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Overview

Early Learning and Childcare: Current Funding

In 2026, the current allocation for early learning and childcare will be €1.48 billion, an increase of €125 million (9%) on last year's allocation. The funding in 2026 for the early learning and childcare sector provides for:

- The continuation of the ECCE programme that will benefit more than 105,000 children in 2026.
- The continued implementation of the National Childcare Scheme, with approximately 286,000 individual children set to benefit from subsidies across 2026. including children in childminding settings.
- The continuation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) to ensure that more than 8,400 children with a disability can access the highest level of targeted AIM supports to assist in their meaningful participation in the ECCE Programme and that more than 2,000 children can benefit from AIM Plus (the expansion of these targeted AIM supports for ECCE-age children beyond time spent in the ECCE programme both in term and out).
- The continued implementation of the Core Funding scheme for the fourth programme year and into the fifth programme year from September 2026, including capacity growth of 4.2%, maintenance of fees at 2021 levels for a majority of providers and further reductions on the maximum weekly fee cap. Core Funding will also support improved pay for early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners with implementation of new 2025 Employment Regulation Orders, with further increases in pay to be supported through enhancement in year 5 of the scheme.
- The continued rollout of Equal Start, whereby services will be provided with a proportionate mix of universal and targeted supports to support children and families accessing their services who are experiencing disadvantage including Bia Blasta, the new pre-school nutrition programme which will provide funding for services offering the ECCE programme in Equal Start Tier 1 and Tier 2 setting, helping them to provide a simple nutritious meal to pre-school children in their service and
- The delivery of a range of regulatory and quality supports for the implementation of the National Action Plan for Childminding; Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan, and the ongoing development of the registration and inspection system as well as policy development commitments set out in First 5 and the Programme for Government.

Early Learning and Childcare: Capital Funding

Some €36 million in capital funding is being made available in 2026 for the Early Learning and Childcare capital programmes. This funding will allow for the first steps in a new programme of acquisition and/or fit out of State-led early learning and childcare services. The focus in the State-led services will be on services to meet demand for affordable, accessible, high quality early learning and childcare that is not otherwise being delivered, including on full day provision particularly for younger children. Up to eight new services will be acquired over the course of 2026 resulting in approximately 700 new places being delivered. This funding allocation will allow Building Blocks Extension Scheme projects approved in 2025 which have run over into 2026 to continue to be funded, delivering 1,500 places. A further Building Blocks scheme will open for applications in 2026, focusing in this round on extensions and modifications to existing premises to allow for increased numbers of children to be offered places on a full day basis. In addition, the allocation will allow for continued investment in quality and systems including necessary ICT development, new supports for sensory spaces in services, childminding development and parent and toddler group grants.

Frequently Asked Questions

National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

1. How will Budget 2026 benefit families availing of the National Childcare Scheme?

An additional €64.1 million was announced for the NCS, bringing investment in that Scheme up to €593.9 million in 2026, representing a 12% increase on the 2025 allocation.

This allocation builds in the growth in the uptake and usage of NCS.

It is estimated that approximately 286,000 children will benefit from this NCS in 2026 and they will be using an additional 50 million subsidised hours. This represents an increase of approximately 14% over 2025. Since September 2024, it has been possible for childminders working in their own homes to register with Tusla and take part in the NCS.

2. I have not signed up for the NCS – can I join it now?

Any Tusla registered early learning and childcare provider – centre-based or childminder - can register for the NCS at any time. Full details are available from Pobal on the Provider Portal. Support and advice on registering your service is available from Pobal and your local City/County Childcare Committee (CCC).

3. What should I tell parents who are not in the NCS but want to join?

Parents should go to the dedicated NCS website www.ncs.gov.ie for all information on the NCS, including how to apply.

4. How do parents keep up-to-date on developments related to the NCS?

The Department promotes the NCS, and updates related to the Scheme are available through www.ncs.gov.ie, social media and other means.

ECCE Programme

5. How is the ECCE Programme being funded?

€259.3 million in funding will be made available in 2026 ensuring the continued success of the ECCE programme with over 105,000 children to benefit from the programme in 2026. Payment under the ECCE programme is by way of capitation, payable in respect of each eligible child enrolled, which is paid directly to the provider. The weekly ECCE capitation rate is €69.00 per child attending on a full-time basis.

6. Will the ECCE capitation rate be increased?

There is no change to the ECCE capitation rate. However, between ECCE capitation and Core Funding, there is currently a minimum of €80.40 per child per week, before the application of graduate premiums, targeted measures and the ring-fenced funding for improving staff pay and conditions. Developments in Core Funding for year 5 (from September 2026 – August 2027) will see this minimum income increase further.

7. Will AIM supports continue to be available?

AIM supports will continue to be available. AIM provides a range of both targeted and universal measures, to support ECCE-age children with disabilities access and meaningfully participate in the ECCE Programme and early learning and care more broadly.

8. What do the Budget 2026 measures mean for AIM?

An additional €5.2 million was announced for AIM under Budget 2026, which will have a total allocation of €86.1 million in 2026.

This will support more than 8,400 children with a disability requiring AIM supports to access and participate in the ECCE programme in 2026, an increase from 7,900 children in the previous year. It will also support an estimated 2,000 ECCE-age children to spend time in early learning and care beyond time spent in the ECCE programme.

It will also support the full year cost of a 10% increase in the AIM Level 7 capitation rate, to bring these rates into line with the new hourly rate of pay in the ERO for educators which commenced on 13 October 2025.

9. Are there plans for introducing further extensions to AIM?

First 5 committed to extending AIM, with the ongoing extension of AIM informed by an end-of-year-3 evaluation, which was published in January 2024. Based on this evaluation AIM is now being extended on a phased basis as funding becomes available.

As a first step, all AIM targeted supports have, since the beginning of September 2024, been available to ECCE children beyond the time that they spend in the ECCE programme – both in term and out of term. Children can now access these supports for up to an additional 3 hours per day during the ECCE term and up to 6 hours per day outside of the ECCE term (in holiday periods).

Work is underway on an extension of AIM to children of pre-ECCE eligible age. The nature of the supports required for these younger children will differ from those of the ECCE-aged cohort. To address this, the Department are currently designing a tailored model to facilitate the extension of AIM supports to this younger age group.

An action plan has been developed to respond to other areas for improvement identified through the AIM evaluation, including increasing awareness of AIM, strengthening support for children with autism, further building the capacity and confidence of educators and providers in supporting children with autism and streamlining the application process for equipment, appliances, and minor alterations. This also includes the rollout of the revised Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years programme (LINC Level 6 Special Purpose Award) and related CPD training, currently in development in conjunction with Mary Immaculate College.

10. What do the Budget 2026 measures for Core Funding mean for early learning and childcare providers?

2026 sees an allocation of €405 million for Core Funding. This is an increase of €52 million on the 2025 allocation of €353 million – representing a 15% year-on-year increase. The additional funding allows for the continued implementation of the Core Funding scheme for the fourth programme year (September 2025 to August 2026) and continuing into the fifth programme year starting September 2026 with strengthened support.

The additional funding being made available in 2026 will allow for a 4.2% increase in growth of the sector in year five of the scheme. This growth increase will be driven both by new services joining the sector and existing services offering more places and/or longer hours to families. €14.45 million has been secured for this purpose in a full programme year.

A further €0.89 million has been secured in a full programme year specifically to extend support to new capacity created by the Building Blocks Grants.

Increases to the allocations for non-staff overheads will ensure that the scheme is adequately responding to increased costs. €8.34 million has been secured for this purpose in a full programme year.

In addition, over €20 million in brand new funding for a full programme year has been secured to support providers in adhering to the fee management conditions including reductions in the maximum fee caps in the 2026/2027 programme year. This will guarantee that Core Funding's monetary protections will continue to be passed on to families while ensuring sustainability and stability for the providers.

11. What changes will be made to Core Funding in 2026?

Significant increases came into effect for the fourth year of the scheme, which runs from September 2025 to August 2026. These changes include:

- increases to all the early learning and care base rates, to ensure Partner Services can keep pace with rising costs without needing to increase fees charged to parents.
- increases to the minimum base rate allocation to support smaller services.
- a reduction to the maximum base rate allocation and
- increased funding to support the outcomes of the Joint Labour Committee which commenced on 13 October 2025 when new Employment Regulation Orders came into effect.

The additional funding in 2026 will allow for further increases in September 2026 for the fifth year of the scheme.

In addition to the funding increases, changes were made to the fee management system for the fourth year of Core Funding. A cap on fees which was introduced for First-Time Partner Services in Year 3 has been reduced and extended to all new and existing Partner Services.

Full details of Core Funding 2026/2027 will be made available to the sector in 2026, in advance of programme readiness for Year 5 of Core Funding.

12. What is the package for small-medium services?

A number of targeted supports for small and sessional services in Year 2 of the scheme were introduced in order to improve sustainability of these services, and these supports were strengthened in subsequent years. These measures included a flat rate top up of €5,000 (increased from €4,075 in Year 2) for sessional-only services, and a minimum base rate allocation of €14,400 (increased from €14,000 in Year 3).

In a continued commitment to supporting these services, these measures will continue to apply in the 2026/2027 programme year.

13. What administrative supports are available to providers?

Work is well advanced on the Programme for Government commitment to develop an Action Plan for Administrative and Regulatory Simplification for the Early Learning and Childcare Sector.

To inform this plan, a review of the end-to-end processes linked to publicly-funded early learning and childcare schemes/programmes has been completed. A report of the findings of this review has been produced. Following recent further engagement with the sector, and these reports, the Action Plan will be finalised in 2025.

In advance of the publication of the Action Plan for Administrative and Regulatory simplification, the Department has identified a series of immediate measures that have already been delivered or are currently in train for delivery before year end 2025.

14. Do the increases in Budget 2026 mean that the hourly base rates will increase in September 2026?

Full details on Year 5 of Core Funding (September 2026-August 2027), including the allocation of new funding secured in Budget 2026, will be made available to the sector in 2026. The increased funding will result in the hourly base rates increasing in September 2026.

15. Will the Staff Funding Additional Contribution continue to be a separate element of the Core Funding grant calculation in 2026/2027?

A new element of the overall Core Funding grant calculation was introduced in September 2025 to distribute funding which is ring-fenced for improving staff pay and conditions – called the Staff Funding Additional Contribution. This will continue to be a standalone element of the overall grant calculation, similar to the Graduate Premiums, in 2026/2027.

16. How does Budget 2026 support capacity growth/ address supply issues?

Since its introduction, Core Funding has stimulated significant growth in capacity – with capacity growth for cohorts (such as children under the age of three) and in areas (such as Dublin) where there has been significant pressure on places. Administrative data from Core Funding Partner Services between May 2023 and May 2025 showed an increase in staffed capacity of 15%, driven both by new services joining the sector and existing services offering more places and/or longer hours to families.

Funding to support capacity growth of 3.5% across the sector is included in the allocation for the current fourth programme year (2025/2026).

€14.45 million in a full programme year will be allocated towards funding the natural growth of the sector, allowing for further capacity growth of up to 4.2% in the fifth year of the scheme (2026/2027).

This additional funding will support an increase in Partner Services; and also, more staff working in the sector, more rooms and places, and more graduate lead educators and managers.

An additional €0.89 million in a full programme year has been secured to facilitate additional capacity created by the Building Blocks Scheme.

17. What about providers who have not signed up to Core Funding?

While the State cannot mandate providers to participate in the scheme, Core Funding has been designed with maximum participation of providers in mind as reflected in the year-on-year growth of investment in the Scheme (rising from €259 million in year 1 of the Scheme to €437 million in year 5).

As of 17 October 2025, 4,494 eligible providers have applied for Core Funding, with the fourth year of the scheme in operation for one month. There are now more Partner Services contracted for Core Funding than at any point since the scheme's launch in 2022. Participation in Core Funding is optional, but it remains open to all registered providers subject to their agreement to the terms and conditions of the Core Funding Agreement. It is a matter for providers to decide whether they wish to sign up to Core Funding and thereby benefit from the significant financial supports it offers to providers and the certainty it gives to parents through the associated fee management measures.

16. Core Funding does not go far enough to cover the cost of operating a service.

The introduction of Core Funding in September 2022 brought a significant increase in investment for the sector, with €259 million of funding paid directly to providers in Year 1 of the scheme, of which €210.8m was entirely new funding.

This funding, which has increased by over 50% in Year 4 (to over €390 million), is being paid directly to providers in the sector in order to progress public management of privately delivered services for the public good.

Alongside the significant increases in funding, in 2024 the Department introduced a process whereby services whose fees are below their county average could apply for an assessment to increase their fees to an approved level. This Fee Increase Assessment process balanced the need of parents for stability with their early learning and care and school- age childcare costs and the need for providers to operate viable businesses in order to continue providing this Public Good service for their community. The Core Funding contract for 2025/26 includes a commitment to engage in a similar fee assessment process for the current programme year.

2026 will see further investment in Core Funding, with the budget increasing by nearly 15% on the 2025 budget to €405 million. The increases in 2026 translate to a full year allocation of €437 million for Year 5 of Core Funding, which will run from September 2026 to August 2027, increasing by nearly 11% on the current year 4 allocation. Full details on Year 4 of Core Funding (September 2025-August 2026) will be made available to the sector in advance of programme readiness for Year 5 of Core Funding.

In addition to the increased level of Core Funding for Year 5 of the scheme, there will continue to be wider financial supports available from the Department where a service is experiencing financial

difficulty or has concerns about their viability, which can be accessed while remaining within Core Funding.

17. Can early learning and childcare providers increase their fees?

Yes – but only with approval from the Department if the provider is a Core Funding Partner Service. Prior to the introduction of Core Funding, there was a wide variance of fees in the sector, with some services charging much lower fees than comparable services, while being held to the same fee freeze. To address this, and in addition to the 15% increase in Core Funding in Year 3, a new Fee Increase Assessment process was introduced, whereby services charging low fees could apply to increase their fees up to a level approved by the Department.

Only services charging low fees (fees below the average in their county) were eligible to apply. The onus was on the provider to demonstrate a need for a fee increase. This process opened for applications on 1 August 2024 and closed on 29 November 2024.

In total, 1,145 applications to the Fee Increase Assessment process were received. Inclusive of appeal outcomes, 898 services that applied to the Fee Increase Assessment process were approved to increase at least one fee option from their fees list. 247 services that applied were unsuccessful and did not receive approval to increase any of their fees.

Within the 2025/2026 Core Funding Partner Services Agreement, the Department committed to undertaking a further Fee Increase Assessment type exercise which will seek to support the ongoing viability of services where fees are particularly low. As with the 2024/2025 Fee Increase Assessment process, eligibility will be restricted to providers charging the lowest fees. The details of the 2025/2026 fee increase process will be communicated to the sector once finalised.

18. What sustainability supports will be available in 2026?

In 2026, sustainability funding will continue to be open to early learning and childcare providers within the Core Funding scheme to help them remain viable, especially in the event unexpected challenges.

The Department will continue to work collaboratively with its partners Pobal and City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) to provide support to providers.

Through Case Management supports, the Department will assist providers with interpreting aspects of their business model including analysis of staff ratios and cash flow, as well as more specialised advice and support appropriate to individual circumstances. Sustainability funding will enhance Core Funding by providing supports to services who are in most in need of financial assistance ensuring the delivery of high-quality early learning and childcare.

Equal Start

19. What is Equal Start?

Equal Start is a funding model and set of universal and targeted measures to support access to, and participation in, early learning and care and school-age childcare for children and their families who experience disadvantage.

Equal Start includes a suite of universal supports, child-targeted supports, and setting-targeted supports to ensure every child and every setting will benefit from a continuum of supports that reflects

a continuum of need. The initial rollout of Equal Start commenced in September 2024. The full rollout of the scheme is planned in phases from 2024-2028.

20. Who benefits from Equal Start?

Equal Start is designed to support children and their families who may be experiencing disadvantage to access early learning and childcare settings, through a range of supports.

Children to benefit from child-targeted supports include children living in disadvantaged areas, Traveller children, Roma children, children availing of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor body, children experiencing homelessness and children in the International Protection system.

A total of 787 Tier 1 and Tier 2 designated Core Funding Partner settings are benefitting from setting-targeted supports, with up to 820 settings to benefit in 2026. These settings have been objectively identified as operating in the context of the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage.

In line with the rules for Equal Start, Partner Services with a Tier 1 or Tier 2 priority designation under Equal Start 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).

The Equal Start Identification Model will be rerun for all settings in 2026 for the next two-year cycle (i.e. programme years 2026/27 and 2027/28).

21. What will be provided through Equal Start in 2026?

An additional €5.14 million was secured for Equal Start in Budget 2026, bringing the total budget allocation for Equal Start to €22.33 million in 2026. This funding will provide for the following measures:

- Staffing supports will provide a higher rate of funded additional staffing hours to Tier 1 and Tier 2 services in line with the increase in minimum hourly rates of pay under the new ERO which commenced on 13 October 2025.
- Full year delivery of Bia Blásta, the new pre-school nutrition programme, which offers funding for services providing the ECCE programme in Equal Start Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings, helping them to replace lunch boxes brought from home with a shared simple nutritious meal.
- Development of a new Family and Community Partnership Coordinator role and associated training.
- Review and update of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines and associated training will be completed.
- Continued rollout of Early Talk Boost.
- Continued coverage of Family Link Workers in all 17 Tusla areas for the rollout of the Traveller Parenting Support Programme.
- Full-year cost of two Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists to work in Better Start to promote inclusive early learning and care and school-age childcare
- Roll-out of Meitheal training and engagement by early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners in Meitheal.

22. What is available through Bia Blásta?

Bia Blásta is the new pre-school nutrition programme under Equal Start.

Bia Blásta supports the replacement of the lunch box from home with the provision of a light nutritious meal to children in settings with an Equal Start priority designation that are providing the ECCE programme.

The Bia Blásta programme is the first time that dedicated funding is being provided for children who attend the 3-hour free pre-school programme. Rollout of Bia Blásta commenced on 1 October 2025, with all Equal Start Tier 1 and Tier 2 services that provide the ECCE programme invited to participate.

Participating services will receive a €1.50 per day payment per ECCE registered child and a weekly payment to services of €27.23 for preparation, such as food ordering. In addition, a dietitian/nutritionist is being recruited through Better Start to oversee the nutritional standard of programme delivery.

23. What is a Family and Community Partnership Coordinator?

The Nurturing Skills workforce plan identified a future role within early learning and care and school-age childcare settings of a Family and Community Partnership Coordinator, tasked with 'leading and supporting partnership and engagement between families and the service provider and to pilot the delivery of parenting programmes through services'.

Equal Start has also committed to 'develop a role profile for Family and Community Partnership Coordinators, drawing on the experience of the Inclusion Coordinator role and other family outreach and liaison roles (e.g. Home-School-Community-Liaison in DEIS schools; Traveller Parent Support Programme Family Liaison Workers)' and to 'develop a LINC-type training programme to be a requirement for the role, with priority initially for Equal Start-targeted services'.

During 2026, the Department will put in place a dedicated training programme for this role, recognising it as a specialised and distinct leadership role within early learning and care and school-age childcare services.

Childminding

24. I am a childminder – what does Budget 2026 mean for me?

Following the commencement of the Childminding regulations on 30 September 2024, all childminders can now register with Tusla and take part in the NCS.

Budget 2026 continues to fund the work of the City and County Childcare Committees (CCC). Each CCC has a Childminding Development Officer to provide tailored supports to childminders. These supports include the provision of the pre-registration training course which prepares childminders to register with Tusla. Budget 2026 also provides for the continued delivery of the Childminding Development Grant. The annual Grant scheme provides up to €1,000 to assist both registered and unregistered

childminders who are providing a childminding service in their own homes. The Grant aims to support childminders to enhance quality and safety in their service.

25. What childminding initiatives are included in Budget 2026?

Budget 2026 provides additional funding for the NCS overall, including funding to meet the projected increase in the number of childminders availing of the scheme. Budget 2026 continues to provide for a Childminding Development Officer in each county to support childminders with pre-registration training as well as other registration supports. Budget 2026 also provides continuing funding for actions to support implementation of the National Action Plan for Childminding, which in 2026 will include a focus on communications actions to help raise awareness and understanding of the new Childminding Regulations among childminders and parents. Budget 2026 also provides for the continued delivery of the Childminding Development Grant. The annual Grant scheme provides up to €1,000 to assist both registered and unregistered childminders who are providing a childminding service in their own homes. The Grant aims to support childminders to enhance quality and safety in their service.

Capital

26. What Capital Programmes will be available in 2026?

Some €36 million in capital funding is being made available in 2026 for the early learning and care and school-age childcare capital programmes.

This funding will allow for the commencement of the first phase of a new programme of acquisition and/or fit out of State-led services.

The focus in State-led services will be to support an increase in capacity to meet demand for affordable, accessible, high quality early learning and care and school-age childcare that is not otherwise being delivered, and on full day provision particularly for younger children. Depending on the specific circumstances of each site, the Department may acquire buildings outright and fit out premises or engage in a long-term lease and use capital funding for the fit out of these buildings. Up to eight new services will be acquired over the course of 2026.

This funding allocation will also allow Building Blocks Extension Scheme projects approved in 2025 which have run over into 2026 to continue to be funded. It is also proposed that a further Building Blocks scheme will open for applications in 2026, focusing in this round on extensions and modifications to existing premises to allow for increased numbers of children to be offered places on a full day basis.

How does Budget 2026 support the creation of 2,200 new early learning and care and school-age childcare places? Is this through Building Blocks?

1,500 Building Blocks places are being funded through the 2026 capital allocation.

A further 700 places will be delivered by the capital allocation in 2026 through the State-led early learning and childcare programme which will begin the acquisition and fit out of buildings.

27. Will Budget 2026 help improve workforce recruitment and retention?

Many early learning and care and school-age childcare services report difficulties in staff recruitment and retention. This is a challenge for many employers in the current tight labour market.

According to the latest *Annual Early Years Sector Profile Survey*: staff turnover stands at 25.8%, with an estimated one-third moving between services rather than leaving the sector. Despite turnover, the number of staff working directly with children has grown by 10% year on year. Improvements in pay is certainly key to improving recruitment and retention rates, as is the full implementation of Nurturing Skills.

In general, staffing pressures in the sector are caused not by insufficient supply of qualified personnel, but by high levels of staff turnover. Recruitment and staff retention difficulties are linked to poor terms and conditions.

The level of pay for early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners does not reflect the value of their work for children, families, society and the economy.

The Joint Labour Committee is the formal mechanism established by which employer and employee representatives can negotiate minimum pay rates, which are set down in Employment Regulation Orders. Through the Joint Labour Committee process, Employment Regulation Orders have been signed into law in September 2022, June 2024 and October 2025. Based on 2025 Core Funding data, it is estimated that over 67% of staff working in services will see increases in their rates of pay as a result of the 2025 Orders.

Outcomes from the Joint Labour Committee process are supported by Government through Core Funding.

The Government is committed to a new Employment Regulation Order process in the second half of 2026 and to making funding available for a further future round of pay improvements subject to the deliberations of the independent Joint Labour Committee.

28. Are there any plans to support the well-being of the workforce?

To help support welfare and wellness of the early learning and care and school-age childcare workforce, the Equal Start model includes an action to 'develop and introduce well-being supports for early years educators and practitioners, in addition to supports for early learning and childcare settings to enable more supportive working environments to be created for staff'.

Employee wellness can be impacted by staffing pressures, but also because of busy work and home lives. Similar to other employers, early learning care and school-age childcare employers often need to provide support to staff who are experiencing difficulties as a result of workplace stress, but also because of pressure in home and family life. In addition to reacting to times of difficulty, employers can also work proactively with their employees to offer initiatives that promote wellbeing.

A pilot employee assistance programme will be funded in five City/County Childcare Committee areas, Cork City, Cork County, Longford, Meath and Cavan. Following evaluation, it is the intention to expand this programme across the sector offering this valuable resource and support to the workforce for times of difficulty both personally and professionally.

29. How will the Budget support implementation of Nurturing Skills?

Nurturing Skills, the workforce plan for early learning and care and school-age childcare, continues to be implemented in line with commitments in the Implementation Plan. Actions during 2026 will include:

- Completion of the commitment in *Nurturing Skills* to carry out a mid-point review, including a public consultation process, and the publication of a second implementation plan for 2026-2028.
- Continued development of the national Continuing Professional Development (CPD) system which includes, the Nurturing Skills Learning Hub and Nurturing Skills eLearning Programmes. These will continue to be reviewed and updated ensuring the training needs of the sector are met. A range of professional development opportunities, mentoring, and practical support will continue to be offered to support the provision of high-quality early learning and care for the children and families.
- Advancing the development of qualifications and training for school-age childcare and childminding.
- Commission and review research on a number of Nurturing Skills commitments including induction programme for new staff to the sector and the examination of language requirements.
- Advancing the process for recognition of prior qualifications and learning, in line with the delivery of new quality-assured courses in early learning and care from Level 5 to Level 8 that were in place from September 2022.

Complementing these measures, Core Funding will support services to meet the pay rates set in Employment Regulations Orders. Pay and conditions are key to improving staff recruitment and retention, which are critical in ensuring the consistency of care that is so important for quality provision of early learning and care and school-age childcare.

30. Will the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund (NSLF) be extended?

The NSLF aims to assist early years educators to pursue early learning and care (ELC) qualifications that have been approved by the Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB) while continuing to work in the sector. Both First 5 and Nurturing Skills have committed to a graduate-led ELC workforce, with at least 50% of staff (i.e. all lead educators, assistant manager and managers) working directly with children in centre-based ELC settings and coordinators supporting the work of childminders, hold an appropriate degree-level qualification.

The NSLF makes a significant contribution to course fees that early year's educators face while pursuing QAB-approved ELC qualifications at levels 7 and 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The funding is paid directly to the higher education institution on behalf of the early years educator in order to minimise the financial and administrative barrier the educator faces when seeking to undertake further studies. The Nurturing Skills Learner Fund is co-funded by the European Union through the European social Fund+ Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training programme (EIST) 2021-27.

Budget 2026 will continue supporting the first two cohorts totalling 700 NSLF-funded educators to continue their studies, while also making provision to fund a third intake in Autumn 2026.