclusion Profile and the observation visit, the Better Start Early Years Specialist will support the provider, in consultation with the parent or guardian, to devise an Access and Inclusion Plan for the child. This will outline what actions, adaptations and additional supports may be required to ensure the child's inclusion in the preschool.

6 AIM Level 4: Expert educational advice, mentoring and support

6.1 AIM Level 4 support by telephone

The Better Start Early Years Specialist Service can be contacted by phone, email or via the online application form. It is not necessary to fill out the online application form if support from a Specialist is required over the phone. However, consent from a parent or guardian is required before any information relating to a child can be shared or discussed by the service provider. Should the phone support prove insufficient to address matters of concern, the service provider may choose, or be directed to proceed to, an online application in order to receive a higher level of support.

6.2 Online application for AIM Level 4 support

In applying online for support from the Better Start Early Years Specialist service, service providers, in conjunction with parents, will be asked to provide the following details:

- Name of child and service provider
- DCYA reference number
- Consent from parent for Better Start to interact with the child and service provider and to share information with other relevant professionals where this is necessary to prepare and plan for the child's inclusion in the preschool service

The application form also includes a simple Access and Inclusion Profile. A Specialist may take a service provider through some of these questions as a guide over the phone or the service provider and the parent can complete the form themselves without any involvement from a third party.

7 AIM Level 5: Grants for equipment, appliances and minor building alterations

7.1 Categories of Level 5 Applications

Applications for level 5 support fall into one of the following three categories:

- Applications for minor alterations
- Applications for equipment in respect of a visual or hearing impairment
- Applications for equipment in respect of all other types of disability

7.2 Applications for minor alterations

7.2.1 Application requirements

A service provider, in partnership with a parent, may submit an application for a capital grant towards the cost of minor building alterations. An application should be accompanied by two short reports by designated professionals (as defined in section 7.2.2), as follows, which indicate the nature of the proposed minor alteration works and confirm:

- a) that the proposed minor alteration works are necessary and are critical to enabling the participation of the child in the ECCE programme in the relevant preschool, and
- b) that the proposed minor alteration works are compliant with the Building (Part M Amendment) Regulations 2010, and

The service provider will also be required to confirm that the preschool service will not be rendered non-compliant with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 as a result of the minor alteration works.

7.2.2 Categories of designated professional for minor alterations applications

Report (a), confirming that the proposed minor alteration works are necessary and critical to the child's participation in ECCE, should be completed by **either**:

- i. An occupational therapist working for or on behalf of the HSE, who is registered with the Health and Social Care Professionals Council (CORU); **or**
- ii. Such other category of health and social care professional as may be recognised by Pobal, in consultation with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Health, for the purposes of this scheme.

In the case of a healthcare professional, the definition of designated professional is limited to therapists working for or on behalf of the HSE. As such, reports from healthcare professionals working in a private capacity will not be accepted for the purposes of applications for AIM Level 5 support.

Report (b), confirming that the proposed minor alteration works are compliant with the relevant Building Regulations, should be completed by **either**:

- i. An architect, who is registered on the register of architects maintained by the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland; **or**
- ii. An engineer, who is registered with Engineers Ireland as a Chartered Engineer CEng MIEI or an Associate Engineer AEng MIEI or an Engineering Technician EngTech MIEI or a Fellow CEng FIEI.

7.2.3 Contribution towards professional fees

In the case of the designated professional at (i) or (ii) under rule 7.2.2 above, the service provider can apply for a contribution of up to a maximum of €300 inclusive of VAT towards the cost of any professional fees. One valid quote for professional fees should be included

with the application. No professional fee will apply in the case of the designated professional at (iii) or (iv) at 7.2.2 above, as they will be working for or on behalf of the HSE.

7.2.4 Procurement guidelines

When submitting an application for minor alterations, service providers must adhere to statutory procurement requirements as per Pobal's procurement guidelines. Current requirements are:

- For building works and alterations less than €5,000, one written quotation/tender is required.
- For building works and repairs equal to or in excess of €5,000, a minimum of 3 written quotations/tenders are required.
- Service providers are required to source valid quotations at the application stage and to include the most favourable quote with their application. Where appropriate, Pobal can request the submission of all quotes as part of the appraisal, contracting, payment, reporting and compliance stages.

7.2.5 Definition of valid quotation for minor alterations

For a quote to be deemed valid it must: (1) be dated within 3 months of the application, (2) be on headed paper, (3) include a VAT number, (4) be clearly itemised and (5) where more than one quote is attached/required, they must be from separate suppliers.

7.2.6 Eligibility of expenditure on minor alterations

No alteration costs, or part thereof, which have already been expended or purchased are eligible. All items or services purchased (excluding professional fees) must be after the approval date.

7.2.7 Eligibility of applications for grants towards minor alterations

The submitted application will be reviewed by an Appraisal Officer in Pobal, who will firstly establish if the application is complete and meets the initial requirements to be eligible for consideration. These requirements are as follows:

- The service provider is a registered preschool service under active contract to deliver the ECCE programme.
- The child qualifies for the ECCE programme or will qualify for the programme from the planned date of enrolment for which completed minor alterations are needed.
- The report supporting the application has been completed by a designated professional who is registered or accredited by the relevant professional body.
- The report supporting the application relates directly to the child named in the application and to the relevant preschool service.
- The service provider has confirmed that the minor alteration works remain compliant with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016.
- Quotes have been provided in line with Pobal procurement guidelines.
- The alteration has not already been carried out.

7.2.8 Eligible amount of grant payable towards minor alterations

The maximum grant payable under the scheme is capped at €7,000 inclusive of VAT. This can include a maximum contribution towards the cost of professional fees of €300 inclusive of VAT. In other words, the maximum grant payable to cover both minor alterations and professional fees cannot exceed €7,000 including VAT.

7.2.9 Installation and cost of permanent fixed equipment

Permanent fixed equipment (i.e. wall mounted changing beds) will be installed by the supplier of the equipment. Therefore, the cost of installation of permanent fixed equipment should be included in the application and quotation submitted.

7.2.10 Payments and Expenditure Reporting

On receipt of a signed grant agreement, the service provider will be paid 90% of their approved funding for minor alterations. The remaining 10% will be paid subject to the submission and verification of an expenditure return to Pobal.

7.3 Applications for equipment in respect of a visual or hearing impairment

7.3.1 Application requirements

A service provider, in partnership with a parent, may submit an application for equipment in respect of a visual or hearing impairment. An application should be accompanied by a short report by a designated professional which specifies the precise equipment sought and confirms:

- a) that the proposed equipment is necessary and critical to enabling the participation of the child in the ECCE programme in the relevant preschool, and
- b) that the proposed equipment is not already available in the preschool service or capable of being transferred to and used in the preschool service.

Where the report is submitted by a Visiting Teacher, it is generally known as a letter of recommendation.

7.3.2 Categories of designated professional

For the purposes of this category, a designated professional is limited to:

- i. Visiting Teacher, or
- ii. an occupational therapist working for, or on behalf of, the HSE, or
- iii. a speech and language therapist working for, or on behalf of, the HSE.

7.3.3 Eligibility of applications for equipment in respect of visual or hearing impairment

The submitted application will be reviewed by an Appraisal Officer in Pobal, who will firstly establish if the application is complete and meets the initial requirements to be eligible for consideration. These requirements are as follows:

- The service provider is a registered preschool service under contract to deliver the ECCE programme.
- The child qualifies for the ECCE programme or will qualify for the programme from the planned date of enrolment for which the equipment is needed.
- The proposed equipment falls within the list of eligible equipment maintained by Pobal.
- The report supporting the application has been completed by a Visiting Teacher or a registered occupational therapist or speech and language therapist working for, or on behalf of, the HSE.

7.4 Applications for equipment in respect of all other types of disability

7.4.1 Application requirements

A service provider, in partnership with a parent, may submit an application for other types of equipment which may be required for a child with a disability. An application should be accompanied by a short report by a designated professional which specifies the precise equipment sought and confirms:

- a) that the proposed equipment is necessary and critical to enabling the participation of the child in the ECCE programme in the relevant preschool, and
- b) that the proposed equipment is not already available in the preschool service or capable of being transferred to and used in the preschool service.

7.4.2 Categories of designated professional

For the purposes of this category, a designated professional is limited to:

- i. an occupational therapist working for, or on behalf of, the HSE, or
- ii. a physiotherapist working for, or on behalf of, the HSE.
- iii. a speech and language therapist working for, or on behalf of, the HSE, or
- iv. such other category of health and social care professional as may be recognised by Pobal, in consultation with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Health, for the purposes of this scheme.

7.4.3 Eligibility of applications for equipment in respect of all other types of disability

The submitted application will be reviewed by an Appraisal Officer in Pobal, who will firstly establish if the application is complete and meets the initial requirements to be eligible for consideration. These requirements are as follows:

- The service provider is a registered preschool service under contract to deliver the ECCE programme.
- The child is eligible for the ECCE programme or will be eligible for the programme from the planned date of enrolment for which the equipment is needed.
- The proposed equipment falls within the list of eligible equipment maintained by Pobal.
- The report supporting the application has been completed by a registered occupational therapist, physiotherapist or speech and language therapist working for, or on behalf of, the HSE.

7.5 Eligibility of equipment

Applications for equipment will only be considered where they are deemed to be critical to the child's **participation in the ECCE programme**. Where a child also requires an item of equipment for use outside the ECCE programme, e.g. at home, application should be made through the HSE or current healthcare provider regarding this equipment.

7.6 Eligibility of portable equipment and appliances

Where a child uses an item of equipment or an appliance in the home that could reasonably be transported to and from preschool, applications for duplicate or similar equipment or appliances for use in the preschool will not be granted.

7.7 Duplicate equipment for two different ECCE services

Application for duplicate equipment for use in an ECCE setting may be made where the equipment meets all other eligibility criteria set out in the AIM Rules and where a child has approval from DCYA to split his or her attendance between two different ECCE services. This is subject to ECCE rule 2.2.11 'Provision of ECCE Programme by more than one Service Provider'.

7.8 Categories of eligible equipment

A list of categories of eligible equipment is maintained and updated from time to time by Pobal in consultation with the HSE. This list can be viewed on www.aim.gov.ie.

7.9 Value of eligible equipment and appliances

Applications for equipment and appliances will not be considered where the value of an item is under €50.

7.10 Applications for multiple AIM Level 5 supports

In some cases, a preschool service, in conjunction with a parent, may need to apply for two inter-dependent categories of AIM Level 5 support, e.g. a minor alteration and specialised equipment. In this instance, the applicant should flag the relationship between the two applications and should seek to ensure that there is consistency across the supporting reports, e.g. the same designated professional might complete one report covering both applications or the report for minor alterations might reference and take account of the report for specialised equipment and vice versa.

7.11 Decision making process

Where an application is complete and eligible, it will be assessed and a decision will be made by the Deciding Officer who will be a separate individual to the Appraisal Officer. The Deciding Officer may decide to 'part-fund' an application. The Deciding Officer will reach a decision on the basis set out below.

An application will be approved, subject to funding, where:

- i. an Appraisal Officer confirms that an application is complete and meets initial eligibility requirements, and
- ii. the attached report by the designated professional confirms items a) and b) under the application requirements for the relevant category of application, and
- iii. the Deciding Officer is satisfied that no further information is required in relation to the application.

An application will be rejected where:

- i. the attached report by the designated professional fails to confirm items a) and b) of the application requirements for the relevant category of application, and
- ii. the Deciding Officer is satisfied that no further information is required in relation to the application.

Before reaching a decision, the Deciding Officer may seek additional information from the Appraisal Officer, the applicants, a Better Start Early Years Specialist, any designated professional who has submitted a report in support of an application or from the relevant City or County Childcare Committee (CCC). Where that further information causes an Appraisal Officer or designated professional to alter their conclusion, then the Deciding Officer should take this new conclusion into account and reach a decision in accordance with the criteria set out above.

7.12 Incomplete applications

Where an application is incomplete, it will be immediately referred back to the applicant who will be informed that the application is incomplete and cannot be considered further. However, the applicant will have the opportunity to resubmit as appropriate, e.g. an applicant could remedy any omissions in the original application and resubmit.

7.13 Ineligible applications

Where an application fails to meet the eligibility requirements for its category, this will be immediately communicated to the applicant who will be informed that the application is ineligible and cannot be considered further. However, the applicant will have the opportunity to submit a new application on PIP. The applicant will also be informed of their right to seek verbal feedback in the first instance and, if not satisfied with this feedback, a review of the Appraisal Officer's decision in the matter.

7.14 Communication of decision

Having reached a decision, Pobal will communicate this to the service provider. Where the decision is to approve, the service provider will be notified. Where the service is approved equipment or appliances, arrangements will be made for their provision and delivery to the preschool service. Where the service is approved for minor alterations, a funding contract will be issued. Where the decision is not to approve, the service provider will be informed of his/her right to verbal feedback in the first instance and, if not satisfied with this feedback, to seek a review.

7.15 Review of decision where the decision is to decline an application

The Service Provider, in conjunction with the parent, will have the right to request verbal feedback in the first instance and, if not satisfied with this feedback, to request a review.

7.15.1 Membership of review team

The membership of the Review Team will be different from those Appraisal Officers and Deciding Officers who were engaged with the initial decision making in relation to the application for supports.

7.15.2 Review process

The review process will be documented in detail by Pobal. It will involve a desktop review of the application paperwork, the process followed in managing the application from receipt to final decision and the decision reached. It will not involve fresh assessments or service visits by specialists, healthcare professionals or any other official involved in the application process. However, any new information submitted by the applicant can be taken into account, if relevant. Pobal may also contact Better Start for further information or clarification.

7.15.3 Decision on outcome of review

The decision of the Review Team will be relayed to the service provider and the parent. Generally, the decision of the Review Team will be final. If further, new information comes to hand following this decision, a new application can be submitted via PIP.

7.16 Requesting a second stage review

Generally, the decision of the Review Team will be final. In exceptional circumstances, service providers, in conjunction with parents or guardians, who have completed the review process as outlined above may contact Pobal AIM team to request a second stage review.

7.16.1 Membership of second stage review team

Second stage reviews are conducted by staff who have not been involved either in processing the original application or in conducting the original review of the application.

7.16.2 Second stage review process

The second stage review process will be documented in detail by Pobal. It will involve a desktop review of the application paperwork, the process followed in managing the application from receipt to final decision and the decision reached. It will not involve fresh

assessments or service visits by specialists, healthcare professionals or any other official involved in the application process. However, any new information submitted by the applicant can be taken into account, if relevant. Pobal may also contact Better Start for further information or clarification.

7.16.3 Decision on outcome of second stage review

The decision of the Review Team will be relayed to the service provider and the parent. The outcome of a second stage review is final. If further, new information comes to hand following this decision, a new application can be submitted via PIP.

7.17 Provision of equipment and appliances

Where an application for equipment is approved, this equipment will be procured by Pobal and delivered directly to the child's preschool service.

7.18 Duration of procurement and delivery process for equipment

Pobal will begin the procurement process as soon as possible after the application for AIM Level 5 supports has been approved. The procurement process for more specialised equipment may be longer due to the possible need to source equipment or necessary parts from abroad. Once the procurement process has been completed, the equipment will be ordered from the appointed supplier. Some very specialist items are made to order. As such, applicants are advised to allow at least 6-10 weeks from approval of the AIM Level 5 application for the installation and delivery of equipment. **As mentioned in 5.2.4, preschool providers and parents are advised to apply for targeted AIM supports at least three months before the child's planned start date in ECCE.**

7.19 Training in use of equipment

When training is recommended by the designated health professional, this is communicated to the supplier of the approved equipment.

Demonstration for all relevant preschool staff in the proper use of the equipment will be provided by the supplier as a standard additional service. The designated healthcare professional will identify on the form if they also need to be present for training and set up provided by the supplier which Pobal will communicate to the healthcare professional.

The supplier will liaise directly with the preschool and designated health professional to arrange a suitable time for training. The preschool must engage with Pobal and any other body who will provide training in relation to any equipment or appliance granted under AIM.

7.20 Disposal or transfer of equipment at the end of the child's participation in the ECCE programme

At the end of the child's participation in the ECCE programme, the following rules apply. Pobal's decision on the application of these rules is final:

1. Fixed equipment and low value items (as determined by Pobal) remain in the preschool and ownership is transferred to the preschool
2. Ownership of personal items is transferred to the parent
3. Ownership of other equipment is transferred to the primary school to which the child is transitioning (where deemed appropriate by an HSE or HSE-funded professional)
4. If a piece of equipment is no longer required by a child, the service provider, health professional or parent can inform Pobal by emailing aimlevel5@pobal.ie (see 7.23)

Transfer of ownership of equipment from Pobal to the relevant party as outlined above occurs at the end of the child's participation in the ECCE programme. Preschool providers

and parents must engage with Pobal in relation to the transfer of ownership of equipment (including returning signed transfer of ownership forms, as appropriate). Equipment provided under AIM Level 5 should not be removed from the preschool until the transfer of ownership process is completed.

7.21 Ownership of equipment and insurance

All equipment provided under AIM Level 5 is the property of Pobal and the DCYA, until such a time as the transfer of ownership process (described in section 7.20) is completed.

All equipment provided under AIM Level 5 is insured by Pobal for fire and theft. On completion of the transfer of ownership process, insurance requirements transfer to the new owner.

7.22 Transportation of equipment after transfer of ownership

If required, the transfer of equipment provided under AIM Level 5 can be arranged by Pobal by contacting aimlevel5@pobal.ie

7.23 Recycling of equipment

Where a piece of equipment purchased under AIM is no longer in use, the service provider, health professional or parent can inform Pobal by emailing aimlevel5@pobal.ie. On receipt of this notification Pobal will arrange for the equipment to be collected and recycled as appropriate.

8 AIM Level 6: Therapy supports

8.1 Application process for therapy supports

8.1.1 Access and Inclusion Profile

Where a service provider, in conjunction with a parent, considers that a child may need therapeutic support in order to access and meaningfully participate in preschool, they can apply for this support by completing the Access and Inclusion Profile, which will include relevant health services which the child is or has received or is waitlisted for.

8.1.2 Where the child is already known by the relevant healthcare service

The Better Start Early Years Specialist will contact the healthcare professional (or service) identified in the Access and Inclusion Profile to review strategies already in place for that child so that the Early Years Specialist can reinforce these strategies with the preschool. As the child is already known to the relevant healthcare service (i.e. is currently receiving services or has in the past), the parents and preschool can also review preschool preparation and participation needs directly with their healthcare service.

8.1.3 Where the child is not yet known by the health service relevant to the child's participation in ECCE

Where the Better Start Early Years Specialist has reviewed the child's Access and Inclusion Plan with the preschool, met the child and exhausted all AIM Level 4 supports and challenges to the child's access and/or participation remain, the Early Years Specialist will contact the relevant health service where the child is on a waiting list as identified on the child's Access and Inclusion Profile, or the relevant contact person in the HSE if the child is not on a waiting list, for universal supports over the phone.

Where universal strategies do not result in the child's optimal participation in preschool,

the Early Years Specialist will contact the healthcare professional again regarding the need to progress to targeted interventions. Where the child is not already on a waiting list for an HSE/HSE-funded Early Intervention Team or Service, the EYS will request the parent to complete and return the following forms to the EYS:

1. The HSE's National Access Policy Referral Form
2. Age relevant Additional Information Form

The Early Years Specialist (EYS) will email the two forms to the parent at the email contact address provided on the Access and Inclusion Profile. The parent should return the completed form to the EYS, who will forward it with a copy of the Access and Inclusion Profile and an outline of strategies and supports already provided to the agreed HSE contact person, by registered post. The agreed response time is within five weeks. This is a formal referral to Early Intervention services, where the child will receive therapeutic supports critical to his or her participation in the ECCE programme while he or she remains on a waiting list for other therapy needs.

8.1.4 Information shared during referral process

When making a referral to early intervention services for targeted supports, the Better Start Early Years Specialist will share the Access and Inclusion Profile with the HSE. The HSE, in turn, will acknowledge receipt of the referral and advise the Better Start Early Years Specialist regarding proposed strategies and supports which will be made available.

8.1.5 Diagnosis of disability

The provision of supports under AIM Level 6 will be grounded in a needs-based approach, specifically addressing the needs of the child which are critical to their meaningful participation in the ECCE programme. In other words, children seeking to access therapeutic supports under AIM Level 6 will not require formal diagnosis.

8.1.6 Model of service delivery – stepped care approach

The model of service delivery for AIM Level 6 supports is a stepped care approach, ranging from universal strategies to more specific, targeted individual interventions. The stepped care approach is a well-recognised, effective model implemented by many services. Within this model, service delivery is aimed at:

- prevention
- early intervention
- brief, generic interventions
- more individually tailored one-to-one intervention.

As such, a response to a request for support under AIM Level 6 may include universal and/or targeted strategies to support the child.

9 AIM Level 7: Additional capitation

9.1 Applications for AIM Level 7 - Additional capitation

A service provider, in conjunction with a parent or guardian, can apply for additional capitation under AIM Level 7 where the provider considers that this is likely to be critical to ensuring a child's meaningful participation in the ECCE programme in their service. Providers and parents or guardians should in the first instance complete an Access and Inclusion Profile for the child and, within the profile, select AIM Level 7 under service request.

9.2 Eligibility requirements

Applications will be considered eligible for consideration if:

- The preschool service is registered and under active contract to deliver the ECCE programme.¹
- The child qualifies for the ECCE programme or will qualify for the programme from the planned date of enrolment for which the additional capitation is needed

Where an application is deemed not to meet the initial eligibility requirements, a service provider can contact Pobal client services for further assistance and will also have a right to seek a review of their case.

9.3 Decision making process

The decision making process for AIM Level 7 supports generally comprises three steps:

1. Recommendation by Better Start Early Years Specialist
2. Review of application by appraisal officer in Pobal
3. Final decision by deciding officer in Pobal

9.3.1 Role of Better Start Early Years Specialist Service

Where an application is complete and eligible, it will be referred to the Better Start Early Years Specialist Service who may visit the service provider and child with a view to identifying whether AIM Level 7 support is critical to the child's meaningful participation in the ECCE programme in that preschool service. In order to determine this, the Specialist will:

- Complete an observation based on the Access and Inclusion Profile as a means of providing a clear and objective opinion of both the child's and the service's strengths, abilities and needs,
- determine whether all other levels and supports have been considered and appropriately utilised,
- determine whether the provision of additional capitation would result in an undesirable balance of staff and children as indicated by the National Early Years Quality Development Service guidelines,
- obtain other expert input from the HSE as necessary.

Having undertaken all of the above, the Better Start Early Years Specialist will make a written, evidence informed recommendation as to whether AIM Level 7 support is critical to the child's participation in the preschool service. She or he will forward this recommendation to an appraisal officer in Pobal for review.

9.3.2 Basis for recommendation by Better Start Early Years Specialist

The Better Start Early Years Specialist's recommendation will be based on the completed Access and Inclusion Profile, the expert judgement of the Specialist, and any other expert advice sought by the Specialist.

9.3.3 Degree of support to be granted

Where the Specialist recommends that AIM Level 7 support is critical to a child's participation in the preschool session, the Specialist will further consider the degree and type of AIM Level 7 support required, having regard for:

- The child's needs in the context of the preschool environment (Complex, additionally complex, medically complex)

¹ Services that are under contract to deliver CCSP or TEC, but who have ECCE eligible children, are also eligible to apply for AIM for these children.

- The capacity of the service including current adult to child ratios
- External supports available to the child and/or the service provider
- The current level of AIM Level 7 support awarded

A Deciding Officer may grant AIM Level 7 additional capitation on a pro rata basis where there is a clear justification for doing so, for example, where a child is not able to attend the service on a full-time basis or where other supports are available on a part-time basis.

9.3.4 Review by Appraisal Officer

An Appraisal Officer will review the recommendation made by the Early Years Specialist to establish that it is complete and meets requirements for final decision. The appraisal officer may seek additional information from the Early Years Specialist if required. Once reviewed and completed, the appraisal officer will refer the appraisal to a deciding officer for final decision.

9.3.5 Final decision by Deciding Officer

The Deciding Officer will reach a decision on the basis set out below.

An application will be approved, subject to funding, where:

- i. an Appraisal Officer confirms that an application is complete and meets initial eligibility requirements, and
- ii. a Better Start Early Years Specialist confirms that it is his or her recommendation that AIM Level 7 support is critical to enable the child's participation in the preschool, and
- iii. the Deciding Officer is satisfied that no further information is required in relation to the application.

An application will be rejected where:

- i. a Better Start Early Years Specialist confirms that it is her or her recommendation that AIM Level 7 support is not critical to enable the child's participation in the preschool and/or that other supports have not been sufficiently considered and utilised, and
- ii. the Deciding Officer is satisfied that no further information is required in relation to the application.

Before reaching a decision, the Deciding Officer may revert to the Appraisal Officer or the Better Start Early Years Specialist seeking further information. Where that further information causes an Appraisal Officer or a Better Start Early Years Specialist to alter their conclusion, then the Deciding Officer should take this new conclusion into account and reach a decision in accordance with the criteria set out above.

9.3.6 Decision on degree of AIM Level 7 support to be granted

In deciding to grant AIM Level 7 support, the Deciding Officer will also decide the rate of the AIM Level 7 capitation, having regard to the recommendation of the Better Start Early Years Specialist.

9.4 Communication of decision

Where the decision is to approve the application, the service provider and parent will each receive an email from Pobal, notifying them of the approval and of the basis on which the additional capitation is being approved, i.e. the type of support which should be provided on foot of the additional capitation (see 9.7), supervision arrangements etc., taking into account any views expressed by the parent or service provider.

9.5 Requesting a review of an AIM Level 7 application

9.5.1 Review of decision where the decision is to decline application

The Service Provider, in conjunction with the parent, will have the right to request verbal feedback in the first instance and, if not satisfied with this feedback, to request a review.

9.5.2 Membership of review team

The membership of the Review Team will be different from those Appraisal Officers and Deciding Officers who were engaged with the initial decision making in relation to the application for supports.

9.5.3 Review process

The review process will be documented in detail by Pobal. It will involve a desktop review of the application paperwork, the process followed in managing the application from receipt to final decision and the decision reached. It will not involve fresh assessments or service visits by specialists, healthcare professionals or any other official involved in the application process. However, any new information submitted by the applicant can be taken into account, if relevant. Pobal may also contact Better Start for further information or clarification.

9.5.4 Decision on outcome of review

The decision of the Review Team will be relayed to the service provider and the parent or guardian. Generally, the decision of the Review Team will be final. If further, new information comes to hand following this decision, a new application can be submitted via PIP.

9.6 Requesting a second stage review

Generally, the decision of the Review Team will be final. In exceptional circumstances, service providers, in conjunction with parents or guardians, who have completed the review process as outlined above may contact Pobal AIM team to request a second stage review.

9.6.1 Membership of second stage review team

Second stage reviews are conducted by staff who have not been involved either in processing the original application or in conducting the original review of the application.

9.6.2 Second stage review process

The second stage review process will be documented in detail by Pobal. It will involve a desktop review of the application paperwork, the process followed in managing the application from receipt to final decision and the decision reached. It will not involve fresh assessments or service visits by specialists, healthcare professionals or any other official involved in the application process. However, any new information submitted by the applicant can be taken into account, if relevant. Pobal may also contact Better Start for further information or clarification.

9.6.3 Decision on outcome of second stage review

The decision of the Review Team will be relayed to the service provider and the parent or guardian. The outcome of a second stage review is final. If further, new information comes to hand following this decision, a new application can be submitted via PIP.

9.7 Uses of AIM Level 7 additional capitation

Where AIM Level 7 support is granted, additional capitation will be provided to the preschool service to either reduce the child-to-adult ratio in the preschool room or to buy in additional assistance. The approved use of the additional capitation is outlined as part of the decision notification to the service provider.

9.7.1 Use of additional capitation to reduce adult-to-child ratio in the preschool room

Where it is deemed appropriate and approved by Pobal, services can use the additional capitation granted under AIM Level 7 to reduce the adult-to-child ratio in the preschool room by enrolling fewer children.

9.7.2 AIM Level 7 additional assistance staff as a shared resource for the service

AIM does not fund Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). Accordingly, any staff member hired under AIM is a shared resource for all children in the preschool session. Furthermore, one additional staff member may be deemed to be sufficient to meet the needs of two or more children who have been granted additional capitation, where these children are attending the same preschool session.

9.7.3 AIM Level 7 additional assistance staff and the child-to-adult ratio in the preschool room

Where AIM Level 7 additional capitation is used to bring an additional staff member into the ECCE session, this additional person does not constitute part of the child-to-adult ratio for the purposes of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. This is to safeguard the use of this resource to meet the particular needs for which it was funded. This means that the staff member (who is providing the AIM Level 7 Additional Assistance) is not permitted to be included in the child-to-adult ratio. Where a room with one adult and eleven children prior to the staff member providing the AIM Level 7 Additional Assistance commences, the room cannot add a further eleven children, as the additional assistant is not allowed to be included in the child-to-adult ratio.

9.8 AIM Level 7: moving to a different session and/or a different preschool room

Providers and parents should note that, where a child in receipt of AIM Level 7 additional capitation moves to a different preschool session, for example from the morning session to the afternoon session, or to a different room in the same preschool service, this may affect the child's entitlement to AIM Level 7 support.

For example, if a child who has been granted AIM Level 7 support, which has been used to buy in additional assistance to the preschool room, moves into a preschool room where there is an additional staff member hired under AIM Level 7 to support another child, it may be found that one additional staff member is sufficient to support both children in the preschool room.

Pobal should be informed of all changes to a child's preschool environment and may change the level of support approved accordingly.

9.9 Rates of additional capitation

- A rate of €130 per week to enable a service to supplement their staffing by 10 additional staff hours per week.
- A rate of €195 per week to enable a service to supplement their staffing by 15 hours per week.

AIM Level 7 additional capitation can also be approved on a pro rata basis where there is a clear justification for doing so (e.g. the child cannot attend the service on a full-time basis or other supports are available on a part-time basis).

9.10 Recruitment of staff under AIM Level 7

Where the preschool service is using the additional capitation to fund an extra staff member, this recruitment process is wholly carried out by the preschool provider. Neither

the Department of Children and Youth Affairs nor Pobal has any role in the recruitment of staff for preschool services.

9.11 Employer of staff under AIM Level 7

In the case of staff funded by AIM Level 7 additional capitation, the service provider is the employer, except in the case of HSE-approved nurses or healthcare assistants.

9.12 Qualification requirements for staff hired under AIM Level 7

Staff hired under AIM Level 7 must satisfy the qualification requirements of the Early Years Services Regulations 2016, which stipulate that all staff working in preschool services must have, at minimum, a major award in Early Childhood Care and Education at Level 5 of the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ) or a qualification deemed by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to be equivalent. There are two exceptions to this rule, outlined at 9.13 and 9.14 below.

9.13 Grandfathering

Staff who do not satisfy the minimum qualification requirements to work in ECCE services, but who have signed a Grandfathering Declaration and agreed to leave the sector by September 2021, are eligible to work in ECCE services and are therefore eligible to work as additional assistance staff under AIM Level 7 until 31st August 2021.

9.14 Staff to support children with medically complex needs availing of AIM

In exceptional circumstances, an exemption to the minimum qualifications requirements for staff working in ECCE services may be made where a child with medically complex needs who is availing of AIM Level 7 requires specialised health supports, for example, a healthcare assistant or nursing care, in order to participate in the ECCE programme. An exemption **may** be granted by Pobal where it is considered that such specialist support is required. The provider should request an exemption during the appraisal process or once AIM Level 7 capitation has been approved, prior to recruitment.

9.15 Payment of AIM Level 7 additional capitation

In order to receive AIM Level 7 additional capitation, the provider must:

- have an ECCE-registered child, or an ECCE-eligible child approved on CCSP or TEC, whose application for AIM Level 7 additional capitation has been approved;
- have met any pre-payment conditions outlined in the approval notification; and
- be tax compliant with a valid tax clearance number.

In the case of additional assistance, in order to receive the AIM Level 7 additional capitation the provider must have appointed or recruited a staff member to provide additional assistance in the preschool room. If there is a delay in appointment or recruitment of the staff member, it is the responsibility of the provider to inform Pobal.

Payments in relation to AIM Level 7 additional capitation will be made in line with the payments schedule available on the PIP Portal.

9.16 Backdating of AIM Level 7 payments

Backdating of AIM Level 7 payments is not permitted. Where an application for additional capitation is approved, the additional capitation will be applied from the **latest** of:

- the date on which the child commences on the ECCE programme;
- the date on which the additional assistance has been approved; and
- the date on which the additional assistance commences.

10 Attendance of children in receipt of AIM supports

10.1 Notification of non-attendance to Pobal

The service provider must contact the child's parent or guardian to establish the cause of the child's absence within the first week of the absence commencing. If a child leaves the service or has not attended for four consecutive weeks, the service must create a Leaver form via the PIP Portal stating the date the child last attended the service and inform the AIM team by emailing aimteam@pobal.ie

10.2 Non-attendance of child in receipt of AIM targeted supports

Funding will cease after the four week absence, or after six weeks if a child is sick and the service provider has applied to their local CCC to retain the registration beyond four weeks. In exceptional cases, this period may be reviewed and extended by Pobal. Where a child in receipt of targeted AIM supports seems likely to be absent for more than four weeks, or six weeks where an application has been made to the CCC, the service provider should contact Pobal AIM team by emailing aimteam@pobal.ie.

10.3 Reduction in attendance

Where attendance differs from registration in a consistent pattern over a four week period, e.g. reduction in the number of days of attendance per week, registrations must be updated to reflect the actual pattern of attendance. An update on PIP must occur within four weeks of the reduced attendance pattern commencing. Failure to update registrations to reflect the actual attendance pattern will result in an over-claim due to the Department. Over-claims will be recouped in accordance with the terms of the grant funding agreement.

In exceptional cases, this period may be reviewed and extended by Pobal. Where it seems likely that a child in receipt of AIM supports will need to change their attendance pattern temporarily for four weeks or more, the service provider should contact Pobal AIM team by emailing aimteam@pobal.ie.

11 Moving services

11.1 Notice when moving a child to another service

If a parent or guardian wishes to move their child to another service provider, they must provide four ECCE weeks' written notice of this to the current service provider. Parents and guardians and carers should note that, where a service is closed due to holidays, this time is not counted as part of the four weeks' notice.

11.2 Moving services: continuing to access AIM supports

In order to assess a child's needs for AIM supports, the child must be observed in the preschool service. When AIM supports are granted, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) enters into a contract with the preschool provider. This contract ends if the child leaves the service. Therefore, when a child moves services and wishes to avail of AIM supports in the new preschool service, a new application for AIM supports must be made on PIP. This allows the child's needs to be assessed in the new service and a new AIM contract to be drawn up with the new service.

12 Carrying AIM supports forward into the next ECCE year

12.1 Carrying AIM supports forward into the next ECCE year in the same service

Where a parent or guardian wishes to carry AIM supports forward into the next ECCE year and the child will be staying in the same preschool, a second year extension form must be completed by the preschool and submitted on PIP. This form is reviewed by the Better Start Early Years Specialist Service and Pobal AIM team to review the level of support required for the next preschool year. Second year extension requests can be submitted prior to the new preschool year commencing. Service Providers are encouraged to submit extension requests as early as possible to ensure the required support is in place for the child. The application process opens in early May each year and the preschool service will be notified of this via PIP.

12.2 Carrying AIM supports forward into the next ECCE year (moving services)

Where a parent or guardian wishes to carry AIM supports forward into the next ECCE year, but the child will be moving services, the rules under 'Moving Services' (rule 11.2) apply.

13 Complaints procedures

13.1 Complaints about an application for AIM targeted supports

Where a provider or parent or guardian wishes to make a complaint about an application for AIM targeted supports, they should follow the process under 'requesting a review of an application' at the relevant AIM Level above.

13.2 Complaints about the running of a preschool service

Providers are required by the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016, to have a complaints policy. This policy should outline how a concern will be managed. Firstly, parents are advised to put their concern in writing to the ECCE service and request a copy of their complaints policy. They should also ask that their issue is addressed under that policy.

If an understanding cannot be reached after contacting the preschool provider directly, the complainant's local City or County Childcare Committee (CCC) will be able to offer further advice.

Finally, if the parent or guardian is dissatisfied with the response received from the provider or may have reasons that they feel are prohibiting them from bringing the matter to their provider directly, they may contact the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate.

The Tusla Early Years Inspectorate does not investigate individual concerns or complaints. However, the Inspectorate reviews all information about early learning and care services and assesses this information against the Early Years Services Regulations 2016. It uses this information to determine the focus and timing of its inspections. The complainant will receive an acknowledgment indicating if their concern has been accepted by the Early Years Inspectorate. The Inspectorate may also contact the complainant to clarify information provided by them.

13.3 Complaints relating to employment under AIM Level 7

Staff employed under AIM Level 7 should note that concerns and complaints concerning their employment should be addressed in the first instance to their employer, which is the

preschool service. Neither the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, nor Pobal, may intervene in disputes between staff and their employers.