



An Roinn Leanaí, Míchumais
agus Comhionannais
Department of Children,
Disability and Equality



**Equal Start Programme Rules
Programme Year 2026/2027**

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

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Glossary of Terms

- **Bia Blasta** refers to the Bia Blasta- Preschool Nutrition Programme for children in the ECCE programme.
- **Bia Blasta daily capitation** refers to a daily capitation of funding of €1.50 per child per day for services operating at 38 weeks and €1.74 per child per day for services operating at 41 weeks.
- **Bia Blasta food preparation payment** refers to the weekly payment of €27.23 per 38 week service and €25.24 per 41 week service for an hour and a half of preparation time including purchasing the food.
- **Bia Blasta Equipment Grant** refers to a grant of up to 1,000 euro per opting in service to purchase appropriate equipment from an eligible equipment list.
- **Department** means the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE).
- **Change of Circumstance** means a change to an ELC or SAC service that results in a new Service Reference Number being assigned, these changes are; ownership, address, or legal entity. For the avoidance of doubt, for Core Funding purposes, despite any such change the ELC or SAC service remains a Partner Service in existence and not a New Partner Service.
- **City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs)** coordinate the implementation of national Early Learning and Childcare policy and programmes at a local level on behalf of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality.
- **Core Funding** means the supply-side funding stream that the Department has made available to Partner Services in order to achieve a range of policy objectives including improved quality of services, affordability for parents or guardians and sustainability for providers.
- **Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)** service means a Tusla-registered service providing a pre-school service and/or a school-age service.
- **ECCE** means the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme, a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range funded by the Department.

- **Employment Regulation Orders (EROs)** set minimum rates of pay and conditions for workers in a specified sector. An ERO is drawn up by a Joint Labour Committee set up through an Establishment Order.
- **Equal Start** means 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.
- **Equal Start Identification model** refers to 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 setting-targeted supports under Equal Start.
- **Minister** means the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality.
- **Partner Service** means an Early Learning and Care (ELC) and/or School Age Childcare (SAC) service in its entirety, including all Rooms, sessions and Service Types within that service, who has entered into the Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement with the Minister. Partner Service may include Childminders who meet the eligibility criteria set out in Schedule 2 in the Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement.
- **Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan (QIP Plan)** is an annual plan completed by Partner Services at the start of the Programme Year outlining their focus in terms of quality development. Partner Services choose from pre-determined areas of practice based on the Service Type(s). They identify Quality and Inclusion Action(s) to be completed within the chosen area of practice that considers the types of changes and supports that may be required to achieve those actions.
- **Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan Report (QIPP Report)** is an annual end of year report completed by Partner Services which outlines their progress on the Quality and Inclusion Action(s) they identified in their Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan.
- **Tusla** means the Child and Family Agency.

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

Equal Start is a major 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.

Achievements to date are outlined in Appendix 1.

2 Eligibility for Setting-Targeted Supports Under Equal Start

To avail of Equal Start setting-targeted supports, early learning and childcare services must be eligible for and have signed a Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement for the provision of Core Funding in Programme Year 5 (2026/2027) (i.e. a Partner Service).

Any Tusla-registered Service and children registered in any Core Funding Partner Service can benefit from universal supports under Equal Start¹.

2.1 Equal Start Identification Model

Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings that are eligible for these setting-targeted supports have been objectively identified through the Equal Start Identification Model as catering for children experiencing the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage.

Settings are designated as universal, Tier 1/Tier 2 priority settings and transitional through the Equal Start Identification Model, which is underpinned by a range of administrative data² 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), or is an asylum seeker or refugee

¹ For some universal supports, services must also meet additional eligibility criteria. For example, to avail of the updated Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) programme, services must have an ECCE-contract with DCDE.

² The information used for the original identification model was as provided under the child's NCS 2025 application, ECCE 2025 registration or CCSP 2025 registration. Updated data was used for identifying new services (see section 2.5) and for Bia Blasta (see section 3.7).

Equal Start-designated priority cohorts

Settings are designated in accordance with the following steps.

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).

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 Emergency Reception and Orientation Centre or if the child is an asylum seeker or refugee (using information provided in the NCS application)

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 indices](#) for the small area in which they live:

- Score of 0 for any small areas which have a value of the HP Deprivation Index higher than -7.5
- Score of 2 for any small areas which have a value of the HP Deprivation Index of -20 or lower
- Sliding scale of scores (z-score) for services which have a value of the HP Deprivation Index between -7.5 and -20

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

Service Disadvantage Score = (Sum of Child Disadvantage Scores) / (Number of Scheme Children)

A small adjustment is made to the score to provide additional weighting to services with a higher number of disadvantaged children by calculating a normalised absolute score from the sum of the children's scores.

Adjusted service score = 90% * Service Disadvantage Score + 10% * Normalised absolute score.

A final score is then calculated, using a weighted average of the service disadvantage score of the service over 4 snapshot dates over two years. These dates relate to the previous runs of the Equal Start Identification Model to assess new services.

Final service score = 50%* Adjusted service Score (from May 2026) + 25% *Adjusted Service Score (from October 2025) + 15% *Adjusted Service Score (from April 2025) + 10%* Adjusted Service Score (from October 2024).

Services are then designated as Tier 1, Tier 2 or universal based on their final service score.

- Services with a final score of 0.8 and above are designated as a Tier 1 priority setting.
- Services with a final score of 0.4 to 0.79 are designated as a Tier 2 priority settings.

- Services with a final score of less than 0.4 are designated as a universal setting, excepting those services who qualify as an Equal Start Transitional Service (see 2.3 below).

Any Core Funding Partner Service designated as an Equal Start setting can opt out of receiving Equal Start targeted supports (see section 2.4).

2.2 Duration of Tier 1 and Tier 2 Priority Designation

Services assigned a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority designation under Equal Start from September 2026 that wish to remain in Equal Start, will retain that designation for a two-programme year cycle.

2.3 Re-assessment of settings

The Equal Start Identification Model will be rerun for all early learning and childcare settings in advance of Programme Year 2028/2029. All services regardless of existing Equal Start status will be reassessed for eligibility.

This updated designation will remain in place for the next two-year cycle (programme years 2028/2029 and 2029/2030), applying the same or similar methodology as per section 2.1.

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 Transitional 1 service for programme years 2026/2027 and 2027/2028.
- If a Tier 2 setting's score falls below 0.4 in the re-assessment in 2026, they will be designated as a Transitional 2 service for the 2026/2027 programme year.
- Services in this scenario who have already opted into Bia Blasta will retain this support for the Equal Start cycle 2026-2028.
- Where a Tier 2 setting's score increases above 0.8 in the re-assessment in 2026, they will be designated as a Tier 1 setting for the next two-year cycle.

New services (as defined in 2.5) that are designated as a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority services during the first two programme-year cycle (i.e. for all or part of Programme Year 2026/2027 and all or part of Programme Year 2027/2028), will retain their priority designation until the identification model is rerun for the next two programme-year cycle (i.e. programme years 2028/2029 and 2029/2030).

For example, if a new service is designated as a Tier 1 priority setting during the 2026-2027 Programme Year, they will be allocated Tier 1 supports until the Equal Start Identification Model is run again for 2028-2030.

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 Applying for Equal Start Assessment

There is no application to become an Equal Start setting.

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

Settings may opt-out of being an Equal Start setting or may choose to avail of some supports and not others. A service can decide to opt-out of Staffing Supports and choose to opt-into Equal Start Bia Blasta, and vice versa. Alternatively, a service can choose to decline all setting-targeted supports.

If a service intends to opt-out, the service can do so through raising a Service Request on the Early Years Hive or by emailing the Equal Start team at EqualStart@dcde.gov.ie.

In order to participate in Bia Blasta, a Tier 1 or Tier 2 service must opt-in, as outlined in Section 3.7. Services who are not in Equal Start but are identified using the Equal Start Identification model as having significant disadvantage must also opt in, in order to participate in the programme, as outlined in Section 3.7.

2.5 New Service Providers Entering Equal Start

A new service established after the most recent run of the Equal Start Identification Model (for Programme Years 2026/2027 and 2027/2028) will be assessed for a disadvantage score. New services will be assessed, applying the same or similar methodology as per Section 2.1 in half yearly assessment periods.

For Programme Year 2026/2027, assessments of new services will be conducted in October 2026 and April 2027. Only services that have signed a Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement can avail of Equal Start Supports.

The new service, if designated as a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority setting, will receive their first allocation for Equal Start Staffing Supports from the date of their submission of the Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement in Programme Year 5 (2026/2027) or the 1 September 2026, whichever is later.

However, in the case where the new service has received an Equal Start designation after 1 January 2027, the allocation will commence from the first payment week in January or the week of their submission of the Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement for the provision of Core Funding in Programme Year 5 (2026/2027), whichever is the later.

The new service, if designated as a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority service and if providing the ECCE programme, will be invited to participate in Bia Blasta and can opt-in to receive Bia Blasta supports.

For the 2026/2027 programme year, “New Partner Services” are defined strictly to mean services that were not in existence on 30 September 2021. Services that have made changes such as name, address, owner, or legal structure do not qualify as New Services. If a Partner Service undergoes a closure and has been closed for over 6 months and has fully deregistered with Tusla, and subsequently a new service registers under

Tusla, this will be considered to be 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 as a new service.

2.6 Change of Circumstances

Generally, where a Tier 1 or Tier 2 designated setting has made changes including name, address, owner, or legal structure, they will still keep their priority designation until reassessment as explained in section 2.3.

However, if a service that has been designated as an Equal Start priority service experiences a change in circumstances that results in serving a different group of children, it may lose its Equal Start priority designation.

The rules for what counts as a “Change of Circumstances” are explained in Schedule 1 and Schedule 2 of the Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement, and also in Sections 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5 of the Equal Start Rules.

3 Equal Start Supports and Requirements for Tier 1 and Tier 2 Settings for 2026/2027 programme year

The Equal Start designated 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 Partner Service Funding Agreement will automatically cease entitlement to Equal Start targeted supports and funding. It is the responsibility of the approved Partner Service to ensure adherence with their Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement requirements.

In this regard, Partner Services must ensure that they understand and adhere to the requirements of Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement for the provision of Core Funding in Programme Year 5 (2026/2027) and this Equal Start Rules document.

Failure to comply with any of these terms may result in the suspension of Equal Start funding and supports and may, in some circumstances, lead to the recoupment of funding provided. Please note the DCDE reserves the right to recoup non-compliance/overpayment from one childcare funding programme allocations from monies due to another funding stream.

3.1 Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation

The Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation is calculated for each individual service. The calculations are based on data submitted by services as part of their capped Core Funding Application for the 2026/2027 programme year.

3.2 Equal Start Staffing Supports for Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority settings

Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority services will receive an allocation to fund staff hours in excess of the minimum staff hours required to deliver the stated staffed capacity on their capped Core Funding 2026/2027 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.

As per the Equal Start policy, settings identified as not meeting the threshold for priority designation, after each two-year cycle, will be given **one year** of funding to transition out of the Equal Start model.

The Minister will endeavour, if possible, to provide a full two years of transitional Staffing Supports Funding for services who do not meet the threshold for priority designation in 2026-2028, subject to the Estimates 2027 process.

As such, services exiting the Equal Start model will be eligible for the following payments:

- Transitional Equal Start Services who were Tier 1 services in programme cycle 2024-2026 (hereafter known as Transitional 1 services) will receive an 8% increase in minimum staff hours for the 2026/2027 programme year.
- Transitional Equal Start Services who were Tier 2 services in programme cycle 2024-2026 (hereafter known as Transitional 2 services) will receive an 6% increase in minimum staff hours for the 2026/2027 programme year

Bia Blasta will continue to be offered to services who availed of Bia Blasta in the 2025/2026 programme cycle, including Transitional 1 and Transitional 2 services. The calculation of Equal Start Staffing Supports is based on the minimum staff hours required to deliver the stated capacity on the capped Core Funding application record for the 2026/2027 programme year. For example, if an ECCE only service has one room and one session running within that room for 3 hours a day and 5 days a week during term, with a capacity of 11 in the 2.5 - 6 years age range , 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. The existing hourly rate of €18.15 will be used as the basis for the calculation of the total allocation for settings for the programme year, pending any increase via an Employment Regulation Order that may come into effect during this period.

The existing floor payment of €36.30 (equivalent to 2 hours per week) will continue for the programme year, pending any increase via an Employment Regulation Order that may come into effect during this period.

The Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation will be calculated once the Original Core Funding Application for Programme Year 5 (2026/2027) has been approved, and the Core Funding base rate associated with that application has been capped. Payments in respect of the Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation for Programme Year 2026/2027 will only be made once the service has completed the contracting process for Core Funding 2026/2027.

Services who submitted their original Core Funding Application Module on or before the 31 August 2026 must have an 'Approved' August Review and Confirm for Core Funding 2026/2027 which will be their capped application for the 2026/2027 Programme Year. Services who submitted their original Core Funding Application Module on or after the 1 September 2026 must have reached an 'Approved' status on the original application which will be their capped application for the 2026/2027 Programme Year.

Funding for Equal Start Staffing Supports may only be used for the purposes described hereunder:

- increased contact time facilitated through 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)
- increased contact time to facilitate the delivery of Early Talk Boost
- extra non-contact time to upload child-level Early Talk Boost data
- 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 the 'key person' approach adopted in the case of Meitheal)
- extra non-contact time to facilitate better co-ordination within service settings and to support staff, such as meetings, planning, mentoring, and with advice services such as Better Start
- extra non-contact time to facilitate engagement in Better Start webinars related to inclusion of children and families from Equal Start priority cohorts, for example, webinars hosted by the Better Start Traveller and Roma Early Years Specialists
- extra non-contact time to engage in Equal Start Communities of Professional Practice (CoPPs)
- extra non-contact time to engage in Department-led consultations on Equal Start
- extra non-contact time to facilitate engagement in Continuous Professional Development in Programme Year 2025/26, as listed in Appendix 2, and
- extra non-contact time to facilitate the development and implementation of the Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan (see section 4.2).

3.3 Ineligible expenditure for Staffing Supports allocation

The Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation can only be used for the purposes listed at 3.2 above.

The Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation cannot be used to cover sick leave, annual leave or other forms of leave.

The Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation cannot be used to increase the hourly staff rates of pay at a service level or to fund the staffing hours of individuals that are funded by AIM for the same period.

Care should be taken that the number of adults in the room does not hinder children's experiences and/or the learning environment.

3.4 Payment schedule

Equal Start Staffing Supports

The Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation for Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority settings and Transitional settings will be applicable from the first Monday after the programme year begins, or the Monday of the week the Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement for the provision of Core Funding in Programme Year 5 (2026/2027) is signed, whichever is later.

Partner Services that are in Equal Start 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 Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement is active (where they have also been designated as a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority setting, or Transitional setting under Equal Start).

Equal Start Staffing Supports payments are paid in line with Core Funding payments.

Equal Start Bia Blasta

The Equal Start Bia Blasta Programme Year 2026/2027 operates in line with the ECCE calendar year 2026/2027.

The Bia Blasta allocations will commence from the later of the following:

- the first week of the ECCE Programme 2026/2027
- the week you opted into Bia Blasta
- the week in which you submitted your Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement 2026/2027
- the week in which you submitted ECCE Funding Agreement 2026/2027 and have active ECCE registrations.

Partner Services that do not meet the eligibility from the start of the ECCE calendar year 2026/2027 will be allocated the appropriate number of weekly payments.

If your Core Funding Partner Service Agreement has not been submitted before you begin delivering the ECCE programme in your service, you will not receive Bia Blasta payments until your Core Funding Partner Service Agreement has been submitted and approved.

Please note that if your service commences ECCE before 1 September 2026, you must have your Core Funding Partner Service Agreement submitted in order to receive Bia Blasta payments from the start of the programme year.

To avoid loss of payment, please ensure your Core Funding Partner Service Agreement is submitted when your service commences ECCE 2026-2027.

3.5 Record Keeping

The purpose of the Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation for Tier 1 and Tier 2 priority settings and Transitional settings as outlined in 3.1 ensures these settings can meet the needs of children.

The setting must keep a record of, and report on how the Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation was utilised in the Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan and associated end-of-year report, ensuring adherence to the purposes outlined in 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 year's educator person cannot fulfil this role)
- b) Training and CPD dates, and certificates of completion
- c) Records of the delivery of Early Talk Boost
- d) A record of engagements with the HSE and Tusla, including any/all Meitheal activity
- e) Other measures outlined in the Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan and reported through the Quality and Inclusive Practice Planning process (see section 4.2), including reduced child-to-staff ratios and/or group sizes, parental liaison and supports, supports delivered within service settings, and engagements with Better Start.

The records listed above will either be records that a setting will record in the normal course of its business, by regulation or by virtue of good local management processes.

DCDE will continue to develop systems to simplify and streamline processes, avoiding creating additional administrative processes where possible.

Equal Start Bia Blasta

There is a requirement that all capitation funds received per-child for Bia Blasta are spent on food, and that receipts for food are kept for review.

The additional staff time paid for under Equal Start Bia Blasta via Equal Start is €27.23 for a 38-week service and €25.24 for a 41-week service and is to be used for food ordering and preparation.

3.6 Qualifications

All staff supported by the Equal Start Staffing Supports allocation in Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings and Transitional 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.

3.7 Equal Start Bia Blasta – the Pre-school Nutrition Programme

Under Bia Blasta, services are asked to replace all food brought from home including lunch boxes with nutritional meals and snacks for all children in the ECCE programme.

Services will receive:

- €1.50 per child per day for the 38-week services and €1.74 per child per day for the 41-week services in the ECCE programme year.
- €27.23 (38-week services) and €25.24 (41-week services), per week for additional food preparation time (1hr 30 minutes) for the ECCE programme year.

Services are expected to engage in a programme of learning about nutritious food and the social aspects of eating together with the children. Resources will be provided, and Equal Start services will have access to a dedicated dietitian for Bia Blasta based in Better Start.

Services can collect a Bia Blasta resources pack from their local CCC or request a copy by contacting the Better Start dietitian.

Services are encouraged to take the Safefood [online training programme](#) in food safety that covers all aspects of food safety, including temperature and Allergen Control, and HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) training.

Services are invited to opt in to Bia Blasta after being identified by the Equal Start Identification Model.

All Equal Start priority services and other identified eligible services with ECCE registrations will be invited to opt in and can opt in at any point in the ECCE programme year.

Conditions of Inclusion in Equal Start Bia Blasta:

- Services must have an active ECCE Funding Agreement and active ECCE Registrations.
- All conditions for services inclusion in Equal Start also apply to Bia Blasta, including status as a Partner Service. Services outside Equal Start priority services that have been invited to participate in Bia Blasta or were previously part of Equal Start universal service and remain in Bia Blasta must satisfy all conditions for participation in ECCE including receipt of Core Funding.
- Services cannot participate in Bia Blasta if they are in receipt of other funding for food or meals, including the school meals funding from the Department of Social Protection.
- The capitation payment must be spent on food and services must keep receipts for a maximum of three years. There is no expectation of services to return unspent funding.
- Services cannot charge parents for food received under the Bia Blasta programme.

The Bia Blasta allocations will commence from the later of the following:

- The first week of the ECCE Programme 2026/2027.
- The week you opted into Bia Blasta.
- The week in which you submitted your Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement 2026/2027.
- The week in which you submitted ECCE Funding Agreement 2026/2027 and have active ECCE registrations.

Partner Services that do not meet the eligibility from the start of the ECCE calendar year 2026/2027 will be allocated the appropriate number of weekly payments.

Bia Blasta – Equipment Grant

A limited once-off equipment grant is available for every Bia Blasta service up to the end of Programme Year 2027, with up to €1,000 available from a list of eligible items including for example, a fridge or dishwasher. Services who are designated as a Tier 1/ Tier 2 service and any identified service eligible for Bia Blasta who opt in will continue to be eligible for the equipment grant until August 2027. Services who did not avail of this in programme call 2025/2026 are eligible to avail of the grant in programme call 2026/2027.

How does an eligible service apply for the equipment grant?

- Participating services will receive an Equipment Grant application form from their CCC at the start of September, to complete and return. The grant will also be available to eligible Tier 1/ Tier 2 services after the October re-run and the application form will be available from their local CCC.
- A list of eligible items is included on the application form.
- Original receipts must be supplied.
- Receipts for items purchased must be dated from the date the service opts in to Bia Blasta.
- The minimum spend for the *Bia Blasta* equipment programme is €200.
- Services can use the maximum grant of €1,000 towards a number of eligible items.
- Services will complete the form and return it to their CCC with the original receipts.
- The CCC will assess the form and receipts, where appropriate, approve it for reimbursement.

Payment schedule

Services will be eligible to view allocations from 21 August 2026, and payment will be processed in line with the ECCE payment schedule with first payment due in August.

Payments will be capitation based, by ECCE registration and will change with the registrations. Bia Blasta is only applicable to ECCE payable weeks. Services will be eligible for allocations from the Bia Blasta Designation Date or Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement accepted on date, whichever is later.

If a service moves out of Tier 1 or Tier 2 of Equal Start, they may still participate in Bia Blasta, once the service opted in to Bia Blasta during the 2025-2026 programme year.

4 Equal Start Reporting Requirements

4.1 Service Profile

Equal Start Tier 1 and Tier 2 Equal Start Staffing Supports should be reflected under the question “Is this role funded in whole or in part by Equal Start Staffing Support?” captured as part on an ‘In ratio’ staff member record in the Service Profile.

This is a drop-down selection with three options – ‘Yes, completely funded’, ‘Yes, partially funded’, ‘No’.

4.2 Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan

Partner Services must complete the Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan 2026/2027 as part of their Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement; this includes all Tier 1 and Tier 2 Equal Start priority settings and Transitional settings.

Partner Services are also required to complete the Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan Report 2025/2026 under the condition of the Core Funding Partner Service Funding Agreement. Failure to complete these processes by the required date may result in payments being placed on hold.

Equal Start priority services are 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.

This is to be completed as part of the Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan and associated end-of-year report, therefore the dates for receipt of link, completion, uploading, review and reporting will be as with the Quality and Inclusive Practice 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 and Transitional settings must maintain records as outlined in sections 3.4, 3.5 and 3.7 to enable verification by the DCDE or agents acting on its behalf that the general terms of the Equal Start Programme Rules 2026/2027 are complied with.

The DCDE may recoup the allocation for Equal Start Staffing Supports, at and for any time, 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 allocation date
- a payment made to a service that has opted out of Equal Start Staffing Supports and/or Bia Blasta
- not used for any of the purposes outlined at sections 3.2 and 3.7.

Equal Start payments may be placed on hold if the Quality and Inclusive Practice Plan and Report have not been submitted.

Where a Tier 1, Tier 2 or Transitional setting identifies that they will not be in a position to, or cannot, use the full allocation for Equal Start Staffing Supports, they can identify unspent funding for recoupment by the DCDE.

6 Additional Information

6.1 How To Guide

Please see link to the [How to Guide](#) document explaining how the Equal Start allocation and payment information can be located on the Early Years Hive.

6.2 Queries

Please see [FAQs](#) for further information.

For general Equal Start related queries, please contact EqualStart@dcde.gov.ie or raise a request on the Early Years Hive.

To view your allocation information, please refer to the Funding section of the Early Years Hive. Further resources are available under the Help and Support sections on the Early Years Hive.

6.3 Sample recording tool for Equal Start Staffing Supports

Below is a sample spreadsheet that can be used for recording funding allocation.

Please contact your local CCC for a copy of this.

EQUAL START RECORDING TOOL -SAMPLE									
Service Name: ABC Childcare									
Total Allocation of Hours for 2024/25 Programme Year				310					
Total Allocation of Funding for 2024/25 Programme Year				5084					
Record of Use of Hours - Detail	Date of Use of Hour	Evidence	Number of Hour	Hourly rate €	Cost €	Plus PRS	Total Cost	Balance of Fundi	Balance of Hours
DEI Training - Mary Murphy attended	Nov 5th, 8th 10th 17	Certificate for Mary Murphy	16	17	272	30	302	4781.67	294
DEI Training - Jenny Bloggs attended	Nov 5th, 8th 10th 17	Certificate for Jenny Bloggs	16	22	352	39	391	4390.42	278
Additional staff in wobbler room to allow for non contact	Sept 10th 2-4pm	Staff Roll book	2	15	30	3	33	4357.08	276
Meeting with one Parent	Sept 3rd 3-4pm	Mins/note of meeting	1	16.5	16.5	2	18	4338.74	275
Meitheal meeting	Sept 10th 12-2pm	Email confirmation of meeting	2	18.5	37	4	41	4297.61	273
Staff planning - reviewing inclusion policy - 6 staff for 1h	October 15th 6-7pm	Staff planning meeting minutes	1	20	20	2	22	4275.38	272
Staff planning - reviewing inclusion policy - 6 staff for 1h	October 15th 6-7pm	Staff planning meeting minutes	1	18	18	2	20	4255.38	271
Staff planning - reviewing inclusion policy - 6 staff for 1h	October 15th 6-7pm	Staff planning meeting minutes	1	13.65	13.65	2	15	4240.20	270
Staff planning - reviewing inclusion policy - 6 staff for 1h	October 15th 6-7pm	Staff planning meeting minutes	1	15.5	15.5	2	17	4222.98	269
Staff planning - reviewing inclusion policy - 6 staff for 1h	October 15th 6-7pm	Staff planning meeting minutes	1	15	15	2	17	4206.30	268
Staff planning - reviewing inclusion policy - 6 staff for 1h	October 15th 6-7pm	Staff planning meeting minutes	1	14.5	14.5	2	16	4190.19	267
Implementing actions from Quality and Inclusion Plan (	November 5th	Report on the books in the bo	2	13.65	27.3	3	30	4159.84	265
Implementing actions from Quality and Inclusion Plan (	November 19th	Research on books to include	2	20	40	4	44	4115.38	263

7 Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1

Equal Start achievements: September 2024 – June 2026

- The provision of Equal Start Staffing Supports to 824 services identified as operating in a context of concentrated disadvantage, that can be used to support engagement between the settings and families, as well as other child and family support activities.
- Supports delivered as part of the rollout of the Traveller Parenting Support Programme in 17 Tusla areas, with responsibilities on Family Link Workers to engage with Traveller parents of young children, 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).
- Appointment of two Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists working in Better Start to promote inclusive early learning and childcare.
- Roll-out of Early Talk Boost – an intervention for language delay - to settings with an Equal Start priority designation.
- Development of guidance and supports to assist services in participating in inter-agency cooperation, such as Meitheal.
- Annual roll-out of My Little Library. This programme has been running since 2023, this action takes place yearly from May to September. Every year 40,000 My Little Library bags are collected by children starting school. This number continues to grow alongside the programme.
- Equal Start Bia Blasta – Preschool nutrition programme for all children in ECCE, which commenced from October 2025. Initially all Equal Start priority services with ECCE registrations have been invited to opt in. A second list of services outside Equal Start priority services but identified as having a disadvantaged profile are invited to participate in Bia Blasta. The list of services invited to participate in Bia Blasta continues to expand.
- Development of an agreed protocol for Critical Incidents funding under the existing Case Management Process is complete.

In addition, there is considerable development work underway in preparation for the roll-out of additional Equal Start supports and initiatives in the coming years, including:

- Review and updating of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines and associated training. The updated Guidelines will be published in September 2026. The updated training will be delivered by CCCs commencing in Programme Year 2026/2027.
- Review of the current Inclusion Coordinator role and updating of Leadership for Inclusion Programme. The revised programme was delivered to the first cohort of students from January 2026.

- Development of a new Family Community Partnership Coordinator role and development and rollout of associated training programme.
- Development and roll-out of a dedicated Equal Start Communications and Engagement Plan.

For further details of all universal, child-targeted and setting targeted supports to be rolled out under Equal Start, please see [Equal Start: a model to support access and participation in early learning and childcare for all children](#).

7.2 Appendix 2

Continuous Professional Development under Equal Start

The following is the list of courses that staff cover can be used for:

- DCDE/County/City Childcare Committee Diversity, Equality and Inclusion training
- Early Talk Boost training
- Meitheal training
- Inclusion Admission Policy and Procedure training
- Well-being initiatives
- Everyday Spaces training
- Critical Incident training
- Family and Community Partnership training