



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



**Equal Start Programme Rules
Programme Year 2024/2025**

Please note that information contained within these rules is subject to change by the DCEDIY.

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Glossary of Terms

- **Department** means the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).
- **Early Learning and Childcare service** means a Tusla-registered service providing a pre-school service and/or a school-age service.
- **Equal Start** means is the funding model and set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and participation in early learning and childcare for children and their families who experience disadvantage
- **Key Person** means an early years educator or school-age childcare practitioner assigned to individual children to act as their “go to” person.
- **Identification model** means the model that objectively identifies Equal Start priority cohorts (i.e. cohorts of children experiencing disadvantage) and Equal Start priority settings (i.e. settings operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage) for child- and setting-targeted supports under Equal Start.
- **Minister** means the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
- **Partner Service** means an Early Learning and Childcare service, which has entered into an agreement for the provision of Core Funding Programme 2024/25.
- **Scheme Administrator** means the body (Pobal) appointed by the Minister to administer Equal Start.
- **Tusla** means the Child and Family Agency.

1 Overview of Equal Start Supports for Early Learning and Childcare services

Equal Start is a major new model of Government-funded supports to ensure children experiencing disadvantage can access and meaningfully participate in early learning and childcare.

Equal Start includes a suite of **universal** supports, **child-targeted** supports and **setting-targeted** supports to ensure every child and every early learning and childcare setting will benefit from a continuum of supports that reflects a continuum of need.

€13.5 million in additional funding has been allocated for the initial rollout of Equal Start in the first year of the programme (September 2024-August 2025).

The majority of this additional funding will be allocated towards setting-targeted supports to fund additional staff hours.

Services will also see additional supports from the first programme year including:

- Extended responsibilities for Family Link Workers in the Traveller Parenting Support Programme to engage with Traveller parents of children aged 1-5 years, supporting them to attend and participate in early learning and childcare, avail of the ECCE programme and where applicable applying for the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), and an additional 6 Family Link Workers to ensure coverage across all 17 Tusla areas.
- Appointment of Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists to work in Better Start
- Roll-out of Early Talk Boost (setting-targeted support)
- Roll-out of Meitheal training and engagement by early years' educators and school-age childcare practitioners in Meitheal (setting-targeted support)
- Development and roll-out of Communications and Engagement Plan
- Roll-out of My Little Library.

In addition, there will be considerable development work in preparation for the roll-out of additional supports and initiatives in future years (from 2025) including

- Review and updating of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines and associated training
- Review of the current Inclusion Co-ordinator role and updating of Leadership for Inclusion Programme
- Development of a new Family Community Liaison role and development and rollout of associated training programme

- Development of a new strand of funding under the existing Case Management Process for critical incidents

For further details of all universal, child-targeted and setting targeted supports to be roll-out under Equal Start in year 1 and in subsequent programme years, please see ([Equal Start](#)).

2 Eligibility for Supports under Equal Start

To avail of Equal Start supports, early learning and childcare services must be eligible for and have signed an Agreement for the provision of Core Funding in Programme Year 3 (2024/2025) (i.e. a Partner Service). Any Partner Service and children registered in any Partner Service can benefit from universal supports under Equal Start.

The following cohorts are prioritised for supports in Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority services:

- Children who may be experiencing socio-economic disadvantage;
- Children from a Traveller or Roma ethnic background;
- Children availing of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor body or a CCSP registration;
- Children living in homelessness accommodation;
- Children from a migrant background, particularly those in the refugee system

Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings that are to benefit from these setting-targeted supports have been objectively identified through the Equal Start Identification Model as operating in the context of the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage.

2.1 Equal Start Identification Model

Settings are designated as universal or Tier 1/Tier 2 priority settings through the Equal Start Identification Model, which is underpinned by a range of administrative data¹ on every child registered in each setting, specifically:

- The Pobal HP Deprivation index for the small area in which the child lives, obtained through the child's Eircode.
- The child's ethnic group or background (if available).
- If the child avails of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor referral or has a Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) registration.
- If the child is living in homeless accommodation.
- If the child is living in an International Protection Accommodation Centre or Emergency Reception and Orientation Centre (EROC).

Equal Start-designated priority cohorts

Children that meet at least one of the following criteria are designated as an Equal Start-priority cohort.

- lives in a small area assigned as deprived under the Pobal HP Deprivation Index².
- is from a Traveller or Roma ethnic background.
- avails of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor referral or a CCSP registration.
- is living in homeless accommodation.
- is living in an International Protection Accommodation Centre or Emergency Orientation and Reception Centres (EROC).

Settings are designated in accordance with the following steps.

¹ The information used was as provided under the child's NCS 2023 application, ECCE 2023 registration or CCSP 2023 registration.

² Where a valid address was not available for a child, attempts were made to get a valid address from the setting or from an application/registration for a different programme/scheme. Where a valid address could not be found, the child was removed from the overall service score calculation, meaning the average of the service score includes only the children for whom a score has been assigned.

Firstly, a child level disadvantage score is calculated for all children registered within each setting. This score, which is a number between 0 (least disadvantaged) and 2 (most disadvantaged), is calculated using the following equation:

If the child meets at least one of the following criteria, they are assigned a score of 2:

- If the child is from a Roma or Traveller ethnic background.
- If the child avails of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor referral or a CCSP registration.
- If the child is living in a homeless accommodation.
- If the child is living in an International Protection Accommodation Centre or EROC.

If the child meets none of the criteria above, a score from 0 – 2 will be calculated based on the geographic deprivation score, using the [Pobal HP Deprivation index](#), for the small area in which they live:

- Score of 0 for any small areas higher than -7.5
- Score of 2 for any small areas of -20 or lower
- Sliding scale of scores (z-score) between -7.5 and -20

Secondly, a setting-level disadvantage score is calculated for all settings. This score, which is a number between 0 (least disadvantaged) and 2 (most disadvantaged), will be calculated using the following equation:

$(\text{Sum of Child Disadvantage Scores}) / (\text{Number of Scheme Children}) = \text{Service Disadvantage Score}$

- Services with a score of 0.8 and above are designated as a Tier 1 priority setting.
- Services with a score of 0.4 to 0.8 are designated as a Tier 2 priority settings.
- Services with a score of less than 0.4 are designated as a universal setting.

Any Partner Service designated as an Equal Start Setting (Universal, Tier 1 or Tier 2) can opt-out of the Equal Start Designation (see section 2.6).

Any new service (as defined in 2.4) established after the assessment of all settings can be assessed at the next available assessment period (October and April – subject to change)

2.2 Duration of Tier 1 and Tier 2 Priority Designation

Partner Services with a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority designation under Equal Start in 2024 will retain that designation for a two programme year cycle once they remain in contract for Core Funding (i.e. for programme years 2024/25 and 2025/26).

2.3 Re-assessment of Settings

The Equal Start Identification Model will be rerun in 2026 for the next two-year cycle (i.e. programme years 2026/27 and 2027/28) for all settings, applying the same or similar methodology as per paragraph 2.1. If a service occupies two or part of two consecutive programme years then they will be eligible for reassessment.

Where Tier 1 and/or Tier 2 settings in programme years 2024/25-2025/26 no longer meet the threshold for their current Equal Start Priority Designation, their designation will be adjusted as follows:

- If a Tier 1 priority setting's score falls below 0.8 in the re-assessment in 2026, but remains greater than or equal to 0.4 they will be designated as a Tier 2 setting for the next two-year cycle.
- If a Tier 1 priority setting's score falls below 0.4 in the re-assessment in 2026, they will be designated as a Tier 2 priority setting for the 2026/27 programme year and as a universal setting for the 2027/28 programme year.
- If a Tier 2 setting's score falls below 0.4 in the re-assessment in 2026, they will be designated as a universal setting for the next two-year cycle but will retain a reduced level of support for programme year 2026/27.

New services (as defined in 2.4) that are designated as a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority setting during the first two programme-year cycle (i.e. for all or part of programme year 2024/25 and all or part of programme year 2025/26), will retain the priority designation until the identification model is rerun for the next two programme-year cycle (i.e. programme years 2026/27 and 2027/28).

For example, if a new service, as defined in 2.4, is identified as a Tier 1 priority setting in September 2025, they will be allocated Tier 1 supports until the identification model is run again for 2026. Adjustments to designations as per this section will be applied to all Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings at the end of the two year period.

2.4 New Service Provider - Definition

A new service is defined as a service that was not in existence on 1 June 2024. Services that have made change of circumstances including name, address, owner, or legal structure do not qualify as a new

service. If a service undergoes a closure and has been closed for over 6 months and has fully deregistered with Tusla, and subsequently re-registers as a new service under Tusla, this will be considered to be a new service.

2.5 Change of Circumstances

Where a setting has made changes including name, address, owner, or legal structure, the service will retain their priority designation until reassessment as per section 2.3 regardless of these changes.

2.6 Applying for Equal Start Assessment

There is no application to become an Equal Start setting. When a provider signs the Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement, they are automatically included to participate in Equal Start.

The Equal Start designation for settings (i.e. universal, Tier 1, Tier 2) is objectively derived using the Equal Start Identification Model.

Settings may opt-out of being an Equal Start setting (universal, Tier 1 or Tier 2). If a service intends to opt-out, the service can reply to the notification correspondence by 23rd August 2024 indicating that they do not want to be an Equal Start setting.

2.7 New Services Entering Equal Start

A Partner Service is automatically an Equal Start setting unless they choose to opt-out of Equal Start. The Equal Start Identification Model assessment windows will be run every six months.

A new service who has signed a Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement will be assessed for a disadvantage score at the next run of the Equal Start Identification Model. The new service if designated as a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority setting will receive their first payment from either the date of confirmation of their designation as Tier 1 or Tier 2 and/or their signing of the Agreement for the provision of Core Funding in Programme Year 3 (2024/25), whichever is the later.

3 Equal Start Supports and Requirements for Tier 1 and Tier 2 Settings for 2024/25 programme year

The Equal Start Partner Service must have a Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement in place prior to 1 September of the programme year to ensure funding arrangements are in place for the start of the

programme year. Cessation of a Core Funding Partnership Service Funding Agreement will automatically cease entitlement Equal Start funding or other supports. It is the responsibility of the approved Partner Service to ensure adherence with their funding agreement requirements. In this regard, approved providers must ensure that they understand and adhere to the requirements of Agreement for the provision of Core Funding in Programme Year 3 (2024/2025) and this rules document. Failure to comply with any of these terms may result in the suspension of Equal Start funding and supports.

3.1 Additional Staff Hours for Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority settings

Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority settings will receive an allocation to fund staff hours in excess of the minimum staff hours required to deliver the stated capacity on their Core Funding 2024/25 application. For a Tier 1 setting, the allocation will translate to a 15% increase in minimum staff hours. For a Tier 2 setting, the allocation will translate to an 8% increase in minimum staff hours.

In addition to the stated capacity of settings for the 2024/25 programme year, an hourly rate of €16.40 is used as the basis for the calculation of the total allocation for settings.

The actual additional staff hours' allocation will only be available once the Core Funding 2024/25 application has been received and approved. In addition, any payment in respect of the additional staff hours' allocation can only be made once the service has contracted for Core Funding 2024/25.

There will be a payment floor for the additional staff hours allocation of €32.80 per week for all Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority setting (equivalent to 2 hours per week).

Funding for additional staff hours may only be used for the purposes described hereunder:

- increased contact time to facilitate reduced child-to-staff ratios and/or group sizes (noting that care should be taken that the number of adults in the room does not hinder children's experiences and/or the learning environment, noting also increased contact time can facilitate the delivery of Early Talk Boost)
- extra non-contact time to facilitate better parental liaison and supports
- extra non-contact time to facilitate better liaison with the HSE and Tusla, including engagement in Meitheal (noting that a key person approach is adopted in the case of Meitheal)
- extra non-contact time to facilitate better co-ordination within service settings such as meetings, planning, mentoring, and advice services such as Better Start to support staff; and
- extra non-contact time to facilitate engagement in Continuous Professional Development in programme year 2024/25, as listed in Appendix A

- extra non-contact time to facilitate the development and implementation of the Tackling Disadvantage Plan as part of the overall Quality Action Plan (see section 4.2).

3.2 Ineligible expenditure for additional staff hours allocation

The additional staff hours allocation can only be used for the purposes listed at 3.1 above.

The additional staff hours' allocation cannot be used to cover sick leave, annual leave or other forms of leave. The additional staff hours allocation cannot be used to increase the hourly staff rates of pay or to fund the staffing hours of individuals that are funded by AIM for the same period. Consideration needs to be given to the number of adults in a room and its impact on the quality of provision.

3.3 Payment schedule

The additional staff hours' allocation for Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority settings will be applicable from the first Monday after which the Programme Year begins, or the Monday of the week the Agreement for the provision of Core Funding in Programme Year 3 (2024/2025) is signed, whichever is later. Partner Services that are in Core Funding for less than a full programme year will be allocated the appropriate number of weekly payments for the total number of weeks their Agreement is active (where they have also been designated as a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority setting under Equal Start).

3.4 Record Keeping

The additional staff hours' allocation for Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority settings comes with some flexibility to ensure these settings can meet the needs of the children. The setting must keep a record of, and report on how the additional staff hours' allocation was utilised in the Tackling Disadvantage Plan, ensuring adherence to 3.1. This must be achieved using the following methods through using new and existing documentation:

- a) Staffing roll books which identify the Equal Start funded early years' educators and/or school-age childcare practitioners in the room. (the AIM-funded early years educator person cannot fulfil this role)
- b) Training dates, and certificates of completion
- c) A record of Meitheal activity
- d) Other measures outlined in the Tackling Disadvantage Plan and reported through the Tackling Disadvantage Planning process

The records listed above will either be records that a setting will record in the normal course of its business either as required by regulation or by virtue of good local management processes. DCEDIY will continue to develop systems to simplify and streamline processes, avoiding creating additional administrative processes where it can be avoided. Services should ensure that they have their records available, in line with above (3.3).

3.5 Additional staff hours allocation

The additional staff hours' allocation is calculated for each individual service. The calculations are based on data submitted by services as part of their Core Funding application form.

The calculation is based on the minimum staff hours required to deliver the stated capacity on the Core Funding 2024/25 application. For example, if an ECCE only service has 11 places, they will need a minimum of one staff member for 15 hours per week, for 38 weeks, therefore the minimum annual staff hours are 570. Calculations will vary based on hours and weeks of operation and the number of places. There will be a payment floor of €32.80 for all services (equivalent to 2 hours per week). Only services with a very small numbers of children will reach a point where a floor is required.

3.6 Qualifications

All staff supported by the additional staff hours allocation in Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings must hold at least a Level 5 major award in Early Childhood Care and Education on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), or a qualification that the Minister has deemed to be equivalent.

4 Equal Start Reporting Requirements

4.1 Service Profile

Additional staff hours should be reflected as out of ratio staff in the Service Profile of Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings- unless the member of staff is included in ratio for another session. A staff member who operates in ratio for a session can only be counted for that purpose.

4.2 Tackling Disadvantage Plan

The Tackling Disadvantage Plan will form part of the Quality Action Plan 2024/25 that Partner Services currently complete as part of their Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement.

The Tackling Disadvantage Plan is part of the agreement requirement, initially in programme year 2024/2025 for Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings. Providers in these settings will be required to identify the tasks to be carried out that will improve and support access and participation for the children and their families who attend their setting. It will be completed as part of the Quality Action Plan, therefore the dates for receipt of link, completion, uploading, review and reporting will be as with the Quality Action Plan.

5 Financial Requirements

It is an essential requirement that all public monies are appropriately accounted for and used for their intended purpose.

Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings must maintain records as outlined in section 3.3 to enable verification by the DCEDIY or agents acting on its behalf that the general terms of the Equal Start Programme Rules 2024/25 are complied with.

The DCEDIY may recoup the allocation for additional staff hours that is judged to be or have been:

- an overpayment on this or any other Department funded scheme
- a payment made to a service that ceased to be a Core Funding Partner Service prior to the payment being made
- not used for any of the purposes outlined at section 3. 1

Where a Tier 1 or Tier 2 setting identifies that they will not be in a position to, or cannot, use the full allocation for additional staff hours, they can identify unspent funding for recoupment by the DCEDIY.