

síolta

The National Quality Framework
for Early Childhood Education

Final Report on the Development and Implementation of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme

Early Years Education Policy Unit



DECEMBER 2013

síolta

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SECTION ONE:
Development and Early Implementation

1.1 Introduction

This report provides an overview of the development and field testing of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP). It outlines the timeline, key roles and activities and draws upon evaluation data gathered at various stages of the action research and development process. It briefly describes the processes, tools, materials and the professional roles that have been developed to support implementation of the Síolta QAP. It concludes with consideration of the context within which the Síolta QAP will operate into the future and makes a set of recommendations to connect this research and development phase for Síolta and the Síolta QAP with national and international policy developments related to the improvement of the quality of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland.

1.2 Development of the Síolta Quality Framework

In 2002, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established by the then Department of Education and Science under the management of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra and the Dublin Institute of Technology. The key remit of the CECDE was to manage and support a range of research and development activities in support of capacity building for quality in early childhood education provision in Ireland. A programme of research and development incorporating consultation with all stakeholders in the ECCE sector concluded in 2006 with the publication of the Síolta Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. This comprised 12 Principles of Quality, 16 Standards and 75 Components of Quality. Collectively, they represent a national consensus on the essential indicators of quality in practice in all settings where children aged birth to six years are present. (See Appendix 1 for further detail on the content of the Síolta Quality Framework). In 2006, the CECDE published four manuals, setting out how the Framework applied to different settings, i.e., the infant classrooms in primary schools, childminding, sessional services and full/part time day-care. The CECDE also developed a range of workshop materials to enable a range of stakeholder organisations such as the (VCOs) and City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) to host information sessions to familiarise practitioners with the content. The CECDE also published a set of Research Digests which analysed and presented research evidence and practical advice on changing practice for each of the 16 Síolta Standards.

The published material is available on www.siolta.ie.

1.3 Objectives of Síolta

In developing a National Quality Framework, it was intended that:

These guidelines will have to be adaptable for use in a wide range and variety of settings in which integrated care and education is provided to children from birth to six. These settings include relatively informal childminding arrangements, pre-schools, playgroups, crèches and nurseries all of which can be organised as private enterprises or as community-based initiatives and which may or may not be in receipt of State funding. They also include the infant classes of primary schools where the guidelines will be relevant to initiatives such as Whole School Evaluation and School Development Planning. (CECDE, 2001:4)

This initial ambition was further refined during the research and development stage of Síolta, culminating in the conclusion that:

Síolta has relevance for the work of a wide range of ECCE practitioners irrespective of the context of their practice. Furthermore, it can provide valuable information for other professionals whose work requires them to interact with young children and their families. It is also intended that the information should be of value to parents and families, and be of support to them in their role as the primary educators of their children. It is hoped that Síolta will also be valuable at many levels in practice situations. For example, as:

- A support for individual professional practice and development
- A focus for team work and team development
- A tool for management, strategic planning and policy development
- A common base for the interactions of a varied team of professionals.

It will also support formal and informal assessment processes, or indeed simply serve to promote common understandings amongst the broad range of adults who influence the early experiences of young children. (CECDE, 2006:3)

The informal assessment processes generally encompass the range of actions outlined in the bullets above and are usually internal to ECCE settings involving the staff, children and parents. Formal assessment processes are usually associated with the application of an external perspective on quality which leads to some form of recognition of achievement against agreed benchmarks.

1.4 Development of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP)

By the end of 2008, the CECDE had developed the Síolta QAP, once again through extensive research and consultation processes. It comprised a series of clearly defined steps including self assessment, action planning, quality development and evidence collection, portfolio building and validation. Specialist roles of Mentor and Validator were identified where the Mentor would support the early years service through the Síolta QAP and the Validator would verify the self assessed ratings for the service across the indicators of quality. (See Appendix 1 for a further explanation of the Síolta QAP).

The development of the Síolta QAP was designed to facilitate the use of the indicators of quality in Síolta for both internal self evaluation and external assessment. The processes developed to support implementation of Síolta were constructed to ensure that evaluation and monitoring, whether internal or external, were guided by the same goals; to develop common understanding about the nature of quality in practice and promote positive co-operative relationships that would empower all stakeholders to deliver high quality experiences for children. By insisting on breaking with traditional expectations around external assessment, i.e., that the external assessment holds more weight than the internal, and re-conceptualising the relationship as one of guidance and facilitation it was intended that participation in the Síolta QAP would yield sustained self-motivated engagement with the Síolta Standards and Components. In other words, the goal of external support and assessment in the Síolta QAP should be to increase intrinsic motivation of staff in the ECCE setting to a point where the external support is no longer necessary and the Validator's summative assessment report is sought only as an affirmation of the competence of continuous internal quality improvement processes. The Síolta Quality Spiral (see Figure 1) is the visual expression of this goal. It describes the concept that achieving quality in practice is a product of reflection, research in action and pedagogical documentation.

Figure 1: Síolta Quality Improvement Spiral



These have been described as characteristics of higher professional functioning in ECCE settings (Formosino, 2012) and have their theoretical roots in transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) and experiential and emancipatory learning theory in the style of eminent educationalists and philosophers such as John Dewey, Jurgen Habermas, and Paolo Freire. Processes in the Síolta QAP should themselves mentor the ECCE practitioner through a learning journey that results in self awareness, critical reflection and ultimately insight and transformed practice. Using Senninger’s Learning Zone Model to conceptualise the role of mentoring and support, (see Figure 2), these processes begin by helping practitioners to identify their comfort zone, what they are doing well at the present, to ask critical questions informed by the Síolta Standards and Components and move, through engagement with new information, ideas and practice into the learning zone. The role of the expert advice and support, in the form of the Síolta Mentor is to prevent this experience pushing them into the panic zone where learning and development is impossible.

Figure 2: Senninger’s Learning Zone



1.5 Síolta Quality Assurance Programme Field Test

With the development phase completed, the CECDE closed in November 2008. Implementation of Síolta became the responsibility of the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills.

In the implementation of the Síolta QAP field test, the Early Years Education Policy Unit sought partnerships with organisations with expertise in the delivery and support of quality ECCE services. These organisations included Voluntary Childcare Organisations (VCOs) and Early Intervention Programmes (PEIP) co-funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and the Government.

The implementation model envisaged organisations providing key support staff, who met specified qualifying criteria, for the implementation of Síolta and facilitating their attendance at induction and CPD training. The cost of providing these staff was borne by the participating organisations within their own resources; however, most were in receipt of some level of funding from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The Early Years Education Policy Unit undertook to cover the costs for the development and delivery of the Mentor induction programme and CPD training, development of materials, tools and processes for the Síolta QAP, evaluation research and preparation of a final report.

1.6 Recruitment of Síolta Mentors

The Early Years Education Policy Unit developed a role profile with accompanying qualification and skills, knowledge and experience criteria to support the identification and selection of staff for the role of Síolta Mentor. The profile specified a bachelor degree in early childhood care and education (or equivalent) and at least five years experience of delivering an early childhood programme in a centre based setting. Desirable skills and experience included leadership, working with adult learners and excellent communication skills.

In 2008 and 2009, the three PEIP sites (Youngballymun, Preparing for Life and CDI Tallaght) each recruited a Síolta Mentor to work with settings in their areas. In September 2009, the VCOs were asked to nominate staff who met the minimum experience and qualification criteria to take up the role of Síolta Mentor. Additional Síolta Mentors were drawn from the staff of the Daughters of Charity, the National College of Ireland Early Learning Initiative and High/Scope Ireland. A total of 24 individuals were nominated and accepted as suitable candidates for the role of Síolta Mentor across the following organisations:

- Barnardos
- Border Counties Childhood Network
- Childminding Ireland
- Daughters of Charity
- High/Scope Ireland
- Irish Steiner Waldorf Kindergarten Association
- Irish Pre-school Play Association *
- National Children's Nurseries Association*
- National College of Ireland Early Learning Initiative
- PEIP sites

* These two organisations amalgamated in 2011 to become Early Childhood Ireland

All of the Mentors continued to report to their own line managers within their employing organisation.

1.7 Induction of Síolta Mentors

The first Síolta Mentor induction programme was a 4-day course held in March 2009. It had been organised primarily for the Mentors who would be working on the PEIP sites but the VCOs were invited to send along staff as observers, as at that stage, it was being suggested that they would have a future role in the roll-out of Síolta.

The main group of Síolta Mentors participated in the induction programme held in November 2009. This began with a 4-day introduction course which covered the following:

- Introduction to the Síolta Framework – Principles, Standards and Components
- Introduction to the stages and processes of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme
- Introduction to the role of the Síolta Mentor
- Familiarisation with tools, resources and processes associated with the Síolta QAP (e.g., Self Assessment Tool).

1.8 Continuing Professional Development Programme

This initial induction course was further supplemented by a regular programme of continuing professional development (CPD) to provide opportunities for the sharing of learning, resources and experiences among Síolta Mentors. The Early Years Education Policy Unit organised and delivered the content for these sessions which took place on the following dates:

- | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| → 18 February 2010 | → 10 February 2011 | → 3 May 2012 |
| → 13 May 2010 | → 26 May 2011 | → 12 October 2012 |
| → 16 September 2010 | → 29 September 2011 | → 20 March 2013 |

It was agreed with the implementing bodies that after March 2013, further CPD days would be organised by the VCOs with input as required by the Early Years Education Policy Unit.

1.9 Recruitment of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Settings and Commencement of the Field Work

The time frame for the recruitment of ECCE settings into the Síolta QAP field test mirrored that of the availability of Mentors. Therefore, the first settings recruited were those identified by Preparing for Life in Darndale in 2009. These were followed by those in Youngballymun, with the bulk of settings coming on board in early 2010 following the induction of the main cohort of Mentors. Each organisation undertook the recruitment of settings according to their own capacity to contact and inform prospective participants. However, they were asked to prioritise settings that were most in need of support towards quality improvement. This latter decision was informed by the fact that while the intention of the field test was to trial the Síolta QAP materials and processes, the availability of expert advice and guidance should be deployed where it would make the most impact on the quality of experiences of children.

By March 2010, a total of 134 ECCE settings had confirmed their willingness to participate in the field test. These settings were drawn from diverse backgrounds including full day-care, sessional and childminding services. They also represented both private for profit, community and voluntary and school based ECCE provision in both rural and urban locations.

1.10 Tracking Implementation of the Field Test

The Early Years Education Policy Unit designed a Síolta Implementation Tracking System which was agreed with the VCOs in Q2 2010. Its purpose was to collect qualitative and quantitative information on services' progress through the Síolta QAP. The agreed reporting dates were as follows:

Progress Report	Reporting Period	Deadline for Submission to Early Years Education Policy Unit
01/2010	Period ending 30th June	31st July 2010
02/2010	Period ending 30th September	31st October 2010
03/2010	Period ending 31st December	31st January 2011
01/2011	Period ending 31st March	30th April 2011
02/2011	Period ending 30th June	31st July 2011

The national evaluation of the Síolta QAP field test commenced in Q2 2011 and concluded in December 2011. Given that input was required from Síolta Mentors and services for the national evaluation, the requirement to provide tracking reports was temporarily discontinued.

In July 2012, a scaled down version of the tracking template was used to monitor progress until the conclusion of the field test in June 2013.

1.11 Co-ordination with Implementing Bodies

As previously described, Síolta Mentors were employed and reported directly to line managers within their own parent organisation. The Early Years Education Policy Unit held regular meetings with these line managers as part of the co-ordination of this relationship. A total of eight meetings took place over the course of the field test.

1.12 Síolta Validation: Development of Materials and Processes

While all stages of the Síolta QAP were identified prior to the closure of the CECDE, tools and materials to support the completion of the final validation stage were not fully developed. It was rationalised that completion of these elements would not prevent commencement of the field testing and that there would be time to complete this part of the QAP before it was required by participating services. This would also allow for the consultation with stakeholders that characterised the development of the rest of the Síolta Framework and QAP.

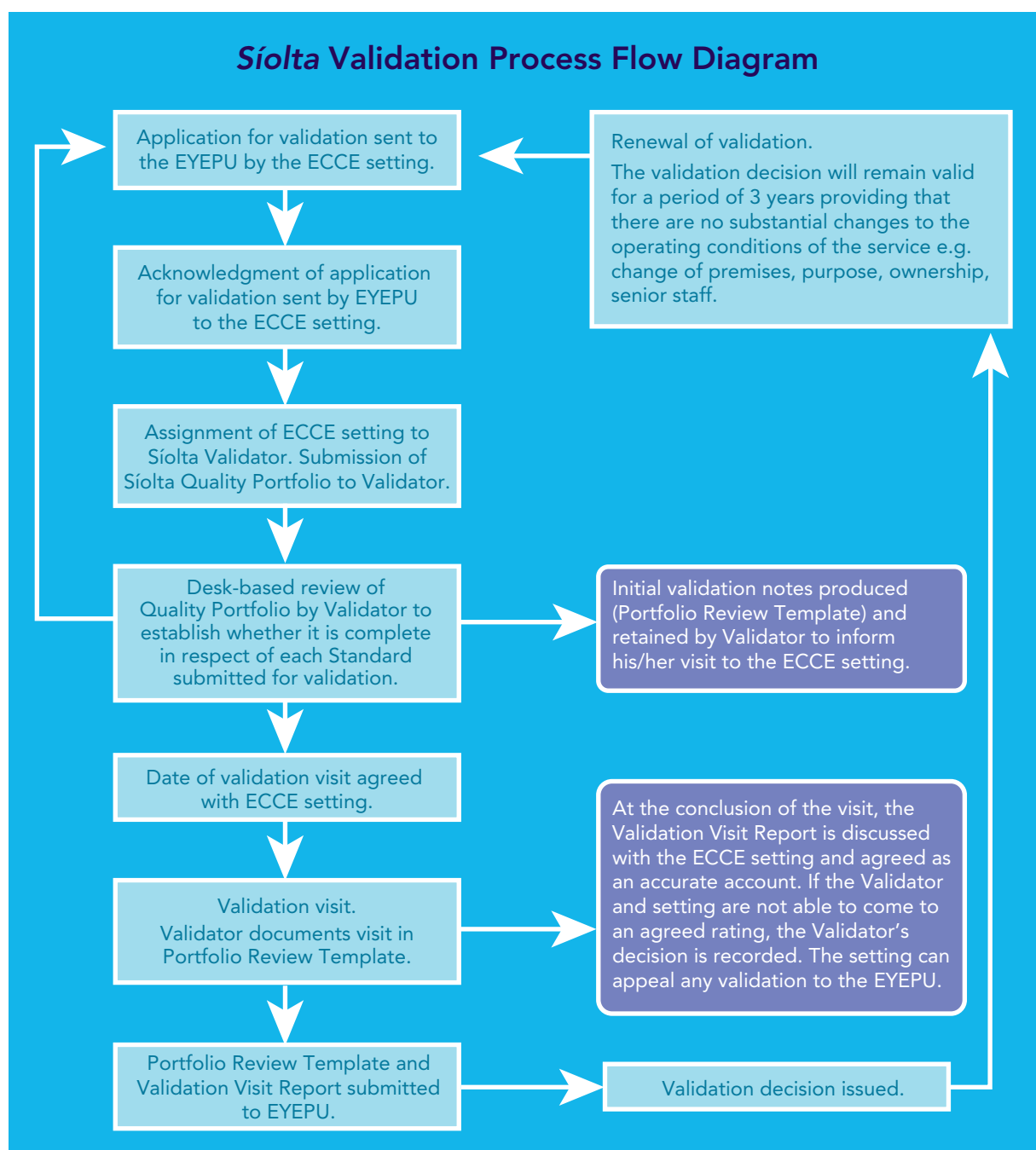
The validation stage of the QAP invites an external perspective to review the internal evaluation, quality improvement and documentation that has been completed by staff and other relevant stakeholders in the ECCE setting. In the spirit of the Síolta QAP, this external perspective is characterised as a 'critical friend' who seeks to validate the work of the ECCE setting and where this is not possible, to offer constructive criticism to allow the setting to accommodate the external perspective into the next steps in their quality improvement journey. The key focus of consultation towards the development of the Validation materials and process was to ensure that the tools and materials developed to support validation promoted openness and transparency as essential characteristics. (For further information see the Síolta Validation Manual).

A consultation process was carried out in March 2011 to complete the development of the validation tools and processes necessary for the implementation of the Síolta QAP.

1.13 Recruitment and Induction of Validators

The role of the Validator in the Síolta QAP must be carried out by a suitably qualified and experienced person who has also completed training in the Síolta QAP. In the context of the field test, it was identified that timelines would not allow for Validators to be recruited outside the ranks of the existing Mentors as the training required would be too lengthy. Therefore, expressions of interest in being prepared to take on the role of Síolta Validator were sought from the existing Síolta Mentors through their managing organisations. 16 Mentors indicated their interest and were invited to a two day induction programme which took place on 14th and 21st February 2012 and which focused on the validation process. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Síolta Validation Process Flow Diagram



1.14 Síolta Validation: Processes

The first service to go through the full validation process was Moatview Early Education Centre, Darndale, Dublin. The validation visit was undertaken on 21 June 2012. By the conclusion of the field test in June 2013, 47 services had been through the full validation process. An additional 9 services who had engaged partially with the QAP (i.e., not on all 16 Standards) had received feedback. Validation of settings participating in the Síolta QAP field test continued to be carried out until the end of September 2013 – a total of 57 settings were fully or partially validated. While at first glance, the proportion of services achieving full validation appears low, it should be recalled that many services were recruited into the field test based upon the fact that they were facing many challenges in relation to the quality of their practice. Another factor which may have affected the capacity to complete the QAP to validation was the introduction of the Free Pre-school Year Scheme in 2009/10 which introduced qualification requirements of staff as a contractual obligation for funding from DCYA. The survey of services who did not complete to validation, which is included later in this report does note that the need to achieve accredited qualifications did influence the capacity to complete the Síolta QAP. Additionally, some services, particularly those recruited within the Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes, were participating in multiple interventions and this again diluted their capacity to complete to validation. It is positive to note that many settings, who did not complete within the time limitations of the Síolta QAP field test, continued to engage with the materials and processes and will complete the full QAP.

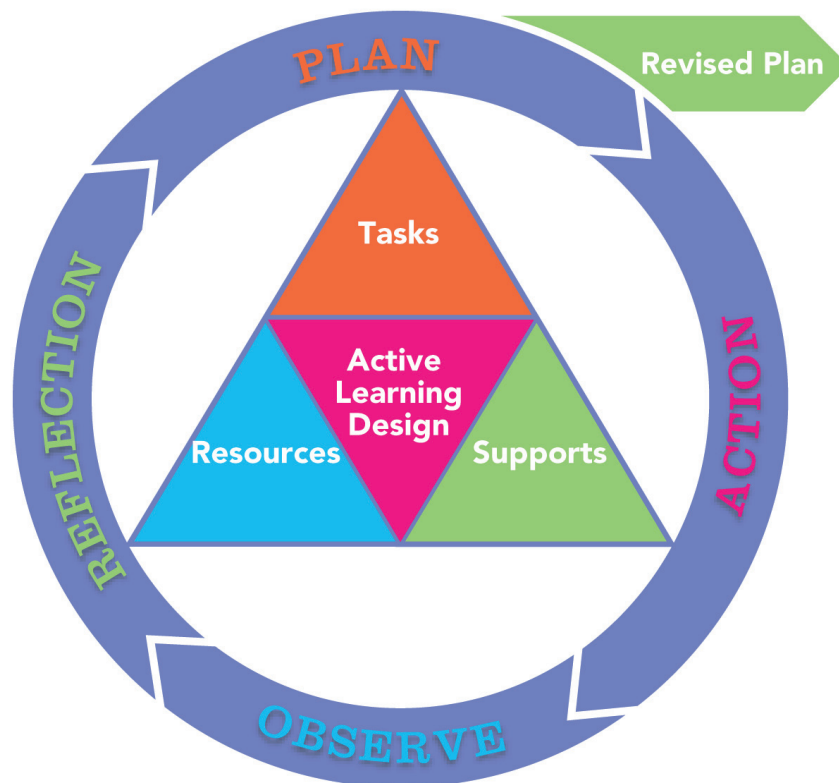
SECTION TWO:
Evaluation and Monitoring

This section reports on a range of data from evaluation exercises conducted as part of the Síolta QAP field test.

2.1 National Evaluation of the Síolta QAP Field Test

A key characteristic of the field test of the Síolta QAP was that it would support the opportunity for an action research approach (see Figure 4) to underpin the research and development process. This meant that regular review of processes and materials would be undertaken on both an informal and formal basis. Informal review was facilitated through the continuing professional development days for the Síolta Mentors, meetings with the managing organisations and the Síolta tracking instrument. In early 2011, it was judged that enough time had elapsed since the commencement of the field test to allow for a more objective external evaluation. Following an open tender procedure, Goodbody Economic Consultants were appointed in April 2011 to undertake an evaluation of the initial implementation of the Síolta QAP. The evaluation was designed to test the methodology used for the implementation of the Síolta QAP and to test the materials developed for its implementation.

Figure 4: Active Learning to Action Research (ALAR Model) adapted from Zuber-Skerritt (1995)¹



¹ Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1995), "Models for action research", in Pinchen, S. and Passfield, R. (Eds), *Moving on: Creative Applications of Action Learning and Action Research*, ALARPM Association, Brisbane, pp. 2-29.

The following summarises the main research activities undertaken by Goodbody Economic Consultants:

- Desk-based research began in April 2011
- Workshop with Síolta Mentors held in May 2011
- Postal survey of participating services issued in June 2011 – response rate 62%
- 7 case studies conducted in June and July 2011
- Electronic survey of Síolta Mentors issued in July 2011 – response rate 95%
- Experiment re inter-rater reliability and internal consistency conducted between September and November 2011.

Goodbody Economic Consultants submitted a draft evaluation report to the Department of Education and Skills on 21 October 2011 and presented the draft findings on 22 November 2011 to the organisations and early years services that had been directly involved in the Síolta QAP field test. The final evaluation report was completed in December 2011. The presentation of the findings to the wider early years sector was held on 29 February 2012. The main findings of the report are summarised below.

2.1.1 Key messages from the Goodbody report

Diversity of approaches

Despite the structured nature of the Síolta QAP, the evaluation showed that, in supporting services settings through the QAP process, Mentors adopted different approaches ranging from very directional and hands on to semi-directional, semi-supportive. The different approaches adopted were to a large extent influenced by the level of Mentor resources made available, e.g., number of weekly hours available to support settings and geographical area covered.

Extent to which quality improvement has taken place

Quality improvement activities were reported across all settings. However, as with the implementation strategies, the participating settings reported differing experiences which reflected the diverse capacity to engage with the Síolta quality assurance materials and processes. For example, some settings needed a lot of support to develop their understanding of quality and to develop basic concepts and skills associated with the QAP while others reported significant progress in the implementation of quality improvement actions. The extent to which settings have been able to benefit from the QAP process has been influenced by the levels of support and guidance that Síolta Mentors have been able to deliver.

Several factors were identified which both enabled and impeded the progression of settings through the QAP process. In addition to intensive Mentor support, factors included capacity, motivation and commitment of staff, availability of supports to staff and availability of managerial staff to support the process. Impeding factors included time required to dedicate to the process, interpretation of Síolta guidance, open-ended nature of Síolta and lack of buy-in from some staff.

Effectiveness of support guidance and materials

ECCE settings and their Mentors made extensive use of the Síolta support guidance. Where settings experienced difficulties with the language used in the Síolta manuals, increased Mentor support was required. In some cases this was experienced as inhibiting settings capability to work independently through the process.

Síolta principles, standards and components

The content validity of Síolta was tested as part of this implementation process. In the main, there was a high level of support among Mentors and ECCE settings in terms of the relevance of the contents of the Síolta Framework. However, there was some frustration expressed by staff in ECCE settings due to perceived repetition across the Components. It was suggested that this could be avoided by a consolidation of some Components without affecting quality improvement outcomes.

Síolta QAP: Structure

The researchers identified that Mentors adopted various methods to support the implementation of the QAP. This can be partly attributed to the field test nature of Síolta implementation, the lack of prescription in the support documentation regarding Mentor/setting interaction and the relative complexity of the actions/activities involved at each stage. It was suggested that a more detailed description of the programme would be beneficial and would support a common approach to the Mentor's interaction with settings.

Further guidance is required in terms of how baseline assessments are to be completed. Researchers found that some ECCE settings spent a lot of time working through baseline self assessment on all Síolta Components (75) before progressing to any action planning for quality improvement. Other Mentors skipped the baseline assessment step and moved straight to action plans and quality improvement work. The researchers suggested that ECCE settings would benefit by completing the QAP process on a Standard by Standard approach.

Self Assessment Tool

The research process included a test of the reliability of the Síolta Self Assessment Tool. (See Appendix 2 for details of the Self Assessment Tool and rating scale). Analysis of baseline assessments of settings participating in the field test was encouraging in respect of the level of consistency associated with the ratings completed by the settings. However, an experiment to establish inter-rater reliability was less encouraging due to modest inter-rater agreement. The researchers suggest that this may be attributed to the lack of training and experience of the Mentors in the use of the Self Assessment Tool. Recommendations for future roll out of Síolta include intensive Mentor training where a common view on the level of quality associated with each rating can be agreed. Also, consideration should be given to increasing the rating scale to five levels thus reducing the tendency to favour level 3 rating.

Mediation through implementing bodies

The implementation of the Síolta QAP was mediated through a range of different organisations which had the potential to reduce the level of control over the nature and practices of implementation, e.g., Mentors from VCOs were nominated by their organisations on the basis of the prescribed qualification and experience criteria but were not interviewed for the posts. The researchers concluded that while Mentors may have been influenced in their approach to implementing the Síolta QAP by their experiences working within their parent organisations, it is not considered likely that an open recruitment process would have resulted in different outcomes. More intensive training would ensure a common understanding of the Framework and QAP contents.

Mentoring model

A key issue to address in the context of any future roll-out of Síolta is the appropriateness of the Mentor role. The researchers considered that mentoring is an essential feature of the Síolta QAP as it encourages the settings to engage in the process of quality development and develop the core skills necessary to ensure that the capacity and commitment for sustained quality improvement is developed and embedded in the ECCE setting. Any alternative approach would involve a more prescriptive model of quality assurance (e.g., based upon checklists). This would potentially give ECCE settings more independence while working through the quality improvement process, but would not deliver on the capacity development. If the mentoring approach is maintained, it will be necessary to provide more intensive Mentor induction training.

2.1.2 Summary of Recommendations

In light of the findings from the evaluation, it was recommended that:

- A review is conducted of the language used in the Síolta manual, with a view to removing elements of ambiguity and making it easily comprehensible to its target audience
- A review is conducted of the Síolta Standards and Components with a view to consolidating Components covering similar aspects of service provision and practice
- Standard 15, which relates to the extent to which ECCE settings are compliant with all national legislation and regulations, be removed from the Framework
- An approach where settings can complete the formal QAP process for individual Standards, on the basis of available capacities within the setting, should be implemented
- A Standard by Standard approach should be adopted, where the Síolta 12-step QAP process is completed in its entirety for an individual Standard (or group of related Standards) before a setting commences the QAP process for the next Standard(s)
- Resources permitting, the mentoring approach should be maintained
- Settings commencing the QAP process should be provided with a brief, i.e., Mentor – Setting implementation plan, setting out what will be required from settings over the course of the QAP process, and the nature of Mentor – Setting interactions that will take place
- More detailed prescriptive guidance be developed describing the precise nature of each step forming the QAP process, including the level of detail and time that should be allocated to the completion of baseline assessments
- Síolta Mentors should be provided with intensive training prior to commencing in the role, as part of which detailed guidance should be provided in terms of all aspects of the role. The training should include information on current Regulations and potential conflict areas with the HSE Inspectorate, as well as how to handle conflicts that may arise. The training should also cover workshop exercises to ensure a common understanding of the quality levels associated with the Self Assessment Tool rating levels
- Consideration should be given to the creation of a Co-ordinator of Mentors role
- Consideration be given to moving to a five scale rating tool.

These recommendations were presented to the Early Years Education Policy Unit by Goodbody Consultants in December 2011 for consideration in the continued development of the Síolta QAP. This evaluation had taken place at the halfway point in the field test to allow for the action research design for the field test to be substantially supported.

2.2 Submissions on the Future Development of Síolta and the Síolta QAP

In February 2012, Goodbody Consultants presented the final report of the national evaluation of the Síolta QAP to a wide range of stakeholders at a public meeting in the Department of Education and Skills in Marlborough Street. At the event and subsequently, submissions were invited from all interested parties in response to the following question:

What role can Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and the Síolta QAP play in the future development of the ECCE sector in Ireland?

The following organisations responded:

1. Early Years – the organisation for Young Children (Northern Ireland)
2. Start Strong (SS)
3. Dublin City Childcare Committee (CCC)
4. Early Learning Initiative, Dublin (ELI)
5. Roscommon CCC
6. NUI Galway
7. Waterford CCC
8. Youngballymun
9. Donegal CCC
10. Comhar Naíonraí Na Gaeltachta (CNNG)
11. Early Childhood Ireland (ECI)
12. South Dublin CCC (SDCCC)
13. Carlow CCC (CWCCC)
14. Border Counties Childhood Network (BCCN)

From the submissions, there was a high degree of consensus regarding the central role that both Síolta and the Síolta QAP could and should play in the development of the ECCE sector in Ireland. Most of the recommendations made in the Goodbody report were also supported in each submission with the exception of the recommendations regarding the alteration in language and content of the Síolta Manuals (ELI and NUI Galway) and the removal of Standard 15 (WCCC/SDCCC/CWCCC). In addition, each submission provided a range of suggestions relating to the following:

- National policy development
- Workforce development
- Resources

Two submissions described alternative models of delivery for both the Síolta QAP and a continuum of supports for quality improvement in ECCE settings (Donegal CCC and ECI). Under each heading the following represented areas of strong agreement across all submissions

1. National policy

- a) Síolta and Aistear should be closely aligned and presented as a related set of practice guidelines (10 recommendations)
- b) The 2006 Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations which provide the statutory basis for current inspection of ECCE settings should take into account the content of both Síolta and Aistear (7 recommendations)

- c) Development of a coordinated interagency approach to quality improvement led at national level (6 recommendations)
- d) The City and County Childcare Committees should play an increased role in delivery support for quality improvement including facilitating engagement with both Síolta and Aistear. (6 recommendations)

In addition, recommendations were also made that State funding should be linked to Síolta (2); that a minimum qualification of a Level 5 Major award should be required of all staff in settings completing the Síolta QAP (3); that priority for investment in quality improvement be given to areas of disadvantage (2); to use Síolta to inform outcome measures for children on the Growing Up in Ireland Longitudinal Study (3).

2. Workforce development

This area had the largest range of recommendations with the following attracting the highest degree of consensus:

- a) Specialised training programmes for Síolta Mentors should be developed with appropriate accreditation at post graduate level (10)
- b) Professional development for staff in ECCE settings that is flexible in method/access/level and which is aligned to Síolta and Aistear (7)
- c) Professional development targeted at staff delivering further education and training in ECCE (7)
- d) Leadership development programmes for managers/board/committee members (6)
- e) A mechanism to allow ECCE staff to gain CPD credits for participation in Síolta/Aistear related activity (4).

Additional recommendations included: dedicated funding for professional development activity linked to Síolta (2); targeted training in specific areas, e.g., curriculum, quality assurance skills, leadership (2).

3. Resources

- a) Funding for non contact hours for ECCE staff engaged with Síolta (6)
- b) Funded research focusing on the barriers and supports for quality improvement in ECCE (4)
- c) Development of specific resources to support ECCE settings with the implementation of Síolta, e.g., templates, guidelines, exemplars of practice at each level (narrative and video) (3)
- d) Conduct an audit of Síolta materials and resources developed by the CCCs and VCOs (3).

Additional recommendations were made regarding: revision of Síolta Manuals to remove duplication and simplify language (2); creation of opportunities for sharing practice at local and national level, e.g., practitioner led seminars, conference etc. (2); creation of an Early Childhood Specialist role (graduate level) to support a wide range of policy initiatives across the ECCE sector, e.g., inclusion, literacy and numeracy, curriculum, quality (2).

Five submissions highlighted the necessity to raise awareness of Síolta with parents and other stakeholders in the ECCE sector.

There was, also, a range of additional suggestions made by individual organisations which reflected a particular issue, e.g., recommendation of High/Scope as a curriculum model, prioritising designated disadvantaged areas for investment in quality improvement.

2.3 Evaluation of the Síolta Validation Stage

Goodbody Economic Consultants evaluated the field testing of the Síolta QAP up to validation stage. In addition to supporting the action research design for the field test, the rationale for this was, that as it was likely to take up to one year for ECCE settings to be in a position to proceed to validation, much valuable insight on the early experiences of implementation would be lost if evaluation was delayed to the end of the process. A focused evaluation on the final stage of the Síolta QAP would also offer the opportunity to review whether earlier recommendations were still valid.

The Early Years Education Policy Unit evaluated the Validation stage of the QAP. This involved the following qualitative and quantitative data collection:

- Evaluation of the Síolta Validator Induction Programme
- Review of Síolta Validator Manual including resources for ECCE settings
- Analysis of self assessed and validated quality ratings
- Survey of validated ECCE settings
- Survey of settings who did not complete to validation
- Analysis of costs of Síolta QAP.

2.3.1 Validator Induction Programme

The Early Years Education Policy unit ran a two day Síolta Validation Induction Programme on 14th and 21st February 2012. As part of the ongoing action research design of the project, the perspectives of the Validators on both the induction programme and the Validator's manual were gathered. This feedback is detailed in Appendix 5 with the main findings summarised below.

The majority of respondents felt that the induction programme was effective in preparing them for the role of Síolta Validator. In particular, the programme was felt to have:

- Helped define the role of Validator and how it differs from that of Mentor
- Provided clear information on the structure of the validation and appeals processes
- Flagged possible challenges
- Facilitated shared learning and reflection.

The most relevant content of the programme were considered to be the opportunity to work through the Validator's Manual and the practical exercises, which gave the opportunity to examine submitted portfolios and discuss them with others.

When asked for suggestions on how the Induction Programme could be improved, respondents suggested that greater emphasis could be given to the practical exercises with a view to achieving a shared understanding of the quality of evidence that constitutes ratings at different levels. CPD was also highlighted as necessary to build skills and expertise in this role.

2.3.2 Síolta Validator Manual

The majority of respondents agreed that the Síolta Validators Manual addresses all the areas relevant to the role of Síolta Validator. Suggestions for how the advice/guidance that future Síolta Validators would receive about the process/role could be improved were as follows:

- Shadowing for at least one visit should be an element of the induction process
- Learning/experience of Validators and settings could be incorporated into training
- Access to exemplars of validated Standards and Components
- More time for discussion after the various activities to come to a common understanding of the issues
- Messages to get across
 - » Take time going through portfolios, look for consistency of information, take notes as you go
 - » Importance of achieving the appropriate balance in being respectful, friendly and ensuring that you are clear and firm in discussions with settings
 - » Importance of giving time for feedback and discussion
 - » Validators are not Inspectors.

2.3.3 Analysis of Variation in Síolta Quality Assurance Programme – Self-Assessed and Validated Ratings

The validation of ECCE settings within the Síolta QAP involves the review of evidence presented by the setting to support their self assessed quality ratings against each of the Síolta Standards and Components of Quality. This evidence is available in a Quality Portfolio presented by the ECCE settings and also on a visit by the Validator to the setting. The constructive, empowerment approach that characterises the Síolta QAP also provides for opportunity for negotiation of the final validated rating. The analysis of self assessed and validated rating therefore was completed to understand further:

- The level of consistency between self assessed ratings and validated ratings²
- Trends in rating levels for each Síolta Standard and Component
- Variation between pre and post visit validated ratings.

The detail of the analysis of the validate ratings can be found in Appendix 3. Clear messages from this analysis included:

- Almost 90% of self assessed ratings by ECCE settings were endorsed by the Validators. This is a positive testimony to the capacity of the Síolta Standards and Components of Quality to promote, encourage and realise quality improvement in practice across a diverse range of ECCE settings. It also demonstrates that the diversity of backgrounds of the Validators in terms of their professional profiles and employer organisation did not unduly influence the objectivity of the validation process.
- The variation identified in the remaining 10% of components showed that those areas which represented the more process focused or relational aspects of practice demonstrated less consistency in validated ratings and also appeared to be those most influenced by the on-site visit and negotiation between the Validator and staff in the setting. Curriculum, (Standard 7), Interactions, (Standard 5), Transitions (Standard 13) and Planning and Evaluation, (Standard 8) emerged as challenging in terms of the ECCE setting providing documentary evidence to support their self assessed rating.

² These figures are based on the analysis of 47 ECCE settings who had completed the full Síolta QAP by June 2013.

The finding that documentation and assessment of Standards and Components more associated with process quality in ECCE practice was more challenging is noteworthy as it is consistent with feedback from other activities in the ECCE sector relating to quality in practice, e.g., the joint inspection initiative between the HSE and DES Inspectorates. This will be discussed further in the concluding recommendations of this report.

2.3.4 Feedback from Services on Síolta Validation Process

In keeping with the action research nature of the Síolta QAP field test, on 21st June 2012, a questionnaire was posted out to 17 services that had come through a full Síolta validation. The services were asked to give feedback about their experiences of the validation stage and to give their views on how the process could be improved under the following headings:

- Administration process
- Preparation for the validation visit
- Validation process and visit
- Síolta QAP Record of Validation certificates.

By 12th July 2012, 9 services had provided feedback which represented a 53% response rate. The detail of the feedback is contained in Appendix 4 but the key findings are summarised as follows:

All services were satisfied that the materials and processes associated with the validation stage of the Síolta QAP were easy to understand, supported them in negotiating the process and were necessary to the completion of the process. Areas that could be improved included: improving the attractiveness of the Síolta QAP Certification and ensuring that all Validators provided written feedback to settings.

2.3.5 Survey of ECCE settings who did not complete the Síolta QAP

On 2nd July 2013, each of the 7 implementing bodies that had participated in the Síolta QAP field test were emailed a list of the services that had been mentored by them. The implementing bodies were asked to arrange for their Síolta mentor(s) to confirm the following:

- Each service's level of engagement with the Síolta QAP and their progress through it
- For each service that did not complete the Síolta QAP, the main reasons for their non-completion.

By 31st July 2013, responses had been received from three of the implementing bodies. Collectively, these implementing bodies had mentored 108 services (79% of all those involved in the field test) and had employed 15 Síolta Mentors. One organisation did not respond as all their participating services had completed the QAP. The three remaining organisations did not characterise their settings as non-completing as they were continuing to support them towards validation and so did not complete returns.

Level of engagement and progress

87 of the 108 services (81%) had, through the course of the field test, engaged with the full Síolta QAP. The remaining 21 (19%) had worked with only some of the Standards.

As the following table shows, 40 (37%) of the services that participated in the field test have completed the full validation process and one additional service was in the process of being validated. 26 (24%) of the field test services had withdrawn from the process and this analysis is based upon their feedback.

Progress in QAP	Number of Services	% Services
Validated	40	37%
Received feedback	7	7%
Assigned to Validator	1	1%
Submitted for validation but then deferred	2	2%
May submit in future	32	29%
Still participating in QAP but not expected to go forward for validation	0	0%
No longer participating in QAP	26	24%
Total	108	100%

Reasons for non-completion

For each service whose progress was described as “May submit in future” or “Still participating in QAP but not expected to go forward for validation” or “No longer participating in QAP”, Síolta Mentors were asked to identify the main reason(s) for their non-completion of the Síolta QAP. Drop down lists (based on the non-completion issues identified by the Goodbody evaluation report) were provided. It was possible for each service to select up to three reasons.

In total, reasons for non-completion were provided in respect of 55 services. As the following table shows, the amount of staff time required by the QAP was identified as a reason by 25 of the 55 services (45%). Lack of staff non-contact time and staff changes were also frequently cited as reasons for non-completion.

Reasons for non-completion	Number of Services*	% Services*
Amount of staff time required	25	45%
Lack of staff non-contact time	12	22%
Staff changes	10	18%
Lack of buy-in from staff	7	13%
Staff under-going own training	6	11%
Funding/sustainability issues	6	11%
Lack of descriptive writing skills	5	9%
Formal qualification level of staff	3	5%
Lack of reflective skills	2	4%
Reliance on CE staff	2	4%
Lack of computer skills	1	2%
Too few contact hours with Mentor	0	0%
Costs associated with participation	0	0%
Other	15	27%

* Each service could identify more than one reason.

As shown above, Síolta Mentors identified “other” reasons for non-completion in respect of 15 services. A breakdown of this “other” category is provided below:

“Other” breakdown	Number of Services
Service closed	4
Owner/manager health or family issues	3
Owner/manager lacked the time (for reasons other than health/family)	3
Change of premises/construction work	2
Uncertainties due to field test nature of implementation	1
No support from Committee	1
Poor management	1
Total	15

The feedback from these services provides valuable insight into the barriers to participation in any future development of the Síolta QAP. Lack of time emerged as the most common barrier. Many staff in ECCE settings are paid for direct contact hours with children only, with no provision for planning, documenting or evaluating their practice.

2.3.6 Resource Allocation and Síolta QAP

Each of the 7 implementing bodies that had participated in the Síolta QAP field test were asked for information on the costs that had been incurred by their organisation. The implementing bodies were asked to reflect the full actual costs incurred, irrespective of funding source.

The implementing bodies were asked to provide the following details for each of the years 2010, 2011 and 2012:

- The full salary costs of staff who had a direct role in the implementation of the Síolta QAP field test, including Síolta mentor(s) as well as any staff that had a direct role in relation to the management, supervision and/or administration of the Síolta QAP field test
- An estimate of the proportion of each staff member’s time that was taken up by the implementation of the Síolta QAP field test
- An estimate of other costs incurred that related directly to the implementation of the Síolta QAP field test, including training, travel and subsistence, printing, postage and telephone.

Responses were received from four of the original implementing bodies³. Collectively, these implementing bodies had mentored 108 services (79% of all those involved in the field test), 40 of which have completed the full validation process. The responding implementing bodies had employed 15 Síolta Mentors.

Analysis of responses

The full salary costs of 15 Síolta Mentors and 4 management/ supervisory/ administrative staff, including employers PRSI and employers pension contribution (if applicable), were obtained. These salary costs were analysed with reference to the proportion of time each individual spent on field test related work in each of the years 2010 to 2012, to estimate the salary costs directly attributable to the field test.

³ In December 2011, two of the original implementing bodies, National Children’s Nurseries Association and Irish Pre-school Play Association merged to become Early Childhood Ireland.

In addition to salary costs, the implementing bodies provided details of other staff costs (i.e. travel and subsistence and training) that were incurred in respect of each staff member from 2010 to 2012 and that were directly related to the implementation of the Síolta QAP field test.

The implementing bodies also provided an estimate of the administration overhead costs (such as printing, postage and telephone) associated directly with the implementation of the Síolta QAP field test from 2010 to 2012.

The following table sets out an estimate of the field test costs incurred by the responding implementing bodies.

Actual Responses	2010	2011	2012	Total
Mentors Salary Costs	€449,552.17	€432,475.72	€207,898.96	€1,089,926.84
Management/ Supervisory/ Administrative Staff Salary Costs	€41,506.20	€42,380.40	€10,706.80	€94,593.40
Other Staff Costs	€39,537.80	€41,721.80	€24,263.00	€105,522.60
Administration overheads	€5,879.00	€5,879.00	€4,894.43	€16,652.43
Estimated total	€536,475.17	€522,456.92	€247,763.19	€1,306,695.27

The total cost equates to an estimated €12,099 per service mentored or €32,667 per service that completed the full validation process.

Extrapolation

The table below extrapolates the reported costs associated with 15 Síolta Mentors to the full cohort of 21⁴ that participated in the field test. It is important to note that this extrapolation assumes that the cost structures of the non-responding implementing bodies are similar to the average of the three organisations that responded. This may not, however, be the case.

Extrapolation	2010	2011	2012	Total
Mentors Salary Costs	€629,373.03	€605,466.00	€291,058.55	€1,525,897.58
Management/ Supervisory/ Administrative Staff Salary Costs	€58,108.68	€59,332.56	€14,989.52	€132,430.76
Other Staff Costs	€5,352.92	€8,410.52	€3,968.20	€17,731.64
Administration overheads	€230.60	€230.60	€852.20	€1,313.40
Estimated total	€751,065.23	€731,439.68	€346,868.47	€1,829,373.38

Given that a total of 136 services participated in the field test and that 47 of these completed the full validation process, this extrapolation suggests an estimate cost of €13,451.27 per service mentored or €38,922.84 per validated service.

⁴ While 24 Mentors were recruited and inducted, three did not continue to participate in the field test after initial induction.

Other costs

It should be noted that the above estimates do not include costs associated with the Department of Education and Skills staff nor costs associated with the development of the Síolta QAP and the external evaluation of the field test.

2.4 Conclusions Drawn from Evaluation/Feedback Data

The data collected during the Síolta QAP field test provides valuable insights into the perspectives of the various participants. It was clearly evident that participation in the Síolta QAP made a positive impact on the level of quality in practice in ECCE settings.

The evaluation data demonstrates that participation in the Síolta QAP was a challenging experience. However, even those services that did not complete the QAP within the time allocated for the field test reported that they would like to continue. All participants endorsed the different elements of the Síolta QAP, particularly the availability of expert advice and guidance in the role of the Mentor. Suggestions for revision and improvement of the materials and processes can be characterised as fine tuning rather than total re-engineering and the field test design, which accommodated regular review of progress through the Mentor CPD programme, allowed for the integration of many of the suggested changes as they became apparent, e.g., a review of the manuals was completed with the Mentors during the field test stage.

In relation to broader issues associated with national policy in ECCE, the data also shows that there is a strong need in the ECCE sector for clarity and coherence across all national practice guidelines with repeated advocacy for alignment of Síolta, Aistear and regulatory requirements. Professional education and training programmes also need to embrace the content and direction provided by Síolta and Aistear and ensure that all graduates are adequately prepared to engage with them in everyday practice. This wider agenda is considered further in the next section of the report.

SECTION THREE:
Future Development of Síolta

3.1 National Policy Context

The main objective for the development of Síolta and the Síolta QAP was to support the development of high quality early childhood care and education provision for children aged 0-6 years. In order to ensure that the lessons learned as a result of the research and development stages of Síolta realise this agenda, it is important that they are integrated into and connect with relevant national policy. These policy developments include:

- The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES)
- State funding for the provision of early childhood care and education
- Development in relation to statutory inspection/regulation of early childhood care and education settings (HSE/ DES/DCYA)
- State funding for quality improvement in ECCE, e.g., CCCs, VCOs, Early Intervention teams etc. (DCYA/DES/HSE)
- Development of a National Early Years Strategy (DCYA).

3.1.1 National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

A wide range of actions have been included in this Strategy relating specifically to the work of staff in ECCE settings. It is clearly identified that children's early childhood experiences play a critical role in supporting the development of key skills and knowledge related to the development of literacy and numeracy in later childhood and throughout life. A number of recommendations relate to the development of the workforce capacity of ECCE practitioners and teachers in primary schools to implement best practice. Recognition of the importance of establishing a continuum of learning experiences across early childhood, regardless of the setting the child is attending, is also reflected in recommendations relating to supporting parents and families in their role as primary educators; the creation of networks to share good practice across all staff engaged in early learning activity in centres; the development of information sharing processes and tools and common approaches to pre service and in service training for staff across the ECCE and primary school sectors. Specific recommendations directly related to oversight and monitoring of the quality of practice state that the strategy should seek to:

Improve the quality assurance of state-funded ECCE provision by:

- Requiring self-evaluation to be carried out in all state-funded ECCE settings
- Providing materials and guidance to support self-evaluation
- Developing and implementing pilot external evaluations of the quality of provision (including the quality of early literacy and numeracy provision) in ECCE settings
- Reviewing outcomes of pilot evaluations and use learning to improve quality assurance mechanisms and models. (DES, 2011:84)

A pilot initiative completed by a joint DES and HSE Inspection team reported in the final quarter of 2012. The findings showed that, while the ECCE settings inspected were able to demonstrate a good standard of practice in relation to the care of children, many were struggling with the implementation of appropriate developmental/educational programme content. The report identified the need to review and develop approaches to quality improvement in the ECCE sector to incorporate education focused inspection based on Aistear and Síolta and quality supports for these services.

3.1.2 State funding for the provision of early childhood care and education

Since 2010, universal access to early learning opportunities has been available in a diverse range of early childhood care and education settings for children from 3 years 2 months to children aged 4 years and 7 months. The contractual criteria for early childhood services included in the free pre-school scheme state that:

Participating service providers are required to use Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006) and Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) to provide an appropriate educational and care programme for children in their pre-school year. Participating service providers may be supported in meeting this requirement by a range of designated support services and agencies, including their local City or County Childcare Committee. Service providers must facilitate visits and use advice from designated support staff from such organisations.

With almost 90% of early years settings on contract to deliver the free pre-school year, this presents both an opportunity and challenge to all support agencies and is an obvious context within which to mainstream the learning from the research and development stage of Síolta and the Síolta QAP.

3.1.3 State funding for quality improvement in ECCE (outside the formal education sector)

The first clearly identifiable reference to quality improvement as a criteria for State funding can be found in documentation associated with the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) of 2000. This major funding programme focused on three sub-measures: capital grants for the creation of places, staffing grants to support the retention of qualified staff in community non profit services and sub-measure 3:

Quality Improvement, where the majority of resources were allocated towards assisting CCCs and NVCOs to deliver interventions to support quality childcare. Additional resources were also available for National or regional quality improvement innovative projects.

(Office for the Minister for Children, 2007:vii)

While other small scale initiatives could be identified addressing a variety of issues associated with quality, e.g., training, working with parents, transitions, these tended to remain as local initiatives and had little impact outside the immediate participants.

The activities supported under the EOCP quality improvement sub-measure involved providing block grants to a range of organisations including the VCOs and CCCs. There were few pre-established criteria to allow for the identification of quality improvement activity and no co-ordination of how this funding was spent. This was observed in the value for money review of the EOCP published in 2007 with the following recommendations:

.....there was some evidence of duplication of activities across NVCOs and also in relation to those undertaken by the CCCs. It is therefore recommended that the remits of the NVCOs should be more closely defined in order to reduce levels of duplication between these organisations and also to avoid overlap with the activities of the CCCs.

(ibid:ix)

There is a need to focus on quantifiable indicators reflecting other objectives in relation to quality of provision, the wider costs of childcare and relationship to local needs.

(ibid:xiv)

The same pattern of State funding for quality improvement continues to this day with block grants allocated to a range of organisations working in the sector. Targeted projects also continue to be a feature with the Dublin based Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes and the National Early Years Access Initiative representing an investment of almost €20 million funding in research and development activity designed to yield indigenous knowledge on effective early intervention strategies including quality improvement.

A number of reports on the ECCE sector in Ireland have identified the need for greater coordination in the deployment of State funding to support developments in the ECCE sector (OECD, 2004, NESF, 2005, Start Strong, 2012). The experience of implementing the Síolta QAP would reinforce such recommendations and suggest that further implementation of Síolta and the Síolta QAP should be done in the context of a national quality improvement strategy for the ECCE sector which would harness all existing and future State funding for quality improvement towards a clear, commonly agreed agenda. This agenda would detail roles and responsibilities and desirable outcomes for all agencies working in the field.

3.1.4 Developments in relation to inspection/regulation of ECCE services

Regulation of the ECCE sector commenced in 1997 with the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations 1996. At that time it was envisioned that these regulations would warrant review every five years. The first review commenced in 2005 and resulted in the publication of revised regulations (Child Care (Pre-school Services) No. 2 Regulations in 2006. The major addition to the regulations at that time was the addition of regulation 5 concerning the Health, Welfare and Development of the child.

In May 2013, the screening of an investigative report into the quality of provision in ECCE settings in Ireland (A Breach of Trust: Prime Time Investigates, RTÉ, May 27th 2013) prompted the publication, by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, of an eight point plan for quality improvement in the ECCE sector. This included commitments to:

- increase the required qualification standards of childcare staff
- support implementation of Síolta and Aistear, including examining the establishment of nationwide mentoring supports
- implement new National Pre-School Standards
- introduce registration of all childcare providers
- develop a more robust, consistent and regular inspection system
- publish inspection reports
- ensure action is taken in response to findings of non-compliance
- increase sanctions for non-compliant childcare providers.

Actions in relation to the publication of inspection reports and review of sanctions for non-compliance were addressed as a matter of priority during the summer months of 2013. In advance of the move into the Child and Family Agency, the HSE are working on the development of a national registration system for pre-school services which will come into force in 2014. New qualification requirements for staff in ECCE settings on contract to deliver state funded early years schemes were publicly announced in September 2013,

...from 1 September 2014 for new services and from September 2015 for existing services, all staff must have a level 5 qualification in early childhood care and education, and team leaders will have to have a Level 6 qualification.

The recommendations regarding the implementation of Síolta and Aistear were enabled in the budget announcements of October 15th 2013 with a commitment of financial resources. Included in the commitments were the following:

- Additional staff will be recruited to the Pre-School Inspectorate of the new Child and Family Agency to address gaps which currently exist in the inspection system (cost: €1.1m)
- A new mentoring service for pre-school services will be introduced. The service will employ graduates in early childhood care and education who will work directly with services to improve quality including assisting services to implement the Síolta Framework and Aistear curriculum for 0 to 6 years. (cost: €2.5m in 2014)
- Training support will be provided to assist staff already working in the sector to meet the new qualification requirements being introduced from September 2015. (cost: €1.5m in 2014).

To support the work of the new mentoring service, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment have agreed to take a lead role in developing a set of practice guidelines drawing on core elements of Síolta and Aistear. This resource will not detract from the integrity of the original frameworks, rather, it will allow trained mentors to focus their quality support actions on the areas of practice which have been identified through research as most in need of development, e.g., planning and evaluation, curriculum, identity and belonging.

All these developments represent opportunities for the findings of the Síolta QAP field test to inform national policy.

3.1.5 Development of a National Early Years Strategy

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs was established in 2011 and is committed to developing a Children and Young People's Policy Framework as a successor to the 2000-2010 National Children's Strategy.

The policy Framework will focus on the key developmental periods for children and young people

- Prenatal, infancy, early childhood (0 to 6 years);
- Middle childhood years (6-12 years);
- Adolescence and early adulthood (12 plus years) (DCYA website accessed August 2 2012).

It is intended to develop a detailed strategy for each of these three age cohorts. The preparation of an Early Years Strategy presents a further opportunity for the mainstreaming of activity in support of quality improvement in ECCE settings. The findings of the field test of the Síolta QAP should, therefore, be taken into consideration in the preparation of the National Early Years Strategy.

3.2 Discussion and Conclusions

The policy agenda that drove the development of Síolta was the need to improve the quality of early childhood care and education services in Ireland through the establishment of agreed quality standards and implementation processes based on self evaluation. This agenda, in turn, is based on a solid and growing body of national and international research evidence that states that poor quality ECCE services can be detrimental to children's immediate wellbeing and future life achievement.

The development of Síolta and the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme realised the ambitious initial goal of creating an evidence based Framework which defines, supports and assesses the quality of early childhood education in Ireland. Further, this Framework has attracted consensus across the diverse communities of practice that constitute the early childhood care and education workforce and the wide range of stakeholder organisations representing parents, employers and special interest groups.

Engagement with the development and implementation of Síolta has yielded a rich body of indigenous research evidence; provoked intense debate and contestation of core values and principles underpinning ECCE practice; challenged established practices and transformed education and training standards. Through the QAP, ECCE practitioners have established their capacity to deliver high quality early childhood services that respect and value children as individuals and citizens and develop the critical skills and dispositions that form the strong foundations for future development and learning throughout life. Self reflection and self evaluation processes combined with sustained access to expert mentoring, advice and feedback have emerged as the mechanisms through which high quality is delivered and maintained. The ultimate and most critical goal of ensuring children's experiences in centre based settings in early childhood are positive and enriching, is a realistic one according to the evaluation evidence. However, the journey to this point has also shown that achievement of high quality in ECCE requires major investment by all. The following have emerged as critical conditions for the success of quality improvement in ECCE:

- Recognition by all stakeholders of the relevance of Síolta for the development of high quality ECCE settings
- Recognition by all practitioners that delivery of high quality is a professional obligation
- Recognition by the State that delivery of high quality should be resourced and rewarded.

These conditions are further translated into the reality of practice through the following:

- Investment in the development and deployment of skilled expert Mentors to allow for national access to the Síolta QAP
- Coordinated messaging regarding the relationship between Síolta, Aistear and statutory regulation requirements
- Coordination across all oversight and monitoring activity in ECCE settings
- Investment in professional development for the ECCE workforce
- Investment in research activity and knowledge exchange to maintain the relevance and responsiveness of ECCE practice.

Since 2002, the Department of Education and Skills has taken a strong lead in the development of resources to encourage the delivery of high quality early education experiences for children aged 0-6 years. The conclusions and recommendations of the field test of the Síolta QAP will now inform the continued work towards realisation of this quality improvement agenda.

The challenge will be to harness the myriad resources that already populate the ECCE landscape into the coordinated effort that is required to achieve change and development across such a diverse community of provision and practice. The Department of Education and Skills is fully committed to continuing to provide the leadership and expertise it has developed with respect to quality in practice in ECCE and to work in partnership with stakeholders at all levels of the system. The Department will be working closely with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on the implementation of the quality improvement agenda announced in the October 2013 budget. The content of Síolta and Aistear and the expertise developed by the DES during the implementation of the Síolta QAP will be an important resource for the new mentoring/quality support service to be established in 2014.

In this phase in the development of early childhood care and education services in Ireland, the focus is moving from research and development to implementation in practice. Co-ordinated effort by all stakeholders will allow the vision of high quality early childhood experiences for all children to progress from rhetoric into reality and will promote the capacity of early years practitioners (in partnership with parents and families) to provide children with the nurturing and enriching experiences that will help develop each child's potential.

Appendix 1: Overview of Síolta Quality Framework and the Quality Assurance Programme

Elements of Síolta

Síolta is designed to allow early education settings to evaluate (both informally and formally) the quality of the service they are providing. As a resource for practitioners who are using Síolta, there are User Manuals available for each of the following settings:

- i. Full and Part-time Daycare
- ii. Sessional Services
- iii. Infant Classes
- iv. Childminding

Each manual includes the following:

A. Principles of Quality

The twelve Principles are the benchmark for all quality practice and service provision in early education.

1. Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.
2. The child's individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood experience.
3. Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.
4. Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the wellbeing, learning and development of the young child.
5. Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education.
6. Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated.
7. The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her/his well-being, learning and development.
8. The safety, welfare and well-being of all children must be protected and promoted in all early childhood environments.
9. The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental.
10. The provision of quality early childhood experiences requires cooperation, communication and mutual respect.
11. Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education
12. Play is central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child.

B. Standards of Quality

The sixteen national Standards cover the areas of practice to be addressed and translate the vision of quality contained in the Principles into the reality of practice.

C. Components of Quality

These provide quality indicators for all practitioners in implementing Síolta. These Components relate directly to the Standards and help break them down into more focused and specific parts. See example below.

D. Signposts for Reflection

These act as self-reflection guidelines for practitioners to think about current practice, and to identify elements that are positive as well as those in need of attention. They can be used by individual practitioners or by groups/teams that are planning for an entire setting. Where appropriate, the Signposts for Reflection have been mediated across three age ranges, namely: birth - 18 months, 12 - 36 months and 2½ - 6 years.

These Signposts for Reflection and accompanying 'Think abouts' are provided as examples or prompts. They are not in any way exhaustive and can be added to based on a person's own practice and expertise.

Standard 1 - Rights of the Child

Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that he/she is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in his/her own development and learning

Component 1.1

Each child has opportunities to make choices, is enabled to make decision, and has his/her choices and decisions respected.

Component 1.2

Each child has opportunities and is enabled to take the lead, initiate activity, be appropriately independent and is supported to solve problems

Component 1.3

Each child is enabled to participate actively in the daily routine, in activities, in conversations and in other appropriate situations, and is considered as a partner by the adult.

For further details of Síolta Standards and Components see Síolta User Manual.

Síolta Quality Assurance Programme

The Síolta QAP was developed to allow Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings to engage formally with the Síolta Quality Framework. The three stages and 10 steps to developing quality are detailed below.

The Stages of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme

There are ten distinct steps in the Síolta QAP. These steps are not linear in nature and settings may engage in them simultaneously or sequentially.

Stage A: Registration
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Registration 2. Allocation of Síolta Mentor 3. Introduction to Síolta QAP (materials and processes)
Stage B: Self-assessment (Baseline) and Quality Improvement
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Baseline Assessment 5. Action Planning 6. Developing Quality & Portfolio Building 7. Portfolio Review and Submission
Stage C: Validation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Validation 9. Certification 10. Renewal

Appendix 2: Síolta Quality Assurance Programme – Tools and Materials

These core elements of the Síolta QAP are explained through a series of supporting documentation, which are made available to participants. The key supporting documentation includes:

- The Síolta User Manual appropriate to the setting type
- An Overview of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme
- Síolta Self –Assessment Tool and User Guide
- Síolta Guide to Action Planning
- Síolta Portfolio Building Guide
- Síolta Research Digests
- Síolta Validation Guide
- Síolta Mentor Manual
- Síolta Validator Manual

Self Assessment Tool and Rating Scale

The successful implementation of the Síolta QAP requires assessment decisions to be made by settings regarding their level of quality and quality practice vis-a-vis the Síolta Standards and Components. The Self Assessment Tool is used by settings as part of this assessment-making decision process. It is used initially at the baseline assessment stage (step 6) and again prior to the submission of an application for Validation.

The Self-assessment Tool contains four sections:

- **Section A** – naming the Standard and Component
- **Section B** – rating the setting on a scale from 1-4 for the Component
- **Section C** – describing quality and quality practice to support the rating level chosen
- **Section D** – listing the evidence and documentation that supports the rating.

As part of Section B a four level rating system is applied, where settings award themselves one of four ratings with respect to the 75 Síolta Components. The four rating levels awardable are as follows:

Level 1: Level 1 is applicable if there is no observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.

Level 2: Level 2 is applicable if there is some observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.

Level 3: Level 3 is applicable if there is significant observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.

Level 4: Level 4 is applicable if there is extensive observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.

Settings agree on a rating level on the basis of collective discussions within the setting. As part of the Section C the setting describes the practice that corresponds to the chosen rating level, while as part of Section D the setting identifies the evidence and documentation that supports the chosen rating.

Appendix 3: Analysis of Validation Ratings

Self-Assessed Component Ratings

43 of the 47 services rated themselves as either Level 3 or 4 on all 75 components. Only four services included self-assessed ratings at Level 2. There were no self-assessed ratings below 2.

23 of the 47 services rated themselves as Level 4 on all 75 components. A further 11 rated themselves as 4 on at least 90% of components. The following table summarises the breakdown:

All components self-assessed at 4	At least 90% components self-assessed at 4	89%-75% components self-assessed at 4	74%-50% components self-assessed at 4	49%-25% components self-assessed at 4	24%-1% components self-assessed at 4
23	11	7	3	0	3

The components that were most often self-assessed as 4 were:

- Rights of the Child: 1.1
- Parents and Families: 3.3
- Interactions: 5.3
- Play: 6.1, 6.3, 6.6
- Health and Welfare: 9.2, 9.4
- Legislation and Regulation: 15.1

The components that were least often self-assessed as 4 were:

- Environments: 2.2, 2.5
- Consultation: 4.1
- Planning and Evaluation: 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4
- Transitions: 13.2, 13.4
- Community Involvement: 16.2, 16.3, 16.4

Validated Component Ratings

10 services were validated at 4 for all 75 components. The following table summarises the outcome of the validations:

All components validated at 4	At least 90% components validated at 4	89%-75% components validated at 4	74%-50% components validated at 4	49%-25% components validated at 4	24%-1% components validated at 4
10	14	10	9	2	2

The components that were most often validated at Level 4 were:

- Health and Welfare: 9.2, 9.4, 9.6, 9.7
- Professional Practice: 11.5
- Communication: 12.3
- Legislation and Regulation: 15.1

The components that were least often validated at Level 4 were:

- Environments: 2.5
- Curriculum: 7.5, 7.6
- Planning and Evaluation: 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4
- Transitions: 13.4
- Identity and Belonging: 14.1
- Community Involvement: 16.3, 16.4

Comparison of Self-Assessed and Validated Ratings

Across the 47 validations, the validated component ratings differed from the self-assessed ratings in 493 instances - averaging 10.5 per validation. However, the scale of variation was not distributed evenly, as the following summary shows:

- 9 services that had all 75 of their self-assessed ratings validated.
- 17 services had one or more of their component ratings lowered by 1. The number of components changed varied in each case, ranging from one to 17.
- 5 services had one or more of their component ratings increased by 1. The number of components changed varied in each case, ranging from 5 to 54.
- 11 services had some components lowered by 1 and some increased by 1. The numbers of components involved ranged from 2 to 31.
- 3 services had some components lowered by 1 and some lowered by 2. Between 35 and 47 components were involved in each case.
- 2 services had components increased by 1, lowered by 1 and lowered by 2. In one of these instances 5 components were involved, in the other the number was 22.

The self-assessed ratings of the following components were the most likely to be validated:

- Environments: 2.3, 2.4, 2.8
- Interactions: 5.3
- Play: 6.1, 6.6
- Health and Welfare: 9.1, 9.2, 9.3, 9.4
- Organisation: 10.1, 10.3, 10.6, 10.7
- Professional Practice: 11.4, 11.5
- Legislation and Regulation: 15.1

The self-assessed ratings of the following components were the most likely to be changed at validation:

- Rights of the Child: 1.2
- Interactions: 5.6
- Curriculum: 7.2, 7.5, 7.6
- Planning and Evaluation: 8.3, 8.4
- Transitions: 13.2, 13.4
- Identity and Belonging: 14.2

Pre-visit Decisions

During the portfolio review stage of the validation process, the Validator reads each component and assesses the accompanying evidence. If sufficient evidence is present to make a rating decision on a particular component, the Validator records a pre-visit decision against it on the Portfolio Review Template. Pre-visit decisions can be altered based on new information/clarification received during the validation visit.

If the portfolio does not contain sufficient evidence to make a pre-visit decision or if the Validator wishes to clarify/verify issues in practice, the Validator can decide to either not record a pre-visit decision or to record a range (for example, "3-4"). For the purposes of the following analysis both options are taken as meaning "no decision".

As the following table shows, the number of components with no pre-visit decision recorded against them varied from portfolio to portfolio.

Number of "no decision" components	0-15	16-30	31-45	46-60	61-75
Number of services	25	14	5	1	2

Pre-visit decisions were most common in respect of the following components:

- Parents and Families: 3.1
- Health and Welfare: 9.1, 9.2, 9.4
- Organisation: 10.1
- Professional Practice: 11.4
- Community Involvement: 16.3

Pre-visit decisions were least likely in respect of the following components:

- Environments: 2.5, 2.6, 2.7
- Interactions: 5.4
- Play: 6.7
- Organisation: 10.5
- Professional Practice: 11.5
- Identity and Belonging: 14.2, 14.3

Comparison of Pre-visit Decisions and Validated Ratings

Where pre-visit decisions had been made, those decisions matched all the corresponding validated ratings in the case of 7 services. In the case of the other 40 services, the validated component ratings differed from pre-visit decisions in 417 instances - averaging 10 per validation involved. In one case, the pre-visit decisions of 12 components were lowered (by one level). In the remaining 39 cases, the pre-visit decision of one or more of the components was revised upwards (by one level). In addition, 4 of these services also had ratings revised upwards by 2 or 3 levels. The number of pre-visit decisions that were raised ranged from 1 to 42 per service. Pre-visit decisions were also lowered in 11 of these cases – however, the number of components involved each time was at most 3.

No pre-visit decisions were lowered by more than one level.

Pre-visit decisions were most likely to be changed in respect of the following components:

- Rights of the Child: 1.1, 1.2
- Environments: 2.1, 2.2
- Parents and Families: 3.3
- Consultation: 4.1
- Planning and Evaluation: 8.1, 8.2, 8.3
- Health and Welfare: 9.5

Pre-visit decisions were least likely to be changed in respect of the following components:

- Interactions: 5.1
- Play: 6.5
- Curriculum: 7.1, 7.2
- Communication: 12.3
- Community Involvement: 16.1, 16.3

Interactions	3
Play	6
Curriculum	11
Health and Welfare	4
Legislation and Regulation	0

Appendix 4: Survey of ECCE setting on Experience of Síolta Validation

Administration Process

At the time they submitted their Síolta Quality Portfolio for validation, all responding services were either 'very clear' or 'clear' (56% and 44%, respectively) about what the next steps in the process would be.

The majority of services were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' (67% and 11%, respectively) with how long the process took, from the time they were ready to submit their Síolta Quality Portfolio to the time they received their Síolta QAP Record of Validation certificates. However, one service was 'dissatisfied' and one was 'very dissatisfied' – in these cases the process had taken 5 and 6 months, respectively.

All services reported having found it 'very easy' (89%) or 'easy' (11%) to deliver their Síolta Quality Portfolio to the Síolta Validator and to retrieve it.

4 services made additional comments in relation to the administration process. Two re-stated that they had found the process very smooth and that the communication had been clear and consistent. One service commented that, at first, they were unclear on how to organise/structure their Quality Portfolio but that once it was explained to them it was fine. The other suggested that there was repetition within components and standards, which could be improved.

Preparation for the Validation Visit

All services were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' (56% and 44%, respectively) with the amount of advice/guidance they received before the validation visit to help them prepare for it and know what to expect.

78% of the services had received a copy of the 'Preparing for your Validation Visit' checklist before the validation visit. One service had not and one didn't know. All those that had received a copy of the checklist had found it to be either 'very helpful' (57%) or 'helpful' (43%). One service suggested that the checklist should stress that services should 'be confident and proud of your abilities and service'.

Other suggestions for how the advice/guidance that services receive about the validation visit could be improved were as follows:

- 'Just to reiterate to services that you have already produced your folders and evidence and to be proud of what you have already achieved.'
- 'The best advice probably comes from previous services who have been validated.'
- 'I found it very helpful to meet with my Validator first thing on the morning of the visit and she specified the particular items that she wanted to study at the end of her visit - policies, staff and child files etc. That gave me the opportunity to have them readily available for her. Maybe this information could be shared by email the day before the visit.'

The Validation Process and Visit

Services were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements about the validation process and visit.

- All services 'strongly agreed' that the validation process and visit were carried out in a positive, affirmative and supportive manner and that their Síolta Validator displayed strong knowledge and expertise related to the theory and practice of early childhood care and education.
- Services either 'strongly agreed' (78%) or 'agreed' (22%) that the validation process and visit were carried out in an open-minded and objective manner.
- 89% of services either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that they had been given sufficient opportunity by their Síolta Validator to discuss the validation ratings and report. The remaining service, however, disagreed with this statement and stated that 'there needs to be plenty of time for feedback and discussion at the end. Sometimes issues need to be explained by the service to the Validator'.

All services confirmed that the Síolta Validation Appeals Process had been explained to them by their Síolta Validator. 56% found the appeals process 'very easy' to understand and 33% found it 'easy' to understand – the remaining service did not answer the question. 89% stated that the Síolta Validator had left a copy of the Síolta Validation Application for Appeal Form with them at the end of the validation visit, as required. The remaining service could not remember.

The following suggestions were made as to how validation visits could be improved:

- 'I think the appeals process should be explained before the validation visit because, while it was explained on the day, there was a lot of feedback given and we really didn't take in the importance of reading the details of the validation record and timeframe for appeal.'
- 'It might be helpful for the Validator to provide a list of areas of concern or specific interest that they would like to study during their visit, otherwise I was very happy/satisfied with the validation visit.'

Síolta QAP Record of Validation Certificates

89% of services stated that they understood how the 75 individual Síolta component ratings were combined to give the ratings for each standard and the overall rating. The one service that did not understand explained that they 'did understand ceiling components but didn't fully understand how overall rating came from this'.

78% of services stated that the overall Síolta QAP rating that they received was the same as they had expected following the validation visit. The two services that had received different ratings than expected stated the following:

- 'Service received mostly 4 and some level 3 but overall rating was 3 which we could not fully understand.'
- 'Standards 3, 8, 13 and 16 have 4 components in which we got three Level 4s and one Level 3 in each yet in Standards 3, 8 and 13 we got overall of Level 4 but in 16 we got Level 3. As I said above with all the feedback given on day of visit, I didn't quite make the deadline for appeal and feel we should have Level 4 in Standard 16.'

All services felt that the Síolta QAP Record of Validation certificates that they received were clear and easy to understand. Suggestions for improving the certificates were as follows:

- 'Level 3 and 4, "Significant evidence" and "comprehensive evidence" could be more positive labels. E.g. NCNA Centre of Excellence award - if you achieve the required level you then receive the "Centre of Excellence" plaque. Even saying you have comprehensive evidence leaves the query are there some things not up to scratch.'
- 'I think some more thought could be given to the presentation of the scores to the public. A "4" doesn't mean anything to the general public (parent). Also advice on how to promote the service once having achieved the award. We found it a bit challenging to put together our press release. Level 4 sounded like there were a lot more levels to achieve, i.e. are we now a 4 Star service? We were delighted to take part in the pilot programme and to have been given the opportunity to complete Síolta. We are very proud of the achievements of this service and all involved.'
- 'Our service has displayed the record of validation alongside the certificate to show areas of quality. I think it might be worthwhile looking at the cert itself. It's not very striking. Early Childhood Ireland presented us with certs also and they really look well and stand out - it is first one that is noticed by parents/visitors to centre.'

Appendix 5: Feedback from Síolta Validators on Síolta Validation

On 26th June 2012, a questionnaire was sent by email to the 17 people who had attended at least one day of the Síolta Validation Induction Programme, irrespective of whether they had actually conducted a Síolta validation. Respondents were asked to give feedback about their experiences of the validation stage of the Síolta QAP and to give their views on how the process could be improved under the following headings:

- Induction programme
- Síolta Validators manual
- Administration process
- Desk-based review
- Validation visit
- Validation appeals process
- After the validation visit

By 8th August 2012, 12 responses had been received which represented a 71% response rate. Of the 5 people who did not respond, only one had completed a validation and she was on maternity leave.

Of those that did respond, 42% had completed one validation to date and 33% had completed two. The remaining 25% had not yet completed a validation. The following sections summarise the responses received under the headings listed above. The responses of those who had not yet completed a validation are included under "Induction Programme", "Síolta Validation Manual" and part of "After the Validation Visit" only.

Validator Induction Programme

A two day Síolta Validation Induction Programme was held on 14th and 21st February 2012. 83% of respondents had attended both days of the programme.

The majority of respondents (75%) felt that the induction programme was effective in preparing them for the role of Síolta Validator. The other services either didn't know (2) or did not answer the question (1). In particular, the programme was felt to have:

- helped define the role of Validator and how it differs from that of Mentor (4 responses)
- provided clear information on the structure of the validation and appeals processes (3 responses)
- flagged possible challenges (2 responses)
- facilitated shared learning and reflection (2 responses)

The most relevant aspects of the programme were considered to be:

- the opportunity to work through the Validators Manual and the various processes involved (7 responses)
- the practical exercise, which gave the opportunity to examine submitted portfolios and discuss them with others (7 responses)

When asked for suggestions on how the Induction Programme could be improved, 8 respondents suggested that greater emphasis could be given to the practical exercise with a view to achieving a shared understanding of the quality of evidence that constitutes a rating at each level. Two respondents suggested follow-up/CPD days for Validators.

Síolta Validators Manual

The majority of respondents (67%) agreed that the Síolta Validators Manual addresses all the areas relevant to the role of Síolta Validator. Of the remainder, one did not agree and three didn't know. The respondent that disagreed suggested that a tool to guide the assessment of interactions and involvement in a standardised way should be included.

92% of respondents felt that the Síolta Validation Manual is sufficiently clear and easy to understand. The remaining respondent didn't know. One respondent suggested that the Summary of Validation Visit (Form SV6a) is not necessary and that the manual should more clearly specify which forms can be emailed to EYEPU and which must be returned in hardcopy.

Suggestions for how the advice/guidance that future Síolta Validators receive about the process/role could be improved were as follows:

- Shadowing for at least one visit should be an element of induction process (3 responses)
- Learning/experience of Validators and settings could be incorporated into training (2 responses)
- Access to exemplars of validated Standards and Components (1 response)
- More time for discussion after the various activities to come to a common understanding of the issues (1 response)
- Messages to get across (1 response each):
 - » Take time going through portfolios, look for consistency of information, take notes as you go
 - » Importance of achieving the appropriate balance in being respectful, friendly and ensuring that you are clear and firm in discussions with settings
 - » Importance of giving time for feedback and discussion
 - » That Validators are not Inspectors

Administration Process

89% of respondents found the process of getting and returning Síolta Quality Portfolios either "very easy" or "easy". The remaining respondent did not answer the question.

89% of respondents also found the administration/paperwork side of the Validation process to be "very easy" or "easy". Additional comments were made that the administration process went "smoothly" and was "very efficient" and that it was easier and quicker second time. The remaining respondent found it "difficult" and suggested that there should be fewer forms.

Suggestions for how the administration process could be improved were as follows:

- The Portfolio Review Template (Form SV4) and the Validation Visit Report (Form SV6) could be combined (2 responses)
- The Summary of Validation Visit (Form SV6a) could be done away with (1 response)
- In the long term, it would be helpful if all forms could be managed online (1 response)

Desk-based Review

Respondents were asked to state how long it took them (approximately) to complete the desk-based reviews. The time taken ranged from 1 day to “more than 3 days” and the overall average was 2 days. A third of respondents stated that the review had taken as long as they had expected, 44% said it took more time than expected with the remaining 22% saying it had taken less time than expected.

The time taken to review each portfolio decreased with experience. On average, first reviews took 2¼ days compared to only 1¼ days for second reviews.

In the additional comments made, 6 respondents highlighted that more organised portfolios were easier to work through. The amount of time required also depended on the quality of the evidence and how well it was linked to the components. One respondent commented that the review can become particularly challenging if there are consistent discrepancies between a setting’s self-assessed ratings and the quality/amount of evidence supplied.

The most common suggestion (4 responses) for how the desk-based review process could be improved was for settings to be better supported in building portfolios. Specific suggestions made included reviewing/updating the Portfolio Building Guide, providing exemplars of good practice and providing more training for Síolta Mentors.

Validation Visit

Respondents were asked to state the approximate duration of the validation visits they conducted. The minimum duration reported was 3 hours, however the majority lasted either 4 hours (56%) or more (33%). 56% of respondents stated that the visit had lasted longer than expected, while the remainder said that it had last as long as expected.

Most respondents had conducted the Síolta validation visits alone with only two having conducted a visit with a co-Validator. Both of these had done so as part of shadowing exercise, which they found very helpful. Some respondents suggested that co-validation may be appropriate in the case of large setting (4 responses) and newly recruited Validators (2 responses). A comment was also made that having two Validators would help ensure the transparency and impartiality of the process. However, 3 respondents were of the view that having more than one Validator would risk overwhelming settings. A comment was also made that co-ordinating with a co-Validator and ensuring consistency of approach could, in itself, be time-consuming.

The Validators reported that all services were either “very prepared” (50%) or “prepared” (50%) for the visit and knew what to expect. Two respondents commented that the “Preparing for your Validation Visit” checklist is clear and helpful.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements about how they conducted the validation visit.

- All respondents ‘strongly agreed’ that they carried out the validation visit in a positive, affirmative and supportive manner.
- Respondents either ‘strongly agreed’ (67%) or ‘agreed’ (33%) that they carried out the validation visit in an open-minded and objective manner.
- Respondents either ‘strongly agreed’ (89%) or ‘agreed’ (11%) that they gave the settings sufficient opportunity to discuss the validation ratings and report.

Three respondents commented that the most difficult aspect was managing the duration of the visit, especially in relation to the feedback session with the manager/owner at the end. Other difficulties mentioned included:

- Level of documentation not included in portfolio but left to be viewed on site (1 response)
- In small settings, finding a place where one can be unobtrusive but can clearly observe (1 response)
- Filling out paperwork while conducting the feedback session (1 response)
- Ensuring feedback is very positive but still gives required messages (1 response)
- Waiting for staff to settle and relax (1 response)
- Ensuring review queries are all addressed – maintaining focus (1 response).

Validation Appeals Process

All respondents found the Síolta Validation Appeals Process either “very easy” (67%) or “easy” (33%) to understand.

All respondents confirmed that they had explained the appeals process to settings during the validation visit and all except one (who couldn’t remember) left a copy of the Síolta Validation Application for Appeal form with the settings at the end of the validation visit.

Suggestions for improving the appeals process were as follows:

- Extending the appeals window (2 responses)
- Starting appeals window from the official notification of ratings rather than the validation visit (1 response)
- Emailing the appeals form to settings so that they have the option to complete it electronically (1 response).

After the Validation Visit

75% of respondents thought that Síolta Validators should have to provide written feedback to every setting following a validation visit, however only 67% of respondents reported having actually done so.

All those who responded to the question on the calculation of Síolta ratings stated that they understood how the 75 individual component ratings are combined to give the ratings for each Standard and the overall rating. Three respondents did not answer the question.

All those who responded to the question on whether the experience of validating a Síolta Quality Portfolio will affect how they mentor settings in the future stated that it would. Two respondents did not answer the question.

- 8 respondents mentioned portfolio building and that they now have a greater understanding of what is required to build an accurate picture of quality practice
- 3 respondents said it would help them better prepare settings for validation visits and to reassure settings regarding the role of Validator
- 2 respondents stated that they will pass on new ideas and areas of practice described in the portfolios to their own settings
- 2 respondents believed that conducting validations had given them a complete picture of the Síolta QAP process, which will allow them to feel more confident mentoring services.

Suggestions for improving the Síolta Mentor Manual were as follows:

- Give more focus to portfolio building (3 responses): emphasis on quality over quantity of evidence, templates/greater direction to support evidence gathering and presentation, tips on using multi-media evidence
- Highlight that a mentor's working relationship with a service can make a difference to how they engage with the process (1 response)
- Expand section on self-assessments to include more around reflective practice (1 response)
- Develop a research digest to support Mentors – role of mentor, supporting reflective practice (1 response).



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