

1. Introduction

This document provides an overview and update on the activities of the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) and the Childcare Directorate of the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) in relation to the continued development of *Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. It addresses the following issues;

- Development of *Siolta* materials and resources.
- Development of the *Siolta* Quality Assurance Programme.
- Roles and responsibilities of agencies and organisation in relation to the development of *Siolta*.
- Brief overview of developments in related policy areas.

2. *Siolta* materials and resources

It should be noted that *Siolta* is a registered trademark. The Early Years Education Policy Unit retains editorial control over the use of the *Siolta* trademark in any publication.

A range of documentation has already been produced to support the implementation of *Siolta* and this consists of:

- *Siolta* User Manuals for the following settings: Full and Part-time Daycare, Sessional Services, Childminding, Infant Classes.
- *Siolta* workshop materials including Facilitators Guide, PowerPoint presentation template and Research Digests for each *Siolta* Standard.
- *Siolta* Implementation Toolkit including Baseline Assessment Tool and User Guide, Portfolio Building Guide, *Siolta* Coordinator Manual.

2.1 *Siolta* Manuals

Siolta manuals for the four identified setting types are being updated and reprinted as required. The update retains all of the *Siolta* Standards and Components but removes out of date references and contact details. To date, manuals for Sessional

Services and Full and Part-time daycare have been completed and the new editions are available from the Government Publications Office, Molesworth St, Dublin 2 at a cost of €5 per manual. A re-print of the manual for the Childminding setting is subject to demand. The first edition of the Infant Class manual is still available by contacting Kieran_Ormond@education.gov.ie

2.2 *Siolta* Workshop Materials

These materials were developed to facilitate the delivery of introductory information workshops on *Siolta*. The original version of these materials is now out of print. These materials will be reviewed and updated as necessary.

2.3 *Siolta* Quality Assurance Programme Implementation Toolkit

The materials in the Toolkit were developed to support the work of *Siolta* Coordinators working with preschool services on the *Siolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP). These materials and processes are currently being field tested and as part of that process the Toolkit is also being reviewed and revised. It is anticipated that upon completion of the 'testing' phase of implementation of the *Siolta* QAP, a full suite of updated manuals and associated resources will be published.

3. Development of *Síolta* based activity in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Sector

With the publication of *Síolta* in 2006, two types of activity were developed, originally by the CECDE¹, to support service providers to use the *Síolta* materials in practice settings. These are:

- *Síolta* information workshops – designed to introduce the *Síolta* Principles, Standards and Components of Quality and their relevance to practice in ECCE settings.
- *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) – designed to provide structured, supported engagement for ECCE services who wish to seek external assessment of their service provision/practice against the *Síolta* Standards and Components of Quality.

3.1 *Síolta* information workshops

A set of workshop materials (see 2.2) were designed to ensure that support organisations could hold information sessions or workshops on the Principles, Standards and Components of *Síolta*. A research digest was developed for each *Síolta* Standard to facilitate these workshops and promote consistent messaging irrespective of how the workshop was being delivered. To date, organisations such as the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), education and training institutions, Voluntary Childcare Organisations (VCOs) and other community, voluntary and private organisations have availed of these materials and have provided these information sessions to ECCE service providers. This has been a valuable support to the introduction of the Free Preschool Year as services contracted to deliver this scheme are obliged to ‘...adhere to the Principles of *Síolta*...’ in delivery of their programmes. It is welcome that so many support agencies have used the *Síolta* workshop materials as the foundation for a range of quality improvement activities. Such activity has, we hope, begun to help practitioners use *Síolta* in their everyday work to the benefit of children and their families. *Síolta* provides clear nationally agreed guidance on all areas of ECCE service

delivery and the commitment demonstrated by support agencies and service providers to becoming familiar with *Síolta* is a very positive indicator of quality improvement. It is important to note, however, that attendance at *Síolta* information workshops is not compulsory for services delivering the Free Preschool Year scheme nor does attendance result in any national recognition either for the service or the staff in the service. Whether a participant attends one workshop on a *Síolta* Standard or workshops on all 16 of the *Síolta* Standards, this level of engagement with *Síolta*, while very worthwhile, is at the informal level. This is not to discourage services from attending *Síolta* information workshops; undoubtedly, services who are investing in the quality of their practice by engaging in professional development activities will be demonstrating their continuing commitment to delivering a quality service to children and families.

3.2 *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme

The *Síolta* QAP is a twelve step process whereby an ECCE setting will carry out a range of activities including; baseline self assessment, action planning and quality development work, evidence collection and portfolio building. The setting will be supported in this activity by an experienced, qualified mentor (*Síolta* Coordinator) who has been trained to guide the setting through each step of the QAP. At the conclusion of these activities, the ECCE setting will submit the completed *Síolta* portfolio for external validation. In order to field test the *Síolta* QAP, an implementation model was developed in 2008 which involved selecting and training *Síolta* Coordinators and then recruiting a diverse range of ECCE settings to complete the 12 steps of the *Síolta* QAP. Since 2008, a number of organisations have been working with a range of ECCE settings using the implementation model. These organisations include the Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes in Darndale (Preparing for Life), Ballymun (youngballymun) and Tallaght (West Tallaght Child Development Initiative), the Voluntary Childcare Organisations² and The Daughters of Charity. A list of geographical locations of these services can be seen at Figure 1.

¹ The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) closed in November 2008.

² These Voluntary Childcare Organisations are Barnardos, the Border Counties Childcare Network, Childminding Ireland, Irish Steiner Waldorf Kindergarten Association, the National Children’s Nursery Association and the Irish Pre-school Play Association.

Figure 1

County	No of services engaging formally with <i>Síolta</i> QAP
Clare	6
Cork City	4
Cork County	8
Donegal	7
Dublin (City)	12
Dublin (DLR)	7
Dublin (Fingal)	8
Dublin (South)	24
Galway	2
Kildare	7
Kilkenny	4
Limerick	4
Louth	1
Mayo	1
Monaghan	2
Offaly	1
Roscommon	9
Tipperary	1
Waterford City	5
Waterford County	9
Westmeath	7
Wexford	1
Wicklow	2
Not specified	3
Total	135

Recruitment of ECCE settings into the test phase of the *Síolta* QAP has now been completed and 25 *Síolta* Coordinators are working nationally with 135 ECCE services across the broad spectrum of service provision including sessional, full and part-time daycare, childminding and infant classes in schools. As this is a field test for the *Síolta* QAP, some of these services are working towards completion of a portfolio of quality across all 16 Standards and some are concentrating on a selected number of Standards. Once an ECCE setting is assigned to a *Síolta* Coordinator for mentoring through the *Síolta* QAP activities with a view to achieving external assessment and validation, that service is considered to be formally engaged with *Síolta*.

As the implementation model represents a brand new way of working across different organisations, the model needs to be evaluated to ensure that it's delivering on its objectives. A tender for evaluation of the *Síolta* QAP is at an advanced stage

of preparation. While dependent on budgetary constraints, it is expected that the tender will issue in early 2011 with the evaluation completed within a 12 month period.

As recruitment of ECCE services has taken place over the past two years, services are at various stages of the *Síolta* QAP. A tracking system was set up by the EYEPU to gather data on the progress of each ECCE service and also to identify the type, nature and volume of input required by the *Síolta* Coordinator. This tracking system is populated by data supplied by the Voluntary ChildCare Organisations.

4. Roles and responsibilities of agencies and organisation in relation to *Síolta*

With the rate of change in the sector, it may be helpful to briefly describe the different organisations and what their role is in the ECCE sector in supporting the implementation of *Síolta*.

As outlined in previous sections, activities associated with the implementation of *Síolta* can be described as relating to either quality improvement/professional development or to the field testing of the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme. The introduction in January 2010 of the Free Preschool Year obliged services contracted to deliver this scheme to '*...adhere to the Principles of Síolta...*' in delivery of their programmes. This undoubtedly has increased the demand for support from ECCE services in relation to quality improvement/professional development activities. The launch of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in October 2009 has also led to a demand for support to help practitioners understand and use its contents and to understand how *Aistear* supports *Síolta* implementation. *Síolta* focuses on all aspects of quality within ECCE settings including learning and development while *Aistear* explores in depth how adults can provide appropriately challenging, positive and enjoyable learning experiences for children from birth to six years.

4.1 Early Years Education Policy Unit (DES & OMCYA)

The EYEPU retains complete and final authority and responsibility in relation to the development and implementation of *Síolta* including editorial control over any use of the *Síolta* trademark,

development and publication of *Síolta* materials and implementation and evaluation of the *Síolta* QAP. The Unit is overseeing the implementation of *Síolta* by the VCOs and is providing a programme of Continuing Professional Development for *Síolta* Coordinators employed by the VCOs.

4.2 Child Care Directorate (OMCYA)

The Childcare Directorate is responsible for administering the National Childcare Investment Programme, the Free Preschool Year, the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) scheme and the Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) scheme. The Childcare Directorate provides funding for the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) and a number of Voluntary Childcare Organisations (VCOs) in return for their assistance in delivering their early years programmes. The Childcare Directorate is also responsible for the Child Care (Preschool Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006.

4.3 Pobal

Pobal assists the Childcare Directorate in implementing their early years programmes and overseeing the work of the CCCs and the VCOs. They undertake monitoring and compliance visits to ECCE services in receipt of State funding under the Free Preschool Year, CCS and CETS schemes. Pobal have also supported the CCCs and VCOs with preparation of their strategic plans for the period 2011 - 2013.

4.4 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

The NCCA's remit is to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary schools. The Council developed *Aistear* in partnership with the early childhood sector, and published the Framework online at www.ncca.ie/earlylearning in 2009. Since then, the NCCA has developed the online *Aistear* Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/aistear toolkit) which includes a range of resources to help practitioners become more familiar with the Framework and to see how it might be used in their work with children. These resources include information leaflets and tip sheets on play. Over time, the Toolkit will include examples of *Aistear*-in-action in different types of settings. These examples will include video clips, photographs and samples of children's 'work'. The

examples will also show how *Síolta* and *Aistear* can be used together to support high quality practice across all ECCE settings.

4.5 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs)

The CCCs' primary role is to assist the Childcare Directorate of the OMCYA to administer its early years programmes. This role includes processing applications from ECCE services, providing information and support towards application for funding schemes and monitoring compliance with funding scheme criteria. Additionally, CCCs also provide a range of resource information and support for services and parents including policy in relation to specific initiatives such as *Síolta* and *Aistear* and in regard to education and training.

4.6 Voluntary Childcare Organisations (VCOs) and their work with *Síolta*

The VCOs are a group of membership organisations who receive funding from the Childcare Directorate of the OMCYA to deliver on a range of activities associated with the development of quality in ECCE services. As part of this activity, a number of the VCOs have undertaken to assign staff from within their organisations, who are suitably qualified and experienced, to take on the role of *Síolta* Coordinator for the field testing phase of the *Síolta* QAP. These *Síolta* Coordinators are undertaking a programme of professional development specific to their role within the *Síolta* Implementation Model. Currently, each of these organisations has recruited and is supporting a range of ECCE services to participate in the implementation of *Síolta*.

5. Brief overview of developments in related policy areas

The development and implementation of *Síolta* is characterised as one of a number of 'pillars' of quality in the delivery of ECCE services in Ireland. The relationship between *Síolta* and these related areas is briefly explained below:

5.1 *Síolta* and Statutory Regulation

Síolta has been designed to promote and support compliance with statutory regulations applicable to all ECCE services. These ECCE services include infant classes in primary schools that are inspected as part of the Whole School Evaluation (WSE) process carried

out by the Department of Education and Skills. To dovetail *Síolta* with the Regulations set out in the Child Care (Preschool Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006, the associated Standards and with the WSE process, a mapping exercise will be undertaken as part of the development of the validation element of the *Síolta* QAP.

5.2 *Síolta* and *Aistear*

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework provides information, practical ideas, suggestions, and examples of how adults can support and nurture children's early learning and development. As part of ongoing collaborative work, the EYEPU and the NCCA co-organised a number of information seminars in 2010 on the two frameworks (*Síolta* and *Aistear*) for support organisations in the ECCE sector.

5.3 *Síolta* and Workforce Development

The EYEPU has a brief to develop a Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector. Since 2007, a range of research and consultation processes have been carried out in relation to the achievement of this brief. The Workforce Development Plan will be published this month and of specific relevance to the development and implementation of *Síolta* is the following recommendation:

The establishment of an agreed set of national standards for all awards in early childhood care and education (incorporating core knowledge, skills, competencies and work experience) across all relevant levels of the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland.

The Workforce Development Plan identified occupational profiles in the ECCE sector with associated levels of knowledge, skill and competency and mapped these across to award levels on the National Framework of Qualifications. In addition to providing clarity for the ECCE sector on professional pathways and related levels of qualifications, this activity highlighted the importance of using the national practice frameworks for ECCE, *Síolta* and *Aistear* as essential guidelines for the development of national award standards for education and training programmes. New award standards in Early Childhood Care and Education at Levels 4, 5 and 6 will be finalised early in 2011 and these award standards include the principles and goals of *Síolta* and *Aistear*.

6. Conclusion

The ECCE sector has been experiencing a challenging period of change since the announcement in April 2009 of direct State funding for a Free Preschool Year. *Síolta* has been embedded into this initiative with the requirement that participating preschool services deliver a programme which '*adheres to the Principles of Síolta*'.

Undoubtedly many services will require support to meet this obligation. And a collective effort from all organisations in a position to offer such support is welcome. However, participation in the Free Preschool Year scheme does not require participation in the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme nor does it require practitioners to attend workshops on any of the 16 *Síolta* Standards.

With CCCs, Voluntary Childcare Organisations, State agencies and Government Departments all working together within the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector, the challenge is to provide clear and consistent definitions on what we mean when we talk about *Síolta* implementation or about the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme.

We hope that this update will provide this clarity.

Early Years Education Policy Unit
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