A REVIEW OF EARLY-YEARS EDUCATION-FOCUSED INSPECTION: APRIL 2016 – JUNE 2017

INSIGHTS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

INSPECTORATE

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

An Roinn Leanaí agus Gnóthaí Óige
Department of Children and Youth Affairs

AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

INSPECTORATE

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JOINT MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

As Minister for Education and Skills and Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, we are very pleased to welcome the publication of Insights and Future Developments: A review of the First Year of Implementation of Early Years Education-focused Inspection, April 2016 - June 2017.

Investment in the provision of high-quality early childhood education is a key priority of Government. We recognise the critical impact that early life experiences can exert over the whole lifespan of an individual. From health and well-being to education and employment, many of the core skills and dispositions for success are established in the early years of life. The annual and growing Government investment in the universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme helps to ensure that every young child can access appropriate, early learning experiences before he or she starts primary school.

This Review of the first year of Implementation of Early Years Education-focused Inspection provides the first detailed, composite evaluation of the nature and quality of early childhood education provision and practice under the ECCE Programme. Since 2015, when the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Education and Skills asked the DES Inspectorate to lead and organise focused inspections on the quality of educational provision in ECCE settings, very significant development work has been undertaken.

A new quality framework for inspection has been disseminated and an inspection model designed that will deliver on our joint commitment to promote continuous improvement in early childhood education settings. The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills has consulted thoroughly with all the Early Years stakeholders and partners and the inspection procedure that has emerged has benefited greatly from this detailed engagement.

Education-focused inspection actively fosters professional dialogue between Early Years inspectors and Early Years practitioners and other personnel in each Early Years setting. This evaluation approach seeks to stimulate positive, professional processes of self-evaluation and action for improvement. The findings of this report provide valuable insights into early years practice, the context for learning and development, and the workings of this new inspection model. The findings also show that we have much to be positive about, especially in relation to the commitment to quality of the Early Years practitioners who deliver early childhood education and the ways in which effective leadership in Early Years services promotes and supports this good practice.

We greatly welcome the fact that as a result of the early years education-focused inspections, parents of young children now have access to published reports on the quality of education provision in Early Years services and we look forward to the Early Years inspection programme expanding further in the future. It is also positive to hear the voices of children themselves represented in the findings of inspection reports through the evaluation of their experiences and achievements. This reminds us of the immediate impact of early education on every child; and the importance of ensuring that their experience is an affirming and enriching one.

We also welcome the insights that this report provides about the challenges for the delivery of quality in Early Years education. We are at an early stage in the implementation of our national vision in this regard. However, this review report provides vital conclusions that will inform ongoing work towards achieving high-quality early childhood education for all. Whether we are parents, providers, practitioners or policymakers, we are all challenged to help to establish coordinated, collaborative partnerships so that we can achieve our shared vision of excellent early childhood education for all our young children.

We wish to congratulate the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills on the successful implementation of this new inspection model which places improvement at the heart of the quality assurance process. We pay tribute to all the early years professionals and the leadership and management of Early Years services for their professionalism in embracing the quality agenda promoted by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills. We also thank the young learners whose fantastic work is captured and celebrated in this review.

Finally, we wish to take the opportunity of the publication of this report to reiterate the commitment of our two Departments to continuing partnership in the best interests of delivering the highest quality early education experience for all our young citizens.

Richard Bruton, Minister for Education and Skills

Katherine Zappone, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

January 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early-Years Education-focused Inspection (EYEI) evaluates the quality of educational provision in early-years settings participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme funded through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. This inspection model was introduced in 2016, having been developed by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) at the request of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Education and Skills in 2015.

This report presents a review of the EYEI model after the first full year of implementation and covers the period April 2016 to June 2017 during which 867 inspections were completed. Composite findings from an analysis of inspection reports prepared by the DES Inspectorate are presented in relation to the four areas of practice set out in the EYEI Quality Framework[1]:

1. The quality of the context to support children's learning and development
2. The quality of processes to support children's learning and development
3. The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements
4. The quality of management and leadership for learning.

The first year of implementation of the EYEI model facilitated the in-depth testing in practice of the framework for inspection, the quality continuum and the protocols and processes for implementation that comprise the EYEI model. A range of feedback, gathered through experiences of implementation of the EYEIs and wider consultation with all stakeholders in the early years sector has informed this review. The feedback has been very valuable and informative with a strong message of welcome for the introduction of education-focused inspection in early-years settings. There is also a clear endorsement of the relevance and effectiveness of the EYEI model. This now allows the expansion of EYEI to the full diversity of early-years services in which the ECCE Programme is being delivered. It will also allow for follow-through inspections to take place over the coming year; this will provide further insight into the impact of EYEI.

In simple terms, Early-Years Education-focused Inspection has worked: it has strengthened the commitment to providing every child with enriching, enjoyable early childhood experiences that provide a great start for young children on their education journey. It has valued and validated the professionalism and commitment of the early years workforce; and it has provided robust, authentic information to parents and policymakers about what has been achieved and what still needs to be addressed in the delivery of high quality early education.

The feedback that emerged from early years services through the inspection process and also through the consultation processes at the end of the first year of EYEI implementation has raised issues relating to the context in which the ECCE Programme operates. It is evident from the findings of inspection that whilst there is much cause for optimism in relation to the nature of practice in early education, there is still much work to be done in developing the capacity of the early years sector in Ireland to deliver high quality early education experiences for children aged from 3 years until they enrol in primary school. This work relates to: the coordination of national evaluation and monitoring processes in the early years sector; provision of effective initial and continuing education programmes for staff in early years services and initiatives to improve their working conditions. It also includes the development of advice and support for the implementation of the national practice frameworks (*Aistear* and *Síolta*) and better communication of the nature, value and importance of early childhood education in early years services to parents, primary schools and the wider society. This is a challenging agenda, but one which is being jointly addressed by the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs through the actions of a range of agencies.

The DES Inspectorate is committed to continuing to work in partnership with all key stakeholders to apply a child-centred, educational lens to the evaluation of state-funded early years provision and, in so doing, to progress our national quality agenda for early childhood care and education.

[1] Department of Education and Skills (2016), *A Guide to Early-Years Education-focused Inspections (EYEI) in Early-Years Services Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme*, Quality Framework for Early-Years Education-Focused Inspections in Early-Years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme.

1. INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

1.1 EARLY-YEARS EDUCATION-FOCUSED INSPECTION

Early-years Education-focused Inspection (EYEI) evaluates the quality of educational provision in early-years settings participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. This inspection model was developed by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) at the request of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Education and Skills in 2015 and was introduced in 2016. This report presents a review of the EYEI model after the first full year of implementation and covers the period April 2016 to June 2017, during which 867 inspections were completed.

1.2 AN ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST YEAR OF EYEI

This report also presents the composite findings from an analysis of inspection reports prepared by the DES Inspectorate in relation to the four areas of practice set out in the EYEI Quality Framework (DES, 2015). The EYEI framework was specifically developed to underpin the new inspection model for ECCE services and to provide insights regarding the strengths and challenges in early-years education practice nationally. The report draws on data from the responses of early years settings to inspection reports, from the outcomes of consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, and from the experiences of early years inspectors. The report draws conclusions regarding the relevance and effectiveness of the EYEI model in supporting and promoting the quality of early childhood education in early years services delivering the ECCE Programme of free pre-school education. Suggestions are also provided as to how future developments and improvements in the quality of early childhood education might be supported.

1.3 THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE) PROGRAMME

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme provides a free pre-school experience for children prior to starting primary school. This programme was introduced in 2010, by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), for children aged more than 3 years 2 months and less than 4 years 7 months on 01 September in the relevant pre-school year. In Budget 2016, this Programme was extended to allow children aged 3 years to access a free pre-school place until they commence primary school, with an upper age limit of participation set at 5 years and 6 months. This added an additional €85 million investment to the original annual Government expenditure of €170 million. Both the DCYA and the DES recognise the critical importance of high quality early education for children's development and for successful learning and progression.

1.4 EYEI IN THE CONTEXT OF INVESTMENT IN QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN EARLY YEARS PROVISION

Early-years Education-focused Inspection (EYEI) was introduced to complement a range of other measures to support the ongoing improvement of quality in early education. The national practice frameworks for early childhood education, *Aistear* and *Síolta*, commissioned by the DES, were developed between 2002 and 2009. *Aistear* (the curriculum framework) and *Síolta* (the quality framework) together provide a clear set of criteria and guidelines to inform capacity building in the early years sector. The frameworks also support practitioners to provide high quality, early learning experiences for children aged 0-6 years in Ireland irrespective of where the learning experiences are provided.

The introduction, in 2010, of the Free Pre-school in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, funded by DCYA, created a universal context in which these national practice frameworks in support of quality early education became particularly relevant. However, it was not until the budget of 2014[2] that resources could be made available for the delivery of a range of measures collectively known as the National Quality Agenda for the Early Years. This agenda provided resources for a range of measures including review of the statutory inspection system operated by TUSLA, establishment of a quality support service for early years services (now known as Better Start) and the establishment of a Learner Fund to support staff in early years services to improve their qualification profile in advance of the introduction of mandatory regulations in December 2016. It also provided for a range of continuing professional development (CPD) measures to support early years staff to update their skills and knowledge in core practice areas such as child protection and inclusion.

[2] https://www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=3019 accessed 24 November 2017

The agenda also included education-focused inspection (EYEI) as an essential element. In particular, it was recognised that the focus on process quality and inspection for improvement, embedded in the EYEI model, had the potential to develop the capacity of early years services and practitioners, participating in the ECCE Programme, to use the *Aistear* and *Síolta* frameworks to support self-evaluation and review processes that are integral to quality improvement in practice.

2. THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF EARLY YEARS EDUCATION-FOCUSED INSPECTION

2.1 THE PURPOSE OF EYEI

A programme of EYEI was commenced to ascertain the nature, range and appropriateness of the early educational experiences of children participating in the ECCE Programme and to contribute to capacity building in the delivery of high quality early education provision and practice.

The EYEI model is underpinned by a number of principles including:

- Early childhood is a significant and distinct time which must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right
- High quality educational experiences in early childhood contribute significantly to life-long learning success
- Children's well-being and holistic educational development should be supported in early childhood in accordance with their needs
- The role of the practitioner within early education settings is central
- Children should be active agents in their learning and development, and enabled to achieve their potential as competent, confident learners, through high quality interactions with their environment and early childhood practitioners
- Children's strengths, needs, opinions, interests and well-being are integral to the early education provided for them
- Play is central to the learning and development of young children
- Each child has his/her own set of experiences and a unique life story. The child's identity as an individual and as a member of a family and wider community is recognised
- The role of parents as children's primary educators is recognised and supported
- Education-focused inspections take cognisance of context factors related to the ECCE setting, including socio-economic circumstances
- The ongoing development of quality through co-professional dialogue between practitioners in early years settings and DES early years inspectors is promoted
- Education-focused inspections are conducted in accordance with the *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate*.[3]

A key objective of the DES Inspectorate is to develop the EYEI model based on research in early years education and in collaboration with practitioners, providers and early years experts.

[3] Department of Education and Skills (September 2015), *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate*.

2.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EYEI FRAMEWORK

Between 2013 and 2015, the DES Inspectorate conducted extensive research on best practice in early years education and care which influenced the development of the EYEI model. A draft inspection framework was developed and an inspection process designed.

The inspection framework addressed the following four areas of practice:

Each of these four areas was further elaborated to encompass a total of 20 learning outcomes (see Appendix 1) and a series of 'signposts for practice' was also developed to assist both inspectors and practitioners to come to a common understanding of how these outcomes might be identified and evaluated. The 'signposts' are neither comprehensive nor exclusive and during early consultation on the content of the framework it was considered that these might be added to over time as experience of implementation of the inspection framework grew.

The application of the inspection framework in practice was also detailed in a *Guide to Early Years Education Focused Inspection in Early Years Settings participating in the ECCE Programme*[4]. These processes drew upon the extensive experience across the DES Inspectorate, and within the Early Years Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills, of inspection for improvement in schools and other education settings.

[4] Department of Education and Sills (2016).

3. IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 RECRUITMENT AND TRIAL INSPECTION

In late 2015, a team of nine early years inspectors was recruited from among qualified, experienced and highly skilled practitioners in the early years sector.[5] This team was supplemented by a number of DES primary inspectors who had expertise and experience in early years education.

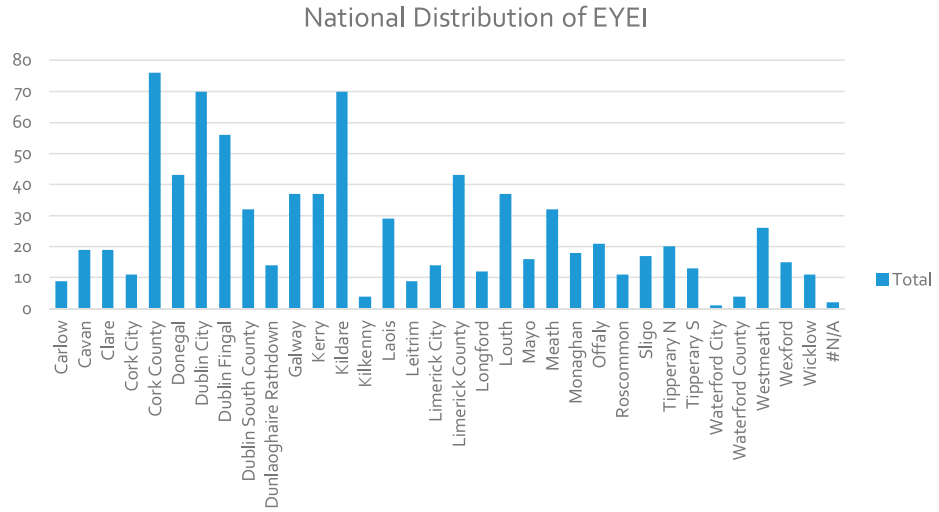
In order to test the relevance and effectiveness of the proposed EYEI model, trial inspections were held in 55 early years settings between December 2015 and March 2016. The settings selected for the trial were drawn from a pool of over 300 services that were identified on the basis of their geographical spread, size and curricular practice. Upon completion of the trial, an extensive consultation process was held with the Early Years sector. This commenced before the finalisation of the inspection framework used in the trial inspections; and it continued during and after the trial inspection period. The details of this consultation process and the findings are available in a published report[6]. As a result of the trial inspections and subsequent consultation, a number of amendments were made to the EYEI model. The most significant change was the introduction of a notice period. Whereas it was originally intended that EYEIs would be unannounced, it is now the case that, normally, an early years setting will receive prior notice, typically 48 hours. Notwithstanding this change, the DES Inspectorate reserves the right to conduct EYEIs without prior notice in a proportion of cases and where an inspection without notification is deemed necessary by the Inspectorate.[7] The final EYEI model can be reviewed in the Guide to EYEI.

3.2 FORMAL IMPLEMENTATION

The formal roll-out of EYEI commenced on 14 April 2016. In the first full year of operation (to 07 April 2017) over 650 Inspections were completed in a diverse range of early years settings nationally. Budget 2017 made a further resource allocation to the DES Inspectorate to allow for the appointment of additional early years inspectors between November 2016 and January 2017.

The total number of early years services eligible for EYEI in 2015/16 was 4178 and in 2016/17 was 4,226[8]. 867 EYEI were completed up to the end of June 2017, which means that approximately 20% of all eligible services received an EYEI in the first phase of implementation.

Figure 1: Geographical spread of Inspection



[5] The qualification requirement for an early years inspector is an honours degree in early childhood care and education plus a minimum of five years post qualification early years practice experience.

[6] Department of Education and Skills (2017) *Early Years Education-focused Inspections in Early Years Settings participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme: Report of a national consultation process*.

[7] The DES Inspectorate reserve the right to conduct unannounced inspection if circumstances warrant this.

[8] DCYA communication. May 2017.

Inspections have been conducted in every county in the country. All EYEI were notified within a 48-hour period. In two instances, inspection was either cancelled or rescheduled due to unforeseen circumstances. Almost all inspections were scheduled and proceeded as planned.

Coordination of inspection activity between the DES Early Years Education Inspectorate and the TUSLA Early Years Inspectorate has been very successful. Protocols have been put in place to ensure that as far as possible DES and TUSLA inspections in early years services will not coincide.

3.3 CONTEXT AND PROCESSES OF INSPECTION

In the main, all EYEIs were conducted in single pre-school sessions in an early years service. Where there was more than one pre-school session in the service, the selection of the session for inspection was usually at the discretion of the inspector in consultation with the service owner/manager. The procedure for inspection followed the processes detailed in the Guide to EYEI involving a short introductory meeting preceding the main observation and evidence gathering activity in the pre-school session and concluding with a post-evaluation feedback meeting with as many staff as were available. The evaluation statements and ratings were shared with all participants during the feedback meetings and an opportunity to share and discuss further information, relevant to the evaluation, was also provided.

3.4 PUBLICATION OF EYEI REPORTS

A draft written report of the inspection was sent to the owner/manager of each service within an average period of 90 days. The service was then provided with the opportunity to correct any factual errors in the report before a final version of the report was issued for a service response. Once the defined period of ten working days for service response had elapsed, the final report was published on the DES website and linked to the DCYA website. Where a service response was submitted, this was published with the final report. Of a total of 514 reports, published up to the end June 2017, 18.5% of settings provided a service response.

3.5. QUALITY ASSURANCE OF EYEI

The DES Inspectorate is committed to ensuring that its inspection processes in all educational settings – early years, primary, post-primary and centres for education – are of very good quality. The ultimate goal in this regard is to embed the use of quality assurance mechanisms in inspection work to ensure that evaluations meet the high standards articulated in the *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate*[9]. A range of procedures and requirements are in place to ensure that inspections are of very good quality. These include:

- Requirement for inspectors to work according to a code of practice[10]: The Code sets out four key principles that provide the standards that inform, guide and govern the Inspectorate's work:
    - A focus on learners
    - Development and improvement
    - Respectful engagement
    - Responsibility and accountability
- Quality frameworks[11] around which inspectors gather evidence and reflect before drawing conclusions and making their evaluative judgements. While inspectors use the frameworks flexibly to inform their work as they monitor and report on quality in schools and early-years settings, the frameworks nonetheless support consistency in evaluations
- Detailed published procedural guidance for every model of inspection
- An initial professional development programme for inspectors
- Continuing professional development (CPD) of inspectors in relation to inspection matters

[9] Department of Education and Skills (2015), *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate*.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Quality Framework for Early-Years Education-Focused Inspections in Early-Years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme (2016); *Looking at our School 2016: A Quality framework for primary schools*; *Looking at our School 2016: A quality framework for post-primary schools*.

- Ongoing evaluation by the Inspectorate of its procedures and protocols with a view to improvement and regular updating of inspection practice
- Asking stakeholders (teachers, principals, boards) for their views about school inspections through post-evaluation questionnaires (primary and post-primary)
- An editing and clearance procedure for all inspection reports
- An inspection review procedure[12] which provides a fair and transparent process to examine concerns raised about inspections.

The development and implementation of EYEI has followed these procedures with the exception of post-evaluation questionnaires in each early years service. This activity will be commenced when the EYEI model has been reviewed and finalised. The remaining procedures have been observed in the conduct of consultation with early years settings that have received an EYEI up to the end of June 2017. An online survey was provided in June 2017 for all services who had received an EYEI, to provide feedback on their experiences. In addition, the survey allowed stakeholders who had not received an EYEI, but who had read EYEI reports, to provide commentary. The data from this consultation is detailed in section five of this report.

4. COMPOSITE FINDINGS FROM INSPECTION

In this section, the composite findings from the first year of Early Years Education-focused inspection (EYEI) are explored through the analysis of evaluation statements and actions advised as set out in inspection reports published between April 2016 and June 2017. The data are presented in narrative format as follows:

1. The analysis of evaluation statements and actions advised in inspection reports are first described in terms of the insights they offer about the strengths and challenges in early years education practice.
2. This discussion is followed by a list of the most frequent actions advised contained in the EYEI reports.

4.1 CONTEXT OF THE DATA

The findings presented in inspection reports, published up to the end of June 2017, should be interpreted with a degree of care. Early Years Education Focused Inspection (EYEI) is an entirely new model of evaluation for the early years sector in Ireland and whilst the findings are based upon a valid sample of evaluation reports, implementation of the EYEI model is at a very early stage. Therefore, it is necessary to consider some related issues before any wider implications or general conclusions are drawn.

- Many of the evaluations in the first phase of EYEI were conducted in settings that had responded to a call for 'expressions of interest' in participating in the trial of the EYEI model. The 'early adopters' of the new inspection system may have been more prepared to meet the standards of the quality framework and, therefore, the findings in respect of these settings have the potential to be positively skewed on the quality continuum (see appendix 2).
- Each inspection report, whilst adhering to a common set of standards, principles and procedures, takes account of the unique and individual context of the early years setting. Similarly, the recommended actions are specifically designed to be authentic and to respond to the development needs of each service.
- Inspection for improvement is an approach to evaluation where the overall objective is not just accountability but stimulation of further quality improvement in practice. To achieve this goal, it is important that the findings of any EYEI are framed in such a way as to ensure that the practitioners in each setting are engaged, empowered and motivated to continue investing in quality improvement of their provision and practice. This will often mean that inspectors have to be selective in prioritising the actions they recommend to services so that practitioners feel encouraged and supported to undertake improvement actions. As the professional capacity within settings rises, the challenge provided by inspection will also change in response to the needs identified and the developing competence of staff within the settings. At this early stage of implementation a degree of caution is being taken in the presentation of actions advised and this will be reflected in the findings.

[12] Department of Education and Skills, *Procedure for Review of Inspections on Schools and Teachers under Section 13(9) of the Education Act 1998*.

4.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS BY AREA IN THE EYEI QUALITY FRAMEWORK[13]

Each published report for EYEI is presented in a standard format (see Appendix 3 for template). Under each area of quality, the early years service is provided with clear evaluation statements related to the outcomes specified in the framework for inspection (see Appendix 1 for outcome statements). The overall quality rating for each area is also detailed and, depending on the level of quality, actions advised are provided to support the service in future planning for quality improvement.

The following narrative presents the composite findings from analysis of evaluation statements and actions advised in EYEI reports completed up to the end of June 2017. Analysis is presented under the four areas of practice detailed in the EYEI Framework.

AREA 1: THE QUALITY OF CONTEXT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Strengths

This area of practice shows the most consistent level of positive findings. Almost all early years services inspected provide safe, warm and welcoming environments that offer a rich range of inviting learning experiences for children. There is strong evidence of very positive relationships between the staff in services and the children and their families. This is perhaps not surprising given that the context of practice has been the subject of statutory regulation since 1997.

Challenges

Challenges for practice in this area include the provision of rich learning opportunities in the outdoor environments of services. Additionally, support for the development of children's sense of identity and belonging could be improved through a range of strategies to ensure that all children and families are fully represented.

AREA 2: THE QUALITY OF PROCESSES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Strengths

Where positive findings were observed in relation to this area of practice they usually identified a strong coherence between curriculum development and observation and understanding of children's interests and needs. Commendable examples include: using strategies to regularly engage with parents and families to ensure the relevance of planning for children's learning; providing rich language experiences that respect the child's mother tongue and emerging second language; provision of playful, exploratory learning experiences that promote children's use of mathematical and scientific skills, for example, persistence and problem solving.

Challenges

The highest incidence of less than satisfactory practice occurs in this area of practice. It is noteworthy that there are a high number of settings that fall into the 'good' category which is described as provision that is '*…effective in meeting the needs of children but with some aspects to be developed*'. Challenges have been identified across all domains of education practice taking place in early years settings such as the degree to which curricula and programmes of learning are informed by *Aistear (the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework)*; the way assessment of learning strategies and processes are used; how assessment for learning (AfL) is employed to inform the next steps in children's learning; and the pedagogical strategies used by early years practitioners to support and extend children's learning.[14]

[13] See Appendix for detail.

[14] Department of Education and Skills (2016), *A Guide to Early-Years Education-focused Inspections in Early-Years Services Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme*, pp. 12-15.

AREA 3: THE QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS.

Strengths

Uniquely, the framework for EYEI pays very specific attention in Area 3 to the experiences and achievements of children in early years settings. Evidence to support the evaluation statements and the ratings in this area are drawn from close observation of children and their work processes and products. The majority of reports indicate a satisfactory level of practice in this area. It is evident that children are enjoying their early learning experiences, have formed friendships, and are being provided with the opportunity to explore and 'make meaning' of the world around them.

Challenges

There is a close correlation between the evaluation of practice in this area and that observed in relation to Area 2 above. Challenges arising in relation to the quality of children's achievements and experiences are frequently related to limitations in the range of learning experiences offered and the teaching and learning strategies used by practitioners. For example, most practitioners struggle in achieving a balance between adult-initiated and directed activity and child-initiated activity. Too much adult-directed activity prevents children exercising choice, being creative and learning important social skills such as self-regulation. Equally, the absence of skilful adult intervention in scaffolding children's learning can result in children becoming frustrated or bored.

AREA 4: THE QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

Strengths

The outcome statements in this domain focus on processes that support good communication within settings as well as with external contacts, cycles of review, planning and evaluation and partnership with families and other professionals. Positive examples of practice in this area include strong organisational provision for the support and supervision of staff and engagement in ongoing professional activities such as self-evaluation and review. Inspirational leadership has been identified in some settings and this is evidenced through high levels of ongoing organisational review, professional reflection, outreach to the wider community and to other professionals, and promoting concrete, productive partnership with parents.

Challenges

As with Area 2, a greater number of 'fair' and 'good' evaluation judgements were recorded in this domain. Processes to support review of practice were underdeveloped in a majority of services and did not involve all staff. Partnership with parents was often at a low level with little evidence of involvement beyond celebratory events. Relationships with primary schools had either not been established or were not working effectively to support children's transitions. In services that were categorised as fair under Area 4 (Management and Leadership for Learning) some staff struggled with working conditions that prevented them from engaging in professional activities such as planning and evaluation.

4.3 ANALYSIS OF ACTIONS ADVISED

Each published EYEI report contains a wealth of observation and analysis in relation to the practice transacted in the early years service. The published reports can be accessed on the DES website at the following address https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Early-Years-Education-Reports/ Analysis of all the actions advised by inspectors under each of the four areas of practice in the ***EYEI Framework for Inspection***, as discussed above, reveals areas where there is potential for improvement across early years services.

AREA 1: QUALITY OF CONTEXT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The most frequently identified aspects of practice about which inspectors made recommendations for improvement included:

- The need for settings to provide a balanced programme of activities that were clearly shared (visually) with children and families.
- The need to ensure that there were strategies in place to support children's transitions from one activity to another within the daily routine.
- Increasing the use of positive supportive interactions that respect the agency of children
- Assignment of children to one significant adult who has the main responsibility for monitoring, planning for and reviewing his/her experiences and progress within the service (the key person approach)
- Ensuring that the diverse community of children, staff and families in the service are represented both visually and practically within the learning environment.
- Making sure that meal times are enjoyable and support children's social learning experiences.

AREA 2: QUALITY OF PROCESSES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The most frequently identified aspects of practice about which inspectors made recommendations for improvement included:

- Curriculum planning and review – incorporating *Aistear* themes, children's interests, lessons from implementation
- Assessing children's learning – using observation
- Improving the indoor and outdoor environment to provide more natural, open-ended resources and experiences for children
- Providing a better balance between adult-led and child-initiated activity
- Fostering creativity – for example, reducing the use of workbooks and templates.

AREA 3: QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The most frequently identified aspects of practice about which inspectors made recommendations for improvement included:

- Ensuring that the diversity of backgrounds of the children, families and wider community in which the service operates is represented in the environment and programme offered to children in the service
- Reducing the presence of overly formalised, structured and prescriptive activities within the service and providing for more open-ended, challenging and creative experiences that will support the development of a wider range of key learning dispositions in children
- Providing more opportunities for children to reflect on their own learning
- Support for language development – for example, English as an Additional Language (EAL), mathematical language and a wide range of communication skills.
- Promoting positive learning dispositions – for example, problem solving, empathy and resilience.

AREA 4: QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

The most frequently identified aspects of practice about which inspectors made recommendations for improvement included:

- Promoting and supporting the development of self-evaluation/service evaluation practices
- Allocation of time and resources to allow staff to engage in professional activities such as collaborative team work and support and supervision of staff
- Fostering concrete strategies to enable and promote meaningful partnership with parents in the learning and development of their child
- Developing relationships with primary schools and teachers to support children's smooth transitions to primary school
- Leadership development
- Accessing external support – for example, information or mentoring.

4.4 RESPONDING TO EDUCATION-FOCUSED INSPECTION

The evidence emerging from the EYEI evaluations suggests that many early years services are challenged to deliver curricular programmes and to use the principles and goals of *Aistear* and *Síolta* to inform planning and review processes. Despite the use of these practice frameworks being a condition in the grant agreement for the ECCE Programme since 2011, there has been no coherent provision of support for early years services on their use of the Frameworks to guide and plan early educational experiences for young children. The need for this to be addressed is often highlighted to inspectors by early years staff and has also been reported in writing to the DES as part of the service responses to the EYEI report. Further evidence of the strong need for support for educational practice in the early years sector is also provided in the comments received from the EYEI consultation survey (see section 5 of this report).

The introduction of education-focused inspection has facilitated the evaluation of practice in early years settings in relation to how children's early learning is supported and promoted. The EYEIs have served to highlight the deficit in supports for early years services to meet the education criteria in the EYEI Framework for Inspection. However, many early years services have made very significant efforts to overcome this lack of support and have achieved very commendable standards in promoting learning and educational practices through their own dedication, energy and resources. Although only a small proportion of services submitted a service response during this first year of EYEI (approximately 20%), those that have done so make clear the positive attitude and commitment of their service to ongoing improvement in the quality of provision and practice of early education. It is to be hoped that as supports are developed and deployed in the early years sector, these positive service responses will gradually increase, providing much valuable and informative guidance for staff, parents and wider stakeholder groups.

4.5 EXEMPLARY PROVISION AND PRACTICE

In concluding this section on the findings of inspection reports published in the first year of implementation of EYEI, it is worth highlighting that, notwithstanding the often challenging context for practice in the early education settings visited by DES Early Years Inspectors, many very positive examples of exemplary practice have been identified across the country. It is especially gratifying to observe practice which exemplifies effective early years practices and approaches that embed and consolidate the children's key learning dispositions such as problem-solving, resilience, self-motivation and empathy. An example of such practice, drawn from the observation records of one DES early years inspector, is included below, highlighting how practice in an excellent early years service supports and reinforces the agency of the children in their pre-school.

The snapshot of practice set out below has been anonymized.

Preschool Exemplar

The Approach

In this service children have complete agency over their learning activities within an amazingly flexible child-centred routine and a well-resourced indoor and outdoor environment. This provides meaningful, challenging, purposeful, yet playful, learning activities. The children direct their own play themes based on their interests. The development of a maternity ward began, based on a recent experience a child had – and the children returned to continue or extend their own self-directed play themes throughout the morning.

The children take responsibility for their own transitions and manage their own care needs and the snack-time routine – they put tablecloths, flowers and plates on the tables. They co-operate and discuss how many plates are needed for each table. They sort their own lunches and respectfully wait until everyone is ready before starting to eat. The transitions are minimal and the practitioners are partners with the children throughout the programme.

The practitioners are deliberate, at times, with their questioning and prompts, and when they use praise and encouragement, it is authentic, relevant and purposefully used to acknowledge effort and achievement or to motivate children to stay on task. They do not interrupt the children when they are engaged and deeply involved in their play but are always close by to offer more resources, suggestions or just reflect back to the children their thoughts when working out something.

One example of this was when a group of children were trying to make sense of a natural phenomenon that occurred outdoors. The children were digging out gravel from a gravel patch and filling up a wheelbarrow when they became preoccupied with working out how water was filling up the hole even though they kept taking gravel out.

They discussed various reasons for the phenomenon using their 'I wonder why' questions. The children got distracted by measuring how deep the water was against their boots before returning to solving the problem. All the while, the practitioner was close by, skilfully reflecting back to them their thoughts and feelings on this phenomenon, while showing a keen interest in their endeavours.

4.6 CONCLUSION

These data present a unique early insight into the way in which the application of an inspection for improvement model, focusing on educational process quality, and the wider context of the education system have begun to impact on the early years sector in Ireland. Although state-funded, universal, free early education has been established since 2010, this is the first time that the quality of educational experiences supported through the ECCE Programme have been evaluated. The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 of the Department of Education and Skills sets out a clear vision for the Irish education and training system '*to become the best in Europe over the next decade*.' [15] Early Years education experiences are an important dimension of this vision.

The DES Inspectorate is committed to supporting learners at all stages of their learning journey and the partnership with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which has primary responsibility for provision of the ECCE Programme, will be a critical element in achieving this goal. The data gathered to inform this report provide insight into the context within which early years education services are being delivered and the scope and nature of children's experiences. The evidence has been gathered at a very early stage in the implementation of this new inspection initiative and previous and subsequent sections of the report highlight the care that should be taken in interpreting the insights they offer. However, despite any disclaimers, the availability of the data is an achievement and is testimony to the strength of commitment of the DES and DCYA to continue to pursue a National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care.

These data demonstrate the importance of establishing evaluation systems for early years services that address the quality of education provision they offer. Despite a challenging environment for the establishment of EYEI, the early years sector has embraced this new initiative and has facilitated the application of an education-focused lens on their provision and practice. The main finding from the first year of operation is one of reassurance that good efforts are being made to provide high quality early learning experiences through the ECCE Programme. There is also significant evidence that much work remains to be done if this essential State investment in early childhood education is to have a real and sustained impact on the quality of provision.

5. CONSULTATION AND REVIEW

In this section, the data collected through consultation and review of the EYEI model are presented including:

- Responses to a consultation survey from practitioners in early years services that had experienced an education-focussed inspection and other stakeholder groups and individuals.
- Feedback from early years inspectors
- Written submission from the Children's Rights Alliance.

5.1 REVIEW AFTER ONE YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION

When EYEIs were introduced in April 2016, the DES Inspectorate committed to reviewing the implementation of the EYEI model following one full year of implementation. So, in May 2017, a review and consultation process commenced. It included a number of strands:

- Meeting of stakeholders – a public meeting of stakeholders and partners was held in the Clock Tower of the Department of Education and Skills on 26 May 2017. At this meeting the progress on the implementation of the EYEI model was shared and discussed with an audience of organisations and individuals interested in the development of the quality of Early Years provision. Presentations of early analysis of inspection reports were shared and participants were invited to provide feedback
- Online survey – an online survey was launched designed to provide an opportunity for feedback on EYEI for both those who had experienced an EYEI and those who had not (see Appendix 4 for details of the survey content). 636 valid responses to the survey were received. The responses divided almost equally into responses from staff in early years services who had experienced an EYEI and those who had an interest in EYEI but no experience of this form of inspection
- Reviews with early years inspectors – Early years inspectors were asked to provide written comment on their experience of conducting EYEIs. They were asked to highlight examples of excellent practice they had observed on inspection and make suggestions for amendment or development of the EYEI model

[15] https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/Department-of-Education-and-Skills-Strategy-Statement-2016-2019.pdf accessed 27/11/2017

- Written submission – stakeholder organisations were invited to submit their comments on EYEI for consideration as part of the review process – a single written submission was received from The Children's Right Alliance. This organisation represents over one hundred members and the details of their recommendations are included in this report

5.2 FINDINGS OF CONSULTATION SURVEY

Each participant in the consultation survey was asked a series of questions depending on whether they had experienced an Early Years Education-focused inspection (EYEI) or not. Of particular relevance to the review of the EYEI Model are the perspectives of staff in early years settings.

5.2.1 NOTIFIED INSPECTION

The provision for a 48-hour notification of inspection was added to the EYEI model after the initial trial and consultation in 2016. Eighty-six percent of respondents to the survey of practitioners affirm that this continues to be a welcome change.

In the open-ended comments from practitioners there was reference to this period of notice being extended further, for example, '*in line with that given to primary schools*'. However there was also a clear welcome for the respectful intention of the notice period in recognising the challenging context of early years service delivery:

> '*I believe advance notice is very helpful to ensure the manager is not committed to something else on the day'*
> *(Owner/Manager, Early Years Service)*

The welcome for notice expressed by practitioners was also noted by early years inspectors, especially in relation to the opportunity it afforded to prepare children for the arrival of another adult in the early years service. However, some inspectors observed that where services attempted to use the notice period to make significant changes to their provision and/or practice, this usually acted to disrupt the normal flow of the service and therefore resulted in a 'poorer' quality of practice than might have otherwise been the case.

5.2.2 POST INSPECTION MEETING

The majority (93%) of respondents reported that they had attended the post-inspection feedback meeting and that they had found this to be a very valuable experience. This strong endorsement of the feedback meeting is reflected in the words of a practitioner:

> *I felt very supported at the feedback meeting with the actions advised that were communicated. The recommendations were clearly explained in detail at the time. From the advice of the inspector on the day we were able to improve our personal learning plan for each child.*
> *(Staff member, Early Years Service)*

The strengths-based approach of EYEI was strongly endorsed with many respondents welcoming the recognition and validation of their professional practice in respect of early education provision:

> *'I was so pleased, for once, to be acknowledged by a fellow professional on the positive and different work and approach we adopt with our children'.*
> *(Staff member, Early Years Service)*

Other comments from practitioners suggested that this meeting could be improved if there was less time pressure on staff who are not paid to attend such meetings and if all staff were able to attend. The following comment reflected the frustration of many early years practitioners who believe that under-resourcing of their practice is a significant barrier to the delivery of a professional, high-quality, early education experience.

'Actions advised must be adequately resourced in terms of increased capital investment to make physical improvements in settings particularly in relation to outdoor environments. There also needs to be provision for substantial non-contact time so that teams can meet to discuss practice and engage in individual and group reflection and also to document practice. There should be time allocated to engage with external agencies e.g. inspection teams, Better Start, etc. Advised actions do not occur in a vacuum and the realities of the current dysfunctional system needs to be taken into account when writing the reports.'
(Owner, Early Years Service)

Early years inspectors also reported that finding sufficient time to prepare for the post-evaluation feedback meeting and opportunity for sharing their findings with all relevant staff in the service were particular challenges. They confirmed that many staff are not available due to part-time work contracts and other commitments and they felt that this limited the potential impact of the professional dialogue at the heart of the EYEI model.

5.2.3 PUBLICATION PROCESSES FOR EARLY YEARS EDUCATION FOCUSED INSPECTION REPORTS

The publication of EYEI reports commenced on 30 June 2016 and, by the end June 2017, over 500 reports have been published on the DES website which is also linked to the DCYA website. The arrangements for the preparation of EYEI reports for publication are detailed in *Publication of School Inspection Reports: Guidelines*[16]. It is positive to note that despite the fact that education-focused inspections and the reports arising from such evaluations are entirely new in the early years sector, the majority of respondents commented that their experience of the publication process was positive.

Despite the positive response of services to their experience of the editorial and publication processes for EYEI reports, many did not take advantage of the opportunity to provide a ***Service Response*** to the inspection report for publication with the final version of their EYEI report. This indicates that the DES Inspectorate should take action, as commented on by many respondents, to familiarise practitioners and owner/managers in the early years services with the positive opportunity available to them, through the service response, to highlight their plans for quality improvement in their service:

'I am unclear as to exactly what the inspectors expect and want from these visits. I would like a course or training in the area of these inspections. These take place around the country but not in Clare where I am based. I would like to feel more prepared and know what to expect'.
(Owner/Manager, Early Years Service)

5.2.4 VALUE OF EYEI REPORTS

For those respondents to the survey who had not had any experience of being inspected, a series of questions on the value of the published EYEI reports was posed. In the main, respondents indicated that they believed the published reports to be very valuable. 83% reported that the presentation and layout of the reports are clear; 88% thought the language easy to understand with 75% agreeing that reports represented a fair, balanced and accurate picture of the early years service. (This lower figure may be explained by the fact that some settings had not received their inspection report at the time of the survey due to the fact that reports are not issued when services are closed for the summer.) In general, respondents reported that reading their inspection report had a positive impact on both their personal and professional practice and the quality of the service they provided.

5.3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF OPEN COMMENTS

Open ended comments were invited at the conclusion of the survey in relation to two questions:

- What suggestions do you have for supports for implementation of actions advised in EYEI reports?
- Any other comments?

[16] Department of Education and Skills (2015).

All 636 respondents took up the opportunity to add a comment in each category. It is important to note that many of the open-ended comments included a welcome for the introduction of education-focused inspection and stated that the experience had been positive and affirming. In particular, it was noted by many that for the first time in their careers this type of inspection valued their work as educators.

The open comments can be further categorised under three broad themes, as follows:

1. Provision of support for engagement in quality improvement
2. Reducing the burden of evaluation and monitoring
3. Issues associated with implementation of EYEI.

5.3.1 PROVISION OF SUPPORT FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Many of the comments under this theme identified the challenging working conditions of staff in early years services as a main source of frustration and difficulty in taking action on quality improvement. The following comment is reflective of many:

> *'It is essential that Early Years Teachers have 'teacher research time' i.e. non-contact hours in order to raise and maintain the quality of teaching, assessment and planning. This cannot be done in the current model without some loss for the provider, manager, the setting or all three. Yes, we can assess and document throughout the session and I do allow time for planning, discussion and assessment out of school hours, but this is not the professional approach that is needed. Teachers, whether they be junior infant, primary, or post-primary teachers are all recognised as professionals by society and state and while it is welcome recognition that the DES are now supporting us, on the ground, through inspection/co-professional dialogue, there needs to be mandatory paid 'research time' for all teachers'.*
> *(Early Years Professional).*

Another strong theme to emerge was the need for continuing professional development (CPD) as part of capacity building for staff: The following is representative of many comments:

> *'Ongoing training for early years practitioners is required - Refresher courses for continuing professional development - More supports for owner managers, for example, with administration work and with management training.'*
> *(Staff, Early Years Service)*

Allied to the issue of CPD, is the desire to see follow up after inspection from support services who could support quality improvement through the provision of mentoring, advisory visits, information and resources:

> *'Inspections are worthwhile in identifying areas that need improvement but the missing link in ensuring that these areas are worked on and practice is enhanced is the follow up and mentoring piece. It can become another tick the box exercise that focuses too much on the box that indicates good/very good etc.'*
> *(Staff, Early Years Service)*

The issue of improving funding for the early years sector was a recurring theme in the feedback; however, diverse views were expressed regarding how any additional funding might be used. Some comments stressed the need to fund infrastructural changes or improvements to the environments in order to deliver quality provision:

> *'More financial support to implement actions advised - Increased funding for each child to allow for the extra printing, folders, photograph costs etc.'*
> *(Manager, Early Years Service)*

However, the majority cited funding as a critical issue in relation to improving the working conditions for staff:

> *'Funded training and on-going mentoring, when a setting needs help or would like extra support. Recognition for settings willing to engage in further training; and financial rewards for settings that raise their standards and provide quality provision. Funding also needs to be provided for 52 weeks of the year. Primary school teachers are not expected to sign on every time the school is on holidays'. (*
> *Owner/Manager, Early Years Service)*

5.3.2 REDUCING THE BURDEN OF EVALUATION AND MONITORING

The second theme emerging from the analysis of open comments was the strong desire for a national policy initiative to streamline evaluation and monitoring activity in the early years sector. The two key issues related to the coordination of current inspection regimes which it was felt would reduce the stress and administrative burden on staff in early years services:

> *'I found the EYEI visit to be a rewarding and validating experience. For the first time our work as Early Years Educators was actually looked at in context by inspectors that were experienced in the field. It would be of great value to all Early Years Educators firstly if we did not get 3 layers of inspections, however. Between TUSLA, EYEI and POBAL, the documentation and paperwork and worry and hassle is huge. If the inspection reports could be collated in such a way that all three were done in one inspection it would be great. We need a break here. The workforce is not happy right now and we are all joining unions. We are all at breaking point and we feel we are not allowed to do our jobs correctly without the thought of an inspection looming. And all three look for different things which is most confusing ...'*
> *(Owner/Manager, Early Years Service)*

Perhaps somewhat ironically, the second issue to emerge under this heading calls for the extension of EYEI to all early years services for children aged 0-6:

> *'Align the inspections with regulation to help embed change in practice and put a meaningful focus on quality. Extend inspections to cover all age groups. Why should quality for the 3-6 age group be defined and not for the under 3s? Not a very equitable process currently.'*
> (Early Years Practitioner)

5.3.3 ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH IMPLEMENTATION OF EYEI.

The third category of responses, that were identifiable from the thematic analysis of the open comments, related directly to the implementation of the EYEI model. The most common theme related to access to inspection reports. For some it was the delay between the carrying out of the EYEI and the service receiving the report and for others it was being able to locate their report on the DES website. In relation to the first matter, the frequency of this observation may be related to the fact that the survey was conducted between the end of May and September and many early years services are closed during the summer months. In line with the procedures for publication, EY inspection reports are not processed through the different stages or published during the holiday period. Irrespective of this however, it is a matter of concern that early years services feel that undue delay in receiving their written EYEI report is impacting on their capacity to move forward with plans for quality improvement:

> *'I would like to see reports accessed more easily. At present it is difficult to go through reports to find one that you are looking for. Perhaps a simple solution would be in alphabetical order. I also felt there was a long delay in receiving the draft report and also a long delay with the report going live. I feel the whole process is invaluable and very supportive and have said this many times at meetings with other professionals in the sector'.*
> (Manager, Early Years Service)

On a somewhat related issue, a small number of respondents called for the first report of an EYEI to be issued but not published. This would allow the service to learn about the expectations of EYEI and set plans in place to address these before a published report was provided:

> *'I feel that the first visit should be announced and conducted as an advisory inspection only and not published and a subsequent follow-up one unannounced. This would inform services as to what is required and it would be up to services to then implement changes'.*

A variety of comments asked that attention be paid to the way in which EYEI reports were written, with a number asking for more practical advice regarding the implementation of the actions advised. Some comments expressed concern regarding how consistent the evaluation judgements in reports were and a very small group of respondents expressed the opinion that the EYEI Framework did not respect the Montessori approach to early years provision. While these collective concerns were expressed by a very small number of respondents, it is nonetheless important to take forward these messages into the future plans for quality assuring the EYEI model.

5.3.4 CONCLUSION

The open comments from the consultation survey provide a rich source of information to facilitate review and, where necessary, revision of the EYEI model and processes. They also provide clear evidence of the need for sustained investment in the early years sector to support the provision of high-quality early education and to promote continuous improvement.

5.4 WRITTEN SUBMISSION

The Children's Right Alliance prepared a detailed submission in response to the request for feedback on the first year of implementation of EYEI. Many of the comments in this submission echo those of the respondents to the consultation survey and those of early years inspectors. The DES Inspectorate welcomes this contribution to the review of EYEI and has taken these recommendations on board for consideration. The Inspectorate has also shared the recommendations with other agencies where responsibility for implementation involves a wider range of stakeholders.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 REVIEWING AND IMPROVING THE RELEVANCE OF THE EYEI MODEL

The first year of implementation of the EYEI model facilitated the in-depth testing in practice of the framework for inspection, the quality continuum, and the protocols and processes for implementation. The feedback from early years practitioners, early years inspectors, and a wide range of other stakeholders has been very valuable and informative. In the main, the overwhelming message has been one of welcome for the introduction of education focused inspection in early years settings. There is also a clear endorsement of the relevance and effectiveness of the EYEI model. This is a very positive achievement given the challenging context into which this new inspection model was launched. Suggestions for further development focus on expanding the remit of EYEI and for greater coordination of inspection activities across all relevant agencies. Promoting greater transparency in evaluation and monitoring activity, through the provision of clear information on all aspects of EYEI, is an immediate required action. Developing mechanisms to ensure greater coordination and consistency of approaches across both inspection and quality support services should also be prioritised.

6.2 THE NATURE OF EARLY EDUCATIONAL PROVISION AND PRACTICE IN THE ECCE PROGRAMME

It is evident from the findings of inspection that while there is much cause for optimism in relation to the nature of practice in early education, there is still much work to be done in developing the capacity of the early years sector in Ireland, to deliver high quality early education experiences for children aged from 3 years until they enrol in primary school.

EYEI has identified that in 867, out of 4,227 (2016/17) settings contracted to deliver State funded early education, many practitioners have not received basic training in *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the two national practice guides underpinning quality early educational experience. This deficit in both initial and continuing professional education is further exacerbated by the difficulties experienced in relation to essential skills that support educational practice. These include observation and assessment of children's learning and progress, curriculum design and implementation and mediation of the curriculum for diverse groups of children. The pedagogical strategies required to support children's development of foundational learning dispositions and skills such as,oral language, metacognition, self-regulation, empathy and problem solving are also highlighted in EYEI reports. The findings of the consultation survey reinforce the validity of the inspection findings. The first theme emerging from the consultation in relation to the support required for quality improvement in early education practice, focuses on professional education and training. Furthermore, consultation responses highlight the importance of providing dedicated time as part of the normal working day for early years practitioners to engage in these critical pedagogical practices.

The introduction of arrangements for systematic quality assurance of the early educational experience of young children, by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills, is a landmark in the development of the Irish education system. For the first time, the educational experiences and learning and growth opportunities provided for our youngest learners have been recorded and published in inspection reports that are rooted in

evidence and which promote an evaluation for improvement approach within early years services. And, there is much to be positive about with plentiful evidence of respectful collaboration between adults and children in the development and delivery of learning experiences. However, a recurring theme is the need to develop further the capacity of early years practitioners to implement pedagogy that is holistic, inclusive and grounded in the image of the competent, confident child. Practitioners' responses also highlight the challenges of providing for the diverse population of young children that now typically attend most early years settings. There is a call for additional supports for the inclusion of children with diverse needs and for mentoring to strengthen the capacity to provide programmes of learning that respect children's agency.

EYEI has also revealed that there are many challenges facing early years services in relation to general governance and more specifically the quality of leadership for learning. Many services are small in scale and often isolated and unconnected to other early years services or support networks. Staff working conditions are not ideal with temporary or part-time work being a regular feature of provision. A strong theme in the consultation feedback is the need to value educational practices such as planning, review, staff support and supervision; and for practitioners to be recognised as essential and resourced appropriately. Leadership is a critical factor in ensuring that quality improvement happens. Deficits in this capacity in early years services must be addressed if quality improvement is to become a reality in practice.

There is a significant, shared challenge for early years services and primary schools to build relationships and develop protocols that support successful transitions from pre-schools to primary schools. Many of the actions advised in inspection reports encourage early years services to take the initiative in communicating with teachers and principals in their local school(s) to support smooth transitions for children; to promote greater coherence in curriculum and programme planning; and to reduce or resist pressures for overly formal and didactic practice in either of these early education settings.

Consultation feedback highlights that many early years practitioners believe that primary schools, parents and wider society do not fully appreciate the significant progress that the early years sector has made in the initial and continuing professional development of staff and in the wider professionalisation of the sector. This gap in understanding between the sectors can sometimes present difficulties for early years staff in providing high quality experiences for children through their work. EYEI reports also recognise the vital importance of primary schools playing their part in supporting successful transitions from the pre-school into the infant classroom. Therefore, there is an onus on primary schools to work to promote supportive relationships with early years settings in the catchment area of the school. From a policy perspective, framing the young child's transition journey as a seamless and well-supported pathway will contribute significantly to building common understanding among practitioners and teachers and is likely to enhance the quality of the young child's early learning experience and educational transition.

The publication of this Review of EYEI is likely to foster very useful discussion and debate among professionals in both sectors. It is hoped that this dialogue will support a wider recognition of the professional expertise that early years practitioners bring to their work and the value that an excellent start in pre-school can bring for later phases of education and for the life opportunities of all children. It may also help to highlight the common goals of both early years settings and primary schools and help to identify opportunities and initiatives for cross-sectoral working and cooperation between professionals.

Consultation feedback highlights that many early years practitioners believe that they are not regarded as educational professionals by primary schools and/or parents and wider society and that this presents difficulties for them in achieving high quality experiences for children in this aspect of their work.

6.3 FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EYEI MODEL

This review, following the first year of EYEIs, fulfils the DES commitment to provide opportunity for the development and refinement of the EYEI model. As analysis of the data in this report confirms that the EYEI model, including the framework for inspection, has proven to be a robust set of outcome indicators against which to evaluate the practice in early years services. This endorsement allows for the confirmation of the model as the basis upon which future EYEI will be conducted.

Having said this, it is understood that the context of practice in early years services is changing. There is the potential for larger numbers and a wider age span of children, variety of governance systems, changing staffing patterns, and the introduction of a comprehensive access and inclusion model (AIM) for children with disabilities. This may warrant a review of the signposts for practice which accompany the outcome statements in the framework for inspection. Such a review would also support and reinforce the transparency and consistency of inspection practices. This does not represent a change to the EYEI model as it has always been stated that these signposts for practice are neither prescriptive nor comprehensive. The signposts may be developed and expanded to provide clarity in relation to the way in which inspection will be conducted against the quality framework.

The next step in developing the EYEI model is to extend implementation to include the full range of early years services. To date, inspection activity has concentrated on small-scale services that generally operate one or two pre-school sessions per day. With the expansion of the ECCE Programme, to allow children from age 3 to participate for up to two full years in State funded preschool, the size of services may grow to accommodate the wider age range of children. Processes for the conduct of EYEI in large-scale services will be detailed and included in a revised guide to EYEI. The procedures will help to provide opportunities to develop and acknowledge collegial and collaborative practices for staff and promote the sense of team working that is so important in the routines and culture of any educational provision.

It is recognised that the processes leading to the publication of EYEI reports has been challenging for some of the early years services. This might be resolved through the provision of clearer guidance on these processes in an amended Guide to EYEI. The development of additional protocols for inspectors, to support practitioners to engage in these processes, may be of assistance. These might include: development of more detailed guidelines; preparation of exemplars; and use of podcasts that explain the editorial and publication processes in more detail.

Follow-through inspections have not taken place in the first year of implementation of the EYEI model and this would be a clear requirement for the future testing and development of the Inspectorate's quality assurance arrangements in the early years sector.

In conclusion, the EYEI model does not require major adjustment as a result of this review. However, the DES Inspectorate, as a learning organisation, is fully committed to reflection, review, research and policy analysis that will result in positive changes to its own procedures for evaluation and support. In this regard, the DES Inspectorate welcomes contributions, ideas and insights that will facilitate the further development of the EYEI model and other quality-focussed initiatives.

6.4 THE CONTEXT FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

A rich dataset on the quality of education practice in early years services has been developed as a result of the implementation of EYEI. Analysis of the findings from inspection has shown that there are particular strengths and challenges across the four areas of practice outlined in the EYEI quality framework. This data can now be used to support early years practitioners and service leaders to improve the quality of early years provision and practice. Further coordination and alignment between the outcomes of inspection and the provision of support services for early years settings has also been called for by stakeholders in the early years sector in the course of the consultation processes for EYEI. In addition, the need to establish clear governance arrangements, across the relevant agencies, to allow for sharing of more detailed data has been strongly recommended.

The consultation has revealed that many practitioners are of the opinion that they have not had sufficient training in the application in practice of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, and *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. This is consistent with the findings of EYEI which also highlight many challenges for practitioners in this regard. The reality of diversely qualified staff, employed on part-time contracts is also a continuing challenge for engaging in quality improvement activity. High turnover of staff contributes to instability in both the workforce employed in services and in the operation of services themselves. It is important that the evidence gathered from EYEI, and the conclusions and recommendations that arise, are communicated effectively to policy makers with the relevant authority and scope to take action that will lead to a more stable context for quality improvement.

In this first year of operation it has become apparent that, in addition to the challenges being faced by early years practitioners engaging with the core messages of the inspection framework, parents and other professionals working with this age range of children may also need access to further information and support. The value of play-based learning, the concept of school readiness, and the importance of respecting and including the voice of the child are all issues that attract diverse and at times conflicting opinion. For example, many early years services report that parents have expectations of 'academic' activities such as reading, writing and learning numbers in preparation for primary school. This runs counter to a great body of research and expert advice about age-appropriate learning and development for young children. There is a need for the core messages of the EYEI framework for inspection to be clearly mediated to all stakeholders so that shared values, beliefs about practice and common understanding can be developed about the nature of appropriate, high quality early education pedagogy among all adults involved in supporting children's early learning.

6.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The commencement of early years education-focused inspection in pre-school services funded by the State in April 2016, has directed a spotlight on the quality of educational provision in early years services delivering the free pre-school Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme The publication and implementation of the framework for inspection has raised the profile of both the value and the core characteristics of quality in early learning experiences and provision. The recruitment of highly qualified and experienced early years inspectors has broadened the expertise of the DES Inspectorate, and the preparation and publication of inspection reports has identified and presented clear challenges for all stakeholders in the development and delivery of quality early childhood education.

In simple terms, Early-Years Education-focused Inspection has worked: it has strengthened the commitment to providing every child with the best start on their education journey; it has valued and validated the professionalism and commitment of the early years workforce; and it has provided robust, authentic information to parents and policy makers alike of what has been achieved and what still needs to be addressed in relation to the delivery of high quality early education.

It is clear that the early years sector is complex, diverse and facing rapid change in both the conditions and contexts of practice. After the first year of operation, a strong message of welcome has emerged from many of the diverse stakeholders who have communicated endorsement for the positive developmental impact of EYEI. While there are still many challenges for practitioners and for services committed to high-quality practice, it is evident that progress is underway. This progress can be assisted by providing professional, evidence-informed reports and advice on the quality in practice in early years services to all stakeholders including parents, practitioners and policy makers. The DES Inspectorate is committed to continuing to work in partnership with all key stakeholders to apply a child-centred, educational lens in the evaluation of State funded early years provision.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY-YEARS EDUCATION-FOCUSED INSPECTIONS IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS PARTICIPATING IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE) PROGRAMME

Area	Outcome
Area 1 - Quality of context to support children's learning and development	1. The atmosphere and organisation of the setting nurture children's learning and development and support the inclusion of all children
	2. Relationships are responsive, respectful and reciprocal
	3. Children's sense of identity and belonging is nurtured
Area 2 – Quality of processes to support children's learning and development	*4.* Provision is informed by *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*
	5. Information about the children's development informs next steps in learning
	6. High quality interactions with children are facilitated
	7. The environment and resources support children's learning and development
	8. Play is central to children's learning and development
	9. Emergent language, literacy and numeracy skills are fostered
	10. Provision for children's learning and development is closely aligned to their interests and developing capabilities
	11. Children learn in an inclusive environment

APPENDIX

Area	Outcome
Area 3 – Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements	12. Children demonstrate engagement and enjoyment in their learning and a positive sense of well-being
	13. Children experience achievement and are developing through their learning experiences
	14. Children are developing a sense of identity and belonging and personal and social skills to support their learning and development
	15. Children communicate their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others in a variety of ways
	16. Children make sense of their world by interacting with others and the environment through playing, investigating and questioning
Area 4 - Quality of management and leadership for learning	17. Planning, review and evaluation are informed by *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*
	18. Management in the setting provides for a high quality learning and development experience for children
	19. Clear two-way channels of communication are fostered between the early years setting, parents, families and children
	20. Transitions into, from and within the setting are managed effectively to support children's learning and development

APPENDIX 2: QUALITY CONTINUUM FOR EARLY YEARS EDUCATION-FOCUSED INSPECTION

Table 1: The Quality Continuum for Early Years Education-focused Inspection.

Excellent	Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of children.
Very good	Provision that is very good is highly effective in meeting the needs of children.
Good	Provision that is good is effective in meeting the needs of children but with some aspects to be developed.
Fair	Provision that is fair requires practice to be improved to meet the needs of children.
Poor	Provision that is poor is inadequate and requires significant improvement to meet the needs of children.

APPENDIX 3: EARLY YEARS EDUCATION-FOCUSED INSPECTION REPORT TEMPLATE

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Early-Years Education-focused Inspection Report

Setting Name

Setting ID

Setting address line 1

Setting address line 2

Setting address line 3

Date of inspection: date month year

AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

APPENDIX

CONTEXT OF SETTING

AREA 1

QUALITY OF CONTEXT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- The quality of the context to support the children's learning and development is …..

Actions advised

AREA 2

QUALITY OF PROCESSES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- The quality of the processes to support the children's learning and development is…..

Actions advised

AREA 3

QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- The quality of the children's learning experiences and achievements is ….

Actions advised

AREA 4

QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

- The quality of management and leadership for learning is …..

Action advised

CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT THE ACTIONS ADVISED ABOVE

- The capacity of the service to implement the actions advised above is ….

APPENDIX

Summary of Overall Inspection Findings

Area	Quality Level
Quality of context to support children's learning and development	
Quality of processes to support children's learning and development	
Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements	
Quality of management and leadership for learning	

Language used in Early-Years Education-focused Inspection reports

Excellent	Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of children.
Very good	Provision that is very good is highly effective in meeting the needs of children.
Good	Provision that is good is effective in meeting the needs of children but with some aspects to be developed.
Fair	Provision that is fair requires practice to be improved to meet the needs of children.
Poor	Provision that is poor is inadequate and requires significant improvement to meet the needs of children.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 4: CONSULTATION SURVEY QUESTIONS

Early years Education-focused Inspections Survey: ***<u>Question Set Respondent Category 1:</u>*** Early-Years practitioner/ owner manager in an early-years service that has had an EYEI, and who attended the post-inspection feedback meeting, submitted a Setting Response, and read a number of published EYEI reports	
The Inspection Process	*Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree*
1.	The advance notification process was satisfactory
2.	The inspection process took into account the context in which the service was operating
3.	I had an opportunity to discuss with the inspector(s) the quality of education provision in the setting
4.	The feedback meeting with the inspector(s) after the inspection was helpful
5.	At the feedback meeting, the key strengths of the setting were acknowledged
6.	At the feedback meeting, any actions advised were clearly explained
7.	At the feedback meeting, the quality level for each area of practice was clearly communicated.
8.	At the feedback meeting, the inspector(s) provided helpful guidance about how education provision in the setting could be improved
9.	At the feedback meeting, the Factual Verification process was clearly explained
10.	At the feedback meeting, the Setting Response process was clearly explained
11.	My experience of engaging in the Factual Verification process was positive
12.	My experience of engaging in the Setting Response process was positive
The Inspection Report	*Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree*
13.	The style of presentation of the inspection report was clear and helpful
14.	The language of the inspection report was clear and easy to understand
15.	The written inspection report presents a fair and balanced account of the aspects of the service evaluated during the inspection
16.	The written inspection report is helpful in developing practice in the service
17.	The Early Years Education-focused Inspection experience has helped me to reflect on and develop my personal professional practice
18.	Based on the advice contained in the inspection report, I have made one or more changes to improve education provision in the service
19.	The inspection report has contributed in a practical way to planning for improvement in my service
20.	Overall, I was satisfied with the inspection process

APPENDIX

EYEI reports in general	*Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree*
21.	EYEI reports are clear
22.	EYEI reports are interesting
23.	EYEI reports contain concrete examples of strengths in education provision in early-years settings
24.	The actions advised in EYEI reports are generally practical, reasonable and clearly stated
25.	EYEI reports are useful in highlighting important issues of quality in early years education provision
26.	EYEI reports have given me some useful ideas about how to improve and/or develop education provision in my early years service
27.	**(YES/NO)**I have implemented in my own service some ideas from the EYEI reports I have read
28.	**(YES/NO)**Do you wish to comment on what you would like to see in terms of supports for implementing the actions advised in EYEI reports?
29.	Supports for the implementation of the actions advised in EYEI reports that you would like to see **(max. 700 characters)**
30.	**(YES/NO)**Do you wish to make any comments about the future development of Early Years Education-focused Inspections?
31.	Further comments **(max. 700 characters)**

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Early years Education-focused Inspections Survey: ***<u>Question Set Respondent Category 2:</u>*** Early-Years practitioner/ owner manager in an early-years service that did not experience an EYEI	
EYEI reports in general	*Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree*
1.	EYEI reports are clear
2.	EYEI reports are interesting
3.	EYEI reports contain concrete examples of strengths in education provision in early-years settings
4.	The actions advised in EYEI reports are generally practical, reasonable and clearly stated
5.	EYEI reports are useful in highlighting important issues of quality in early years education provision
6.	EYEI reports have given me some useful ideas about how to improve and/or develop education provision in my early years service
7.	**(YES/NO)**I have implemented in my own service some ideas from the EYEI reports I have read
8.	**(YES/NO)**Do you wish to comment on what you would like to see in terms of supports for implementing the actions advised in EYEI reports?
9.	Supports for the implementation of the actions advised in EYEI reports that you would like to see **(max. 700 characters)**
10.	**(YES/NO)**Do you wish to make any comments about the future development of Early Years Education-focused Inspections?
11.	Further comments**(max. 700 characters)**

Early years Education-focused Inspections Survey: ***<u>Question Set Respondent Category 3:</u>*** Parent of a child availing of a free pre-school place	
EYEI reports in general	*Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree*
1.	EYEI reports are clear
2.	EYEI reports are interesting
3.	EYEI reports contain concrete examples of strengths in education provision in early-years settings
4.	The actions advised in EYEI reports are generally practical, reasonable and clearly stated
5.	EYEI reports are useful in highlighting important issues of quality in early years education provision
6.	**(YES/NO)**Do you wish to make any comments about the future development of Early Years Education-focused Inspections?
7.	Further comments **(max. 700 characters)**

APPENDIX

Early years Education-focused Inspections Survey: ***<u>Question Set Respondent Category 4:</u>*** An Academic in the area of Early-Years education	
EYEI reports in general	*Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree*
1.	EYEI reports are clear
2.	EYEI reports are interesting
3.	EYEI reports contain concrete examples of strengths in education provision in early-years settings
4.	The actions advised in EYEI reports are generally practical, reasonable and clearly stated
5.	EYEI reports are useful in highlighting important issues of quality in early years education provision
6.	**(YES/NO)**Do you wish to comment on what you would like to see in terms of supports for implementing the actions advised in EYEI reports?
7.	Supports for the implementation of the actions advised in EYEI reports that you would like to see **(max. 700 characters)**
8.	**(YES/NO)**Do you wish to make any comments about the future development of Early Years Education-focused Inspections?
9.	Further comments **(max. 700 characters)**

Early years Education-focused Inspections Survey: ***<u>Question Set Respondent Category 6:</u>*** **Other**	
EYEI reports in general	*Strongly Agree – Agree – Neutral – Disagree – Strongly Disagree*
1.	EYEI reports are clear
2.	EYEI reports are interesting
3.	EYEI reports contain concrete examples of strengths in education provision in early-years settings
4.	The actions advised in EYEI reports are generally practical, reasonable and clearly stated
5.	EYEI reports are useful in highlighting important issues of quality in early years education provision
6.	**(YES/NO)**Do you wish to make any comments about the future development of Early Years Education-focused Inspections?
7.	Further comments **(max. 700 characters)**

NOTES

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