Ollscoil na Gaillimhe
University of Galway

An Institiúid Cúrsa Saoil & Sochaí
Institute for Lifecourse & Society

unesco Chair

The Early Years Sector:

A *Case Study* in Policy Development

By Dr Fergal Lynch,
Senior Lead, Government and Public Policy Engagement

UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway

October 2023

The author of this report is:

Dr Fergal Lynch, Senior Lead, Government and Public Policy Engagement, University of Galway.

Any citation of this report should use the following reference:

Lynch, F. (2023) The Early Years Sector: A Case Study in Policy Development. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway.

ISBN: 978-1-911702-10-8

For further information, please contact:
UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre
Institute for Lifecourse and Society
Upper Newcastle Road
University of Galway
Galway, Ireland

T: +353 91 495 398
E: cfrc@universityofgalway.ie
W: www.universityofgalway.ie/cfrc/

About the Author

Dr Fergal Lynch is Senior Lead, Government and Public Policy Engagement in the University of Galway. He was Secretary General of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth from 2015 to 2022.

About the UNESCO Child and Family Centre

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) is part of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at the University of Galway. It was founded in 2007, through support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, Ireland and the Health Services Executive (HSE), with a base in the School of Political Science and Sociology. The mission of the Centre is to help create the conditions for excellent policies, services and practices that improve the lives of children, youth and families, it is uniquely positioned to advance theory and practice and to facilitate knowledge transfer across the worlds of research, policy and practice. Recurring themes of interest across the work programme are: prevention and early intervention as a strategic orientation for policy and practice; family support as a policy and service paradigm; interventions that enable youth agency and development and, across all areas, a strong commitment to engaged research emphasising voice and participation.

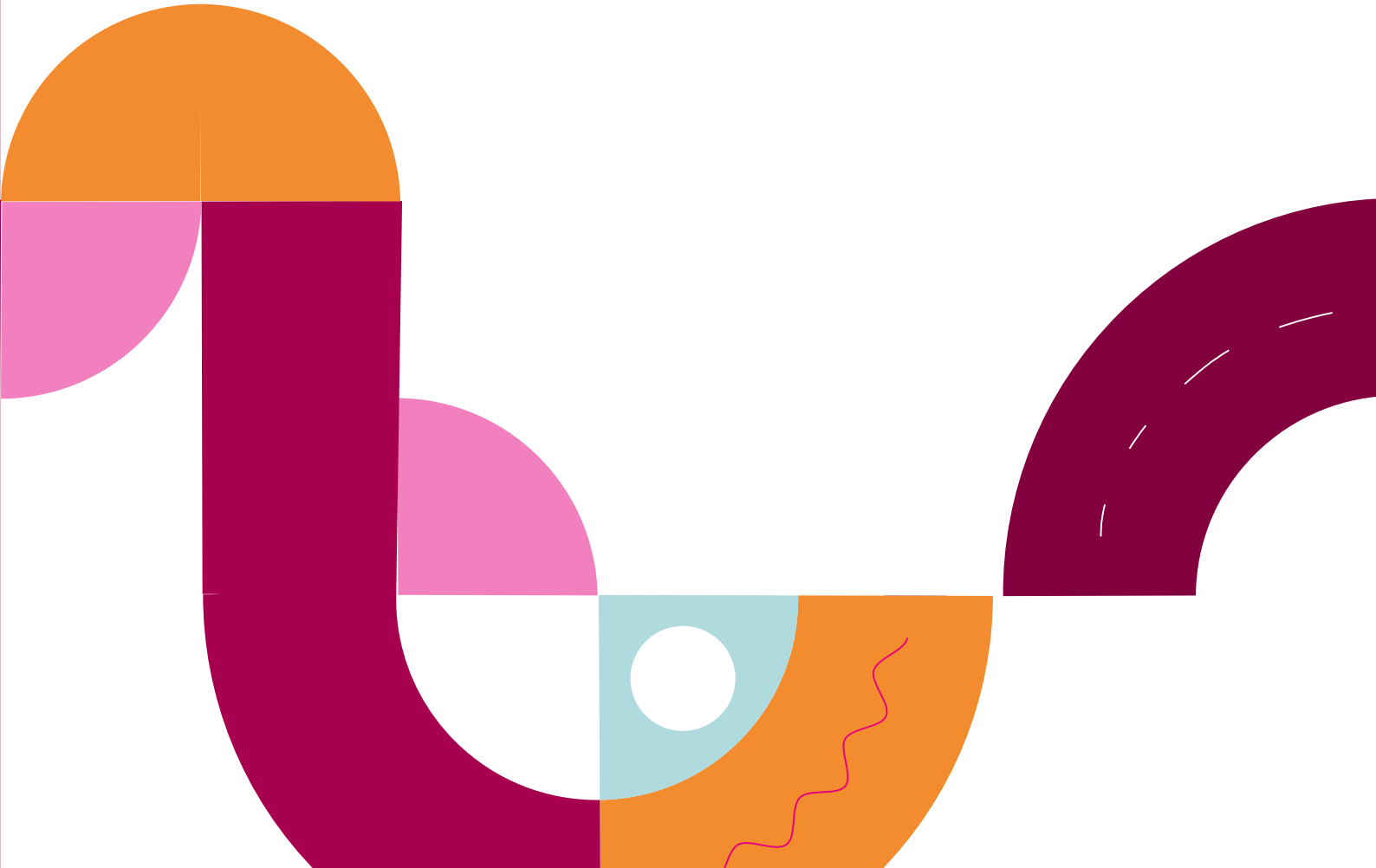
Institute for Lifecourse and Society,
University of Galway, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 91 495 398
Email: cfrc@universityofgalway.ie
Web: www.universityofgalway.ie/cfrc/
Twitter: @UNESCO_CFRC

Contents

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to the case study participants, who gave so generously of their time and expertise, and to those in DCEDIY and the University of Galway for their practical support and advice. I am also deeply grateful to a number of colleagues who commented on various drafts of the paper. As always, any errors or misinterpretations are my own.



1 Introduction

Ireland's Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) sector has been the subject of significant policy development in recent years. While much remains to be done, we can point to tangible improvements in a range of areas affecting children and their parents.

There is now a clear strategic pathway for the future, built around recent key policy documents, most notably *First 5* (2018), the Workforce Plan, *Nurturing Skills* (2021), the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021) and the new funding model proposed in *Partnership for the Public Good (2021) (PPG)*. The sector has been the subject of sustained political and administrative focus for many years, particularly since the development of the National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland 2000).

From a policy perspective, there is much to be learned in the approach taken and the processes used to develop and implement government decisions in this area. The objective of this case study is to examine the experience of how policies were developed, the context and background to their preparation, the opportunities and obstacles encountered during the process, the manner in which they have been implemented (or not) to date, and in particular, the lessons to be learned for future policy making. The focus here is on the process of policy making and implementation, not on whether the policies developed are in themselves considered to be 'good' or 'bad'. In this context, the case study asks:

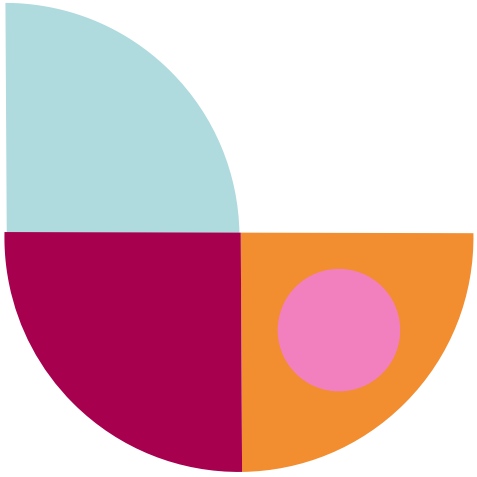
> *What lessons for policy development, implementation and evaluation in Ireland can we take from the recent experience of the ELC/SAC sector?*

Related questions include: the impetus for policy development, the key factors that influenced policy choices, the significance of stakeholder engagement, and the use of research and evidence to drive policy change and implementation. A particular focus of this case study is the implications of the lessons learned from the experience of policy development in the ELC/SAC sector. The approach to these and other questions, as well as the methodology, is outlined in the Appendix.

The case study is intended primarily for policy practitioners and others with an interest in the study of policy development and implementation. It is based on an analysis of key developments in the sector and on interviews carried out with selected stakeholders, comprising Ministers, policy officials, early years educators, providers and advocates, and academics. The interviewees offered valuable insights from different perspectives on policy formulation and implementation in the ELC/SAC sector. Their views are reflected throughout the discussion, but the conclusions and analysis are of course the author's own. The case study focuses on the reflections and experience of key informants, and draws upon the published literature, but in the time available it was not possible to carry out a detailed analysis of other documentary evidence.

The study aims to provide insights into the policy process of one sector and to offer lessons of relevance to other areas of public policy interest. The author is a former senior policy official with a close involvement in the area under examination. This brings a good understanding of the operating environment in which these policies were developed, but it is important to acknowledge that the perspective offered is one of an internal 'actor' who sought to manage the danger of insider bias, rather than of a purely external observer.

In the discussion below, *Section 2* sets out the policy context of ELC/SAC services and the significant developments in the sector over the last two decades. *Section 3* explores the agenda setting process and the influences behind the recent substantial growth in State intervention. *Section 4* examines policy formulation and development in the sector, including the processes used, the influence of research and analysis, the value of positive working relationships with stakeholders and the significance of pragmatism and agility of response to evolving circumstances. *Section 5* considers the key elements that translate policy development into policy implementation, and the implications of unintended consequences of policy decisions. *Section 6* discusses the value of ongoing monitoring and evaluation, and the importance of fully integrating it with policy development from the outset. Finally, *Section 7* reflects on the lessons learned from this study of the ELC/SAC sector and their applicability to wider public policy development.



Policy context

There is strong national and international evidence that the phase from antenatal to the age of five years is the most critical period in a child's life, and is vital for development over the course of life. Longitudinal research demonstrates close links between early childhood experiences and health in adulthood; multiple adverse experiences in childhood increase greatly the risk of poor physical and mental health in later life.

Research evidence also notes that after home and family, early learning and care settings are extremely important in shaping babies' and young children's lives (*First 5* 2018). This underlines the strong economic rationale for investment in the early years of life, and for developing effective, policies that promote the development of a well-functioning sector (Heckman 2011).

The main policy objectives in the ELC/SAC sector in Ireland have been founded on promoting access, affordability and quality (Government of Ireland 2015a). In the past, Ireland has fared poorly under these and other indicators. The net cost of childcare to parents has been substantial - the highest in the EU (European Commission 2019); the supply of ELC/SAC places has been variable, with under-provision for certain age groups and patchy availability in some regions; and inspection reports point to inconsistent quality of services[1]. In addition, public investment was low by international comparisons, while high staff turnover and low pay hampered efforts to professionalise the sector (*Partnership for the Public Good*, 2021).

However, recent years have brought some substantial improvements in a number of respects:

- There has been a major increase in public funding of the sector over the last decade, albeit from a very low base, rising from €260m in 2015 to just over €1.1b in Budget 2024.

1 Tusla Inspectorate Reports (various) https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/creche-inspection-reports/

- The number of places has doubled in the last decade, with almost 210,000 children now being supported in ELC/SAC services.
- The range and coverage of schemes to improve access and affordability has extended substantially in recent years. The pre-school Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, introduced in 2010, has been expanded to a second year and uptake stands at over 96 per cent; the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) has greatly helped children with a disability to access the ECCE programme, and AIM will be extended beyond ECCE from September 2024; the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) introduced in 2019 streamlined a set of earlier schemes and has since been further enhanced; a new Core Funding scheme was introduced in 2022; and the Equal Participation Model (EPM) aimed at addressing disadvantage will commence in September 2024.
- There has been an increased emphasis on SAC and childminding, as evidenced by the Action Plan on School-Age Childcare in 2017 (DCYA 2017) and the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028).
- Important measures to support professionalisation of the workforce have been initiated, most recently through the publication of *Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC 2022-2028* and the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee which has delivered historic Employment Regulation Orders (EROs) that set minimum pay rates for roles in the sector (supported by the Core Funding scheme). The first EROs, commenced in September 2022, have led to pay increases for more than 70 per cent of the workforce, and an updated ERO is to commence before the end of 2023.
- There have been new standards, strengthened regulation and enhanced inspection across the ELC/SAC sector. In 2016, regulations set minimum qualifications for staff and the Department of Education inspections of ELC settings commenced. These were extended to the full birth-to-6-years age range in 2022. National Quality Guidelines for SAC were published in 2020 (DCYA 2020).

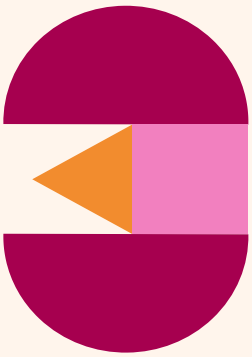
However, in spite of areas of undoubted and significant progress, much remains to be done. Many challenges remain in areas affecting access, availability, affordability and quality.

- The sector is quite fragmented, with many players operating in an increasingly complex system of public support through Government Departments, Pobal, and City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs). The Government's plans for a single agency to oversee the public governance of the sector will be a critical step, but will take time to implement.

- The current mix of for-profit, voluntary and community providers – all privately delivered – is challenging, with the Expert Group on a new funding model noting that Ireland is a clear outlier in international terms in having virtually no public provision of ELC/SAC (*Partnership for the Public Good* 2021). The Group recommends examining whether some element of public provision should be introduced alongside private provision.
- Even after an increase of some 300 per cent in public funding since 2015, the level of State investment in the sector remains low by international standards[2]. There is likely to be continuing pressure for further investment in the years ahead.
- Pay in the sector remains low, and does not reflect the true value of the work done by early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners.
- Inspection reports from the Department of Education and Tusla point to variable quality in the sector, with inconsistent implementation of the national practice frameworks, *Aistear* and *Síolta*.
- There is evidence of under-supply of ELC/SAC for come cohorts of children (including baby and toddler places) and in some parts of the country (Pobal 2022) and the availability of sufficient places is likely to be challenging for some time ahead.
- The cost of ELC/SAC remains high for some families, particularly for those availing of long hours or those with more than one child using the services.
- Participation in ELC/SAC is lower in some groups, including Traveller and Roma children, and children with a disability.

A range of commitments and actions to address these issues are set out in the policy documents noted earlier including *First 5* (2018), *Nurturing Skills* (2021), the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021) and *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021). These acknowledge the path to be travelled and set out a way forward that aims to secure access, affordability and quality in the sector. All of the documents acknowledge the significant challenges ahead and seek to focus on effective implementation.

2 The OECD estimates that Ireland spends 0.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) on ELC compared to an OECD average of 0.8%. However, the calculation for Ireland excludes spending on children aged under 6 who have moved on to primary school. In addition, GDP is a poor indicator for international spending comparisons. Using a modified gross national income (GNI) estimate of €234 billion (2021) Ireland's spending on ELC in 2023 would represent 0.43%. To increase this spending to, for example, 1% of modified GNI, equalling €2.3 billion, an additional €1.3 billion would be required.



Agenda setting and deciding what to decide

Given the growing extent of State involvement in the ELC/SAC sector, it is interesting to examine where the impetus for this intervention arose, and how ELC-related issues came to feature so prominently on the agenda for successive governments. Ireland has moved from minimal State involvement in the period before 2000 to a point of substantial intervention today, as indicated by the extent of regulation, funding and public policy influence.

The State has effectively shifted from an earlier position of 'don't want to know' through 'reluctant involvement' to 'active leader and funder' (Langford 2022). We have reached a stage where 'the backbone of a high quality, stable and sustainable model of integrated ECEC[3] has been established' and where 'there is a strong foundation on which to build' (Hayes 2021).

The State's involvement was initially minimalist, influenced from the 1930s by the principle of subsidiarity; by the cultural outlook on the role of women as taking care of their own children at home; and by the public sector marriage bar up to 1973, which greatly restricted the number of mothers likely to work outside the home. Linked to subsidiarity was the role of the churches in the sphere of healthcare and education. In the words of one participant in this case study, 'if the church didn't do it, it didn't get done'.

The debate from the 1970s about the role of women in society and the demand for greater female participation in the labour market began to bring the issue of childcare

3 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). This paper uses the term Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) as adopted by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). Interestingly, the term has been the source of criticism by some interviewees, who favour the term ECEC.

provision to the fore, but pressure for State provision of childcare was slow to grow initially. As late as 2000, there was controversy over a budget initiative on tax individualisation for couples that was perceived as favouring women working outside the home, to the disadvantage of those opting to remain working within the home (Budget 2000).

In the interviews for this case study, there was a broad consensus on the factors that prompted growing State involvement in the ELC/SAC sector. In the decade from the mid-1990s, respondents pointed in particular to the equality agenda and availability of funding under the EU Structural Funds. Irish officials recognised that capital funding from Europe could be used for the construction of creches, and that European Social Funds could be used to employ women as childcare workers in community creches in disadvantaged areas. This funding was restricted to positive action measures under equality legislation and was expressly limited by State Aid rules which prohibited any form of core funding beyond these equality-related areas.

On this basis, €230m under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) was used to provide some 39,580 places between 2000 and 2006, and a further €178m funded 24,347 places under the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) from 2006 to 2010[4].

It is striking that the first large-scale measures to fund childcare in Ireland came from EU Structural and Social Funding that aimed to increase women's access to paid employment – with access to childcare recognised as a key enabler of this – rather than from policies that recognised the value of investing in the early years of children's lives. However, the policy approach illustrates the pragmatism of policy practitioners and their determination to identify and use significant funding opportunities when they arose.

> *Back then, while there was no funding available for childcare with the child at the centre, we did have a policy position which informed our thinking and drove us to fight for resources for childcare wherever they might be found.* (Langford 2022, page 2).

A number of respondents, including a former Minister, pointed to the foresight of some officials in the mid to late 1990s who argued that childcare provision needed to catch up with availability in other countries, both from the perspective of equal participation of women in society and the benefits of ELC for pre-school children. The case for this was complemented by increasing demand for labour in a strengthening economy in the early 2000s and pressure from unions for childcare supports.

4 Information supplied to the Committee of Public Accounts, 13 June 2019

Respondents point to a common set of triggers for the later growing attention placed by the State on ELC/SAC supports. Affordability, access and quality became increasingly prominent public issues for government. In particular, the pressure from parents who faced one of the highest levels of childcare cost internationally (OECD 2021) grew substantially from the mid-2000s. One respondent, a policy practitioner, observed that 'national politicians felt the heat about childcare and it became a doorstep issue as parents effectively faced a second mortgage'.

More recently, the policy positions adopted by those seeking political office were important. In describing her path to becoming Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2020, Zappone (2022) refers to 'practising a politics of care, especially with regard to one of my prime ambitions as a Cabinet member of the Irish Government, namely, to build a fully-fledged model of childcare, that would be of high quality, accessible and affordable'. Others with ministerial experience equally pointed to a personal commitment to address affordability for parents as a key priority of their tenure.

The ELC/SAC sector became increasingly organised, particularly after 2010, and pointed to serious concerns about low pay, high staff turnover and the inherent viability of services. Quality issues received public attention from a series of media stories, including *Primetime Investigates*, while the inspection reports pointed to the need for improvements.

The State has become increasingly involved in seeking to address quality issues, most notably in the areas of pay, representation and qualifications. Langford (2022) tracks the progress from rather crude staffing grants in 2007 to the NCS (2018) and Core Funding (2022) which much more clearly reflect the true costs of employing staff, and the establishment of an Employment Regulation Order in 2022 that confers recognition for pay levels not previously possible by the State since it is not the employer of staff in the sector. She also describes the move from no formal qualifications to the establishment of minimum educational standards[5] (Level 5), with incentives towards qualifications to Level 7 and beyond, and the development and funding of quality initiatives – *Síolta, Aistear* and the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide (2019) which integrates both.

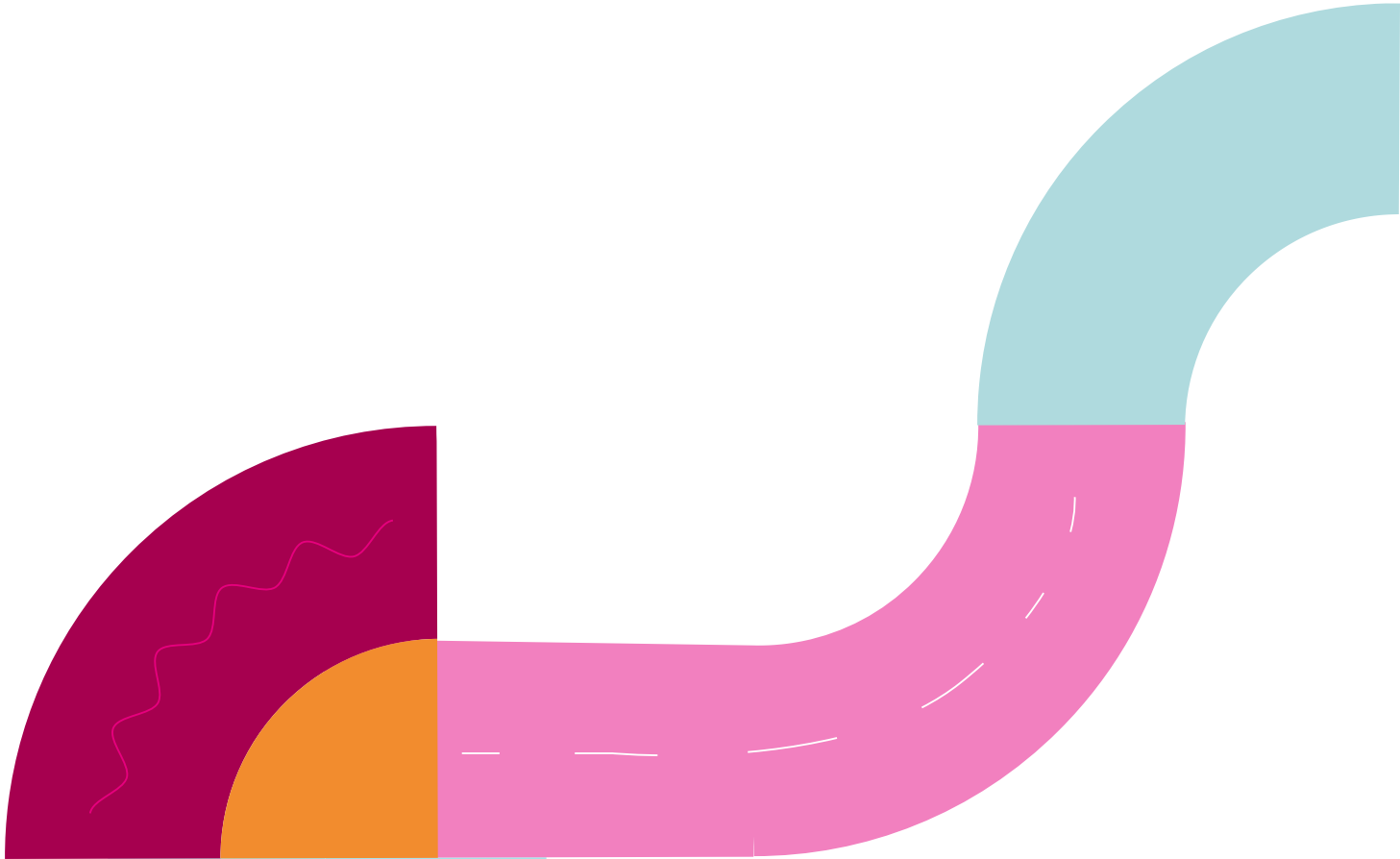
State supports expanded not only because of the pressures for quality, but also from a growing realisation about the importance of ELC/SAC to the wider economy. One respondent with ministerial experience observed: 'the argument that childcare affects areas like education, health, employment and the wider economy was compelling, and it was really important at Budget time'. Another Minister said that the growing availability of Irish data in the last ten years that helped officials to frame clear,

5 Under the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 all staff working directly with children must hold a minimum of QQI level 5 award in Early Childhood Care and Education.

costed proposals was key to establishing credibility with government colleagues and to advancing the wider case politically for investment in the sector.

Evidence from national and international research was also important, and was increasingly harnessed by officials, academics and stakeholders in the sector to argue that childcare needed urgent attention. As one academic put it, 'the OECD analysis showed that we were way behind in our supports and services'. An interviewee from ELC sector said: 'international evidence was vital. The EU and OECD raised concerns about the lack of education and care interventions for young children and the lack of participation by mothers in the workforce. After the EU funded the earliest initiatives here, it could also point to the clear gaps that were evident in comparison to other countries.'

Interestingly, two respondents (a policy practitioner and an academic) pointed to Ireland's legacy and its treatment of the weakest as a historical factor in promoting better supports in the ELC/SAC sector today. One observed that 'the sector deals with vulnerability; there is a sense of history that Irish society has failed vulnerable children in the past and that we want to get it right now'.



Policy formulation and development

The progress made in developing ELC/SAC services in recent years has been substantial. In the words of one policy practitioner in this study, 'it has moved on enormously in the last 20 years ... It takes time to develop and implement change in an area this big. It's effectively a whole new sector since about 2000, compared to some 200 years of a primary school system'.

Respondents regularly pointed to the challenges outstanding, the work yet to be done, and the gaps remaining (discussed below) but the mood expressed by interviewees was generally positive, with a repeated proviso that recent investment levels be continued, and the pathway set by recent policy documents (*First 5* (2018), *Nurturing Skills* (2021) and *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021) maintained.

The experience of policy making in relation to ELC/SAC services brings interesting insights into effective and less successful actions. Policy practitioners and Ministers tended to emphasise the importance of pragmatism, the need to seize opportunities as they arose, and the building of trust, especially through clear communication and close engagement with stakeholders. Those in the sector stressed communication, consultation and the need to have their views acted upon rather than simply heard. Academics acknowledged the progress made but were particularly concerned about what remained to be done, and about the market-based model on which services are currently built.

Across the case study interviews, the importance of using evidence to inform policy choices was emphasised, both as a means of identifying the right thing to do, and of persuading government of the case for it. Respondents pointed in particular to the strong use of research evidence in developing the new funding model under *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021) and to the openness of the process: the Working Papers and all minutes of the

Expert Group's meetings were published online[6]. The means by which *First 5* (2018) was developed, drawing on national and international evidence, was also regularly cited and welcomed.

Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) sought to address its immediate information gaps about an entirely new situation by carrying out three surveys of parental needs as children had to remain at home. 'We did what we could to gather data on a hugely changed situation. We had to make major and urgent decisions in a matter of days, but we were determined to get as clear a picture as possible in the circumstances', said one policy practitioner. These surveys influenced the temporary support schemes that were rapidly developed and implemented during the early stages of the pandemic to keep the sector afloat at a time of greatly limited services.

The use of international evidence and comparative performance has been critical to the development of Irish public policy on ELC/SAC. From the earliest days of the EOCP (2000-2006) Ireland has studied progress in other countries, using it as a benchmark for improvements in the sector. Officials pointed to the influence of engagement with the EU and OECD over many years, both as a means of learning from the experiences of other countries and, more recently, helping to shape international targets for development. Ireland's policy on ELC/SAC was supported by a series of country-specific recommendations (CSRs) under the European Semester Programme, and was influenced by internationally established goals for improvement such as the Barcelona targets (European Council 2002). More recently, Ireland has participated extensively in international groups that help shape policy on ELC/SAC within the EU and OECD countries[7].

A key force in policy development was the collaboration with other departments and agencies. An innovative approach to the establishment of the National Children's Office was the use of co-located policy units with staff from the Departments of Education, Justice and Social & Family Affairs sharing offices and working closely together, while maintaining formal assignment to their respective parent Department. This practice proved very effective and continued with the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011.

The development of positive working relationships through consultation and constant communication was seen as vital across all groups of study participants. DCEDIY was widely acknowledged for

6 Publications (first5fundingmodel.gov.ie)

7 For example, Ireland participates at EU level on groups relating to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), the EU Child Guarantee and on updating of the *Barcelona Targets*. It also participates in an OECD network on ECEC, as well as in UN structures including the UNCRC and UNESCO. The Early Years Work Sector is one of 11 areas of co-operation under the British-Irish Council.

its formal consultation arrangements in the ELC/SAC sector and for the extent of its informal approaches to keeping lines of communication open. The Early Years Forum, set up in 2016 and reconstituted in 2020 as the ELC Stakeholder Forum, and individual consultation processes were cited by a number of interviewees. Many stressed the importance of regular informal engagements, where the Department could check in with stakeholders to 'test the temperature' as one participant from the sector described it. Ministers also welcomed the scope for both formal and informal interactions. One said: 'I put a lot of personal effort into keeping in contact with the sector, and worked hard to keep them in the loop. I did the same at political level, and I think it was time well-spent in the long-term.'

However, two issues regarding formal consultation processes and engagements were raised, generally by academics and professionals working in the sector. The first was the perception that some discussions for the Expert Group (*Partnership for the Public Good* 2021) were constrained in the specific questions posed at workshops and focus groups, which could lead to an overly limited discussion and little scope for participants to raise other issues of concern to them. One academic reported: 'the consultation sessions were very well organised and professionally managed, but there was no scope for groups to raise their own issues. … There was a feeling of being led or gently funnelled towards a pre-ordained outcome'. Those leading the consultation would have argued that they needed to keep the discussion focused, but this was seen by some respondents as too restrictive.

A second issue, raised mainly by the ELC/SAC sector, was the need to make careful decisions about who should be at the table for consultation. Some interviewees argued that in recent times, representation at discussions with the Minister and Department was not always balanced, taking account of the relative size and membership of newer and emerging groups. They argued for clear 'rules of engagement' and that groups at the table should be required to establish their credentials in terms of governance, membership and financial standing.

Other respondents including those with ministerial experience noted that appropriate representation at engagements with the ELC/SAC sector was a challenge. One participant noted that 'some groups can become hyper-responsive to what's aggravating their membership currently, with not much regard to longer-term objectives.'

The tactics and pragmatism necessary for effective policy development was explored by many participants in the case study. Those most closely involved in direct policy analysis and development spoke of the need to be flexible and agile. 'It's not enough to know what you want to do – you also have to know how to get there', observed one policy practitioner.

One of the most striking examples of pragmatism and agility is the way in which the 'free pre-school year' or ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) scheme

was introduced in 2010. It came against a background of severe cutbacks in public expenditure as a result of the financial crisis. In Budget 2009, the Government was minded to abolish the Early Childhood Supplement (ECS), which paid €1,000 per year to parents of children aged under six. Abolition would save some €480m per annum. There had been much criticism of the ECS as it was paid without regard to actual use of ELC services. As one interviewee from the sector observed, 'parents could spend the money on anything. It cost millions and did nothing for the development of effective childcare.'

Policy officials argued that establishing a pre-school service for all would be hugely beneficial for young children, and could be done for a fraction of the ECS costs, thus still yielding sizeable savings for the Exchequer. The argument was in keeping with a series of government commitments and strategies[8] at the time, and with international targets[9] that aimed for a significant expansion of ELC/SAC services for young children and their families.

Government approval for ECCE was achieved rapidly, and the scheme was introduced just eight months later, from 1 January 2010. A number of interviewees involved in the development of the scheme commented on the speed of introduction, and the 'rather unorthodox' means by which agreement was secured. Officials in the then Department of Health and Children engaged directly with the Minister for Finance (with the agreement of their own Minister) at a very early stage, followed only then by more detailed discussions with Finance officials. Development, costing of proposals and the work to implement was done at exceptional pace because, in the words of one official involved, 'we had to get this done quickly or it was not going to happen at all'.

The result was a scheme that provided up to 38 weeks of pre-school services for all children before they entered primary school. With initial full-year costs of €175m, it was considerably cheaper than the untargeted ECS and was welcomed by parents and public representatives at a time of substantial

8 A Programme for Government commitment to 'the provision of a specific budget for pre-school education' was included in the Action Programme for the Millennium, in 1997. The National Forum on Early Childhood Education, established in 1998, called for a White Paper (which was published in 1999) and was followed by a National Childcare Strategy (1999) and the National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000) which committed to 'quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures. The Programme for Government (2007) committed to ensuring that 'every child has access to a pre-school place by 2012', and in 2009 the Renewed Programme for Government contained a faster delivery timetable, which led to the introduction of ECCE from 1 January 2010.

9 In 1996, the EU Commission published 40 Quality Targets for ECEC, including publicly funded full-time ECEC places for at least 90% of children aged 3-6 years and at least 15% of children under three. The Barcelona Targets of 2002 (European Council 2002) aimed to remove disincentives to female labour force participation and to provide childcare by 2010 for 90% of children from age 3 to mandatory school age, and to 33% of children aged under 3 years. In 2004, the OECD's Thematic Review of ECEC Policy in Ireland was influential in the design of the National Childcare Investment Programme (2006-2010) and supported the expansion of ELC/SAC, including a goal of free morning education sessions for all children followed where necessary by a subsidised, fee-paying pre-school session in the afternoons.

public expenditure cuts elsewhere. Officials admitted that implementation at the time required 'a leap of faith', especially in view of the challenge to provide sufficient places at short notice, but uptake quickly reached around 95 per cent of eligible children, and it was extended in 2016 and again in 2018, now covering two years of provision[10].

Tactics and a pragmatic approach also underpinned the debate that preceded substantial investment in ELC/SAC services from 2015 onwards. That year, an inter-departmental group (IDG) prepared a report (Government of Ireland 2015a) on the case for, and possible scope of, additional resources for the sector. However, rather than simply recommending more supports at substantial extra cost, the report suggested what could be done for specified increasing amounts of money, with priorities attached to each amount. One policy official commented: 'it made far more sense to say to government, look, here's what you could do if you decided to invest an extra €10m, €20m or €50m and so on. That way, instead of just giving them a shopping list with a massive bill, we set out what could be achieved depending on how much resource you decide to put it in.' The investment subsequently made – an additional €85m in 2016 alone – was influenced by the suggested priorities and costings from the IDG report.

Pragmatism and a focus on finding policy solutions across agencies was in evidence in the development of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in 2015. Earlier attempts had failed to address the challenge of supporting children with disabilities to access the ECCE programme successfully. Three government departments had responsibilities in the area – Children and Youth Affairs, Education and Skills, and Health – and all acknowledged that participation rates in ECCE among children with a disability was well below the average for all children. It was also a source of concern to the Ombudsman for Children (OCO, 2013). An inter-departmental group (Government of Ireland 2015b) was set up in 2015 and reported within just three months proposing an innovative, costed model with seven levels of progressive support for children, based on their needs. It was chaired by DCYA and comprised representatives of the other two Departments, key agencies[11] and parent groups, and there was close collaboration with disability groups in both development and implementation.

10 Initially children were eligible for 38 weeks, between the ages of 3 years and 2 months and 4 years and 7 months in the September in the year of enrolment. From September 2016, this was extended to cover three enrolment points (September, January and April), which effectively offered between 61 and 88 weeks depending on the child's date of birth, age at first enrolment and parental choice regarding school starting age. Since September 2018, children qualify for two years of funded pre-school, and can enrol from the age of 2 years and 8 months, continuing until they transfer to primary school.

11 Health Service Executive, Tusla, Dublin City Childcare Committee, National Council for Special Education, National Disability Authority, and the National Early Years Specialist *Better Start*.

AIM proved to be a considerable success and was acknowledged in very positive terms across all categories of interviewee for this case study. From the perspective of policy development, it demonstrated, in the words of one policy official, that 'a short-term, intensive piece of work with the right people around the table, who have the right attitude to finding workable solutions, can produce results quickly'. The model was quickly approved by government and funded for early implementation, with resources of €15m in its first year. Since the launch of AIM, over 27,000 children have benefited directly[12] from targeted supports and tens of thousands more have benefited from the universal supports under the scheme. It has also won national and international awards[13]. Interviewees for this case study identified the critical success factors as strong political support; collaboration across agencies which was not always forthcoming previously; communication at all stages of development; and the emphasis on building trust among all stakeholders so that the policy could be implemented successfully.

Two other considerations were raised by case study participants in relation to effective development of policy in ELC/SAC. The first was the value of involving the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform (DPNDR) in the process at the earliest possible stage. 'It is vital to keep DPER in the loop from the beginning, so that they are aware of what you're trying to do, and your budget negotiations are in a clear context', said one participant.

The second consideration was the importance of resourcing the policy development function adequately, and of structuring it appropriately. There were serious difficulties in policy integration and delivery of ELC/SAC at first. Hayes (1995) noted that there were then at least six government departments[14] involved in some aspect of support, funding or regulation of childcare, pointing 'to a worrying lack of co-ordination which must have serious implications for the quality and effectiveness of such services for young children in Ireland' (page 23). Since then there have been important developments in the structures governing ELC/SAC and related areas which streamlined Departmental responsibilities during the early 2000s and led ultimately to

12 DECDIY information, October 2023

13 Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Award (2018) and UN Zero Project Award (2020)

14 Department of Health (grant aids for full day nursery provision; pre-schools in Family Resource Centres); Department of Equality and Law Reform (European funds for local childcare initiatives); Department of Education (Early Start initiative, specific pre-school services, including for Traveller children); Department of Employment, Trade and Enterprise (training and employment schemes, FÁS training schemes, NOW initiative, County Enterprise Boards, all with various elements designed to support parents of childminding age); Department of Social Welfare (including Community Development Programme funding for disadvantaged areas); and Department of Agriculture (rural childcare delivered under Leader II programme in disadvantaged areas).

the establishment of a new Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011[15].

While this was welcome, a number of policy interviewees commented on how few officials were assigned to ELC/SAC at first, and welcomed the growth from one Principal Officer and 20 other staff in 2015 to a fully-fledged division of the Department by 2018. In 2023 the DCEDIY's division for ELC/SAC had an Assistant Secretary with six Principal Officers and some 100 other staff. One official argued that 'the civil service fools itself it if thinks you can do good policy analysis and policy development on a shoestring'. Another noted that 'until quite recently we had limited scope for reflection or strategic development ... the minimal staffing meant that we had to concentrate almost solely on the basic operational elements of schemes'. The value of specialist expertise was raised by Ministers and the sector, as well as policy officials, and the secondment of experts from the sector was welcomed.

Learning from experience

As would be expected, participants in the case study pointed to a range of criticisms and learnings for future development of policy. One of the most striking of these was a view from some in the ELC/SAC sector that the pace of attempted change was simply too fast, leaving providers and staff with insufficient time to prepare for change. One interviewee from the sector commented that 'decisions were being taken and changes implemented at warp speed' which meant 'you couldn't bring people with you. ... The danger was people would become disillusioned and then disengage from the process'. Participants who made similar comments acknowledged that it would be unusual for government departments to be criticised for moving too quickly, but argued that rushed development of policies simply led to mistakes in design and implementation that could have been avoided.

In response, policy officials tended to acknowledge the pace at which they were trying to move, but also pointed to criticisms from others for a perceived lack of sufficient progress. They justified the speed of the work by pointing to the scale of what had to be done, and to how much ground needed to be made up. One commented 'there was so much to do, and some of what we were trying to achieve should have been done ten years beforehand'. Another observed that 'the shock of change is difficult to deal with, and radical change is a shock'.

15 A National Children's Office (NCO) was established in 2001 with a remit to co-ordinate childcare policy and to implement the National Childcare Strategy (2000). The Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) was established in December 2005 and incorporated the NCO into an expanded structure. The Minister of State for Children was entitled to attend Cabinet meetings but without a vote. In May 2008, the OMC was renamed the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) to reflect its expanded role, under which 'youth affairs' was transferred over from the Department of Education and Skills. An innovative feature of these structures was the co-location of staff from other Departments (initially Education, Justice and Social & Family Affairs) to assist cross-departmental working. In 2011, the OMCYA was replaced by a new Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) with a Minister of full Cabinet rank and expanded in 2020 with additional responsibilities under a Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).

However officials also pointed to examples where the developed policy was envisaged to take many years to complete, because of the scale of change required, such as the incremental approach taken under the National Action Plan for Childminding (DCEDIY 2021).

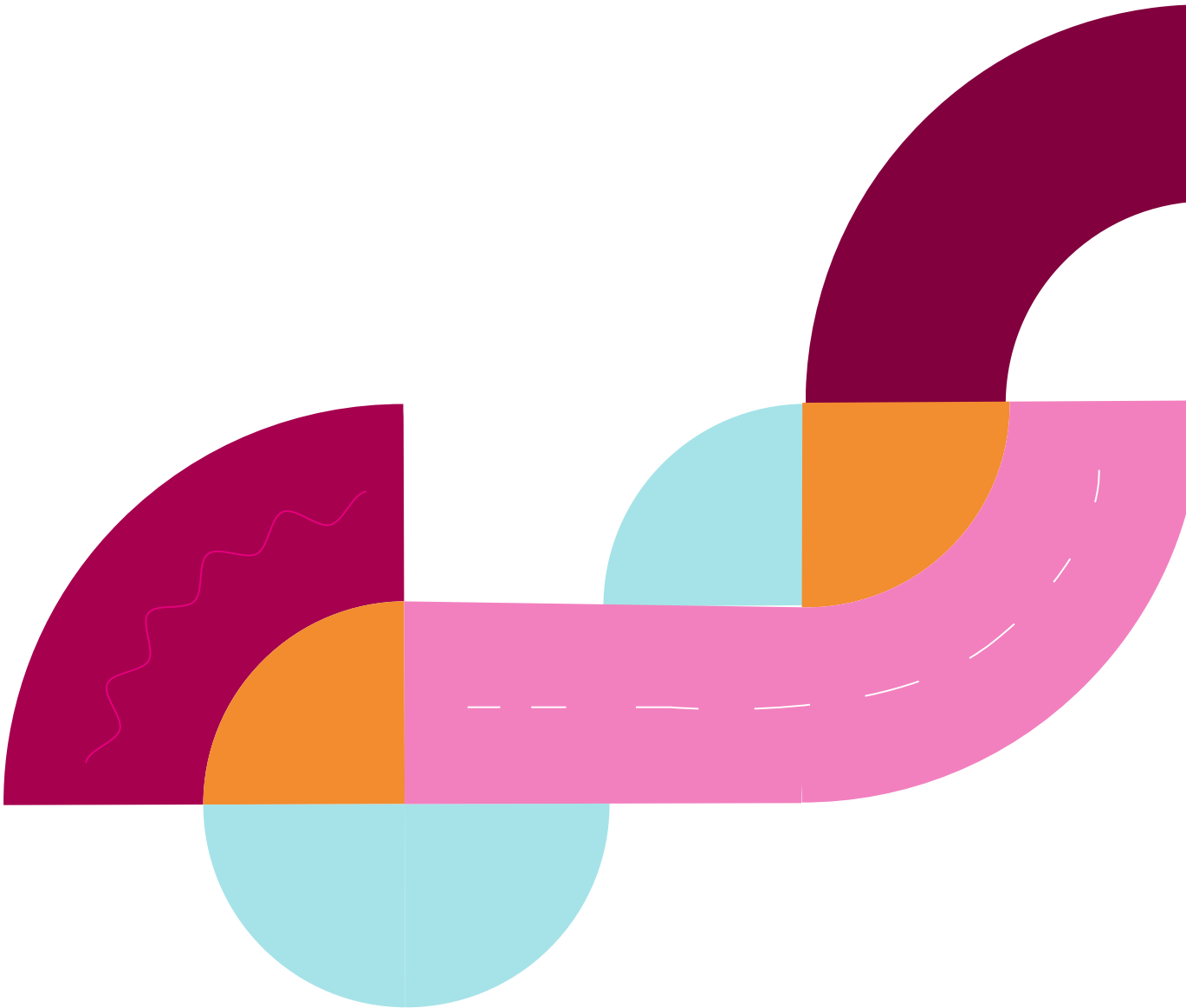
Academics and some in the ELC/SAC sector argued that the initial focus on developing the ECCE scheme has meant insufficient policy attention to the needs of children under three. While agreeing with the objective of supporting all children to be cared for at home during their first year, one argued that policy on children aged between one and three years was being neglected. They observed that 'this has long-term negative impacts, most notably on language skills, which are so important for later education, socialisation and overall development'. Policy officials and Ministers pointed to *First 5* (2018) as a clear basis for developing services in this regard, and the strategy was strongly welcomed by case study participants of all categories. Officials also pointed to the international focus placed initially on those aged three and over by the OECD and the European Commission.

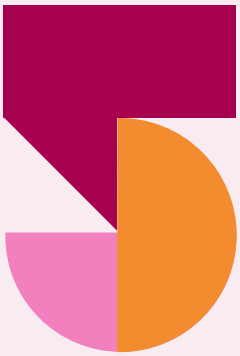
There was much discussion by interviewees of the debate between public and market-based models for the ELC/SAC sector. Questions were raised about the basis on which the State appeared to have decided upon a market-based model with public supports, rather than for example, specifying a public model as an ultimate objective. Participants noted that the terms of reference for *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021) were predicated on a continued market-based system. One interviewee from the ELC/SAC sector argued that policy decisions on the issue seemed to ignore the international research arguments for a public model. 'I realise the costs involved in a fully public system, but Ireland has ended up with a corporate model, which is not supported by the literature.' An academic participant believed that 'we should see and treat childhood as a public good', and that 'we have never openly asked the policy question about the case for a public model', but accepted that *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021) was founded on the principles of the public good.

One participant from the ELC/SAC sector agreed: 'we need to … be clear on the policy implications of some decisions. We are using increasing amounts of public money to help develop private facilities. Have we thought through the implications of this?' The same participant considered that there is much uncertainty about what model should be sought. 'The sector isn't clear on what it wants, and even those seeking a public model are not sure what this would entail.' Participants generally anticipated that the costs of public ownership and provision would be very high, making it politically unpopular, and that there would also be strong opposition from for-profit providers.

There were also concerns about the viability of smaller providers, and about the implications for quality and services as a whole of a continued growth in 'multi-site' or 'chain' providers, although more work would be required to establish evidence of this in Ireland. Nonetheless, the future

configuration of the ELC/SAC sector remains a significant policy issue. Policy officials have pointed to recent steps influenced by *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021) for greater public management of the system and expanded investment by the State. This suggested a movement towards a more 'demarketised' system. In addition, the final recommendation of PPG which recommends piloting the introduction of a segment of public provision is of significance as a possible indication of future direction.





Policy implementation

A critical test of any development of policy is whether it has been designed with feasibility of implementation in mind, and whether it is actually implemented successfully. It is the difference between policy making in theory and policy delivery in practice. Participants in this case study were generally very positive about the extent of implementation. One respondent from the sector said: 'The early years sector is among the best for real implementation of policy decisions'. Another respondent in the ELC/SAC sector pointed to 'a good alignment of the policy-research-practice triangle' and to policy implementation on the basis of well-developed policy.

Policy officials pointed to two elements designed to achieve successful implementation – close collaboration during the design stage with those responsible for implementation, and the inclusion of staged timelines in the published strategies, with provision for annual reviews (*First 5* 2018; *Nurturing Skills* 2021; *Partnership for the Public Good* 2021).

Unsurprisingly, timely implementation of policy decisions was seen as key to policy success. Interviewees for this case study spoke of how tangible delivery helps to build trust, and foster collaboration in further work. A respondent from the ELC/SAC sector pointed to AIM as an example of speedy implementation of policy development. 'AIM has been transformative – one of the most positive developments in early years. It was put together quickly and then implemented in a collaborative way'. The same respondent also commented favourably on the approach planned for implementation of the *National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028* (DCEDIY 2021). They noted that because of the complexity of the area, and the fact that it is largely unregulated at present, a phasing over seven years was proposed. 'I see it as a practical response to a nebulous issue in the grey economy. We need to give it plenty of time because of its sensitivity, and how it's provided so informally at the moment.'

Unintended consequences in implementation

Inevitably, policy implementation carries with it a series of unintended or parallel consequences, and there were plenty of examples to consider in the ELC/SAC sector. Two were seen as positive. The age-of-entry rules for ECCE had the effect of encouraging parents to wait until their child was nearer five before starting primary school, in order to maximise the benefit available from up to two free pre-school years. A later starting age for primary school was seen by all interviewees who commented on it as of significant advantage to young children. A second, perhaps less expected, advantage of implementing ECCE was that pre-schools services were well positioned to identify potential disabilities or developmental issues that might not otherwise have become apparent until entry to primary school. Possible issues of neglect or abuse could also come to light earlier.

Other unintended consequences were less welcome. The ECCE model led to a proliferation of sessional services operating over 38 weeks of the year which limited the opportunities for staff seeking full-time work. Ireland is an outlier with regard to the number of part-time, part-year workers in the sector. Many participants also pointed to the impact of ECCE on provision of places for children aged under three years. Efforts to help professionalise the sector included higher capitation payments for graduates in ECCE rooms, but this resulted in fewer graduates working with the under-three group. As one academic observed: 'this unwittingly left less qualified staff with the youngest children who needed the earliest possible intervention in areas like language development'. The issue was addressed under the later Core Funding scheme, but it illustrates the unintended impact of one positive initiative on a related area.

Similarly, the speed of introducing ECCE from 2010 had significant effects on the mix between public and private providers. 'Effectively it moved us from a 75/25 community/private mix to the opposite, because €175m of ECCE funding incentivised the emergence of many new three-hour, morning-only private services', said one policy official. The shift in composition of providers was a by-product of ECCE; 'it certainly wasn't something we were actively seeking', said another policy official.

Learning from the experience of implementation

There is of course much to be learned and improved upon from the experience of implementing policy in the ELC/SAC sector. Observations from participants in this case study include insufficient implementation, technical or design flaws, unsuccessful 'reach' for some groups and a continuing challenge in effective communication with the public.

Academics and policy practitioners alike pointed to inconsistent application of the *Aistear* curriculum and *Síolta* framework for the achievement of quality. One academic said: 'they were and are excellent approaches, but they are not being implemented in a coherent way across the country'. The role of *First 5* (2018) in

advancing their fuller implementation was cited by a number of interviewees as a cause for hope in the future.

Those who criticised the speed of policy development also took issue with the pace of attempted implementation of these measures. They encountered practical problems that, they felt, could have been avoided at the planning stage. One respondent from the ELC/SAC sector said: 'even a strong policy creates a poor lived experience if it doesn't deal with problems identified early on. We were told that the problems we'd identified during the consultation stage could be picked up later. But this didn't always work. We need to beware of implementing "as we go" and assuming we can fix things as they arise.'

Problems with accurate estimates of timing and exact impacts were cited by Ministers and officials. In the case of the NCS, a major step forward which merged a number of existing schemes and moved to an IT-based system for parents to apply online, officials concluded that they had been too ambitious in projecting a completion date following government approval and announcement. Implementation had to be pushed back a number of times because of the unanticipated complexities in systems development.

Ministers and policy officials acknowledged implementation problems where new initiatives could not meet the needs of some. For example, the NCS as originally implemented did not address fully the needs of some of the most vulnerable groups. While widely welcomed overall, a system of sponsorship referral for specific vulnerable groups 'dealt only with those at the very edge' according to one interviewee with ministerial experience, 'but there were other groups that weren't sufficiently catered for initially. There was too much of a "one-size-fits-all" approach.' The issue was subsequently addressed through enhancements of the NCS.

Similarly some technical problems in design or implementation of the NCS created a poor experience for users. Ministers and officials commented that some parents and providers found the IT system difficult and 'too clunky to navigate' at first, and others disliked some of the technical jargon used.

Policy officials and interviewees from the sector agreed that the number of commitments contained in the key strategies made comprehensive implementation difficult. This was evident from such key documents as *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (Government of Ireland 2014) and *First 5* (2018). They argued for a focus on a smaller number of actions, commenting favourably, for example, on the 25 recommendations contained in *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021).

A number of case study participants argued for a continued emphasis on implementation across government departments and agencies. The DCEDIY's role in leading cross-cutting initiatives for children was acknowledged, but one policy official warned that *First 5* (2018) - 'an excellent strategy' - risked becoming 'too DCEDIY-specific' without sufficient attention to its far-reaching coverage across government.

A significant continuing issue in implementation is that of effective communication with stakeholders. Despite the efforts of DCEDIY, Ministers and policy officials felt that much remains to be done. One official observed: 'we haven't cracked really effective communication, especially when we're trying to counter the inaccuracies and rumours that can circulate around social media.' Officials pointed to the work they were doing in this area, both in formal and informal engagements with stakeholders, and in their communications with the public, but acknowledged that it was 'always a challenge to get ahead of the negativity, even in the most positive of stories'. Ministers noted the need to avoid technical language and jargon, and to make the information accessible to all. 'We must be more comms-focused', said one, and 'show that what we're doing is good for children, and good for parents.'

Overall, the implementation of policy in the ELC/SAC sector was seen among most interviewees as very strong, notwithstanding the issues outlined here. Participants across categories welcomed the implementation to date of ECCE, AIM, the NCS and the new Core Funding scheme, generally seeing them as 'very substantial steps forward' for parents and children. While acknowledging the undoubted challenges remaining, it is encouraging that policy development has been followed by substantial delivery, even with more to be done.

Policy monitoring and evaluation

The arrangements for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of policies should be integral to the process of development and implementation, but it is noticeable that this has not been a common practice in many spheres of public policy making until quite recently.

The process of ongoing monitoring and periodic formal evaluation is reflected in the traditional policy cycle (Cairney 2019), but the tendency has often been to treat M&E as an add-on rather than part of a complete system of policy development. Indeed, a key concern is the reluctance in public policy spaces to amend and if necessary, terminate, a policy that is not meeting its objectives (Cairney 2019).

In the ELC/SAC sector, the consensus among those interviewed for this case study was that M&E has developed significantly in recent years, improving on the earlier period when little such work was done formally. One policy practitioner recalled that 'when the EOCP (Equal Opportunities Capital Programme) got over €200m in the early 2000s, we had very little basis for evaluating the quality of what was done with it'. A study carried out in 2004 (Fitzpatrick and Associates 2007) could reach no concrete conclusions on quality 'because no KPIs (key performance indicators) had been set at the beginning of the process.'

In the case study interviews, policy practitioners described the progress made in M&E. One observed: 'It's an area we are getting much better at. We are not there regarding a full assessment of outcomes; this will take a few more years of data to evaluate accurately. But we have definitely built in a monitoring and evaluation framework to our policy making now. It's not just an add-on at the end of the process'.

Evaluations to date include the NCS (Frontier Economics 2021), ECCE (in progress) AIM (RSM 2019, and a three-year evaluation to be published shortly) and *Better Start* (in progress). Importantly the most recent strategies have included commitments to timed reviews and to an action plan that will respond to the findings of each evaluation. This has applied, for example, in the case of the ECCE and AIM reviews, with

commitment to and publication of specific follow-up points from the evaluations. The NCS review (Frontier Economics 2021) led to important changes to the rules relating to 'wrap around'[16], and a separate review (DCEDIY 2020) led to the Department amending the financial incentives that were encouraging a concentration of graduates in rooms with ECCE-age children. There has also been provision for monitoring the implementation of *First 5*, which provided for annual and end-of-phase 1 reviews, since carried out. There are commitments to reviewing implementation of the new funding model under *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021) along similar lines, as well as annual reports of progress on the National Action Plan on Childminding and on *Nurturing Skills* (2021).

External independent evaluation has been carried in the sector by the OECD which was invited to review progress in the sector (OECD 2021) and the sector is reviewed more widely by Oireachtas Committees and by the Children's Rights Alliance's annual report cards. (Children's Rights Alliance (annual)).

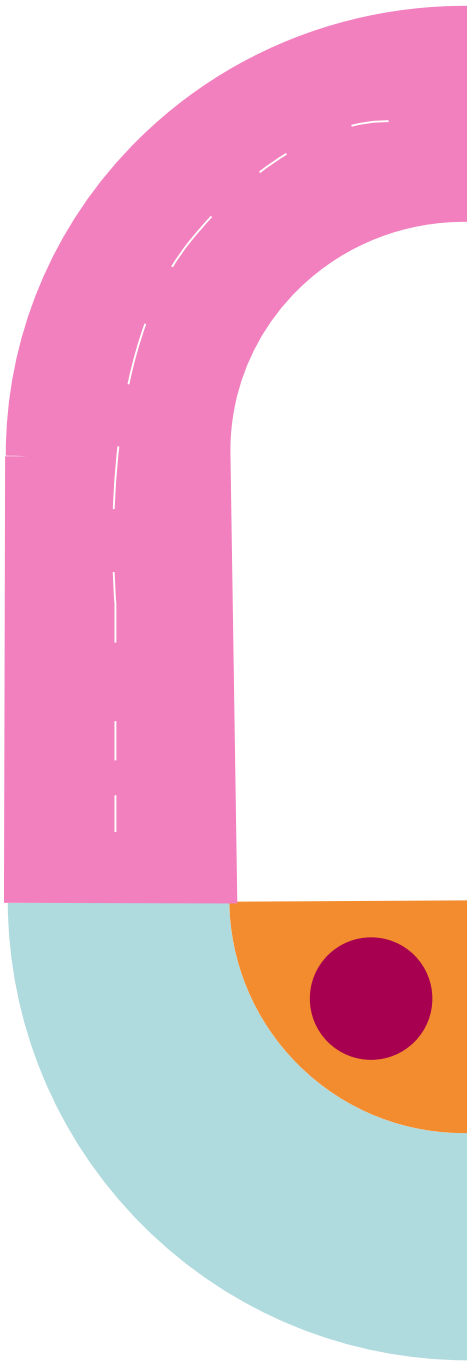
The shortage of reliable, nationally comparable data in the sector was problematic in the earlier years, as noted by practitioners and academics in this case study. The data situation has improved substantially in recent years. The information compiled by Pobal, the Central Statistics Office (CSO), DCEDIY, providers and the longitudinal study *Growing up in* Ireland (GUI) has greatly enhanced the availability of reliable data on which to monitor outputs and evaluate outcomes over time. However, policy practitioners, academics and providers all identified data as a key area for further development, particularly the availability of more detailed, real-time data for speedy responses. One respondent in the sector felt 'there is a case for ongoing external independent monitoring, rather than relying solely on official sources'.

Academics stressed the importance of acting on the results of evaluations. One cited the high standard of inspections of the sector by the Department of Education's inspectorate, but asked how the problems identified in their reports were followed up. Another welcomed the progress made in training and upskilling of staff in the sector, but noted: 'there are some 60,000 with qualifications in the sector, but where have they all gone now? Have we examined where they have gone and how we can retain staff at a time of such shortages?' In response, officials pointed to *Nurturing Skills* (2021), which has as one of its five pillars the recruitment and retention of staff, and to research conducted for DCEDIY by the CSO on ELC graduate outcomes in Ireland (CSO 2021). Officials also contributed extensively to an EU working group in this area (European Commission 2020).

The approach to M&E in the sector has developed considerably in the last ten years,

16 There was an end to the practice of deducting time spent in pre-school or school from the NCS hours awarded.

and there was a general welcome for its deeper integration within policy development and implementation. The challenge now is to further develop our data sets and to be able to assess outcomes as well as outputs of public investment in ELC/SAC. In the words of one provider, 'we need to be consciously innovative and open to constructive, objective analysis. We mustn't be afraid to act on the results.'



7 Reflections and lessons learned

The ELC/SAC sector has developed substantially over the last 25 years.

In the words of one public servant who was key to initiating the reforms:

> *Back in 1998, I would dearly have loved to be where you are today, with the State now willing to take the steps necessary to enable Ireland to have childcare services on a par with those countries which back in 1998 we looked toward with envy.* (Langford 2022, page 1).

Much remains to be done and the work to achieve a more accessible, affordable and quality service continues. This case study has offered a perspective on the progress made to date and, on the development, implementation and evaluation of policy in the area. It concludes with some reflections on the lessons to be learned for policy making and delivery generally.

1 Develop policy within a clear overarching framework

The ELC/SAC sector has benefited strongly from well-thought-out strategies that were developed within an overarching framework. In particular, *First 5* (2018) set out a clear pathway for development and was supported by individual strategies that were consistent with its objectives, including *Nurturing Skills* (2021) and *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021). Participants from all groups in this case study noted the value of a coherent mutually reinforcing set of policies, all pointing in the same direction. One academic observed: 'we have largely avoided *ad hoc* initiatives and stuck to an overall plan'.

Consistency and credibility are best achieved by focusing on a small number of key objectives and concentrating on their implementation. Policy in the sector has tended towards numerous actions across a large number of domains, making prioritisation more difficult. Such a focus is challenging when seeking progress across the work of many departments and agencies, but it is key to effective implementation. For

example *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021) made just 25 recommendations, including those with a medium to long-term timeframe.

2 Prioritise the use of research and evidence to help inform effective policy decisions

Effective, evidence-informed policy is possible when marshalled objectively and with clear analysis. This is demonstrated by the evidence-driven approach taken by *First 5* (2018) and related strategies in Ireland. Harnessing national and international evidence, and good use of data is highly persuasive for government when choosing between competing priorities for resources. It is also key to collaborating with stakeholders on policy choices, making the implications of different approaches clearer. In the words of one policy practitioner 'if you have good evidence, you have a much better chance of making good policy. You can also respectfully challenge those arguing for something that doesn't make sense.'

A strong message from the case study interviews was the importance of close collaboration between researchers and policy makers in the development of public policy. Academics, policy makers and those in the sector all pointed to the need to build alliances and to utilise fully the work being done by researchers. One policy practitioner argued: 'we don't have enough of the voice of researchers in policy making in early years ... we need more challenging voices from the higher education sector. Academic input to policy-making should be visible. They can help create an informed debate, with clear evidence and facts ... We should remember the benefit of informed, rigorous fact-based debate ... versus some of the stuff we hear on social media'.

Academics agreed with this view, arguing for a clear signal from government departments about their priority areas for research. This is a common request, as acknowledged in the recent Research and Innovation Strategy, *Impact 2030* (Government of Ireland 2022). This debate underlines the value of applied research that is developed with a view to addressing or further understanding policy problems, as opposed to other forms of research that do not have this focus.

The value of international evidence to effective policy making has been a strong theme throughout the discussion. Officials pointed to the significant scope for learning from the experience of other countries through peer exchange and expert inputs such as OECD- and EU-led exchanges and analysis. In addition, there is increasing scope for Ireland to shape policy beyond this country by sharing our experience of the policy road travelled in recent years, and the considerable progress we have made. We can now inform EU targets and international initiatives in a manner that far exceeds our relative size in the international community.

The value of continuously monitoring implementation and evaluating outcomes is also clear from the experience of the ELC/SAC sector. A commitment to taking corrective action is especially important.

Participants in this case study from the sector welcomed in particular the use of action plans which responded directly to the results of review processes.

Finally it is important to use the evidence emerging from monitoring and evaluation meaningfully. As one policy practitioner observed: 'we need to measure what's valuable, not just what's measurable'.

3 Support the work underway to promote greater research impact on policy making

Recent signals in favour of greater research input to policy making have been positive. These include the support offered by the international review of Ireland's policy development system (OECD 2023) and the steps promised under *Impact 2030* (Government of Ireland 2022) and civil service renewal (Government of Ireland 2021) to support further use of evidence-informed public policy. A particularly welcome development has been the establishment in 2022 of an Evidence for Policy Unit within the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), which has convened networks within the higher education sector and the civil service to help create links between research and policy development across the public sector.

These initiatives encourage us to think about how best to take the objective further. Among the steps that might be considered are the introduction of practical supports in higher education institutions that help broker closer contact between researchers and policy makers, and the use of communities of practice. These and similar fora offer scope for exchange of information on recent developments and exploration of new ideas (OECD 2023). Recent brokerage events and seminars demonstrate the value of fostering debate and exchange of information between researchers and policy makers (IUA/DCEDIY 2023; EPA 2022) which merits further exploration.

More fundamentally, the development of structures that help integrate the work already underway in promoting research for policy making would be of considerable benefit. This would require careful consideration to maximise its effectiveness, but some valuable thinking has already been done in Ireland to start the debate (Royal Irish Academy/Irish Research Council 2021).

4 Pay careful attention to the feasibility of implementation

Public policy must be designed with the feasibility of implementation to the fore. This requires close collaboration between those proposing a policy approach and those charged with implementing it. The argument is not new, but there are still plenty of examples where failure to align the two has resulted in poorly delivered or undelivered outputs.

It is also critical to assess timelines for implementation objectively, and to address external pressures for unrealistic targets for

delivery. Public commitments that contain staged timelines for implementation – as occurred in recent ELC/SAC strategies (*First 5* 2018; *Nurturing Skills* 2021) can help manage expectations and create trust in the plan for delivery; over-ambitious timelines can create a perception of failure even where implementation is ultimately a success.

5 Emphasise strong leadership and management action

Leadership, culture and resilience were cited regularly by case study participants when discussing key ingredients for policy success. The role of leaders in building effective teams, fostering a positive and inclusive culture, and keeping focused on objectives was seen as vital to achieving change. Ministers spoke of an ability to connect with government colleagues and a determination not to be deflected from their priorities. One said: 'don't be put off by negativity – press on and don't let go. If it doesn't work at first, pick your time to move on it again.' Similarly, policy practitioners noted the value of judging the right time for action. One said: 'if you have to, park it and come back to it, but don't drop it if it's the right thing to do'.

Team-building, team retention and promoting a culture of mutual support come through the case study as critical elements. Identifying the right people, leading them supportively and protecting them from other urgent but less important work were emphasised by policy practitioners and those in the ELC/SAC sector. Decisive management action is particularly influential at times of great urgency or crisis, as evidenced by the significant decisions proposed and taken in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. 'We had to move fast and firmly, we were dealing with so many unknowns', recalled one policy practitioner. 'The sense that we had each other's backs and were acting as a team was vital.'

As part of decisive leadership, the importance of looking ahead to medium and long term challenge was much in evidence during the interviews. Policy practitioners stressed the need for leaders not only to manage the short-term but to scan for what could be a very different future. Officials' work in this regard from the mid-1990s was acknowledged by Ministers in their proposals for resourcing the earliest elements of State-funded childcare. More recently, the concept of *strategic foresight* has been gaining attention in Ireland (OECD 2023) with policy practitioners and academics citing its potential value as an integral part of future policy development. A key concern, however, is that it must be embedded within policy-making processes from the outset, rather than layered on later.

Leadership in policy making is also about seizing opportunities, and being proactive rather than reactive. One policy practitioner advised: 'don't wait for a crisis! Act when you can and try to be ahead of the game'. Langford (2022) reflected on the role of crises in policy development in ELC/SAC, hoping that they should no longer be necessary to achieve progress:

It took the financial downturn and the planned withdrawal from parents in the crisis budget of April 2009 of the Early Childcare Supplement to give us the ECCE … It took the Covid 19 crisis and shutdown of the country for everyone outside the childcare sector to realise that after the doctors and nurses the most essential workers in the State were the childcare workforce. (Langford 2022, pages 6-7).

6 Support intensive stakeholder engagement and consultation

Ongoing engagement and transparency with stakeholders has been key to progress in the ELC/SAC sector. This has been vital to building trust and ensuring that policy makers have a good understanding of the sector's concerns and ambitions. Participants from all categories stressed the value of informal as well as formal engagement. 'If you feel you can pick up the phone to an official, and let them know what way the wind is blowing,' said one interviewee from the sector 'you can save a lot of time and trouble later'. Policy officials also noted the value of informal contacts, both to gauge views and also 'to float some ideas' when a policy approach is being mooted.

It is important to take careful account of the differing perspectives of stakeholders, and to work with them accordingly. 'You need to find how best to work with different people, and understand where they are coming from', said one policy practitioner. 'Be pragmatic, and try to align your agendas. Look for win-wins, and you can make real progress.'

Of particular concern to those outside direct policy practitioners is the need to be heard and listened to, and to be satisfied that their views are being genuinely taken into account, even if not always accepted. 'Make it real', said one participant from the sector, 'and if you're not going to do what we suggest, say why, and how your alternative is going to meet our concerns.'

In terms of formal consultations such as workshops and focus groups, the importance of giving stakeholders latitude to raise other related issues was emphasised, as noted earlier in relation to possible 'funnelling' of questions and any sense that discussions are being managed towards a predetermined result. That said, participants were generally very positive about consultations in the ELC/SAC sector, and felt that the approach could be applied in other policy spheres. Participants were particularly positive, for example, about the approach used in developing *Nurturing Skills* (2021), where stakeholders were very closely involved in co-creating the policy proposals in a highly consultative and collaborative process.

The need to tailor consultation processes to the issue involved was noted, especially by policy practitioners. They contrasted the direct collaboration with stakeholders in the area of workforce planning, where staff were members of the working group in *Nurturing Skills* (2021), with the process

for *Partnership for the Public Good* (2021) where the report was the product of experts in the field, supported by separate consultations with the sector.

7 Ensure continuous communication

Connected to stakeholder engagement and consultation is the wider approach to communicating messages to all affected by the sector. Similar points apply about transparency, building of trust, openness and honesty. 'People want to know what's going on, even if there's not much you can tell them at the moment', said one Minister.

The need to deal rapidly and clearly with incorrect information was evident from all groups interviewed. Social media and the voices of 'vocal minorities spreading rumours and misinformation' were cited as particular concerns that needed to be addressed 'before they take over the message'. This points to the need for a strong, well-developed communications functions that maximise information for those who need it. The value of communicating effectively with parents was particularly cited, as well as keeping in close touch with the sector. Avoiding jargon in communications, and making IT systems as user-friendly as possible, were also key points of concern.

There were indications throughout the case study of differing levels of information on policy progress in the sector. Unsurprisingly, policy makers had the most up-to-date information, and those in the sector who had regular direct contact with DCEDIY were also familiar with developments. Policy officials also tended to be the most positive about the success of policy implementation. By contrast, academics and sometimes those in the sector, expressed the greatest concerns about the extent of progress being made in the sector. This raised questions of adequate communication by policy practitioners, and again pointed to the need for renewed efforts to ensure that policy developments and progress in implementation were sufficiently communicated to all with an interest in the sector. Of course communication gaps are not the sole issue arising here; we must also acknowledge the presence of competing interests, and differing perspectives and priorities, in the context of any debate on progress made on policy issues.

8 Maximise collaboration with other Departments and agencies

Cross-departmental working is vital to the development and implementation of public policy in an area as broad-ranging as the ELC/SAC sector. The strategies sponsored by DCEDIY and its predecessors have been consistently based on wide collaboration across the system (Government of Ireland 2014) recognising that effective policy making and implementation will not be achieved by individual agencies alone. An important example in the early years area is the close working relationships with the Department of Education and its agencies, including the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

and the Department's own inspectorate. This collaboration was also a key input to the establishment of the original pre-school year, the development of *Aistear* and *Síolta*, and a range of other policy issues as the State's role in the ELC/SAC sector developed.

The use of co-located policy units with the Departments of Education and Skills, Justice and Equality, and Social and Family Affairs, noted earlier, facilitated positive working relationships between staff of different agencies, while maintaining connection with their respective parent Departments. Even if this arrangement is not considered practical or warranted for other policy issues, the clear message from the ELC/SAC sector, unsurprisingly, is that policy development, successful implementation and positive outcomes are hugely assisted by a conscious emphasis on collaborative working across boundaries. The approach ties in also with the earlier discussion on developing good working relationships, formal and informal networks and mutual respect based on trust.

9 Combine rigour of analysis with pragmatism and agility at all parts of the policy process

Much has been made of the need for a rigorous, evidence-based policy within a well-defined policy framework. In addition however, it is clear that policy development and implementation benefits strongly from pragmatism and an ability to seize opportunities, sometimes unexpected, as they arise. Innovation and creativity – 'that spark of recognising what's possible', as one Minister put it, can be key to achieving progress in a challenging environment. Some of the most successful initiatives in ELC/SAC have emerged from agile reaction to changing circumstances, such as the way in which ECCE was developed at a time of severe financial retrenchment. Policy responses that are crafted from rapidly changing circumstances can prove very effective, provided they are consistent with the overall objectives for the area. This was evident from ECCE and some of the urgent ELC/SAC initiatives during Covid that successfully protected the sector during a period of virtual shutdown.

Timing and timescales are important. Being realistic about how long implementation will take is important to timely delivery, and to managing expectations about what is possible. The experience of an over-ambitious timescale for implementing the NCS, discussed earlier, is replicated in many other areas of public policy. It underlines the need to plan in detail for and resource each element of implementation, and to avoid pressures for unrealistic commitments about delivery dates. However, the reality of the annual budgetary process for current spending and within-year spending rules must be noted here, together with the inevitable pressures from the political system to achieve urgent delivery.

The speed of attempted policy development and implementation was a factor in the ELC/SAC area. Relatively unusual criticisms of a

Government Department moving too fast have to be taken seriously, while balancing this with the need to achieve progress and substantial reform as soon as the system can absorb it.

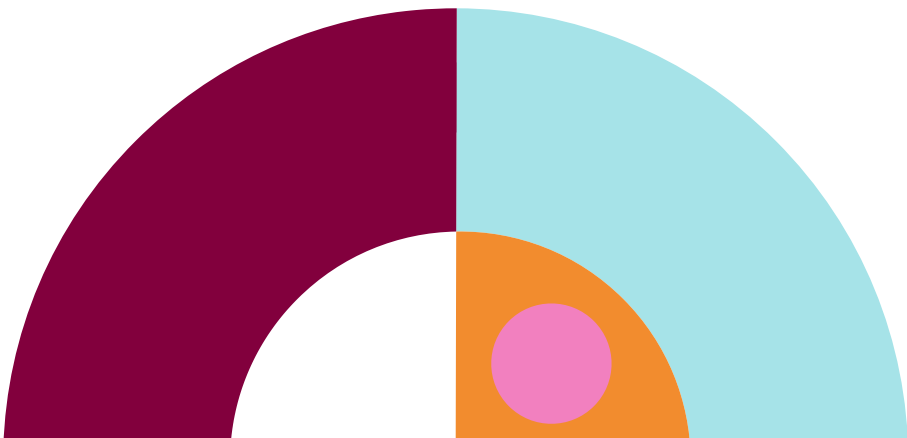
Keeping policy responses simple is another key message from this case study. Concerns to deal fully with quality in the ELC/SAC sector have resulted, for example, in two systems of inspection – one dealing with care and safety (Tusla) and the other with education and curriculum (the Department of Education inspectorate). A third set of inspections deal with adherence to governance and payment systems (Pobal). This dispersal of functions was generally recognised as unsatisfactory, and there are commitments to address it, but the challenge of unification or streamlining is not small.

Finally, there are strong benefits in training officials to develop expertise in effective policy-making, and in resourcing their teams adequately for the job they do. This has been recognised at national level in the most recent strategy for civil service renewal to 2030 (Government of Ireland 2021) and supported internationally (OECD 2023). Recent developments in training and development, where the Institute of Public Administration will combine its work with that of the civil service's *OneLearning* unit, are very welcome in this regard.

Conclusion

Agenda setting, policy development, policy implementation and policy monitoring and evaluation are rarely neat, sequential or linear activities in public policy (Cairney 2019). However, the experience of the ELC/SAC sector over the last two decades points to the value of an evidence-based, reflective system that listens closely to stakeholders, engages early with the political system, and is sufficiently agile to respond to changing circumstances and emerging opportunities.

There is now a welcome focus on strengthening our policy development capacity, as evidenced by the Civil Service Renewal Strategy (Government of Ireland 2021), the establishment of a Research for Evidence Unit within DFHERIS under Impact 2030 (Government of Ireland 2022) and Ireland's work with the OECD (2023) on public policy and strategic foresight. The ELC/SAC sector has been an interesting case study in policy making, and much of its experience is of relevance to the wider work underway in further developing our public policy system.



Appendix

Methodology

In developing the overall approach to this case study, I had discussions with experts in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the University of Galway[17] on possible approaches to and advisable parameters for the work. This greatly assisted my thinking on how best to proceed.

Rosenberg and Yates (2007) describe the typical procedural steps in developing a structured approach to effective case studies. They note that not all of the steps are relevant to every case study, and that the order in which they are done may vary[18]. I have adhered to these principles. I used the steps below to prepare the case study.

1. Identify the case, context and phenomena of interest

Ireland's ELC/SAC sector has been the subject of significant development in recent years. There have been considerable improvements in the three key areas of access, affordability and quality. While much remains to be done, the sector is ripe for a policy analysis of the lessons to be learned from the experience over the last 15 to 20 years. A case study that examines the development of public policy in the sector, considers how the opportunities and obstacles were addressed, and reviews implementation and evaluation would seem to be a useful addition to the wider field of policy studies.

2. Pose the research question

The case study set out to answer the following key question:

> *What lessons for policy development, implementation and evaluation in Ireland can we take from the recent experience of the ELC/SAC sector?*

Related questions that arose during the course of this examination were as follows:

- What was the impetus for the policy development?

17 I am very grateful to Dr Anne-Marie Brooks, Assistant Secretary, DCEDIY and Prof John Canavan, University of Galway, for helping me identify possible approaches to this case study and to Dr Brooks for supplying valuable background information throughout the process.

18 They describe the steps as 'logical but not necessarily sequential' (page 448).

- What were the key factors that influenced policy choices?
- How significant was stakeholder and engagement in driving policy development and change?
- How significant was the use of research and evidence in driving policy change and implementation?
- What were the key factors that influenced policy outcomes (e.g. collaboration with key stakeholders, leadership and management, governance, communication, policy focus, other)?
- Were there unintended consequences to the decisions made, and what can we learn from them?
- What positives should we build upon and/or use in other spheres?
- What negatives were encountered or what mistakes were made and/or actions should be done differently in future?
- What are the implications for future policy development in Ireland, from the perspective of children and families, policy makers, researchers, service providers and other stakeholders?

3. Describe the specific case study approach

Rosenberg and Yates (2007) distinguish between case studies that are *intrinsic* (studied for their own sake), *instrumental* (studied to understand related issues of interest), and *collective* (where a single case – whether intrinsic or instrumental – can be extended to other cases). In this case study, my focus will be on examining the various aspects of policy relating to ELC/SAC, with specific reference to the lessons about policy development that can be learned and used in other areas of public policy. In this sense the approach is intended to be collective.

4. Determine the most suitable data collection methods

Rosenberg and Yates (2007) summarise the main methods of qualitative data collection in case studies as participant observation, in-depth interview, focus groups, questionnaires and document review. They note that the use of multiple methods can promote a rigour not offered by one method alone. In this case, I used participant interviews, supported by analysis of published reports and strategies. It was not possible in the time available to analyse other documents in depth, but I was supplied with a range of statistical information regarding the sector by the DCEDIY.

Interviewees were identified with the assistance of DCEDIY and agencies, and invitations were issued by email. I held interviews with 14 relevant individuals who had been extensively involved in the development and/or implementation of the policy: those who have held ministerial responsibility for ELC/SAC (2); policy officials from relevant government departments (5); the ELC/SAC sector, including providers, early years educators and representative organisations (4); and academics in Irish universities (3).

I developed an interview guide, covering the main issues and questions to be explored, which was shared in advance with those agreeing to be interviewed to allow for reflection and preparation. I also suppled each interviewee with a one-page summary of my proposed work, together with a consent form for their signature, confirming their willingness to participate and noting their right to withdraw at any time.

I took notes during the interviews but to ensure accuracy, I taped each interview with the consent of participants. Interviewees were told that they would not be named and their confidentiality would be protected. All recorded interviews were deleted on completion of the case study.

5. Select analysis strategies most suitable to the collection of data

The contents of interviews were summarised in the form of a note prepared within 24 hours of each session, using the taped material and supplementary handwritten notes. The notes were categorised under the five themes from the interview guide (agenda setting; policy analysis and development; policy implementation; policy monitoring and evaluation; and reflections and lessons learned). On completion of all interviews, the notes of each discussion were reviewed, and common issues and topics extracted from each of the five themes. These were used to inform the text of the case study itself. A number of issues ranged across more than one of the five themes, and were then categorised within the theme of strongest relevance to the discussion.

6. Draw and verify conclusions

I drew conclusions from the messages that emerged from the interviews, data analysis and examination of the published strategies and other papers, as set out in the references below. I shared drafts of the case study with the Department to check factual accuracy, to obtain any further factual details not previously to hand, and for comments on content. I incorporated these in the final version of the paper, with the usual proviso that all of the conclusions are my own.

References

Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (2019). At https://www.aistearsiolta.ie/en/introduction/

Budget 2000. At Financial Resolutions, 1999. Budget Statement, 1999. – Dáil Éireann (28th Dáil) – Wednesday, 1 Dec 1999 – Houses of the Oireachtas

Cairney, Paul (2019) Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues. UK: Macmillan Education.

Children's Rights Alliance Report Cards (annual). The 2023 report card is at Report Card 2023 | Children's Rights Alliance (childrensrights.ie)

CSO (2021) *Early Learning Care Graduate Outcomes 2013–2017.* At Early Learning Care Graduate Outcomes 2013-2017 – CSO – Central Statistics Office

DCEDIY (2020) *Focused Policy Assessment of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Higher Capitation Payment*. At gov.ie - Focused Policy Assessment (FPA) of the ECCE Higher Capitation Payment (www.gov.ie)

DCEDIY (2021) National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028. At 5d403d61-a868-488c-9766-5b1e42f1e408.pdf (www.gov.ie)

DCYA (2017) *Action Plan on School-Age Childcare*. At 0bd72e21ac674cdb9eed1952c309c144.pdf (assets.gov.ie)

DCYA (2020) *National Quality Guidelines for School-Age Childcare Services: Guidelines, Components and Elements*. At gov.ie - National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services | Guidelines, Components and Elements (September 2020) (www.gov.ie)

Environmental Protection Agency (2022) *EPA Environmental Science to Policy Seminar, October 2022 – Seminar Reflections Paper.* At EPA_Science_to_Policy_Seminar_Report.pdf

European Commission (2019) *Country Report Ireland 2019 Including an In-Depth Review on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances.* At https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-02/2019-european-semester-country-report-ireland_en.pdf

European Commission (2020) *ET Working Group, Early Childhood Education and Care: How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff* Final Report. At Early childhood education and care - Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu)

European Council (2002) Barcelona European Council of 15 and 16 March 2002 (2002), SN 100/1/02 REV 1.

First 5 (2018) A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028. At First 5 | A Government Strategy For Babies & Young Children

Fitzpatrick & Associates (2007) Value for Money Review of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme Final Report. At Microsoft Word - VFM Review Final.doc - bd9329546c8f49aba2ed7e810cec1c75.pdf (www.gov.ie)

Frontier Economics (2021) *12 Month Review of the National Childcare Scheme: A report commissioned by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Ireland)*. At 205797_f6c41d8e-a71c-488e-b8e8-590cdbd4a69c.pdf

Government of Ireland (2000) *The National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives*. Dublin: Government Publications.

Government of Ireland (2014) *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020*. At https://merrionstreet.ie/en/category-index/society/child-protection/government-launches-better-outcomes-brighter-futures-the-national-policy-framework-for-children-and-young-people-2014-2020.html

Government of Ireland (2015a) *Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland – Options and Recommendations for Government*. At gov.ie - Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland (www.gov.ie)

Government of Ireland (2015b) *Supporting access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability: Report of the Inter-Departmental Group*. At Inter-Departmental-Group-Report-launched-Nov-2015.pdf (aim.gov.ie)

Government of Ireland (2021) *Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy: Building on our Strengths*. At gov.ie - Civil Service Renewal Plan (www.gov.ie)

Government of Ireland (2022) *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*. At 224616_5f34f71e-e13e-404b-8685-4113428b3390 (2).pdf

Growing Up in Ireland Publications (various). At Growing Up in Ireland Publications – Growing Up in Ireland

Hayes, Nóirín (1995) 'The Case for a National Policy on Early Education'. *Poverty and Policy Discussion Paper No 2* Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

Hayes, Nóirín (2021) 'Childcare Policy Development in Ireland: The Case of Early Childhood Education and Care' In de Buitleir, Donal (ed) *Achieving Impact in Public Service: Essays in honour of Sylda Langford* Institute of Public Administration, Dublin

Heckman, James (2021) 'The Economics of Inequality: The Value of Early Childhood Education', *American Educator*, Spring 2011.

IUA/DCEDIY (2023) *An Evidence for Public Policy Event Report* 1 March 2023. At FINAL-IUA-DECDIY-Evidence-for-Policy-Brokerage-Event-report-1.pdf (campusengage.ie)

Langford, Sylda (2022) *Different Times – Same Challenges*. Keynote address given at Childcare Committees Ireland, 21st Anniversary Event, 30 November 2022 (unpublished).

National Action Plan for Childminding (2021) 2021–2028. At 5d403d61-a868-488c-9766-5b1e42f1e408.pdf (www.gov.ie)

National Childcare Strategy (1999) *Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare* Dublin: Stationery Office

Nurturing Skills (2021) *The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) 2022–2028*. At www.gov.ie/nurturingskills.

OECD (2021) *Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on Sector Quality*. At https://scholar.google.com/cholar?q=OECD+(2021)+Strengthening+Early+Childhood+Education+and+Care+in+Ireland:+Review+on+Sector+Quality&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholart

OECD (2023) *Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland* At https://www.oecd.org/gov/strengthening-policy-development-in-the-public-sector-in-ireland-6724d155-en.htm

Ombudsman for Children (2013) *A statement based on a complaint regarding the inclusion of a child with disabilities attending a mainstream pre-school under the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme*. At OCO-ECCE-Investigation-2013.pdf

Partnership for the Public Good (2021) *A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare*. At first5fundingmodel.gov.ie

Pobal (2022) *Early Years Sector Profile Report* (published annually). The most recent report is at Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020/2021 - Pobal

Rosenberg, John P. & Yates, Patsy M. (2007) 'Schematic representation of case study research designs', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 60(4), 447–452. At https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.nuigalway.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04385.x

Royal Irish Academy/Irish Research Council (2021) *Research for Public Policy: An Outline Roadmap – A Royal Irish Academy – Irish Research Council Discussion Paper*. At research-for-public-policy-outline-map.pdf

RSM (2019) *An End of Year One Review of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)* Final Report. At AIM-end-of-year-one-review.pdf

Zappone, Katherine (2022) *Practicing a Politics of Care: Opportunities and Risks*. Paper given at *Conversations on Care, WISE Centre, Glasgow Caledonian University, October 13 2022* (unpublished).

Notes

Notes