Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland

REVIEW ON SECTOR QUALITY

OECD

Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland

REVIEW ON SECTOR QUALITY

OECD

BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Members of the OECD.

This document, as well as any data and map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

Note by Turkey
The information in this document with reference to "Cyprus" relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognises the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of the United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the "Cyprus issue".

Note by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Union
The Republic of Cyprus is recognised by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

Foreword

Some of the workplace skills that we value most, whether it is curiosity and creativity, or an ability to think independently while still working collaboratively, start to be developed in the earliest years of life. Early childhood education and care (ECEC), as children's first experience outside the home environment, holds immense promise for guiding children towards a positive and rich life-long learning and development path. However, this role of ECEC is coupled with great responsibility in not only ensuring access to but also quality of services.

Historically, policies on ECEC have focused on setting norms to ensure the safety of young children, such as the formulation of standards on buildings, materials or staff-to-child group ratios. However, it is the quality of interactions that children experience, known as process quality, which matters most for their development, learning and well-being. Fostering process quality involves designing policies in a way that best facilitates meaningful interactions in ECEC settings, going beyond simply a regulatory nature. This was the focus of the Quality beyond Regulations policy review, which the OECD developed to help countries and jurisdictions better support the different dimensions of quality in ECEC.

As part of its participation in this project, Ireland asked the OECD to conduct an in-depth review of the Irish ECEC system (also referred to as Early Learning and Care or ELC in Ireland). Ireland is currently pursuing a strong policy agenda for ECEC and has committed itself to improving access to, as well as affordability and quality of ECEC provision. These ongoing reforms are centred around the ECEC workforce, the funding system, home-based ECEC provision and governance of the sector. The overarching objective of the present review is to provide policy recommendations to strengthen the performance of the ECEC system in Ireland, in line with national policy goals. The realisation of this report was possible due to the strong engagement of a large range of stakeholders in Ireland, as well as the support of the European Commission.

The review focuses on policies in the area of workforce development, and quality assurance and improvement. The ECEC workforce, which encompasses professionals who interact with children and families in ECEC settings, is at the core of the quality of children's experiences within these settings. Raising the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce and retaining high-quality staff is a challenge for many countries including Ireland. ECEC staff's initial education, professional development and working conditions all matter for the quality of provision and workforce satisfaction, thus making them priorities for reform in Ireland. Furthermore, ECEC in Ireland is almost fully offered by private providers, including chains, large structures and small structures. In this context, the quality assurance system (e.g. monitoring and inspection) provides important feedback on strengths and weaknesses in the system to inform further actions for improvement and provide valuable information for parents to help them evaluate the quality of services when making decisions about their children's early education.

The report discusses how carefully designed policies can support meaningful interactions for all children as part of their ECEC experience - this is where focus should be placed.

Acknowledgments

Table of contents

FIGURES

TABLES

Abbreviations and acronyms

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
Aistear	Curriculum framework
Better Start QDS	Better Start Quality Development Service
CBR	Country Background Report
CCC	City and County Childcare Committee
CCSP	Community Childcare Subvention Plus programme
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DE	Department of Education
DE Inspectorate	Department of Education Inspectorate
EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education (A universal state-funded programme providing two years of free pre-school for children, not to be confused with ECEC)
ELC	Early Learning and Care (national term used to refer to early childhood education and care in Ireland)
EU	European Union
FET	Further Education and Training
First 5	Ireland's Whole-of-government ten-year strategy for babies, young children and their families
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
INCO	Inclusion Co-ordinator
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
JLC	Joint Labour Committee
LINC	Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCS	National Childcare Scheme
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NSAI	National Síolta Aistear Initiative
NVCO	National Voluntary Childcare Organisation
OSAG	Operations and Systems Alignment Group
PACG	Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines
PATD	Professional Awards Type Descriptors
Pobal	An organisation working on behalf of the Irish government to support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion and development
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
QAB	Qualifications Advisory Board
QAP	Quality Assurance Programme
QFEYEI	Quality Framework for Early Years Education Inspection
QRF	Tusla Quality and Regulatory Framework
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland

RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAC	School Age Childcare
Síolta	National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education
SIPTU	Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union
SOLAS	Further Education and Training Authority
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey
Tusla	Child and Family Agency (provides services to support child and family protection and welfare)
Tusla EYI	Tusla Early Years Inspectorate
Tusla QRF	Tusla Quality and Regulatory Framework

Executive summary

Ireland is currently pursuing a strong policy agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), with the adoption of a long-term Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families covering the period 2019 to 2028 (hereafter referred to as "First 5"). With this strategy, the country has committed itself to improving access, affordability and quality of ECEC provision. Related work and reforms are ongoing on the ECEC workforce, the funding system, home-based ECEC provision and governance of the sector. Implementing plans to increase public funding substantively in order to make ECEC more affordable for families, to strengthen the workforce and to support the policy agenda for quality improvement is an important step towards addressing the challenges of Ireland's ECEC sector.

Enrolment, funding and provision

In Ireland, nearly all children aged 3 to 5 (who were not enrolled in primary education) were enrolled in ECEC in 2019, which is above the OECD average; and 25% of children under age 3 were enrolled, which is close to the OECD average.

Despite an increase in public investment over the past decade, average expenditure per child aged 3 to 5 is below the OECD average. Moreover, among OECD countries, Ireland has one of the highest levels of childcare costs for parents. However, if recent trends in public investment and commitments announced in the budget for 2022 were maintained over the longer term, Ireland would be making progress in catching up with OECD averages in future years. Given the market-driven nature of the ECEC sector, increased funding should be accompanied by mechanisms to ensure that it translates into higher quality.

The creation of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme – not to be confused with the term ECEC – and the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) have signalled further public engagement for the sector. The ECCE programme provides public funding for pre-primary education and has contributed to high enrolment rates for the concerned age group. However, public funding through the ECCE programme has created an incentive for providers to focus on the age group served by this programme and has attracted the most qualified staff to the programme, leading to a fragmentation of provision at the detriment of ECEC for the youngest children. It will therefore be important to overcome the duality between provision for the ECCE programme and non-ECCE provision by increasing funding for younger children, aligning incentives to attract qualified staff and extending education-focused inspections to non-ECCE programmes, as committed to in the First 5 strategy.

Workforce development

Raising the levels of qualifications of staff working in the sector and the quality of their preparation has been a core element of Ireland's recent policies to improve the quality of provision for children. As a result of these efforts, the qualifications of staff in ECEC centres have indeed risen, with the percentages of both staff holding the minimum qualification to work with children (ISCED 4 or NFQ level 5) and staff with an ISCED Level 6 qualification (bachelor's degree) increasing over recent years. The government

has made efforts to raise the quality of initial education programmes for ECEC staff, for instance, by setting standards and requiring the inclusion of a practical component.

The relatively strong focus on formal types of education to raise the qualification of the workforce would nevertheless benefit from being embedded in a more comprehensive approach that reflects the different needs of different staff. This requires a clear strategy involving employers, training providers and workforce representatives to facilitate access to training and also support more informal and centre-embedded learning, which can be demanding in terms of commitment, cost and time. The government has recently taken a more direct involvement in steering professional development, notably with the creation of a dedicated agency, Better Start, and the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative. The recognition of prior learning is another important component that needs to be further developed.

The market-driven nature of the sector and the low level of public funding have resulted in low wages and precarious working conditions for staff (with part of them working part-time and on temporary contracts), causing a high turnover in the sector. The establishment in 2021 of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) tasked to develop and propose requirements for pay and working conditions in ECEC is an important step towards the development of wage standards. It will be important that the JLC covers several aspects of terms and conditions of employment, including fixed-term contracts and working time.

Developing leadership will be an important condition for the success of ongoing policy initiatives to improve quality in ECEC in Ireland, be it through further staff development, through greater consistency in the implementation of the curriculum and quality frameworks, or through a greater focus on self-evaluation.

Quality assurance and improvement

In recent years, the Irish government has established a range of quality assurance arrangements for the ECEC sector. In addition to monitoring of compliance with the regulatory standards that cover both structural and process quality, education-focused inspections were introduced for the publicly funded ECCE programme to reinforce the focus put on process quality. Ireland plans to extend education-focused inspections to non-ECCE provision and to bring a larger percentage of home-based settings within the scope of regulation and inspection.

Responsibilities and functions are allocated across different institutions, which has translated into an increased burden for providers, taking too much time away from staff focusing on children's experiences. Streamlining the activities of the range of bodies engaged in inspection and regulation, and developing a single integrated framework to be used as the common reference point for all inspection activities and for self-evaluation should be a priority going forward.

Complementing the role of the inspectorates, a number of organisations provide ongoing support and guidance to providers on quality and improvement to respond to issues identified in inspections and to develop improvement strategies independently of inspections. However, access for providers to external guidance and support for improvement is limited and patchy. While potentially challenging, the objective should be to establish a more easily accessible 'one-stop-shop' approach to directing providers to all relevant guidance and sources of support.

Several national bodies gather and analyse data and evidence to monitor the quality of the ECEC sector. Strengthening arrangements for appropriate data sharing between the national bodies with an interest in quality monitoring and improvement would allow for a more holistic view of performance in the sector.

Assessments and recommendations

Governance, funding and provision

Ireland has a strong and ambitious policy agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care that builds on significant progress achieved so far

Ireland is currently pursuing a strong and ambitious policy agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) with the adoption of a long-term Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families covering the period 2019 to 2028 (hereafter referred to as "First 5").

With this strategy, the country has committed itself to improving access, affordability and quality of ECEC provision, while involving stakeholders in the development of more specific policies to meet these goals. Related work on a new Workforce Development Plan, which should put forward strategies to further professionalise the workforce, has been underway and is due for publication at the end of 2021. A National Action Plan for Childminding has already been published to develop concrete steps for extending regulation and supporting quality development in home-based settings. A new funding model is also being developed with initial announcements made in October 2021, while the existing support structures are being re-considered through a review of the "operating model". Lastly, the government plans reforms of monitoring and inspection arrangements to ensure a more integrated and proportionate approach to quality assurance and improvement.

This policy agenda builds on a shared feeling in the sector that important milestones have been reached over the past 20 years since the adoption of a National Childcare Strategy in 1999 and the creation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme in 2000. The creation of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme – not to be confused with the term ECEC – has signalled further public engagement for the sector. This programme provides public funding for children aged 2 years 8 months to 5 years 6 months to attend pre-school. A number of further public funding schemes have been in place providing support to parents, recently streamlined through a National Childcare Scheme in 2019.

In terms of children's access, the participation of children aged 3 to 5 was nearly universal in 2019, placing Ireland among the leading countries in enrolment rates for this age group. A minority of children under the age of 3 (25%) were enrolled in registered ECEC services in 2019, the same as the OECD average. The extent of participation in other types of ECEC, such as home-based settings, is unclear.

Important pieces have already been put in place concerning the quality in ECEC provision. In 2009 and 2006, respectively a curriculum framework and a quality framework, *Aistear* and *Síolta*, were introduced, both of which are child-centred and play-based. The use of both frameworks in practice – which has differed across settings – has been promoted more actively in recent years through dedicated resources and training. The introduction of education-focused inspections constitutes a further

element of the sector's more recent quality agenda, complementing statutory inspections that already examined process quality alongside structural quality and compliance with regulations. A review of the curriculum framework ("Updating *Aistear*") is providing an important opportunity to further strengthen the use of the framework across settings.

While co-ordination arrangements have been put in place and levels of public investment been increased, sector governance remains complex and levels of funding relatively low

However, while the current policy agenda has created a large number of expectations for positive change for the sector, there are concerns about the extent and pace of reforms, and the way in which stakeholders and practitioners on the ground are consulted and involved.

The connection and sequencing of different elements of reform also appear less clear to stakeholders. This may reflect overall complexity in responsibility and governance for the sector, even if arrangements to facilitate co-ordination and stakeholder engagement have been put in place. While policy responsibility for ECEC (outside primary school) lies with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), the Department of Education (DE), also has some specific and some shared responsibilities in the areas of quality, workforce development and curriculum, as well as special needs education. The DE Early Years Education Policy Unit is co-located with the DCEDIY. Other institutions play a role for more discrete areas of responsibility. Pobal, for instance, administers the government's funding schemes and audits compliance with funding requirements. There are two inspectorates, and the Operations and Systems Alignment Group chaired by DCEDIY seeks to promote co-ordination between them.

Public funding needs to increase substantively to match the aspirations of such an ambitious reform agenda, even if it has already increased in recent years. A review of the current funding model is in process. Indeed, by international comparison, spending on ECEC remains relatively low. In 2018, annual expenditure per child aged 3 to 5 amounted to USD 4 439, compared to USD 10 118, on average across OECD member countries. A substantial increase in public funding, combined with adequate monitoring and leadership capacity in settings, seems needed to make ECEC more affordable for families, while improving quality and providing good working conditions for staff. Existing funding schemes, such as the National Childcare Scheme, also appear to entail some administrative complexity, resulting in difficulties for some parents to access financial support.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> *Strengthen co-ordination across departments and agencies to deliver coherent and efficient ECEC policies while ensuring that co-ordination arrangements are not unduly burdensome.*
>
> *Implement plans to increase public funding substantially in order to make ECEC more affordable for families, strengthen the workforce and support the policy agenda for quality improvement in the sector, as announced in the budget for 2022.*

The existing model of private provision creates challenges for access, affordability and quality, while provision overall appears somewhat fragmented

In Ireland, centre-based ECEC services are mainly offered by private providers, which can be for-profit or community-based. Among OECD countries, Ireland represents indeed only one of five countries in which more than three-quarters of children attending pre-primary education were enrolled in private institutions. This model of provision is seen as creating challenges for access, affordability and quality, even if it is acknowledged that it has facilitated a quick expansion of centre-based provision in particular

for older children. Childcare costs for parents remain among the highest in OECD countries, while working conditions in the sector have not caught up with increasing qualification requirements.

At the same time, community-based providers, which often serve more disadvantaged children and may have difficulty raising sufficient fees from parents, seem to be struggling to be financially sustainable. This is also evidenced by the use of staff employed through government-funded programmes in order to support unemployed people in gaining employment. A number of stakeholders have been raising demands to progress towards a fully publicly funded and managed system, also encouraged by the government's recent involvement to ensure the operation and funding of ECEC in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current model of provision and funding may moreover create imbalances in supply and demand, and lead to a fragmentation of provision with different levels of financing and parental fees. For instance, public funding through the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme has reportedly created an incentive for providers to focus on the age group served by this programme. This has led to the closure of rooms for younger children, which are more expensive to run due to lower child-staff ratios, and for which funding needs to be topped up with parental fees. Funding arrangements also attract highly qualified staff in ECCE rooms, and therefore for work with the oldest children.

> *Recommendation:*
>
> *Make efforts to overcome the duality between provision for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and non-ECCE provision by increasing funding for younger children, aligning incentives to attract qualified staff, and extending education-focused inspections into non-ECCE programmes, as committed to in First 5.*

Plans to bring childminders into the regulatory system are highly welcome, but need to be developed further with care so as not to drive childminders out of the ECEC system

Childminding clearly plays a substantial role in the overall pattern of Irish ECEC provision. National sources estimate that in 2016, 13% of pre-school aged children were cared for by a childminder, au pair or nanny. Home-based ECEC is however largely unregulated in Ireland. Childminders are self-employed, and the costs for childminding depend on the terms and conditions negotiated between childminders and parents. No financial subsidies, such as through the National Childcare Scheme, are available to parents employing unregistered childminders, which raises the importance of moving childminding into a more regulated space as planned under First 5 and the National Action Plan for Childminding.

As underlined in the National Action Plan for Childminding, options to regulate the childminding sector need to be considered carefully so as not to lose high-quality staff and reduce provision. There will be a need for the development of registration and qualification requirements, and quality standards that are coherent with those established for centre-based provision but appropriate to the childminding context. It will be crucial that the new arrangements are proportionate and deliverable in practice and that sufficient support is available to help childminders engage positively with them. Regulation and funding should keep the administration involved to the extent necessary. Creating more opportunities for professional development of childminders also requires dedicated strategies. Besides (re-)assessing current support structures, such as the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), one option includes the development of professional networks of childminders to facilitate professional learning and exchange, as committed to in the National Action Plan for Childminding.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> *Advance with plans and commitments in the National Action Plan for Childminding to increase the regulation of the childminding sector and ensure registration, training and funding reflect the nature of childminders' work and involve minimum administrative burden for childminders and parents. Build on the meaningful consultation of childminders themselves to develop new regulations.*

Innovative programmes support the creation of inclusive environments for children, but other disadvantaged groups of children might require additional strategies

As part of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, a specific initiative has been developed to support settings in delivering an inclusive experience for children. This Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) provides different levels of universal and targeted support to children in ECCE rooms for centres that apply. The model has been highly welcomed in the sector, although there is some evidence of a need for additional specialised supports and expertise (e.g. through more multidisciplinary teams). Stakeholders also appear to demand further efforts in addressing other sources of disadvantage in ECEC, in particular for children from Traveller and Roma communities. Strengthening connections with initiatives in the school system could be worthwhile in view of facilitating the transitions of disadvantaged children.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> *Consider further efforts to support inclusion in ECEC, such as providing additional specialised expertise and building connections with initiatives in tackling disadvantage from the primary school system, as committed to in First 5.*
>
> *Make further efforts in addressing other sources of disadvantage in ECEC, in particular for the inclusion of children from Traveller and Roma communities.*

Workforce development

The importance of workforce development is strongly recognised in policy, but a continued focus on the quality of education and training programmes is needed

ECEC professionals are key agents for supporting the quality of an ECEC system and for shaping children's everyday interactions, which are likely to influence their learning, development and well-being. Raising the levels of qualifications of staff working in the sector and the quality of their preparation has been a core element of Ireland's recent policies to improve the quality of provision for children (e.g. through legal requirements, financial incentives and some funding for upskilling). As a result of these efforts, the qualifications of staff in ECEC centres have indeed risen, with 94% of staff working with children holding the minimum ISCED 4 qualification (NFQ level 5) in 2019/2020, compared to 71% in 2010.

As part of the country's First 5 strategy and a new Workforce Development Plan, Ireland is now pursuing the next stage in the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce. The First 5 strategy includes a commitment to progress towards a graduate-led workforce, with the specific target of at least 50% of ECEC staff in registered centres holding a degree by 2028 (at least ISCED 6 or NFQ level 7). Based on the current qualification profile, this means increasing the share of degree holders by 17 percentage points between 2021 and 2028.

These goals and plans recognise the importance of education and training for high-quality ECEC provision, and may, in the long term, help raise social recognition for the sector and support the development of a stronger shared professional identity. Importantly, plans have been underpinned by the introduction of new standards for training programmes for staff, broadening for example programme content and raising the profile of practical experience. These new standards provide good opportunities to review, raise and harmonise the quality of programmes, even if continued attention to quality is required (e.g. the qualification of teacher educators, feedback loops between training providers and ECEC settings, linkages between training for ECEC staff and primary school teachers), and the impact of current changes in programmes needs to be monitored to inform further adjustments (e.g. through surveys of students).

The extent and quality of practical experience as part of programmes in particular needs to be assessed and supported. Further careful reflection could be useful on ways in which to strengthen work-based learning for new professionals in the future.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> *Build on the momentum of newly created standards, criteria and guidelines for qualification programmes to improve their quality. Monitor the impact of recent changes on the experience of students to inform future adjustments.*
>
> *Support ECEC centres in offering quality practical placements through adequate resources, guidance/standards and regulations. The government should facilitate partnerships and trust between centres and institutions in co-developing and assessing placements and programmes.*

A more comprehensive approach seems needed to support all staff in their development, and to better recognise the needs and experience of the current workforce

The relatively strong focus on formal types of education to raise the qualification of the workforce would nevertheless benefit from being embedded in a more comprehensive approach that reflects different needs of different staff. New staff need inductions that provide guidance and mentoring from more experienced colleagues to adapt to concrete work situations, for example. On the other hand, current staff already with degree-level qualifications also need to keep improving their practices, including through less structured training. Further strategies should be developed to support a broader range of professional learning in different types of settings, including those of smaller size. Such opportunities should include more informal and centre-embedded learning.

Particular attention needs to be paid to the needs of current practitioners who want to gain new qualifications. This requires a clear strategy involving employers, training providers and workforce representatives to facilitate access to formal training, which can be demanding in terms of commitment, cost and time. Although some settings may reimburse training costs to staff, this does not seem very common. Financial support from the government has been made available in the past through a bursary scheme, the Learner Fund, which should continue providing support. More information on available funding that staff can access should also be available.

The recognition of prior learning is another important component that needs to be further developed. The experience of other social sectors, such as nursing, in Ireland or elsewhere could provide valuable perspectives on how to bring qualifications and experience together in a twin track system. Lastly, care needs to be taken in the message that the country's upskilling policy communicates to current staff, 50% of which are not envisaged to hold a degree qualification (at least ISCED 6, NFQ level 7) in 2028. Equally important, a discussion is needed on the role(s) of staff with lower levels of qualifications in settings in the future (e.g. as an assistant or co-professional in a room).

> *Recommendations:*
>
> *Build and support a larger ecosystem of formal and informal opportunities for professional development based on an assessment of current staff engagement and needs. Support centre-embedded learning and learning between centres with dedicated strategies (e.g. by creating time in schedules, building team leader capacity).*
>
> *Put in place a clear strategy to realise the goals for upskilling the workforce, based on the engagement of employers, staff and government. This should include the recognition of prior learning or skills acquired on the job, flexibility to combine work and study through part-time and blended learning, study leave and funding arrangements.*

Working conditions are relatively poor, contributing to high turnover and challenges for settings to work on quality improvement

Staff working conditions and well-being can be important drivers of process quality. In Ireland, with ECEC being almost fully provided by private institutions, the government's general approach has been not to regulate most aspects of staff's working conditions. Since the representation of employers and the workforce has only begun to take shape more recently, there has also been no collective bargaining of working conditions. Terms of work are negotiated between individual employers and employees. Combined with generally tight budgets in the sector, this has resulted in relatively poor working conditions.

Salaries, which are a crucial component of working conditions, are low from both a national and international perspective. This is also linked to the number of hours worked by staff. A relatively high share of ECEC staff work part-time, especially in centres only delivering the hours paid for through the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme (3 hours per day or 15 hours per week). Some contracts moreover only cover the pre-school year. This is again related to the way provision is organised and funded. Similarly, job security appears to be less strong than for many other workers in Ireland, even if the share of staff on permanent contracts differs across types of staff in ECEC centres. Other benefits, such as sick pay, maternity leave or pensions are also at a minimum for ECEC staff. This situation is quite different to primary education, where salaries and other benefits such as annual leave are very attractive.

Relatively poor working conditions contribute to a highly gendered workforce, with most staff being women, as well as high turnover rates in the sector. On average, the share of staff leaving services in the last twelve months was estimated at 18% for 2019/2020, with some variation across regions and types of centres. Half of services also reported experiencing challenges in recruiting suitably qualified staff. A lack of stability in the workforce can have a number of negative effects on the quality of provision, especially where staff change during the year, as it is important for children to learn and play in a stable environment. Frequent changes to centre staffing also mean that it is complicated to build up internal professional capacity and to follow up effectively on external inspections. Where staff leave the sector, investments in initial preparation and in gaining additional qualifications are lost. Better working conditions are therefore also an important pre-condition for realising the expected gains of the current upskilling goals. With new highly educated staff entering the sector, turnover rates might otherwise simply increase further.

A new mechanism has been established to negotiate working conditions for the sector between employers and the workforce, which could be supported with further policies

Attracting and maintaining a high-quality workforce cannot go without working conditions commensurate with the content, responsibilities and expectations attached to the job. One strategy for going forward lies in further clarifying roles and responsibilities and related requirements for knowledge, skills and values, while ensuring that wages are aligned with these roles. This can build on previous work carried out on the definition of occupational roles for the sector. Greater clarity about roles and possible opportunities for career development could also help make work in the sector more attractive and help retain staff. As new roles and career structures are developed, some innovative models of shared staffing across settings could be explored, also to take account of the large number of small centres. To benefit all children, and support the development of a more integrated system of provision, roles should nevertheless be defined for the sector as a whole, and not for a specific programme.

With low levels of public investment in ECEC and considerable fees for parents, higher wages cannot come without additional funding from the government as planned as part of First 5. Initial features of the new funding model, as revealed with the announcement on the budget for 2022, and further revisions to the existing funding model discussed at the time of writing are important to achieve improvements in working conditions. As featured in October 2021 announcements, the allocation of new funding can include

clauses that ensure that it translates into enhanced quality, including better working conditions, with unchanged parental fees. Furthermore, in order to ensure that increased investments lead indeed to better quality, monitoring and inspection arrangements need to be strengthened to set incentives for quality improvement as discussed below. Building leadership capacity in settings will also be important. A more integrated provision of ECEC and linkages with school-age childcare, which is often also provided by ECEC settings, could help improve some aspects of staff's working conditions, such as limited contracts or working hours.

In mid-2021, a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) for the sector was established by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, following a preparatory process led by DCEDIY, bringing together trade union and employer representatives under an independent chair, and tasked to develop and propose minimum requirements for pay and working conditions in ECEC. This is an important step towards the development of wage standards. Acknowledging that the scope of agreements under a JLC is determined by the parties to the JLC and not by the government, it will be important that the JLC covers several aspects of terms and conditions of employment, including fixed-term contracts and working time. At present, the time available for ECEC staff outside of their work with children is limited, leaving little time for engagement in professional learning, while demands on time have actually increased (e.g. for administration and paperwork related to inspections or funding). While the government does not take part in the JLC, it can make the allocation of additional funding contingent on progress being made in achieving a successful outcome from the JLC, as has already been done in the October 2021 announcements.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> *Continue efforts and discussions with stakeholders to define ECEC categories of staff, their required competencies/qualifications and career pathways, as done during preparation of the Workforce Development Plan, and how they can be implemented locally.*
>
> *Commit to maintain the Joint Labour Committee (JLC) on a long-term basis and continue to make the allocation of additional funding conditional to the achievement of working conditions standards. Acknowledging that the scope of agreements under a JLC is determined by the parties to the JLC and not by the government, the JLC should cover minimum wages and pay scale for different categories of staff; the definition of working hours with the inclusion of protected time for activities to be performed without children; terms and conditions for employment. As part of the JLC, the question of staff hired under a succession of short-term contracts with breaks in between can also be discussed.*

Leadership will be key for making change happen in settings, and some promising initiatives exist, but more should still be done to strengthen leadership capacity

Leadership is a key element for developing and sustaining quality in ECEC by creating a stimulating environment for both staff and children. Similar to a number of other countries, attention to leadership development in ECEC settings has thus far been rather incipient in Ireland, although it has been given greater importance as part of ongoing policy initiatives. The introduction of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) as part of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme has led to the creation of an inclusion co-ordinator role in participating settings to promote inclusive practices – something that has been highly welcomed by staff. Other than that, the organisation of leadership and management is largely up to individual centres and/or the providers to which they belong.

Leadership however will be an important condition for the success of ongoing policy initiatives to improve quality in ECEC in Ireland, be it through further staff development, through greater consistency in the implementation of the *Aistear* curriculum and *Síolta* quality frameworks, or through a greater focus on self-evaluation. To further develop leadership in the sector, it will first be important to gain a better understanding of the current leadership arrangements in different types of settings, to then develop a shared vision of the leadership functions required for quality provision. While effective leadership is always context dependent, there needs to be a strong focus on pedagogical leadership, especially in large centres

whose managers might have more of a business background. Leadership can then be further promoted through both preparation and training as well as monitoring and inspection.

Particular attention will also have to be paid to the large number of small centres and how leadership can be developed in these settings. This could again be supported through the development of more integrated ECEC settings and linkages with school-age childcare.

Lastly, the demanding nature of ECEC centre leadership should be sufficiently reflected in employment conditions, such as remuneration, to help attract staff to leadership roles and encourage them to stay. Adequate support systems may help mitigate work-related stress, such as the one stemming from too much administrative work, and support leaders in balancing their functions.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> *Develop pedagogical leadership capacity in settings. This should include a clearer definition of the role of centre managers and adequate preparation for their role through dedicated leadership training. The role of room leaders should also be rethought and clarified, to include pedagogical leadership in rooms or centres more broadly, including with staff for younger children.*

Quality assurance and improvement

Arrangements for regulation and inspection provide a good basis for quality improvement, and efforts are underway to raise stakeholders' voice in inspections

In recent years, the Irish government has established a range of quality assurance arrangements for the ECEC sector, with responsibilities and functions allocated across different institutions.

Systematic arrangements for the statutory registration of centre-based and of part of home-based provision are in place (although a small minority of childminders are registered) with Tusla, a state agency, managing and maintaining the national register. Regulations for ECEC, most recently updated in 2016, set out standards that providers need to meet in order to achieve and maintain registration. Continued compliance with regulatory standards is monitored nationally through a systematic risk-based inspection programme for all registered providers through Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate.

To drive improvement in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, at the request of DCEDIY the Department of Education Inspectorate (DE Inspectorate) has extended inspections to the ECCE programme, and there are plans to also extend to programmes for children under the age of three. In addition to these two forms of inspections, a third form of external review is undertaken by Pobal, a separate public agency, with a focus on compliance with DCEDIY funding requirements.

The Tusla inspection programme has played an important role in ensuring centre-based provision meets the expectations set out in regulations. Tusla takes into account several factors of risk to determine the schedule of inspections but all services receive an inspection within a three-year timeframe. A Quality and Regulatory Framework helps clarify expectations for compliance, while an e-learning programme supports providers in preparing for these inspections. The DE inspections, using their own quality framework, have also already had a positive impact, providing impetus for a shift towards focusing more strongly on process quality. These education-focused inspections aim to inspect ECCE rooms at least once every five years.

Systematic ways for tapping into the experience of the direct users of services should be a priority for any monitoring and quality assurance strategy, although engaging parents' and children's voices in ECEC inspections has particular challenges. Some innovative steps are being taken to build children's views into consultations in Ireland, and both Tusla and the DE inspections are exploring ways of better engaging with parents and children in future inspection models.

Although developments are still at a very early stage and much stronger impact needs to be achieved in fostering a culture of effective self-evaluation and improvement, inspection bodies have clearly recognised the value of promoting the development of self-evaluation skills and practices through their work. The ongoing review of the curriculum framework, *Aistear*, provides a welcomed opportunity to create new momentum for improving the ability of providers to self-evaluate, if accompanied by a well-resourced programme of advice, training and support. As the capacity for self-evaluation develops, external review can move even further in the direction of risk-based or proportionate programming.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> *Encourage settings to take responsibility for their own continuous improvement by further developing resources and programmes of support aimed at building capacity for self-evaluation and improvement planning in the sector as committed to in the First 5 strategy. Inspections of ECEC centres should include attention to how good settings are at reviewing their own provision and taking action to improve.*
>
> *Pursue as a priority the initiatives currently underway to increase the engagement of children and parents/carers in inspection processes.*

In the short term, the different strands of regulation and inspection need to be better co-ordinated, and, in the longer term, potentially more fully integrated

Overall, however, providers find current arrangements for external review, to be somewhat confusing and as taking too much time away from staff focusing on children's experiences. This may be a particular issue for small providers. The focus in inspection seems to be overlapping between Tusla and DE, with both taking an interest in process quality, albeit to different degrees.

Streamlining the activities of the range of bodies engaged in inspection and regulation should be a priority going forward. This will also potentially be even more important as childminding is brought within the scope of regulation and inspection. In the short term, this should include steps to deepen the integration of frameworks and methodologies used for inspection, in particular by Tusla and DE Inspectorates, and improving the flow of data between institutions. Taken together, the existing quality and curriculum frameworks present a somewhat complex landscape of documentation to navigate. Key quality documents that settings need to engage with, should be integrated into a more coherent overall package. Both Tusla and DE inspections could then draw selectively on this common framework appropriate to their needs.

Continued attention should also be paid to ensuring proactive, systematic co-ordination of inspection programming between Tusla and DE inspections. Going forward, there may be benefit in arranging some joint inspections within the overall programme, providing an integrated experience for the setting and promoting exchange of expertise between inspectors with different backgrounds.

Over and above improvements to co-ordination, possibilities for a more significant re-shaping of the regulatory landscape should be considered in the longer term (e.g. bringing inspection and monitoring within a single organisation). This would also need to consider the current monitoring activities of Pobal, and especially so if significant changes are made to the overall funding model.

As part of these changes to re-shape the regulatory landscape, the consistency in quality assurance arrangements for different types of provision should be reviewed. The aim should be to bring all ECEC provision within a coherent set of quality assurance arrangements operating in line with a core set of principles and quality expectations, while being adapted proportionately to different settings. Extending the scope of regulation and inspection to childminding will send a clear signal that it is equally important and worthy of attention for quality development.

Recommendations:

Take steps to streamline and integrate the processes of regulation and inspection experienced by ECEC providers as committed to in the First 5 strategy. In the short term, deepen collaborative working between Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate and the DE Inspectorate. In the longer term, consider bringing their functions within a single body that provides integrated care and education inspections.

Develop a single integrated framework to be used as the common reference point for all inspection activities and for self-evaluation by settings. An inter-agency group including Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate, the DE Inspectorate and support bodies including Better Start should take the lead in developing this framework through a process of extensive consultation and practitioner involvement.

Inspections have a clear developmental focus, but more robust steps could be in place for intervention and more information on quality could be available to service users

How the outputs of monitoring and inspection are used is a further area worth consideration. Inspections in the Irish ECEC system have a clear developmental purpose in a range of ways. Every inspection provides settings with an independent perspective on the strengths and weaknesses, drawing on wide experience of evaluating settings. Processes are also in place to promote improvements when settings are found to be persistently non-compliant and/or falling short of expected standards. Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate supports providers to make the necessary improvements when non-compliance is identified and prevent them from re-occurring. ECEC settings which Tusla finds to be non-compliant with regulations can ultimately be removed from the register in the case of continued breach of regulations, although this only happens very rarely. DE inspections have employed an improvement-focused style of inspecting, reflecting the approach developed for school inspections. The DE Inspectorate can refer struggling settings to sources of external support although, unlike for Tusla, no direct route of referral has been established.

However, it can apparently be difficult to address persistent quality concerns and to enforce the necessary remedial action. The range of statutory options open to Tusla to ensure providers take prompt action to address concerns, short of moving to de-registration, appear to be too limited. Processes for intervening robustly where services fall short in aspects of structural and/or process quality should be reviewed, introducing stronger intermediate steps in the statutory intervention options open to Tusla. Complaints received by Tusla are analysed and may subsequently be used to inform inspection activity but a more explicit and widely publicised national system of complaints could help address quality concerns and increase public confidence that concerns are being addressed robustly where they occur.

Consideration should also be given to increasing the transparency of evaluations and to making the results of inspections more accessible to the public. At present, it seems difficult for parents and other stakeholders to access a clear and succinct analysis of the quality that the services in their area provide. Using transparency as a driver for improving quality would appear particularly relevant in a market-based system of provision as currently exists in the Irish ECEC sector. This could entail developing and publicising an integrated online parent portal that brings together relevant information in a user-friendly and accessible form, in line with the existing commitment in the First 5 strategy.

Recommendations:

Review the statutory steps available for Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate to deploy in cases of services that are falling persistently short of expected standards. Consider developing a more formal system for service users to have complaints reviewed by Tusla, as the body responsible for statutory registration, if they remain dissatisfied after exhausting the complaints procedures operated by providers.

In pursuit of the commitment in the First 5 strategy, increase ease of access for parents/carers to user-friendly information about the quality of services, drawing on the results of both Tusla and DE inspections.

A number of quality support structures have been established, but need to be streamlined into a stronger development support infrastructure

Complementing the role of the inspectorates, a number of organisations provide ongoing support and guidance to providers on quality and improvement, to respond to issues identified in inspections and to develop improvement strategies independently of inspections. For example, the Better Start Quality Development Service provides an important source of active consultancy for centres seeking to address development needs. At a more local level, 30 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) receive national funding to provide local co-ordination and support for the ECEC sector in their areas and a number of National Voluntary Childcare Organisations provide a source of guidance and resources.

Overall, however, access for providers to external guidance and support for improvement is limited and patchy. The capacity and resources of the CCCs, for instance, appear to be variable, and their functions have been changing to more administrative tasks and less provision of quality support, as compared to before. Developing a stronger and more coherent infrastructure for development support should be a priority for the next stages of national policy development. This will be especially important given the plan to bring a large number of unregulated home-based providers into the system.

While potentially challenging, the objective should be to establish a more easily accessible 'one-stop-shop' approach to directing providers to all relevant guidance and sources of support. The extent to which the existing City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), or perhaps larger organisational units, could provide a stronger 'middle layer' merits exploration. A commitment to create a new national body, provisionally called 'Childcare Ireland', will be directly relevant to these considerations.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> *Develop a stronger and more coherent infrastructure for providing quality development support for ECEC settings replacing the relatively patchy and fragmented provision currently in place.*
>
> *Improve synergies between providers of continuing professional development in the short term, while working towards a more unified system of quality support in the long term.*

A range of data and evidence is being collected, but could be shared and combined more effectively to support the quality system

Well-designed arrangements for the gathering and analysis of data and evidence from across the sector play an important role in a comprehensive quality assurance and improvement strategy. In Ireland, there are a growing number of ways in which this is being done. Pobal collects a substantial amount of data on the sector nationally, focused on settings receiving national funding. Tusla collects a range of data on all registered provision through the registration and inspection processes, and also has access to other forms of evidence (e.g. in the form of 'unsolicited information' submissions from the public). In addition, Tusla and the DE Inspectorate both separately undertake systematic analysis of the results of their inspections. More generally, a strong culture of using evidence and evaluating policies is apparent in the Irish ECEC context, such as in relation to the First 5 strategy.

While valuable data appear to be gathered and analysed, there is a need to explore how data and intelligence can be shared more easily between the various bodies involved (and potentially other institutions supporting quality) and integrated to strengthen quality assurance arrangements and policy development. Possible options involve the development of a shared 'data lake' or central data hub which integrates the intelligence from each of the bodies into a single coherent database. Such a shared 'data lake' could also ensure that providers are not asked for the same data multiple times by different bodies. Some data sharing protocols exist, but these may need to be reviewed while others may need to be developed to form an integrated data management environment.

22 |

Recommendation:

Strengthen arrangements for enabling appropriate data sharing between the national bodies with an interest in quality monitoring and improvement, including the inspectorates, government departments and other agencies, to enable the integrated, holistic analysis of performance in the sector.

1 Context of the review

This report discusses ways to improve the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland with a specific emphasis on aspects related to workforce development, and quality assurance and improvement. It is based on findings from the OECD *Quality beyond Regulations* project, which analyses how policies can enhance quality in ECEC, and more particularly, the quality of interactions children experience at their ECEC settings, or process quality. This first chapter explains the main features of the OECD *Quality beyond Regulations* project and how the review on Ireland has been undertaken. It then discusses the policy context of the review and presents the main strengths and challenges faced by Ireland regarding equity, funding and governance of ECEC.

The OECD Quality beyond Regulations project

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) holds tremendous potential for children, families and societies when it is of high quality. High-quality ECEC is crucial for children's development, learning and well-being and supports children's outcomes later in life, including school performance, labour market participation, and physical and mental health. At the societal level, quality ECEC can foster increased intergenerational social mobility, social integration and a reduction of poverty (OECD, 2018[1]). Children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are most likely to benefit from high-quality ECEC.

The OECD's *Quality beyond Regulations* policy review supports countries and jurisdictions to better understand the different dimensions of quality in ECEC and the policies that can enhance process quality in particular. As part of its participation in this project, Ireland asked the OECD to conduct an in-depth review of the Irish ECEC system (also referred to as Early Learning and Care or ELC in Ireland). The review focuses on the quality of ECEC in Ireland, in particular on policies that can support process quality, or the quality of interactions children experience at their ECEC settings, and emphasises aspects related to workforce development, and quality assurance and improvement.

The overarching objective of the review is to provide policy recommendations to strengthen the performance of the ECEC system in Ireland, in line with national policy goals. The review analyses the strengths and challenges of existing ECEC policies in Ireland from a comparative international perspective and provides recommendations for future policy development.

Specific objectives include:

- Informing future policy design and implementation, through recommendations on policy development and guidance on key considerations that can facilitate successful delivery in view of the national context.
- Providing an opportunity for Ireland to learn from other OECD member countries and international good practice to generate new thinking on ECEC quality development.

This first chapter discusses the main strengths and challenges faced by Ireland regarding equity, funding and governance of ECEC, and makes recommendations to inform discussions on ongoing and future policy developments, summarised at the beginning of the chapter (Box 1.1).

Box 1.1. Policy recommendations

Funding

- Implement plans to increase public funding substantively in order to make ECEC more affordable for families, strengthen the workforce and support the policy agenda for quality improvement in the sector, as announced in the budget for 2022. Ireland's public investment per child in ECEC should catch-up with the average in OECD countries.
- Ensure that the new funding model leads to transparent and stable mechanisms for the level and allocation of public funding in the sector.
- Accompany any increase in public funding with a strengthening and streamlining of the monitoring framework as discussed in Chapter 3.
- Implement plans to reach a commitment on capping fees for parents while taking into account the heterogeneous financial situation of different settings. In the future, assess the implications of the new funding model and the expected adoption of standards for working conditions on the financial sustainability of the sector.

Equity and inclusion

- Improve affordability and accessibility for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Implement plans to revise the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) to simplify it and ensure that all parents are able to request it. Continue close monitoring to help understand if the programme is meeting the needs of families and to inform further improvements.

- Make efforts to overcome the duality between provision for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and non-ECCE provision by increasing funding for younger children, aligning incentives to attract qualified staff, and extending education-focused inspections to non-ECCE programmes, as committed to in First 5 (see Chapters 2 and 3).

- Ensure that eligible children with special needs have access to the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) by training ECEC staff to help identify children's need for the programme, in support of expert's assessments. Consider further efforts to support inclusion in ECEC, such as providing additional specialised expertise (e.g. through multidisciplinary teams or local/regional hubs) and building connections with initiatives in tackling disadvantage from the primary school system, as committed to in First 5.

- Make further efforts in addressing other sources of disadvantage in ECEC, in particular for the inclusion of children from Traveller and Roma communities, for example by supporting ECEC staff to gain further knowledge and training on their specific needs.

Governance and reforms agenda

- Strengthen co-ordination across departments and agencies to deliver coherent and efficient ECEC policies while ensuring that co-ordination arrangements are not unduly burdensome. If a central agency is created, ensure that such agency has real co-ordination power and dedicated functions so that it does not add another layer of governance.

- Continue to communicate the features of the new funding model to inform implementation of the Workforce Development plan and the negotiations on working conditions.

- Continue to ensure that policy design and reform is conducted with a participatory approach, ensuring that all actors in the sector feel represented. Continue communicating transparently with all stakeholders in the sector, so that they are informed on what to expect at every stage.

A review of process quality in early childhood education and care in OECD countries

Awareness on the importance of ECEC has grown among policymakers worldwide. In OECD countries, the expansion of provision of pre-primary education (ISCED 02) and targeted measures for children from disadvantaged backgrounds resulted in an increase in enrolment rates, reaching universal or near-universal participation for children aged 3 to 5 in several countries. In most OECD countries, participation is universal or near-universal in the year before primary school entry, which constitutes significant progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals' education targets. As access to ECEC increases, policymakers are shifting their attention to ensuring the quality of provision for all children. In particular, process quality has been identified as the primary driver for children's development in ECEC (Melhuish et al., 2015[2]). Process quality refers to the children's experience of ECEC and includes their interactions with other children, staff, space and materials, their families and the wider community.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of high-quality ECEC, funding for ECEC has remained lower than for later stages of education. On average in 2019, OECD countries spent 0.87% of gross domestic product (GDP) on ECEC as compared to 1.5% and 1.9% of GDP on primary and secondary education, respectively (OECD, 2021[3]). Actually, in about half of OECD countries, expenditure on children

aged 3 to 5 enrolled in ECEC as a percentage of GDP decreased between 2013 and 2017 (OECD, 2020[4]). Furthermore, the proportion of private expenditure is higher in pre-primary education than in primary education. More children are enrolled in private institutions in ECEC than in primary and secondary education, which further highlights differences across stages of education (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1. Share of enrolment by type of institution and education level

Average enrolment of children/students in public and private educational settings across OECD countries, 2019

Source: OECD (2021[3]), *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/19991487.
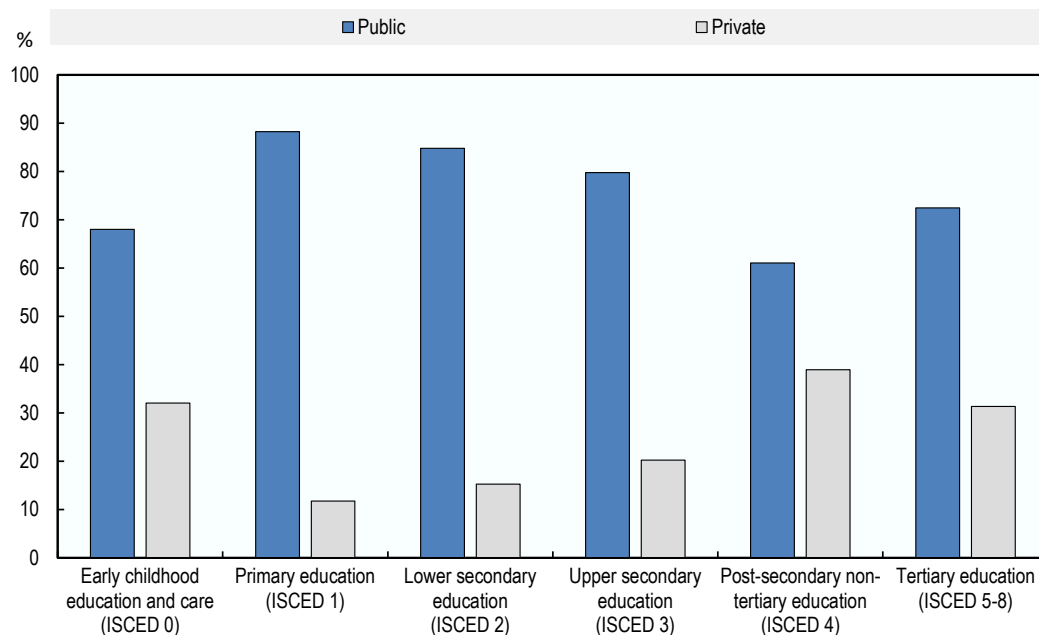
In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has created challenges for the continued operation and funding of ECEC services across the world, which highlighted the importance of ECEC in multiple ways. The need of continuing to provide ECEC services to allow parents to go to work became evident, particularly in the case of essential workers. Discussions also revolved around the long-term effects for children that the closure of services may imply. More than at later stages of education, close interactions with educators and peers are essential to provide children with cognitive and emotional support, which can be challenging to ensure through online platforms (OECD, 2021[5]). With the Covid-19 pandemic negatively affecting global health, economy and social welfare, government support will be needed to ensure that children have access to quality ECEC despite the challenging context.

The OECD's *Quality beyond Regulations* policy review supports countries and jurisdictions to better understand the different dimensions of quality in ECEC and the policies that can enhance process quality in particular (Box 1.2). The complex nature of quality in ECEC requires multi-faceted policy solutions. The review conceptualises in a framework the linkages between process quality and five high-level policy levers that can be instrumental in building ECEC systems that foster children's daily experiences: governance, standards and funding; curriculum and pedagogy; workforce development; data and monitoring; and family and community engagement (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2. Five policy areas to support high-quality early childhood education and care

Quality beyond Regulations policy review framework
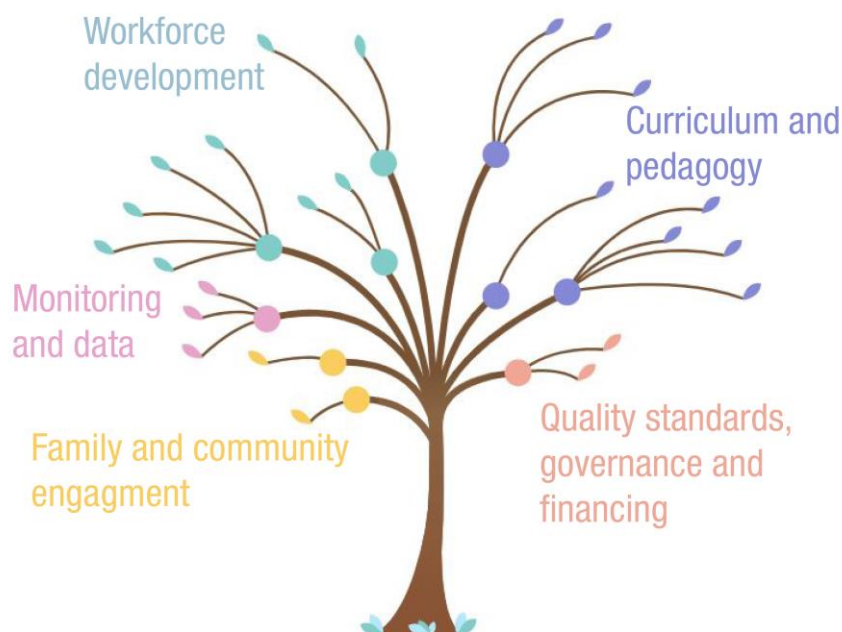
Source: *Starting Strong: Mapping Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, https://quality-ecec.oecd.org.

Box 1.2. The *Quality beyond Regulations* project

The *Quality beyond Regulations* policy review was initiated to support countries and jurisdictions to better understand the different dimensions of quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC), focusing on process quality in particular. The first phase of the project culminated in a literature review and meta-analysis of the links between different dimensions of quality and children's learning, development and well-being, published under the title Engaging Young Children (OECD, 2018[6]).

The second phase of the project built from this research base to address the overarching question: How can policies enhance process quality and child development and what are good examples of these policies? To address this question, countries in the OECD's Early Childhood Education and Care Network were invited to share information on relevant policies by completing a questionnaire. Twenty-six countries responded to this invitation, resulting in a rich database of information on ECEC systems around the world and their efforts to promote high-quality ECEC as of the year 2019.

In addition, six countries (Australia, Canada, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg and Switzerland) participated in the *Quality beyond Regulations* project by completing in-depth country background reports. These reports were undertaken by national governments, as well as provincial governments in the case of Canada. The reports were based on a common framework developed by the OECD to facilitate comparative analysis and maximise the opportunities for countries and jurisdictions to learn from each other. The country background reports were complementary to the information collected in the policy questionnaire. Together, these two sources provided the data for the main analyses of the review.

> The project culminated in the publication of the report *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*. In addition, a multidimensional map of policy levers for quality in ECEC was published on an online platform, making available the breadth and depth of policy information that underpins the findings of the publication.
>
> Note: The report has been published under OECD (2021), *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/f47a06ae-en. The online platform is accessible at the website: https://quality ecec.oecd.org.

A specific country review of early childhood education and care in Ireland

As part of the *Quality beyond Regulations* policy review, this specific country policy review focuses on the quality of ECEC in Ireland, in particular on policies that can support process quality. Building on the five policy levers of the *Quality beyond Regulations* policy framework (Figure 1.2), the present review puts a specific emphasis on aspects related to 1) workforce development (including the governance context, working conditions and staff preparation for curriculum implementation) and 2) quality assurance and improvement (including the institutional set-up for monitoring implementation of the national curriculum framework). Equity and diversity are included as a cross-cutting dimension.

The scope of the review focuses on all registered, licensed or otherwise regulated ECEC settings. ECEC typically refers to all regulated settings under ISCED Level 0 serving children between 0 and 5 or 6 years old (see Box 1.3). While the focus of the review is on ISCED 0 settings (typically children aged 0 to 5 in Ireland), it also discusses the mainly unregulated childminding sector as the government has plans to reform it. Furthermore, ISCED 1 settings (primary education) targeting children younger than 6 years old are also considered where applicable, in particular when relevant for supporting transitions across the two levels.

The review is based on a mixed method design and uses a combination of both quantitative and qualitative analysis, drawing on both national and international data and evidence. The review process entails the preparation of a country background report (CBR) (see Frontier Economics (2021[7])). This report consists of a self-assessment commissioned by the Irish authorities following the review's conceptual framework and detailed guidelines from the OECD. Unless otherwise noted, information on the Irish ECEC system included in this report is drawn from the CBR. The CBR and this report complement each other and can be read in conjunction for a more comprehensive view of the Irish ECEC system.

The review was undertaken by an OECD-led review team providing an independent analysis of ECEC policies in the country. The OECD review team was comprised of Stéphanie Jamet (Head of the OECD team for Early Childhood Education and Care), Thomas Radinger (OECD), Victoria Liberatore (OECD) and William Maxwell (independent educational consultant). The review team engaged in two dedicated missions between December 2020 and September 2021 to collect a broad cross-section of evidence and views on ECEC policies from key stakeholder groups in Ireland. This included a fact-finding mission and a main policy mission (which was conducted in two rounds). In the context of travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, all missions took place virtually via video-conference. For a detailed description of the schedule of each mission, readers should refer to Annex A.

Each mission entailed a series of semi-structured interviews with a wide range of education stakeholders, including those in government departments, national agencies, local actors, inspectorates, training providers, non-governmental organisations, providers of ECEC services, workforce representatives, researchers and others. The OECD review team also spoke to ECEC setting leaders, staff (room leaders and assistants) and parents from four centres, as well as an independent childminder. The settings were proposed by Better Start, following OECD guidance with the aim to maximise diversity in terms of setting types (e.g. type of provider, size and socio-economic composition). Online visits to settings also included

a self-recorded video to give the review team a fuller impression of the setting. Each meeting contributed to the review team's understanding of ECEC in Ireland and the role of different actors.

The missions were designed by the OECD in collaboration with the Irish authorities. The co-ordination of the work within Ireland was undertaken by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), in collaboration with an Oversight Group formed to accompany the work of the review and involving other government actors with a remit in ECEC.

The review was organised with the support of the European Commission (EC), which co-financed the review in the context of a broader partnership established between the OECD and the EC for the project. A representative of the EC participated as an observer of the review's visits (Sylwia Sitka, Policy Officer for Ireland from the EC's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture [DG EAC]). The EC was not involved in the drafting of this report and views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.

Structure and scope of the report

The review aims to identify strengths, challenges and policy recommendations with a particular focus in the areas of workforce development, and quality assurance and improvement, including monitoring and inspection. In addition to this introductory chapter, this report includes two thematic chapters on the two main areas of the review, and a summary of the assessment and recommendations.

The scope of the review does not directly include issues related to access and funding of ECEC; however, these are considered the framework conditions and starting point for the two main areas of analysis. As such, they are discussed as context to the review in Chapter 1. Other structural issues related to ECEC provision, such as the large unregulated childminding sector or differences in provision for children aged 0 to 3 and children aged 3 to 5 are addressed more directly in the review and individual thematic chapters as they relate to and are shaped by quality assurance and improvement and workforce development policies.

Monitoring and inspection, and workforce development are powerful policy levers that can help drive improvement in the sector. Even in challenging conditions, the quality assurance system is crucial to monitor and improve ECEC provision, and to ensure value for both public and private investments in the early years. The workforce's preparation and working conditions are key to boost staff practices, which are one of the most proximal factors to the child's experience of ECEC together with policies around curriculum and pedagogy, also driving children's learning, development and well-being.

The policy context of the review of early childhood education and care in Ireland

Governance, funding and enrolment

ECEC in Ireland is under the primary responsibility of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), working in collaboration with the Department of Education (DE). DCEDIY is responsible for governance and quality; regulation, monitoring and evaluation; funding; and workforce development of all ECEC settings other than those in primary schools, as well as oversight and funding of the national infrastructure of supports for ECEC provision, including supports for quality and inclusion in ECEC services, and research, data and monitoring of the sector. DCEDIY has overall responsibility for implementing the First 5 Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (hereafter referred to as "First 5"). The First 5 strategy includes the government's long-term plan for ECEC, which focuses specifically on the first five years of a child's life and sets targets to improve the systems and supports available to children and their families.

The Department of Education collaborates with DCEDIY (through its Early Years Policy Unit), particularly in the areas of quality, workforce development and curriculum, as well as disability. More specifically, DE is responsible for 40 Early Start pre-schools, specialised in pre-school provision for children with diagnosed special educational needs, conducting education-focused ECEC inspections and curriculum development. The DE also has responsibilities in the setting of standards for further and higher education programmes for ECEC staff in conjunction with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science.

In the last decades, Ireland has reached important achievements in terms of children's enrolment in ECEC. The participation of children aged 3 to 5 in ECEC and primary education was nearly universal in 2019, placing Ireland among the leading countries in enrolment rates for this age group (Figure 1.3). Among this age group, 40% of children attend primary school, as parents have the choice to enrol them either in ECEC or in primary education (junior infant classes) from the age of 4. A minority of children under age 3 (25%) were enrolled in ECEC in 2019, the same as the OECD average for this age group (Figure 1.4). However, Irish children spend less time in ECEC than those in other countries of the European Union (EU). The average number of weekly hours spent in ECEC for children above age 3 is 25.5 hours, as compared to the EU average of 29.5 hours. For children below age 3, it is 22.6 hours, while the EU average is 27.4 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019[8]).

Figure 1.3. Enrolment rates in early childhood education and care services and primary education, age 3 to 5

Percentage of children enrolled in early childhood education and care (ISCED Level 0) or primary education (ISCED Level 1), age 3 to 5, 2005-19
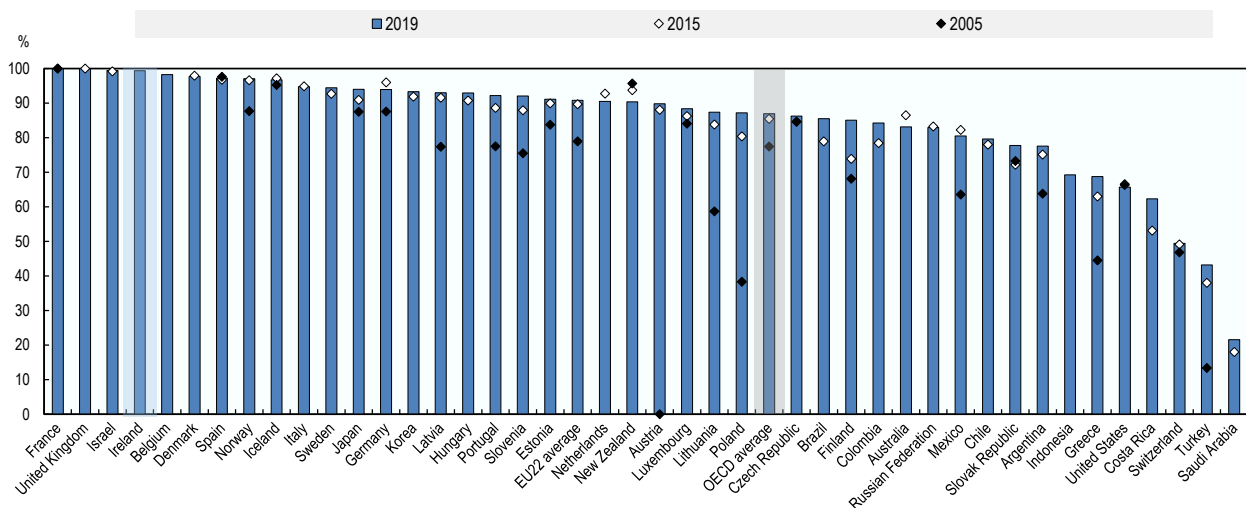
Note: EU22 average is calculated as the unweighted mean of the data values of the 22 countries that are members of both the European Union and the OECD for which data are available or can be estimated.
Countries are ranked in descending order of the enrolment rates of 3 to 5 year-olds in 2019.
Source: OECD (2021[3]), Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators, Table B2.1, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en.

Figure 1.4. Enrolment rates of children under age 3 in early childhood education and care, by type of service

Percentage of children enrolled in all ECEC services (Early childhood education [ISCED 0] and other registered ECEC services outside the scope of ISCED 0), 2015 and 2019
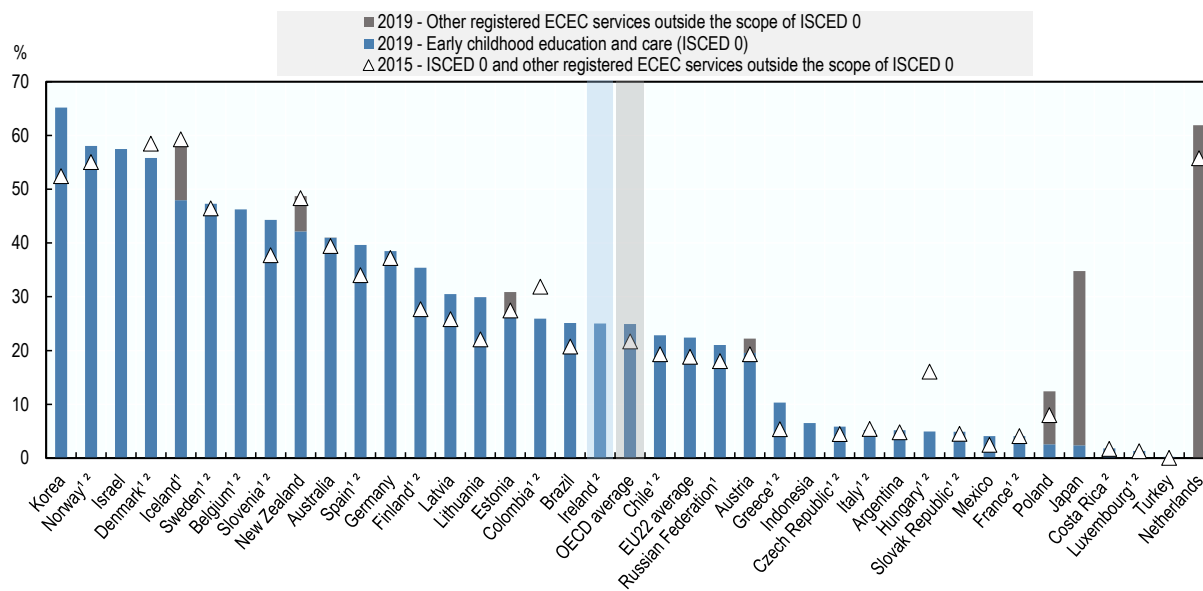
1. Data for 2015 excludes other registered ECEC services.
2. Data for 2019 is missing for other registered ECEC services.
Notes: 2015 refers to both early childhood education and care (ISCED 0) and other registered ECEC services outside the scope of ISCED 0 (except for OECD and EU averages which only cover services within ISCED 0).
EU22 average is calculated as the unweighted mean of the data values of the 22 countries that are members of both the European Union and the OECD for which data are available or can be estimated.
Countries are ranked in descending order of the enrolment rates in ISCED 0 of children under the age of 3 in 2019.
Source: OECD (2021[3]), *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, Table B2.1, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en.

Expenditure in ECEC in Ireland remains relatively low, despite an increase in public funding over the past years. Annual expenditure per child in ECEC (ISCED 0) in 2019 in Ireland was well below the OECD average (USD 4.439 as compared to USD 10.118, converted using purchasing power parity-PPP) (Figure 1.5) (OECD, 2021[3]). According to OECD data, expenditure on ECEC in Ireland (public and private) represented 0.2% of GDP in 2019, which is the lowest share across OECD countries. However, these data should be interpreted with caution since the GDP indicator for Ireland may be upwardly distorted in regards to underlying economic activity, as noted by OECD (2018[9]); and since primary education starts at a relatively early age in Ireland, meaning ECEC spending covers a relatively small age range of children.

Figure 1.5. Annual expenditure per child in early childhood education and care (ISCED 0)

Annual expenditure per child in USD, converted using PPPs (based on head counts), 2019
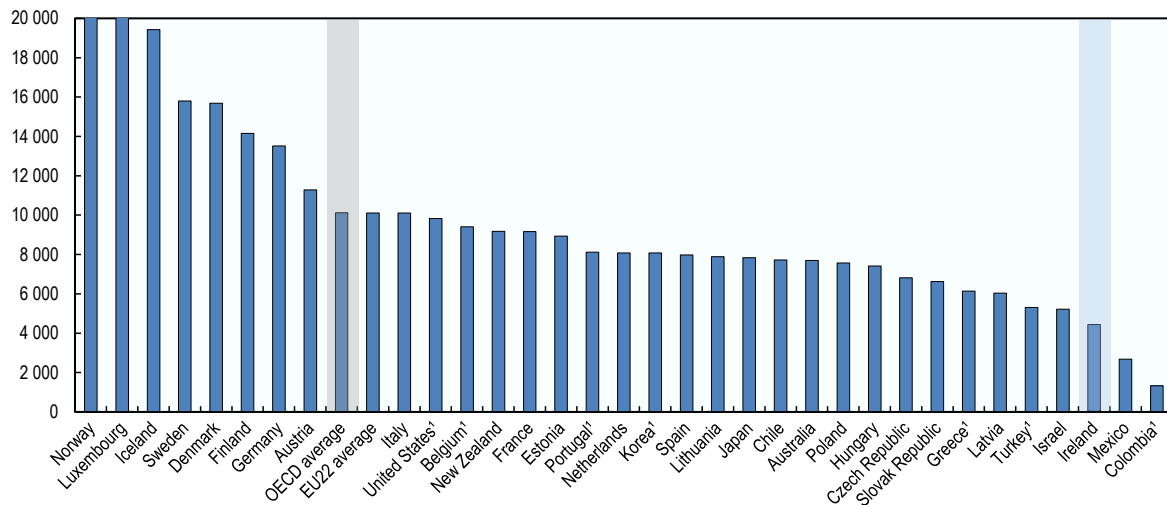
1. Data include only annual expenditure per child in pre-primary education (ISCED 02)
2. Data does not cover day care centres and integrated centres for early childhood education and care.
Notes: Public and private institutions are included.
EU22 average is calculated as the unweighted mean of the data values of the 22 countries that are members of both the European Union and the OECD for which data are available or can be estimated.
*Countries are ranked in descending order of annual expenditure per child in USD, converted using purchasing power parity (PPP).*
Source: OECD (2021[3]), *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, Table B2.3, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en.

In Ireland, ECEC services are offered by private providers, including chains, large structures and small structures (Box 1.3). National sources show that in 2019, 74% of the country's centre-based settings were for-profit (privately managed) and the remaining were non-profit community providers (typically overseen by a board of management that can include parents). In 2019, all children in Ireland were enrolled in private institutions. Ireland is therefore only one of five OECD countries (Australia, Ireland, Japan, Korea and New Zealand) in which more than three-quarters of children attending pre-primary level (ISCED 02) were enrolled in private institutions (OECD, 2021[3]). In the last eight years, the number of private for-profit providers increased by 11%, while the number of community providers remained constant (Pobal, 2021[10]). The slower growth in community provision in recent years is largely explained by a lack of large scale capital funding to succeed funding schemes available previously. Community services are also more likely to be located in disadvantaged areas, as compared to private for-profit providers.

Box 1.3. Types of ECEC settings in Ireland

The provision of ECEC in Ireland involves both centre-based and home-based settings, with a multiplicity of types of centre-based settings, including day care, pre-school provision and breakfast clubs, as well as some specific settings in disadvantaged regions, targeting disadvantaged children (both community-based ECEC settings and a small number of Early Start settings in schools) and early intervention classes in schools for young children with autism spectrum disorder. Other regulated settings include drop-in centres.

Some centre-based settings, such as day nurseries and crèches, provide full-time day care (i.e. more than 5 hours service per day). Part-time day care includes structured services that offer more than 3.5 hours and less than 5 hours per day. Sessional services, which consist of structured programmes offering ECEC for up to 3.5 hours per session (e.g. a morning or an afternoon), are also available. Structures offering sessional services include playgroups, crèches, Montessori groups, the Early Start programme, playschools and Naíonraí (nursery schools or playschools operating through Irish medium). ECEC centres may furthermore offer school-age childcare (SAC) that is after school care, in addition to early childhood education and care.

Home-based ECEC is largely unregulated and there is limited information on the size of the sector. National sources estimate that in 2016, 13% of pre-school aged children where cared for by a childminder, au pair or nanny. Only a small minority (estimated at less than 1%) of childminders are registered. Childminders care for children at their own home, and their services may be offered full-time or for specific hours during the day, depending of the conditions negotiated with parents. Only childminders caring for more than three pre-school aged children (or more than six children of any age) have to register with Tusla (the Child and Family Agency) and are covered by regulations under the Child Care Act 1991. In line with the National Action Plan for Childminding, Ireland is currently implementing strategies to extend regulation and support for childminders.

Several funding schemes and targeted programmes are in place, but efforts are needed to ensure that they foster quality for children of all ages and backgrounds

In the last two decades, Ireland has put in place several funding schemes to support all children's participation in ECEC. In the 2019/2020 programme year, DCEDIY had contracted a total of 4 690 settings to provide at least one of the existing funding programmes, including the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). The ECCE programme, introduced in 2010 and expanded in 2016 and 2018 ensures universal access to ECEC to children in the two years before starting primary school. This subsidy covers fully funded ECEC for 15 hours per week over 38 weeks of the year to all children from age 2 years and 8 months. In the 2019/2020 programme year, 105 975 children benefitted from this programme (Pobal, 2021[10]). In this programme, the government pays a capitation fee to participating ECEC settings, who in turn provide a pre-school service free of charge to all eligible children. The programme also provides settings with additional funding, and thus a higher capitation payment, for each room leader (i.e. teacher) that holds a degree at ISCED 6 level or above.

The NCS was introduced in 2019 and provides universal and targeted subsidies for families depending on parents' income and other circumstances. This subsidy covers hours in addition to the ECCE programme (in ECEC and care for school-aged children) and is given to providers, who in turn reduce fees for parents. Participation in the scheme is open for all registered providers. It therefore currently excludes the vast majority of the childminding sector, which raises the importance of further regulating this sector. The NCS

was designed to replace and streamline previous targeted programmes. At the time of writing, a number of these legacy schemes, such as the Community Childcare Subvention Plus, were still in place.

In addition, several targeted programmes aim at ensuring equity and diversity in ECEC. The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) has been established to create a more inclusive environment in ECEC settings, providing different levels of universal and targeted support for children in ECCE rooms to centres in response to children's needs and the specific pre-school context. Support under AIM includes advice and mentoring from specialists, specialised equipment and funding for additional assistance where needed. This programme is a child-centred model designed to enable full participation in ECEC for children with special needs or disabilities, and builds on the Irish Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for ECEC (DCYA, 2016[11]). Moreover, the Early Start programme, managed by the Department of Education, offers one year of free ECEC in 40 primary schools in disadvantaged areas to children aged three to five.

The administration around some funding schemes has created difficulties for beneficiaries. The NCS is perceived by stakeholders as a complex system, which demands time and skills from parents in order to apply. This can be a barrier for parents with low literacy and digital literacy competences. It would be important to simplify the procedure for applying to the NCS, as well as provide parents with support in doing so, e.g. through local institutions to ensure that all families are able to request the financial support.

The NCS is more generous for parents who work or take part in education or training, in recognition of the importance of parental labour market participation for combating child poverty, which was less the case with the previous schemes. The Government recently completed a review of the NCS and committed to some reforms to the scheme in the announced budget for 2022, communicated in October 2021. These reforms include a change in the practice of deducting hours spent in pre-school or school from NCS subsidised hours, which will increase subsidised hours. As a result, children whose eligible parents are not employed or studying will be able to benefit from full-time ECEC if they are enrolled in the ECCE programme or to part-time subsidised ECEC if they are not. Children whose eligible parents are employed would be entitled to full-time subsidised ECEC. Continued evaluation of the scheme according to its monitoring plan would allow for better awareness of whether the NCS is meeting the needs of families, and could inform further improvements. For example, monitoring would inform whether the parameters of the scheme need to be adjusted to ensure that it fully supports the enrolment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds in ECEC, including at an early age, independently from the labour market situation of their parents.

Furthermore, the ECCE programme appears to have created a fragmentation within the system of ECEC provision. The financial incentives within this programme seem to have pushed providers to focus on offering services to children in the ECCE age group, to the detriment of children under age 3. The higher capitation payment, attracts the most qualified and experienced staff to ECCE rooms. Although child-staff ratios are lower, rooms for children under age 3 often have less experience and lower qualified staff. The monitoring of the ECCE programme by the DE Inspectorate in addition to Tusla inspection creates an asymmetry in quality requirements between ECCE programmes and those for younger children (see Chapter 3). The introduction of the ECCE programme also created overlapping with junior infant classes in primary school and with Early Start rooms (although only a small percentage of children are enrolled in Early Start settings). Overcoming the duality between ECCE and non-ECCE provision is fundamental to reach more homogenous quality outcomes in the sector. Some strategies that can be helpful include increasing funding for younger children, aligning incentives to attract qualified staff and extending education-focused inspections into non-ECCE programmes. The government has committed to pilot education-focused inspections in programmes (or rooms) for children under the age of 3 and announced in the budget for 2022 that a higher level of funding will be available to the provision of ECEC for the youngest children to account for additional costs coming from higher staff ratio requirements.

In terms of inclusion objectives, AIM has been welcomed as an initiative to facilitate the integration of children with a disability into ECEC. The programme has reached 5 708 children in 2019/20 through targeted support (Pobal, 2021[10]) in addition to thousands more through universal support as all children in the room benefit from additional specialised staff. However, further efforts are needed to ensure that no eligible children are being left out of AIM supports. ECEC staff could be trained to have a role in helping identify children's need for AIM, supporting the formal assessment conducted by specialists from Better Start, a quality development agency. The need for further specialised expertise (e.g. provided through multidisciplinary teams or local/regional hubs) could also be assessed.

Stakeholders appear to demand further efforts in addressing other sources of disadvantage in ECEC, in particular concerning the inclusion of children from Traveller and Roma communities. National data show that 18% of ECEC services report at least one Traveller child attending, and 9% of settings report having at least one Roma children attending (Pobal, 2021[10]). ECEC staff would benefit from more knowledge and training on the specific needs of children from Traveller and Roma communities (e.g. adapting support to the months of the year when children from nomadic communities attend ECEC, facilitating transitions to primary school for these children). As committed to in the First 5 strategy, building connections and learning from initiatives in tackling disadvantage from the school system could facilitate the transitions of children with disadvantages from ECEC to primary education and ensure that these children are overall better integrated in the education system from the beginning. An expert group is currently working on developing a model for the sector informed by an initiative from the school system, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme.

The market-driven nature of the sector calls for strategies to ensure affordability and quality of ECEC

Several complexities arise from the nature of the model of provision and funding. The market-driven nature of the sector, where most private providers are for-profit, makes it difficult for the government to influence working conditions in the sector and to ensure that public funding is linked to quality outcomes, as analysed more in detail in Chapter 2 and 3. The current model of provision and the low level of public funding result in low wages and precarious working conditions for staff (with part of them working part-time and on temporary contracts), causing high turnover in the sector. In particular, this creates significant differences with primary education, which is a fully public system offering better working conditions.

Moreover, in the current model ECEC providers decide on the level of parental fees (outside of the ECCE programme, which is free to parents). Among OECD countries, Ireland has one of the highest levels of childcare costs for parents (Figure 1.6). Another challenge is to ensure that the offer of ECEC services matches the actual demand, as private providers tend to concentrate on the services where they can make bigger profits. Financial incentives also tend to create unintended consequences on the offer of services. For example, the ECCE programme created incentives to increase places for children aged 3 to 5, at the expense of places for children under age 3. In order to better serve parents' and communities' needs in the current systems, mechanisms need to be set to monitor, forecast and steer supply in response to demand for services, including in home-based settings.

Figure 1.6. Childcare costs for parents in OECD countries

Typical net childcare costs for two children in full-time care, in percentage of women's median full-time earnings, by family type and in-work earnings, 2019
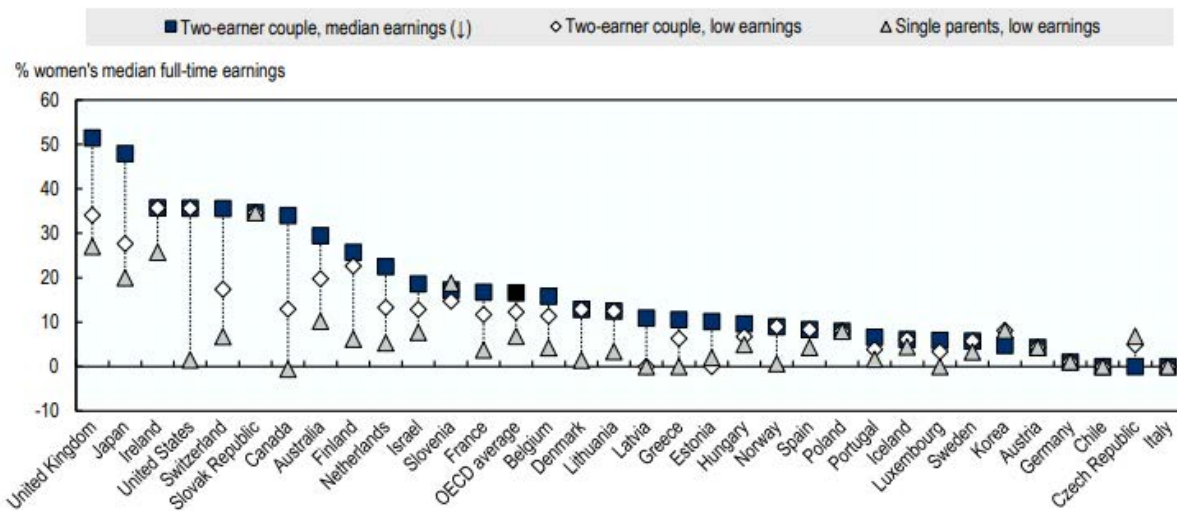
Notes: Data reflect the net cost (gross fees less childcare benefits/rebates and tax deductions, plus any resulting changes in other taxes and benefits following the use of childcare) of full-time care in a typical childcare centre for a two-child family, where both parents are in full-time employment and the children are aged 2 and 3. 'Full-time' care is defined as care for at least 40 hours per week. Low earnings refer to the 20th percentile, and median earnings to the 50th percentile, of the full-time gender-specific earnings distribution. Two earners are assumed for couples, male and female. For single parents, women's earnings distribution is assumed. In countries where local authorities regulate childcare fees, childcare settings for a specific sub-national jurisdiction is assumed. For Korea, the results refer to 2018; for Chile to 2015. For Mexico, Turkey and New Zealand information on childcare fees is not available. For Japan, data reflect the situation before the expansion of free ECEC to all children aged between 3 and 5, and to infants aged 2 and under from low-income families, in October 2019.
Source: OECD (2020[12]), Tax and Benefit Models, http://oe.cd/TaxBEN.

A substantive increase in public funding is needed to make ECEC more affordable for families and to strengthen the workforce. Some stakeholders demand a progression towards a fully publicly funded and managed system. This is advanced by several social partners such as Children's Rights Alliance, the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), and the National Women's Council among others, as well as by the INFORM group of experts in ECEC (Children's Rights Alliance, 2021[13]; Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality, 2021[14]).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector has become more extensively publicly funded as the government has supported the operation and funding of ECEC settings. The increase in public funding during the pandemic has been widely welcomed, and has set a precedent in moving towards more governmental involvement in the sector. Government's support included the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, as well as commercial rates waiver and a range of grants (i.e. Reopening Support Grant, Covid-19 Capital Grant, Restart Grant and Playing Outdoors Grant). According to national sources, total public funding provided to the sector in 2020 (including additional COVID-19 funding), meant an increase in public funding of 32%, as compared to 2019.

Ireland is currently developing a new funding model for the sector, which sets out plans for mechanisms for public investment in the sector, including decisions on the level of funding and on the criteria for allocation of funding. Initial features of this model were revealed in the announcement on the budget for 2022, in which the DCEDIY is allocated EUR 716 million for ECEC and school-age childcare (an increase of EUR 78 million). This funding will allow DCEDIY to develop a new core funding stream from September 2022 for approximately 4 700 providers amounting to EUR 69 million from September 2022 and EUR 207.3 million in 2023. If recent trends in public investment

and commitments in announced budget for 2022 were maintained over the longer term, Ireland would be making progress in catching up with OECD averages in future years.

In the current market-driven model, though, mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that higher funding translates into higher quality instead of higher profits, which is inevitably complicated when provision is privately managed. Until recently, the government lacked means to ensure that public funding served to attract and retain qualified staff in ECEC. While higher capitation payments are allocated to providers who hire more qualified staff in ECCE programmes, there is currently no mechanism to ensure that this additional funding is passed to the staff member (see Chapter 2). Outside the ECCE programme, which is fully funded by the government and free for parents, there are also no regulations to cap parental fees.

Initial features of the new funding model include mechanisms to ensure that public funding for the sector translates into enhanced quality with unchanged parental fees. The additional funding is conditional on reaching an agreement between representatives of trade unions and employer organisations on an Employment Regulation Order that will set working condition standards for the sector. The new core funding scheme also includes a commitment by providers to freeze fees as a condition to benefit from the new core funding scheme.

Efforts are also in place to ensure greater transparency and predictability of public funding in the sector. While a late announcement on the continuation of COVID-19 related support packages in Autumn 2021 created uncertainties in the beginning of the 2021 school year for ECEC providers (as well as for other sectors benefitting from these supports across the whole economy), as part of Budget 2022, government has confirmed COVID-19 supports for the ECEC sector will remain in place until April 2022. In addition, a transition fund has also been confirmed to operate between April 2022 and the introduction of a new core funding scheme in September 2022.

The complexity of the governance and organisation of provision of ECEC requires enhanced co-ordination efforts

In addition to the involvement of two government departments, multiple other actors are also involved in the governance of ECEC provision, some with overlapping functions. In this context, and with a growing number of agencies involved in the governance of the sector, several initiatives are in place to promote collaboration between stakeholders. For example, arrangements have been put in place to promote co-ordination of inspections through the high-level Operations and Systems Alignment Group led by the DCEDIY.

Another example of arrangements to foster co-operation among stakeholders is the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative (NSAI), which was established in 2016 to support the nationally co-ordinated roll-out of *Síolta* and *Aistear,* the national quality and curriculum frameworks for ECEC. The NSAI is led by DE, in collaboration with DCEDIY, who fund the initiative, as well as the Better Start Quality Development Service and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). NCCA is the statutory body that advises the Government on curriculum and assessment issues in ECEC, primary and post-primary education.

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, established in 2006, sets principles and standards for quality in ECEC and aims to assist ECEC staff and other stakeholders in supporting children's development, also providing guidance for self-reflection. *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework introduced in 2009 is addressed to all children from birth to 6 years old in ECEC and primary school. Some children aged 4 and most children aged 5 and 6 who are enrolled in primary education are mainly covered by the primary education curriculum. Both curriculum frameworks, for ECEC and primary school, are currently under review. The ECEC quality and curriculum frameworks provide a strong basis for defining a high-quality child-centred approach in ECEC but their impact appears to have been relatively

limited across the sector as a whole as they are implemented to different degrees. The apparent overlapping across several co-existing frameworks has been a challenge for ECEC staff to accurately understand their complementarity. As committed to in First 5, the government is working towards the development of a single self-evaluation framework.

The monitoring of ECEC settings and programmes is split across several institutions (see Chapter 3): 1) Tusla, a government agency, assesses regulatory compliance across a range of areas for all registered providers and performs registration; 2) the DE Inspectorate conducts education-focused inspections of the publicly funded ECCE programme; 3) Pobal, another government-funded agency, monitors administrative and financial information. Structural quality standards are set in regulations under the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. Detailed guidance on how the regulations are to be interpreted is presented in the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate's Quality and Regulatory Framework.

Several actors are involved in providing support for quality improvement including Better Start (which is part of Pobal) as well as City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs) and independent providers. Better Start provides a range of individual service mentoring, coaching and training programmes including on the quality and curriculum frameworks (*Síolta* and *Aistear*). There are 30 CCCs in Ireland, established in 2001 to encourage the development of ECEC locally. Funded by the DCEDIY through Pobal, and led by individual boards of management, their functions depend on each local implementation plan for the CCC. Locally, the CCCs often participate in the Children and Young People's Services Committees which seek to help ensure effective co-ordination of a wide range of services for children at county level. The functions of the CCCs typically include providing professional development trainings and mentoring, as well as information for parents and settings regarding funding schemes and meeting regulations. There are also seven NVCOs, which perform functions on behalf of DCEDIY, including providing training programmes and others, such as background checks on staff.

The government has made efforts to implement a participatory approach to include the view of different stakeholders on the sector. Several consultations have been undertaken in the last decade to inform policy design and reform. An example of this are the consultations conducted to inform the design and review of the *Aistear* curriculum framework ("Updating *Aistear*"), led by the NCCA (2021[15]). Another initiative has been the establishment in 2016 of the Early Learning and Childcare Stakeholder forum, which enables consultation and engagement between DCEDIY, DE, state agencies and key representatives of the sector. The reform processes on workforce development and funding have also involved extensive collaboration with stakeholders and public consultation. Work on preparation of the Workforce Development Plan has involved international collaboration, through both European Union and OECD networks. Public consultation on both the new funding model and the Workforce Development Plan took place in 2020, while a number of stakeholder working groups worked intensively in 2021 on detailed proposals for the Workforce Development Plan.

With a multiplicity of actors, frameworks and overlapping functions, the governance of the sector remains complex. Despite arrangements to promote collaboration between agencies and stakeholders, the lack of co-ordination in some important matters (e.g. monitoring and inspection, quality support) may undermine efforts to raise quality in the long term. Stakeholders describe the ECEC system as "fragmented" and "little aligned", with a history of having been developed in a "piecemeal fashion". Streamlining the activities of the range of institutions engaged in inspection and regulatory activity should be a priority going forward (see Chapter 3).

Better co-ordination of the quality support system will also be crucial to ensure a systematic approach to staff's professional development (see Chapters 2 and 3). With the creation of Better Start, the activities of CCCs (and the NVCOs) have been changing to more administrative tasks, and less provision of quality support, as compared to before. Funding levels for CCCs have also apparently remained unchanged over time. Given that the CCCs have autonomy and operate independently from each other, there appear

to be important differences in the quality of the service that each of them provides, as well as work duplication, even if a statement of work and objectives set by the DCEDIY ensure some consistency. In particular, it can be beneficial to explore the possibility of strengthening CCC's role to provide a 'middle layer' in the quality assurance system (see Chapter 3). To ensure a consistent and more efficient service in CCCs across the country, it might be helpful to rationalise their functions at the regional level and to more clearly define their roles in relation to other quality support organisations.

Despite the government's efforts to implement a participatory approach, there is a feeling in the sector that policy is still designed in a top-down approach and that stakeholders' views have not been considered enough in policy initiatives for the sector. This might be a sign that consultations have not been inclusive enough, that not all relevant topics have been included, and that results of consultations have not always been taken into account when designing and implementing policies. A system where many actors with different perspectives co-exist, given the complexity of the governance and organisation of ECEC provision, requires particular efforts to include all voices in the process of decision making. Continuing to include the voice of parents and children is also important.

Ireland has an ambitious policy agenda to reform ECEC

Ireland has recently initiated a series of reforms to further support the quality of ECEC. Its policy agenda for the sector is steered by First 5, a ten-year, whole-of-government strategy published in 2018 to improve access, affordability and quality of ECEC for all babies, young children and their families (see Box 1.4). Through First 5, the government has brought together different stakeholders in the sector through a participatory approach (e.g. the Early Learning and Childcare Stakeholder Forum) (Government of Ireland, 2019[16]). In the context of a complex governance system, this strategy can be useful to consolidate a national vision for the sector and foster higher quality.

Ireland is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of the operating model. As committed to by the government, efforts are being made to reform the current operating model to strengthen co-ordination and coherence with the aim of expanding high-quality ECEC, best practice and innovation, and professional development in all settings, along with developing career paths for ECEC staff. If a central agency is developed, such as the provisionally titled Childcare Ireland, it can help to steer policies and build coherence in the sector as long as its role and its relation to other bodies in the system are clearly defined.

The commitments of the Government in the First 5 strategy have wide support among stakeholders. It has committed to increase public funding in the coming years, and a review of the funding model is currently ongoing, with the objective of improving quality, affordability and accessibility. The Government is also revising the monitoring and inspection system with the aim of strengthening quality assurance. Ensuring that all ECEC settings implement the curriculum framework is also a priority for the Government, which will be crucial in ensuring quality in ECEC.

Another important objective for the Government has been to build a high-quality workforce. A national Workforce Development Plan covering both initial and continuing professional development has been underway since mid-2019 (DCEDIY, 2021[17]). A National Action Plan for Childminding has also been published, as part of a strategy to extend regulation and support for childminders. The action plan has been through public consultation (DCEDIY, 2021[18]).

Box 1.4. Ireland's First 5 strategy

The Government's First 5 long-term plan for ECEC focuses specifically on the first five years of a child's life and sets targets to improve the systems and supports available to babies, young children and their families. First 5 proposes a vision of early childhood education and care, as well a framework

---

for action to ensure that all children have positive early experiences and get a great start in life. The Government's main commitments for the sector include:

- Expanding the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and progressively increasing the number of families eligible for targeted subsidies.
- Progressing towards a graduate-led ECEC workforce.
- Developing a new funding model for ECEC to ensure additional public funding can be used to deliver higher quality, more affordable, more sustainable and more inclusive services.
- Progressively reforming the sector's regulatory and inspection systems and strengthening quality assurance with a renewed emphasis on self-evaluation.
- Extending regulations and support for childminders and school-age childcare settings.
- Developing supports for children's transitions to, through and from ECEC to primary schools.
- Considering the extension of AIM to other age groups or children with additional needs other than a disability or through consolidating wider supports for young children with disabilities, following an evaluation of AIM.
- Developing a programme for the delivery of ECEC in the context of concentrated disadvantage, informed by the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) model in schools.

The Government also published in 2019 the initial First 5 Implementation Plan 2019-2021. The "First 5 Big Steps'' describe major changes that will be delivered through this strategy:

- A broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring.
- A new model of parenting support.
- New developments in child health, including a dedicated child health workforce.
- Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system, including a new funding model.
- A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty.

Source: Government of Ireland, (2019[16]), First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028

As the policy agenda is ambitious and promising, it is crucial to ensure that public funding is sufficient to meet these goals and allocated in a way that supports quality improvement. As discussed in Chapter 2 and 3, the review of the funding model needs to pay particular attention to the gap in quality and accessibility between ECEC for the youngest children and the ECCE programme for older children. The Workforce Development Plan, the National Action Plan for Childminding, and changes in the inspection system can also help increasing quality of ECEC for the youngest children.

With many reforms under discussion at the same time and many of these reforms being linked, the sequencing of reforms is particularly important. The government should continue to transparently inform all stakeholders on the ongoing processes and implementations of reforms. In particular, it seems important to continue communicating the features of the new funding model to inform implementation of the Workforce Development Plan and the negotiations on working conditions (see Chapter 2). Finally, it is important to monitor the impact of reforms, which requires thinking about evaluations and putting in place some methods at the time of the introduction of new policies or of changes to existing policies.

References

Children's Rights Alliance (2021), *Report Card*, Children's Rights Alliance, Dublin, https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/Report-Card-23-Feb-2021.pdf (accessed on 8 October 2021). [13]

Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality (2021), *Report of the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality*, Citizens' Assembly, Dublin, http://citizensassembly.ie/en/about-the-citizens-assembly/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf (accessed on 20 September 2021). [14]

DCEDIY (2021), *National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028)*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Dublin, https://bit.ly/ChildmindingActionPlan (accessed on 7 September 2021). [18]

DCEDIY (2021), *Workforce Development Plan Phase 1 Progress Report*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Dublin, https://assets.gov.ie/135093/54a31bf1-e9cd-41dc-8362-a64c1456d1f7.pdf (accessed on 8 September 2021). [17]

DCYA (2016), *DiversIty, Equality and InclusIon Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care*. [11]

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019), *Eurydice Brief: Key data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://op.europa.eu/s/sMJ1 (accessed on 6 October 2021). [8]

Frontier Economics (2021), *OECD Country Background Report for the OECD Quality Beyond Regulations Project – Early Learning and Care in Ireland*, Frontier Economics, London, https://assets.gov.ie/138286/2a4c0b9d-e605-4f64-9fa8-a4ae70f7f273.pdf (accessed on 26 August 2021). [7]

Government of Ireland (2019), *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, https://first5.gov.ie (accessed on 8 September 2021). [16]

Melhuish, E. et al. (2015), *A review of research on the effects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) upon child development. WP4.1 Curriculum and quality analysis impact review*, CARE, http://ecec-care.org/fileadmin/careproject/Publications/reports/. [2]

NCCA (2021), *Updating Aistear: Rationale and Process*, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Dublin, http://ttps://ncca.ie/media/5053/updating-aistear_rationale-and-process_background-paper_2021.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021). [15]

OECD (2021), *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b35a14e5-en. [3]

OECD (2021), *Using Digital Technologies for Early Education during COVID-19: OECD Report for the G20 2020 Education Working Group*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/fe8d68ad-en. [5]

OECD (2020), *Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en. [4]

OECD (2020), *Is Childcare Affordable?*, OECD, http://oe.cd/childcare-brief-202.   [12]

OECD (2018), *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong*, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en.   [1]

OECD (2018), *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en.   [6]

OECD (2018), *OECD Economic Surveys: Ireland 2018*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/eco_surveys-irl-2018-en.   [9]

Pobal (2021), *Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2019/2020*, Pobal, Dublin, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/137583/?page=null (accessed on 26 August 2021).   [10]

2 The development of the early childhood education and care workforce in Ireland

This chapter discusses the main strengths and challenges faced by Ireland in building and retaining an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce that can best support quality. It focuses on policies to strengthen the initial preparation and training of the ECEC workforce, strategies for continuing professional development that support staff's engagement in a range of learning opportunities, policies to improve staff's working conditions, and approaches to leadership development to create a stimulating environment for both staff and children.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals are key agents for supporting the quality of an ECEC system. ECEC professionals can profoundly shape children's everyday interactions, which are likely to influence their learning, development and well-being (OECD, 2021[1]; OECD, 2018[2]). As described in Chapter 1, Ireland has been very active in developing policies to further professionalise its ECEC workforce, as pledged in the country's First 5 Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (hereafter referred to as "First 5"). At the time of writing, a Workforce Development Plan for the Early Learning and Care, School-age Childcare and Childminding sector is due for publication at the end of 2021; a National Action Plan for Childminding was published earlier this year; and initial announcements on a new funding model were made in the 2022 Budget at the time of finalisation of this report. These three major plans seek to support the commitments in First 5.

This chapter considers the main strengths and challenges faced by Ireland in building and retaining an ECEC workforce that can best support quality, and makes recommendations to inform discussions on ongoing and future policy developments, summarised at the beginning of the chapter in Box 2.1.

In line with the framework of the Starting Strong VI publication and the Quality beyond Regulations project (OECD, 2021[1]), the discussion focuses on the following five aspects of workforce development:

- Policies to improve the qualification of ECEC professionals to work with children and raise their status by setting qualification requirements and regulations for staff in different types of provision.
- Policies to make sure ECEC staff are well prepared to foster enriching interactions through broad training that includes quality work-based learning and is well aligned with the curriculum framework.
- Strategies for continuing professional development that support staff's engagement in a range of learning opportunities through time and funding, matching their needs at different career stages.
- Policies to improve staff's working conditions through salaries and employment contracts that reflect staff's qualifications, and protected time for their range of professional tasks.
- Approaches to leadership development to create a stimulating environment for both staff and children through preparation for pedagogical leadership and incentives for quality improvement.

The success of Ireland's reform agenda to drive the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce to the benefit of children will also depend on the effective and meaningful engagement and the building of consensus among the different parties involved, including providers and staff. While the government and the responsible departments – the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Education (DE) - have been creating platforms and taking steps to consult stakeholders, such as through stakeholder groups to accompany the work on the Workforce Development Plan and reforms of the funding model, this is not necessarily the feeling on the ground. Moreover, it represents a significant challenge in a context where multiple voices try to be heard, not always representing the full range of views within a stakeholder group, but sometimes potentially particular interests. The adequate resourcing of the sector, sequencing and linkage of the different reforms that are underway, and strategies for tracking progress are further elements that will impact the workforce and further development of leadership in settings.

Box 2.1. Policy recommendations

Qualification requirements and regulations

- For <u>centre-based</u> settings, attach qualification requirements to categories of staff and not to staff in a particular programme, in line with objectives of the Workforce Development Plan to define roles and career pathways for the ECEC workforce. Use regulations on staff-child ratios to indicate the composition of teams of various categories of staff for the organisation of activities with children depending on their age and on the type of activities.

- For <u>home-based</u> settings, advance with plans to increase the regulation of the sector but ensure registration, training and funding reflect the nature of childminders' work and involve minimum administrative burden for childminders and parents. Build on the meaningful consultation of childminders themselves to develop new regulations.

Initial preparation and training

- Build on the momentum of newly created standards, criteria and guidelines for qualification programmes to improve the quality of programmes through quality assurance, funding mechanisms and the qualification of ECEC staff. Monitor the impact of recent changes on the experience of students to inform future adjustments (e.g. extent of practical training in further education).

- Support ECEC centres in offering quality practical placements through adequate resources, guidance/standards and regulations. The government should facilitate partnerships and trust between centres and institutions in co-developing and assessing placements and programmes. Based on further consultations, strengthen work-based learning in initial preparation for instance by considering the introduction of an apprenticeship scheme or an approach based on similar principles.

- As committed to in First 5, encourage some joint training/courses in the preparation for ECEC staff and primary teachers to help raise the recognition of work done by ECEC staff, inform professional practices of staff in different levels of the education system and support transition practices.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

- Build and support a larger ecosystem of formal and informal opportunities for professional development based on an assessment of current staff engagement and needs. Support centre-embedded learning and learning between centres with dedicated strategies (e.g. by creating time in schedules, building team leader capacity and creating resources to support team work).

- Put in place a clear strategy to realise the goals for upskilling the workforce based on the engagement of employers, staff and government. This should include the recognition of prior learning or skills acquired on the job, flexibility to combine work and study through part-time and blended learning, study leave and funding arrangements. Increase awareness of available funding schemes for current staff and eligibility criteria.

- Re-assess the current architecture of CPD provision by gaining a comprehensive view on the funding, capacity and quality standards of different organisations, such as the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), National Voluntary Childhood Organisations (NVCOs) and Better Start. Improve synergies between providers in the short term, while working towards a more unified system of quality support in the long term. This should include stronger processes for assessing and monitoring the quality of provision and how it meets staff and system needs.

Working conditions

- Make the improvement of ECEC staff working conditions a priority and signal this by committing to stable long-term public funding allocated to ECEC settings according to the fulfilment of criteria for improved working conditions (e.g. wages and conditions of employment contract) as recently done with the introduction of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) and announcements on the 2022 budget.

- Continue efforts and discussions with stakeholders to define ECEC categories of staff, their required competencies/qualifications and career pathways, as done during preparation of the Workforce Development Plan, and how they can be implemented locally.
- Commit to maintain the Joint Labour Committee (JLC) on a long-term basis and continue to make the allocation of additional funding conditional to the achievement of working conditions standards. Acknowledging that the scope of agreements under a JLC is determined by the parties to the JLC and not by the government, the JLC should cover: minimum wages and pay scale for different categories of staff; the definition of working hours with the inclusion of protected time for activities to be performed without children; terms and conditions for employment. The objective should be to move towards a full-time employment contract as a basis with common minimum non-wage clauses for all categories of staff and wages related to the category of staff, qualification and experience. As part of the JLC, the question of staff hired under a succession of short-term contracts with breaks in between can also be discussed.

Leadership

- Develop pedagogical leadership capacity in settings. This should include a clearer definition of the role of centre managers (who can be owners of their ECEC centre or employed by a provider) and adequate preparation for their role through dedicated leadership training. The role of room leaders should also be rethought and clarified, to include pedagogical leadership in rooms or centres more broadly, including with staff for younger children.
- Set incentives for the management of centres to be driven by quality improvement through the inspection and quality support system, and free capacity of managers to focus on the experience of children by reducing the administrative burden that funding and inspection create.

Qualification requirements and regulations

Context

In Ireland, there are no nationally agreed upon job titles or occupational profiles for different ECEC staff, although this is an objective of the Workforce Development Plan to define categories of ECEC staff along with their roles, responsibilities and qualification requirements. Half of ECEC staff are described in surveys as "early years assistants". A third of staff are described as "room leaders", which would correspond to a "teacher" in other countries but the term "teacher" is not used in Ireland for ECEC. The remaining part includes centre managers or deputy managers who would correspond to "leaders" in other countries. To ease readers' understanding, regardless of their familiarity with the Irish context, this chapter uses the terms "assistants", "room leaders (i.e. teachers)" and "leaders" for these three categories of staff.

Raising the levels of qualifications of staff working in the ECEC sector as well as the quality of education and training has been a core element of Ireland's recent policies to improve the quality of provision for children. Successive governments have put a particular focus on raising the formal qualifications of the workforce through legal requirements, financial incentives (namely through "higher capitation" rates as part of the Early Childhood Care and Education [ECCE] programme which provides two years of free universal pre-school and additional capitation for centres with an Inclusion Co-ordinator in place) and some funding for training (e.g. government bursaries awarded through the Learner Fund since 2014). As part of the current First 5 strategy and the Workforce Development Plan, the country is now pursuing the next stage in the professionalisation and upskilling of its ECEC workforce.

Revisions to ECEC sector regulations in 2016 introduced a minimum qualification requirement for all staff working directly with children. Since then, all staff in registered settings subject to the regulations require

at least an ISCED 4 qualification (post-secondary non-tertiary education equivalent to level 5 on the National Framework for Qualifications, NFQ, see Annex Figure 2.A.1). Exemptions for a small share of staff from this requirement to facilitate the transition ('Grandfather' declaration) was due to expire in September 2021 but was subsequently extended for a period of two years subject to a number of conditions. Moreover, staff working as "room leaders" (i.e. teachers) with children in the ECCE programme must hold an ISCED 5 qualification (short-cycle tertiary education equivalent to NFQ level 6), and providers can apply for additional funding ("higher capitation") where a room leader holds a degree-level qualification at ISCED 6 (Bachelor's equivalent to NFQ level 7) or above (DCEDIY, 2021[3]; DCYA, 2019[4]; Frontier Economics, 2021[5]).

The same qualification requirements apply to registered childminders in home-based settings, although only a very small percentage of childminders are actually registered as the legislation exempts and excludes some categories (i.e. those taking care of six children or less, of which not more than three are pre-school children). The qualifications and training of the majority of childminders are therefore unknown. However, the government has committed to bringing childminding into the scope of regulation in the coming years (e.g. through the First 5 strategy and a National Action Plan for Childminding) (DCEDIY, 2021[3]; DCYA, 2019[4]; Frontier Economics, 2021[5]).

The qualifications of staff in centre-based settings have indeed risen as a result of these changes, with 94% of staff who work directly with children holding the minimum ISCED 4 qualification in 2019/2020, compared to 71% in 2010. As with all data from the Annual Sector Profile published by Pobal referenced throughout this chapter, these numbers cover ECEC and a proportion of school-age childcare. An increasing percentage of staff have an ISCED 6 qualification or higher (26.6% in 2019/2020, compared to 18% in 2015/2016). According to data from mid-2020, a small share were still working in the sector under the 'Grandfather' declaration, exempt from the minimum ISCED 4 qualification (NFQ level 5), while many already had a relevant qualification at this level or higher (Pobal, 2021[6]).

Recent and ongoing policy initiatives seek to raise the level of qualifications further. The country's First 5 strategy includes a commitment to progress towards a graduate-level workforce in the ECEC sector, with the specific target of at least 50% of staff in registered centres holding a degree by 2028 (at least ISCED 6 or NFQ level 7). Based on the current qualification profile, this means increasing by 17 percentage points the percentage of degree holders in the next seven years (DCEDIY, 2021[3]; DCYA, 2019[4]; Frontier Economics, 2021[5]).

The plan to raise qualifications requires attention to quality training, adequate working conditions and the recognition of the experience of current staff

Raising qualification requirements and levels in the ECEC workforce speaks to the increased recognition of the importance of education and training for high-quality provision. As studies from different national contexts and for different types of provision suggest, highly qualified staff tend to be better able to sustain enriching and stimulating interactions with children (Manning et al., 2019[7]; Lin and Magnuson, 2018[8]). However, not all research finds a direct link between higher qualifications and higher process quality (von Suchodoletz et al., 2020[9]), pointing towards the importance of content and delivery of initial education (OECD, 2021[1]).

As analysed in depth in the following section on initial education, some positive changes have also been introduced in this respect with the publication of new standards for the development of ECEC training programmes. Such standards, together with a continued focus on quality assurance, are important building blocks in the government's strategy to equip the ECEC workforce with the additional skills needed to yield the expected results in quality improvement. A sustained focus on quality in programmes is also important since requirements and incentives to gain new qualifications entail a risk of creating poor quality programmes to enable staff to gain the new certifications without a true engagement in professional learning and improvement. This may have been the case with the introduction of the ECCE programme

in 2010 and the related financial incentives for upskilling (e.g. creation of poor quality online programmes). The government could consider monitoring the impact of higher qualifications on process quality to inform future policies.

Entry standards generally also signal the level of knowledge and skills expected of staff and contribute to shaping the social status of a profession (OECD, 2019[10]). In this context, higher levels of qualification to work in ECEC may also help make the sector more attractive and raise social recognition. However, higher qualifications need to be underpinned by commensurate remuneration. At present, efforts to upskill the workforce appear to be facilitating turnover as ECEC staff search for better remunerated work (e.g. in primary school, as teachers or special needs assistants). As highlighted further below in the chapter, improving working conditions is therefore an important pre-condition for realising the potential of higher qualifications. This is recognised through the First 5 strategy, ongoing work on the Workforce Development Plan, the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee for the sector and the development of a new funding model (Government of Ireland, 2019[11]; DCEDIY, 2021[3]; DCYA, 2019[4]).

Lastly, the experience of current practitioners needs to be sufficiently valued and recognised, so that they are able to meet the new qualification requirements (also see section on professional development below) and access potential new roles and career progression (also see section on working conditions below). Care needs to be taken in the message that the country's upskilling policy communicates to current staff, 50% of which are not envisaged to hold a degree qualification (at least ISCED 6, NFQ level 7) in 2028. Equally important, discussion and reflection are needed on the role(s) of staff with lower levels of qualifications in ECEC settings (e.g. as an assistant or co-professional in a room, a substitute to ensure the staff-child ratio when an adult leaves a room, etc.).

Some policies have unintendedly led to the concentration of staff with higher qualifications in larger private for-profit centres and with children of older ages

The distribution of staff with different levels of qualifications across and within ECEC settings also requires more attention. To tackle the effects of contextual factors that put children on unequal footing, such as socio-economic background, quality staff also need to work with less privileged children (OECD, 2020[12]; OECD, 2019[10]). In Ireland, at present, staff in private for-profit settings have on average higher qualifications than those in community non-profit settings which tend to serve the most disadvantaged children (see Chapter 1) (Table 2.1).

This may have to do with the additional costs higher qualifications imply (e.g. facilitating training to gain new qualifications and rewarding higher qualifications with higher wages) and which can be more difficult to finance for non-profit or smaller for-profit providers. While no data on differences in staff qualifications by other centre characteristics are available (e.g. "full day" vs. "sessional"), there also appear to be differences in the financing of different types of settings (e.g. also linked to child-staff ratios for different age groups). In the end, plans to further upskill the workforce need to be accompanied by funding and workforce policies, as committed in the First 5 strategy, to ensure that these plans do not drive further splits in the sector between different types of provision and locations.

Table 2.1. Staff qualifications by type of provider

Staff working directly with children

Qualification level	All staff		Community non-profit		Private for -profit	
	Number of staff	% of staff	Number of staff	% of staff	Number of staff	% of staff
NFQ Level 5 or above	15 926	94.5	5 810	91.4	10 116	96.4
NFQ Level 6 or above	11 592	68.8	3 976	62.5	7 616	72.6

Qualification level	All staff		Community non-profit		Private for -profit	
	Number of staff	% of staff	Number of staff	% of staff	Number of staff	% of staff
No relevant qualification	865	5.1	519	8.2	346	3.3
NFQ Level 4	65	0.4	30	0.5	35	0.4
NFQ Level 5	4 334	25.7	1 834	28.8	2 500	23.8
NFQ Level 6	7 110	42.2	2 658	41.8	4 452	42.4
NFQ Level 7	1 441	8.5	420	6.6	1 021	9.7
NFQ Level 8	2 776	16.5	822	12.9	1 954	18.6
NFQ Level 9/10	265	1.6	76	1.2	189	1.8

Note: NFQ: National Framework of Qualifications.

Source: Adapted from Pobal (2021[6]) Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2019/2020, Table 6.8, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/137583/?page=null (accessed 26 August 2021).

Different requirements and incentives for "room leaders" (i.e. teachers) employed through the ECCE programme have led to a situation where babies and toddlers are educated by the least qualified staff (Table 2.2) (Branigan and Ciarán, 2020[13]). These questions of staff sorting are inextricably linked to the resourcing of the sector and should be considered in ongoing and future work on the funding of ECEC.

The distribution of staff should also be considered in the potential design of a career structure, and the qualifications and experience attached to different staff roles. Indeed, roles should be defined for the sector as a whole and not be attached to a specific scheme or programme. The *Aistear* curriculum framework that covers children from 0 to 6 in all settings should bring some continuity in ECEC provision. However, programme-based funding, and differences in regulations and inspections (as analysed in Chapter 3) tend to fragment provision into programmes with varying fees and quality, even if some centres in fact provide all activities. With the sector being privately provided, the government cannot directly affect the organisation of provision but can make sure that its policies support and encourage an integrated approach.

Ongoing work on the definition of roles and responsibilities with attached qualification and experience requirements is important in this regard. Regulations on staff-to-child ratios can vary with children's age and types of activities to support different combinations of staff working with children and ensure that the youngest children are also exposed to highly qualified staff. Moreover, ECCE room leaders (i.e. teachers) could have a pedagogical leadership role with staff working with younger children (see section on leadership). The planned extension of education inspections to non-ECCE rooms goes in the right direction and will support a more integrated approach to ECEC provision (see Chapter 3).

As new roles and career structures are developed and implemented, some innovative models of shared staffing across settings could nevertheless be explored given the large number of small centres. For instance, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) which seeks to foster inclusive ECEC environments supports one specially trained inclusion co-ordinator (INCO) per setting, regardless of the size of the setting. While one person in a setting can fulfil multiple roles, this can still represent particular difficulties for settings to implement. However, the private nature of ECEC provision in Ireland and the fact that staff are employees of private employers make it difficult for centres to share staff in practice.

Table 2.2. Staff qualifications by age range of children that staff work with

Staff working directly with children

	All staff (%)	Up to 1 year (%)	1 year to 3 years (%)	3 years to 5 years (%)	5 years and more (%)
NFQ Level 5 or above	94	96	96	97	75
No relevant qualification	5.1	3.3	3.9	2.4	23.4
NFQ Level 4	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.2	1.3
NFQ Level 5	25.7	41.9	37.2	20.1	26.9
NFQ Level 6	42.1	43.8	42.3	43.9	31.5
NFQ Level 7	8.6	3.6	4.6	10.9	5.6
NFQ Level 8	16.5	6.5	10.8	20.5	9.8
NFQ Level 9/10	1.6	0.6	0.7	2.0	1.5

Note: NFQ: National Framework of Qualifications. Children of 5 years and more include school-aged childcare, which explains the large share of staff with no relevant qualification.
Source: Adapted from Pobal (2021[6]) Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2019/2020, Table 6.10, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/137583/?page=null (accessed 26 August 2021).

Plans to bring childminders into regulations and require minimum levels of education are welcome, but need to be developed further with care to retain staff in the sector

Plans to upskill the workforce in the largely unregulated childminding sector and to ensure that minimum quality standards are met in this sector are also ambitious and welcome (also see Chapter 3). While childminding staff in different countries often have fewer qualifications, positive associations between staff qualifications and enriching pedagogical experiences for children have also been documented for home-based settings (Eckhardt and Egert, 2020[14]; Schaack, Le and Setodji, 2017[15]).

Childminders play an important role in the provision of ECEC in Ireland, and appear to be a popular choice for childcare and early education, even if their exact numbers and profiles are unclear (see Chapter 1). Options to regulate the sector therefore need to be carefully considered, especially in terms of qualification requirements, and policy developments need to ensure the voice of childminders and the nature of their work within their own homes is taken into account. Indeed, public consultations for the National Action Plan for Childminding highlighted mixed views with regards to qualification requirements for childminders, with some stakeholders suggesting they should be equivalent to those of staff working in ECEC centres, and others suggesting there should be no qualification requirements at all (DCEDIY, 2021[16]). This was echoed during the review team's missions, with some stakeholders highlighting the difficulty of setting the right standards in general, but also in relation to staff in centre-based ECEC.

Continuing assessment of the main issues to be tackled to ensure quality in the childminding sector will be needed, possibly adopting a pragmatic approach so as to not lose high-quality staff. Such an assessment could be informed by local knowledge and engagement through the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), local agencies that provide advice and support to a range of stakeholders, including childminders, as well as Childminding Ireland, a national membership organisation.

The regulation and funding of childminders should build on learning from previous and existing experiences in this respect. This includes the Childminding Development Grants which provide some financial support for investment in equipment, tax exemptions through the Childcare Services Tax Relief, or previous practices of childminders benefitting from training opportunities, police checks, or a public listing through voluntary notification with their local CCC. Minimising the administrative burden for registration and

funding, which can already be considerable for ECEC centres, on childminders will be essential to facilitate participation and uptake (e.g. through support within the CCCs or other local structures).

The National Action Plan for Childminding already formulates a roadmap for greater regulation, including the removal of some of the exemptions for registration with the regulator (Tusla), and the creation of both a Foundation Training Programme and a Quality Development Programme (tied to an ISCED 4 or NFQ level 5 award) (DCEDIY, 2021[16]). The specifics are still to be defined as part of a next phase of consultation, research and development, and as informed by the Workforce Development Plan. The action plan nevertheless already formulates some helpful principles, such as the importance of a "balanced" and "incremental" approach so as not to drive childminders out of the sector while ensuring quality of ECEC, suitable training formats that take into account that childminders work on their own, the recognition of prior learning and availability of sufficient funding. Extending the scope of regulation to childminding while enabling access to the NCS through childminding would also support parents accessing this option, who currently do not benefit from this subsidy and pay full fees, as negotiated with their childminder.

Initial education and preparation

Context

Initial education and preparation to work in the ECEC sector is offered in further education and training as well as higher education institutions. Further education providers, which include among others the country's 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) that deliver a range of local education services, including secondary education, adult education and apprenticeships, offer qualifications at ISCED levels 4 and 5 (NFQ levels 5 and 6), that is tertiary and post-secondary non-tertiary education. Higher education institutions, that is mainly universities, technological universities and institutes of technology, offer awards at degree-level (ISCED 5 and higher, NFQ level 6 and higher). In line with changing qualification requirements for employment in the ECEC sector in Ireland, the number of degree programmes, and students graduating from them, has increased substantially. In 2007/2008, 11 higher education institutions were offering relevant degree programmes to a total of 1 259 students, a figure that had risen to 16 institutions serving 3 341 students by 2017/2018 (Frontier Economics, 2021[5]).

The Department of Education (DE) holds policy responsibility for the quality of initial training in both further and higher education. This is done in co-ordination with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), which has the lead policy role in the quality of provision and workforce development, and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (DFHERIS) who is responsible for the core funding and governance of the further and higher education sectors. There is no professional regulatory body for the ECEC sector, contrary to school education and health and social care that have such bodies in the form of a Teaching Council and the Health & Social Care Professionals Council (CORU). In the absence of professional self-regulation, the DCEDIY maintains a list of approved qualifications that meet statutory regulations and funding requirements (see https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/297c05-early-years-recognised-qualifications). Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), a government agency responsible for maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), among others, has a statutory remit to develop award standards for ECEC related qualifications and validating programmes. SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority, is responsible for the overall direction and funding of the further education and training sector (Frontier Economics, 2021[5]; DCEDIY, 2021[3]).

Recent initiatives provide an opportunity to review and improve initial preparation, but a continued focus on quality assurance and development is needed

There have been several efforts to improve the quality of initial education programmes for ECEC professionals. In particular, efforts have been made through new standards to ensure that the curriculum and quality frameworks, *Aistear* and *Síolta* respectively, are better integrated and that programmes include more practical training. These changes seek to respond to concerns identified also in an earlier review and survey of professionals by the DE, which highlighted gaps in these areas (DES, 2019[17]).

In 2019, the DE and DCEDIY published Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for education programmes at bachelor level (ordinary and honours degrees) (ISCED 6 and 7, NQF levels 7 and 8), which built on previously commissioned research and discussions from a working group hosting the main institutions involved (DES, 2019[17]; Frontier Economics, 2021[5]). These criteria and guidelines, the first to be established for ECEC degrees in Ireland, provide a useful framework for institutions to design and deliver their programmes, promoting a shared vision of the knowledge, practices and values that students should acquire and quality standards for the delivery of programmes. With their publication, the Irish Government has taken more direct actions to raise standards. A Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB) has been established, involving external experts, to review programmes on their coherence with criteria and guidelines. Following validation by the board, programmes can be included on the list of recognised qualifications maintained and updated by the DCEDIY (DES, 2019[17]).

In parallel, existing standards were also updated for further education training awards (ISCED 4 and 5, NFQ levels 5 and 6), which had last been revised in 2011. These new standards, which are linked to the Professional Award-type Descriptors (PATD) that specify minimum learning achievements as part of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), were published by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in 2019 (QQI, 2019[18]). Following the development of the criteria and guidelines for higher education programmes, the scope of these standards was extended to include awards at higher levels (ISCED 6 and 7, NFQ levels 7 and 8). Only masters and higher degrees (ISCED 8, NFQ level 9 and above) remain outside the scope of any standards. The skills, knowledge and competencies that the standards specify are to be used in the development or review of programmes by individual institutions, awarding and accreditation bodies, and the DCEDIY (Frontier Economics, 2021[5]; QQI, 2019[19]).

In further education and training, the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) took the development of new standards (PATD) as an opportunity to develop new programmes for ECEC, based on a shared curriculum, and informed by research and stakeholder engagement. Programmes include a Certificate in Early Learning and Care (ISCED 4, NQF Level 5) and an Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care (ISCED 5, NQF Level 6). The process, which has been led by Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB), has created a common curriculum, but each ETB has to apply to the QQI for validation of their own programme(s), incorporating the shared curriculum into their own context (DDLETB, 2020[20]). While it was planned for all boards to incorporate the curriculum into their programmes, this was no longer certain at the time of the main policy mission. How other institutions in further education and training, notably private and commercial providers, would respond to the new ETB curriculum was also unclear.

All these initiatives, which have come into force for programmes from September 2021 onwards, (although students previously enrolled can still graduate from existing programmes) provide good opportunities to review, raise and harmonise the quality of initial professional preparation. This was also acknowledged by stakeholders in both higher and further education during the policy missions, with the new standards being seen as facilitating a process of self-reflection and a chance to raise public confidence in the quality of initial preparation. Where the standards lead to greater harmonisation of programmes, they may also support the development of a stronger shared professional identity among ECEC staff, which is yet to be fully established among the workforce.

Unlike previously when the curriculum framework was not integrated systematically in programmes, they must now also address curriculum implementation, planning and assessment. Initial preparation should therefore now cover a broad range of areas, including playful learning, transitions, diversity and family engagement. This is also the case for the new common curriculum developed for ETB programmes, which reflects *Aistear* and *Síolta* in both programme and module learning outcomes, teaching and learning resources, and assessment criteria and guidelines. There appears to be an important focus on curriculum and pedagogy, play, child and family engagement as well as inclusion and diversity. As data collected for the Quality beyond Regulations project suggest, the breadth of programmes is comparable to that in many other countries, and more extensive than in some other participating countries (Figure 2.1).

Nevertheless, some challenges may not yet be sufficiently considered for implementation. For higher education (ISCED 6 and 7, NFQ levels 7 and 8), the existence of multiple standards (e.g. PACG and PATD) creates unnecessary complexity, even if both have reportedly been aligned in their development. Depending on education institutions' previous experience of self-review, they have reportedly found it challenging to submit to an external assessment, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic context.

Other aspects to keep in mind for the future development of initial preparation programmes are quality assurance of these new programmes, qualifications of programme teaching staff (who also need to familiarise themselves with the new programmes) as well as the mainstreaming of diversity and equity issues in programme curriculum. In further education colleges, the employment of staff from different disciplines (sometimes unrelated to ECEC) as well as working conditions can apparently be an issue, with the latter limiting time for course preparation and feedback to students. As highlighted by a general review of initial teacher education in Ireland, the impact of the changes initiated in the qualification programmes for ECEC staff, including on students' experiences, needs to be monitored (e.g. through annual or bi-annual surveys of students) (Sahlberg, 2019[21]).

Figure 2.1. Breadth of content required as part of ECEC professionals' initial education to obtain the minimum qualification

Average across settings of the percentage of content areas required to be included, among those included in the Quality beyond Regulations questionnaire, by age group, 2019
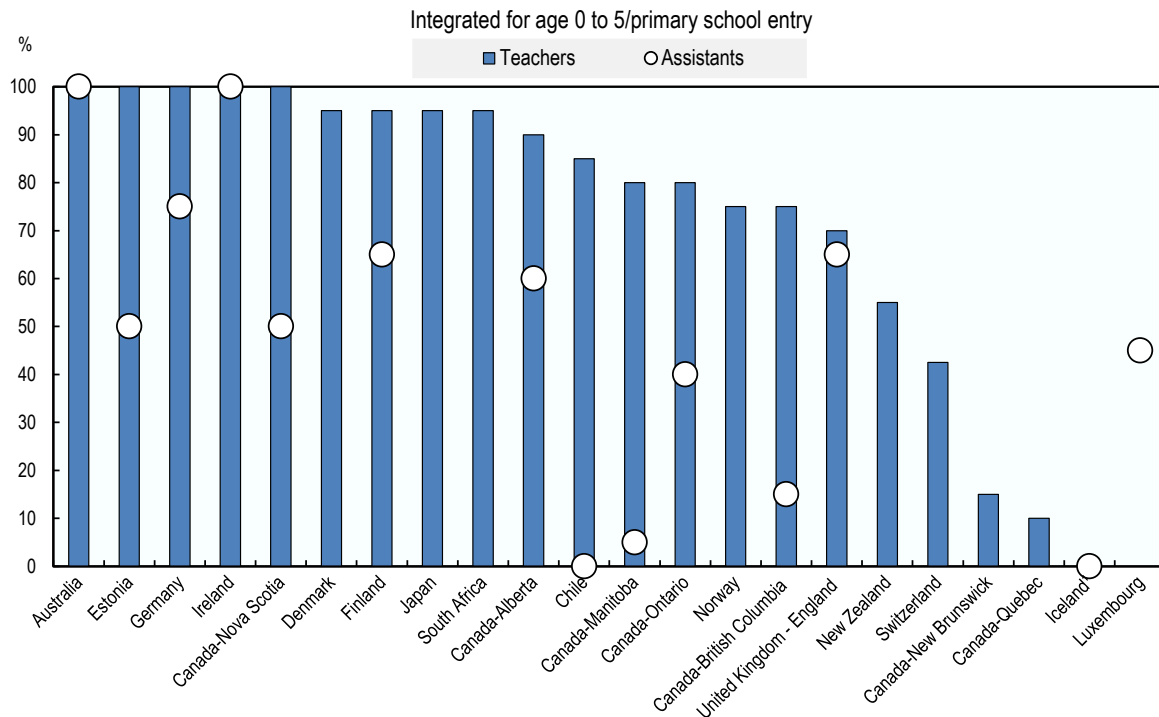
Note: Teachers in Ireland refer to ECCE "room leaders", assistants to all other staff.
Source: OECD (2021[1]), Starting Strong VI: Supporting meaningful interactions in in Early Childhood Education and Care.

The extent of practical training has also been strengthened, but support for implementation and greater feedback loops within the system are required for quality

Research has long highlighted the important role played by work-based training in supporting context-based learning (Balduzzi and Lazzari, 2015[22]; Flämig, König and Spiekermann, 2015[23]). As prospective staff engage in hands-on activities and deal with challenges of everyday practice, they are provided with opportunities to build and apply new knowledge in real-life situations (Kaarby and Lindboe, 2016[24]). The OECD TALIS Starting Strong 2018 survey (an international survey of pre-school staff) suggests that initial preparation that includes a practical component tends to expose staff to a broader range of content, in particular in areas that are otherwise less commonly integrated into programmes, such as working with a diversity of children or classroom management (OECD, 2020[12]).

The incorporation of professional practice placements in programmes in Ireland then represents another positive change, strengthening links between theory and practice. While higher-level qualifications have been acknowledged for the strong pedagogical knowledge they provide for students, they have often not sufficiently covered practical aspects to the same degree (e.g. child observations, working with a group of young children, changing nappies). Similarly, the extent of work experience as part of ISCED 4 and 5 (NFQ level 5 and 6) programmes has been limited (e.g. as little as a total of 30 hours through a 10-day placement in sessional care), placing much responsibility on ECEC providers and settings to provide practical training to new staff.

Requirements for further education courses (through PATD standards) however are less rigorous than those for higher education (through PACG). The criteria and guidelines for degree-level qualifications (PACG) recommend structured, supervised, and assessed professional practice in a range of settings and age groups for a minimum of 35% of the overall duration of courses. Based on a workload of between 4 500 and 6 000 hours over a course of 3 or 4 years, this equals 525 hours per year. The general standards for all programmes (PATD) set the requirement at 150 hours per year, which should cover work with both children aged 0 to 2 and older children, and offer a variety of learning opportunities, including observation, self-assessment and application of theory and knowledge to practice. The experience of students, training institutions and ECEC settings of the new practice placements, in particular in further education and training, should therefore be monitored to inform their further development. Greater attention also needs to be paid to the capacity of ECEC settings to offer sufficient practicum places of high quality for students, a concern that was frequently voiced during missions of the review team.

More generally, the linkages between education and training institutions, on the one hand, and ECEC settings, on the other, can be strengthened to support quality in initial preparation, as proposed in the Workforce Development Plan. Research highlights the importance of co-operation between training providers and ECEC settings for an authentic and reflective practical experience, and of competence and working condition standards for mentors (Oberhuemer, 2015[25]). Initial preparation is increasingly understood as a system that builds on positive feedback loops between its different parts to drive change. Partnerships should include joint programme design, evaluation and improvement, which requires time, resources and professional agency and trust (OECD, 2019[10]).

Within education and training institutions, linkages across preparation programmes for ECEC and primary education, and interactions among staff and students on these programmes, would also be beneficial, potentially supporting a greater understanding of each other's work, transition practices and professional practice (Sahlberg, 2019[21]). This is committed in the First 5 strategy and the Workforce Development Plan. As school-age childcare is regulated and new qualifications are developed, linkages should also be considered between these programmes and ECEC qualifications.

Lastly, further careful reflection and discussion about strengthening work-based learning for new professionals could be useful, for instance through the introduction of an apprenticeship scheme. As could be observed during the policy missions, some students may in practice already combine work and study following completion of the first years on their programme and an intermediate award that qualifies them for work in the sector. While this can be challenging in terms of time and responsibilities, it has the advantage of providing students with greater practical experience as staff members with full responsibilities, combined with the study of theory and financial support. Consultations for the Workforce Development Plan suggest that an apprenticeship model could be supported among some stakeholders, but there is also a feeling in the sector that it should be carefully designed (DCEDIY, 2021[3]).

Continuing professional development

Continuing professional development is pivotal for ECEC staff to extend and update their knowledge and develop new skills (OECD, 2021[1]; Hamre, Partee and Mulcahy, 2017[26]). Recent studies suggest that staff participation in well-designed professional development can be effective to support process quality in ECEC settings, for instance by enhancing staff's abilities to create close, warm and responsive relationships with children, to manage behaviour, and to stimulate children's reasoning and language development (Eckhardt and Egert, 2020[14]; Egert, Dederer and Fukkink, 2020[27]; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017[28]; Werner et al., 2016[29]). Participation in professional development can moreover support the development of staff's professional identity and their well-being, buffer the negative effect of stress and burnout, and boost satisfaction, commitment and retention (Peleman et al., 2018[30]; Sandilos et al., 2018[31]; Totenhagen et al., 2016[32]). Effective adult learning activities typically exhibit features such as

responsiveness to context, a strong evaluative dimension of practice, and individual feedback and guidance (OECD, 2021[1]; Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020[33]).

In Ireland, continuing professional development for ECEC staff is largely at the discretion of individual settings and providers, leaders and staff. There are no regulations, requirements or recommendations for minimum participation. In terms of offer and activities, 30 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) provide training opportunities (as well as other services for the sector), as do a number of National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs) (see Chapter 1). Tertiary education institutions participate in the ongoing development of ECEC staff, through initial preparation programmes that are open to experienced staff keen on gaining new qualifications, but also some other short courses and seminars.

More recently, as part of the government's agenda to improve quality and ensure a more consistent adoption of *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the government has taken a more direct involvement in steering professional development, notably with the creation of a dedicated agency, Better Start, and the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI). The NSAI consists of a range of training and mentoring support services such as workshops and onsite mentoring sessions focused on the *Siolta* and *Aistear* frameworks, the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (an online resource for use by practitioners and others), and the Aistear and Play programme. Important elements of the NSAI include the initiative's resource development group, which plays a role in developing quality resources, and the steering group, which facilitates co-ordination between different government actors.

Better Start, located in Pobal, a government intermediary agency, provides mentoring and coaching services to ECEC settings through its Quality Development Service (QDS) since 2016. The ECEC specialists employed through this service use in particular the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide as a core resource and support the implementation of the curriculum and quality frameworks. The organisation also provides support for the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) on the topic of the inclusion of children with disabilities (through mentoring, advice and courses) as well as some other trainings and online resources through an Early Years Learning and Development Unit (Frontier Economics, 2021[5]).

A strong focus on formal qualifications needs to be complemented with a broader view of professional learning that meets the improvement needs of a diverse range of staff

It seems that a large proportion of ECEC centre staff in Ireland dedicate some time to further training (84% according to a survey not representative of the full sector carried out in December 2020 and January 2021 by SIPTU, the country's largest trade union (SIPTU, 2021[34])), but it is unclear if staff who need it the most participate and what type of development activities staff engage in. While the government has ambitious goals for upskilling the ECEC workforce, as described at the beginning of the chapter, the current approach does not seem sufficiently adapted to the various staff profiles with different needs and at different stages of their careers.

New staff need inductions that provide guidance and mentoring from more experienced colleagues to apply their knowledge, adapt to concrete work situations and understand the organisational culture of the workplace. At the same time, induction can create a positive dynamic for staff to engage in subsequent training (OECD, 2020[12]). On the other hand, a substantial share of current staff need to upskill to meet new requirements or to remain attractive to employers as novice staff with higher qualifications enter the workforce. This requires access to formal training, which can be demanding in terms of commitment, cost and time. In 2019/2020, 14% of staff working with children were in the process of acquiring a formal qualification, with 49% of them studying for an ISCED 5 qualification (NFQ level 6), and 33% for a qualification at ISCED 6 (NFQ level 7) or above (Pobal, 2021[6]). Finally, current professionals already with degree-level qualifications (26.6% in 2019/2020 according to Pobal) also need to keep up to date with emerging knowledge and improve their practices, including through less structured types of training.

The relatively strong focus on formal types of education to raise the qualification of current staff would benefit from being embedded in a more comprehensive approach to professional learning that builds on a range of opportunities for different types of staff. More formal development opportunities should be seen as only one component within a much larger ecosystem of a continuum of formal and informal professional learning opportunities (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020[33]). As studies suggest, informal learning can also promote staff's subject and pedagogical knowledge and shape their professional beliefs and dispositions (Kyndt et al., 2016[35]). Some other valuable types of learning are offered (e.g. mentoring and coaching through Better Start's quality development service), but could be extended more widely. Recognition of the importance of informal learning and learning in teams and among peers has been limited, although the review team heard of some practices in centres (e.g. staff meeting at the end of the day and/or week to reflect together across rooms, using tools such as the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide, an online resource facilitating self-assessments).

Taking a broader view at professional development should also reflect evolving notions of professionalism in the ECEC field and the active role of staff in their own learning as reflective practitioners, both individually and collectively. It would seek to create conditions for staff to embrace a professional growth mind-set, a commitment to continuous improvement and ownership of their practice (OECD, 2020[12]). Such an approach could help make work in the sector more attractive to potential candidates, keep staff motivated and engaged, establish avenues for career progression and ensure high-quality ECEC for children (OECD, 2020[12]).

The review team recognises that professionalising the ECEC workforce is a process that will inevitably take time. As a next step on a journey towards a broader approach to professional development, however, it would be helpful to gain more knowledge about the types of learning that different types of staff currently engage in, what types of learning are supported by centres (on and off site), and what needs of different centres and staff are not yet addressed. This could then inform further strategies to support a broader range of professional learning, that includes informal and centre-embedded learning (e.g. by creating time in schedules, building team leader capacity, creating further resources to support team work). Particular strategies for centre-embedded learning might be necessary for centres of small size or those located in rural parts of the country (e.g. by creating professional networks and digital exchange platforms). Peer learning and networks could also be facilitated through professional development activities aimed at groups of settings, which could also have benefits in economies of scale (Urban, Robson and Scacchi, 2017[36]). Developing a type of voluntary 'learning log' or 'portfolio' could help recognise the value of different types of learning besides formal qualifications, and make staff aware that this is encouraged.

Learning about current induction strategies for new staff in settings, establishing common expectations or standards about quality induction practices (e.g. preparation of mentors, protocols for team learning, strategies to reduce workloads of novices, etc.) and raising the awareness of existing staff to opportunities for participation in induction activities so they benefit from the perspectives of their new colleagues, should be a further priority. This is also important as students on practical placements are typically limited in the responsibilities they can take on (e.g. interactions with parents, leading a room). At present, the organisation of induction is at the discretion of individual centres (and providers) (Frontier Economics, 2021[5]), so practices will vary widely. There seem to be established practices in some centres however (e.g. providing an introduction to the setting's curriculum and policies, training in manual handling of children). Indeed, the need to develop induction is recognised in the Workforce Development Plan (DCEDIY, 2021[3]), and was highlighted in the criteria and guidelines for higher education (DES, 2019[17]).

ECEC staff are generally motivated to engage in further professional development, but face some barriers in accessing opportunities and gaining new qualifications

Motivating staff to engage in the continuous learning and development of their practice and ensuring they have access to these opportunities are important considerations for any professional development system (OECD, 2021[1]; OECD, 2020[12]). In Ireland, the strong policy focus on upskilling and training the existing workforce means that staff need to have both the incentives, resources and opportunities to continue developing their skills, also through formal training.

Time is an important resource for (and cost of) participation in training (Bayly et al., 2020[37]). According to findings from TALIS Starting Strong 2018, release time during regular working hours for professional development can encourage greater engagement in development activities (OECD, 2020[12]). In Ireland, only some staff benefit from funded hours during which they can participate in structured training (e.g. through participation in activities organised by Better Start as part of a pilot scheme, which compensates providers for staff participation in training with payments of EUR 14 per hour for up to 18 hours per person in a year). Most staff however have to go for training in their own time, which competes with their personal responsibilities, not to mention other professional ones such as pedagogical planning and meeting with parents. This is different to a number of other countries that provide time incentives for staff to participate in training.

While the government has currently little leeway to influence working conditions (which are set by providers in negotiation with staff as discussed in the next section), there could be more dedicated time for staff to engage in professional improvement, including in peer and team learning activities through more non-contact time. This requires resources in settings to compensate for staff absences (which could be addressed through a new funding model discussed at the time of writing, also see Chapter 1), but also flexibility in the delivery of professional development activities. It can be a challenge for centre staff and childminders to take part in trainings given their work schedules, especially those working in small settings with staff constraints, meaning trainings must then take place during evenings or on weekends. Learning experiences from adjustments to the delivery of professional development in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic could inform the design of more flexible development courses (e.g. blended learning involving some online courses), which were already recommended by Urban et al (2017[36]) as part of a review of occupational role profiles in ECEC in Ireland. There is also little support available in terms of funding for staff to participate in training (Urban, Robson and Scacchi, 2017[36]). Although some settings may reimburse training costs to staff, this is reportedly not very common.

The government's relatively strong focus on formal types of education to raise the level of qualifications among sector staff requires a clear strategy to enable and incentivise current staff (mostly ISCED 5 practitioners, NFQ level 6) to engage in such training. Such a strategy needs to involve employers, education and training institutions and representatives from the workforce, and would include the possibility for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) or of skills acquired on the job, flexibility to combine work and study through part-time and blended learning, study leave arrangements and adequate funding mechanisms. Creativity in the design of flexible programmes could build on previous experiences, such as the part-time, blended LINC programme (described below in the section on leadership), and would also help address potential geographical barriers to formal training or to allow practitioners to reduce potential costs related to training (e.g. required for relocation).

Given the size of the workforce, upskilling to new qualification levels requires a significant investment and the government is seeking resources from the European Social Fund for this purpose. The costs of the necessary formal training need to be adequately shared between staff, providers and the government as the benefits do not pertain only to the participating staff. Funding arrangements also need to consider the diversity of providers and settings, and the particular challenges faced by some of them to implement the upskilling agenda (e.g. small size providers might have more difficulties to release their staff to go on educational courses or give them paid time off). The experience of the pilot scheme providing payments

to settings to release practitioners or to compensate them for participation through Better Start should help inform new funding arrangements, which are also part of ongoing work on the Workforce Development Plan (DCEDIY, 2021[3]) and for a new funding model.

For staff, financial support for gaining new qualifications (to meet minimum requirements to work with children or in an ECCE room, but also simply to engage in further professional learning) has been made available in the past through a bursary scheme, the Learner Fund. Administered by Pobal, this fund has thus far supported over 5 000 professionals to raise their level of qualification. A renewal of this fund seems important, as the review team heard of concerns that the programme would not be open to staff who benefitted from funding in the past to upskill to new requirements. The fund also needs to be aligned with other potential sources of public funding for people in work to progress in their career, such as the Skills to Advance programme offered by SOLAS. Greater information on funding opportunities that is easily accessible to staff interested in gaining further qualifications would also be important.

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) seems an important component that should be further developed in the plans to upskill the workforce so as to recognise comprehensive work done by practitioners, their informal learning on the job and any other structured training they may already have engaged in. This requires thinking about what work experience would mean in terms of qualifications. Both the training provider and the ECEC workplace would likely have a role in the evaluation and recognition of informal learning. The experience of professionalising other social sectors, such as nursing, in Ireland or elsewhere could provide interesting perspectives on how to implement a twin track process and on bringing qualifications and experience together. Plans to build a consistent and coherent approach to RPL within and across the public higher education sector (under the Human Capital Initiative) are welcome but also including further education institutions in efforts to develop RPL is important for the less qualified part of the ECEC workforce. Continued reflection about the linkages between education programmes and the development of micro credentials to facilitate progression and transfers across levels of qualification will also be useful, and involve different types of institutions.

The childminding sector likely needs particular attention to facilitate the participation of childminders in professional learning and to target professional development strategies to their needs. Options include the development of professional networks of childminders, as proposed in the National Action Plan for Childminding, to facilitate practical arrangements for training and professional learning, and the exchange of and co-operation on practices (Box 2.2).

Box 2.2. Professional learning networks for childminders

Some research suggests that networking may play an important role in the quality of staff-child interactions in family daycare settings. Opportunities for networking or collaborating with other family daycare providers seem to be associated with higher quality staff-child interactions. In **Canada**, informal networking was a predictor of better staff-child interactions, although organised networking with other providers was not related to quality (Doherty et al., 2006[38]). The benefits associated with these mechanisms of quality, particularly opportunities for collaboration and networking, may be specific to family daycare settings given the small number of staff and children in each provision.

In most countries, family-care providers work from their own home with limited opportunities for collaboration or networking with other providers. In some European countries, providers jointly take care of children at the same location. In **Denmark**, family-care providers living in the same neighbourhood organise themselves in so-called "playroom groups" and have regular meetings where children can play together and also organise activities, such as music, movement or dance, as well as outings for the whole group of children. In **France**, some "relays" for home-based ECEC staff have been developed to enable them to meet among themselves and learn from others, participate in group activities under the lead of ECEC professionals and discuss with them about the content of their work, working conditions and administrative aspects. These "relays" are also opened to parents who can benefit from help to find a home-based ECEC staff or mediation in case of conflict between the family and the home-based ECEC staff. Also in some federal states in **Germany** and in the **United Kingdom**, family-care providers are allowed to collaborate and jointly take care of larger groups of children.

Source: OECD (2018, p. 86[2]), Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en.

The landscape of providers supporting professional development appears fragmented, and there could be more quality assurance and needs assessments

The professional development architecture for ECEC in Ireland, while incorporating a range of valuable expertise on the ground and promising approaches in line with evidence of effective practice, is highly fragmented with several institutions being in charge of the provision of training.

Better Start, established to drive quality in the sector, is acknowledged for the quality of its programmes and services and offers training identified as holding particular promise for professional learning (e.g. combinations of formats, such as workshops, coursework and onsite support) (Egert, Dederer and Fukkink, 2020[27]; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017[28]). During its policy missions, the review team heard positive experiences of working with the Better Start Quality Development Service (QDS) ECEC specialists in quality and curriculum (e.g. helping staff [and parents] to develop a common understanding of what a curriculum is, developing outdoor spaces, working on policies around transitions, etc.). At the same time, though settings and providers no longer need a referral to access QDS coaching, and priority criteria now encompass a wider range of areas (e.g. staff turnover, disadvantage), the offer, scope and resources of the Service seem limited.

There also seems to be some complexity in the organisation of Better Start, with support for the implementation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in settings, as well as other trainings (e.g. sensory processing or sign language were frequently referred to in interviews) being separate to and layered on top of the Quality Development Service (QDS). Moreover, Better Start's Learning and Development Unit supports the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative (NSAI) with a series of dedicated workshops and onsite mentoring as part of Aistear and Play.

Professional development is also provided through the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs), for instance offering introductory workshops for *Síolta and Aistear* and developing networks for childminders in order to share expertise in child safety and well-being, among other subjects. In addition, several institutions or employers themselves provide various types of unstructured ECEC training. Finally, initial ECEC preparation programmes are supposed to be open to existing staff who want to raise their qualifications but providers need to propose flexible programmes in terms of mode of provision, time requirement and content, in addition to any other short-term professional development.

As a consequence of the fragmented approach to training, staff and ECEC centre leaders may not be aware of the full range of available opportunities, partly due to a lack of efficient and coherent communication. A fragmented training landscape also does not support the development of a shared professional identity. There is little visibility on the range and quality of some of the available programmes. The current system likewise seems to not have enough scale to reach all of the workforce systematically, nor processes and feedback loops to assess the needs of practitioners and the quality of the training on offer. For instance, the needs of Irish-medium settings in ECEC do not seem sufficiently met, impacting negatively their provision. Overall, the current system seems to offer little leeway for the government to steer the overall provision of staff development towards certain goals (e.g. through funding or quality assurance). Leadership capacity in centres (discussed in the final section) requires strengthening to design coherent development strategies for staff that support the vision of the setting.

It seems important to get a comprehensive view on the funding, capacity and quality standards of organisations such as the CCCs, NVCOs and Better Start, to improve connections between different providers in the short term, while working towards a more unified system of quality support and development in the long term (as is envisaged in 'First 5', with different options being discussed in the Operating Model Review Group) (also see Chapters 1 and 3). A more unified model would not only help ensure greater efficiencies in the resources spent on professional development, but also help impact outcomes for children more systematically.

An assessment of the current landscape would also need to look at the particular strengths and challenges of different approaches and organisations, in view of preserving existing expertise. For instance, the Quality Development Service of Better Start provides intensive support over typically six months, but could provide a more proportional approach to accompany a setting and its staff based on needs. The work of the CCCs (typically the first point of contact for settings and staff seeking support), while representing a source of valuable expertise and local knowledge, is highly variable in terms of capacity and resources, which is also linked to the way they are governed. At the same time, their role and that of the NVCOs has been evolving with the creation of Better Start, which has led them to move more towards administration (e.g. related to the NCS) or other areas (e.g. the creation of digital resources or engagement in research) beyond direct quality support..

In addition to such a mapping of provision, further consideration is needed on how the quality support and development system is monitored and overseen, how it is informed through the assessment of staff and system needs, and how it ties in with monitoring and inspection. A number of departments and institutions are currently involved in the management of professional development initiatives (e.g. DCEDIY, DE). The National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative (NSAI) illustrates the potential complexity this entails. Led by the DE in collaboration with DCEDIY, who fund the NSAI, the initiative is implemented in co-ordination with the NCCA, with staff split across the DE, the NCCA and Better Start. Insights from monitoring and inspection (e.g. through composite reports) can inform the development of the professional development offer, the planning of activities in settings and the engagement of staff; but the current quality assurance arrangements might make this overly complex (e.g. to bring together insights from different institutions, or to communicate a consistent message to settings and staff) (see Chapter 3).

Breaking down barriers between systems would also be beneficial. Continuing professional development seems rather disconnected from initial preparation, and there could be value in joint development (as well as initial training) opportunities for primary and ECEC practitioners, as is recognised by the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality of Ireland and First 5 (Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality, 2021[39]; Government of Ireland, 2019[11]), and a review of initial teacher education at universities and colleges (Sahlberg, 2019[21]).

The mapping and assessment of the current professional development landscape and architecture also needs to consider what's on offer for the childminding sector, whether their needs are met and how opportunities can be provided. In particular, it seems that there is little knowledge of the *Aistear* curriculum framework in home-based settings, though childminders may have practices that are aligned with its principles. At present, the CCCs as well as Childminding Ireland (one of the seven NVCOs and a membership organisation) constitute important sources of support and training. Six childminding development officers have recently taken up office and the number will double by 2022. They operate on a regional basis and support CCCs with resources and advice, which the CCCs subsequently provide to childminders who in turn inform CCCs about their service. The National Action Plan for Childminding states that a specific training course will be proposed to childminders (building on the former Quality Awareness Programme) as of 2022, covering topics such as child development, child well-being, play, hygiene, and health and safety.

Working conditions

Context

Staff working conditions have an impact on staff well-being, in particular on their emotional well-being, which in turn has an effect on their practices with children and their performance at work. Overall, staff working conditions and well-being can be important drivers of process quality. Furthermore, working conditions and well-being determine the quality of the job (Cazes, Hijzen and Saint-Martin, 2015[40]), which may be a reason for candidates to join the sector, and for existing staff to stay or leave, finally determining the capacity of the sector to retain high-quality staff. Working conditions include various aspects, such as earnings, job security and career prospects, workload, and the quality of the working environment in the ECEC centre.

Working conditions are generally relatively poor

With ECEC being almost fully provided by private institutions in Ireland, the government's general approach has consisted in not regulating most aspects of staff's working conditions. In addition, given that Ireland's total expenditure in ECEC is relatively low (see Chapter 1), the sector is generally under tight budgets, which has resulted in relatively poor working conditions. There is however large variation across settings depending on their size, opening hours and type of funding (private for-profit or community-based, non-profit).

Salaries are a crucial component of working conditions. Research provides supporting evidence that salary is important for attracting and retaining ECEC staff. Several studies also find a relationship between salaries and the quality of staff's interactions with children, with better-paid staff having more personal interactions with children and fewer detached ones (Cassidy et al., 2017[41]; Hu et al., 2017[42]). This relationship has also been found in the case of home-based settings (Eckhardt and Egert, 2020[14]). On top of the salary itself, it seems that ECEC staff perceptions regarding the fairness of their wage are also positively correlated with process quality (Cassidy et al., 2017[41]). Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2018, looking at data from nine participating countries, show that staff have low satisfaction with salaries and that this is associated with stress and disengagement at work (OECD, 2020[12]).

Comparable and comprehensive data across countries on salaries of ECEC staff are missing. Data often cover only statutory salaries and salaries of pre-primary staff in the public sector. However, available evidence suggests that wages are low in Ireland, both from a national and international perspective. Statistics from Pobal that cover ECEC and school-age childcare indicate that the average wage, EUR 12.45 per hour in 2019/2020 (EUR 11.99 per hour in 2018/2019), is just above the living wage (EUR 12.30) (i.e. the level of earnings that allowed for a minimum acceptable standard of living) and above the minimum wage (EUR 10.20 per hour). Wages are higher for ECCE room leaders who have a higher qualification (EUR 13.69) and lower for non-ECCE room leaders (EUR 12.53) and assistants, the latter of which are below the living wage. A study commissioned by the government to inform a new funding model compared data on average annual salaries for ECEC teachers in public institutions in a number of countries with Ireland-specific data covering the whole workforce (i.e. including room leaders and assistants) delivering private provision (Table 2.3). It concluded that in terms of absolute levels, average earnings for the ECEC workforce in Ireland were at the lower end of the international distribution but not among the lowest. In terms of earnings relative to the national average, Ireland however has the lowest relative pay of all the countries considered (although for most other participating countries, only teachers were included).

Table 2.3. Mean hourly pay wages for ECEC staff in a selection of countries and jurisdictions

Country	Year	Mean hourly pay (in EUR adjusted for PPP)	Ratio of ECEC mean hourly pay to national mean	Ratio of ECEC mean hourly pay wage to minimum wage	Comments
Canada (Ontario)	2019	€12.84	46%	140%	Converted from median wage of €11.70/hr
England (United Kingdom)	2019	€11.56	43%	131%	-
France	2017	€19.92	75%	193%	For teachers in public, centre-based settings
Germany	2019	€18.54 – €30.49	58% - 95%	199% - 327%	Statutory salaries for teachers in public settings
Ireland	2019	€12.55	47%	131%	All staff
Netherlands	2017	€26.04	78%	179%	For teachers in public, centre-based settings
New Zealand	2018	€15.06	71%	171%	For teachers
Norway	2017	€19.13	60%	-	For teachers in public, centre-based settings

Source: Paull (2020[43]), Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Towards a New Funding Model: Review of Working Conditions for Staff in Early Learning and Care

Job security is another important reward for staff's work. Statistics from Pobal indicate that 76% of ECEC staff had a permanent contract in 2020, which is below the percentage of permanent contracts in Ireland in the private sector (90%). There are variations among staff with assistants being less likely than room leaders to have a permanent contract. Furthermore, staff working with non-ECCE children, both assistants and room leaders (i.e. teachers), are more likely to have a permanent contract compared to their ECCE counterparts. This is related to the fact that the publicly funded ECCE programmes are funded only for the 38 weeks during which they operate and that settings may not need their staff in the summer months (or might be closed). Childminders are self-employed workers and set the terms of their working conditions, based on the fees and other aspects (e.g. hours worked) negotiated with parents. Childminders do benefit from some financial support as well, such as tax reliefs and Childminder Development Grants

(for the purchase of equipment), to encourage them to join the formal economy, although take up, while increasing slightly, has remained low (DCEDIY, 2021[16]).

The number of hours worked also has implications on monthly or annual wages. A relatively high share of ECEC staff in Ireland work part-time, although Ireland as a whole has a lower proportion of part-time workers than many other European countries for which data was available (Paull, 2020[43]). The format of the ECCE programme that is delivered in 3 hour sessions per day or 15 hours per week contributes to part-time work especially in centres that do not have a sufficient number of children enrolled in other ECEC activities to propose a full-time contract to their staff. Furthermore, part of ECEC staff are only paid for their activities with children and not for extra-activities (i.e. preparatory work). However, there is no information available on whether part-time work is by choice or not.

Other benefits that contribute to living standards are also at the minimum statutory provision that is available for ECEC staff. A survey of around 2 000 ECEC staff done by the country's largest trade union shows that 77% of respondents had no sick pay scheme from work, 91% had no pension beyond the State Pension and only 10% had paid maternity leave from work (SIPTU, 2021[34]). In a survey of centre-based providers, a majority of respondents indicated that the capacity to offer attractive additional staff benefits was a key concern in relation to attracting and retaining staff (Crowe, 2020[44]).

The combination of low wages, a low number of paid working hours, and the prevalence of temporary contracts means that working conditions are generally poor in the sector. This makes it complicated for staff to get and pay a mortgage, for instance. Another implication is that most staff (98%) are female while other factors also contribute.

The gap in working conditions and status between ECEC and primary education is large in Ireland. Primary school teachers' salaries are generally considered as attractive and relatively high from an international perspective. Primary school teachers are highly qualified, have access to and are rewarded for participation in professional development, and benefit from relatively long holiday periods and a pension scheme (Early Childhood Ireland, 2020[45]). The sector is predominantly public with schools being mainly publicly funded and the DE paying for staff wages. Primary school teachers moreover benefit from regulation and standard setting through the country's Teaching Council, which can help drive professionalism and recognition for teachers' work. The OECD has noted that gaps in staff's working conditions between ECEC and primary education makes it difficult for the ECEC sector to attract and retain good candidates. Furthermore, given the fact that the work of teachers (or of staff with more pedagogical responsibilities) in both pre-primary and primary education levels is important and requires skills, knowledge and expertise, educational requirements and salaries could be better aligned (OECD, 2020[12]).

While ECEC staff's working conditions in Ireland is a source of concern, other countries are in a similar situation. In many countries, working conditions of staff working with the youngest children are also poor (OECD, 2021[1]). In some countries with integrated ECEC settings for children under the age of 3 and pre-primary education (e.g. Norway), working conditions are more favourable and the status of the profession is also higher (OECD, 2020[12]).

Relatively poor working conditions contribute to high turnover rates

The turnover rate (percentage of staff who have left the centres in the past twelve months) was estimated at 18% on average across the country with this rate reaching 38% in Dublin county (Pobal, 2021[6]). The highest retention rates are in the for-profit sector and in settings located in rural areas. There are not many available data to compare with other countries but this is estimated to be a high turnover rate in Ireland. Estimates for countries participating in TALIS Starting Strong 2018 using a different methodology found that the percentage of staff who left the ECEC centre in the previous year ranged from 7% in Norway to 22% in Japan, suggesting that the turnover rate is indeed relatively high in Ireland. Moreover, according to information on the destinations of staff who had left their centre in Ireland, a majority (52%) had left the

ECEC sector entirely and the percentage of staff leaving the sector is on the rise (Pobal, 2021[6]). A majority of providers reported experiencing challenges in recruiting suitably qualified staff over the past 12 months.

Most stakeholders consider that relatively poor working conditions contribute to these high turnover rates, especially low wages and the lack of stable contracts for some staff. A survey of ECEC providers indicated that these features were creating a significant challenge to recruitment and retention of staff (Crowe, 2020[44]).

There are several possible implications of high turnover. The quality of ECEC provision can be affected, especially if staff change during the year as it is important for children to be cared for, learn and play in a stable environment. The investment in initial training is partly lost. This is particularly problematic as the government has taken several steps to strengthen initial preparation as is discussed in depth in the previous sections. This is partly done with the expectation that novice staff might in theory be able to change the system towards better quality (e.g. through the implementation of best and innovative practices) as they are more qualified, which does not realise in practice as they are also more likely to leave their role. Furthermore, with staff leaving, it is complicated for institutions in charge of monitoring and inspection to follow up with staff to improve their performance and service delivery. Finally, frequent changes in centre staffing make it difficult for providers to build professional capacity and teams that work together on their own improvement (e.g. through established routines and a shared organisational culture).

To attract and retain ECEC staff, wages need to be aligned with responsibilities

Improving working conditions in the ECEC sector is a necessity to ensure quality provision. Attracting and maintaining a high-quality workforce cannot go without working conditions commensurate with the content, responsibilities and expectations attached to the job.

A general strategy to achieve quality in ECEC when at least part of the workforce has relatively low qualifications and low wages consists in raising the professionalisation of the workforce through clear roles and responsibilities, education requirements and professional development, while ensuring that wages are aligned with these roles. The government has done quite a lot on the professionalisation of the workforce, which is welcomed. In 2002, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (then responsible for the ECEC sector) published a set of occupational role profiles for the ECEC sector and a previous Workforce Development Plan adopted in 2010 already mapped these roles with the National Framework of Qualifications. This work resulted in the development of Professional Award Type Descriptors (PATD) for new initial training programmes at ISCED levels 4 to 7 (NFQ 5 to 9) (also see above section on initial education).

The 2021 Workforce Development Plan includes further work on the definition of roles and career framework for the profession. In particular, it is welcomed to consider how this framework can apply to settings from different sizes. Large settings have often already created other roles to diversify staff's responsibilities and differentiate wages. The harmonisation of these roles could facilitate staff mobility across these settings. However, small settings might not be able to offer a diversity of roles and might face increasing difficulties to attract new staff as qualification standards on the workforce increase.

Little has been done in the past to align wages with roles and responsibilities on a permanent basis and make sure that staff can have career prospects in the profession. This is partly because, with the sector being private, wages are negotiated between employers (ECEC providers) and employees (ECEC staff) and the government has few direct policy levers to influence the process. This misalignment between qualification requirements and wages has increased in the past years and will continue to do so if nothing is done to align wages with new qualification requirements. With new highly educated staff entering the profession, turnover rates might increase further.

However, the government has recently taken important steps to improve the working conditions of the ECEC workforce. With public investment in ECEC being low and fees for parents being high

(see Chapter 1), higher wages cannot come without additional funding from the government as planned as part of the government's First 5 strategy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government fully subsidised ECEC staff wages (to a maximum ceiling) through the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme. This was replaced in August 2020 by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. ECEC employers can benefit from this scheme without fulfilling the standard rule according to which businesses should have experienced a 30% or more reduction in turnover to benefit from the scheme. These actions have been highly welcomed by stakeholders and have supported the view that at least part of the ECEC sector could become publicly funded and managed (also see Chapter 1).

Furthermore, as 17% of staff in community ECEC services were employed by several government-funded programmes in 2019/2020 (Pobal, 2021[6]), the government is in fact already subsidising part of the wage bill in the not-for-profit market. The review team heard about successful transitions from these schemes to regular positions, especially for people on the Community Employment programme designed to help individuals who are long-term unemployed to get back into employment, suggesting that the scheme benefits both ECEC centres and workers.

The government's preferred approach is to maintain a privately managed sector while increasing public funding. This approach requires that strong mechanisms are in place to ensure that public funding leads to quality and higher wages (and other quality working conditions). Strengthening the monitoring and inspection framework as discussed in Chapter 3 with a focus on process quality would give stronger incentives to settings to offer wages more aligned with roles and responsibilities to attract and retain high-quality candidates. In addition, direct mechanisms linking funding to quality objectives are needed. Since the introduction of the ECCE programme in 2010, the government allocates higher funding to centres with room leaders who hold an ISCED 6 qualification (NFQ level 7) or above through the higher capitation scheme in order to raise wages of room leaders in ECCE rooms and incentivise employment of graduates. An additional capitation is also paid to centres for employing an inclusion co-ordinator (INCO) qualified through the LINC programme. The higher capitation payment has been successful in increasing the qualification level among the ECCE room leaders. However, there is evidence that only part of these additional payments are passed through to the salaries of the graduate staff for whom the payments were made.

Some countries have tried to make additional funding ring-fenced for workers' pay, for instance by developing some "attestation". These strategies are likely to lead to large additional administrative burdens without guaranteeing that additional funding translates into higher wages. A more promising avenue consists in strengthening the monitoring and inspection framework while linking public funding to a carefully designed set of parameters that are strong inputs to quality. Fulfilling some wage standards would be part of these parameters.

In mid-2021, following a consultation process led by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail established a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) to agree on minimum wages for staff and leaders in ECEC. A JLC is a committee composed of representatives of trade unions, employer organisations and an independent chair. The JLC proposes an Employment Regulation Order (ERO), which, if accepted by the Labour Court, will set minimum requirements for ECEC staff working conditions. The ERO generally sets minimum wages but can also cover several other working conditions such as working hours and training. Through this process, institutions representing both employers and employees in ECEC are asked to engage in discussions within a formal process for setting terms and conditions for employment in ECEC.

The JLC is an important step towards the development of wage standards. For this initiative to succeed, it will be important that institutions involved represent the majority of ECEC providers and ECEC staff. At present, there does not seem to be a common voice for providers or staff, with multiple interests and stakeholders being represented through a range of institutions and associations. On the provider side, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) has recently started bringing employers together. It will also be important that the JLC defines some minimum wages but also considers defining grids for

career progression as minimum wages might mainly impact new entrants or novice staff. While the introduction of a JLC is promising, there are challenges related to the fact that the mechanism has not been used much in Ireland in the recent past, with only two JLCs being active, and that they have mainly been used for low-skilled professions.

Furthermore, in October 2021, the Government announced initial features of a new core funding stream as part of the 2022 Budget. Main features related to staff working conditions are summarised below.

- The new core funding stream will start in September 2022, be allocated to approximately 4 700 ECEC providers and cover 30 000 staff. It will amount to EUR 69 million in 2022 and EUR 207.3 million in 2023. A one-off transition fund of EUR 37 million will support providers before the new funding stream comes into place.
- The new core funding scheme is contingent on an ERO being agreed to determine minimum wages and terms and conditions of employment for ECEC staff. If there is no agreement on an ERO, a significant proportion of the funding will not be made available. Another condition is a commitment from providers not to increase parental fees.
- This additional funding is planned to cover the costs coming from the adoption of an ERO related to higher wages and improved terms and conditions of employment. It also aims to fund staff's work on tasks to be performed without children, curriculum implementation, and support for degree-qualified staff.
- This funding will be allocated to providers according to their capacity. Higher level of funding will be allocated to centres with the youngest children and with more qualified staff.

This announcement clarifies future public funding available to the sector and gives room for negotiations of improved working conditions within the JLC while supporting the financial sustainability of ECEC provision. Linking funding to the adoption of an ERO provides incentives to achieve an agreement and ensures that higher funding translates into improved wages and other working conditions. This additional funding is presented as the beginning of a multi-annual investment plan, which should also facilitate the adoption of working conditions standards that have long-term financial impacts for ECEC providers.

Developing the use of more favourable employment contracts for ECEC staff

ECEC staff who do not have a permanent contract can be in very precarious and unstable situations. For instance, some contracts only cover the ECCE programme year and staff are on unemployment benefits during the summer break. This is particularly the case for small settings while larger settings have more flexibility to organise the provision of services in a way so as to employ staff on a permanent basis.

Ensuring that fixed-term contracts are stepping stones towards permanent contracts is another important priority. The Irish Labour legislation stipulates that employees cannot remain on a series of fixed-term contracts indefinitely and that the combined duration of the contracts shall not exceed four years. After this, if the employer wishes the employee to continue, it must be with a contract of indefinite duration. However, given the high turnover rate in the sector, the government might consider ways to encourage quicker transitions towards a permanent contract. Like for wages, revisions to the funding framework (discussed at the time of writing for the creation of a new funding model) are important to meet this goal. Moving to a system in which the allocation of funding is conditional on a number of criteria including qualifications, wages and the employment contract of the workforce, as done in the announcement on the 2022 budget (through the contingency on an ERO being adopted), can steer improvement in working conditions. Acknowledging that the scope of agreements under a JLC is determined by the parties to the JLC and not by the government, it will be important that the JLC covers several aspects of the terms and conditions of employment, including regulations of fixed-term contracts, and examines the possibility to reduce the basis of eligibility for a contract of indefinite duration as this is the case for school teachers (3 years instead of 4 years). This is aligned with the mandate of the JLC as stated by the Minister:

"An agreement on a new set of terms and conditions of employment will help maintain and grow the talented pool of people working in the sector as well as providing security and opportunity for career development in the Early Years' and Childcare sectors."

The prevalence of temporary and part-time contracts is also related to the organisation of the ECEC sector that is quite fragmented, with main "sessions" that last a limited number of hours such as the ECCE programme and complementary activities (e.g. breakfast clubs and after school). As discussed above, ensuring that regulations (e.g. on staff qualification) and related funding are attached to roles and responsibilities rather than to programmes would encourage mobility of staff across programmes and should help the development of full-time contracts. For instance, regulations and related funding should encourage the recruitment of room leaders (i.e. teachers) who could for instance work in ECCE sessions and in sessions for younger children with a pedagogical leadership role (see section on leadership). Higher qualified staff would then also benefit the youngest children.

Setting protected times for activities to be performed without children

The quality of a working environment also includes non-economic aspects of jobs, such as the nature and content of the tasks at hand and working time arrangements (Cazes, Hijzen and Saint-Martin, 2015[40]). A heavy workload with multiple ongoing tasks that demand persistent physical, psychological or emotional efforts can lead to less engagement and commitment, with detrimental effects on classroom or playgroup practices (Ansari et al., 2020[46]). There is empirical evidence suggesting that excessive demands and work overload (i.e. high demand, not enough time, short of assistance) are negatively associated with process quality (Aboagye et al., 2020[47]; Aboagye et al., 2020[48]; Chen, Phillips and Izci, 2018[49])..

ECEC staff's work includes a variety of responsibilities and activities that go beyond working directly with children and all contribute to process quality. These include individual planning or preparing play and learning activities; collaborating and speaking with colleagues and parents or guardians; documenting children's development, well-being and learning; attending professional development activities; and administrative tasks. Some countries have regulations to ensure that staff have paid time allocated to tasks that are performed without children, generally more often for teachers than assistants (OECD, 2021[1]).

In Ireland, there is no regulation to protect time for these activities; and with a substantial share of ECEC staff having part-time jobs where they're only paid for the hours dedicated directly to children, it is likely that they perform these tasks outside their paid hours. In 2018/2019, 78% of staff had between 1 and 5 hours per week without child contact (Pobal, 2021[6]), which seems like a low number compared to some other countries (e.g. TALIS Starting Strong 2018 participating countries). Percentages of staff with a small number of hours without children are higher for staff in community services than in for-profit ones. Providers receive funding from the government to perform the administrative work but this does not seem to be sufficient. Administrative demands and paperwork have apparently increased greatly over time in response to new funding schemes and inspection requirements (see Chapter 3). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new demands on staff time for managing health and safety protocols, maintaining communication with parents through new tools such as digital applications, among others. There is large variation across centres, with large ones being more likely to provide paid non-contact time.

There are costs to the provision of non-contact time, and in centres where there is more non-contact time the services are generally more expensive (Crowe, 2020[44]). Better defined working hours and the inclusion of protected time for activities to be performed without children as part of the employment contract could be examined by the JLC. This will also be important to facilitate staff's engagement in professional learning and development, including in informal ways and in collaboration with their peers as discussed in the previous section.

Leadership

Context

Leadership is a key element for developing and sustaining quality in ECEC by creating a stimulating environment for both staff and children. Leaders of ECEC settings have an important role to play in providing the conditions for staff to develop high-quality practices, for instance by building a climate of trust and collaboration, facilitating staff engagement in professional learning and addressing sources of stress for staff in their work (OECD, 2021[1]; Douglass, 2019[50]). Findings from the TALIS Starting Strong 2018 survey show that in centres in which leaders set a clear vision, staff report a stronger sense of self-efficacy (OECD, 2020[51]). Leadership is also important for translating policies into practice, and driving innovation and change in systems (OECD, 2019[10]; OECD, 2015[52]).

While the importance of leadership seems to be receiving greater attention in recent and ongoing policy initiatives, such as the country's First 5 strategy and the Workforce Development Plan, attention to leadership development in ECEC settings has thus far been rather incipient in Ireland. As highlighted in the previous section, there are no structured career development opportunities for ECEC staff in registered ECEC centres and different roles in ECEC settings are not well defined. This also applies to leadership and there is no common understanding of the leadership roles and structures required for quality ECEC services in Ireland and the functions such roles should entail.

The organisation of leadership and management in registered ECEC centres in Ireland is largely up to individual centres and/or the providers they belong to. Centres may be led by a manager who can be the owner of the centre or be employed by the service if belonging to a larger group. Managers may work with children and take part in learning and play as part of their role or dedicate themselves fully to their management role. Services must designate a staff member in charge to replace the managers in their absence. Depending on the size of the centre, managers may be supported by a deputy and administrative staff as well. As the review team learnt during its missions, ECEC centres in Ireland may establish further leadership roles for staff, such as roles related to quality improvement, curriculum development, preparation for inspection or fire safety.

In 2019/2020, more than half of all managers (centre managers and deputy managers) were also the owners of their service (56% or 2 287), and over three-quarters of all managers (owners or not) also worked with children. Owner-managers were more likely to also work with children (84%) than managers employed by their service (73%). There were 1 219 deputy managers as well as 565 clerical staff (Pobal, 2021[6]).

Recent policies have created specific leadership positions in ECEC centres to support the creation of inclusive environments, underpinned by qualification requirements and additional funding for ECEC centres. Inclusion coordinators (INCOs), which are part of AIM to support children with a disability (see Chapter 1), are prepared for their role through a dedicated Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) training programme as well as subsequent professional development opportunities (see Box 2.3).

Box 2.3. Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) programme

Established in 2016 in relation to the AIM programme, Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years (LINC) is an ISCED 5 (NFQ Level 6) Special Purpose Award designed to support the inclusion of children with a disability in the ECCE programme. The programme aims to prepare participants to adopt a leadership role within ECEC settings that enables them to support and supervise other staff in the setting to plan for, implement and review inclusive practices. It is delivered by a consortium led by Mary Immaculate College, and includes other academic and sector organisations. Participants, who come with a diverse profile in terms of previous qualifications and experience, are nominated by their employer and continue working while undertaking the programme.

The programme builds on an innovative competency-based blended leadership adult learning methodology. A Competency Framework for Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education forms the basis of the programme, which employs a variety of methods to ensure it is accessible to learners with a range of learning styles and experiences. Each of the programme's six modules comprises one face-to-face day (approx. six hours) along with six weekly online 'units' of both synchronous and asynchronous learning materials. A text-based tutorial system has been used for communication among learners themselves and with their tutors. Finally, a key element of the programme is the mentoring session in which learners meet with their tutor on a one-to-one basis and reflect on their practice. Learners have also been supported through a range of services, both academically and in terms of ICT requirements.

In 2019, up to 1 150 free training places with bursaries were made available to pre-school practitioners in the programme. By autumn 2020, approximately 3 450 practitioners had completed the programme, and 60% of ECCE settings had a qualified inclusion co-ordinator. Internal information coming from self-evaluation reports of the programme suggest high satisfaction rates among participants. Participants seem to value in particular the programme's online recorded lessons, face-to-face classroom sessions and mentoring visits for their learning.

Sources: Ring, E and L. O'Sullivan (2019[53]), "Creating Spaces Where Diversity Is the Norm: An innovative competency-based blended learning teacher education program in Ireland"; LINC Consortium (2019[54]), *Interim Evaluation of the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme*.; Breen, F. et al. (2018[55]), "LINC Programme: Enabling Leadership for Inclusion through an Innovative Competency-Based Blended Adult Continuing Professional Learning Programme"

Attention to leadership development in policy is incipient, but leadership will be key for making change happen in ECEC settings

The review team encourages Ireland to pursue plans to include leadership as a core element of ongoing and future policy initiatives, such as the Workforce Development Plan, and to consider how leadership capacity can be further developed across the sector.

Indeed, Ireland is not alone in this challenge, as the Quality beyond Regulations project demonstrated. When asking participating countries about regulations and policies for ECEC centre leaders, many were unable to provide information, which reflects that leadership in ECEC has not received much attention so far, either in research or policies (OECD, 2021[1]). The need to consider how leadership is organised and developed also seemed to be recognised by various stakeholders interviewed for the missions of the review team.

Leadership will be an important condition for the success of ongoing policy initiatives to improve quality in ECEC in Ireland, be it through further staff development which relies largely on centres and staff themselves, through greater consistency in the implementation of the *Aistear* curriculum and *Síolta* quality

frameworks, or through a greater focus on and capacity for self-evaluation as part of the inspection and monitoring framework (see Chapter 3). At the same time, more opportunities for leadership as part of a broader career structure could help make the sector more attractive and help retain staff, if supported by adequate working conditions (more on this in the section on working conditions).

To further develop leadership in the sector, it will be important to gain a better understanding of the current leadership arrangements and how they differ across types of centres (e.g. by commissioning related research). As data from Pobal for 2019/2020 suggest, leadership structures clearly differ across private for-profit and community providers, and urban and rural locations. Almost three-quarters of all managers worked in a private for-profit ECEC centre (72%), and managers were almost twice as likely to work in an urban centre (66%) (Pobal, 2021[6]). This should also include an assessment of how roles and responsibilities are distributed between centres and managers who are employed by that centre, and different types of staff within centres (e.g. managers, deputy managers and other staff).

Based on a deeper understanding of the current leadership arrangements, a shared understanding of the different leadership functions that are needed in different types of services, and the role of staff leadership within these, can be developed. This needs to encompass the full range of leadership functions, from pedagogical leadership to administration and management, community engagement and family involvement. As suggested by stakeholders during the missions, any future leadership concept would benefit from being linked to an overall vision of the function of ECEC centres within their community, and how leadership can promote this. The country's quality and curriculum frameworks (*Síolta* and *Aistear*) would provide a good basis for this. The leadership roles and functions need to then be translated into a profile of values, knowledge and skills to be developed and promoted through elements such as leadership preparation and training, and monitoring and inspection. Setting and promoting expectations about leadership through such levers will be important in a context where centres and services have a large degree of autonomy to define their leadership structures.

The conception of leadership roles differs across countries and sometimes within them (OECD, 2021[1]; OECD, 2020[12]), so Ireland will have to define models that are best suited for its particular context and how they can best support staff in working with children. However, other countries may provide inspiration for reflections of leadership in Ireland. While recognising that leadership always depends on specific contexts, such as the children served in a centre, there should be a strong focus on pedagogical leadership, and the role of leadership for staff management and development (OECD, 2021[1]; OECD, 2020[12]; Douglass, 2019[50]).

As TALIS Starting Strong 2018 data suggest, the size of centres appears to be an important factor influencing the way leaders spend their time, and centres of different sizes may require different leadership structures (OECD, 2020[12]). In Ireland, the organisation of the ECEC sector with relatively small centres and short opening hours does not facilitate the development of leadership. Particular attention will therefore have to be paid to the large number of small centres in the country and how leadership can be developed in and for these types of settings. Israel, which also has a large number of small centres and where pedagogical work with children is also an essential part of leaders' role, provides an example for a leadership model for smaller settings (Box 2.4) (OECD, 2020[12]). Moving from ECCE "sessions" to more integrated centres with a clear role for leaders could support quality. On the other hand, there are also relatively large for-profit ECEC centres that might belong to a commercial provider chain. Leaders of these centres might focus more on administrative leadership and adopt profit-driven management strategies. As the government plans to increase public funding in the sector, it will be important to ensure that leaders of these centres have the incentives, knowledge and skills to develop quality improvement policies aligned with the government' objectives.

Building the capacity of leadership in community settings should be a further priority. As the review team learnt during its missions, this part of the Irish ECEC system has undergone significant change as overall provision has expanded, and today faces challenges in governance and leadership. As requirements have

expanded (e.g. linked to funding through the ECCE programme, or to registration as a limited company), the management of community services (typically overseen by a Board of Management or Management Committee) has become more complex, creating new demands in terms of compliance with different regulations (e.g. ECEC-specific regulations as well as charity-specific regulations). This needs to be seen within a broader vision of ECEC provision in Ireland (see Chapter 1).

Box 2.4. Examples for leadership models for small centres: Israel

In 2013, the Ministry of Education of Israel enacted a reform related to the resourcing of the ECEC sector. The reform encompassed three main elements: 1) an additional staff member for ECEC centres with over 30 children aged 3 to 4; 2) a differential budget to enrich the structural and pedagogical environment; and 3) support from a leading teacher.

A leading teacher is a teacher who stands out in their educational activities, and is therefore appointed by the instructor/supervisor (district level positions) to serve as a leading teacher, alongside their duty as a teacher who manages an ECEC centre by themselves. Each leading teacher supports teachers from 10 to 15 ECEC centres (within a geographical district), for 30 hours per year (recognised for promotion and salary increase), during which they mainly support the professional needs of teachers from ECEC centres other than their own and promote community-related issues. To this end, a leading teacher is required to first participate in a year-long pre-determined training and undergoes continuous professional development activities. There are currently about 1 000 leading teachers (out of 22 000 teachers in pre-primary centres – leaders and substitutes, so their share is approximately 5% of all teachers).

The leading teacher role is considered as mid-level leadership (higher than a teacher, but lower than instructor/supervisor), which offers teachers a career development path. While both instructor and supervisor are district level positions, there is a hierarchy: the supervisor, who is more senior than the instructor, is responsible for approximately 100 to 120 ECEC centres within a certain geographical district. The instructor is either a specialist in a given content domain or a multidisciplinary expert. Instructors guide and instruct the staff of several ECEC centres within the district, depending on the relevance of their expertise to teachers' needs in a given centre.

Source: OECD (2020[12]), Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b90bba3d-en.

There are some interesting initiatives to develop leadership as part of training and quality support, but larger investments in leadership capacity building are required

There is also scope to better support leadership through initial and continuous education and training programmes. Leadership preparation and training can help set expectations to engage in specific functions and develop the necessary skills to fulfil them. As reported by the inspectorate of the Department of Education (DE), leadership has been found as one of the weakest areas in the ECEC sector in the last five years, needing a lot of investment and capacity building, such as through initial education and training.

Existing initiatives for leadership development in Ireland are limited, although they provide a basis to build on (e.g. Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) training programme, see Box 2.3). The guidelines for graduate-level initial education programmes (PACG) described in the section on staff training, recommend to include various aspects of leadership, such as curriculum implementation, team management and stakeholder engagement (Box 2.5). However, not all staff with degree-level qualifications are leaders, and

not all leaders hold degrees (Frontier Economics, 2021[5]). It will be important that this is included in the standards (PATD) and ECEC programmes offered in the further education and training (FET) sector.

Leaders do not always come from within the ECEC sector. It is therefore important to also develop specific programmes for leaders that cover the main functions of leadership including both administrative and pedagogical leadership. As the inspectorate of the Department of Education highlighted, there is no common understanding of the professional role of leaders, who often perceive themselves as organisational managers of a business rather than as pedagogical leaders driving quality. This probably applies in particular to leaders and owner-managers who are not working with children, as no qualification requirements exist for these staff. For leaders working with children, regulations do require them to hold at least a major award in early learning and care at ISCED level 4 (NQF Level 5) (Childcare Act 1991 [Early Years Services] Regulations 2016) (Frontier Economics, 2021[5]).

Inspection and monitoring processes (analysed in depth in Chapter 3) can also play an important role in promoting quality leadership in ECEC centres. In Ireland, management and leadership are included in the inspection frameworks developed and used by the Early Years Inspectorate of Tusla, the regulator (for all centre-based care) and the education-focused inspections of the Department for Education (for ECCE rooms serving children aged 2 years and 8 months and older only, although at the time of writing plans are underway to extend inspections to earlier years):

- The Quality and Regulatory Framework of Tusla assesses management policies and procedures, which include: governance arrangements, administrative processes, designated person-in-charge procedures, recruitment policy, vetting, staff supervision policy, internal communications system, the staff roster, staff planning, the setting's annual review, records of individual children and data protection measures, and service records (Tusla, 2018[56]).

- The Quality Framework for Early Years Education of DE inspections examines the quality of leadership as part of the framework's Area 4, "Quality of management and leadership for learning". The related outcomes refer to 1) planning, review and evaluation are informed by *Síolta* (the quality framework); 2) management within the setting provides for a high quality learning and development experience for children; 3) clear two-way channels of communication are fostered between the early years setting, parents, families and children; and 4) transitions into, from and within the setting are managed effectively to support children's learning and development (DES, 2018[57]).

As the review team learnt during its missions, leadership and management are considered very important for addressing quality issues identified by the different inspections. Tusla, for instance, noted that management is deemed a key proxy for the quality of the service. However, the DE inspection for instance acknowledged that evaluations of leadership were still often light touch (also compared to the school level) given where ECEC centres are at in terms of leadership capacity. The framework and inspections could be further used to promote different aspects of leadership in settings, such as leadership for learning, organisational and distributed leadership (e.g. by leaders joining DE inspections of other settings, further developing self-evaluation practices and skills).

Box 2.5. Leadership in standards for initial education and training in Ireland

Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines (PACG)

- **Curriculum implementation and pedagogy**. PACG-aligned graduate awards include training on generating an appropriate curriculum that stimulates and promotes positive learning dispositions, emergent literacy, maths and science skills. Alongside curriculum development, there is training on pedagogy: building strong pedagogical relationships with children and co-constructing pedagogical knowledge together with children.

- **Establishing collaborative relationships with other institutions**. According to the PACG, graduates should be trained to build up support for ELC settings within local communities and establish collaborative relationships with other professionals (e.g. health and social services).

- **Supporting educators/assistants**. Graduates should be trained in implementing effective and democratic organisational structures and processes.

- **Managing teams and encouraging staff collaboration**. Degree programmes should include aspects such as sharing and exchanging expertise with colleagues in team meetings, engaging in discussion and learning from disagreement.

- **Engaging with families and communities**. Graduates should be trained to make the cultural heritage of local communities accessible to children; involve children in community-based projects (festivals, cultural events, etc.); have knowledge of working with parents and local communities (knowledge about families, poverty and diversity); establish partnership relationships with parents based on mutual understanding, trust and co-operation; and provide effective communication with all stakeholders and partners.

- **Children's interactions with materials and space**. Graduates are trained in supporting children's symbolic play through appropriate provision of structured and unstructured materials.

Leadership responsibilities are not sufficiently reflected in remuneration and other working conditions

Within Ireland's market-based model of private provision of ECEC, and as described in the section on working conditions, the terms of employment for centre managers and other leaders are established by centres and providers themselves. There are no central frameworks or conditions, such as centrally defined salary scales, although this is the goal of the recently established Joint Labour Committee. According to available information, the nature of remuneration differs for managers who are also owners of their centre or setting, and managers who are employed by their provider, taking the form of an annual salary, an hourly wage or other income. Among managers employed by their service, most leaders receive an hourly wage for their work (70.6% in 2019/2020). Owner-managers are most likely to receive other income, e.g. drawing non-fixed income from the business (66.2% in 2019/2020) (Pobal, 2021[6]).

The leadership of ECEC centres entails a variety of functions and responsibilities, the balance of which differs across and within countries depending on specific contexts and needs. Regardless of particular job profiles, the ECEC centre leadership role entails the juggling of multiple tasks and the careful management of time and resources. The demanding nature of ECEC centre leadership should be sufficiently reflected in employment conditions, such as remuneration, to help attract staff to leadership roles and encourage them to stay. Adequate support systems may help mitigate work-related stress, such as that stemming from too much administrative work, and support leaders in balancing their functions.

References

Aboagye, M. et al. (2020), "Managing conflictual teacher-child relationship in pre-schools: A preliminary test of the job resources buffering-effect hypothesis in an emerging economy", *Children and Youth Services Review*. [47]

Aboagye, M. et al. (2020), "Finding something good in the bad: the curvilinear emotional demand-conflict teacher–child relationship link", *Early Child Development and Care*, pp. 1-18. [48]

Ansari, A. et al. (2020), "Preschool Teachers' Emotional Exhaustion in Relation to Classroom Instruction and Teacher-child Interactions", *Early Education and Development*, pp. 1-14, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1848301. [46]

Balduzzi, L. and A. Lazzari (2015), "Mentoring practices in workplace-based professional preparation: a critical analysis of policy developments in the Italian context", *Early Years,*, pp. 35:2, 124-138. [22]

Bayly, B. et al. (2020), "Leveraging self-determination theory to understand which preschool teachers benefit most from a professional development intervention", *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*. [37]

Boeskens, L., D. Nusche and M. Yurita (2020), "Policies to support teachers' continuing professional learning: A conceptual framework and mapping of OECD data"*, OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 235, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/247b7c4d-en. [33]

Branigan, R. and M. Ciarán (2020), *Focused Policy Assessment of the Early Childhood Care and Education Higher Capitation Payment*, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Dublin, https://igees.gov.ie/focused-policy-assessment-of-the-early-childhood-care-and-education-higher-capitation-payment/ (accessed on 1 October 2021). [13]

Breen, F. et al. (2018), "LINC Programme: Enabling Leadership for Inclusion through an Innovative Competency-Based Blended Adult Continuing Professional Learning Programme", *Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education,*, pp. 99-115, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1197457 (accessed on 1 October 2021). [55]

Cassidy, D. et al. (2017), "Teacher work environments are toddler learning environments: teacher professional well-being, classroom emotional support, and toddlers' emotional expressions and behaviours", *Early Child Development and Care*, Vol. 187/11, pp. 1666-1678, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1180516. [41]

Cazes, S., A. Hijzen and A. Saint-Martin (2015), "Measuring and Assessing Job Quality: The OECD Job Quality Framework"*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 174, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jrp02kjw1mr-en. [40]

Chen, S., B. Phillips and B. Izci (2018), "Teacher–child relational conflict in Head Start – exploring the roles of child behaviour, teacher stress, and bias, and classroom environment", *Early Child Development and Care*, pp. 1174-1186. [49]

Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality (2021), *Report of the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality*, Citizens' Assembly, Dublin, http://citizensassembly.ie/en/about-the-citizens-assembly/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf (accessed on 20 September 2021).   [39]

Crowe (2020), *Final Report to Department of Children & Youth Affairs: Cost of Providing Quality Childcare*.   [44]

DCEDIY (2021), *National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028)*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Dublin, https://bit.ly/ChildmindingActionPlan (accessed on 7 September 2021).   [16]

DCEDIY (2021), *Workforce Development Plan Phase 1 Progress Report*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Dublin, https://assets.gov.ie/135093/54a31bf1-e9cd-41dc-8362-a64c1456d1f7.pdf (accessed on 8 September 2021).   [3]

DCYA (2019), *Workforce Development Plan for the ELC/SAC Sector. Background Note and Draft Terms of Reference for the Steering Group*, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Dublin, https://assets.gov.ie/26650/a384c2888749488d8e93badc501507b3.pdf (accessed on 8 September 2021).   [4]

DDLETB (2020), *Early Learning and Care Phase 1 Consultation November 2020 Childcare (early childhood) Service Providers*, DDLETB ELC Programme Development Group, Dublin, http://www.limerickchildcare.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ELC-Consultation-Phase-1-Information-Pack.pdf (accessed on 9 September 2021).   [20]

DES (2019), *Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Profesional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland*, https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Early-Childhood/professional-award-criteria-and-guidelines-for-initial-professional-education-l7-8-degree-programmes-elc-ireland.pdf (accessed on June 2020).   [17]

DES (2018), *A Guide to Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)*, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin, https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/guide-to-early-years-education-inspections.pdf (accessed on 27 August 2021).   [57]

Doherty, G. et al. (2006), "Predictors of quality in family child care", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 21/3, pp. 296-312, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2006.07.006.   [38]

Douglass, A. (2019), "Leadership for quality early childhood education and care"*, OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 211, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/6e563bae-en.   [50]

Early Childhood Ireland (2020), *Pathways to Better Prospects: Delivering Proper Terms and Conditions for the Early Years Workforce in Ireland A Literature Review.*.   [45]

Eckhardt, A. and F. Egert (2020), "Predictors for the quality of family child care: A meta-analysis", *Children and Youth Services Review*.   [14]

Egert, F., V. Dederer and R. Fukkink (2020), "The impact of in-service professional development on the quality of teacher-child interactions in early education and care: A meta-analysis", *Educational Research Review*.   [27]

Flämig, K., A. König and N. Spiekermann (2015), "Potentials, dissonances and reform initiatives in field-based learning and mentoring practices in the early childhood sector in Germany", *Early Years*, pp. 211-226. [23]

Frontier Economics (2021), *OECD Country Background Report for the OECD Quality Beyond Regulations Project – Early Learning and Care in Ireland*, Frontier Economics, London, https://assets.gov.ie/138286/2a4c0b9d-e605-4f64-9fa8-a4ae70f7f273.pdf (accessed on 26 August 2021). [5]

Government of Ireland (2019), *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, https://first5.gov.ie (accessed on 8 September 2021). [11]

Hamre, B., A. Partee and C. Mulcahy (2017), "Enhancing the impact of professional development in the context of preschool expansion", *AERA Open*. [26]

Hu, B. et al. (2017), "Are structural quality indicators associated with preschool process quality in China? An exploration of threshold effects", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 40, pp. 163-173, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2017.03.006. [42]

Kaarby, K. and I. Lindboe (2016), "The workplace as learning environment in early childhood teacher education: An investigation of work-based education", *Higher Education Pedagogies*, pp. 106-120. [24]

Kyndt, E. et al. (2016), "Teachers' everyday professional development: Mapping informal learning activities, antecedents, and learning outcomes", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 86/4, pp. 1111-1150, http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0034654315627864. [35]

LINC Consortium (2019), *Interim Evaluation of the Leadership for INClusion inthe Early Years (LINC) Programme*, http://bit.ly/LINC_Interim_Evaluation (accessed on 4 October 2021). [54]

Lin, Y. and K. Magnuson (2018), "Classroom quality and children's academic skills in child care centers: Understanding the role of teacher qualifications", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 42, pp. 215-227, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2017.10.003. [8]

Manning, M. et al. (2019), "Is teacher qualification associated with the quality of the early childhood education and care environment? A meta-analytic review", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 89/3, pp. 370-415, https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0034654319837540. [7]

Markussen-Brown, J. et al. (2017), "The effects of language-and literacy-focused professional development on early educators and children: A best-evidence meta-analysis", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, pp. 97-115. [28]

Oberhuemer, P. (2015), *Seeking New Cultures of Cooperation: A Cross-national Analysis of Workplace-based Learning and Mentoring Practices in Early Years Professional Education/Training*, Routledge, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2015.1028218. [25]

OECD (2021), *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/f47a06ae-en. [1]

OECD (2020), *Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b90bba3d-en. [12]

OECD (2020), *Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b90bba3d-en.

[51]

OECD (2019), *Working and Learning Together: Rethinking Human Resource Policies for Schools*, OECD Reviews of School Resources, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b7aaf050-en.

[10]

OECD (2018), *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en.

[2]

OECD (2015), *Schooling Redesigned*, OECD, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264245914-en.

[52]

Paull, G. (2020), *Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Towards a New Funding Model: Review of Working Conditions for Staff in Early Learning and Care*, https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/publications-2/.

[43]

Peleman, B. et al. (2018), "Continuous professional development and ECEC quality: Findings from a European systematic literature review", *European Journal of Education*, pp. 9-22.

[30]

Pobal (2021), *Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2019/2020*, Pobal, Dublin, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/137583/?page=null (accessed on 26 August 2021).

[6]

QQI (2019), *Changes on the way for awards standards in Early Learning and Care*, https://www.qqi.ie/News/Pages/Changes-on-the-way-for-awards-standards-in-Early-Learning-and-Care.aspx (accessed on 9 September 2021).

[19]

QQI (2019), *Professional Award-type Descriptors at NFQ Levels 5 to 8: Annotated for QQI Early Learning and Care (ELC) Awards*, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, Dublin, https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Professional%20Award%20Type%20Descriptors%20at%20NFQ%20Levels%205-8%20%28Annotated%20for%20QQI%20ELC%20Awards%29.pdf (accessed on 10 September 2021).

[18]

Ring, E. and L. O'Sullivan (2019), "Creating Spaces Where Diversity Is the Norm: An innovative competency-based blended learning teacher education program in Ireland", *Childhood Education*, Vol. 95/2, pp. 29-39, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2019.1593758.

[53]

Sahlberg, P. (2019), *The Structure of Teacher Education in Ireland: Review of Progress in Implementing Reform*, Higher Education Authority (HEA), Dublin, https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/05/HEA-Structure-of-Teacher-Education.pdf (accessed on 20 September 2021).

[21]

Sandilos, L. et al. (2018), "Does professional development reduce the influence of teacher stress on teacher–child interactions in pre-kindergarten classrooms?", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, pp. 280-290.

[31]

Schaack, D., V. Le and C. Setodji (2017), "Home-based child care provider education and specialized training: Associations with caregiving quality and toddler social-emotional and cognitive outcomes", *Early Education and Development*, Vol. 28/6, pp. 655-668, https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2017.1321927.

[15]

SIPTU (2021), *SIPTU Big Start CampaignThe Early Years Professionals' Survey 2020*, SIPTU, Dublin, https://www.siptu.ie/media/publications/file_22249_en.pdf (accessed on 15 September 2021). [34]

Totenhagen, C. et al. (2016), *Retaining Early Childhood Education Workers: A Review of the Empirical Literature*, Taylor and Francis Inc., http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1214652. [32]

Tusla (2018), *Quality and Regulatory Framework: Full Day Care Service and Part-Time Day Care Service*, Early Years Inspectorate, Tusla, Dublin, https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/early-years-quality-and-regulatory-framework (accessed on 8 27 2021). [56]

Urban, M., S. Robson and V. Scacchi (2017), *Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Ireland in Early Childhood Education and Care*, University of Roehampton, Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC), London, https://assets.gov.ie/24908/d9cb10bb2d9141f5b5288722ea13194c.pdf (accessed on 20 September 2021). [36]

von Suchodoletz, A. et al. (2020), "Investigating quality indicators of early childhood education programs in Kosovo, Ukraine and Finland", *International Journal of Early Years Education*, pp. 1-17. [9]

Werner, C. et al. (2016), "Do intervention programs in child care promote the quality of caregiver-child interactions? A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials", *Prevention Science*, pp. 259-273. [29]

Annex 2.A.

Annex Figure 2.A.1. National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)
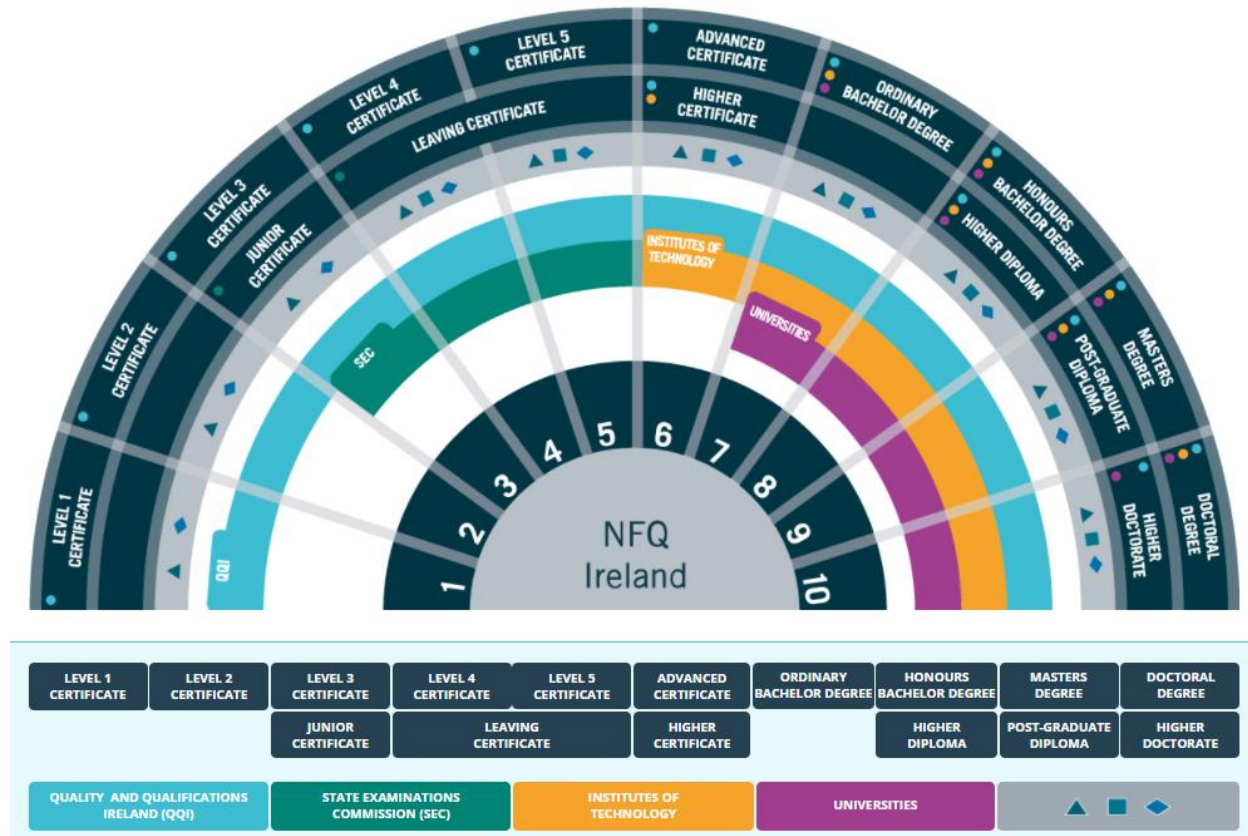
Source: https://nfq.qqi.ie (accessed 1 November 2021).

3 Quality assurance and improvement in early childhood education and care in Ireland

This chapter discusses the main strengths and challenges faced by Ireland in developing a system for quality assurance and improvement that best support the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. It focusses on how the quality system is governed, how frameworks, tools and processes have been developed and deployed, and how the outcomes of inspections are used to promote improvement.

Governments across the world have increasingly recognised the benefits of investing in facilitating access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) and ensuring that the provision which they develop is of high quality, so they have taken steps to develop a variety of arrangements to assure and improve standards in the sector (OECD, 2021[1]). The OECD's earlier review of policies and practices across member states, *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood and Care,* found that they are very diverse, but are generally designed to serve common purposes including satisfying the need for public accountability and providing feedback on strengths and weaknesses in the system to inform further actions for improvement (OECD, 2015[2]). It was also noted that quality systems can provide valuable information for parents to help them evaluate the quality of services when making choices, a particularly important role in systems such as Ireland's, which have a heavy reliance on a market approach to delivery, with many private and for-profit providers as described in Chapter 1.

Two general trends in the development of ECEC quality arrangements internationally are highlighted in both the OECD review (OECD, 2015[2]) and in a survey of ECEC in 43 education systems undertaken by the European Commission (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019[3]). One of these common trends is a tendency for more countries to move from a position where they focused quality arrangements solely on 'structural quality', to a position in which they give increasing attention to also monitoring 'process quality', developing arrangements which give balanced attention to both.

As part of the *Quality beyond Regulations* project, the OECD defines structural quality as aspects such as staff-child ratios, group sizes, the physical size of settings, curriculum frameworks and minimum staff qualifications. These are seen as aspects that (while not sufficient on their own) can create the conditions for delivering good process quality. The definition of process quality includes aspects such as "children's daily interactions through their ECEC settings, including with other children, staff and teachers, space and materials, their families and the wider community" (OECD, 2021[1]).

With regard to ECEC inspection procedures, this has commonly meant that monitoring and inspection arrangements were established initially to focus primarily on structural quality, created by departments and inspectorates responsible for areas of policy such as health, family or social affairs. Subsequently, these arrangements were enhanced by additional ones designed to create a stronger focus on process quality, introduced by ministries and inspectorates with responsibilities for education, now extending their activities in the 0 to 5 years age range.

A second trend highlighted in both the OECD and Eurydice studies is towards extending quality arrangements from focusing solely on centre-based provision for older children in the ECEC age range (approximately 3 to 5-year-olds), which is usually where the greatest level of public funding is invested, to paying increased attention to promoting quality in services for younger children and in services, such as childminding, which are not centre-based. Putting these two trends together, the Eurydice report notes that the external evaluation of ECEC settings for older children often sought to address both structural and process quality. Much less attention was given to monitoring process quality in services for children in the 0 to 3 year age range where, if monitoring was in place, it was usually restricted to structural quality (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019[3]).

Both of these trends have been evident in the recent development of ECEC quality assurance arrangements in Ireland. Strengths and challenges in current policy and practice will now be discussed in three main areas:

- how the quality system is governed, including how responsibilities for undertaking quality assurance activities are distributed at national level and throughout the system
- how frameworks, tools and processes have been developed and deployed in the quality system
- how the outcomes of inspections and other sources of intelligence are used to promote improvement.

The chapter also makes recommendations for ongoing and future policy development, summarised at the beginning of the chapter in Box 3.1.

Box 3.1. Policy recommendations

Governance and responsibilities for quality assurance

- Take steps to streamline and integrate the processes of regulation and inspection experienced by ECEC providers as committed to in the First 5 strategy. In the short term, deepen collaborative working between Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate (EYI) and the Department of Education's (DE) Inspectorate. In the longer term, consider bringing their functions within a single body that provides integrated care and education inspections.

- More broadly, keep all inspection, monitoring and auditing activities under continued review to seek opportunities to reduce burdens on providers.

- Pursue plans to extend the scope of regulation and inspection to childminding and to extend the scope of education-focused inspections beyond ECCE centres. Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate should work together on developing suitable inspection arrangements.

- Encourage settings to take responsibility for their own continuous improvement by further developing resources and programmes of support aimed at building capacity for self-evaluation and improvement planning in the sector as committed to in the First 5 strategy. Inspections of ECEC centres should include attention to how good settings are at reviewing their own provision and taking action to improve.

Inspection frameworks, tools and processes

- Develop a single integrated quality framework to be used as the common reference point for all inspection activities and for self-evaluation by settings. This framework should integrate both structural and process quality aspects and encourage settings to aim for increasing levels of high performance beyond basic compliance, wherever appropriate. An inter-agency group including Tusla EYI, the DE Inspectorate and support bodies including Better Start should take the lead in developing this framework through a process of extensive consultation and practitioner involvement.

- Take further steps to co-ordinate the planning of inspection programmes between Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate, including clearly articulating the principles determining how the inspectorates draw up the sample of settings to be inspected each year.

- Continue to move further towards more risk-based, proportionate approaches to inspection programming, as improvements to information and data gathering allow.

- Pursue as a priority the initiatives currently underway to increase the engagement of children and parents/carers in inspection processes.

- Consider developing a more formal system for service users to have complaints reviewed by Tusla, as the body responsible for statutory registration, if they remain dissatisfied after exhausting the complaints procedures operated by providers.

Use of the outcomes of inspection and monitoring processes

- Review the statutory steps available for Tusla EYI to deploy in cases of services that are falling persistently short of expected standards. Introduce options that strengthen Tusla's ability to take robust action, which ensures that speedy and decisive remedial action is taken.

- In pursuit of the commitment in the First 5 strategy, increase ease of access for parents/carers to user-friendly information about the quality of services, drawing on the results of both Tusla

---

and DE inspections. The development of a web portal for parents/carers, which brings together inspection findings, information about financial support and other relevant information on ECEC providers in their area, could be an appropriate way forward.

- Develop a stronger and more coherent infrastructure for providing quality development support for ECEC settings replacing the relatively patchy and fragmented provision currently in place. This should be a key concern in the review 'of the operating model' for ECEC currently underway and in consideration of the role of the proposals for the creation of a body provisionally referred to as 'Childcare Ireland'.

- Strengthen arrangements for enabling appropriate data sharing between the national bodies with an interest in quality monitoring and improvement including the inspectorates, government departments and other agencies, to support collaborative action, improve risk identification and to enable the integrated, holistic analysis of performance in the sector.

Governance and responsibilities for quality assurance in the ECEC sector

Context

In recent years, the Irish government has established a range of national quality assurance arrangements (regulation, inspection, quality assurance and improvement support) for the ECEC sector, with responsibilities and functions allocated across different bodies (Figure 3.1) (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]).

In 1996, systematic arrangements were established for the regulation and inspection of centre-based provision for children in ECEC. Statutory registration was established in 2014. The role of managing and maintaining the national register is allocated to Tusla, a dedicated state agency established in 2014 to deliver a wide range of services and functions relating to children and families and charged with improving the well-being and outcomes of children. Regulations, which were most recently updated in 2016, set out standards, which providers need to meet in order to achieve and maintain registration. The purpose of registration is described as being to ensure the health, safety and well-being of children and to ensure settings are promoting children's development effectively, requiring both structural and process quality requirements to be met (Childcare Act 1991 [Early Years Services] Regulations 2016) (Government of Ireland, 2016[5]).

Compliance with the regulatory standards (defined in the areas of: governance; health welfare and development of the child; safety; and premises and facilities) is monitored nationally through a systematic inspection programme for all centre-based ECEC provision and a small percentage of childminders. This regulatory inspection programme is undertaken by Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate (Tusla EYI), a discrete unit which was created within Tusla when it was established.

In 2010, the government introduced the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme (not to be confused with ECEC) to provide an allocation of nationally funded pre-school provision freely available to all children in defined age ranges. The age range was extended twice (in 2016 and again in 2018) to include younger age groups and now includes children from age 2 years and 8 months until age 5 years and 6 months (see Chapter 1). As this programme was extended, a higher priority was placed on providing high-quality education and learning experiences within these nationally funded centres. Reflecting this priority, and a desire to accelerate the spread and impact of the curriculum and pedagogical practice guidance that had been developed with *Aistear* (2009) and *Síolta* (2006), the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs asked the Department of Education Inspectorate (DE Inspectorate) to extend its inspection operations to ECCE-funded provision. The DE Inspectorate established an early years team and began inspections in 2016 (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]).

This split pattern of having one inspectorate responsible for regulatory inspection with a larger focus on structural quality, with a second inspectorate primarily focused on process quality, can be seen in a number of other countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019[3]). This is usually the case where education inspectorates have been asked to perform the latter role some time after the initial regulatory inspection regime was established. In some countries, like the Netherlands, the regulatory inspection role is devolved to local government (municipality) level, while the national education inspectorate undertakes a programme of inspections focused on process quality.

In others, both inspection functions are carried out at national level, as in Ireland, and by separate inspectorates. In Wales and in Scotland within the United Kingdom (UK), for example, social care inspectorates, which inspect the quality of care in all regulated adult and children's services (from ECEC provision to adult care homes), serve the regulatory compliance role, while the education inspectorates in those jurisdictions undertake complementary inspections of centre-based provision focused on the quality of support for learning and development. In some other cases, a strong focus on process quality has also been introduced, but both functions have been combined within a single inspectorate, which has been designed to have the capacity to serve both functions. This is the case, for example, in England (UK) and in Malta (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019[3]).

In addition to the inspection programmes undertaken by Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate, ECCE-funded centres are also subject to a third form of external review undertaken by Pobal, a public agency administering programmes on behalf of different departments of the Irish Government. Pobal has been commissioned by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), which leads on ECEC policy in Ireland to support the implementation of all DCEDIY-funded programmes for ECEC and school-age childcare, to undertake regular compliance visits and, where necessary more detailed audits, to ensure that funded centres comply with the conditions attached to the funding they are receiving (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]).

Looking forward, the Irish Government is clearly committed to ensuring that quality assurance arrangements in the ECEC sector continue to strengthen and improve. In October 2021, as part of the announcement of a wider package of increased investment in the sector, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth announced additional investment for development of the support infrastructure, including funding for new childminding initiatives, for quality support and for development and reform of inspection systems.

Figure 3.1. Governance of quality assurance and improvement support in ECEC in Ireland
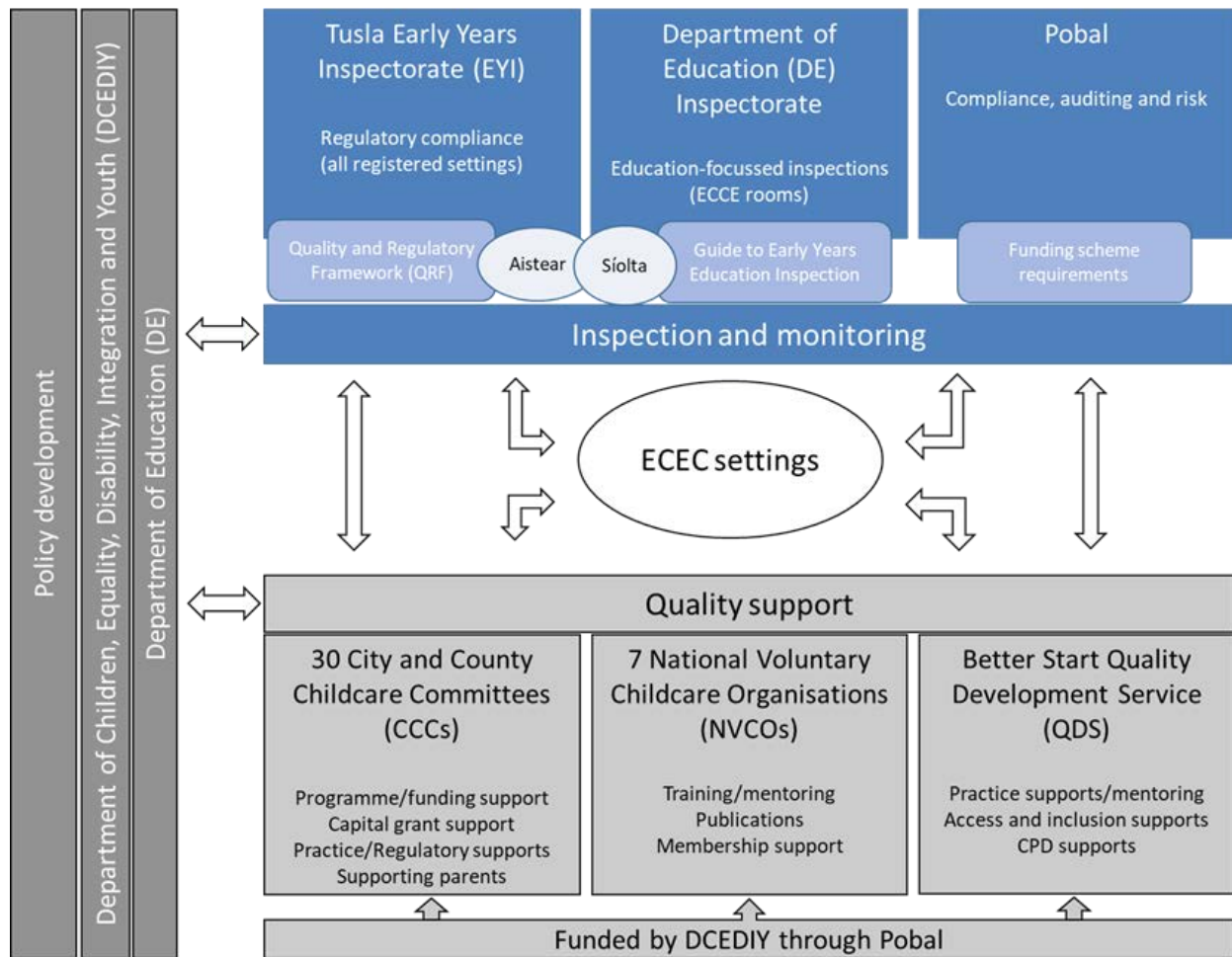
Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on First 5 support organisations (https://first5.gov.ie/supportorganisations).

Regulation, inspection and quality assurance requires better co-ordination in the short term and a potential reorganisation in the long term

The Tusla EYI inspection programme has played an important role in ensuring centre-based (and a small part of home-based) provision is designed and operated in a manner which meets the expectations of the revised 2016 regulations. During its series of policy missions, the review team received positive feedback on the way in which these inspections are conducted.

The DE inspections have also had a positive impact. They were broadly welcomed when introduced and, while still limited to ECCE rooms, they have provided impetus for a shift towards focusing more strongly on process quality, specifically the quality of support provided for children's cognitive development, early learning and social skills. Stakeholders interviewed during the missions have strongly welcomed the introduction of these education-centred inspections with their focus on quality improvement and curriculum implementation. A review of the first tranche of inspection reports, undertaken by the DE Inspectorate concluded that they provide actionable advice in clearly defined quality dimensions and are having a positive impact in strengthening the focus on education and learning within the sector (DES Inspectorate, 2018[6]).

With regard to Pobal's monitoring activities, funded centres experience these compliance visits as another form of external 'inspection', albeit they appreciate the specific focus they have on ensuring funding programme conditions are being met.

It is clear therefore, that as funding through the ECCE programme and other funding programmes has expanded, the range of bodies involved in a regulatory, monitoring or inspection role in the ECEC sector has increased. Tusla, the DE Inspectorate and Pobal all undertake different functions in this respect in relation to ECCE-funded centres, while Tusla and Pobal do so in other settings. In recognition of the risks accompanying the growing number of agencies involved, arrangements have been put in place to promote co-ordination between them. A number of interview partners noted steps being taken to improve co-ordination through a high-level Operations and Systems Alignment Group (OSAG) led by the DCEDIY. They also commented on other OSAG harmonisation practices, such as the co-ordination of schedules and calendars between inspectorates, shared meetings, joint professional development and planned improvements to data sharing.

Nonetheless, there was evidence that providers find current arrangements for external review to be somewhat confusing and burdensome. For instance, ECCE-funded centres may have to deal separately with three different bodies monitoring their ECEC provision (Tusla's EYI, the DE Inspectorate and Pobal), while additionally being subject to more generic regulatory inspections on issues like environmental health.

The most obvious areas in which there is a risk of confusion are in aspects of process quality, particularly around support for learning and development and around the management and governance of provision. Tusla assesses compliance under four themes: governance; health, welfare and development of the child; safety; and premises and facilities. This includes both structural and process quality areas. DE Inspectors do not look at compliance with structural aspects but do focus their evaluations on key processes relating to children's learning, development and well-being, and processes relating to leadership and management. This creates an inevitable overlap.

Overall, there appears to be a sense among stakeholders and practitioners in the system that while external reviews have an important role to play in ensuring consistent quality, there is a risk that their current nature and organisation, involving multiple organisations and frameworks, is taking too much time away from staff focusing on children's experiences in services. While this may be more manageable for larger providers operating chains of centres with dedicated management and administrative staff capacity, it can be particularly challenging for providers which are small in size and operating in isolation. They often lack the capacity and resources to deal with multiple and growing external demands and requirements. In Ireland, providers are mainly private and can be classified as either for-profit or community-based as outlined in Chapter 1.

Streamlining and rationalising the activities of the range of bodies engaged in inspection and regulation should be a priority going forward. The growing challenge of designing effective governance arrangements for education systems in an increasingly complex environment, with increasing demands for accountability, has been highlighted and explored in a report from the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (Burns and Koester, 2016[7]). Arrangements can easily become more and more complex as their scope and sophistication broadens. In Ireland, developing streamlined arrangements will be important for all ECEC providers that are subject to regulation and inspection, including the much wider group that will come into scope as regulation and inspection of childminding is extended (more on this in the following section).

In the short term, actions to achieve streamlining and greater co-ordination should include taking steps to deepen the integration of frameworks and methodologies used for inspection and monitoring, and improving the flow of intelligence and data between bodies. Such actions should have a particular focus on deepening co-ordination of the work of Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate. The range of experience and professional backgrounds of the staff teams within these two inspectorates is different, but both bring valuable expertise that complement each other. Joint professional development opportunities for

inspectors from the Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate have been held successfully. Joint inspections might also be a positive step. Proposals have been developed for the occasional involvement of inspectors from the Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate in each other's inspection teams but to date these plans have not been implemented.

Attention should also be paid to streamlining the monitoring activities of Pobal while still ensuring that they fulfil their key purposes. This may include keeping under consideration the scope for placing reliance on work undertaken and data gathered by the inspection bodies, wherever that makes sense. It is clear however, that Pobal's role will need to be reviewed if significant changes are made to the overall funding model (which was under review at the time of writing, see Chapter 1). If such changes are required it will be important to ensure that the burden on providers is kept to the minimum necessary level.

Over and above rationalising activities and improving co-ordination, the potential for re-shaping the 'regulatory landscape' more significantly should also be considered. For example, this could be done by bringing inspection and monitoring functions, which are currently dispersed across different bodies, within a single organisation that provides integrated care and education inspections.

One option, given the priority on ensuring high-quality learning and pedagogy within ECEC provision, would be to combine the functions and expertise of the Tusla EYI and DE Inspectorate, and place them within a newly created Education and Children's Inspectorate to cover the years from ECEC to upper secondary education. Such an inspectorate would be well placed to reduce complexity and increase coherence through rationalising and integrating inspection activities, while also benefitting from integrating knowledge and intelligence currently held in separate places. This approach would retain the benefits of having a coherent overview of support for children's learning and development throughout the age range from 0 to 18, while also encouraging a more integrated view across educational development and support for children's health and well-being. This approach has been adopted in Malta and in England (UK), for example. There would also be challenges accompanying this option. Given that policy on care and education are split across two separate Ministerial portfolios in Ireland, this merged inspection body would need to be designed to have direct lines of responsibility and accountability to both departments of government. As with existing arrangements, care would also need to be taken to build strong links between this new Education and Children's Inspectorate and the bodies providing improvement support for ECEC providers, including the provisionally named 'Childcare Ireland', assuming it has those functions in its remit. Care would also need to be taken to ensure that the new body had sufficient expertise in all aspects of ECEC provision and that the different nature and characteristics of provision in the ECEC sector were understood, valued and reflected at all levels of the new organisation.

Another option to streamline the current infrastructure might be to bring the inspection functions currently residing with Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate's Early Years team together into a newly merged inspection body which could either be separate to, be located within Tusla, or be established as a part of the new provisionally named Childcare Ireland. As with a single education and children's services inspectorate, this design of inspection body would have the potential benefit of reducing complexity and increasing coherence through rationalising and integrating inspection activities and combining knowledge and intelligence. If located within a broader agency which leads improvement support in the sector (such as the provisionally named Childcare Ireland), the merged inspection body would also benefit from smoother collaboration, communication and intelligence-sharing, further facilitating positive synergies between the evaluation and support parts of the national infrastructure. Care would nonetheless need to be taken to build in appropriate internal firewalls so that inspectors continue to evaluate and report 'without fear or favour'. The primary line of Ministerial accountability would be simple and direct through DCEDIY. This option would also present challenges, however. There could be a risk that the increased focus on improving process quality (particularly around pedagogy and curriculum) in ECEC, which is evident in recent Irish developments, in EU policy and international developments more widely, could be diluted if significant education expertise was not built into this new body and sufficiently strong links to the education department were not maintained. Having ECEC and school inspections split across two separate

inspection bodies would also inevitably mean losing the benefits of having a single source of evaluation evidence and professional advice which has a holistic view of provision across the whole age range. Care would have to be taken to ensure this arrangement did not have the unintended consequence of weakening efforts to create a smoother transition from ECEC into formal schooling, building higher quality educational pedagogy into ECEC and ensuring a strong focus on holistic child development and well-being in primary provision.

Regardless of the specific option chosen, the enhanced focus on process quality introduced by the development of the DE Inspectorate's education-focused inspections should be preserved and spread more widely across the ECEC quality assurance system, with appropriate expertise and delivery capacity. Either of the options discussed above should have the benefit of ensuring that data, knowledge and intelligence on ECEC settings, which is currently gathered and held separately, is more easily shared and brought together to provide a fuller picture of the performance of individual providers and of the sector as whole.

In parallel with reviewing the arrangements for onsite inspection and monitoring activities by national bodies, consideration should be also given to the scope for integrating, streamlining and reducing duplication in the requirements for ECEC providers to provide information and data to central bodies.

Extending the scope of quality arrangements to other parts of the ECEC sector

The national quality assurance arrangements based on regulation and inspection by Tusla, and monitoring of funded provision by Pobal, in practice currently only cover centre-based provision and a relatively small number of registered childminders. Furthermore, the more extensive arrangements which also involve potential engagement with the DE Inspectorate only apply to ECCE-funded provision, that is centres, or specific rooms within centres, which are supported by ECCE funding. While home-based providers are required to register with Tusla if they serve a certain number of children, this covers only a small proportion of the overall provision in the sector. In practice, most childminders are not currently within the scope of quality assurance arrangements. Indeed, the full size and extent of the childminding sector is unknown (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]).

Increasing the scope and coherence of quality assurance arrangements across all the main areas of provision within the ECEC sector, while respecting the particularities of different types of provision, will be an important step in the national ambition to ensure high quality and drive improvement across all types of settings. Countries which have been working to develop quality assurance arrangements for their ECEC sectors have typically started by focusing on centre-based provision and many have not progressed to addressing home-based settings. A number of countries, however, such as all the jurisdictions within the UK, have established arrangements for the regulation and inspection of childminding, which are coherent with their overall approach but adapted to suit the particular circumstances of that type of setting (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019[3]).

With regard to childminding, which clearly plays a substantial role in the overall pattern of Irish ECEC provision as discussed in Chapter 1, the review team noted that the government's First 5 Whole--of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families seeks to extend regulations and support for childminders (as well as school-age childcare) (Government of Ireland, 2019[8]). Related goals and next steps have been formulated in a National Action Plan for Childminding launched in April 2021 (DCEDIY, 2021[9]). Appropriate ways of including childminding in the national quality arrangements should be developed as a priority within this plan. As a first stage, this will require building up a better understanding of the size and characteristics of the sector. In parallel with scoping out the sector, there will be a need for the development of registration requirements and quality standards. As the National Action Plan for Childminding states, these will need to be well aligned with those established for centre-based provision, but appropriate to the childminding context (also see Chapter 3 on qualification requirements and training for childminders as part of regulation).

As expectations and requirements are placed on a whole new group of service providers for the first time, it will be crucial to ensure that the arrangements developed are proportionate and deliverable in practice, and that sufficient support is available to help service providers engage positively with the new arrangements. Both Tusla and the DE Inspectorate should collaborate appropriately in taking forward this work with the DCEDIY.

The consistency and coherence of how quality assurance arrangements operate in different types of centre-based provision should also be reviewed. For example, as nationally funded and quality assured provision for three to six-year-olds has become established through the ECCE programme, now sitting alongside junior infant class provision which has historically existed within schools, it seems timely to review the way school-based junior and senior infant classes are inspected and quality assured to ensure consistency and coherence of the overall approach across ECEC provision, as proposed in the First 5 strategy. While practice in school-based classes is based on the Primary School Curriculum, in both school and non-school settings, all children from birth to age six are within the scope of *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, and *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. The principles and practices articulated in the *Aistear* and *Síolta* frameworks provide an appropriate foundation for coherence across ECEC provision (see next section). The ongoing review of both curriculum frameworks, for ECEC and primary school, also aims to enhance coherence.

The objective should be to bring all ECEC provision within a set of quality assurance arrangements which consistently operate in line with a core set of principles and quality expectations, while being adapted proportionately to different settings. For example, when extending education-focused inspections by the DE Inspectorate to earlier age groups, as is currently being piloted, inspections need to be adapted to the developmental needs of that particular age group.

Extending the scope of regulation and inspection to childminding will send a clear signal that these areas are also seen as important and worthy of attention in terms of quality development. This should help re-address an imbalance, which appears to be currently present in the system, whereby providers tend to focus their attention and resources on ensuring quality (as well as supply) in centre-based provision for older children (particularly in ECCE rooms) because these are the areas where the current monitoring and inspection arrangements (as well as funding schemes) place a stronger focus.

Self-evaluation in the sector is at an early stage and needs focused attention to build capacity

While external review or inspection has long been established as one of the main strands of quality assurance strategies in education systems, there has been a strong trend internationally towards developing complementary policies and practices for internal review, or self-evaluation. This is increasingly also seen as a key dimension of strategies aimed at ensuring that a quality culture is embedded across schools and other educational sectors (OECD, 2013[10]; European Commission, 2020[11]).

Ireland has recognised the value of promoting self-evaluation in the ECEC sector. However, compared to schools where this tool has been promoted and supported for some time, the development of ECEC providers' necessary understanding and capacity for implementation is understandably at a much earlier stage. It should now be given clear priority and resourcing. Stronger impact needs to be achieved in enabling managers, leaders and practitioners within the ECEC sector to build their skills and capacity to undertake effective self-evaluation and improvement planning in their own settings.

Some valuable first steps have been taken towards building a quality culture in ECEC settings in Ireland. In recent years *Aistear* and *Síolta* have been more actively promoted alongside each, raising expectations around quality in the sector. Together they provide a strong basis for further action to embed a more comprehensive quality culture across the ECEC sector, one which addresses process aspects as well as structural aspects, and the quality of pedagogy and learning environments provided. Together with the

introduction of DE inspections for ECCE settings in 2016 (which are planned to be extended to ECEC centres more globally), they signal the importance already being placed on ensuring ECEC providers deliver high-quality professional engagement and processes which promote children's holistic learning, development and well-being, alongside ensuring more basic aspects of child safety.

To date, however, the impact of these initiatives, although broadly welcomed, appears to have been relatively limited across the sector as a whole. Existing measures to foster self-assessment and improvement planning through the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) have largely relied on the motivation of providers and services to engage in the process and have been difficult to sustain once validation through the process has been achieved. As was reported to the review team, the current QAP process is planned to be phased out. The sustainable development of capacity for quality development has also been hampered by structural issues such as high staff turnover as discussed in Chapter 2 on workforce development. Existing initiatives and resources are sometimes difficult to navigate for practitioners.

Consideration should thus be given to how to spread awareness and accelerate implementation through actions including a re-fresh and re-launch of a more streamlined and integrated package of key quality documentation along with a well-resourced programme of advice, training and support. The current process of "Updating *Aistear*", that is a review and updating of the existing curriculum framework, led by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), also presents an opportunity to create new momentum for improving the ability of providers to self-evaluate and improve their curricular provision and pedagogical practices; and for creating further alignment with the primary school curriculum, also under review at the time of writing (more on this below).

Efforts to improve providers' capacity for internal self-evaluation and improvement should be aligned closely with external inspection and monitoring processes. Advice, guidance and support provided for self-evaluation should draw directly on the expertise of the inspectorates and draw on the same standards and quality indicators, while being adapted for different types of provision and contexts. There is a valuable role for the inspectorates in providing guidance on effective self-evaluation and improvement arrangements, and highlighting good practice when they see it developing in practice.

Both Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate have taken steps to encourage the development of self-evaluation in ECEC centres in recent years.

Tusla has published the Early Years Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) and offered an e-learning programme to help settings use the QRF to promote improved compliance. Since it opened a year ago, 9 200 providers and their staff have participated in the QRF e-learning programme. Inspection tools and checklists are routinely shared with services so they can self-assess their service delivery against regulatory requirements in advance of inspection and use them on an ongoing basis for self-directed quality improvement. During COVID-19 Tusla developed a self-assessment checklist to facilitate compliance, with positive results. The self-assessment tool is integrated into the inspection process and reviewed by inspectors prior to onsite activity.

The DE Inspectorate has also published the quality framework which forms the basis of its inspection evaluations and encourages centres to use it for their own ongoing self-evaluation and development. It provides signposts for practice and encourages centres to assess their practice and provision on a quality scale which ranges from poor to excellent. It also published webinars to support self-evaluation using the quality framework, and webinars sharing the findings of inspection combined with research to support reflection and quality improvement in the ECCE programme and infant classes in primary schools.

As has being recognised in the development of inspection processes in Ireland, inspections of individual settings can also help build capacity for self-evaluation by ensuring that inspectors focus explicitly on self-evaluation arrangements and provide constructive dialogue and feedback on the processes that are

in place. The DE Inspectorate has drawn directly on its school inspection practices to build a strong element of professional dialogue into the way their inspections are conducted.

Other systems are also pursuing the development of self-evaluation in ECEC settings, often led by their inspectorates (see Box 3.2 for an example from Scotland).

Box 3.2. Examples of promoting self-evaluation in ECEC settings: Scotland

As in Ireland, Scotland has two inspectorates playing complementary roles in the ECEC sector. The Care Inspectorate undertakes a statutory programme of regulatory inspections covering all registered ECEC provision, while Education Scotland undertakes a programme of education-focused inspections. Both inspectorates have been taking co-ordinated action to promote self-evaluation and improvement planning in the sector.

Building on previous editions of self-evaluation guidance provided for ECEC settings, in 2017 Education Scotland published *How Good is our Learning and Childcare?,* a self-evaluation resource which sits within a well-established family of guides produced for schools and other sectors of education (Education Scotland, 2016[12]). Evaluating a setting's arrangements for self-evaluation and improvement planning is a core part of the evaluation process promoted by this guide. It is also a core element in any inspection undertaken by Education Scotland inspectors. Education Scotland also has a range of more specific improvement resources and practice exemplars for ECEC settings on its website, for example the *Early Learning Play Pedagogy Toolkit*.

In 2019, the Care Inspectorate published *Self-evaluation for Improvement - Your Guide*, which provides guidance on how settings can develop systematic processes for assessing their performance against the recently revised National Standards for Early Learning and Care Providers (Care Inspectorate, 2019[13]). Guidance is provided on how to turn the outcomes of self-evaluation into an effective programme of action to generate improvement; and additional 'bite-size' videos on using the guidance have been made available online. During the Covid-19 pandemic, while normal programmes of onsite inspection were suspended, the Care Inspectorate invited settings who would normally have been subject to onsite inspection visits to instead use these resources to undertake and submit a self-evaluation report, which was then discussed with inspectors by phone or video-call.

The Care Inspectorate is also providing a more intensive programme of improvement support for staff in almost 90 ECEC settings which were identified as needing help to move forward. A dedicated team is providing staff with training in quality improvement methodology, and providing ongoing support through learning communities, 'practice clinics' and one-to-one collaboration.

Sources: Education Scotland (2016[12]), How Good is our Early Learning and Childcare?, https://education.gov.scot/improvement/self-evaluation/how-good-is-our-early-learning-and-childcare (accessed 6 October 2021); Care Inspectorate (2019[13]), Supporting Self-evaluation for Improvement – your guide, https://www.careinspectorate.com/images/Self_evaluation_for_improvement_-_your_guide.pdf (accessed 6 October 2021).

Inspection frameworks, tools and processes

Context

In order to understand the standards and quality against which they will be assessed when inspected, Irish ECEC providers who engage with the ECCE programme need to pay attention to two main frameworks. These have been developed separately by Tusla and the DE Inspectorate, reflecting the division of

functions and focus areas between them, albeit with attention to promoting consistency between the two (Figure 3.1).

The first of these is the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) in which Tusla has helpfully articulated the standards that providers need to meet to achieve and maintain registration, as set out in the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (Tusla, 2018[14]). Tusla inspections use the QRF as the key reference point for their evaluations of provision. Stakeholders interviewed during the policy missions confirmed to the review team that publication of the QRF has helped clarify expectations for registration and ongoing compliance with regulations, which had apparently been less clear in the past. As indicated earlier, an e-learning programme has helpfully been made available to support providers and practitioners in preparing for inspection and to meet statutory requirements. Quality standards and regulations include structural and process aspects, such as minimum qualification requirements for staff, staff-to-child ratios and space requirements (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]).

A second relevant framework is the one which the DE Inspectorate has produced and which they use as the basis for their evaluations in inspections. This quality framework is known as the Quality Framework for Early Years Education Inspection (QFEYEI) and is articulated in the *Guide to Early Years Education Inspection* (DES Inspectorate, 2018[15]). It looks beyond structural aspects and the core requirements for registration, focusing on a deeper consideration of process quality. The framework sets out four areas of practice to be evaluated during the inspection process:

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

In addition to the specific frameworks developed by the inspectorates, centres focusing on quality assurance and improvement need to engage with two other key documents which have been developed by government to guide practice in the ECEC sector, *Aistear* and *Síolta* (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]), already mentioned further above.

The *Aistear* framework, published initially in 2009 by Ireland's National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), sets out a national curriculum framework for the early childhood years. It is a strong framework which embodies principles recognised as best practice internationally and it has strong support among ECEC practitioners. The NCCA is currently in the process of consulting with the sector about updating *Aistear* and have recently published initial documentation *Updating Aistear – Rationale and Process* (NCCA, 2021[16]).

As this document indicates, it will be important, in the process of this revision to ensure clear and coherent articulation with the curriculum framework for primary school education. Indeed, care should be taken to ensure that the primary school framework, which is also being reviewed, is updated in ways which ensure that a consistent, progressive approach becomes fully embedded across both sectors. The OECD's study *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education* highlights the importance of ensuring smooth transitions if the benefits of good quality ECEC experiences are to be fully realised and reviews a range of ways in which OECD member states are seeking to ensure they happen consistently (OECD, 2017[17]).

Síolta, which was first published in 2006, is described as the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, designed for practitioners to use for their own development. It provides ECEC practitioners with a set of principles, standards and components of quality, and gives advice and guidance on how individual practitioners or groups of staff can use these to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their own practice and develop plans to improve. Appropriate involvement of parents and carers in the process is encouraged (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]).

Good frameworks and resources to support quality development have been developed but now need to be rationalised

Each of these four frameworks have been developed for specific purposes and have value in their own right, however, taken together they present a somewhat complex landscape of documentation for small providers to navigate.

Steps should now be taken to rationalise the key quality documents that providers and practitioners need to engage with, integrating them into a coherent overall package, and presenting them more clearly as an inter-linked suite or 'family' of guidance documents for quality development in the ECEC sector.

As indicated earlier, *Aistear* is being updated through a consultation process led by the NCCA and in its updated form will contribute a key part of this package.

To sit alongside this updated curriculum guidance, work should now be taken forward to rationalise and integrate existing quality frameworks with the aim of developing a single shared and jointly-badged quality framework which forms a common reference point for all inspection and self-evaluation activities. The government has already recognised this need and made a commitment in the First 5 strategy to *"develop a revised self-evaluation framework for ELC to replace the existing Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) so that providers can assess their own performance along the quality spectrum, from compliance to excellence."* This integrated framework should address both structural and process aspects of quality, bringing together aspects currently covered separately in the QRF and the QFEYEI.

Both Tusla and DE inspections should draw selectively on this common framework based on their needs. It should also provide a key reference point for internal evaluation and could be developed and published in formats adapted for use as a self-evaluation tool. An integrated quality framework of this sort should be designed in ways which promote continuous improvement, encouraging evaluative reflection which encourages settings to look beyond achieving minimum compliance and towards achieving increasing levels of excellence in quality.

A very active process of engagement and consultation with practitioners should be built into this development process for an integrated quality framework. A multi-agency group should provide strong leadership for the process, including a strong role for both Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate working in partnership with bodies who are experienced in providing improvement support, such as Better Start.

Co-ordinating inspection programmes

The OECD's study of monitoring quality in ECEC (OECD, 2015[2]) found that where external inspection programmes exist, their frequency is not generally fixed by statute or otherwise. Rather a more flexible approach to the programming of inspections is becoming common, with a risk-based element to the selection of settings alongside a broad expectation of the maximum gap that should elapse between successive inspections. This means that, where a setting has been rated poorly in previous inspections, or where the inspectorate has intelligence to suggest that it may be having difficulties, it will be inspected sooner and/or more frequently. Settings which the inspectorate believes are performing well may be inspected less frequently, or experience less intensive inspection processes. This intelligence-led approach, sometimes known as proportionate inspection programming, is increasingly common among European school inspectorates (Maxwell and Staring, 2018[18]). It makes more efficient use of resources, applies support and pressure where it is most needed, and reduces burdens on providers that are already evaluating and improving their own performance effectively.

In the Irish system, Tusla uses a risk rating model to determine its schedule of inspections while delivering an overall commitment to ensure that every service is inspected at least once every three years. The risk rating incorporates different factors: inherent risks in the service; the provider's record of compliance; the provider's record of reliable processes and practices; and the provider's record of

addressing previous non-compliance and incidents received. The rating is used to target inspections to settings with high risk and to ensure a consistent national approach to prioritisation.

The DE Inspectorate is programming inspections on a somewhat longer time scale, aiming to inspect the ECCE-funded centres at least once on an approximately five-year basis (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]).

As the system is still in the relatively early stages of promoting the spread of a quality culture among ECEC providers, it makes sense for the inspection process to engage directly with all providers within a reasonable timescale. In the longer term, as the capacity to undertake self-evaluation and improvement planning becomes more strongly developed in the system, consideration should be given to moving even further in the direction of risk-based or proportionate programming of inspections. This means targeting providers for inspection more or less frequently depending on the level of risk which they present, judged from the analysis of intelligence gathered about them, as is already done by the Tusla EY Inspectorate.

The review team recognises that the further development of such an approach will take time given the highly variable capacity to engage with quality development currently evident across the sector. It will also be important that, even as inspections are skewed more strongly towards less effective services, the inspectorates continue to engage at some level with others in order to continue to promote further improvements in providers that have already reached high standards. The development of more risk-based and proportionate approaches to programming inspections will, in turn, rely on further developments in the gathering, analysis and sharing of data, as addressed later in this chapter.

Co-ordination of inspection programmes between Tusla and the DE Inspectorate is a challenge, as it is for other systems with two distinct inspectorates operating in parallel in the ECEC sector. The review team understood that the inspectorates took steps to share their planned programmes to avoid the undesirable scenario of two inspectors turning up from different inspectorates at the same or similar times, apparently unknown to each other. Continuing attention should be paid to ensuring proactive, systematic co-ordination of inspection programming between Tusla and the DE Inspectorate. Going forward, there may be benefit in arranging some joint inspections within the overall programme, providing an integrated experience for the setting and promoting exchange of expertise and collaborative practice between inspectors.

Parents and children should be more strongly engaged in quality processes

Systematic ways of tapping into the experience of stakeholders, especially the direct users of services, should be seen as a priority for development in the monitoring and quality assurance strategies for the Irish ECEC sector. The OECD's Starting Strong III and Starting Strong VI reports identified family and community engagement as one of five key quality targets that can be leveraged for better child development in the ECEC sector (OECD, 2011[19]; OECD, 2021[1]). With regard to education quality strategies more generally, the European Commission's Education and Training 2020 Working Group Schools' report on quality assurance policies stresses the importance of stakeholder engagement in both self-evaluation and external inspection processes to ensure the experiences of users are taken into account, informing the judgements reached, and building public confidence and credibility for the processes themselves (European Commission, 2020[11]).

Engaging parents' and children's voices in inspection processes has some particular challenges in the ECEC sector. For example, the short duration of most inspections does not lend itself to the systematic survey approaches often adopted for longer school inspections. Eliciting the views of young children in ways which can feed effectively into evaluation processes is also clearly challenging. As a result, the Eurydice review of ECEC in Europe found that children's voices were rarely heard during the evaluation process (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019[3]).

In Ireland there is considerable scope to increase the engagement of both parents and children in inspection processes. At system level, some innovative steps are being taken to build children's views into

consultations about ECEC reform. Tusla has recently undertaken a systematic consultation with parents and stakeholders to gather their views on how their inspection approaches could be improved. However, the systematic exploration of the views of parents or children has not previously had a strong role in ECEC inspection processes. Having recognised a need to address this issue, both Tusla and the DE Inspectorate are actively exploring ways of better engaging both groups in future inspection models, having been tasked by the DCEDIY to do so. This development work includes consideration of the appropriate use of questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and other means (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]). From 2021, feedback from parents or guardians is now being proactively included in the Tusla inspection process. Parents and guardians can give their views on the service their child attends by completing a new parent/guardian feedback form.

Complaints provide another important way in which stakeholders, usually parents or other family members, can make their voice heard in the quality assurance process. Under current regulations, all registered providers are required to have a comprehensive complaints management process in place. If users of services remain unhappy after exhausting their local provider's complaints processes, they can highlight their concerns to Tusla EYI, who treat such approaches as 'unsolicited information' which is analysed and used to inform inspection activity. In 2020, the Tusla EY Inspectorate received 253 pieces of 'unsolicited information' from stakeholders, 104 of them from parents. These are reviewed, risk assessed and a follow-up inspection is carried out as necessary. Stakeholder representatives interviewed by the review team were not confident, however, that users of services were widely aware of this process, how any such individual submissions of unsolicited information would be dealt with, and what action and feedback the complainant could expect as a result.

A more explicit and widely publicised national system of complaints could have a number of benefits including ensuring a more consistent flow of relevant intelligence into the monitoring and inspection process and increasing public confidence that concerns are being addressed robustly where they occur. It would ensure that the inspectorates are directly aware of patterns of concerns arising locally among service users. At present, there seems to be a perceived lack of clarity about processes for parents to escalate concerns about children's health and safety or the quality of service delivery if they are not satisfied with the provider's response.

Use of the outcomes of inspection and monitoring processes

Context

A third area which is worth consideration is how the outputs of monitoring and inspection activities are used and how data is deployed to support quality development in the system.

A comprehensive comparative review of evaluation and assessment in school education systems (*Synergies for Better Learning*) described the purposes of individual school evaluation in terms of two broad purposes which apply equally well to the evaluation of ECEC settings (OECD, 2013[10]). The first purpose is essentially to directly promote development in the individual setting being evaluated by identifying strengths and weaknesses in the individual setting and promoting action to secure improvement. The second purpose is to provide accountability and transparency by providing information to authorities and stakeholders on how well a service is performing. Both the developmental and accountability purposes are seen as important and needing to be kept in appropriate balance for the system to work effectively overall.

A third purpose can also be defined which extends beyond promoting development and accountability for individual services. That is providing a flow of evidence and feedback for policy makers on how well service provision is developing across the sector as a whole. Regular analysis of the patterns of outcomes emerging from inspection programmes, often combined with complementary analysis of other forms of

data gathered about the system, can provide ministers and policy officials with valuable information on which to base policy decisions and where to focus national resources to best secure higher performance.

Ensuring effective action where services are falling short of expected standards

The developmental purpose of inspections is clear in the Irish ECEC system in a range of ways.

In the first instance, every inspection provides staff, leaders and managers within settings with an independent perspective on the setting's strengths and weaknesses, drawing on wide experience of evaluating settings across the sector. Developing the style and methods of inspection in ways which encourage open professional dialogue throughout the course of inspections helps maximise effectiveness in delivering this developmental function.

In designing their approach for education-focused inspections, the DE Inspectorate have deliberately employed an 'improvement-focused' style of inspecting, reflecting the approach they have developed for school inspections. This was noted and appreciated by practitioners interviewed by the review team, as they had experienced it positively in practice.

Every Tusla inspection report identifies areas of compliance with regulatory requirements, as well as areas of non-compliance, identifying their potential impact or risk. Inspectors focus on correcting areas that are non-complaint with regulations and continue to support the provider to make the necessary improvements to resolve issues and prevent them from re-occurring.

The need for inspections to succeed in promoting development and secure improvements becomes increasingly urgent when settings are found to be persistently non-compliant and/or falling well short of expected standards.

The DE Inspectorate undertakes follow up inspections where it identifies serious weaknesses. Inspectors can direct services to sources of external support such as the Quality Development Service of Better Start, a dedicated agency established in Pobal for the coaching and mentoring of services although no direct route of referral has been established.

Tusla EYI undertakes follow up visits to services which it finds to be non-compliant with regulations. In such circumstances, services are required to submit a corrective and preventive action plan. Arrangements are in place which allow Tusla EYI to refer services directly to Better Start Quality Development Service for support, with the service's consent, where potential for improvements in process quality has been identified.

In the case of continued breach of regulations, Tusla can ultimately remove services from the register although this only happens in a very small number of cases. According to Tusla's summary report on ECEC inspections covering the period 2018 to 2019 (Tusla, 2021[20]), just over 30% of regulations assessed by inspectors were judged to be non-compliant. The most common regulation for which non-compliance was identified related to 'safeguarding health, safety and welfare of child'. A subsequent review of outcomes from the regulatory enforcement process looked at 500 non-compliant regulations. It found that almost 86% of services found to be non-compliant on inspection were compliant at the end of the process (Tusla, 2021[21]).

The review team heard evidence that it has sometimes been difficult to address persistent quality concerns arising from some inspections and to enforce the necessary remedial action. There were some indications that ECEC centres can continue operating for some time despite repeatedly failing to address serious failings in their provision. The range of statutory options open to Tusla EYI to ensure providers take prompt action to address concerns, short of moving to the ultimate 'end point' stage of seeking de-registration, appear to be too limited.

Processes for intervening robustly in such cases should be reviewed and consideration should be given to how any obstacles to speedy and decisive action can be removed, including the benefits of introducing

stronger intermediate steps in the statutory intervention options open to Tusla EYI. The goal should be to ensure a rapid response for effective action from ECEC providers in situations where they are falling seriously short of standards related to both structural and process quality.

Information about the quality of services should be made more readily accessible to stakeholders

The outcomes of Irish ECEC inspections are also deployed to serve an accountability function to some extent. The results of individual inspections undertaken by Tusla are available on their website. DE inspections are published on the Department for Education's website. Stakeholders interviewed by the review team seemed to have limited knowledge about what information was available and where to find it.

Consideration should be given to increasing the transparency of evaluations and to making the results of inspections more accessible to the public. Using transparency as a driver for improving quality would appear particularly relevant in a heavily 'market-based' system of provision, as currently exists in the Irish ECEC sector. At present, it seems difficult for parents to access a clear and succinct analysis of the quality that the services in their area provide, having no access to a comprehensive resource that brings together all relevant evaluative judgements made by Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate where appropriate. In so far as parents are being provided with information derived from inspection processes to help them choose between competing providers, priority should be placed on ensuring that high quality is incentivised in their decision making process. That means making explicit the quality of curricular and pedagogical provision as well as levels of compliance with statutory regulations.

To improve access to all information available, consideration should be given to developing and publicising an integrated, easily accessible and user-friendly 'parent portal', which brings together the relevant information and evaluations about each ECEC provision (in line with the existing commitment in the First 5 strategy).

In due course, as regulation and inspection arrangements evolve further in areas like childminding, it should likewise be possible to give parents access to some information on standards and quality of those local service providers.

External support for quality improvement and capacity building is patchy and fragmented

Complementing the role of the inspectorates in providing independent evaluations and feedback on the quality of provision, a number of organisations in Ireland's ECEC sector have developed services to provide ongoing support and guidance to providers on quality and improvement issues (Figure 3.1) (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]).

These kinds of services can serve at least two distinct functions in any quality system. One is a quite specific role in helping individual providers and their staff respond effectively to improvement needs identified by inspections. A second, broader function, not specifically related to inspection activities, is providing ECEC settings with guidance and coaching on developing and implementing self-evaluation and improvement strategies.

Ensuring providers have access to a strong support infrastructure, to complement and work alongside the inspection arrangements, is seen as an important strand of the overall quality strategy for the ECEC sector in Ireland. This will be especially important given the predominance of small and potentially isolated providers, the intention to bring a large number of previously unregulated home-based providers into the system, and the general need for the upskilling of practitioners and service managers and leaders in quality development as discussed in Chapter 2.

Some valuable sources of external improvement support are currently in place. For example, the Quality Development Service of Better Start, which was established within Pobal to provide support for DCEDIY-funded centres needing 'hands-on' guidance and support, provides an important source of active consultancy, including for centres seeking to address urgent development needs identified by Tusla EYI inspections. At a more local level, 30 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) receive national funding to provide local co-ordination and support for the ECEC sector in their areas and a number of National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs) provide a source of guidance and relevant resources (Frontier Economics, 2021[4]).

Overall, however, beyond providing support to centres where an urgent need has been identified through inspection, access for providers to external guidance and support for improvement is limited and patchy overall. The capacity of the CCCs to provide such support appears to be variable, for example. Some are small and have very limited resources to deploy (also see Chapters 1 and 2). This lack of capacity will become even more critical if greater attention is to be given to supporting quality development and improvement in the childminding sector as well as centre-based provision. There is a need to consider ways for how to increase the capacity for providing such support, to ensure it is consistently accessible and of good quality for providers and practitioners across the country.

Developing a stronger and more coherent infrastructure for providing development support, which complements the inspection infrastructure, should be a priority for the next stages of national policy development. There should be a focus on maximising collaboration and exploiting fully the synergies between inspection activities and support activities, while ensuring that inspection teams have the operational independence to evaluate and report on their findings 'without fear or favour'. This will require a major and potentially challenging programme of reform but the review team encountered broad acknowledgement of its importance and a keen desire to make progress in giving shape to the way forward and establishing a timescale for implementing it. Review of the existing arrangements falls within the remit of an oversight group looking at the 'operating model' for the ECEC sector, which is currently developing proposals for reform. The objectives of reform should include developing a more easily accessible 'one-stop-shop' approach to directing providers to all relevant guidance and sources of support relevant to them. The extent to which the existing CCCs, or perhaps larger organisational units bringing together resources for a larger area, could provide a stronger 'middle layer' in the quality assurance system merits exploration.

The review team were aware that a commitment to create a new national body, provisionally named 'Childcare Ireland' will be directly relevant to these considerations, especially if it is envisaged that this body is to serve a strong support and development function for services and practitioners, delivered down to a local level either directly or through local subsidiaries. The review team noted a strong desire in the system for further clarity about how the development of this overarching body will be taken forward, its role, functions and resourcing. This was reflected in the Children's Rights Alliance's 'report card' on the Government's progress on the children's agenda, which strongly urged faster progress in establishing the new body (Children's Rights Alliance, 2021[22]). Defining the right role for the body is a complex process, however, and a carefully managed transition process will certainly be needed if, as expected, it involves major shifts of roles and responsibilities from other parts of the current system.

Analysis of data and evidence is playing a growing role but could be shared and combined more effectively to support the quality system

Well-designed arrangements for the gathering and analysis of data and evidence from across the sector should play an important role in a comprehensive quality assurance strategy. Such arrangements are playing an increasing role in the development of quality assurance approaches in education more generally (OECD, 2013[10]) and the important role they can play in quality assurance processes for the ECEC sector has also been highlighted (OECD, 2018[23]). This latter report argues that data and the outcomes of

monitoring processes can play a key role in informing policy makers about patterns and trends in terms of the nature and characteristics of different provision and the extent to which equitable access is being achieved. They can also provide valuable evidence about strengths and weaknesses to inform judgements about where the system most needs to improve.

Data and evidence typically come in varying forms and from different sources. It includes quantitative statistical data on issues such as enrolments, hours of attendance and demographic characteristics of service users. It also includes data which is based on more qualitative professional judgements, sometimes codified through a pass/fail decision or rating scale, such as the outcomes of inspection processes. Data and evidence can also be generated by commissioning pieces of research to provide insight on issues which are not readily addressed by analysis of routinely generated data. All of these should be considered together to provide a holistic view of the characteristics and performance of the sector, addressing both structural and process quality in an integrated fashion.

In the Irish ECEC sector, there are a growing number of ways in which data and evidence from monitoring activities are being gathered and analysed to support quality assurance, with the different bodies engaged in inspection or regulation activities focusing on information relevant to their specific areas of interest.

Pobal collect a substantial amount of data on the sector nationally through its monitoring activities, focused on the ECEC centres funded by DCEDIY, notably through the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and legacy schemes, such as the Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP). With the introduction of the NCS, data systems used for the administration of schemes are transitioning from a Programmes Implementation Platform (PIP) to a new dedicated system, the Early Years Platform (EYP), which includes a parent and service provider portal ('Hive') (Pobal, 2021[24]). Analysis of patterns and trends in the development of provision and the workforce is undertaken and used to inform policy development.

Tusla collects a range of data on all registered provision through the registration process. They also have access to other significant forms of evidence relevant to the quality of providers in the form of 'unsolicited information' submissions from users. Tusla EYI and the DE Inspectorate both separately undertake systematic analysis of the results of their inspections, providing important sources of evidence to inform policy and practice. This includes more broadly focused analyses of patterns and trends in their inspection findings and more specific reports on particular aspects of provision, such as the composite reports on STEM education and digital learning in the education system as a whole, from ECEC to upper secondary, published by the DE Inspectorate.

More generally, a strong culture of using evidence and evaluating policies is apparent in the Irish ECEC context. This is evident, for example, in the use of research in the development and evaluation of the First 5 strategy, which includes a Research and Evaluation programme as well as a Trials programme to explore and evaluate innovative initiatives (Government of Ireland, 2020[25]), and research commissioned by the DCEDIY to develop a new funding model for the sector.

The inspectorates also have an increasing interest in using data and intelligence to help target their own activities appropriately. Ongoing access to continually updated, robust profiles, bringing together all available data and intelligence on each provider, will be a key asset as they continue to refine their approaches to using such intelligence to feed into risk-based and proportionate inspection programming.

Interviews undertaken by the review team indicated, however, that there was considerable scope for making more effective use of the various sources of data and intelligence now being collected in the quality assurance system. While valuable data appear to be gathered and analysed to varying extents by each of the bodies engaged in monitoring or inspection, there is a need to explore how data and intelligence can be shared more easily between the various national bodies involved (and potentially other organisations involved in quality support) and integrated in ways which could strengthen quality assurance arrangements and inform policy developments. The need for more effective data sharing agreements among the national

bodies in ECEC policy and monitoring was also highlighted by Ireland's Comptroller and Auditor General in a recent Annual Report (Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, 2019[26]).

Possible options could involve the development of a shared 'data lake' or central data hub which integrates the data and intelligence from each of the bodies into a single coherent database. Each body could contribute data to the hub from its own activities and be able to access and draw from it as appropriate to their operational needs, with different levels of access taking appropriate account of data protection issues. Some data sharing protocols are in existence. These may need to be reviewed while others may need to be developed to form an integrated data management environment. There should also be consideration of access and use of data for other institutions, such as the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) or any future 'middle layer' bodies as decided in the review of the operating model. During its missions, the review team heard of concerns that with the change of IT systems for the administration of the NCS, the CCCs no longer had access to data on the services within their area, for example.

A shared 'data lake' approach could also enable rationalisation, ensuring that providers are not asked for the same data multiple times by different national bodies.

More effective arrangements for the pooling and integration of evidence from the inspection bodies could also have benefits by enabling a more integrated analysis of the performance of the system, covering both structural and process quality. This would strengthen the evidence base on which to base national policy decisions such as the targeting of staff development strategies through the identification of skills needs, the identification of priority areas for quality support or the targeting of differential funding allocations.

References

Burns, T. and F. Koester (2016), *Governing Education in a Complex World*, Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264255364-en. [7]

Care Inspectorate (2019), *Supporting Self-evaluation for Improvement – your guide*, Care Inspectorate, Dundee, https://www.careinspectorate.com/images/Self_evaluation_for_improvement_-_your_guide.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021). [13]

Children's Rights Alliance (2021), *Report Card 2021: Is Government keeping its promises to children?*, Children's Rights Alliance, Dublin, https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/Report-Card-23-Feb-2021.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021). [22]

DCEDIY (2021), *National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028)*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Dublin, https://bit.ly/ChildmindingActionPlan (accessed on 7 September 2021). [9]

DES Inspectorate (2018), *A Guide to Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)*, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin, https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/guide-to-early-years-education-inspections.pdf (accessed on 27 August 2021). [15]

DES Inspectorate (2018), *Insights and Future Developments: A Review of Early-Years Education-Focused Inspection: April 2016 – June 2017*, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin, https://assets.gov.ie/25246/9d33fa1d458644c98dde7069477a1351.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021). [6]

Education Scotland (2016), *How Good is our Early Learning and Childcare?*, Education Scotland, Livingston, https://education.gov.scot/improvement/self-evaluation/how-good-is-our-early-learning-and-childcare (accessed on 6 October 2021). [12]

European Commission (2020), *Supporting school self-evaluation and development through quality assurance policies: key considerations for policy makers. Report by ET2020 Working Group Schools*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://op.europa.eu/s/sMLG (accessed on 6 October 2021). [11]

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019), *Eurydice Brief: Key data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://op.europa.eu/s/sMJ1 (accessed on 6 October 2021). [3]

Frontier Economics (2021), *OECD Country Background Report for the OECD Quality Beyond Regulations Project – Early Learning and Care in Ireland*, Frontier Economics, London, https://assets.gov.ie/138286/2a4c0b9d-e605-4f64-9fa8-a4ae70f7f273.pdf (accessed on 26 August 2021). [4]

Government of Ireland (2020), *First 5 Annual Implementation Report 2019*, https://first5.gov.ie/reporting-progress (accessed on 6 October 2021). [25]

Government of Ireland (2019), *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, https://first5.gov.ie (accessed on 8 September 2021). [8]

Government of Ireland (2016), *Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016*, https://assets.gov.ie/34528/d51d93d029bc44f7883d41b25d98e890.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021). [5]

Maxwell, W. and F. Staring (2018), *Better Learning for Europe's Young People: Developing coherent quality assurance strategies for school education*, Publications Office of the European Commission, Luxembourg, https://op.europa.eu/s/sMLL. [18]

NCCA (2021), *Updating Aistear: Rationale and Process*, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Dublin, http://ttps://ncca.ie/media/5053/updating-aistear_rationale-and-process_background-paper_2021.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021). [16]

OECD (2021), *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/f47a06ae-en. [1]

OECD (2018), *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264085145-en. [23]

OECD (2017), *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264276253-en. [17]

OECD (2015), *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264233515-en. [2]

OECD (2013), *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment*, OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264190658-en. [10]

OECD (2011), *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264123564-en. [19]

Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (2019), *2018 Annual Report Chapter 16: Delivery of early learning and childcare programmes*, https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/find-report/publications/2019/2018-annual-report-chapter-16-delivery-of-early-learning-and-childcare-programmes.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021). [26]

Pobal (2021), *Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2019/2020*, Pobal, Dublin, https://www.gov.ie/pdf/137583/?page=null (accessed on 26 August 2021). [24]

Tusla (2021), *Report of Early Years Inspection Reports 2018-2019: Analysis and Trends*, Tusla - Child & Family Agency, Dublin, https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Early_Years_Inspection_Reports_2018_-_2019,_Analysis_and_Trends.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021). [20]

Tusla (2021), *Report of the Early Years Regulatory Enforcement Process: Outcomes*, Tusla - Child & Family Agency, Dublin, https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/The_Early_Years_Regulatory_Enforcement_Process-_Outcomes_Final_02.02.2021.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021). [21]

Tusla (2018), *Early Years Quality and Regulatory Framework*, https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/early-years-quality-and-regulatory-framework (accessed on 6 October 2021). [14]

Annex A. Programme of missions conducted by the review team

Table A A.1. Fact finding mission, December 2020

Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-11:00	Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)*
11:00-12:15	Frontier Economics
12:15-13:15	Tusla
13:15-14:30	
14:30-15:45	Department of Education and Skills (DES)
15:45-16:45	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-11:30	DES Inspectorate
11:30-12:45	Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)
12:45-13:45	Better Start / Pobal
13:45-14:30	
14:30-15:45	Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC), Dublin City University (DCU)
15:45-17:00	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Higher Education Authority (HEA), SOLAS
Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-11:45	Childhood Services Ireland (CSI) of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), Seas Suas, Federation of Early Childhood Providers
11:45-13:00	Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), Barnardos, Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta
13:00-14:00	
14:00-15:15	National Childhood Network, National Forum for Community Childcare Services, Meath County Childcare Committee, BLÁTHÚ
15:15-16:15	Childminding Ireland
Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-11:30	Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)

* In 2021, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) became the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) became the Department of Education (DE).

Table A A.2. Main mission (first round), July 2021

Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-11:00	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
11:00-12:10	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
12:00-13:30	Department of Education and Skills (DES)
13:30-14:15	
14:15-15:45	DES Inspectorate
15:45-16:45	Children's Rights Alliance; National Parents Council

Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-11:45	Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP), Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), Independent consultant
11:45-13:15	Tusla Early Years Inspectorate (EYI)
13:15-14:00	
14:00-15:30	ECEC setting I (centre-based) Virtual tour: 10 minutes Manager: 30 minutes; Room leader: 15 minutes Staff: 15 minutes
15:30-16:30	Pobal (incl Compliance, Audit and Risk).
16:30-16:45	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)

Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-12:00	ECEC setting II (centre-based) Virtual tour: 10 minutes Manager: 30 minutes; Room leader: 15 minutes Staff: 15 minutes
12:00-13:15	Representatives of different City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs)
13:15-14:00	
14:00-15:15	Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), St Nicholas Montessori College, Naíonraí (Irish Language Groups)
15:15-16:00	ECEC setting III (home-based)
16:15-17:15	INFORM

Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-11:30	PLÉ, Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB)
11:30-12:30	Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB)
12:30-13:30	Better Start
13:30-14:15	
14:15-15:45	Mary Immaculate College; School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education, Dublin City University; Trinity College Dublin
16:00-16:30	Hibernia College
17:00-18:00	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)
18:00-18:15	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)

Table A A.3. Main mission (second round), September 2021

Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-11:00	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and Department of Education and Skills (DES)
11:00-12:15	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
12:15-13:30	Group of providers (co-ordinated by Childhood Services Ireland [CSI] of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation [IBEC])
13:30-14:30	
14:30-15:45	Childminding Ireland, Childminding Development Officers from the City/County Childcare Committees
20:00-21:00	Group of individual practitioners (co-ordinated by Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union [SIPTU])
Time (Paris)	Institution
10:30-12:00	ECEC setting IV (centre-based) Virtual tour: 10 minutes Manager: 30 minutes; Room leader: 15 minutes Staff: 15 minutes
12:00-12:45	Parents
13:15-14:45	ECEC setting V (centre-based) Virtual tour: 10 minutes Manager: 30 minutes; Room leader: 15 minutes Staff: 15 minutes
14:45-15:45	
15:45-16:45	Students in further and higher education colleges
16:45-17:45	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), Department of Education and Skills (DES), DES Inspectorate, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Better Start

Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland

REVIEW ON SECTOR QUALITY

In supporting children's development, countries invest in the future successes of economies and societies. Awareness of the critical role early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays in setting a strong foundation for children's learning, development and well-being has grown among policy makers worldwide.

The OECD Quality beyond Regulations policy review provides countries with an overview of the different dimensions of quality in ECEC. It also highlights policies that can enhance process quality in particular. From this review, emerged the present report, taking an in-depth look at Ireland's ECEC system. It outlines the sector's main strengths and challenges, focusing on workforce development and quality assurance through monitoring and inspections. The report provides tailored policy recommendations to improve provision in line with national goals.