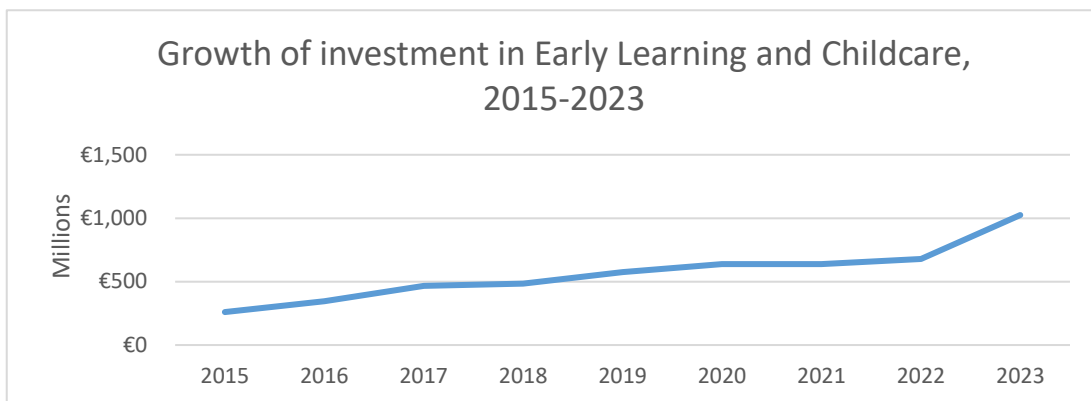




## EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE

### Together for Better in County Westmeath: A lookback on the first programme year

In 2023, State investment in early learning and childcare will exceed €1 billion for the first time. The overwhelming majority of this funding is allocated through Together for Better, the new funding model for early learning and childcare.



Together for Better brings together major early learning and childcare investment strands for the first time – the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme including the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), the National Childcare Scheme and Core Funding – working to serve children and their families, educators, practitioners and providers.

In 2023, this has seen investment of:

- €308 million for the ECCE programme including AIM – giving children the best possible start in life.
- €342 million into the NCS, enabling thousands of families to avail of more affordable early learning and childcare.
- €266 million for Core Funding, a brand new fund going directly to providers to ensure sustainability, freeze fees and enable higher rates of pay for educators and practitioners.

This short brief provides an overview of Together for Better in County Westmeath for the 2022/2023 programme year – which ran from September 2022 to August 2023.

In County Westmeath, 83 services were in contract for one or more strands of Together for Better for the programme year 2022/23. A table of these services and which strands they offer can be found here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4a91f-elc-settings-by-local-authority/>

# Better for Children and their Families in County Westmeath

## National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

The NCS provides financial support to help families with their early learning and childcare costs.

In 2023, the Government was able to increase NCS subsidies so that out of pocket costs for families fell by 25% on average.



Because of the increase in investment in the NCS, the number of families availing of NCS subsidies has risen by 74%, to its highest ever level. In County Westmeath, this has meant that:

- The number of children benefitting from the NCS between January and August 2023 was 2,993, this compares to 1,629 in the same period of 2022, an increase of 84%.
- The number of services offering the NCS for the programme year 2022/23 was 70.
- The total funding under the NCS between January and August 2023 was €4,283,242.45, this compares to €2,427,959.41 in the same period of 2022, an increase of 76%.

## The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme

The ECCE Programme is a free universal two-year preschool programme available to all children within the eligible age range. It provides children with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school. The programme is provided for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year. The programme year runs from September to June each year. In County Westmeath:

- The number of children enrolled in the ECCE programme for the programme year 2022/23 was 2,270.
- The number of services offering the ECCE programme for the programme year 2022/23 was 71.
- Total funding under the ECCE programme for the programme year 2022/23 was €5,738,185.60.

## Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

AIM is a programme of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can fully participate in the ECCE programme, thereby benefitting from quality pre-school education. AIM provides a suite of universal and targeted supports. In County Westmeath:

- The number of children benefitting from targeted AIM supports for the programme year 2022/23 was 131.
- The number of services benefitting from AIM for the programme year 2022/23 was 43.
- Total funding to providers under AIM for the programme year 2022/23 was €639,648.00.



# Better for Educators, Practitioners and Providers in County Westmeath

## Core Funding

Core Funding is a brand new Government investment package for providers. In 2023, €266 million was made available and this new investment has, for the first time, enabled:

- Improved affordability for parents by ensuring that fees do not increase;
- Improved quality through better pay and conditions for the workforce;
- Improved sustainability and stability for providers.

Core Funding operates alongside the ECCE Programme and NCS and provides additional income for providers on top of funding for these schemes, as well as income from parental fees. In County Westmeath:

- The number of services in contract for Core Funding for the programme year 2022/23 was 82.

In County Westmeath, 82 services received €4,256,631.39 through Core Funding: an average payment of €51,910.14 and a median payment of €26,989.38.

99% of all services benefited from increased funding under Core Funding. Approximately 1% benefitted from a funding guarantee that ensured no service will receive less in Core Funding than it previously received the previous funding model.

## Numbers of Registered Services

Early Learning and Care (ELC) services and standalone School-Age Childcare (SAC) services are required by law to register with Tusla.

This year so far, closures of ELC services nationally is at a five-year low and the overall number of ELC and standalone SAC services is now increasing.

**Registered ELC and Standalone SAC service closures & new service openings nationally: January – August and full year, 2019 – 2023**

<b>January to August</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
Total service closures	133	139	113	133	120
Total new services	56	197	118	93	208
Total net difference	-77	58	5	-40	88
<b>Full year</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>Year to date</b>
Total service closures	196	209	156	183	120
Total new services	93	255	207	213	208
Total net difference	-103	46	51	30	88

Source: Tusla register of Early Years Services and Tusla register of School-Aged Services

## **Building Block Capital Programme**

The Building Blocks Capital Programme under the National Development Plan is designed to meet current and long-term early learning and childcare infrastructure needs. Some €69 million has been allocated under this Programme over 2023-2025. In 2023, 151 services were awarded green energy and retrofit upgrade grants of €35,000 to €75,000 under strand 1 of the Programme, the Building Blocks – Improvement Grant.

In County Westmeath, services were awarded a total of €294,089.66:

<b>Service Provider</b>	<b>Strand</b>	<b>Total Grant Awarded</b>
Peter Pan Pre-School	Strand A - Green Energy	€73,550.00
Mullingar Montessori and Afterschool	Strand A - Green Energy	€74,683.00
Grovelands Childcare	Strand A - Green Energy	€71,839.00
Busy Kids Athlone	Strand B - Retrofit	€74,017.66

## **Resources for Families and for Providers**

Find out more about early learning and childcare schemes and campaigns at: [www.gov.ie/childcare](http://www.gov.ie/childcare).

Westmeath County Childcare Committee details are:

<a href="http://www.westmeathchildcare.ie">www.westmeathchildcare.ie</a>	044 93 35454	<a href="mailto:Info@westmeathchildcare.ie">Info@westmeathchildcare.ie</a>
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Families can contact Westmeath CCC, for assistance in relation to their early learning and childcare needs.

For information on the National Childcare Scheme, families can visit [www.NCS.gov.ie](http://www.NCS.gov.ie) or contact the Parent Support Centre on 01 906 8530, Monday to Friday 9am-5pm.

There is a dedicated NCS email for members of the Oireachtas: [NCSoireachtasqueries@pobal.ie](mailto:NCSoireachtasqueries@pobal.ie).

For scheme queries, early learning and childcare providers should be directed to the Early Years Provider Centre by contacting [eypc@pobal.ie](mailto:eypc@pobal.ie), or calling 01 511 7222, Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm (10am to 5pm on Wednesday).

Providers experiencing financial difficulty and who would like support are encouraged to contact Westmeath County Childcare Committee to access case management supports. Services can be assisted on an individual basis through this route. Contact details for all City and County Childcare Committees can be found on [www.myccc.ie](http://www.myccc.ie).

This brief was prepared by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Queries can be sent to [EYQueries@equality.gov.ie](mailto:EYQueries@equality.gov.ie).



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