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CONTENTS

Glossary of terms	5
1 Introduction	7
2 Policy context	8
2.1 Governance of the ELC sector	8
2.2 Factors affecting ELC cohort size	9
2.3 ELC provision and enrolment	11
2.4 ELC structural quality	14
2.5 Funding of ELC	15
2.6 ELC access	17
2.7 Policy objectives	19
2.8 Policies to support process quality and child development	21
2.9 DCYA/DES assessment of Ireland’s ELC system	24
3 Monitoring and inspections	26
3.1 Governance of monitoring and inspection	26
3.2 Method of inspections	29
3.3 Quality dimensions examined in inspections	32
3.4 Development of the monitoring regime	36
3.5 Review process	39
3.6 DCYA/DES assessment of Ireland’s monitoring and inspection system	42
4 Curriculum and pedagogy	44
4.1 Development of Aistear	44
4.2 Overview of the national curriculum design	46
4.3 Curriculum and pedagogy to support children’s individual needs	53
4.4 Engagement with families and community	56
4.5 Lessons learned in curriculum and pedagogy	57
4.6 DCYA/DES assessment of Ireland’s approach to curriculum and pedagogy	58
5 Workforce development	60
5.1 Profile of ELC staff and leaders	60
5.2 Staff shortages and turnover	62
5.3 Required qualifications and competencies	63
5.4 Workforce governance	65
5.5 Funding, incentives and regulation to encourage take-up of training and collaboration	65
5.6 Pre-service training to support process quality and stakeholder engagement	67
5.7 In-service training to support process quality and stakeholder engagement	70
5.8 Training to support leaders	72
5.9 Monitoring and evaluation of training programmes	73

5.10 Working conditions	74
5.11 DCYA/DES assessment	75
List of references	77
Annex A Index of questions	85

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Term	Definition
AIM	Access and Inclusion Model. A model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme.
<i>Aistear</i>	The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.
CCC	City and County Childcare Committee. Local agencies that provide advice and support to services, parents and other stakeholders.
CCSP	Community Childcare Subvention Plus. An income-dependent ELC subsidy for parents.
CCSU	Community Childcare Subvention Universal. A universal ELC subsidy for parents of children aged 6 months to 2 years and 8 months.
CPD	Continuing Professional Development (see also in-service training).
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs.
DES	Department of Education and Skills.
DES Inspectorate	Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate
ECCE	The Early Childhood Care and Education programme. A universal state-funded programme providing two years of free pre-school (15 hours per week, 38 weeks per year) to children aged 2 years 8 months to 5 years 6 months (not to be confused with ECEC).
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care (known as ELC in Ireland).
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland. A membership organisation representing providers of early learning and care and school-age childcare.
ELC	Early Learning and Care. The term used to refer to ECEC in Ireland.
EYEI	Early Years Education Inspections. The DES Inspectorate conducts these inspections in ELC settings that deliver the ECCE programme.
EYI	Early Years Inspectorate. The independent statutory regulator of both ELC and school-age childcare services, responsible for the registration and inspection of services.
First 5	Ireland's whole-of-government ten-year strategy for babies, young children and their families.
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation.
HC	Higher Capitation. Additional funding to settings delivering the ECCE programme that have graduate-qualified room leaders (NFQ Level 7 or above in ELC or equivalent).
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education.
LINC	The Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) programme. An ISCED 5 training programme to prepare staff to take a leadership in role in their service to support children with additional needs.

NCCA	The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. A statutory body that advises the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment in early childhood, primary and post-primary education.
NCS	National Childcare Scheme. A scheme providing universal and income-dependent subsidies to parents.
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications. Ireland's equivalent of the ISCED framework.
NSAI	National <i>Síolta Aistear</i> Initiative. A programme to support the coordinated roll-out of <i>Síolta</i> and <i>Aistear</i> .
NVCOs	National Voluntary Childcare Organisations. A group of national organisations that perform support functions for ELC settings and that receive funding for this from DCYA.
PACG	Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines. Standards for graduate-level ELC courses, coming into force over the period 2021 to 2022.
PATD	Professional Award-type Descriptors. Minimum requirements being introduced from 2021 for ELC course accreditation.
Pobal	An organisation working on behalf of the Irish government to support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion and development.
QAB	Qualifications Advisory Board. A board that reviews degree programmes for compliance with the PACG and makes recommendations to the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.
QDS	Quality Development Service. A Better Start service to bring an integrated national approach to developing quality.
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland. A structure responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training.
QRF	Quality and Regulatory Framework. A child-centred framework published by Tusla that focuses on quality and safety of provision.
SAC	School Age Childcare.
<i>Síolta</i>	The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education.
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities.
TEC	The Training and Employment Childcare Scheme. A programme to support parents on eligible training courses and parents returning to work, by subsidising ELC provision.
Tusla	Tusla - the Child and Family Agency provides services to support child and family protection and welfare, including monitoring and inspection of ELC settings.

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1 This Country Background Report describes the provision of Early Learning and Care (ELC) in Ireland. This report has particular focuses and should not be taken as a comprehensive summary of all areas of ELC.
- 2 Chapter 2 presents an overview of the ELC system, including governance and stated goals. Chapter 3 addresses monitoring and inspections. Chapter 4 covers curriculum and pedagogy. Chapter 5 discusses ELC workforce development, including governance, training, monitoring and working conditions.
- 3 These four chapters address the template Country Background Report questions as well as a number of additional bespoke questions. Each chapter concludes with a description of the strengths and weaknesses of that aspect of the ELC system: this presents the view of the Irish Government, as reflected in Government strategy and policy documents, rather than the objective assessment of the authors.
- 4 Annex A provides a mapping of which sections of the report address each question.
- 5 For the purposes of this report, ELC is defined, in alignment with the definition of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the EU Quality Framework, as: “any regulated arrangement that provides education and care from birth to compulsory primary school age – regardless of the setting, funding, opening hours or programme content – and includes centre and family day care; privately and publicly funded provision; pre-school and pre-primary provision” (Government of Ireland, 2019b).
- 6 This definition of ELC is different from the OECD usage of ECEC in the wider Quality beyond Regulations Policy Review. While primary school for 4- to 5-year-olds is in scope of the wider OECD review, it is not the focus of this report.
- 7 Children may enrol in primary school between the ages of 4 and 6, meaning that children aged 4 to 5 may either be enrolled in ELC or in primary school. References to primary provision are included for purposes of contextualising or clarifying ELC in Ireland.
- 8 The report does not focus on School Age Childcare (SAC). Reference is made to SAC, especially as some 4- to 5-year-olds are in SAC and also because many policies and institutions in Ireland cover both ELC and SAC.

2 POLICY CONTEXT

2.1 Governance of the ELC sector

- 9 This section outlines the governance structure of ELC in Ireland, noting substantial changes that have occurred within the last decade.
- 10 The two lead government departments that oversee ELC are:
- The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (**DCYA**), which has responsibility for the governance, oversight, policy development, funding and implementation of ELC in the large majority of settings other than primary schools (DCYA, 2019i).¹ In line with the new Programme for Government, DCYA will take on additional functions in late 2020. It will be known as the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (**DCEDIY**). Policy responsibility for ELC was previously with the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs under the Department of Health and Children, and transferred to DCYA when it was established in 2011 (DCYA, 2019f).
 - The Department of Education and Skills (**DES**), which works in coordination with DCYA in the above areas and oversees education-focused ELC inspections (introduced in 2016), curriculum development, criteria and guidelines for further and higher education programmes for practitioners, operates 40 Early Start pre-schools and provides funding for ELC provision to some children with disabilities (DCYA, 2019i). The new Programme for Government has established the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, with policy responsibility for the further and higher education sector.² DES will retain oversight of criteria and guidelines for further and higher education programmes for practitioners.
- 11 Aspects of DES's work in ELC are funded by DCYA, including staff who are assigned responsibility for ELC in the DES Inspectorate and in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.³ In addition, the Early Years Education Policy Unit within DES is co-located within DCYA, to support coordination between the two departments.
- 12 Other centralised functions and responsibilities in the ELC sector are for the most part distributed among the following organisations:
- **Tusla – Child and Family Agency** which has responsibility for the registration of settings and for performing inspections through the Early Years Inspectorate (**EYI**). The Child and Family Agency Act 2013 created Tusla, transferred the

¹ There are specialist settings overseen by other departments: specialist settings for children with disabilities overseen by the Department of Health; Early Start settings overseen by DES; and some early intervention classes for young children with autism overseen by DES.

² As of the start of October 2020, this departmental reform is in process.

³ For example, DES oversees *Síolta* (described in §141), but receives funding from DCYA.

role of regulator from the Health Service Executive to Tusla, enhanced the regulator's enforcement powers and introduced a registration requirement for pre-school services (Tusla, 2018). The statutory obligations of Tusla and EYI are set out in more detail in §67.

- **Pobal** – a non-profit organisation which performs funding, administration, compliance inspections and auditing functions. §87 describes Pobal's role in monitoring. The national Better Start initiative is currently located within Pobal. Better Start National Early Years Quality Development was established in 2014 by DCYA to provide on-site mentoring and coaching services. Since that time, its remit has expanded and currently provides three specific programmes to enhance quality and access for ELC.
- The **Department of Health**, which provides a small level of funding for specialist pre-school services for children with disabilities (Duignan, 2018).

13 DCYA funds the following regional and local organisations:

- Seven National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (**NVCOs**), which perform functions on behalf of DCYA, including training programmes, resource publications and background checks for staff.
- Thirty City and County Childcare Committees (**CCCs**), which operate as independent entities whose functions are determined by a Local Implementation Plan and may vary between CCCs. They provide a point of contact to settings and to parents, for example by delivering guidance on funding programmes, locating quality services, meeting regulatory requirements, information on the Access and Inclusion Model, and accessing capital funds. They also provide professional development training and mentoring to settings (DCYA, 2019c). The CCCs have autonomy to offer courses with non-standardised formats (Duignan, 2018).
- Over the last decade, government support for ELC provision has widened the provision of subsidies for parents (through the extension of subsidies to private services and then the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme in 2019) and has also increasingly focused on programmes to support quality (this is discussed in more detail in §32). With this policy shift, support processes have become increasingly centralised and the role of the CCCs has evolved. An example of this shift occurred with the establishment of Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service in 2014 (DCYA, 2014), which adjusted the roles of NVCOs and CCCs to work in coordination with a national initiative.

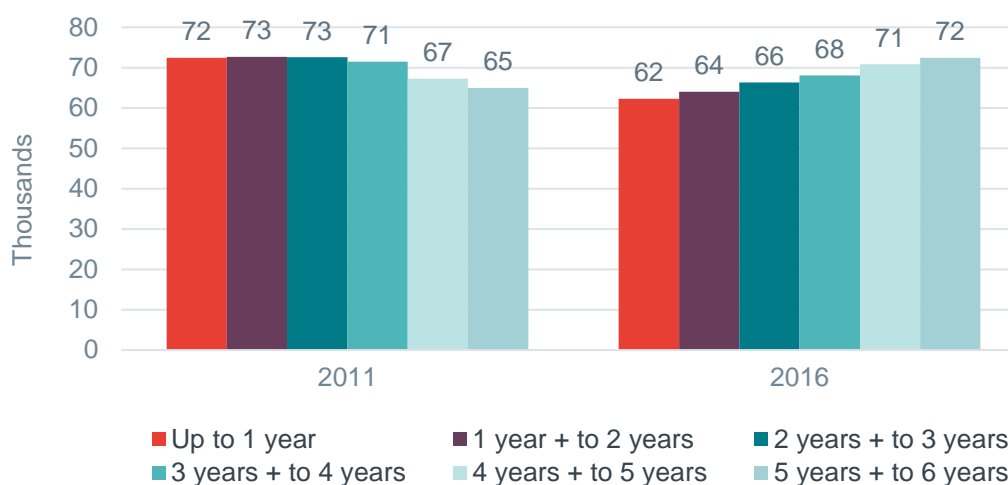
2.2 Factors affecting ELC cohort size

- 14 This section discusses various factors that affect the size of ELC cohorts: trends in fertility and the population of children, parental leave policy, the starting age of compulsory primary school and the legal entitlement to ELC.
- 15 **Fertility and population trends.** Ireland stands out among European countries as having a relatively high fertility rate. In 2018, Ireland had a total fertility rate of 1.75 live births per woman, compared to an EU-27 average of 1.55. At the same time,

fertility is trending downward relative to Europe; since 2010 the fertility rate in Ireland fell by 15%, compared to a 1% decline in the EU-27 (Eurostat, 2020b). In 2018, the average mean age of women at birth of first child was 30.5 in Ireland, higher than the average of 29.2 for the EU-28 (Eurostat, 2020a).

- 16 **Child population size.** The child population of Ireland as measured by the most recent census data from 2011 and 2016 is shown in Figure 1. Between 2011 and 2016, the total population aged 0-5 declined by 4%. This was concentrated in the youngest age brackets; the under 1-year-old population declined by 14%.

Figure 1 Child population size by age



Source: <https://statbank.cso.ie>

- 19 **Parental leave policy** is summarised in the table below. Extending parental leave is a commitment in First 5 (Government of Ireland, 2020b).

Figure 2 Parental leave policy in Ireland, 2020

Leave type	Beneficiaries	Duration
Maternity	Female employees	26 weeks paid and up to 16 weeks unpaid
Adoptive	Adoptive mothers and men adopting alone	24 weeks paid and up to 16 weeks unpaid
Paternity	New parents of children under 6 months of age (excluding biological mother)	2 weeks paid
Parental	Parents and guardians of children under 12	26 weeks unpaid. A 3-week additional paid entitlement has been added in response to COVID-19
Parent's Benefit	Parents of children under 1 year of age or in first year of birth or adoption	2 weeks paid

Source: Citizens Information

Note: Policies reflect 1 September 2020 onward.

- 20 **Starting age of compulsory primary school.** In Ireland, children can be enrolled in primary school (junior infant classes) from the age of 4, and they must have started compulsory formal education by the age of 6.⁴
- 21 **Legal entitlement to ELC.** In Ireland, there is no legal entitlement to ELC. Instead there is a universal provision available to parents (ECCE, see §32) from the age of 2 years and 8 months (although, with a single annual intake in September, for some children the starting age for ECCE can be as late as 3 years 7 months).⁵ The subsidy covers two academic years, 15 hours per week for 38 weeks a year. The subsidy extends to 5 years 6 months, which overlaps with the availability of infant classes in primary school, during which parents may choose either ELC or primary provision (or both primary school and SAC). Introducing a universal legal entitlement to pre-school is a commitment in First 5 (Action C.8.1.1) (Government of Ireland, 2019c). The planned key output is to publish and support a legislative bill providing this entitlement by 2021.

2.3 ELC provision and enrolment

- 22 Almost all ELC providers in Ireland are independent operators. These include both registered providers and unregistered childminding settings.
- Registered providers include full- and part-time day care, pre-school provision, breakfast clubs and after-school provision.
 - There is limited information on the size of the unregistered childminding sector. In 2016, 13% of all pre-school children used a childminder, au pair or nanny, while 19% of pre-school children were enrolled in centre-based settings⁶ (Central Statistics Office, 2020). The Draft Childminding Action Plan proposing research into the size of the childminding sector as a part of extending regulation and support to childminders was published in August 2019 for public consultation (DCYA, 2019a). As statistics on the size of the childminding sector were not available as of July 2020, the estimates below focus on centre-based care in registered settings.
- 23 The ELC provision in registered settings has increased substantially in recent years. Between 2013 and 2019, provision of ELC places in registered settings increased by 42%, during which time the vacancy rate among these settings decreased from 13% to 6%. As of 2018/19, there were 4,500 registered providers, 74% of which were private for-profit and 26% of which were “community”, non-

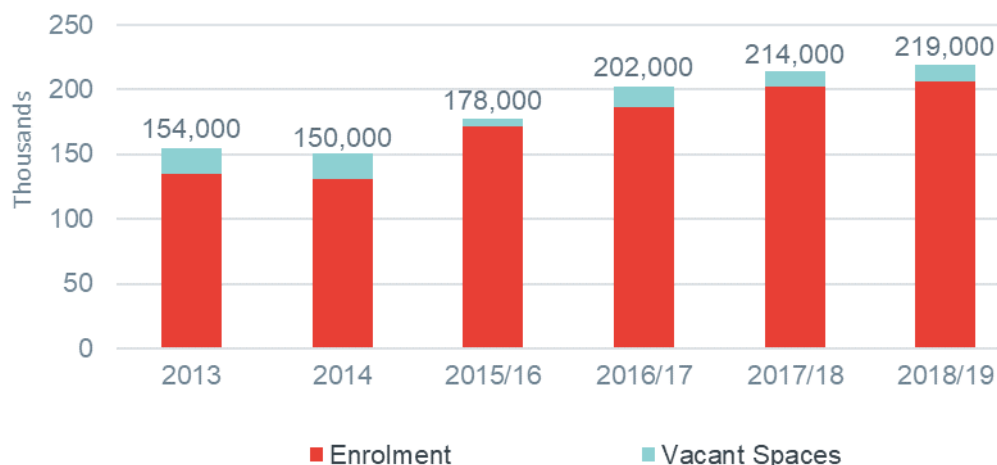
⁴https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/primary_and_post_primary_education/going_to_primary_school/primary_education_life_event.html

⁵https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/pre_school_education_and_childcare/early_childhood_care_and_education_scheme.html

⁶ Centre-based ELC here and subsequently refers to the Quarterly National Household Survey category “Creche / Montessori / Playgroup / After-school facility”. Children could avail themselves of more than one type of childcare. Children who did not use childminder/au pair/nanny or a centre-based provider used parent/partner, unpaid or paid relative or family friend, or “other” childcare.

profit providers. Providers had an average of 44 children per service (Pobal, et al., 2019a).

Figure 3 Provision of ELC by registered providers, 2013-2019



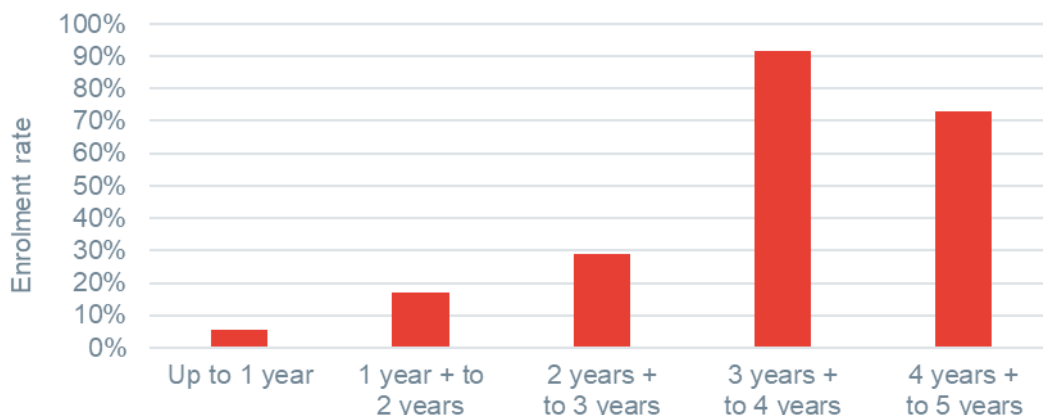
Source: <https://www.pobal.ie/research-analysis/early-years/>

- 24 There is variation in ELC provision between urban and rural areas. Settings located in urban areas have on average more children per service (49) than those in rural areas (41) and are more likely to be private (77% of settings compared to 68%). Full-day fees are 15% higher in urban areas than rural areas. The number of providers offering in-term school-age childcare is slightly higher in rural areas (47%) than in urban areas (41%). Sixty-seven percent of settings providing ELC through the medium of Irish are located in rural areas, although only 37% of the population live in rural areas (Hogan, 2019) (Pobal, et al., 2019a).⁷
- 25 The enrolment rate⁸ in registered settings is shown in Figure 4 for 2016/17 (2016 is the most recent available year of census data on cohort size). The enrolment rate was highest for 3 years + to 4 years, at 92%, reflecting ECCE provision among this cohort.
- 26 The age of transition from ELC to primary school has increased in recent years, particularly since the introduction of the ECCE programme in 2010. In 2010, 59% of junior infants (the first year of primary school) were at least 5 years of age and, by 2017, this had risen to 75% of junior infants (Kennedy & Clarke, 2018).

⁷ Ten percent of ELC and SAC settings offer childcare through the medium of Irish (Pobal, et al., 2019a).

⁸ The enrolment rate is total enrolment in registered services divided by the total population size.

Figure 4 Enrolment rates in registered settings, 2016/17



Source: <https://www.pobal.ie/research-analysis/early-years/> and <https://www.cso.ie/en/index.html>

27 Figure 5 shows that the share of children in private settings increased slightly between 2016 and 2019 for some age groups and remained largely constant for others.

Figure 5 Share of enrolment at private providers, among enrolment at registered settings, 2016-2019



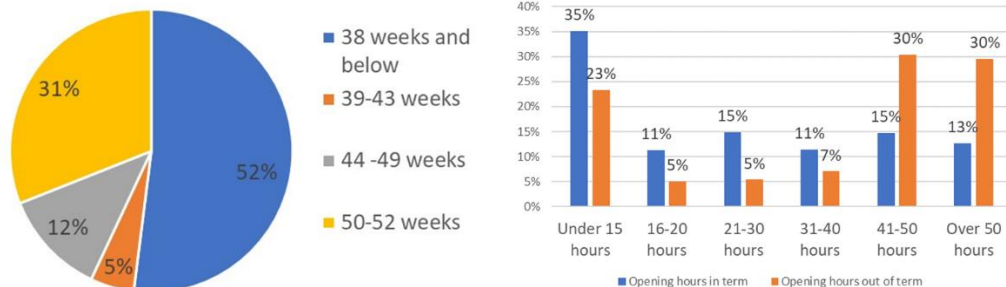
Source: <https://www.pobal.ie/research-analysis/early-years/>

28 In 2016, children in centre-based settings spent an average of 25 hours per week in ELC. In 2007, the same survey found that pre-school-aged children in centre-based settings spent an average of 21 hours per week in ELC (Central Statistics Office, 2020).

29 Average opening hours in 2018/19 for ELC settings are shown in Figure 6. A majority of settings (52%) are open for no more than 38 weeks out of the year, reflecting that the ECCE programme only provides funding for 38 weeks. Many

settings have limited opening hours in and out of term; 35% of settings are open for 15 hours or fewer during term (23% out of term).

Figure 6 Opening hours



Source: (Hogan, 2019)

2.4 ELC structural quality

30 Structural quality standards are set in regulations under the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016.⁹ Detailed guidance on how the regulations are to be interpreted is presented in the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate’s Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF). These requirements are set out in four themes: governance; health, welfare and development of the child; safety; and premises and facilities. The requirements include the following (Tusla, 2018):

- Each employee at a registered provider who works directly with children must hold a major award in Early Childhood Care and Education at International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 4 or higher (National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Level 5), or a qualification deemed equivalent;
- Staff-to-child ratios which vary by age group. 3:1 for 0-1 years, 5:1 for 1-2 years, 6:1 for 2-3 years, 8:1 for children aged 3-6 years in full-time or part-time care, and 11:1 for children aged 3-6 years in sessional (less than 3.5 hours) pre-school provision;
- Clear floor-space requirements which vary by age group, and full-day/part-time/sessional service; and
- Maximum number of children in a room for a sessional service.

31 In order to develop the QRF, Tusla reviewed various sources of evidence, including empirical research of inspection reports and a consultation with stakeholders such as registered providers, parents, ELC representative organisations, national statutory organisations, national organisations for children, third-level college representatives, and representatives of European early years regulatory organisations (Tusla, 2018).

⁹ Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016.

2.5 Funding of ELC

32 Funding for ELC comes from both private sources (i.e. parental fees) and public sources (i.e. DCYA funding schemes). Some providers have other sources of public funding or receive charitable donations, and this is more common among non-profit community providers. The main government funding schemes as of 2019/20 are (DCYA, 2019f):

- The Early Childhood Care and Education (**ECCE**) programme, which provides fully funded ELC for all children in the relevant age category (from a minimum entry age of 2 years 8 months) who can avail themselves of 15 hours per week over 38 weeks of the year for the two years prior to starting primary school. Ninety-six percent of providers participate in ECCE.
- The National Childcare Scheme (**NCS**), which specified by the Childcare Support Act (2018), is replacing previous targeted programmes with a streamlined scheme that provides universal and targeted subsidies for families. The NCS targeted subsidies are directly related to parental income, unlike the targeted subsidies they replaced (the Community Childcare Subvention Plus and the Training and Education Childcare Scheme), which were tied to receipt of social welfare payments or employment status. In this scheme, DCYA pays subsidies directly to providers who in turn reduce the fees they charge to parents. NCS participation requires that designated statutory bodies make referrals for childcare support under NCS. NCS replaced:
 - The Community Childcare Subvention Universal (**CCSU**) programme, which provided a universal subsidy for children between 6 months of age and the start of ECCE. The subsidy depended on the number of childcare hours: up to €20 per week in 2019 (or €0.50 per hour).
 - The Community Childcare Subvention Plus (**CCSP**) programme, which provided a subsidy to parents that depended on the number of ELC hours and parental income profile (as determined by eligibility for certain payments from the Department of Social Protection and/or for a medical card). Variants existed for refugee children (Community Childcare Subvention Resettlement) and homeless children (Community Childcare Subvention Resettlement Transitional). Thirty-nine percent of providers participated in the CCSP programme.
 - The Training and Employment Childcare Scheme (**TEC**), which provided funding to support parents on eligible training courses and certain categories of parents returning to work. Thirty-six percent of providers participated in the TEC programme.
- Funding is also available through a range of specific channels such as Programme Support Payments, Capital Funding, the Access and Inclusion Model, the Learner Fund, Sustainability Funding and other sources.

33 Public funding is tied to quality in the following ways (DCYA, 2019f):

- Settings are eligible to receive public funding if they are registered with Tusla under the Early Years (Pre-School) Regulations, 2016. This is discussed in §69.
 - ECCE room leaders are required to have a minimum of an ISCED 5 (NFQ Level 6) qualification, which exceeds the regulatory minimum requirement of ISCED 4. Providers with room leaders who hold a degree qualification (ISCED 6 or NFQ Level 7/8 and above) in ELC receive a higher capitation (HC) rate. An estimated 53.5% of ECCE providers in 2019 were in receipt of the HC rate.
 - Additional capitation is also paid to providers with a qualified inclusion coordinator, who must have participated in the Leadership for Inclusion (**LINC**) training programme, an ISCED 5 (NFQ Level 6) Special Purpose Award. In 2019, 32% of ECCE settings availed themselves of this additional capitation rate.
- 34 Public expenditure per child in ELC in 2015 (the most recent year for which exact figures are available) was \$3,037 (USD) per child, 59% less than the primary school equivalent, as shown in Figure 7. Between 2015 and 2019, public spending on ELC more than doubled and so these figures are not indicative of the current relative levels of public expenditure.

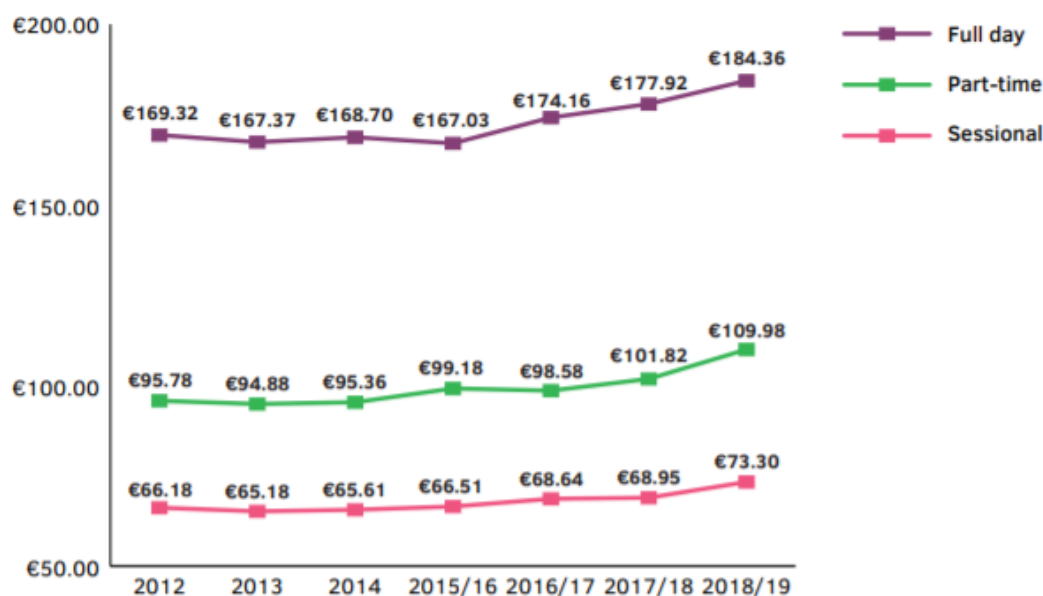
Figure 7 Expenditure on early years and primary, 2015

	Total expenditure (USD, millions)	Number of pupils	Expenditure per pupil (USD)
Early years	216	71,098	3,037
Primary	4,039	544,856	7,413

Source: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

- 35 Parental fees for the hours of care not covered by public subsidies are unregulated. ELC fees in Ireland are high relative to other developed countries. Ireland had among the highest estimated net childcare fees as a percentage of average wage among OECD countries in 2019 (OECD.Stat, 2020).¹⁰ Over the last decade, average weekly fees have increased in nominal terms, as shown in Figure 8. The average full-day weekly fee in 2018/19 was 8% higher than in 2012.

¹⁰ Although Ireland has relatively high parent fees in the OECD cross-country comparisons, OECD figures do not fully account for ECCE and NCS subsidies. Comparisons with other countries or the OECD average should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 8 Average weekly ELC fees since 2012 by type of provision

Source: (Pobal, et al., 2019a)

Note: Fees not adjusted for inflation.

2.6 ELC access

- 36 There is some evidence of differences in enrolment rates between different groups of children:
- Higher maternal educational attainment is associated with higher rates of participation in ELC. In 2016, 25% of children whose mothers had attained an ISCED 2 (NFQ 3) level of education were in ELC, compared to 59% of children whose mothers had attained an ISCED 5 (NFQ 6) level of education (Central Statistics Office, 2020).
 - Higher levels of affluence are somewhat associated with higher rates of participation in ELC. In 2016, 48% of children in “Very Disadvantaged” households participated in ECCE, compared to 56% of children in “Very Affluent” households (Central Statistics Office, 2020).
- 37 Data collected on primary school entrance, summarised in Figure 9, points to differences in ELC enrolment rates among ethnic groups in 2018. While 95% of White or White Irish pupils in junior infants had enrolled from centre-based ELC, only 77% and 73% of Irish Traveller and Roma children had enrolled from centre-based ELC.

Figure 9 Previous setting for junior primary school entrants by ethnicity, 2018

	% pupils previously enrolled in centre-based ELC (see note)	Total entrants (see note)
White or White Irish	95%	38,800
Asian or Asian Irish	92%	1,600
Black or Black Irish	91%	900
Irish Traveller	77%	900
Roma	73%	200
Other ethnicity	91%	1,000
Ethnicity data not available	95%	22,500
Total	94%	65,600

Source: (DES, 2020)

Note: Centre-based ELC includes childcare setting / pre-primary education / Early Start programme / junior school associated with the school. Total entrants exclude entrants from another national or private primary school in Ireland, a special school in Ireland or from schools in Northern Ireland or abroad.

- 38 First 5 committed to carrying out a detailed assessment of access to the Free Pre-School Year, to identify disadvantaged groups with lower-than-normal access rates and take steps to raise access rates among those groups. DCYA will commission work on this later this year.
- 39 There is limited data on differences in self-reported process quality experienced by different groups of children. In 2016, higher levels of affluence were associated with self-reported access to high-quality ELC: 57% among “Very Affluent” households compared to 46% among “Very Disadvantaged” households (Central Statistics Office, 2020).
- 40 Studies have examined potential **barriers to disadvantaged children participating fully in ELC provision**. Some principal findings are summarised below.
- 41 NCCA has published a literature review of Irish research on school readiness among children experiencing disadvantage in a research report on school transitions.¹¹ One study found that social class is the main determinant of children’s social and emotional skills development, especially in language and cognitive skills, and that social class is the main socially generated source of differences in the skills of children at the start of the ECCE programme. This study and others in the review noted that developing ELC services for children in coordination with other services for children and families, and with communication across all stakeholders, is essential in addressing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on child development (O’Kane, 2016).
- 42 The end-of-year-one evaluation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM, see §165) included areas for future development in the programme which point to

¹¹ https://ncca.ie/media/3196/3754_ncca_researchreport19_lr.pdf p49.

barriers that children with additional needs may experience in ELC participation.¹² These included:

- Parents may have varied understanding of the supports available, eligibility and processes in AIM, and some may have difficulty navigating information;
 - Small settings are more likely to delay or experience difficulty in the uptake of AIM supports;
 - It is challenging to consider all aspects of practicality/feasibility when planning the supports that children with very complex and/or nursing needs require; and
 - AIM supports are currently part of the ECCE programme but, outside of the programme, children with additional needs and their parents may face substantial financial and other types of barriers to ELC participation.
- 43 An end-of-year-three evaluation of AIM is currently underway. This evaluation will inform potential enhancements and extensions of the programme.
- 44 The measures in place to support equal access include: (1) NCS funding subsidies to low-income parents (described in §32 above); and (2) AIM for children with special additional needs or disabilities, which is a child-centred model of support introduced in 2016 to assist children with disabilities in accessing the ECCE programme (§165).

2.7 Policy objectives

- 45 Ireland defines ELC quality according to the EU Quality Framework.
- 46 The goals of ELC policies are embedded in several components of government strategy for children and young people. These are listed below, making note of the role of stakeholders in their development:
- **First 5** is a government strategy for 2019 to 2028 covering a range of early childhood areas. First 5 commits to major initiatives on family leave, children's health services, parenting supports, child-friendly communities, and early learning and care and school-age childcare services, among a broad range of actions. First 5 was informed by a consultation with ELC settings and by two open policy debates with relevant stakeholders and drew on findings from an expert advisory group on early years strategy. First 5 includes reforms of the ELC system, focused on affordability, accessibility and quality (Government of Ireland, 2019b). These commitments include:
 - The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) which subsidises costs of ELC and school-aged childcare and progressively increase the number of families eligible for targeted subsidies (§32);
 - Progressing toward a graduate-led ELC workforce (§256);

¹² The three-year evaluation of AIM is currently underway and will provide an update on the areas of development.

- Extending regulations and support for childminders and school-age childcare settings (§201);
 - Developing A new funding model for ELC to ensure additional public funding can be used to deliver higher-quality, more affordable, more sustainable and more inclusive services (see §255); and
 - Progressively reforming the ELC (and school-age childcare) regulatory and inspection systems and strengthening quality assurance with a renewed emphasis on self-evaluation.
- **Better Outcomes Brighter Futures** is a policy framework for children for 2014 to 2020 which relates policy goals to key national outcomes benchmarked against international standards. This strategy was developed in 2012 in consultation with stakeholders including governmental and non-governmental agencies and advisory bodies, experts and the general public. A key outcome indicator was participation in early childhood education at 4 years of age (Government of Ireland, 2014).
- 47 A key indicator of future policy developments is the new **Programme for Government**, published in June 2020 (Government of Ireland, 2020b). These commitments focus on streamlining regulatory requirements and improving quality by:
- Implementing the First 5 strategy;
 - Establishing a new agency, *Childcare Ireland*, with a focus on implementing best practice and innovation, and developing leadership, in-service training and career paths for ELC staff;
 - Investing in public subsidies to parents and capping parental fees irrespective of income;
 - Supporting the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee and drawing up an Employment Regulation Order to determine terms and conditions of employment and minimum pay;
 - Expanding support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); and
 - Publishing and implementing a successor policy framework to *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*.
- 48 Government strategy for ELC operates in concert with other policy areas, which can be broadly divided among the following areas:
- **Promoting equality and inclusion**, including The National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020, National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025, National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020 and Sustainable Development Goals; and
 - **Parental labour force participation**, including Future Jobs Ireland 2019, Pathways to Work 2016-2020 and the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020.

- 49 Over the last decade, the aims of policy and the funding mechanisms to support these aims have evolved. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme and the National Childcare Investment Programme, in operation from 2002 to 2010, prioritised targeted support to disadvantaged households and supporting parental (particularly maternal) training and labour force participation. Recently, policies have shifted focus toward (1) universal provision and (2) promoting high-quality ELC (DCYA, 2019f). Universal schemes have included ECCE and CCSU, and initiatives focused on quality have included professional qualification requirements for staff (see §201), process quality monitoring (see §93-§101) and the Higher Capitation (HC) payments (see §53).
- 50 The shift in policy objectives in Ireland toward emphasising high-quality ELC has happened as a result of a growing body of evidence concerning the benefits to children of high-quality ELC (NESF, 2005), (Esping-Anderson, 2008), (Urban, et al., 2017), (Morris, et al., 2017). International work – including the Barcelona targets, the EU Quality Framework, and the OECD Starting Strong programme – has also influenced policy development in Ireland. There has also been an increasing understanding of the wider economic and social benefits of ELC (Melhuish, 2004) (Melhuish & Barnes, 2012) (Taggart, et al., 2015) (Oireachtas, 2012). Another factor in the wider policy focus on ELC quality has come from the press and the public. In 2013, there was an RTÉ Prime Time childcare exposé on breaches of childcare regulations. This was partly responsible for the Minister for Children announcing a new pre-school quality agenda in 2013.

2.8 Policies to support process quality and child development

- 51 Since 2015, there have been several substantial changes in policies, regulation and monitoring to support ELC process quality. These include the **seven reforms, two action plans and two reviews** outlined below. The role of stakeholders in development and evaluation is noted. The content of these measures is discussed in more detail in subsequent cross-referenced paragraphs.
- 52 The **Early Years (Pre-School) Regulations**, 2016 introduced the qualification requirements described in §86 and a requirement for settings to have access to outdoor space.
- 53 The **Higher Capitation (HC)** payments were introduced in 2010 and expanded in 2016. Higher ECCE capitation payments are paid to providers if the pre-school session has a room leader with a graduate qualification (ISCED 6 or NFQ Level 7/8) or above and three years' experience in ELC. The policy was successful in increasing the qualification level among the ELC workforce. The proportion of staff in the sector holding a graduate qualification increased from 13% in 2013 to 25% in May 2019. At the same time, the HC scheme led to outcomes that were **not the intended focus of the policy**:
- There is evidence that only 10% of HC payments passed through to the salaries of the graduate staff for whom the HC payments were made (DCYA, 2019d). A range of potential factors may have contributed to this finding, including:

- providers shared the incremental capitation among the wages of a wider group of staff, providers used the funds to invest in materials and facilities and providers retained some of the incremental capitation as profit.
- The policy did not reduce the gap between graduate qualifications among 0- to 3-year-old ELC rooms and 3- to 5-year-old ELC rooms. In 2018/2019, the proportion of 3- to 5-year-old rooms with graduate room leaders had increased to double the proportion in rooms with children under 3 years old (31% compared to 16%). This disparity runs counter to the integrated approach to ELC that is set out in First 5 (DCYA, 2019m).
- 54 Introduced in 2016, **AIM** supports children with disabilities to enrol at ECCE providers and supports those providers in delivering high-quality care to these groups while also promoting equality and inclusion to support the participation of other disadvantaged groups. The AIM support is described in more detail in §165. Stakeholder involvement in AIM included the following:
- The model was developed in consultation with representatives of children with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, ELC providers, academics and policy makers.
 - AIM previously underwent a Year 1 evaluation and is currently undergoing a Year 3 evaluation including qualitative and quantitative research with a range of stakeholders: service staff and managers, children currently and previously receiving AIM support, parents, ELC specialists, the ELC agencies and organisations outlined in §10-§13, and national bodies representing those with disabilities including the National Council for Special Needs and the National Disability Authority (DCYA, 2020b).
- 55 The National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative (**NSAI**) was established in 2016 to support the nationally coordinated roll-out of *Síolta* and *Aistear*, which are the national quality and curriculum frameworks for early childhood education. The initiative is being led by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in collaboration with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), who fund the initiative, Better Start Quality Development Service (QDS) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). A core element of the initiative is the provision of clear messaging and centrally devised materials and CPD resources, of which the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* is the most notable example, to ensure access to consistent information and support. The coordination of an agreed work plan is carried out by a dedicated National *Síolta Aistear* implementation office, established in 2019. The NSAI encompasses a range of activities including mentoring and training, carried out by Better Start, City/County Childcare Committees, and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations. The NSAI is an example of **a collaboration between different stakeholders within the ECEC sector which led to improved policies on process quality**.
- Since 2016, DES has conducted Early Years Education Inspections (EYEI) at settings taking part in the ECCE programme, complementing the Tusla inspection regime. During these inspections, an inspector observes practice and gathers evidence, through observation of provision and through dialogue with practitioners and the owner/manager. At the conclusion of the evaluation, the

inspector provides verbal feedback to the setting practitioners/owner/managers. After the inspection, a draft written report on the quality of the educational provision and practice in the setting is provided for consideration and setting response. Following quality assurance processes it is published on the DES website.

- 56 The aims of EYEI are described in more detail in §75. Stakeholders contributed to the development of EYEI, most notably as follows:
- Trial inspections were held in ELC settings, and the results of the trial were included in a consultation with ELC sector stakeholders.
 - As a result of the trial and consultation, EYEI introduced a prior notice period for the setting under inspection (typically 48 hours), rather than conducting inspections unannounced (DES Inspectorate, 2018b). In some instances, EYEI has been conducted without notice.
- 57 In 2017 and 2018, DES oversaw the development of Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines (**PACG**) for Initial Professional Education (Levels 7 and 8) degree programmes in ELC, with the aim of improving the quality and consistency of degree programmes, including a new requirement for supervised practice placements (see §214). A consultation contributed to PACG development, which included higher education institutions and ELC representative organisations.
- 58 In 2019, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (**QQI**) published Professional Award-type Descriptors (**PATD**) (ISCED 4 to 6, NFQ Level 5 to 8). This framework provides minimum standards for further and higher education programme development, with the aim of increasing consistency across courses and ultimately enhancing ELC process quality. These professional development frameworks are discussed in more detail starting in §238. In developing PATD, QQI conducted a consultation with programme developers, coordinators, quality assurance staff and others.
- 59 First 5 sets out areas of current and future policy focus for supporting process quality and child development in ELC. The principal areas are captured in two plans currently in development, as described below.
- 60 The **Workforce Development Plan** is being developed to achieve workforce-related commitments in First 5, including the commitment that 50% of staff working directly with children in centre-based settings and coordinators supporting childminding hold an appropriate degree-level qualification by 2028. The plan will also consider the development of a national Continuing Professional Development (CPD) infrastructure.
- 61 The **Draft Childminding Action Plan**, published in August 2019 for the purpose of public consultation, proposed areas of action aimed at qualifications, training and quality supports to bring childminders into the scope of regulation and supports.
- 62 The **Review of the ELC and SAC Funding Model** was a commitment in First 5 that is currently underway. This work will review different types of funding mechanisms and will develop and introduce a new funding model for ELC and SAC to support quality improvements, provider sustainability and access.

- 63 The **Review of the ELC and SAC Operating System**, which will fulfil First 5 commitments, will assess the high-level operational and governance arrangement of the ELC system. The Early Years Division of DCYA, Pobal, the CCCs, NVCOs and Better Start are in the scope of the review. Neither Tusla EYI nor the DES Inspectorate are in scope, but options to assign additional elements to either or both of these organisations may be considered. The review will propose policy options and recommendations for reform with a view to improving governance, efficiency and effectiveness.

2.9 DCYA/DES assessment of Ireland's ELC system

- 64 In order to supplement the above overview of ELC policy in Ireland, the following box presents the Irish Government's view of the strengths, areas of good practice and innovation, and challenges in Ireland's ELC system, as reflected in government strategy and policy documents.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF IRELAND'S ELC SYSTEM

The ELC system in Ireland has undergone substantial reform in recent years, which has led to improvements across a broad range of areas. The European Semester Country Report Ireland 2020 noted that Ireland has made “substantial progress” in addressing the 2019 country-specific recommendation to increase access to affordable and quality childcare.

These improvements include: the accessibility of settings (particularly for children with disabilities); regulation; inspections (particularly of process quality and child development); workforce qualifications; and standardisation of major awards and degree qualifications.

Three particular strengths of the ELC system in Ireland are:

- Aistear and its focus on a child-centred play-based pedagogy;
- The Access and Inclusion Model, which has successfully supported children with disabilities in accessing ELC and has increased inclusiveness of provision; and
- The commitment to increasing public funding for ELC. Between 2015 and 2019, public spending on ELC more than doubled, and the government has committed to doubling the 2019 level of public spending on ELC by 2028.

The commitment to public investment broadens the potential set of policies available to improve the quality and accessibility of the ELC system. The following areas, in particular, present challenges for ensuring access to high-quality, consistent provision:

- Parental fees for centre-based ELC provision not covered under public entitlements are high compared to other developed countries. A new funding model to increase access to affordable, high-quality ELC is currently under development.
- Ireland has a large unregulated childminding sector. The government has committed to regulating, monitoring and subsidising fees for home-based ELC

settings over the next decade to improve the consistency and quality of provision.

- Low wages in the sector present barriers to obtaining qualifications and contribute to staff shortages and high turnover. The Workforce Development Plan and the new funding model will seek to address these and others related to working conditions.
- Since Síolta and Aistear were introduced in 2006 and 2009 respectively, it has been a challenge to ensure consistent and high-quality implementation. Pre-service and in-service training plans in the Workforce Development Plan, as well as the introduction of education-focused inspections, aim to address this challenge.

3 MONITORING AND INSPECTIONS

3.1 Governance of monitoring and inspection

66 This section describes how regulation and monitoring in ELC are organised in Ireland.

67 Monitoring and inspections are conducted by three organisations:

- **Tusla, which assesses regulatory compliance.** Tusla is the dedicated government agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. Tusla's Quality Assurance Directorate has responsibility for regulation, supervision and quality assurance across a range of areas. This includes the registration and inspection of ELC settings. Inspection of ELC settings is undertaken by Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate (**EYI**), the independent statutory regulator of ELC services in Ireland. The role of Tusla is outlined in the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013. Tusla EYI inspects all registered ECEC settings,¹³ focusing on structural and process elements of quality provision and operational elements which impact on child development and welfare.
- **DES, which inspects process quality.** The DES Inspectorate conducts education-focused inspections of ELC settings that participate in the ECCE programme (children aged 2 years 8 months to 5 years 6 months). This role was agreed in 2016 in a Memorandum of Understanding between the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Education and Skills. The DES Inspectorate carries out these inspections in accordance with contractual requirements specified in the ECCE funding contract and its statutory function as set out in section 13(3)(b) of the Education Act 1998 (DCYA, 2016). The DES Inspectorate also evaluates early education settings within primary schools and early education settings that are funded by the DES, e.g. preschools for children with special educational needs. The early years inspectors are an integral part of the wider DES Inspectorate, which inspects primary and post-primary schools, special schools, centres for education and other education settings.
- **Pobal, which monitors administrative and financial information.** Pobal carries out ELC programmes compliance visits and audits on behalf of DCYA to collect administrative data on registered centre-based ELC providers involved in the ECCE, Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) scheme, CCSP or CCS programmes (which include all age groups) to check compliance with the contractual requirements of the funding schemes. These visits confirm that services in receipt of public funds have accurately reported their provision.

¹³ Centre-based ECEC settings are required to register with Tusla. Some home-based settings are required to register with Tusla, but the majority are exempted from registration, including settings which care for children who are all from one family, settings which care for fewer than four pre-school children and fewer than seven children (of any age) in total.

Pobal also conducts verification checks of services, CCCs and NVCOs in receipt of grants it administers, and it is the fund manager for CCCs and NVCOs. Pobal monitors and reports on dimensions of quality, access and affordability through the annual Pobal Early Years Sector Profile survey of ELC providers in contract with DCYA.¹⁴

68 These organisations coordinate regulation and monitoring through the following mechanisms (Tusla, 2020):

- Agreements are in place between the two Inspectorates, Better Start, Pobal, and the CCCs to define referral pathways for the delivery of quality mentoring and support services to ELC settings.
- DCYA leads an Operations and Systems Alignment Group, comprising representatives from DES, Tusla, Pobal, and Better Start, which coordinates monitoring and inspection in ELC. The group convenes quarterly and shares information between the Tusla and DES inspectorates. The purpose of coordination is to avoid overlapping inspections or different types of inspections within a short timeframe by different inspectorates. DCYA organises a joint annual professional development day for the Tusla and DES Inspectorates.
- The Tusla and DES Inspectorates are currently developing their data-sharing capabilities, for example to have a unified system of provider identification numbers.

69 There are a number of linkages between registration, inspection and quality support. These include:

- Registered ELC settings are required to be in compliance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016.
- Tusla-registered ELC settings are inspected by the Tusla EYI to measure compliance with the regulations.
- Following an inspection, the Tusla EYI, in consultation with the registered provider, may recommend that an ELC setting be given access to support and mentoring from the Better Start QDS team and/or the local CCC (participation of the CCC in this support process varies by area) to improve quality provision and meet regulatory compliance.
- ELC settings which are found to be non-compliant with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 are required to submit a corrective and preventive action plan, which may involve the assistance of quality support and mentoring services. Services must demonstrate corrective and preventive

¹⁴ The Pobal Early Years Sector Profile publishes annual statistics on: participation in public subsidy programmes; characteristics of ELC settings (e.g. types of setting and childcare, geographical distribution, size, opening hours, location, fees, curriculum and quality standards, outdoor space, transport services, medium of Irish); equality and diversity statistics; disabilities; enrolment and vacancies; fees by service characteristics; staff working conditions; staff profiles, staff turnover. The response rate for the survey in 2018/19 was 85%.

- action in areas of non-compliance and submit information to the inspectorate to enable Tusla to assess corrections (Tusla, 2020).
- Where Tusla EYI finds ELC settings consistently in breach of the Regulations and/or when it identifies significant risk, the setting is referred to the Tusla EYI National Registration Enforcement Panel. Tusla EYI uses its statutory powers to take action against the ELC setting, up to and including prosecution and removal from the Early Years Services Register. The decision to remove an ELC setting from the register is taken as a last resort.¹⁵
- 70 Tusla's human resources for ELC monitoring and regulation are as follows (Tusla, 2020):
- EYI has 52 early years inspectors. Inspectors are all either (1) registered in the Public Health Division of the Register of Nurses & Midwives or (2) hold a professional qualification in Social Care, Social Work, Early Years Care, Education or Child Psychology to a minimum level of ISCED 6 (NFQ Level 7/8). In addition, the inspectors are required to have at least 5 years' satisfactory experience within the health and/or education sector or 5 years' relevant satisfactory experience within a professional setting.
 - Tusla EYI also employs an early years specialist qualified at PhD level to support evidence-based practice. There are six specialists working on regulatory and registration systems qualified at ISCED 6 (NFQ Level 7/8). Technical staff on the regulatory Senior Management Team of the Children's Service Regulation are qualified to ISCED 7 or 8 (NFQ Level 9/10), with the majority having at least 20 years of regulatory experience.
 - In 2019, inspectorate staff engaged in 2,155 hours of face-to-face and online training and 515 hours of briefings relating to upskilling in various areas of conducting inspections. Topics included: training in child protection, General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), courtroom skills, hand hygiene, safety coordination, first aid, fire safety, governance, food allergies, exploring play, trauma informed practice, children's rights, key person approach, infant mental health and wellbeing.
- 71 DES's human resources for ELC monitoring are as follows¹⁶:
- Seventeen early years inspector posts were sanctioned for appointment to the DES Inspectorate. All EY Inspectors are required to be NFQ level 8 graduates in Early Childhood Education and Education (or equivalent) with at least five years' practical experience of leading and managing quality provision in early years education settings.
 - There is a five-month induction programme involving training in the theory and practice of education inspection before Inspectors commence practice. Inspectors are required to engage in regular CPD each year.

¹⁵ <https://www.tusla.ie/news/removal-of-early-years-services-from-register/>

¹⁶ Email from DCYA, 30 July 2020.

- An assistant chief inspector manages the EYI programme as a member of the Inspectorate’s Senior Management Group; and
 - Three clerical officers currently support the administration of the inspection programme.
- 72 Pobal’s human resources for ELC and SAC monitoring are as follows¹⁷:
- 27.5 staff in the Compliance Unit. The unit comprises a team of visit officers, quality control reviewers, and administrative and support staff. Over half of the staff hold qualifications in childcare or education fields;
 - Two compliance managers, who are qualified accountants with institute membership; and
 - Five staff within the Audit and Risk Unit, all of whom are qualified accountants with institute membership. They spend approximately 40% of their time annually working on ELC and SAC audits/verification visits.

3.2 Method of inspections

- 73 This section outlines Tusla and DES inspection implementation.
- 74 **Aims and goals.** The role of the **Tusla** Inspectorate is to promote and monitor the safety and quality of care in Early Years provision in accordance with regulations. The Inspectorate implements its role by assessing applications for registration and by inspecting registered services. Tusla inspections of ELC settings measure compliance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. The inspections evaluate the extent to which:
- “The service is well governed;
 - The health, welfare and development of each child is supported;
 - Children are safe in the service; and
 - The premises are safe, suitable and appropriate” (Tusla, 2018).
- 75 The aims of the **DES** Inspectorate model are as follows (DES Inspectorate, 2018a):
- “Highlight the importance of high-quality early education and care in nurturing the foundations for lifelong learning and in helping children develop to their full potential now and into the future;
 - Identify and affirm good educational provision in early years settings;
 - Support the ongoing development of quality in early years settings through the provision of support and advice to practitioners about how children’s learning experiences and achievements can be developed or improved;

¹⁷ Email from DCYA, 8 October 2020.

- Complement other national measures to support continuing improvement in early education provision, for example, mentoring and training to support settings provided by Better Start and the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide;
- Support self-evaluation and review processes in early years settings;
- Provide an assurance of the quality of the early education experienced by children participating in the ECCE Programme;
- Provide information to the public, including parents of pre-school children, on the quality of education in early years settings through the publication of written inspection reports.”

Frequency. Tusla EYI inspects registered ELC services on a three-yearly basis as part of a risk-based inspection programme as specified in the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. The **DES** Inspectorate carries out inspections of ECCE settings (which include children aged 2 years 8 months to 5 years 6 months) on a five-yearly basis, as well as follow-up inspections as required. A setting typically receives two working days’ notice for a DES inspection (DES Inspectorate, 2018a). A DES inspection may also be carried out without notice (DES Inspectorate, 2018a).

- 76 **Scheduling and resource allocation.** Tusla uses a risk-rating model to determine the schedule of inspections. This risk rating incorporates different factors: inherent risks in the service, the provider’s record of compliance and the provider’s record of reliable processes and practices. The rating is used to target inspections at settings with high levels of risk and to ensure a consistent national approach to prioritisation (Tusla, 2020). Additionally, receipt of a notification of incident influences Tusla’s monitoring of ELC settings. Receipt of unsolicited information from parents, staff and external stakeholders triggers a response from the Tusla EYI and may initiate an inspection.
- 77 **Type of setting.** Tusla EYI developed the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) to support registered early years services to comply with the 2016 Regulations. The QRF takes a child-centred approach which focuses on the structural and process elements of quality provision. There is a specific QRF for each service type: full-time day-care service and part-time day-care service; sessional pre-school service; and childminding, drop-in and overnight services.¹⁸
- 78 **Method of inspection.** The Tusla early years inspections combine evidence from the following sources (Tusla, 2018):
- Information from the registration application;
 - Documentary evidence, such as policies and procedures, services’ and children’s records, care and programme records, staff rosters and complaints records;
 - Interviews and consultations with management and staff;

¹⁸ <https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/early-years-quality-and-regulatory-framework/>

- Direct observation of operational practices (observing care, play, interactions of staff and children, etc.); and
 - Review of the premises and facilities.
- 79 The details and processes of **DES** early years education inspection model are set out in a Guide to Early Years Education Inspection (DES Inspectorate, 2018a). This Guide includes a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education that underpins EYEI. The **DES** inspections primarily draw evidence from the inspector's observation of children's learning processes and the pedagogical strategies deployed by ELC practitioners. The inspector may request to see documents such as the parent handbook, information for parents, and curriculum, planning and assessment documents. An important element of the inspection is the professional dialogue with the staff and management at the setting as a part of the information-gathering process. The inspection typically lasts between one and three days, depending on the size of the setting and the number of inspectors. The inspector may also have meetings with staff, may interact with children, and may review samples of children's work (DES Inspectorate, 2018a).
- 80 **Comparison between ELC and primary DES inspections.** The DES Inspectorate has developed a variety of inspection models that are used to evaluate and quality assure educational provision and practice in primary schools. These include: (1) Incidental Inspection; (2) Curriculum Evaluation; (3) Evaluation of Provision for Pupils with Special Educational Needs; (4) Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in *DEIS* Schools; (5) Whole-School Evaluation-Management, Leadership and Learning; (6) Whole-School Evaluation; (7) Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspection and (8) Follow-Through Inspection. Currently there are two types of inspection used in ELC settings: Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) and Follow-Through inspection. The EYEI evaluates the nature, range and appropriateness of early educational experiences of children. The Follow-Through inspection model evaluates how settings have implemented the actions advised in previous inspection reports. Additionally, the primary school DES inspections sometimes administer surveys to a sample of parents, which is not the case for ELC inspections but is planned. Primary schools are also required to engage in self-evaluation processes, which is not the case in ELC settings (DES, 2016a).
- 81 **Procedures and ensuring consistency.** Tusla EYI has a set of Standard Operating Procedures which govern registration, inspection and enforcement practices. A Tusla Policy Practice Threshold and Decision Working Group is in place to ensure a consistent approach is taken across inspections. This group issues quarterly updates on policy practice and threshold decisions which complement the standard operating procedures and the QRF. The inspectorate have recently developed an e-learning programme, available to all stakeholders, to support compliance with inspection against the Quality Regulatory Framework.
- 82 The **DES** Inspectorate submits each ELC inspection report from an EYEI or a Follow-Through inspection to a structured editorial and quality assurance process before being published. The ELC setting has the opportunity to review the report for factual verification and also to provide a response to be published with the final report.

- 83 **Piloting changes to support and referral pathways.** Tusla's EYI and CCCs collaborated on a pilot project in 2019. The pilot trialled improvements to processes relating to:
- Providers' pre-registration and notification of changes in circumstances for existing settings;
 - Tusla EYI referral of providers to CCCs for post-inspection support; and
 - Exchange of information between Tusla EYI and CCCs.
- 84 The pilot has been extended into 2020 and is currently ongoing (Tusla, 2020).

3.3 Quality dimensions examined in inspections

- 85 This section summarises the issues that are examined in Tusla, DES and Pobal inspections.¹⁹ While there is some overlap in monitoring responsibilities, most issues are covered by a subset of inspection agencies.
- 86 **Compliance with regulations, including staff qualifications.** Tusla has authority from the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 to assess compliance with the regulations with respect to promoting the care, safety and wellbeing of children at the setting. In particular, Tusla inspections examine whether:
- Settings are in compliance with regulation on staff-to-child ratios;
 - Staff have the required qualifications, i.e. minimum ISCED 4 (NFQ Level 5) major award in ELC or equivalent; and
 - Tusla early years inspectors inspect compliance with the regulations under 4 themes: (i) governance, (ii) health, welfare and development of the child, (iii) safety, (iv) premises and facilities.
- 87 **Pobal** compliance visits to services assess key contractual conditions of programmes administered through Pobal (Pobal, 2016) (Comptroller & Auditor General, 2019). They:
- Assess whether the children who have been registered with DCYA under one of the childcare programmes are enrolled in and attending the service;
 - Review a sample of fee income records;
 - Assess whether the service is implementing the correct fee payment policy, whether the fee payment policy, parent letters (where applicable) and calendars (where applicable) are displayed in the service, and whether a copy signed by the parent/guardian of each child is on file;
 - Check whether records are maintained of optional extra charges, deposits, voluntary donations and/or fees for additional hours and whether they are in accordance with the fee payment policy of the service; and

¹⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, in this section Tusla information is drawn from (Tusla, 2020) and DES information is from (DES Inspectorate, 2018a).

- Assess whether the service can show the qualifications of all staff working directly with children for the purpose of assessing compliance with the contractual requirements for HC payments in the ECCE programme (where there is a graduate room leader).
- 88 Pobal also audits contractual conditions at a greater level of detail and with additional checks. These audits typically occur in response to issues discovered during compliance visits, through information received from third parties or complaints (Comptroller & Auditor General, 2019).
- 89 Pobal conducts verification checks on capital grants to services and grants to CCCs and NVCOs (Comptroller & Auditor General, 2019).
- 90 **Governance, management and leadership.** Tusla assesses management policies and procedures, which include: governance arrangements, administrative processes, designated person-in-charge procedures, recruitment policy, vetting, staff supervision policy, internal communications system, the staff roster, staff planning, the setting's annual review, records of individual children and data protection measures, and service records.
- 91 **DES** inspections examine whether the management in the setting provides for a high-quality learning and development experience for children.
- 92 **Pobal** assesses key ECCE contractual conditions in compliance visits: records covering child attendance, minimum ECCE enrolment, parental declaration forms, registrations, fees list and records, parent letters, staff qualifications, and staff non-attendance. Pobal also conducts audits at a greater level of detail to investigate risks identified in compliance visits: risk of misappropriation and deficient financial management or corporate governance.
- 93 **Interactions.** Tusla assesses different aspects of interactions, including:
 - Children's positive behaviour and interactions, self-regulation and pro-social behaviour;
 - Respectfulness in the interactions and relationships, promotion of children's development and wellbeing, whether the pedagogical approach is "nurturing" (Hayes, 2007), whether the adults working with the children are responsive and whether they engage in sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, et al., 2002);
 - Assessment of the bidirectional interactions, which is informed by Bioecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); and
 - Indoor and outdoor environments that support children's learning development and wellbeing.
- 94 **DES** inspections evaluate the quality of interactions in fostering child learning, development and wellbeing, according to the following criteria:
 - Responsive, respectful and reciprocal relationships in the ELC setting; and
 - Facilitation of high-quality interactions with children.
- 95 **Parental involvement.** Tusla evaluates:
 - The information available for parents;

- Notification of incidents to Tusla and parents; and
- How the service deals with complaints.

DES inspections assess the degree to which the ELC setting fosters clear two-way channels of communication between the early years setting, parents, families and children. Signposts in this area include:

- Parents and families are proactively consulted as the primary educators of their children and are involved as partners in their children's learning and development;
- Parents and families are made aware of the policies, procedures and curriculum in operation within the setting; and
- The setting regularly shares verbal and documented information on children's learning and achievements with parents and families in a spirit of openness, mutual respect and transparency.

96 **Processes to support children's development, learning and wellbeing.** Tusla examines many areas that affect children's development, learning and wellbeing. These include the extent to which the physical or material environment supports development; and whether the personal care provided meets basic needs. It assesses whether the learning environment enables children to make autonomous decisions (for example, whether activities are primarily large-group activities or follow children's emergent interests).

97 **DES** inspections assess process quality criteria in support of child learning and development, including that:

- Children's sense of identity and belonging is nurtured;
- Information about the children's development informs next steps in learning;
- The environment and resources support children's learning and development; and
- Provision for children's learning and development is closely aligned to their interests and developing capabilities

98 **Assessing child development.** Tusla inspections assess children's independence, development of life skills, communication and active engagement in their learning. **DES** inspections assess the following criteria for child development:

- Children demonstrate engagement and enjoyment in their learning and a positive sense of wellbeing;
- Children experience achievement and are developing through their learning experiences;
- Children are developing a sense of identity and belonging and personal and social skills to support their learning and development;
- Children communicate their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others in a variety of ways; and
- Children make sense of their world by interacting with others and the environment through playing, investigating and questioning.

- 99 **Implementation of the *Síolta* quality framework.** *Síolta*,²⁰ the National Quality Framework for ELC, informed the development of Tusla’s QRF. In addition, DES evaluates whether a setting’s planning, review and evaluation are informed by *Síolta*.
- 100 **Implementation of the *Aistear* curriculum framework.** DES inspections assess the extent to which:
- Provision is informed by *Aistear* (This section of the Quality Framework for DES inspections is shown in Figure 10);
 - Play is central to children’s learning and development; and
 - Emergent language, literacy and numeracy skills are fostered in the setting.

Figure 10 Quality Framework for Early Years Education Inspections: *Aistear* implementation

Outcome	Signposts for Practice: Consider the extent to which...
4. Provision is informed by <i>Aistear</i> : the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A broad-based curriculum, informed by <i>Aistear</i>, has been documented and is being used to support children’s learning and development ■ Practitioners in the setting have been involved in the development of an emergent, enquiry-based curriculum and demonstrate knowledge, understanding and confidence about putting these plans into practice ■ Planning takes account of children’s varying interests, cultural backgrounds, strengths, needs and previous learning experiences ■ There is a planned approach to developing children’s dispositions, values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding ■ Plans are flexible enough to allow for response to children’s emergent interests ■ Planning supports the provision of a connected, holistic learning experience for children using assessment for learning methods to promote the progression of their next steps in learning ■ Planning for curriculum implementation is organised on long-term, medium-term and short-term bases ■ The implementation of the curriculum is monitored and reviewed on a regular basis

Source: (DES Inspectorate, 2018a)

- 101 **Inclusion.** Tusla inspections monitor whether the setting has an appropriate inclusion policy, and DES inspections assess the extent to which:
- The atmosphere and organisation of the setting support the inclusion of all children;
 - Children are empowered to recognise and respond to, or challenge, bias, injustice and discrimination; and
 - Children learn in an inclusive environment.

²⁰ <http://Síolta.ie/media/pdfs/Síolta-manual-2017.pdf>

Transitions. Tusla assesses the extent to which services manage transitions into and within the setting in a child-centred and supportive way.

DES inspections examine how the setting manages transitions into, from and within the setting (including transitions into primary school) to support children's learning and development.

102 **Staff skills and needs for professional development.** Demand for CPD is assessed in many areas of **DES and Tusla** inspections, especially those focused on child learning and development, as described in §98. The feedback and support process following inspections can consider how CPD could assist staff. This is discussed in more detail in §119. In addition, Tusla inspections assess settings' staff training policies.

103 **Safety. Tusla** inspects many aspects of children's safety in the premises. At a high level, these include:

- Safe facilities for rest and play (outdoor and indoor), equipment and materials, premises, minimum space requirements; and
- Safeguarding the health, safety and welfare of the child, checking in and out and record of attendance, first aid, fire safety measures, supervision and insurance.

Tusla inspections can focus on a specific set of regulations; for example, there have been inspections in response to COVID-19 that assess infection control, safety and child welfare.

104 **Data on process quality and child development.** Process quality data is collected through the **DES** inspections and the **Tusla** inspections. This information is relayed to the setting management in feedback sessions, and is published on the DES and Tusla websites for parents and stakeholders to access.²¹ The DES inspection data consists of free text documents which review four areas that cover process quality and child development: quality of context, quality of processes, quality of children's learning experiences and achievements, and quality of management. Tusla inspections record aspects of process quality, such as staff interactions with children and level of supportiveness.

3.4 Development of the monitoring regime

105 This section outlines the stakeholder engagement that has contributed to monitoring, recent developments in the monitoring regime, a current pilot programme and planned changes to monitoring in the future.

106 **Stakeholder engagement – Tusla.** A stakeholder consultation in 2017 informed the development of the QRF. Consultation was carried out with Tusla early years inspectors, parents, providers, the NCCA, DES and others. The consultation provided input on required support, accessibility, training and timeline. In particular,

²¹ <https://www.education.ie/en/publications/inspection-reports-publications/Early-Years-Education-Reports/>
<https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/creche-inspection-reports/>

the consultation provided feedback on the different types of support that would be helpful in achieving compliance, which highlighted a demand for policy templates and guidelines, videos and podcasts, and hard copies of the QRF for providers. To meet this demand, Tusla now provides supporting documents on its website; this includes a practical guide to Developing Policies Procedures and Statements in Early Childhood Education and Care Services and a Quality and Regulatory Framework eLearning programme which provides guidance to support the implementation of the regulations in practice in ELC settings. (Tusla, 2020).

- 107 Stakeholders also contributed to QRF development through a 2015 survey of providers' views on the inspection process. Tusla engaged an independent research company to collect perspectives on overall satisfaction, rigour and robustness, settings' understanding of standards and inspectorate responsiveness. This exercise identified areas for improvement related to the complaints process, inspection consistency and communication with inspectors about the costs associated with resolving areas of non-compliance. This feedback informed changes to professional development and to QRF development (Tusla, 2016).
- 108 Tusla EYI formally engages with two stakeholder fora on an ongoing basis.
- The Early Years Inspectorate Consultative Forum was established in 2015 and provides an opportunity for relevant representatives and stakeholders to contribute to the on-going reform and development of the Inspectorate.
 - The Early Years Regulatory Support Forum was established in Sept 2017. The Forum acts as a support network for early years providers. The EYI briefs representatives of ELC support organisations on key initiatives and updated on the current policy, practice and protocol decisions of the EYI. (Tusla, 2020).
- 109 Tusla EYI engages with vocational educational college tutors and university lecturers biannually to provide updates on regulatory compliance. The Early Years Regulatory Support Forum established in 2017 acts as a support network for early years providers. Representatives of the ECEC support organisations who are members of the forum are briefed by the EYI on its key initiatives and current policy, practice and protocol decisions.
- 110 In 2019, Tusla EYI held a consultation with parents about Tusla early years inspection, and the results are expected to be published at the end of 2020. The consultation focused on three principal areas (Tusla, 2020):
- Parents' priority areas for inspection assessments;
 - Parents' awareness of, knowledge of and requirements for regulatory inspection; and
 - Parents' views on their potential voice in ELC inspections, and how this could be implemented.

Recommendations from the consultation included:

- Providing information about EYI and the inspection process;
- Ensuring parents have knowledge of inspections that are being carried out and their results, including how to access the inspection report; and

- Giving parents a choice about whether their views should be shared with the inspectorate.
- 111 **Stakeholder engagement – DES.** The DES Inspectorate model was developed in consultation with stakeholders, and feedback was collected from practitioners, inspectors and others in its one-year review. Ninety-three percent of practitioner respondents reported that they had attended the post-inspection feedback meeting and found it to be very valuable. A strong majority of practitioner respondents found the written feedback valuable. A challenge that stakeholders highlighted was that working conditions made it difficult to act on inspection feedback. These working conditions included staff shortages, funding and an unmet demand for CPD. Practitioners also voiced a desire for a streamlined inspection policy and for some practical implementation changes to the inspection process to support easy access to information (DES Inspectorate, 2018b). DES has begun work on the extension of the Early Years Education Inspection Quality Framework to settings for children aged 0-3 years. The research and development phase was completed in April 2020, and consultation with stakeholders will commence in autumn 2020. This work has developed approaches to engaging with parents during the inspection process.
- 112 **Changes in monitoring process quality in ELC.** A number of changes in inspections and monitoring have recently taken place, principally: the Child Care Act 1991 Regulations (2016) enhanced the enforcement powers of Tusla, the DES inspections were introduced in 2016 and the QRF was published in 2018.
- 113 **Piloting changes to monitoring.** In 2019, **Tusla** piloted an inspection format based on the QRF. The aim of the pilot was to make inspection results more accessible to parents and easier for providers to use in achieving compliance and improving quality of provision. The pilot feedback from providers was positive.
- 114 **Planned changes to monitoring.** First 5 makes a number of commitments related to monitoring and inspections (Government of Ireland, 2019b). The plan commits to:
 - Developing a single self-evaluation framework for settings, with input from both Tusla and DES inspectorates, to replace the existing *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme;
 - Including the views of parents and children in monitoring (parents do not currently have a formal role in ELC monitoring procedures);
 - Revising arrangements for the inspection of early years of primary school as the primary school curriculum is redeveloped and further aligned with *Aistear*;
 - Making adherence to *Síolta* and *Aistear* a statutory requirement in settings over time;
 - Conducting an evidence-based review of the ELC regulations (amongst other factors, this would examine minimum regulatory qualification levels, indoor and outdoor space requirements, adult-child ratios and group size);
 - Extending the DES inspections to 0-3 years settings; and

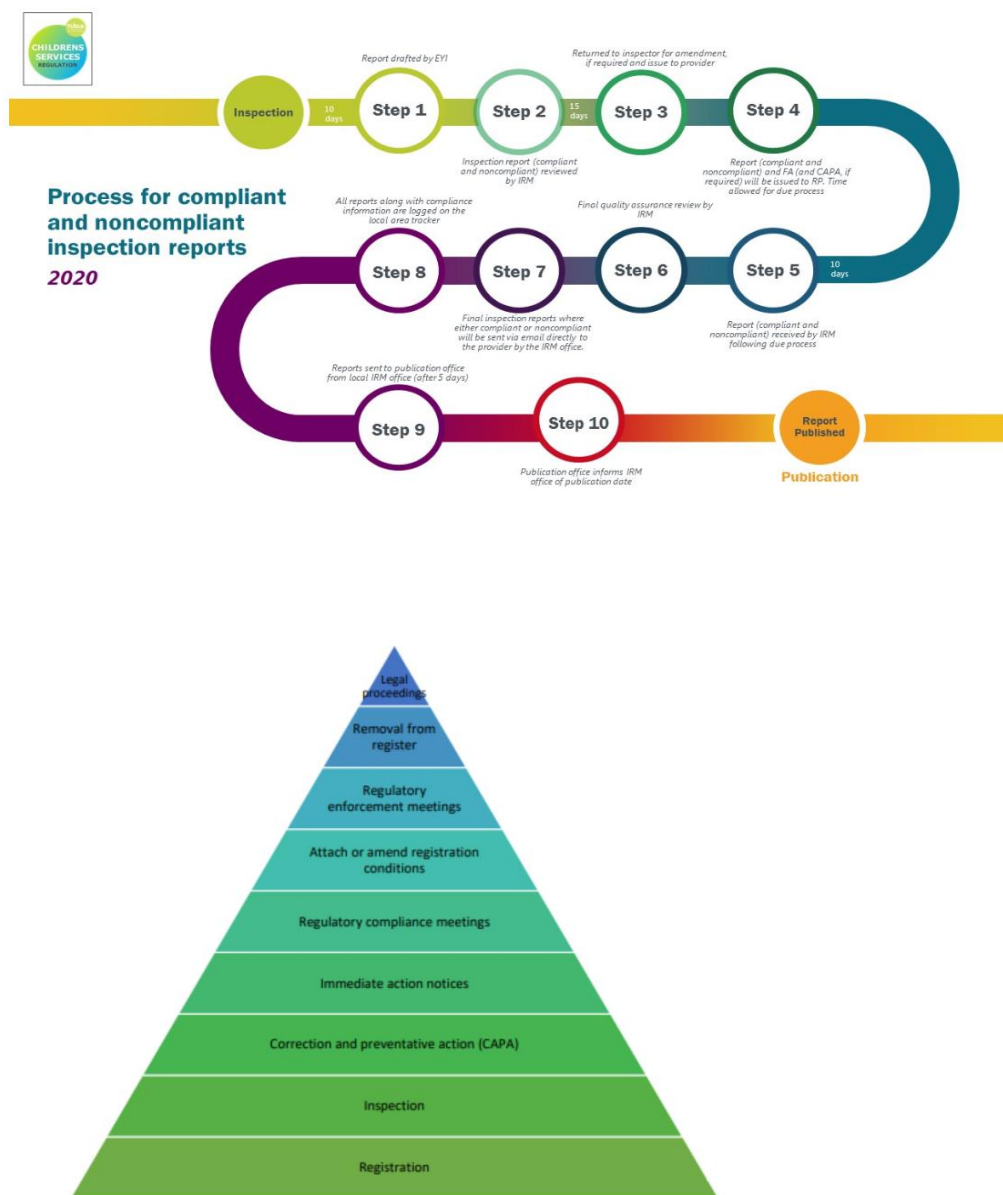
- Introducing regulations for childminding, with an inspection model that is specific to childminding.

3.5 Review process

- 115 This section summarises the review process that follows inspections.
- 116 **A common cycle of DES inspection.** After a DES inspection is completed, the inspector shares draft findings with the ELC setting manager, the practitioners present in the areas of the setting where the inspection took place and members of the setting's management. This meeting enables the setting to ask questions of the inspector and the inspector to discuss how the setting can implement the actions advised. Subsequently, the setting has an opportunity to suggest corrections to errors of fact in the draft inspection report and to submit a written response to the report, including its plans for implementing the actions advised. The report and response are published on the DES website. The management of the setting has the primary responsibility for overseeing implementation of the actions advised. The setting may have a Follow-thought inspection to assess progress in implementing the actions advised, and there is also a process for requesting a review of an inspection (DES Inspectorate, 2018a).
- 117 **A cycle of Tusla monitoring** for a compliant and a non-compliant provider is shown in Figure 11. In summary:
- The inspector provides draft findings to the manager of the setting in a feedback meeting. The inspector reviews effective practice, development areas and the inspection publication procedure.
 - For settings found to be fully compliant, a draft inspection report is produced and checked for factual accuracy by the setting before being finalised. The report is sent to the setting and published on the Tusla website.
 - For settings found to be non-compliant and where the risk is high, an immediate action notice²² may be issued and a draft inspection report is sent to the setting. The setting is given the opportunity to submit a corrective and preventive action response to address non-compliance. Regulatory compliance meetings are often held between the EYI and the registered provider to facilitate compliance with regulations. If non-compliances remain outstanding at the end of the inspection process, the setting continues to be registered, but it may be conditional on corrective action. The inspection report is published on the Tusla website.
- 118 Tusla has a set of referral and enforcement processes for services that are not in compliance with Regulations. These are described below.

²² An immediate action notice is issued during inspection if an inspector identifies a critical risk to the safety or welfare of a child.

Figure 11 Tusla Early Years Inspection process and enforcement pyramid



Source: <https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/a-guide-to-regulatory-enforcement-in-early-years-settings/>

119 **Follow-up and resources for non-compliant ELC settings.** The Inspectorate can make a recommendation to a service to engage with Better Start to support quality improvement through QDS mentoring, coaching and training. Tusla EYI has a service level agreement with Early Childhood Ireland (**ECI**), a NVCO, to provide support to Tusla-registered ELC settings in achieving compliance. A pilot commenced in 2019 for a strengthened process for exchange of information and

- post-inspection supports for compliance with regulations between Tusla and a set of CCCs (Tusla, 2020).
- 120 Pobal reports a monthly “Services of Concern” list to DCYA. DCYA has been revising this model to more proactively identify settings facing difficulty and has been providing more consistent national support (DCYA, 2019g).
- 121 **Escalation processes.** The registered provider is required to act on all areas of identified non-compliance to (1) demonstrate immediate corrective actions and (2) implement ongoing preventive measures including developing a preventive action plan. If a service demonstrates persistent or serious non-compliance which presents critical risks, Tusla EYI exercises its powers of regulatory enforcement. The regulatory enforcement process involves a number of steps set out in Tusla’s regulatory enforcement pyramid (shown above). Depending on the seriousness of the non-compliances, persistent offenders may be referred to the Tusla EYI Conditions Panel or National Registration Enforcement Panel where decisions are taken regarding the appropriate enforcement action.
- 122 It is an offence to carry on an Early Years’ Service which is operating outside of its registration parameters. Services who are found not to be operating in accordance with their approved registration will be subjected to enforcement and must cease the unauthorised aspect of their service. It is also an offence to operate an Early Years’ Service without registration. Providers who are found to be operating an unregistered service will be required to cease and close immediately, and it is Tusla policy to prosecute services who operate and or who are in charge of an unregistered Early Years’ Service.
- 123 During an inspection, the Tusla inspector may identify child safety concerns that fall outside of the scope of the 2016 Regulations. In this case, the inspector can request more information from the service and can also refer the issue to other teams within Tusla (e.g. the Tusla social work team), or external to Tusla (e.g. fire safety officers or environmental health) (Tusla, 2018).
- 124 **Informing policy and practice.** Tusla produces annual reports, based on findings from ELC inspections, which provide evidence for policy and practice decisions. A summary report of collated inspection findings and enforcement action, patterns and trends for 2017 to 2019 is currently in development. A previous report from 2014 summarised findings on the inspection and other regulatory processes, and made recommendations for professional development, research, evaluation and technology support.²³
- 125 The DES Inspectorate has begun to publish a series of webinars to share composite findings from DES early years inspections with parents, early years practitioners and primary teachers working with 4- to 6-year-old children in schools. These webinars combine research evidence with findings and exemplars drawn

²³ https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Report_on_the_Process_of_Pre-school_inspection_practices.pdf

from inspection to provide advice and guidance on effective practice in support of children’s learning and development.²⁴

- 126 DES inspection of ECCE programme settings has resulted in the availability of evaluation data on the quality of education provision from pre-school to post-primary school. Composite reports identifying key issues across the education continuum have been published to inform the development of education policy, for example on digital learning, STEM and modern foreign languages. Others in development include creativity and education for sustainable development. The findings of EYEI will also contribute to the review of *Aistear*.²⁵
- 127 Other recent examples of inspection results informing policy include (Tusla, 2020):
- Tusla found significant non-compliances in equipment and materials, premises, and minimum space requirements in a review of inspection reports. In 2018, capital funding included strands for maintenance, repair and natural outdoor play areas. The inclusion of a requirement for the provision of outdoor play facilities following review of the Regulations in 2016 resulted in capital funding being allocated for natural outdoor play provision in 2018. Non-compliance with fire safety measures resulted in capital funding in 2019 for fire safety equipment.
 - Tusla was a member of the Ministerial working groups that reviewed and advised on the regulatory reform in 2006 and 2016.
 - Pobal monitoring identified an unmet demand for ELC places for 0- to 3-year-olds, and the Department provided capital funding for this in 2019 through its capital grants programme.

3.6 DCYA/DES assessment of Ireland’s monitoring and inspection system

- 128 In order to supplement the above, the following box presents the Irish Government’s view of the benefits and challenges in the inspection and monitoring administrative structure, as reflected in government strategy and policy documents.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

A potential benefit of having more than one inspectorate involved in the regulation and monitoring of ELC quality is their focus on complementary but distinct dimensions of quality. Tusla inspections emphasise measures of structural quality and process quality while the DES inspections are a dedicated tool for measuring process quality and child development.

²⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c71c0-insights/>

²⁵ Email from DCYA, 30 July 2020.

The separate governance of the two inspectorates requires care to ensure that the quality frameworks and implementation are aligned and complementary. In particular, it is important to ensure that the agencies coordinate where possible to reduce the administrative burden of compliance that is placed on providers. Mechanisms such as the Operations and Systems Alignment Group have been put in place to support coordination and complementarity.

There have been a number of calls for streamlining the monitoring and inspection system, and for greater coordination between the different organisations involved. The 2019 annual report of the Comptroller and Auditor General recommended that the inspection bodies agree to formal protocols for data sharing and to providing for the collation of the results of all inspection types. Identifying service providers who were persistently non-compliant across the three inspection regimes (including also the Pobal compliance function) could inform risk-profiling by different bodies (Comptroller & Auditor General, 2019).

Governance arrangements are being adapted in response to these requests, including:

- First 5 has committed to considering options for reforming registration and inspection of ELC to ensure a proportionate inspection regime and a more integrated approach to monitoring. Initial steps have included widening the qualification requirements for Tusla early years inspectors, and piloting the extension of education-focused inspections to children under three (Government of Ireland, 2019b).
- The Programme for Government (2020) has committed to streamlining regulatory requirements while continuing to improve quality, and to ensuring a transparent inspection reporting structure for parents and guardians (Government of Ireland, 2020b).

4 CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

4.1 Development of *Aistear*

- 130 This section describes how international trends, research findings and monitoring results have influenced curriculum design and implementation.
- 131 The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (**NCCA**) is a statutory agency that has responsibility for advising the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment for ELC (and for schools). It is a stakeholder organisation with participation from DCYA, DES, the CCCs, the EYI, the primary school sector and others.
- 132 *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009c) for children from birth to 6 years, uses four interconnected themes to describe children's learning and development and offers ideas for how adults can support this learning. *Aistear* is aligned with *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) from birth to 6 years of age, and the frameworks are intended to be implemented together.
- 133 NCCA considered **children's views** in developing *Aistear* by conducting a portraiture study. The purpose of the study was to ensure that children's voices would be represented and that the framework being developed would connect with the everyday experiences of children and practitioners (NCCA, 2007). In order to contribute to *Aistear* themes, principles and guidelines for practice, this study gathered information around questions such as:
- What does the child enjoy doing in this setting? Why?
 - What places does he/she enjoy being in? Why?
 - Who does he/she enjoy being with? Why?
- 134 In addition to the above portraiture study, the NCCA commissioned a set of four research papers for **developing *Aistear*** which considered global trends in ELC curricula and pedagogy that could be applied to the context in Ireland (NCCA, 2009a). These are summarised below:
- International research in ELC has emphasised the importance of incorporating child development theory into practice, contextual variables, dynamic interactions, active learning, planned environments and well-trained staff. Hayes (2007) advocated for an integrated approach to practice in Ireland that combines care and education (academic and play-based approaches). This is termed "nurturing pedagogy", and the paper calls for a shift in Ireland toward understanding the educative role of caring and promoting this role through training and policy.
 - French (2007) summarised aspects of a modern construction of childhood in which the child is a competent, active learner who is a unique individual capable of making decisions. The child participates in the socio-cultural contexts of the family, the community and society. The child has an ethnic identity and can develop biases early. The paper promoted an anti-bias approach for diversity

education for children of all ethnic groups in Ireland, in the context of an increasingly diverse and multicultural society.

- Kernan (2007) considered different types of play and benefits from play. This included a review of the literature on theories of play and pedagogies of play. The paper summarised the role of adults in supporting and extending children’s play.
- Dunphy (2008) set out the role of formative assessment in helping adults to observe and understand children and to plan future learning experiences. The paper reviewed different international theories of early learning and assessment and advocated for a narrative approach.

135 A number of **recent strands of research** have also informed curriculum development and implementation:

- In 2018, NCCA conducted cross-country reviews of early years and primary curricula for purposes of developing the 2020 draft primary curriculum framework,²⁶ which builds on *Aistear* (O’Donnell, 2018a) (O’Donnell, 2018b). The research highlighted an international focus in primary curricula on literacy and numeracy, digital competence, health and wellbeing and school flexibility to introduce additional subjects, and on ensuring that cross-curricular values, competences and skills complement subject-specific content. The NCCA also commissioned a study of effective pedagogies for redeveloping the primary school curriculum, which emphasised a socio-cultural perspective, play-based pedagogy and the importance of assessment and professional development in implementation (Volante, 2018).
- The NCCA commissioned the OECD to research curriculum alignment and progression between ELC and primary school. The research looked at international data and in-depth case studies from seven jurisdictions to provide insights to different approaches to curricular alignment. It highlighted that most jurisdictions try to build curricular continuity between ELC and primary school, while differences in the goals of ELC and primary education can have an impact on curricular alignment (OECD, 2019).
- In 2019, the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative commissioned a study to review key elements of good practice for ELC for 0 to 3 years and to understand barriers to achieving high process quality. These barriers included staff wages, training and isolation. The study recommended the development of professional development materials and social support to provide to ELC practitioners to address these barriers (French, 2019).

136 Another global trend that has recently informed curriculum design and implementation has been the shift in research and discussion away from children being “school ready” toward an understanding of the transition to primary school in terms of the relationships between the child, family, ELC setting and school (Smyth, 2018). This trend informed the design of the school transition reporting

²⁶ <https://ncca.ie/media/4456/ncca-primary-curriculum-framework-2020.pdf>

templates described in §180. A literature review of primary school transition in Ireland is provided in a paper on the panel study *Growing Up in Ireland*.²⁷

- 137 First 5 includes an action to review *Aistear* within the lifetime of the strategy. NCCA currently plans to commission a research report and gather stakeholder views on potential updates for *Aistear*. For example, diversity of background among young children in Ireland has increased substantially since *Aistear* was published, there is heightened awareness of the importance of outdoor play and considerable policy change has occurred. The process will be initiated in 2021.

4.2 Overview of the national curriculum design

- 138 This section provides an overview of the curriculum framework, its implementation by settings and its evolution over time.
- 139 *Aistear* is a curriculum framework. It is not a prescriptive programme that specifies particular learning experiences. Rather, it provides information to help practitioners flexibly develop a curriculum for their individual settings. As ELC is largely provided in Ireland through independent operators, settings have some discretion as to the role of particular staff members in curriculum development and implementation.
- 140 There is diversity in pedagogical approaches used across ELC settings, which is summarised in Figure 12. This figure combines statistics on the two national frameworks, *Aistear* and *Síolta*, together with other pedagogical approaches. The frameworks and pedagogical approaches have different purposes: services are contracted to follow *Aistear* and *Síolta*, and a service can implement a pedagogical approach together with the national frameworks. Additionally, these statistics measure self-reported pedagogy, and there may be substantial variation in implementation among practitioners within particular self-reported pedagogical approaches.

²⁷ https://ncca.ie/media/3497/bkmnext360_transition-to-primary-education_online.pdf

Figure 12 Percentage of services by curriculum approaches and quality framework

	Community	Private	Urban	Rural	Total
Síolta	81.2%	82.6%	82.1%	82.6%	82.3%
Aistear	86.9%	89.7%	88.6%	89.5%	88.9%
Play-based curriculum	67.7%	68.0%	67.1%	69.5%	67.9%
Montessori	10.8%	52.4%	43.6%	36.7%	41.2%
HighScope	20.5%	6.3%	10.5%	9.4%	10.2%
Naíonra	5.2%	5.2%	6.2%	3.2%	5.2%
Early Start	4.6%	4.1%	4.6%	3.6%	4.2%
Steiner	1.7%	1.9%	1.9%	1.7%	1.9%
ABA (ASD children)	0.6%	0.9%	0.9%	0.6%	0.8%
Froebel	0.5%	1.2%	1.3%	0.5%	1.0%
None	3.5%	0.9%	1.7%	1.4%	1.6%
Other	7.6%	2.7%	4.3%	3.5%	4.0%
Total	1,029	2,792	2,493	1,328	3,821

Source: (Pobal, et al., 2019a)

- 141 *Síolta* is a quality framework for ELC designed to assist practitioners and other stakeholders in supporting the development of babies and young children. It includes principles, standards, components of quality, signposts for reflection and guidance for use. *Aistear* and *Síolta* are designed to complement one another.

THE ROLE OF SÍOLTA IN PROMOTING QUALITY

Síolta is a set of national standards for early childhood education intended to provide support and guidance for all those working with and on behalf of children. It covers all aspects of practice, and its purpose is to improve the overall quality of ELC for children and families. The framework is applicable to different types of settings for children aged 0-6 years.

The framework comprises 12 principles (e.g. the value of early childhood, equality, diversity) and 16 standards of practice (e.g. parents and families, rights of the child, play). The standards are divided into 75 components of quality.

Aistear and Síolta both play roles in helping practitioners to improve the quality of ELC. The frameworks have distinct aims that are designed to be implemented in an integrated way. Síolta comprehensively covers all facets of quality within ELC settings, while Aistear provides guidance on and examples of learning experiences for children.

Both frameworks provide guidance for working with children by three age groups: birth to 18 months, 12 to 36 months, 2.5-6 years). Both frameworks are directed at practitioners who are responsible for the care and education of children within this age range, and Aistear also provides specific guidance to parents in their role as educators.

There are several initiatives to support Síolta implementation, which include:

- The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide, a suite of online resources (§143);
- The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme, an assessment of practice against Síolta standards that is guided by an external mentor;
- Introductory CPD workshops on Síolta; and
- Mentoring through the Quality Development Service (§227).

- 143 *Aistear* is presented on the NCCA website²⁸ alongside the Primary School Curriculum, the Junior Cycle Framework and the Senior Cycle curriculum. Additionally, *Aistear*, *Síolta* and supporting materials are available online to practitioners, parents and stakeholders in the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide.²⁹ This tool offers guidance on curriculum planning: self-evaluation tools, examples and ideas for planning, documenting, assessing and action planning.³⁰ The guide provides examples of particular pedagogical strategies (e.g. story pot, mathematics in everyday experiences and videos on cultural pedagogy).
- 144 The core values of *Aistear* are presented as a set of twelve principles of early learning and development organised into three groups, as shown below. Each of

²⁸ www.curriculumonline.ie

²⁹ <https://www.AistearSíolta.ie/en/>

³⁰ <https://www.AistearSíolta.ie/en/planning-and-assessing-using-Aistears-themes/>

these is accompanied by a short statement and explanation from the child's perspective (NCCA, 2009b).

AISTEAR PRINCIPLES OF EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Children and their lives in early childhood:

- the child's uniqueness
- equality and diversity
- children and citizens

Children's connections with others:

- relationships
- parents, family and community
- the adult's role

How children learn and develop:

- holistic learning and development
- active learning
- play and hands-on experiences
- relevant and meaningful experiences
- communication and language
- the learning environment

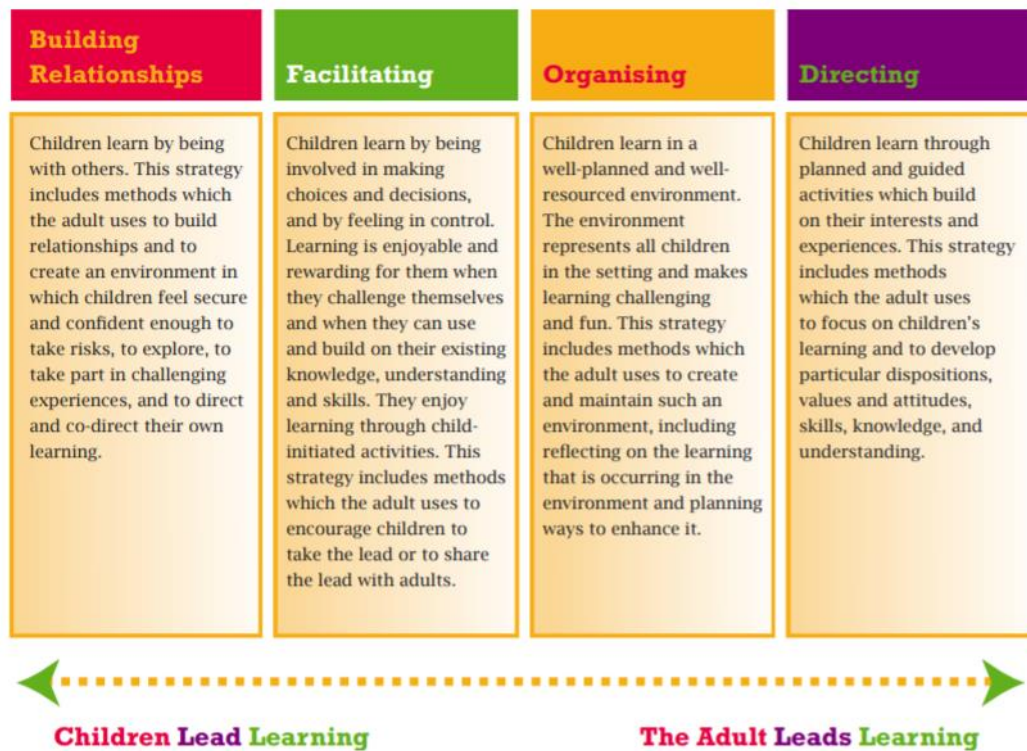
145 *Aistear's* areas of learning and development (i.e. dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) are organised into four themes, each with four aims:

- Wellbeing:
 - Children will be strong psychologically and socially.
 - Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be.
 - Children will be creative and spiritual.
 - Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life.
- Identity and belonging:
 - Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories.
 - Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended.
 - Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others.
 - Children will see themselves as capable learners.
- Communicating:
 - Children will use non-verbal communication skills.
 - Children will use language.
 - Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language.

- Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively.
- Exploring and thinking:
 - Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them.
 - Children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating and problem-solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers.
 - Children will explore ways to represent ideas, feelings, thoughts, objects and actions through symbols.
 - Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness and risk-taking.

Each aim is in turn divided into six learning goals. These are complemented with sample learning opportunities.

- 146 **Pedagogical practice.** *Aistear* emphasises pedagogical practice that is emergent, play-based, a balance between group and individual learning, and a balance between being adult-initiated and child-initiated. *Aistear* supports practitioners' partnerships with parents and families, and reflects a socio-cultural view of early years child development (Government of Ireland, 2020a).
- 147 *Aistear* supports young children's learning and development through play. It is a practical resource which includes a set of guidelines on playful learning, with information on categories of play, the role of the adult in play, preparing the play environment and the importance of relating play experiences across *Aistear*'s themes, aims and learning goals. The value of play for babies, toddlers and young children alongside adults' understanding of how children's play develops and changes over time are central to *Aistear*.
- 148 *Aistear* promotes a balance of child-led and adult-led learning. This is summarised in Figure 13. For each of the strategies provided, *Aistear* provides a set of example interaction methods.

Figure 13 Range of *Aistear* interaction strategies

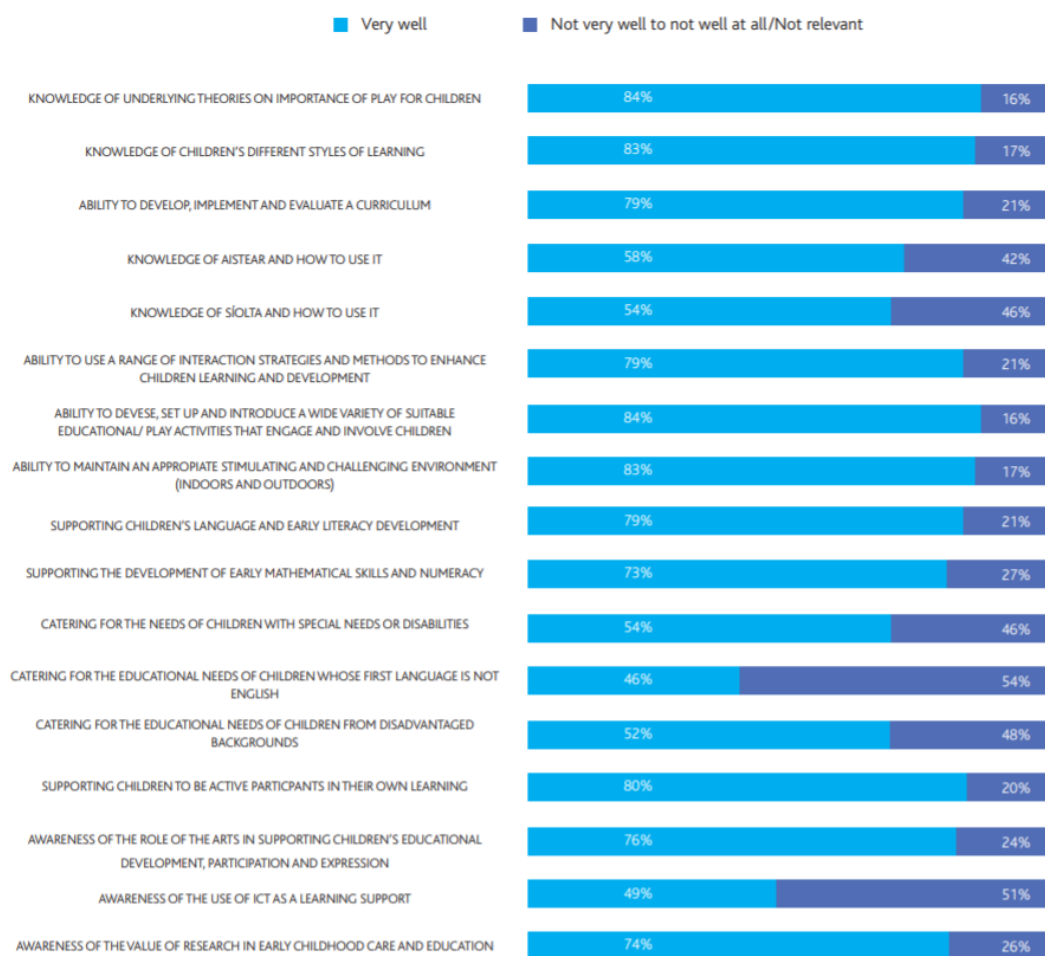
Source: (NCCA, 2009b)

- 151 **Curriculum guidance on interactions.** *Aistear* helps to inform a range of interactions inside and outside settings. These include:
- Staff-child: a reciprocal relationship in which there is a balance of child-led and adult-led activities;
 - Child-child: play with other children to support learning about cooperation, dealing with conflict, empathy, observing, listening and conversing;
 - Child-parent: the child is an active learner growing up as a member of a family and community with particular traditions;
 - Staff-parent: a relationship that provides support for parents as their children's primary educators during early years and information to practitioners for understanding the child's background;
 - Child-community: the extended family and community play important roles in the child's learning.
- 152 **Curriculum changes.** The most considerable curriculum changes in recent years have focused on ensuring that *Aistear* is implemented in settings rather than changes in the curriculum itself. This has had several components. Better Start introduced on-site mentoring through its Early Years QDS in 2015. The National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative was established in 2016 under the oversight of DES, and funded by DCYA, in order to coordinate the roll-out of *Síolta* and *Aistear*. Other measures aimed at achieving this alignment include the DES education-focused

inspections (§75), the development of the PATD and PACG for pre-service training (§214 and §238), the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (§143), the introductory CPD workshops on *Aistear* and *Síolta*, and the *Aistear* and Play CPD course (§228).

- 153 **New and innovative approaches.** A central aim of initiatives introduced in the last decade has been to develop capacity and expertise in the pedagogy of play. This approach has been new and innovative in the context of Ireland. Research on school readiness (Ring, et al., 2016) and results from inspections (DES Inspectorate, 2018b) have highlighted a need for greater understanding of play pedagogy in the context of overly formal approaches to young children’s learning and development.
- 154 **Alignment with initial education programmes.** Currently, *Aistear* and *Síolta* are not systematically incorporated into initial professional education programmes for ELC staff. While some initial education programmes have centred on *Aistear* and *Síolta*, this has not been a requirement and therefore has been variable.

Figure 14 ELC self-reported staff preparedness in areas of education and play



Source: (DES, 2016b)

- 157 A survey of early years practitioners included several questions around how well staff felt that initial and continuing training had prepared them in different areas of curriculum and pedagogy (see Figure 14). These are summarised in DES (2016b). Key perceived gaps included preparedness in the areas of *Aistear* and its use and *Síolta* and its use.
- 158 *Aistear* is embedded in the newly developed (1) Professional Award-Type Descriptors (PATD) for accredited major awards in ELC, (QQI, 2019) and (2) Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for degree programmes in ELC (DES, 2019). These will apply to courses commencing in 2021 onward. Major awards are required to prepare participants to carry out curriculum development, planning, monitoring and review in a way that is informed by *Aistear*. The PATD specifies that pre-service training must include aspects of pedagogical practice that are promoted in *Aistear* (enquiry based, inclusive, age appropriate, aligned with children’s individual needs), so that staff have knowledge and competence in curricular and pedagogical practice.
- 159 **Leadership training.** There is no defined leadership role in services (although HC payments are tied to having a graduate as the “room leader”, there is no official definition of this role). There is also currently no government-supported leadership training for provision to all children (the Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years is an ISCED 5 (NFQ Level 6) Special Purpose Award designed specifically to support inclusion of children with a disability in the ECCE programme (§210)). The Workforce Development Plan has identified these limitations, and leadership definition and training are included in the plan’s scope of work. CPD and other measures to support process quality include: Better Start QDS on-site mentoring (§227), Better Start CPD workshops (§228), the HC payments for sessions with graduate leaders (§53), and the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (§143).

4.3 Curriculum and pedagogy to support children’s individual needs

- 160 This section summarises the approach to supporting the needs of individual children and groups of children. Ireland takes a “rights-based” approach to ELC. The status of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is affirmed through *Síolta*, which provides for a rights-based approach to ELC that involves young children as active participants in the planning, implementation and review of their learning and development (CECDE, 2006).
- 161 *Aistear* reflects the **individual needs** of children in a range of ways. One of these is helping children to understand their individual identity. The first principle of *Aistear* is the child’s uniqueness: “each child has his/her own set of experiences and a unique life-story. He/she is an active learner growing up as a member of a family and community with particular traditions and ways of life”. The role of the adult requires “a respectful understanding of the child’s uniqueness”. An aim within the theme of identity and belonging is that: “[c]hildren will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories”. This aim is then divided into six learning goals related to self-identity, with accompanying sample learning opportunities. Individual identity is also integrated

into the theme of wellbeing, where, for example, the practitioner role “helps babies discover they are unique people” and “draws toddlers’ attention to differences which make them unique”.

- 162 *Aistear* supports children’s learning and development through assessment – a central part of adults’ day-to-day interactions with children. The guidelines for good practice describe assessment and illustrate with examples (Government of Ireland, 2020a). There are two approaches to assessment. *Assessment of Learning* aims to inform parents and professionals about children’s achievement. *Assessment for Learning* focuses on using assessment to help children with the next steps in learning and development. The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* provides resources to support practitioners in assessment.
- 163 *Aistear* also supports individual needs by providing a framework that spans a range of **age groups and developmental levels**. Some of the learning goals within each theme may be more relevant for older or younger children, or for children with different levels of learning in particular areas. For example, within the *Communicating* aim on use of language, the learning goals include the following:
- “In partnership with the adult, children will explore sound, pattern, rhythm, and repetition in language”; and
 - “In partnership with the adult, children will become proficient users of at least one language and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages.”
- 164 Additionally, *Aistear* provides sample learning opportunities for each of three overlapping age groups (babies aged 0 to 18 months, toddlers 1 to 3 years, and young children 2.5 to 6 years). The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* provides guidance and examples that can be divided into age groups (birth to 3 years and 3 years to 6 years).
- 165 AIM embodies an approach to the inclusion of **children with a disability** (or other additional needs) which supports their participation within mainstream services. **AIM** is a child-centred model with seven levels of progressive support for children with disabilities, from universal to targeted support. It does not require a formal diagnosis. The levels of support are summarised in Figure 15.

Figure 15 AIM model of supports



Source: <https://aim.gov.ie/>

166 The AIM programme includes:

- An inclusion charter, in which providers can participate by publishing their own inclusion policy;
- Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines which set out inclusive practice;
- A training course on equality, diversity and inclusion, delivered through the CCCs, to support roll-out of the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines;
- The higher education programme LINC – ELC settings with a LINC graduate in the role of inclusion coordinator receive an ECCE capitation payment which is increased by €2 per child per week; and
- Provision for ECCE settings in partnership with a parent or guardian to apply for targeted support, including specialist advice and mentoring from specialists; specialised equipment, appliances and grants toward minor building alterations; therapy services; or additional capitation.

167 The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines for ELC include information for practitioners to support **children whose home language is not English or Irish**. This includes guidelines relating to (1) how children typically progress with a second language, and (2) methods of working with the child and the family. For example, these could include: understanding the child’s linguistic background; providing “language bridges” by asking for key words in the child’s home language; and finding activities for the child that do not rely on spoken language. Information

for practitioners working with and for the parents of children whose home language is not English or Irish is also available through the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide.³¹

- 168 The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines for ELC also provide other information for practitioners to support children with **diverse cultural backgrounds** and those from Traveller and Roma communities. The guidelines also outline inclusive provision with respect to gender, LGBT, and religious and non-religious beliefs.
- 169 There are targeted funding programmes available through the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) to support access and inclusion for children from low-income households. These are described in (§32).

4.4 Engagement with families and community

- 170 This section outlines different aspects of parental³² and family involvement in pedagogical provision.
- 171 Regulations require that all early years providers provide relevant information about ELC services and the facilities available to parents and guardians who propose sending their child to the service. This includes provision of information to parents on the type of care or programme provided in the service. The QRF specifies that this must include information about the curriculum framework and any additional supported needs or interests (Tusla, 2018).
- 172 Parents are encouraged to communicate their expectations about pedagogical approaches and activities.
- 173 *Aistear's* Guidelines for Good Practice define the contribution of parents in ELC as a partnership role: “[p]artnership involves parents, families and practitioners working together to benefit children. Each recognises, respects and values what the other does and says. Partnership involves responsibility on both sides” (NCCA, 2009d). *Aistear's* guidelines on building partnerships with parents encourage parents to be their child’s first educators and include a set of guidelines for supporting learning at home. The guidelines also specify that ELC staff will support continuity between the setting and home learning environments through communication with parents, and that parents should be involved in the ELC setting.
- 174 The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines for ELC outline methods of parental engagement that consider children’s individual needs. Specific information is provided for children with disabilities, diverse cultural backgrounds, those learning English as a second language, and those from Traveller and Roma communities. The guidelines also outline inclusive provision with respect to

³¹ <https://www.AistearSíolta.ie/en/planning-and-assessing-using-Aistears-themes/resources-for-sharing/supporting-children-to-become-bilingual-birth-6-years-.pdf>; <https://www.AistearSíolta.ie/en/nurturing-and-extending-interactions/resources-for-sharing/supporting-your-child-to-become-bilingual.pdf>

³² In this section, the term “parents” refers to the child’s primary caregivers, including the father and mother and/or guardians.

gender, LGBT, and religious and non-religious beliefs. In 2018, at the request of DES, the NCCA undertook an audit of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum which included opportunities to integrate aspects of Traveller culture into *Aistear* (NCCA, 2018b).

- 175 First 5 sets out commitments to support greater parental involvement and engagement in children’s early learning in ELC settings. Initial actions include developing guidance, information and opportunities for parents to learn about ELC and for practitioners to engage effectively with parents, families and communities (Government of Ireland, 2019b).

4.5 Lessons learned in curriculum and pedagogy

- 176 This section outlines evaluative research findings on curriculum and pedagogy in practice. The examples below summarise lessons learned in promoting process quality and ensuring the alignment between curriculum, pedagogy and children’s needs and that practitioners’ knowledge is up to date.
- 177 **Some practitioners may not consistently practice play-based pedagogy.** In 2016, DCYA published a national study on parents’ and educators’ perspectives on school readiness which included information on ELC curricular and pedagogical practice (Ring, et al., 2016). The study found that while many ELC practitioners had adopted a playful pedagogical approach, others reported that they used more formal pedagogical approaches alongside play, for example flashcards, join-the-dots activities, direct instruction and, in some cases, homework. Some ELC practitioners reported applying programmes used in early primary classes with the aim of preparing children for primary school. This practice runs contrary to research findings on effective ELC practice as well as *Aistear* guidelines. Since 2016, measures aimed at achieving pedagogical alignment include the on-site mentoring from the Better Start Early Years QDS (§227), the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (§143), the *Aistear* and Play CPD course (§228), the DES education-focused inspections (described in §75), and the development of the PATD and PACG, which embed *Aistear* in pre-service training (§214 and §238),
- 178 **Practitioners experience challenges in achieving the learning and development aims of *Aistear*.** The education-focused inspections that were introduced in 2016 have informed strategies for curriculum implementation. The review of the first year of inspections found that practitioners tended to perform well on observation and understanding of children’s interests and needs, in line with *Aistear* guidelines. However, the highest incidence of less-than-satisfactory practice occurred in the area of learning and development. Challenges among practitioners included adherence to the principles of *Aistear*, use of assessment processes, pedagogical strategies and striking a balance between adult-directed and child-directed activities. Additional challenges included maintaining productive partnerships with parents and forming relationships with primary schools to support transition (DES Inspectorate, 2018b).
- 179 **CPD can have a substantial, positive impact on curriculum implementation.** From 2011 to 2013, NCCA in collaboration with Early Childhood Ireland conducted the *Aistear in Action* initiative, to pilot a support for providers in implementing

Aistear. The support included on-site mentoring visits, CPD cluster group meetings and CPD seminars. Reflections on the initiative were gathered from practitioners, parents and children. The study found that the support helped across a wide range of areas, including improving understanding of the role of children as active learners; the richness of the curriculum; the role of parents; creating high-quality interactions; communication; the learning environment; assessment; and documentation. The results suggest that CPD plays a critical role in implementing *Aistear* (NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland, 2013). Separately, an evaluation of the *Aistear* and Play CPD programme was planned for 2019/20 but was not completed due to COVID-19 service closures.

- 180 **Reporting templates effectively support transition to primary school.** A priority in the NCCA's Strategic Plan for 2015-2018 was supporting the transition from ELC to primary school. NCCA commissioned a literature review and an international audit of transition policies and transfer documentation (O'Kane, 2016), and developed reporting templates. This work found that alignment in curriculum and pedagogy across ELC settings and primary schools was highly important for development and learning outcomes. It found the transfer of information between ELC settings and primary schools to be an important contributor along with parental awareness of and involvement in supporting children's transitions. NCCA piloted reporting templates to support transition and found that the templates supported positive transition (NCCA, 2018a). Stakeholders have identified potential areas of future work on the primary curriculum, including achieving an integrated curriculum structure supported by CPD, in alignment with other educational priorities such as standardised testing, literacy or numeracy (NCCA, 2019).
- 181 **AIM has been effective in supporting children with disabilities in accessing the ECCE programme.** AIM underwent a one-year evaluation published in 2019, and a three-year evaluation is currently underway. In the one-year evaluation, stakeholders reported that AIM had helped a large number of children with disabilities to access ECCE provision and develop skills in ELC (e.g. social skills and concentration), and had improved adult-to-child ratios and transition to primary school. AIM has also had wider impacts in ELC settings by changing prevailing culture and attitudes in ELC, fostering a more inclusive culture, increasing access to supports, improving quality of teaching and contributing to the professionalisation of the ELC workforce. In particular, the evaluation found that the following elements were successful: there was a consistent and uniform approach to SEND children in ELC settings, which was accessible and equitable, and the model was child-centred and non-diagnosis-led. The evaluation also identified lessons learned about practical implementation, supporting children with complex needs and communication with stakeholders and parents.

4.6 DCYA/DES assessment of Ireland's approach to curriculum and pedagogy

- 182 The following box presents the Irish government's view on challenges to ensuring pedagogical relevance, as reflected in Government strategy and policy documents.

CHALLENGES TO ENSURING PEDAGOGICAL RELEVANCE

A central challenge in maintaining pedagogical relevance has been to ensure the consistent implementation of guidelines, particularly around a pedagogy that is new for many ELC staff in Ireland. Further actions are needed to address the implementation gap in both Siolta and Aistear. Examples of such initiatives include the introduction of the PATD and PACG for pre-service training, further roll-out of the Aistear and Play CPD programme and continued mentoring by Better Start. In particular, CPD has been shown to have an important role in upskilling ELC staff in play-based pedagogies. A review of Aistear is planned that may incorporate current evidence around pedagogy, for example guidelines around outdoor play. Revisions to Aistear may require training measures to support their implementation.

Another challenge is that the ELC system in Ireland serves an increasingly diverse population of children. This requires that pedagogical practice and the implementation of Aistear support children with diverse backgrounds and whose home language is not English or Irish. This inclusive practice includes providing accessible information to and facilitating two-way communication with a diverse set of parents, families and communities. Some initiatives to address this are being currently rolled out through the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines, the AIM training programme for all services and the LINC programme.

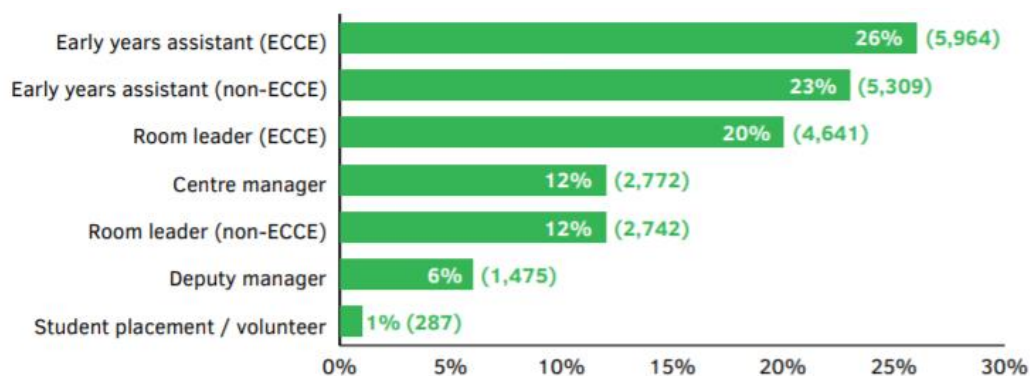
5 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Profile of ELC staff and leaders

183 This section compiles profile characteristics of ELC staff in Ireland: age range of children, workforce demographics, staff background and qualifications.

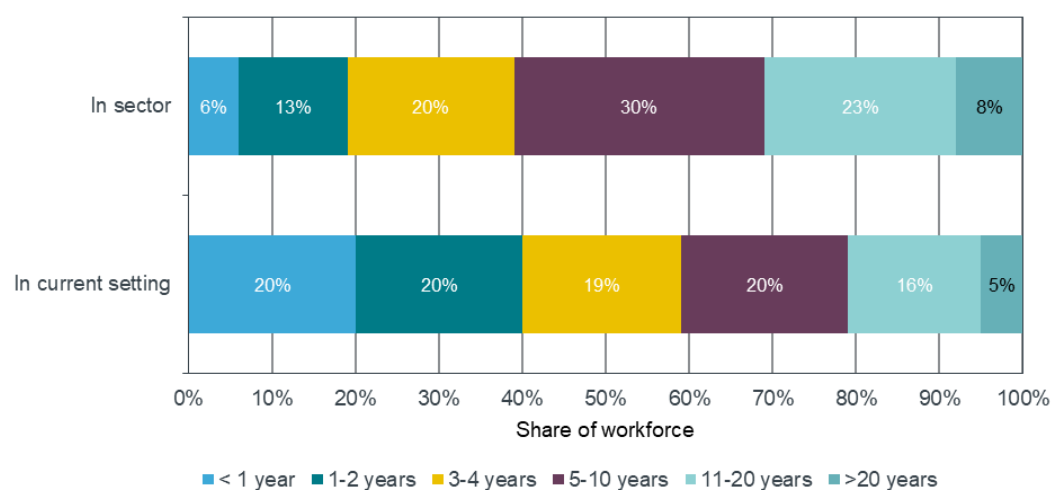
184 **Staff profiles.** There are no nationally agreed job titles or occupational profiles for different ELC staff, although this is an objective of the Workforce Development Plan. Most ELC staff in Ireland are described in surveys as “early years assistants” (49%). Thirty-two percent of staff are room leaders and 18% are centre managers or deputy managers (see Figure 16). Distinctions are made between ECCE and non-ECCE staff, who have different qualification requirements and funding provisions. The distribution of staff experience is shown in Figure 17.

Figure 16 Staff working directly with children by job title, 2018/19



Source: (Pobal, et al., 2019a)

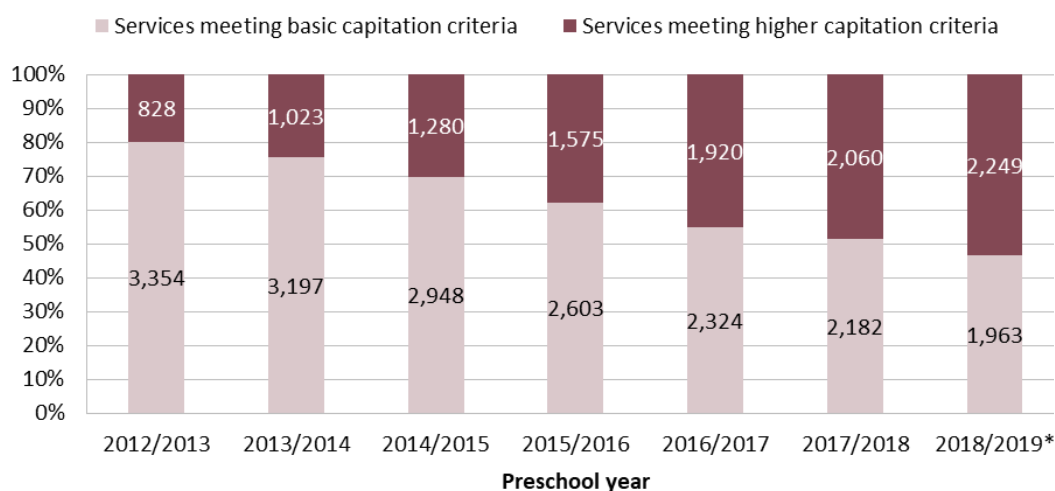
Figure 17 Staff working directly with children by length of time in current service and the ELC/SAC sector



Source: (Pobal, et al., 2019a)

- 185 **Staff qualifications and training.** In 2010, 71% of practitioners had a qualification equal to or higher than ISCED 4 (NFQ Level 5). By mid-2018 this proportion had risen to 94%. Staff working in registered ELC settings are required to have an ISCED 4 qualification, although some staff were given an exemption from 2016 to 2021. There is no such requirement for staff working with school-age children, although First 5 commits to introducing a qualification requirement for school-age childcare to be implemented through the Workforce Development Plan.
- 186 The proportion of staff with a relevant graduate qualification (ISCED 6, NFQ Level 7/8 or higher) increased from 12% in 2012 to 25% in mid-2019 (DCYA, 2019j) (Pobal, et al., 2019a). An estimated 16% of staff working directly with children were in the process of acquiring a graduate qualification in 2018/19 (Pobal, et al., 2019a). Approximately 86% of ELC staff in Ireland reported conducting training or CPD in their own time according to a trade union survey (SIPTU, 2019).
- 187 **Graduate qualifications among room leaders** have increased substantially in the last decade. The proportion of ECCE settings registered for Higher Capitation (HC) (i.e. with ISCED 6 or NFQ Level 7/8 room leaders) is shown in Figure 18. The proportion of ECCE settings registered for HC rose from 20% in 2012/13 to over 50% in 2018/2019.

Figure 18 Proportion of ECCE settings registered for Higher Capitation, 2012/13 to 2018/19



Source: (DCYA, 2019d)

- 188 **Workforce demographics.** The ELC workforce is 98% female, which is a higher share than many comparable countries. Thirteen percent of staff working directly with children are 15-24 years of age, 59% are 25-44 years of age, 27% are 45-64 years of age, and 1% are 65 years and older (Pobal, et al., 2019a).
- 189 **Age range of children.** Ireland has a relatively young ELC age profile, reflecting an early starting age for primary school, and a relatively short period of paid maternity leave compared to EU countries (26 weeks). Thirty-one percent of

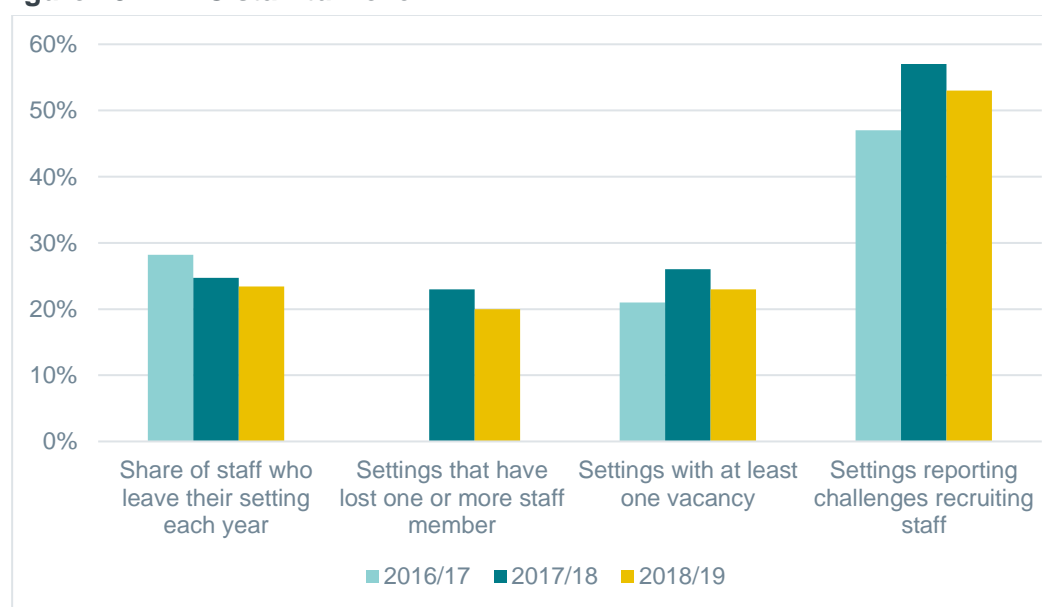
children in registered ELC settings are under age 3, 59% are 3 or 4 years old, and 10% are 5 years or older (Pobal, et al., 2019a).

- 190 More-highly qualified staff are more likely to work with children aged 3 and 4 years, with staff holding short-cycle tertiary, bachelors and post-graduate qualifications (ISCED 5 to 8, NFQ Levels 6 to 10) all over-represented in this age group relative to other ages. Staff working in school-age childcare tend to have the lowest qualification levels, with 24% not having any relevant formal qualifications (Pobal, et al., 2019a).

5.2 Staff shortages and turnover

- 191 Prior to 2016, there were relatively minimal staff shortages in the ELC sector (Duignan, 2018). Between 2012 and 2015/16, fewer than 18% of staff had been employed at their settings for less than a year, which includes both replacements for staff turnover and setting expansion (Pobal Surveys). Since 2016/17, staff turnover has been higher than 20%, although it has been declining year on year (see Figure 19).
- 192 Of the staff who left their setting, 37% moved to another ELC or SAC setting, 39% left the sector altogether and 12% left Ireland (the destination of 12% of leavers was unknown) (Hogan, 2019). There is significant geographic variation in turnover rates, ranging from 15% (Kilkenny) to 36% (Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown) (First 5, et al., 2019).

Figure 19 ELC staff turnover



Source: (Pobal, et al., 2019a)

- 193 The share of settings which reported facing challenges recruiting staff was between 45% and 60% and, in the twelve months up to June 2019, the annual staff turnover rate was 23.4% (Pobal, et al., 2019a). Figure 20 shows that, in 2018/19,

retention was slightly higher in rural and private settings, and slightly lower in urban and community settings.

Figure 20 Staff retention and loss by organisation type and urban/rural location

	Community	Private	Urban	Rural	All
Retained all staff	55%	60%	55%	66%	59%
Lost 1 staff member	23%	19%	20%	20%	20%
Lost 2 or 3	17%	13%	16%	11%	14%
Lost more than 3	5%	8%	9%	3%	7%

Source: (Pobal, et al., 2019a)

194 **Staff vacancies** were relatively consistent across different qualification levels. Vacancies were highest for staff without graduate qualifications, where vacancy posts represented 33% of sector staff posted among 40% of services. Vacancy posts for graduates represented 23% of sector staff among 32% of services (Pobal, et al., 2019a).

195 The increase in staff turnover from pre-2016 levels may reflect a number of factors, including the introduction of staff qualification requirements, the expansion of ELC provision, the increase in the size of the sector workforce and relatively low wage growth in the sector (DCYA, 2020a).

There have been measures to promote the expansion of **school-age childcare at ELC settings** in order to make it easier for providers to offer ELC staff full-time contracts. In particular, the NCS accommodates school-age childcare and a principle underpinning work on the Workforce Development Plan is to enable staff who provide ELC to also provide school-age childcare.

196 The **Workforce Development Plan** specifies several areas of activities to support the supply of staff. This work commenced in 2019 and is expected to conclude in 2021. It includes reviews of (DCYA, 2019j):

- Funding and incentivisation mechanisms for upskilling the workforce;
- Terms and conditions of employment, with the recognition that staff are employed through independent operators; and
- Professional and qualifications recognition.

5.3 Required qualifications and competencies

197 The Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 require that staff members working directly with children in registered centre- or home-based ELC must hold at least a major award in ELC at ISCED 4 (NFQ Level 5), or a

- qualification deemed by the relevant Minister to be equivalent.³³ ECCE settings are required to have a room leader holding a relevant ISCED 5 (NFQ Level 6) qualification.
- 198 There is no regulated minimum in-service training for ELC staff. There is, however, a regulatory requirement for ongoing staff training in early years settings, and Tusla EYI inspect this requirement.
- 199 Quality and Qualifications Ireland (**QQI**) is developing Professional Award-type Descriptors (**PATD**) that define standards of knowledge, skill and competence for major awards in ELC at ISCED 4 to 6 (NFQ Level 5 to 8). The components of these descriptors relating to ELC curriculum and pedagogy are discussed in §220-§223. These descriptors will be incorporated into major awards beginning in September 2021.
- 200 DES has developed Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (**PACG**) for Initial Professional Education Degree Programmes (ISCED 6 or NFQ 7/8), published in 2019. The PACG aim to support the development of degree programmes that will prepare graduates for the delivery of high-quality ELC.
- 201 Planned developments in required qualifications and competencies are summarised below:
- A Qualifications Advisory Board (**QAB**) is currently assessing degree programmes' adherence to the PACG. From September 2022, only students entering QAB-approved degree programmes will be eligible for policies to support graduates working in the sector (e.g. Higher Capitation) (DCYA, 2020a).
 - The Workforce Development Plan will review professional and qualifications recognition during 2020-2021 (DCYA, 2019j). It has been proposed that over time the differences in qualification requirements between ECCE and non-ECCE rooms will be eliminated. It has also been proposed that senior practitioner roles could have a pedagogical leadership training requirement and that occupational roles and career pathways will be defined (DCYA, 2020c).
 - The Draft Childminding Action Plan (2019) sets out potential plans to introduce qualifications for childminders, with funding support to be provided through an expanded Learner Fund. Currently, those childminders that are registered with Tusla have equivalent qualification requirements to those for staff in centre-based settings, but only a small minority (fewer than 1%) of childminders are registered. These qualification requirements may be modified in the future in light of expansion in childminder registration. The requirements will seek to balance the priorities of (1) improving quality standards for childminding and (2) preventing barriers to the registration and regulation of the childminding sector (DCYA, 2019a).

³³ The list of early years recognised qualifications is published here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/297c05-early-years-recognised-qualifications/>. For international qualifications, NARIC Ireland provides advice on the academic recognition of a foreign qualification by comparing it, where possible, to a major award type and level in the Irish NFQ. In addition, DCYA provides a service for the recognition of qualifications that are not on the published list.

5.4 Workforce governance

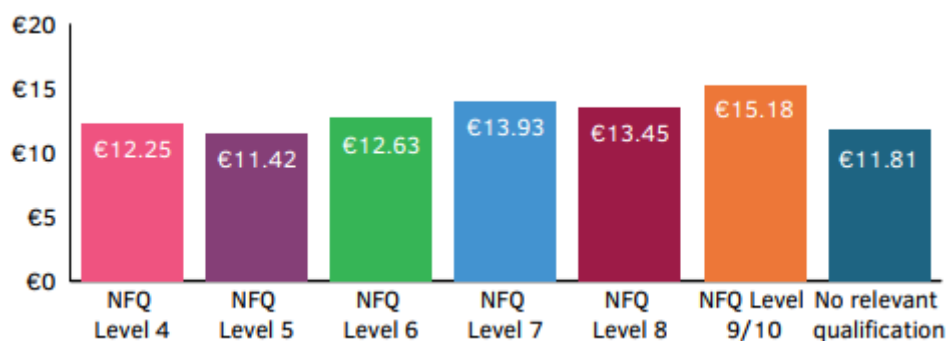
- 202 The Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration has policy responsibility for ELC (including childminders) and consults with the Minister for Education and Skills, who has responsibility for the quality of ELC workforce education and pre-service training programmes.
- 203 In addition to these departments, QQI is a government agency responsible for maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications (**NFQ**), validating education and training programmes, publishing a directory of providers in the NFQ and setting standards for the NFQ awards. QQI also make awards in higher education, largely to private providers, while universities and institutes of technology tend to make their own awards. QQI makes high-level recommendations on recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland, and DCYA oversees the process for recognition of foreign qualifications in ELC.
- 204 There is currently no overall governance of in-service training. A range of governance structures oversee specific training initiatives. For example, AIM governance structures oversee inclusion training programmes and the NSAI oversees training on *Síolta* and *Aistear*.
- 205 Better Start is responsible for administering and delivering various in-service training initiatives on behalf of DCYA and the NSAI. Better Start offers three operation programmes:
- QDS to ELC providers to support implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear*;
 - The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM); and
 - A recently established Early Years Learning and Development Unit (from August 2018). The unit coordinates agreed CPD training from the NSAI, from the Hanen Centre (on practical strategies for helping all children in the classroom build language and social skills), and CPD on *Lámh* (a manual sign system designed for children and adults with disabilities). An online introductory course in Sensory Processing in Early Learning is also administered through the unit.
- 206 Stakeholders have contributed to the recent developments of PACG and PATD. DES held a consultation with higher education, sector and governmental organisations when formulating PACG, and QQI held a consultation on PATD with practitioners, higher education specialists and others.

5.5 Funding, incentives and regulation to encourage take-up of training and collaboration

- 207 **Barriers.** ELC practitioners usually attend in-service training in their own time and at their own expense, although in some instances employers or the government may subsidise such training (Oberhuemer and Schreyer, 2018, p. 569).
- 208 A weak relationship between qualifications and wages can form a barrier for practitioners seeking to increase their qualifications to a graduate level (Duignan,

2018). Indeed, staff with a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6, NFQ Level 7/8) earned only 6-10% more than staff holding ISCED 5 (NFQ Level 6) awards, and 14-18% more than staff with no relevant qualifications (Pobal, et al., 2019a), as shown in Figure 21.

Figure 21 Average hourly wage by highest level of qualification



Source: (Pobal, et al., 2019a)

Note: For staff working directly with children

209 **Funding schemes.** There are currently several subsidies available to improve quality and take-up of pre-service and in-service ELC training:

- The Learner Fund is available to practitioners currently in the sector seeking to upskill to an ISCED 4 to 6 qualification (NFQ Level 5 to 8). It initially provided pre-award funding (4 and 5), and more recently has provided post-award funding (6). It was introduced in 2016, initially to support practitioners in meeting new minimum qualification requirements, and has since expanded to provide support for a range of other types of training. The fund was opened to ISCED 4 (NFQ Level 5) bursaries for childminders in 2019. A pilot payment scheme was introduced in 2018 for settings that participate in approved in-service training programmes. It now compensates for staff time on free-of-charge training programmes within AIM, *Aistear* and Play. As of 2019, CPD payments were made at the rate of €13 per hour of training to a maximum of 18 hours per person per year (DCYA, 2019e).

210 Established in 2016, Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years (**LINC**) is an ISCED 5 (NFQ Level 6) Special Purpose Award designed to support inclusion of children with a disability in the ECCE programme. It is delivered by a consortium of academic and sector organisations. In 2019, up to 1,150 free training places with bursaries were made available to pre-school practitioners on the LINC programme. By autumn 2020, approximately 3,450 practitioners will have completed the programme, and 60% of ECCE settings will have a qualified inclusion coordinator (DCYA, 2020d).

211 **Quality and take-up measures.** In addition to the subsidies outlined above, there have been recent regulatory interventions aimed at increasing the take-up of training. These include:

- The regulatory minimum ISCED 4 (NFQ Level 5) qualification for all staff working directly with children via the Child Care Act (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016;

- The ECCE programme rule limiting participation to settings with room leaders at minimum ISCED 5 (NFQ Level 6);
 - The HC ECCE scheme, which provides HC to settings for sessions with a room leader with ISCED 6 (NFQ Level 7/8) qualifications; and
 - An AIM Level 1 capitation for ECCE settings that employ LINC graduates as inclusion coordinators.
- 212 There are several plans underway for additional measures to increase CPD take-up, including:
- The current funding model review will consider mechanisms to maximise quality (DCYA, 2019j). Key issues include agreed terms and conditions of employment for staff, recognising that the government is not the employer and having regard to the proposals emerging from the Workforce Development Plan. Other indicators of quality, above regulatory and contractual requirements, may include factors such as qualifications for staff in a range of roles; provision of ex-ratio staff (e.g. manager, administrator); supportive working conditions for staff such as minimum number of hours per week paid time for team planning/reflection for each staff member; participation in national quality development activities; provision of parent support services; and acting as a hub for support and training networks for local childminders (DCYA, 2020a).
 - The Workforce Development Plan will review in-service training infrastructure, including leadership development, and mechanisms for upskilling the workforce (DCYA, 2019j).
- 213 **Stakeholder engagement measures.** While there are no specific incentives to encourage engagement with stakeholders such as other ELC settings, community or families, such engagement is encouraged through pre- and in-service training and in staff guidance. Both *Aistear* and *Síolta* encourage ECEC staff to collaborate with other stakeholders to improve process quality. A number of the standards and components of the *Síolta* quality framework encourage collaboration with other stakeholders. The *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide is structured around six pillars, one of which is Parent Partnerships, and includes specific advice on developing relationships with parents.³⁴

5.6 Pre-service training to support process quality and stakeholder engagement

- 214 This section summarises pre-service training content, drawing information from the PATD, including how it prepares staff to promote quality and engage with stakeholders (QQI, 2019). The regulatory requirements for ELC staff qualifications are summarised in §30.

³⁴ <https://www.AistearSiolta.ie/en/>

- 215 **Award requirements.** The requirements for NFQ Level 5 and 6 awards (ISCED 4 and 5) vary. Under PACG, a NFQ Level 7 (ISCED 6) award in ELC will require 180 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and a NFQ Level 8 (also ISCED 6) award will require 240 ECTS (once PACG is implemented), where one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work.
- 216 **Practicum requirements.** Currently, professional practice placements are not required for ELC awards, but most ELC course providers require practice placements for successfully completing the course. The PATD for ISCED 4 and 5 awards (NFQ Level 5 and 6) will require that participants complete 150 hours of professional practice per annum in a minimum of two ELC settings, including a minimum of 50 hours working directly with children aged under 2 years 8 months, and a minimum of 50 hours working with children 2 years 8 months and older. The professional practice placements include observing, applying theory and knowledge, acquiring skills, self-reflecting, self-evaluating practice, and receiving mentoring from practitioners. For ISCED 6 awards (NFQ Level 7), the PACG specifies instead that “structured supervised assessed professional practice placements” should constitute a minimum of 35% of the overall duration of the course and should be undertaken in various settings spanning the full 0-6 age range and catering for a diverse range of children.
- 217 **Types of interactions.** ELC major awards under the PATD will be required to prepare practitioners for a range of interactions. Below are example PATD annotations drawn from a range of award levels for different types of interactions to illustrate this scope:
- Staff-child: develop and implement strategies that support children’s sense of identity and belonging. Develop tailored strategies underpinned by theory to support emergent language, literacy, digital literacy, numeracy, creativity and problem-solving skills and digital learning.
 - Staff-parents and child-parents: have an understanding of the parental voice in ELC, and national and international models of effective partnership with parents; promote a participatory inclusive and anti-bias approach in engagement with families.
 - Staff-staff: engage in regular group reflection which is grounded in reflective practice theory. Demonstrate supervisory and mentoring skills that support the work of others.
 - Child-child: critically apply knowledge of child development to help children form secure and positive relationships.
 - Child-community: implement strategies that foster children’s sense of identity and belonging.
- 218 **Differentiation by award level.** The major award levels differ in the depth of and emphasis placed on each area of knowledge, skills and competencies. The ISCED 4 (NFQ Level 5) award places emphasis on areas such as practical understanding, addressing predictable types of problems, working in team roles and taking responsibility. The ISCED 5 and 6 awards (NFQ Level 6 and 7/8) build on these areas, adding depth, complexity and responsibility. For example, the ISCED 6 awards place emphasis on critical understanding, knowledge of professional

context, collaborating with stakeholders and other members of the profession, advanced skills, evidence-based decision-making, transferring knowledge to others, exercising autonomous judgement and managing complex or innovative activities. This is discussed in more detail in §238.

- 219 **Induction activities.** Currently there are no induction requirements. The PACG recommends the development of an induction model for graduates of ELC courses.
- 220 **Pedagogical practice and resources.** The PATD specifies that pre-service training should promote various dimensions of pedagogical practice, including (with variations by award level):
- Specific knowledge of pedagogy and curricula which is emergent, enquiry based, inclusive, age and stage appropriate, and aligned to children’s interest, needs, strengths and dispositions;
 - Knowledge of high-quality pedagogical environments for children; and
 - Competence in pedagogical practice that is inclusive of children’s interest, development and care needs.
- 221 **Engaging with stakeholders.** The PATD specifies that major awards will include preparation in parental partnership and stakeholder engagement, and how to demonstrate interpersonal, intrapersonal and self-awareness skills in interactions with stakeholders.
- 222 Engagement with other ELC professionals is promoted in pre-service training through the concept of a *community of practice* and through competencies in working with others. Major awards will teach participants to contribute to the development of a community of practice, working with others in curriculum development, demonstrating high-quality interactions and acting effectively in team roles.
- 223 **Recent changes in focus.** The main recent change in focus has been an expansion in the number of degree programmes and the number of students graduating each year. In 2007/08, 11 higher educational institutions offered relevant degree courses, and total enrolments in these courses were 1,259. In 2017/18, these figures had risen to 16 higher educational institutions, with 3,341 enrolments.³⁵ The PACG and PATD process now under way is intended to raise standards in degree programmes and align content.
- 224 **Alignment with the curriculum.** The PATD requires award programmes to incorporate *Aistear*, so that participants have the knowledge and understanding of the framework, and can carry out curriculum development, planning, monitoring and review in a way that is informed by *Aistear*.

³⁵ Email from DCYA, 8 Oct 2020.

5.7 In-service training to support process quality and stakeholder engagement

225 This section summarises in-service training programmes in ELC, including how they support staff in promoting quality and engaging with stakeholders.

226 In the absence of centrally mandated in-service training requirements, in-service training is entirely at the discretion of settings and setting leaders, although a range of training opportunities are provided free of charge to settings by government bodies.

227 **Better Start Quality Development Service (QDS).** QDS provides a team of Better Start quality early years specialists to mentor ELC. The specialists operate on a national basis and use the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide and video observation as a basis for developing quality. They provide feedback, contribute to staff meetings and produce a final report with recommendations for sustaining and continuing quality development. Early years specialists are ELC professionals, with ISCED 6 and 7 (NFQ Level 7 to 9) qualifications. Settings that qualify for QDS must fulfil certain criteria. They must be:

- Full-day care settings (birth to 6 years) catering for a minimum of 40 children on a full-day care basis;
- Settings catering for 20 full- and/or part-time children with at least 40 children overall;
- Group or chain providers with settings under the same ownership;
- Sessional settings for children with at least 40 children in total;
- Providers that have completed the five *Aistear* and Play workshops; and/or
- Settings that have accessed AIM support where quality development supports inclusive practice.

Alternatively, settings can submit a priority request under certain circumstances. These include: an inspection raising issues a quality; limited previous access to quality support; circumstances such as high levels of disadvantage, rural isolation, or additional needs of children; or significant staff turnover.³⁶ To date, the QDS has provided on-site mentoring and coaching to approximately 23% of ELC settings.³⁷

228 **The *Aistear* and Play programme.** *Aistear* and Play is an in-service training programme developed through the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative. It is delivered by Better Start quality early years specialists and supports staff in applying *Aistear* in their practice for children from birth to 6 years. It consists of five individual workshops of 2.5 hours each, two on-site support visits with an early years mentor, and practice tasks for practitioners following the workshops. The aims of the

³⁶ <https://betterstart.pobal.ie/Pages/Quality-Development-Service.aspx>

³⁷ Email from Better Start, 30 Sep 2020.

programme are to support practitioners' understanding and implementation of *Aistear* and *Síolta* to improve quality of provision and to further curriculum development skills. To participate in *Aistear* and Play, the practitioner needs to have completed an introductory workshop on *Aistear*, *Síolta* and the Practice Guide, which is delivered through the CCCs and NVCOs.³⁸ In 2019, the programme offered 1,060 places and booked 806 places, and 616 participants completed the workshop series from 131 services.³⁹

- 229 The **Better Start** AIM early years specialists are mentors who provide expert advice to ELC providers to help them to support children with disabilities participating in the ECCE programme. Better Start early years specialists deliver the Hanen Teacher Talk programme to support language and communication, as well as sign language training where required.
- 230 An online sensory processing awareness training, Sensory Processing in Early Learning, is provided through the Learning and Development Unit.
- 231 A variety of training courses are also provided by CCCs, NVCOs and some third parties including Children First, Equality and Diversity, Healthy Ireland Smart Start, First Aid, Corrective Action Preventive Action, and the *Síolta* and *Aistear* Introductory Workshops (the last of which delivered 253 workshops to 3,100 participants in 2019).⁴⁰
- 232 There are no specific in-service training programmes to prepare staff for working with children who have English as an additional language in ELC settings, but there are some provisions for specially qualified teachers in infant classes (4- to 6-year-olds) in primary schools (Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2018).
- 233 **Recent changes in focus.** There has been a progressive increase in focus on rolling out *Síolta* and *Aistear* nationally following the publication of the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide in 2015, the establishment of Better Start in 2014 and the introduction of the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative in 2016. There has also been an increasing focus on inclusion through the workforce development strands of AIM (e.g. the LINC programme introduced in 2016 and the Equality and Diversity training initiative). In addition, there has been an increased focus on child protection, with roll-out of training to the whole ELC sector over the last five years.
- 234 **Alignment with the curriculum and pre-service training.** In-service training developed through the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative is explicitly aligned with *Aistear*. In addition, the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide, a support for professional practice in ECEC, is explicitly aligned to both *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the national policy frameworks for ECEC. All CPD resources and materials developed through the NSAI are aligned with the national curriculum framework and developed by an expert resource development group.

³⁸ <https://betterstart.pobal.ie/Pages/NSAI.aspx>

³⁹ Email from Better Start, 30 Sep 2020.

⁴⁰ Email from Better Start, 30 Sep 2020. Note that individuals could be participants in more than one workshop, as the series comprises six workshops.

- 235 There is no explicit alignment between in-service training and pre-service training. However, as both in-service and pre-service training reflect *Síolta* and *Aistear*, there is likely to be substantial implicit alignment.

5.8 Training to support leaders

- 236 There is very little specific leadership training for ELC staff, and there is no designated “leadership role” other than the concept of room leader in the ECCE programme and the inclusion coordinator role in AIM. The Workforce Development Plan is developing a profile for “pedagogical leaders” within settings, and it is proposed that there will be specific training programmes to support this role.
- 237 Graduate degrees do provide training on some aspects of curriculum implementation, team management, facilitating high-quality interactions and stakeholder engagement (see below). Not all staff with degrees are leaders, and not all leaders hold graduate qualifications.
- 238 The remainder of this section summarises ways in which PACG-aligned graduate programmes provide leadership training in a number of key areas (DES, 2019).
- 239 **Curriculum implementation and pedagogy.** PACG-aligned graduate awards include training on generating an appropriate curriculum that stimulates and promotes positive learning dispositions, emergent literacy, maths and science skills. Alongside curriculum development, there is training on pedagogy: building strong pedagogical relationships with children and co-constructing pedagogical knowledge together with children.
- 240 **Establishing collaborative relationships with other institutions.** According to the PACG, graduates should be trained to build up support for ELC settings within local communities and establish collaborative relationships with other professionals (e.g. health and social services).
- 241 **Supporting educators/assistants.** Graduates should be trained in implementing effective and democratic organisational structures and processes.
- 242 **Managing teams and encouraging staff collaboration.** Degree programmes should include aspects such as sharing and exchanging expertise with colleagues in team meetings, engaging in discussion and learning from disagreement.
- 243 **Engaging with families and communities.** Graduates should be trained to make the cultural heritage of local communities accessible to children; involve children in community-based projects (festivals, cultural events, etc.); have knowledge of working with parents and local communities (knowledge about families, poverty and diversity); establish partnership relationships with parents based on mutual understanding, trust and cooperation; and provide effective communication with all stakeholders and partners.
- 244 **Children’s interactions with materials and space.** Graduates are trained in supporting children’s symbolic play through appropriate provision of structured and unstructured materials.

5.9 Monitoring and evaluation of training programmes

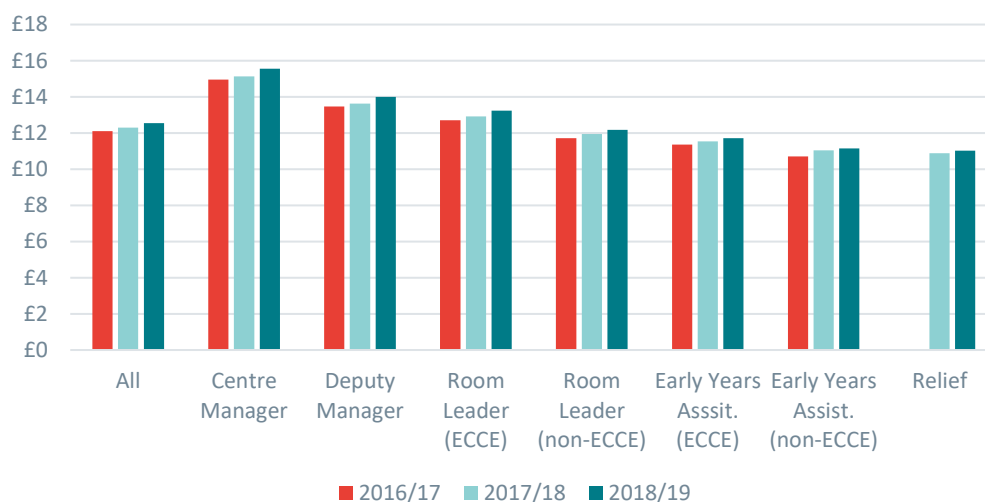
- 245 This section summarises the monitoring and evaluation of pre- and in-service training programmes, including the relationship between ELC monitoring and training.
- 246 DES oversees monitoring and evaluation of ELC pre-service training programmes (and in-service training programmes related to curriculum) as part of their responsibility for the quality of ELC workforce education and training. The DES QAB is in the process of checking alignment of degree programmes with the PACG. Monitoring of pre-service training in further education is conducted by QQI.
- 247 DCYA monitors and evaluates the in-service training and mentoring programmes that it funds, including evaluations currently under way of Better Start and of training programmes under AIM. Responsibility for monitoring and evaluation of other training lies with the organisations that carried out or commissioned the training.
- 248 There is no requirement to involve ELC staff or children in the monitoring and evaluation of training programmes, but there are instances of this taking place and it is a commitment in First 5. For example, the review of the *Aistear* and Play CPD programme (implemented by Better Start as part of the NSAI) involves surveys of staff.
- 249 Monitoring findings have influenced training and competency requirements in a number of areas. Principal examples are summarised below:
- Pobal Early Years Sector Profile – Pobal’s survey data monitors different indicators that have been used to assess training and identify training needs. These include staff turnover rates, staff retention, staff attrition from the ELC sector, staff tenure, staff salaries (including graduate remuneration), difficulties hiring qualified staff, staff vacancies and the relationship between qualifications and these variables (Pobal, et al., 2019a)
 - The Higher Education Authority Graduate Outcomes Survey includes employment information for graduates from ELC education programmes, which has informed policy analysis of staff qualifications (DCYA, 2019d).
 - In 2015, DES conducted a survey to assess the satisfaction of ELC practitioners with their pre-service professional preparation. This survey found that many practitioners felt there was a need for greater standardisation to address the duration, content, supervision and assessment of the practicum. This finding contributed to the DES review of further and higher education courses in ELC (Duignan, 2018).
 - Monitoring contributed to the development of AIM. This included:
 - In 2015, DES conducted a staff survey which found that pre-service professional education did not adequately prepare staff to support a diverse population of children, particularly children with English as a second language or SEND children (Duignan, 2018); and
 - A Disability Equality Specialist Support Agency report which reviewed ELC settings’ access to support from specialists (DCYA, 2019b).

- The Department undertook a Focused Policy Assessment of Higher Capitation (HC), which among other things examined the relationship between qualifications and process quality. It analysed the scores of ECCE settings on key quality measures collected through EYEI. Given some data limitations, the analysis broadly found that HC (i.e. a room leader with at least an ISCED 6 or NFQ Level 7/8 qualification) was associated with higher-quality provision (DCYA, 2019d). This provided evidence in support of policies to encourage increases in workforce qualification.

5.10 Working conditions

- 250 This section summarises information on working conditions of ELC staff, including trends over time.
- 251 Figure 22 shows that average hourly staff wages increased from €12.10 in 2016/17 to €12.55 in 2018/19 (2019 prices), an increase of 3.7% in real terms. Wage growth was reasonably consistent across job descriptions, with the largest increase being for room leaders (ECCE) and the smallest increase for early years assistants (ECCE).
- 252 There is limited data on working hours per week, but this is largely driven by part-time work. Figure 23 shows that the share of ELC staff working part time has remained largely constant since 2013, with around half of staff in part-time work.

Figure 22 Hourly wage, by job description

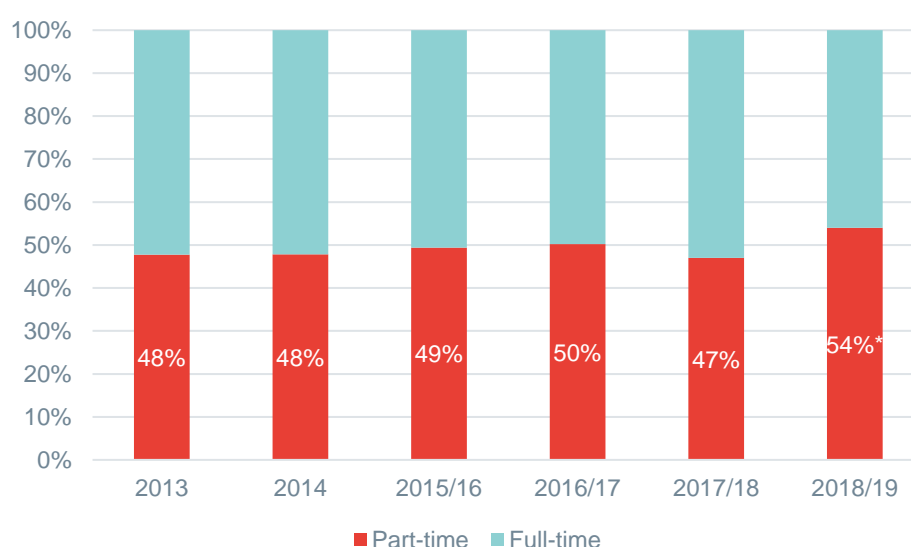


Source: Pobal Sector Profiles

- 253 There is no statutory non-contact time requirement for ELC staff. ELC staff had an average of 5.6 hours per week of non-contact time out of a total of 27 hours in 2018/2019 (Pobal, et al., 2019a).

- 254 The Focused Policy Assessment on Higher Capitation includes a brief literature review of studies on Ireland ELC staff satisfaction with remuneration levels, working conditions and career progression (DCYA, 2019d)
- 255 The government has limited measures available to directly affect the working conditions of ELC staff, as ELC providers are principally independent operators. In view of this, the Funding Model Expert Group includes a review of the terms and conditions of employment as a part of its agenda for 2020-2021. In addition, there is a commitment in the Programme for Government (2020) to establish a Joint Labour Committee with a view to agreeing an Employment Regulation Order to determine minimum rates of pay and employment conditions for ELC workers.

Figure 23 Share of staff working part time



Source: *Pobal Sector Profiles*

Note: *In 2018/19, the definition of part-time work captures all staff working 30 hours or fewer. Comparisons between 2018/19 and previous years should be interpreted with caution.*

5.11 DCYA/DES assessment

- 256 First 5, the Draft Childminding Action Plan and the Workforce Development plan articulate some principal challenges in ensuring that training supports high process quality and child development. These include the following:
- A central challenge is achieving a graduate-led ELC workforce – First 5 sets a goal of at least 50% of staff working directly with children in centre-based settings holding an appropriate degree-level qualification by 2028 (DCYA, 2019j);
 - The planned transition to a fully regulated childminding sector involves challenges in introducing qualifications requirements for childminders – for example, how these requirements would align with those for centre-based practitioners (DCYA, 2019a);

- A Strategic Action under First 5 is to ensure that ELC provides inclusive support and services to diverse children and to families with additional needs. (Government of Ireland, 2019b); and
- There is no professional regulator for ELC. DCYA maintains a list of approved qualifications in order to assess compliance with statutory regulations and ECCE funding criteria. First 5 sets out Initial Actions that would build toward the eventual establishment of a professional standards body.

257 The following box presents the Irish government's view of the strengths and challenges in pre-service and in-service training, as reflected in government strategy and policy documents.

ASSESSMENT OF PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE TRAINING

Monitoring and evaluation findings in recent years have highlighted a need for greater integration of curriculum and pedagogy into pre-service training programmes. The recent development of the PATD and PACG represents an important step in ensuring high-quality pre-service training for ELC staff. Outcomes evidence about how the PATD and PACG prepare ELC staff to deliver high-quality provision will be available once new cohorts of major award participants join the ELC workforce.

In-service training is provided through a range of organisations (Better Start, CCCs, NVCOs), which creates both benefits and challenges. NVCOs and CCCs may be equipped to provide training that is tailored to a setting's specific context, but there are also risks that different organisations will deliver training that varies in content and quality.

CPD programmes such as "Aistear in Action" and "Aistear and Play" have been effective in helping participants with pedagogical practice. However, there are currently barriers to achieving high rates of staff CPD participation. These include limitations in available funding and non-contact time, particularly for home-based providers. The Workforce Development Plan and the Childminding Action Plan include proposals to address these challenges.

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ANNEX A INDEX OF QUESTIONS

Ref.	Section	Question summary
1	2.1	How is the ELC operating system organised in Ireland?
2	2.1	How are responsibilities split between the DCYA and DES?
3	2.1	Have there been any changes in governance over the last decade?
4	2.1	What responsibilities are devolved to the regional/local/setting level?
5	2.4	How are structural quality standards set?
6	2.3	How has the provision of ELC evolved over the last decade?
7	2.2	Have fertility rates and age of first birth changed in the last decade?
8	2.2	Has the starting age of compulsory education changed over the last decade?
9	2.2	Is there a legal entitlement to a (free) place in ELC for children under age 3?
10	2.2	How many children are in ELC age in Ireland?
11	2.3	How have the enrolment rates in ELC evolved?
12	2.6	How do enrolment rates vary by demographic characteristics?
13	2.6	What measures ensure ELC access and quality for all children?
14	2.5	How is ELC funding structured and how is funding related to quality?
15	2.5	What are parental fees for participation in ELC?
16	2.7	How is quality in ELC defined?
17	2.7	What are the goals of ELC policies and how do they related to broader policy objectives?
18	2.8	What measures ensure process quality and child development?
19	2.7; 2.8	How have ELC goals changed over the last decade?
20	2.8	How are stakeholders involved in discussions on process quality?
21	2.9	What are the most important strengths of the ELC system in Ireland?
22	2.9	What are the main challenges for Ireland's ELC system?
23	2.8	What is the agenda for the next steps regarding ELC?
24	3.1	How is the regulation and monitoring of ELC quality organised?
25	3.1	What are the different inspectorates and agencies involved? What are their responsibilities?
26	3.2	What different types of inspections do they carry out?
27	3.1	What are the benefits and challenges of having several inspectorates involved?
28	3.2	What has been the role of different stakeholders in the development of the inspection regime?
29	3.3	What dimensions of quality are monitored?
30	3.3	What are the different issues examined in inspections of settings?
31	3.3	How is the monitoring of implementation of the national curriculum organised?
32	3.2; 3.3; 3.5	How is process quality monitored?

Ref.	Section	Question summary
33	3.3	How does the monitoring of process quality differ across settings?
34	3.3	To what extent does the monitoring consider practices catering to children's individual needs and family and community engagement?
35	3.4	Have there been any recent changes or new proposals regarding monitoring of process quality in your ELC system?
36	3.3; 3.5	How is child development, learning and wellbeing measured or assessed?
37	3.3	How does the monitoring of child development differ across settings?
38	3.4	Have any changes been proposed or occurred regarding monitoring of child development?
39	3.5	How are the results of inspections used?
40	3.1; 3.4	What are the linkages between registration, inspection and quality support services?
41	3.3	Currently, what data is collected to measure process quality in ELC centres?
42	4.2	What are the core values and/or areas of development specified in the curriculum?
43	4.2	To what extent does the curriculum specify or suggest specific pedagogy?
44	4.3	How does the curriculum reflect the individual needs and development of children?
45	4.1	How do global trends and local contexts inform curriculum design and implementation?
46	4.1	How are children's views considered in curriculum design?
47	4.1	Has the curriculum evolved to support process quality? What influenced these changes?
48	4.2	How are staff encouraged to use explicit pedagogical approaches?
49	4.2	How does the pedagogical approach balance child-centred and staff-initiated activities?
50	4.1	Have there been any new or "innovative" pedagogical approaches to promote quality?
51	4.5	Have aspects of curriculum and pedagogy proven to be more/less successful?
52	4.4	How are children and families involved in pedagogical provision?
53	4.3	What pedagogical approaches are used for SEND children, those with additional language requirements or those from disadvantaged backgrounds?
54	4.5	Have lessons been learned regarding best practice for aligning curriculum/pedagogy with individual needs?
55	4.5	Have lessons been learned regarding ensuring pedagogical knowledge is relevant?
56	4.2	How are settings encouraged to embed the curriculum? What resources are available?
57	4.2	How are ELC curricula embedded in pre-service training and setting accreditation?
58	4.2	How much flexibility to adapt the curriculum is delegated to settings or local authorities?
59	4.2	How are centre leaders encouraged and supported to help staff use the curriculum?
60	4.4	How are parents encouraged to be the first educators for their child?
61	4.4	How are parents encouraged to enhance ELC learning experience?
62	5.1	Regarding the different profiles of ELC staff in Ireland; what are the child age ranges, staff gender composition and career pathways?
63	5.1; 5.8	What is the profile of ELC leaders in Ireland?
64	5.2	To what extent are staff shortages and staff turnover in ELC a problem in Ireland?
65	5.3	What are the minimum qualifications for different roles in settings?

Ref.	Section	Question summary
66	5.4	Who is responsible for pre-service training programmes?
67	5.4; 5.5	Who is involved in planning and providing CPD? What is the funding scheme?
68	5.7	What is the role of ELC leaders and educators in deciding on CPD opportunities?
69	5.3	Are there requirements for minimum participation in professional development activities?
70	5.1;	What percentage of ELC staff participate in professional development?
71	5.5; 5.11	What is the overall assessment of the quality of training and CPD for ELC staff?
72	5.4	Who is in charge of deciding on the content of pre-service training and CPD?
73	5.5	How do policies encourage ELC staff to collaborate to improve process quality?
74	5.11	What are the key benefits and challenges for quality arising from training governance?
75	5.3	Are the competency profiles defined for staff?
76	5.6; 5.7	How are staff supported in both pre- and in-service training to promote process quality?
77	5.7	How does in-service training prepare staff to work with additional language requirements?
78	5.7	What is the alignment between CPD and in pre-service training content?
79	5.5; 5.6; 5.7	Does pre- and in-service training prepare staff to engage relevant stakeholders?
80	5.6; 5.7	Has there been a shift in focus of pre- or in-service training in the last five or ten years?
81	5.6; 5.7	What is the alignment between training and the national curriculum?
82	5.8	How does leaders' training prepare them to promote high-quality interactions?
83	5.9	How are training needs and programmes monitored?
84	5.9	What is the role of ELC staff and students in evaluating of these programmes?
85	5.9	How has ELC monitoring in the following areas influenced the delivery of training?
86	5.11	What challenges exist to aligning training with process quality and child needs?
87	5.10	How have ELC working conditions changed over the last decade?

