

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. Why are the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) hours being extended?

One of the commitments in First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, was to undertake an evaluation of AIM and, subject to evaluation findings and other relevant developments, to consider enhancements to, and/or extension of, AIM to, for example, all early learning and care services, all school-age childcare services and to children with additional needs other than a disability.

The AIM evaluation was published in January 2024. The findings from the evaluation have informed this expansion of targeted AIM supports to children beyond time spent in the ECCE programme, in term and out of term from September 2024. The intent of the additional hours funding is to support ECCE-enrolled children with additional needs to remain in services for the full day if they wish to do so.

2. Who can benefit from AIM additional hours?

AIM is designed to ensure that children with additional needs can participate in Early Learning and Care (ELC) including the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. ECCE is a free pre-school programme providing all children with access to pre-school 3 hours per day, 5 days per week. Children can be registered on the ECCE Programme if they are over 2 years and 8 months before 1st September and remain in free pre-school until they transfer to primary school (provided that they are not older than 5½ years at the end of the pre-school year).

For the 2024/25 programme call, children registered for ECCE and attending a service providing ECCE can avail of AIM outside of ECCE hours. As such, in order for a child to access AIM supports, s/he must be registered on the ECCE programme in an ECCE-registered pre-school service and in order to access AIM additional hours s/he must have an NCS claim in place.

3. How many additional AIM hours are available?

The maximum number of additional hours of support available is 30 hours per week, which includes ECCE programme attendance of 15 hours per week in term.

4. How do I apply for AIM additional hours?

A guide to apply for AIM is available at the following link: [How to Apply - Access and Inclusion Model \(aim.gov.ie\)](https://aim.gov.ie)

Applications for AIM targeted supports (Levels 4-7) are completed by the childcare service provider in collaboration with the child's parent/guardian. Most pre-school providers should be familiar with the AIM application process and be able to guide parents through the application.

The application for AIM supports for time spent in ECCE are currently open. The system add-on to support the application process for additional hours is currently under development. An announcement will be made when it goes live in the coming weeks.

5. What happens if a family doesn't need the full 6 hours?

The hours are not fixed and families can use as many hours as they need. Hours outside of ECCE will be linked to the NCS claimed hours. For example, an eligible child using 15 hours per week and 10 hours of NCS subsidised early learning and care can receive 25 hours AIM support.

6. Why is the AIM expansion for ECCE aged children not being introduced until September 2024?

AIM, alongside other early learning and childcare schemes, operates on an annual programme cycle commencing in September of each year. To allow providers and the administrative systems to be ready to roll out this major change, it is important that this new measure follow the normal programme cycle.

7. Are there any changes to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme?

There are no changes to the ECCE programme. ECCE is a free pre-school programme providing all children with access to pre-school 3 hours per day, 5 days per week. Children can be registered on the ECCE Programme if they are over 2 years and 8 months before 1st September and remain in free pre-school until they transfer to primary school (provided that they are not older than 5½ years at the end of the pre-school year).

8. Will there be further expansions of AIM?

When first introduced, AIM supports were designed to support the meaningful participation of children with a disability in the ECCE programme. An end of year 3 evaluation of AIM took place and was published in January 2024. Based on the evaluation findings and other relevant developments, the Department is considering further enhancements to AIM including expansion to other age groups.

Due to differences in relation to provision and regulatory requirements depending on the age of the children, consideration must be given to how exactly an expansion would work for different age groups. The expansion committed to under Budget 2024 – additional hours for ECCE age children - is a first step. Further thought and design is required before undertaking more complex expansions. It must also be taken into consideration that there has been a series of major shifts in early and learning and childcare driven by the substantial investment in recent years and we must introduce change at a rate providers can manage.

9. How will this additional budget address any issue around recruitment under AIM?

While the Department does not determine early year's educators' working conditions, it has provided a range of supports to service providers to enable them to improve wages and working conditions and to support the recruitment and retention of staff. The additional funding supplied by this change to AIM will allow early learning service providers the opportunity to recruit staff for longer hours. The offer of additional hours should make the position of AIM Additional Assistant more secure and consistent for applicants to this position.

10. What is the AIM Capitation rate for the 24/25 programme year?

As well as additional funded hours, the AIM capitation rate will increase by 2.5% from September 2024 - to €246 per week for the 15-hour capitation rate and €492 per week for the 30-hour capitation rate. The increase in the capitation rate will enable a continued alignment between AIM funding and wider funding for the ECCE programme, which is also supplemented by Core Funding.