



# Quality assurance and improvement in the early education and care sector

## About this Policy Brief

This Policy Brief draws on the *Quality beyond Regulations* policy review undertaken by the OECD between 2018 and 2022 to foster an understanding of the different dimensions of quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC), focusing on process quality in particular. Process quality encompasses children's daily interactions through their ECEC settings – including with other children, staff, space and materials, their families and the wider community – which are directly linked to their development, learning and well-being. A primary goal of the policy review was to identify and discuss the main policy levers that can enhance process quality and provide countries with concrete examples of policies. Monitoring and developing comprehensive datasets are critical processes for quality assurance and improvement and are therefore one of these main policy levers. This Policy Brief presents the main policy considerations to design quality assurance and improvement systems for ECEC, building on the main findings of the *Quality beyond Regulations* policy review and two country reviews prepared for Ireland and Luxembourg.

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## Introduction

Countries around the world are investing increasing levels of public funding to ensure that their citizens have ready access to early education and care (ECEC) provision from birth to the point at which children enter the school system.

In many cases, governmental action has initially been driven by the need to provide safe and healthy care environments for children to enable parents to re-enter the workforce while their children are young. Increasingly, however, countries have also responded to growing evidence of the wider benefits for individual children, and for society at large, of promoting children's social and educational development and reducing the likelihood of educational, social and health difficulties occurring later in childhood and into adulthood. Stronger benefits have been associated with higher quality of ECEC provision, and they



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appear to be particularly significant in helping to counter the adverse impacts of socio-economic disadvantage on children's outcomes (OECD, 2021<sup>[1]</sup>; Melhuish et al., 2015<sup>[2]</sup>), a key policy priority for many countries. It is clear from the research that the quality of ECEC matters, as well as its availability, and that quality needs to be present in the educational aspects of early education and childcare as well as in its childcare aspects.

In this context, a diverse range of policies and practices for promoting quality assurance and improvement in ECEC provision have been evolving internationally (OECD, 2015<sup>[3]</sup>; European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, 2019<sup>[4]</sup>). Many countries are active in the process of reviewing, enhancing, or extending their existing approaches.

Quality policies and practices tend to be designed to serve multiple purposes. These include satisfying the need for public accountability while also providing feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of individual services and the sector as a whole in order to inform further actions for improvement. Quality systems can also provide the users of services with valuable information to help them make choices between local services, a particularly relevant function in a sector that is often characterised by a “market approach” with a heavy reliance on private providers (often a mix of both “for-profit” and “not-for-profit” providers) rather than state-run provision.

Quality policies and practices also vary according to the extent to which they address either or both of two distinct dimensions of quality in ECEC services, structural quality and process quality. 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”. That includes more educational aspects of provision, including how the curricular approaches and pedagogy adopted by the setting is applied in practice.

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. The complex nature of quality in ECEC requires multi-faceted policy solutions. The review looks at 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.

As part of the *Quality beyond Regulations* policy review, two countries, Ireland and Luxembourg, asked the OECD to develop a country-specific policy review focusing on the quality of ECEC. The overarching objective of the country reviews was to provide policy recommendations to strengthen the performance of national ECEC systems in line with national policy goals. Building on the five policy levers of the *Quality beyond Regulations* policy framework, the country reviews put a specific emphasis on aspects relevant to each country. Interestingly, both countries chose to focus on the same two policy levers: 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 were included as a cross-cutting dimension.

The scope of the review of Ireland focused on ECEC serving children between 0 and 6 years old. While the review's focus was on regulated ISCED 0 settings, it also discussed 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 were also considered where applicable, in particular, when relevant for supporting transitions across the two levels.

The country review of Luxembourg analysed the national ECEC system, particularly the non-formal sector. Non-formal education in Luxembourg encompasses ECEC for young children who are not yet enrolled in the formal education system that starts at age 3 or 4, as well as education and care for school-age children provided outside of school hours (e.g. before or after-school care).

The reviews for Ireland and Luxembourg took place at a time when both countries were pursuing important reforms. Ireland is pursuing a strong policy agenda by adopting a long-term Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families covering the period 2019 to 2028 (referred to as “First 5”). With this strategy, the country has committed itself to improving the 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. In recent years, the priority in Luxembourg has focused on non-formal education. Key to the reforms has been boosting public investment and improving governance and co-ordination across key institutions that oversee formal and non-formal education. The government now continues adjustments to the system and wants to strengthen the professional development of the non-formal sector workforce.

This Policy Brief draws on the respective thematic chapters on quality assurance and improvement from the Ireland and Luxembourg country review reports, as well as on available literature and data. It discusses the various approaches to and characteristics of quality assurance and improvement in Ireland, Luxembourg and selected OECD countries. Looking across the country-specific reviews for Ireland and Luxembourg suggests that there are opportunities for peer learning across the two countries but also more generally for other countries to learn about policy considerations for building strong quality assurance systems for ECEC.

## Policy considerations and policy pointers

### Develop comprehensive and coherent quality arrangements

- Build up full coverage of the sector by adopting a common approach.
- Ensure the quality systems for ECEC and for schools work together to promote a smooth transition to primary education.
- Build in a strong focus on process quality.
- Rationalise and streamline quality arrangements as they grow and develop.

### Ensure clear and coherent roles for bodies with key responsibilities

- Ensure close collaboration between central agencies with inspection or monitoring roles.
- Consider rationalising and streamlining the range of agencies involved as the system grows.
- Ensure monitoring agencies have the right blend of staff expertise necessary for their role/s.

### Establish a shared understanding of quality standards

- Ensure all stakeholders involved in the quality system have easy access to a coherent suite of quality guidance and standards.
- Rationalise and streamline guidance where possible.
- Ensure monitoring methods used are appropriate for process as well as structural quality.

### Promote self-evaluation and a culture of continuous improvement

- Use policy levers to promote self-evaluation amongst providers.

- Provide guidance and support for providers on building effective self-evaluation processes.
- Include results of self-evaluation processes when reporting on the quality of settings.

#### **Align incentives to reward high quality**

- Ensure robust and timely consequences when settings fail to meet fundamental requirements.
- Develop strong positive incentives for providers to strive towards higher quality standards, especially with regard to process quality.
- Publish transparent evaluations of structural and process quality from monitoring and inspection activities.

#### **Ensure effective support for providers**

- Invest in ensuring that sources of good quality external support are available system-wide.
- Include scope to provide for different levels of support, depending on need.
- Ensure clarity about the roles of external agents regarding support and accountability functions.
- Encourage monitoring agencies to distil knowledge they gain from their activities and spread it across the system.

#### **Optimise the use of data to improve quality**

- Review data sources to provide balanced and comprehensive coverage of key areas.
- Integrate analysis of data and evidence to provide a holistic evaluation at a whole-system level.
- Ensure effective data sharing between quality agencies at the individual service level.

#### **Engage service users in the quality system**

- Develop mechanisms to ensure the voices of parents and children are brought into national quality discussions and debate.
- Ensure the views of parents and children inform service-level inspection activities.
- Make the findings of inspection and monitoring activities transparent to service users.

This paper will now explore eight key issues policy makers might consider in developing policies and arrangements for promoting quality in their own ECEC sector.

### **Policy consideration 1: Develop comprehensive and coherent quality systems for the whole ECEC sector**

The evidence on the positive benefits of good quality provision clearly indicates that promoting children's development and welfare across the whole ECEC age range is important. Policy makers should therefore have an interest in promoting quality across all types of provision in the sector. Especially with regard to countering the impact of socio-economic disadvantage, the earlier children have access to good quality ECEC, the better the chances of preventing a developmental deficit from building up in the early years.

As governments have developed policies in response to this growing body of evidence, they have tended to develop quality arrangements incrementally, introducing a series of enhancements to extend their scope to an increasingly broad range of provision. Typically, this starts with early years provision attached to primary schools, usually optional provision for children in the immediate year or two prior to entering formal schooling (commonly around the 3-5 year-old age range). Adapted versions of the quality arrangements in place for schools would typically be applied to these settings. Next in line have usually been the

development of arrangements for the registration and inspection of a wider range of independent, centre-based provision for 3-5 year-olds, especially as governments have directed significant public funding to subsidise access to these settings. Thereafter, further extension of quality arrangements to provide comprehensive coverage of the sector tends to involve extending arrangements into centre-based provision for children under the age of three and into arrangements designed to bring home-based provision (childminders) into the quality system. In Luxembourg, the scope of the regulation and quality assurance arrangements that apply to young children before compulsory school age (4 years old) also extends to include provision for school-aged children during out-of-school hours, defined as “non-formal education”. In Ireland, school-age childcare is also in the scope of the regulatory framework.

As well as increasing the scope of quality policies and practices in terms of the different types of provision they include, countries have also incrementally increased the breadth of their focus, starting with a focus that was primarily on aspects of structural quality, then moving to a wider focus that increasingly seeks to address process quality dimensions in more depth as well. In practice, this means increasing attention to the educational, developmental and well-being components of ECEC provision, where the quality of process is key, as well as continuing to address its structural aspects. The extension of focus into looking more deeply at process quality aspects tends to start with school-based provision and subsidised centre-based provision for 3-5 year-olds, with further extension to younger children and home-based provision being introduced in subsequent stages.

The combined impact of these trends was seen in both the Ireland and Luxembourg reviews. Ireland’s arrangements involve coverage of structural and, more recently, a strengthened focus on process quality in centre-based provision receiving public funds. Ireland’s government is now planning to bring centre-based provision for younger children and home-based provision into the quality system, focusing on both structural and process aspects. Luxembourg already has home-based provision as well as centre-based provision within the scope of its quality arrangements for structural quality. However, it has recently taken steps to increase the focus on process quality across the sector, especially in the non-formal education sector, which, until 2016, had no expectations placed on it in this regard.

A key risk that policy makers need to bear in mind as quality arrangements are extended over time is that they become too complex or inconsistent in the way that they operate over the sector. This can lead to excessive burdens on providers in engaging with the arrangements and confusion about expectations and standards.

The lack of a clear and coherent connection between quality arrangements for ECEC and those in place for other areas of education, particularly primary education, also presents a risk, particularly with regard to the evaluation of process quality. A smooth transition from ECEC provision to school provision can be impeded if the early years sector and the school sectors operate on very different understandings of the characteristics of high-quality early learning experiences and pedagogy.

### ***Policy pointers***

- Establish quality arrangements that cover the full scope of different types of ECEC provision, including centre-based provision for younger children and home-based provision. Develop these arrangements in ways that are as consistent and coherent with each other as possible while ensuring they are appropriately adapted to the particular characteristics of different types of setting in their application. Luxembourg has adopted an exceptionally comprehensive approach in this regard and indeed recognises non-formal early years provision as part of a continuum of services for children from birth through to adolescents’ transitions into adulthood, guided and regulated by unifying curricular approach and quality strategy. Importantly, the curriculum framework for non-formal education recognises that children’s learning and development is actively occurring regardless of whether or not they are in a school-based formal education setting. The designation



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of “non-formal” for this sector distinguishes it from formal education and informal learning. It is rooted in a social pedagogical approach and guided by clear goals around children’s learning to support their overall educational needs and foster their individual interests.

- Ensure that the quality arrangements for ECEC connect coherently with those for other levels of education, particularly primary education, and promote a smooth transition for children. Ireland, for example, was consulting actively on updating its curricular guidance for the ECEC sector while also simultaneously reviewing its primary curriculum, creating opportunities for strengthening the alignment between them. In Luxembourg, the curriculum for non-formal and formal education (which includes the formal pre-school stage) are designed to be complementary and share key principles, including principles about transitions between stages of education.
- Design quality arrangements to include a strong focus on process quality as well as structural quality in ways that are appropriate to the type of setting involved and the age of the children concerned.
- As quality arrangements are enhanced and extended, place a strong focus on rationalising and streamlining new arrangements with existing ones wherever possible to prevent over-complexity or inconsistency emerging.

### Policy consideration 2: Ensure clear and coherent roles for bodies with key responsibilities for implementing the quality system

This risk of complexity and inconsistency arising in quality assurance arrangements is particularly high in the ECEC sector because the scope and focus of quality arrangements have often shifted over time and led to the involvement of multiple external agencies.

For example, as was the case in both Ireland and Luxembourg, registration and inspection arrangements may initially have been introduced to the ECEC sector by specialist agencies with expertise in child health and early development, focusing primarily on assessing aspects of structural quality and care. As the desire to look at process quality in more depth has developed, a second set of external review arrangements has often then been introduced, with responsibility for their implementation allocated to a different agency with educational and pedagogical expertise (often an existing education-focused inspectorate), whose staff have the professional background to evaluate these aspects in greater depth.

A split in responsibilities for different aspects of the quality assurance process in the ECEC sector of this sort is common internationally, often with these agencies also reporting to different departments or ministries within government.

This creates challenges with regard to avoiding complexity and inconsistency and ensuring that an excessive burden is not placed on providers. The likelihood of over-complexity or confusion in quality arrangements having an adverse impact is high in this sector because of the wide variability in the size and governance of providers. In particular, there is often a large number of small providers operating independently with limited resources. They will be particularly poorly placed to cope with the demands of over-complex or poorly co-ordinated quality systems.

#### ***Policy pointers***

- If responsibilities for implementing the quality system are split across multiple agencies, ensure that their roles are clearly defined and complementary in nature and that strong arrangements are in place to ensure co-ordination between them. In both Ireland and Luxembourg, for example, the relevant ministries have established co-ordination committees, bringing together the different agencies involved in quality assurance as mechanisms to promote co-ordination. In both cases,

however, there was recognition that stronger co-ordination mechanisms needed to be developed. Close collaboration and integration of activities across the agencies should be the aim.

- As quality arrangements are enhanced in scope and scale, consider the potential for simplifying the institutional architecture, including bringing together functions under one body that were previously undertaken by separate institutions. In England (United Kingdom), for example, all registration and inspection functions were brought together and located within a reformed education and children's services inspectorate. In cases where responsibility for inspection is split across more than one agency, arranging for them to report directly to the same government ministry may be advantageous, as was the case in Luxembourg, rather than having split ministerial responsibilities for oversight.
- Whatever the institutional arrangements, ensure that the bodies carrying out inspection functions, either individually or in combination, have the blend of staff expertise and experience necessary to evaluate process quality effectively as well as the structural aspects of settings. This requires strong workforce strategies for the inspection agencies, which enable them to recruit individuals with a strong track record as practitioners and leaders of high-quality provision in the sector. It also means that inspectorates need to invest strongly in training and professional development for their staff to ensure that new recruits are fully prepared for the role and that all inspectors continue to keep up to date with current professional thinking.

### Policy consideration 3: Establish a clear shared understanding of quality standards across the sector

Alongside ensuring that the work of different agencies and processes involved in the quality system are as well co-ordinated as possible, it is also important that service providers are clear about the expectations placed on them. System-wide quality is unlikely to be achieved where such clarity is not present. Clarity about expectations is also important to ensure consistency within and between external evaluators in the judgments they make and to allow users of services and the public to understand what providers are being assessed against.

The frameworks and resources that set out expectations need to address both the structural and process aspects of quality. That commonly results in sets of published quality standards and indicators and core reference documents, such as curriculum guidelines.

Where multiple agencies are involved in promoting quality, each body will tend to generate its own frameworks of criteria for assessing aspects of quality and/or compliance, depending on their particular area of interest. Often these will have been developed independently at different points in time, creating a risk of them appearing complex or disjointed to service users or, at worst, becoming inconsistent in areas of overlap. Continuing attention needs to be given to ensure that guidance develops synchronously and that a unified and coherent set of quality documentation is readily accessible and consistently deployed across the system.

It is also important that the methods used by inspectors to monitor or inspect against different aspects of the quality framework are fit for purpose. For example, while structural quality aspects may be appropriately assessed by examining records, policies and curriculum documents and through interviews with managers and staff, assessing process quality requires seeing how well those policies are translated into practice. Both Ireland and Luxembourg have strong curriculum frameworks that are progressive and based soundly on well-researched, play-based pedagogies. However, both countries have experienced major challenges as they have sought to ensure that these ambitious curricular frameworks, and the pedagogical approaches required to deliver them, are applied in practice consistently on the ground. The delivery of process quality does not necessarily follow on automatically from the development of good structural

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documents. With that in mind, Ireland strengthened curricular supports in both initial qualifications and continuing professional development (including through mentoring and coaching), and also established an education-focused inspection programme, which includes direct observation of practice by inspectors with appropriate pedagogical expertise. Similarly, the Luxembourg team of education-focused regional officers, who were created in 2017 to strengthen monitoring and support for the development of process quality, are now planning to engage more systematically in discussions with staff members (and not only with leaders) and including more direct observation of practice is under consideration for the future.

### ***Policy pointers***

- Publish and promote a national “core set” of documents to provide the key reference points for quality development in the sector. Make sure this presents a unified or closely aligned set of guidance documents that includes balanced attention to both structural and process aspects of quality. It should set out the fundamental requirements for being registered to operate in the sector but should also go beyond compliance, particularly in areas of process quality, to encourage users to strive towards increasing levels of excellence in practice.
- Where multiple documents have developed over time covering different aspects, consider rationalising these into a streamlined “family” of resources. In Ireland, for example, good steps had been taken to ensure that a number of documents addressing different aspects of quality were in place. These included a strong curriculum framework, user-focused guidance on quality development and two more specific quality frameworks produced by the regulatory inspectorate and by the education inspectorate. While all of these documents contained valuable content and guidance in their own right, there was scope for rationalising these into more unified packages. Luxembourg also has a strong, research-based curriculum framework and has recently developed a new set of indicators for assessing process quality.
- Ensure that the methods employed to evaluate provision against the quality standards are fit for purpose. In particular, ensure that the monitoring of process quality includes a strong element of directly observing practice.

### **Policy consideration 4: Promote self-evaluation and a culture of continuous improvement across the sector**

It is widely accepted in many areas of public sector service delivery that the best way to embed high quality in a sector is to ensure that a strong commitment to quality development is “built-in” at the point of service delivery, rather than relying solely on “top-down” mechanisms of regulation, compliance and inspection. This is reflected clearly in the increasing emphasis placed internationally on developing self-evaluation and improvement planning in education systems (OECD, 2013<sup>[5]</sup>; European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>).

This principle applies in the ECEC sector, as in others. However, the development of self-evaluation and improvement planning is generally at an earlier stage in the ECEC sector, reflecting the relatively recent growth of system-wide quality arrangements and the variability in the size, nature and governance arrangements for provision.

Ensuring that providers have easy access to a coherent package of quality indicators and reference materials, as described in the previous section, is an important starting point. However, national policies also need to support providers to build them into a systematic process of evaluating and improving their own provision. The aim should be to build a stronger culture of continuous improvement across the ECEC sector, with a focus on improving both process and structure quality.



Getting to a position in which all providers are engaged in self-evaluation and improvement planning as a routine part of their management can also help free up inspectorates to deploy their limited resources more strategically. Provided self-evaluation processes are robust, inspectorates can potentially use the results of self-evaluation processes, along with other evidence, to target where and when they inspect more efficiently, supporting a shift towards “risk-based” programming of monitoring and inspection activity. This can help address the challenge faced by both Luxembourg and Ireland of monitoring a very large field of providers with a relatively limited number of inspectors.

### ***Policy pointers***

- Consider how to use available policy levers to promote greater attention to self-evaluation and improvement planning arrangements in the sector. In Luxembourg, for example, self-evaluation is a mandatory requirement for centres receiving funding through their national subsidy scheme.
- Develop and promote practical self-evaluation guidance for ECEC leaders and staff, which provides advice on how they can establish a regular cycle of evaluation and improvement of their own provision and practices, with direct reference to national quality indicators. In Luxembourg, providers of non-formal education are required to keep a running record of their practice in a logbook, and a handbook and a set of recently developed quality indicators aim to guide self-evaluation. In Scotland (United Kingdom), both the Care Inspectorate and the education inspectorate (Education Scotland) publish widely-used self-evaluation handbooks for providers, accompanied by a range of web-based advice, resources and practice exemplars designed to support the self-evaluation process (Care Inspectorate, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>; Education Scotland, 2016<sup>[8]</sup>). In Finland, where the government relies on regional bodies and municipalities to quality assure ECEC provision in their areas, it has placed a statutory duty on providers to self-evaluate and has provided training and tools through its national quality agency, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre.
- Ensure that inspections explicitly evaluate settings’ arrangements for self-evaluation and their outcomes and that inspection reports give due credit where effective systems are in place. In Ireland, the education-focused inspections consider self-evaluation as an aspect of leadership and management of the centre. Luxembourg is planning to consider self-evaluation outcomes as part of its external review process. In Scotland and Wales (United Kingdom), reporting on providers’ self-evaluation and improvement arrangements is a well-established component of their publicly available education-focused inspection reports.

### **Policy consideration 5: Align incentives to reward high process quality**

For any quality system to successfully achieve its aims, incentives must point in the right direction. Providers should be rewarded for doing the right things and not encouraged to focus their attention on issues of marginal importance. Incentives include both positive incentives or rewards for good performance and negative incentives or sanctions for falling below expected standards or requirements.

In many countries, the requirement for ECEC providers to achieve statutory registration to operate provides a strong incentive for providers to meet fundamental requirements, primarily in terms of structural quality aspects. Failure to continue to meet these requirements, as evidenced by inspections or other evidence, can trigger sanctions such as statutory “notices to improve” and ultimately lead to loss of registration. This is a powerful incentive, provided the process leading to potential de-registration is credible and robust. Transparency in the process is also important as public/user awareness of the concerns tends to increase the scale and urgency of the provider’s response.

Many countries have also then raised the bar higher by setting more stringent requirements for providers who wish to benefit from major public funding schemes. While technically optional, most providers are

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typically very keen to participate in these schemes. In Luxembourg, for example, since 2017, the quality assurance system in non-formal education is now linked to the ECEC subsidy scheme. Settings that wish to participate in the subsidy scheme must meet a number of conditions. These include implementing the national curriculum framework and the multilingual education programme, meeting continuous professional development requirements and accepting regular external evaluations.

Ireland has been using the incentive of access to public funding schemes to increase qualification levels, a key plank of its strategy to improve quality. In addition, initial planned features of the new Irish funding model, as revealed with the announcement on the budget for 2022, will include financial support for services to meet new requirements for improved working conditions, with unchanged parental fees. In order to ensure that increased investments do indeed lead to better quality, monitoring and inspection arrangements need to be strengthened to set incentives for quality improvement, as discussed below.

Fiscal incentives can also be used in other ways. In Singapore, for example, ECEC centres can access additional government subsidies, beyond standard public funding levels, by opting in to its Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK). This involves heightened levels of monitoring and support for the development of quality, particularly process quality, in the centre and can result in the award of a “quality certificate” (Bull and Bautista, 2018<sup>[9]</sup>).

Incentivising providers to strive for higher levels of quality requires an approach based more heavily on positive incentives. This is particularly relevant to incentivising higher levels of process quality in ways that will encourage providers to strive to levels of excellence well beyond minimum satisfactory standards. Quality systems can provide such incentives by making sure inspections evaluate and report on process quality and do so in a way that explicitly recognises levels of quality that stretch beyond basic or adequate levels through to excellent or sector-leading practice.

Public transparency is important if such incentives are to be fully effective. Where evaluations are transparent, peer pressure and pressure from the users of services will serve to strengthen the provider’s own motivation to reach the highest levels of quality in their provision. This can be especially significant in a sector that often heavily relies on parents/carers making choices amongst a “market” of independent providers that includes private “for-profit” providers. In making their choices, it is clearly desirable that parents and carers should have access to independent information about the process quality being offered as well as information about compliance with regulatory requirements. The knowledge that such evaluations are influencing parental choices creates the right sort of positive incentives for providers to invest in process quality improvement.

Of course, there are real challenges for policy makers in striking the right balance across different types of incentives. For example, in Ireland and Luxembourg, both of which rely heavily on private providers, there could be risks in setting the bar for registration or participation in public funding schemes too high, as doing so might discourage new providers from entering the market and regulatory requirements are critical to ensure minimum standards. A sufficient number of providers is needed in both cases, although it is vital that satisfactory quality standards are met. On the other hand, it is vital that major public investment is used to leverage steady improvements in both structural and process quality across the sector as effectively as possible.

### ***Policy pointers***

- Communicate clearly and transparently the quality standards that providers need to achieve and maintain registration and establish robust arrangements involving progressively strengthening levels of sanctions, which ensure that swift and decisive remedial action is taken by providers in serious breach of statutory requirements.
- Ensure that process quality evaluations, as well as structural quality evaluations, are explicitly reported in inspection reports of services and that they are reported in ways that make clear the

extent to which they are exceeding basic or satisfactory levels. Doing this well requires inspections staffed by experienced early-year practitioners and inspection processes that go beyond inspecting documentation to spending significant time directly observing practice in settings.

- Make the results of inspections and regulatory activities transparent by making them easily accessible to parents/carers in accessible formats. In Wales and in Scotland, where both a care regulator and an education inspectorate have responsibilities for reporting on ECEC provision, inspection reports from both bodies are provided on their websites, including evaluative gradings on a quality scale, addressing both structural and process quality aspects. In Scotland, where both bodies have recently inspected the same service, a single report is published bringing together evaluations from both bodies in one place.

### Policy consideration 6: Ensure the availability of effective sources of improvement support for providers

As countries seek to build a culture of continuous quality improvement across their ECEC sectors, it is important that providers have access to support services that can give them practical support and guidance in their improvement efforts. These kinds of services can serve at least two distinct functions. One is a specific role in helping individual providers and their staff respond effectively to improvement needs identified by inspections. A second, broader function, beyond responding to inspections, is providing settings with ongoing guidance and advice on developing and implementing self-evaluation and improvement strategies. This helps providers benchmark their own provision, seek out new ideas for developing their practice and access training, feedback and advice as they implement changes. It can also promote positive collaboration between providers.

While larger provider organisations that operate a number of settings may have some internal capacity to provide support to the centres they run, the patchwork nature of many ECEC systems, with a mix of public and private provision and sometimes a large proportion of small independent providers, often means that many ECEC providers do not have obvious internal sources of support.

This improvement support role is a distinct role from that served by inspection. While there is a positive trend towards inspection teams building a strong element of professional dialogue into their practice, and inspectorates can play an important role in spreading knowledge about effective practice across the system (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Staring, F., Maxwell, B., 2018<sup>[10]</sup>), it is important that the independence of inspectors' evaluations are not compromised by being too closely involved in the ongoing management of the setting's development. While inspectors can certainly help point providers in the right direction on their occasional visits, practitioners need access to more regular, ongoing sources of support if they are to drive their own continuous improvement and not just see quality development as a matter of responding to occasional external inspections.

In 2017, Luxembourg established a team of 32 regional officers to provide this kind of external improvement support for ECEC providers in the non-formal sector, with each officer providing support for around 40 providers. This team of officers was established within the National Youth Service (*Service National de Jeunesse, SNJ*). It was created with the aim of complementing the role of the team of inspectors that already existed separately in the Department for Children, and whose role was primarily focused on monitoring and ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements. Steps are now being taken to make the distinction clearer between the roles and functions of the SNJ officers, focused primarily on improvement support, and the Department for Children inspectors, whose functions focus primarily on compliance and control, as some ambiguities had arisen around areas of overlap, particularly where the remit of SNJ officers involved checking compliance with regulations. The SNJ officers are being released

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from some of these regulatory compliance duties to help focus their role more purely on process quality improvement support.

Ireland has built up a network of different sources of improvement support, including a specialist central team providing expert support to nationally-funded centres, a system-wide network of local teams attached to 30 “county-level” organisations and advice from some national organisations. The Irish government is currently in the process of reviewing this infrastructure of support bodies with a view to creating a structure that is easier to navigate and is more consistently available.

### ***Policy pointers***

- Ensure ECEC settings across the whole system have consistent access to good quality external support to advise them as they plan and implement improvements.
- Establish a spectrum of different levels of support, ranging from the general availability of development support that assists settings as they seek to take forward aspects of their own continuous improvement through to more intensive and targeted support designed to ensure that settings that are at risk of serious failure address their weaknesses urgently.
- Ensure that there is clarity about the distinct roles of inspectors and of teams providing ongoing support for providers, while also ensuring that communication and co-operation between them are strong, with both working to ensure they complement each other’s work effectively.
- Develop effective ways of capturing the knowledge gained by inspectorates about the interesting and effective practice they have seen, making it widely accessible to support providers in their local improvement efforts.

### **Policy consideration 7: Optimise the use of data in the quality system**

Arrangements for the gathering and analysis of data and evidence from across the sector are playing an increasing role in the development of quality assurance approaches in education more generally (OECD, 2013<sup>[5]</sup>), and the important role they can play in the ECEC sector has been specifically highlighted (OECD, 2018<sup>[11]</sup>). Recent research has also identified the effective use of data to drive improvement as a key building block in a study of six high-quality ECEC systems (Kagan et al., 2019<sup>[12]</sup>). These systems (Australia, Hong Kong [China], England, Finland, Korea and Singapore) systematically gather and analyse data on their ECEC provision, using it to understand strengths and weaknesses in the system, informing future policy and providing evidence for the evaluation of policy impacts, innovations and changes in strategy.

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 based on more qualitative professional judgments, 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 that 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, and providing strategic insights into key issues such as how equitably the system is delivering quality for all children, including those from more vulnerable backgrounds. Ensuring that investment in high-quality ECEC promotes greater equity is a key strategic consideration for both Ireland and Luxembourg, as it is for many, if not most, countries worldwide. In Luxembourg, efforts are made to link data collected from registration processes, structural quality monitoring and process quality monitoring results to guide policies such as the provision of continuous professional development.

In addition to the important role that good management of data and evidence can play at the system level, it can also be important in supporting quality assurance at the level of the individual provider. It is important to have reliable information available to assist inspectorates to plan inspections and inform evaluations. As inspectorates introduce more proportionate inspection programmes that take account of a “risk assessment” of individual providers, as happens in Ireland and planned in Luxembourg, for example, the need for good ongoing intelligence upon which to base these risk assessments is increased.

Where multiple bodies are involved in inspection and monitoring activities, there are clear challenges in ensuring data and evidence are shared appropriately between the relevant agencies and can therefore be used to best effect. While care needs to be taken to ensure data are shared in ways that are consistent with good data protection practice, care should be taken to ensure that inappropriately restrictive practices do not create obstacles to beneficial data exchange.

### **Policy pointers**

- Review the range of data and evidence gathered from across the ECEC sector and consider enhancing or otherwise altering it to provide a comprehensive source of evidence on key aspects of the system, including both structural and process quality aspects.
- Ensure effective arrangements are in place for the appropriate sharing of data gathered or generated by different bodies with roles in the quality system with a view to enabling data and evidence to be brought together easily to provide this comprehensive view at the national level.
- Ensure appropriate and effective data and intelligence sharing is also in place at the individual setting level so that, where there is more than one body responsible for monitoring or inspecting an individual setting, relevant intelligence acquired by any one body is shared with the others, while complying with data protection requirements.

### **Policy consideration 8: Engage service users in the quality process**

The OECD’s *Starting Strong VI* report identifies family and community engagement as one of five key quality targets that can be leveraged for better child development in the ECEC sector (OECD, 2021<sup>[11]</sup>).

As in any area of public services, when reviewing and developing policy for the system as a whole, service users’ views and experiences of the services they currently receive should be a key factor. Countries may need to invest in actively supporting the growth of organisations that can represent the views of ECEC parents in system-level consultations, as such bodies tend to be less well developed than in other sectors.

The views of parents and children should also provide a valuable source of evidence for the process of monitoring and inspecting individual settings. At a minimum level, most systems do seek to ensure any complaints made to central authorities are taken into account by inspectorates, at least as intelligence to inform future inspections. In some systems, they can trigger a direct investigation by inspectors. Engaging parents and children more systematically in routine ECEC inspection processes presents particular challenges, however, given the relatively brief and sometimes unannounced nature of inspections and monitoring visits and the young age range of the children concerned. As a result, effective arrangements are still at a relatively early stage of development in many systems. In Ireland, both of the inspectorates were in the process of actively exploring appropriate methods they could adopt. Methodologies for engaging parents and children in inspections should also be capable of being readily adapted for use by providers as they undertake their own self-evaluation.

Ensuring that the results of monitoring and inspection processes are transparent to parents presents another route through which their influence can be engaged positively in the quality system. This is especially relevant in the ECEC context, where parents are often choosing between a number of local



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providers. Giving parents access to trusted evaluations of the quality of local providers, especially when that includes a strong focus on process quality, helps to create a positive pressure for quality development in the sector as parents make choices and compare the quality of the provider they choose with the quality being provided elsewhere.

### ***Policy pointers***

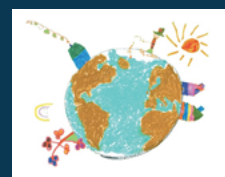
- Develop arrangements to access the views of parents and the perspectives of children, incorporating them into policy-making processes at a whole-system level. Consider how to promote the growth of national representative bodies that can articulate the parental voice. Luxembourg, for example, has plans to introduce a new mandatory parent council at the national level for non-formal education, covering provision at all ages, with a view to creating a mechanism for strengthening the parent voice in national consultations and debate.
- Develop mechanisms for bringing the views of parents and children into inspections and encourage the use of similar approaches in self-evaluation. Interviews or focus groups offer one approach used by a number of inspectorates. Standardised questionnaires for parents have also been developed in countries like Montenegro and Scotland, for example, and others, including Norway, Estonia and Croatia, provide questionnaires for providers to use themselves. Consider having inspections report explicitly on how well providers engage with parents and how well they ensure that children’s voices are taken into account, as is done in Wales.
- Make the findings of inspections transparent to parents and carers by publishing them in an easily accessible format, including clear evaluations of both process and structure quality, and placing them in a location where parents can easily find them. Consider developing a “parent portal” on the Internet as a way to promote easy access to all the relevant information in one place.

### **The bottom line:**

A diverse range of policies and practices are needed to promote quality assurance and improvement in early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision. These policies and practices need to be comprehensive, cover both structural and process aspects of quality and rely on strong institutions and data systems. They can satisfy the need for public accountability while also providing feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of individual services and the sector as a whole in order to inform further actions for improvement. Quality assurance and improvement policies are particularly important in the ECEC sector, which is often characterised by a “market approach” with a heavy reliance on private providers.

## Starting Strong thematic reviews

OECD Starting Strong thematic reviews identify key elements of successful early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies in OECD countries and partner economies. The reviews offer an international perspective on ECEC systems, discuss the strengths and opportunities of different approaches and provide policy orientations that help promote equitable access to high-quality ECEC.



### For more information

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See: [OECD Early Childhood Education and Care](#)

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