

Introduction

This document provides an overview of the activities of the Early Years Education Policy Unit, Department of Education and Skills and the Childcare Directorate, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, in relation to Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. It specifically addresses the following:

- Overview of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP).
- Progress of the national field testing of the Síolta QAP.
- National evaluation of Síolta QAP.

In addition, it also provides a brief update on other areas of national policy that have the potential to impact on the development of quality in practice in early years settings, namely:

- Publication of Common Award Standards at Levels 4, 5 and 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications for courses in Early Childhood Care and Education.
- Qualification requirements for the universal pre-school provision scheme (the ECCE scheme).
- National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Since December 2008, the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills has been responsible for the implementation of Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Síolta was originally developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education at the request of the Department of Education and Skills. The main priority has been to develop a model of implementation for the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) and its associated materials and processes which would facilitate a programme of research to test their reliability and validity across all early years settings. In simple terms, the research would show whether Síolta supports the development of quality in practice regardless of the type of early years setting it is used in. In addition, this research would make recommendations about the most effective and efficient model of using Síolta to support early years practitioners to improve the quality of their practice and provision.

The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme

The Síolta QAP is a series of steps which an ECCE setting works through with the assistance of a trained Síolta Coordinator. In an earlier version of the Síolta QAP diagram, twelve steps were detailed, however this has now been rationalised to the following as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Síolta Quality Assurance Programme



Detailed information on completing each of these steps is provided to every ECCE setting once they embark on the Síolta QAP. The following gives a brief insight into each of the main activities:

- Baseline assessment – a specially designed self-assessment tool asks staff in early years settings to critically reflect on their practice against each of the 75 Components of Quality; write a short description of what they do and then rate themselves against a 4 point rating scale. Exemplars drawn from practice are provided as a guide.
- Action Planning – based on the outcome of their self-assessment, staff in the early years setting will develop a concrete plan of quality improvement work around each Component and Standard.
- Portfolio Building – This activity involves documenting the quality of practice in the early years setting. It includes; gathering evidence of practice related to each Síolta Component, reflecting on this evidence and selecting materials that best describe the level of quality practice in the setting.
- Portfolio Submission – Once the early years setting is happy that they have reached a point in their quality improvement journey whereby they are ready to seek external validation of their self-assessed ratings, they will submit their Quality Portfolio. This involves connecting the evidence to the written description in the self-assessment tool, organising the evidence in a logical sequence and putting it together into a portfolio/presentation.
- Validation – The final stage in the Síolta QAP is validation, where the internal self-assessed ratings and accompanying portfolio of evidence from an early years setting are reviewed by an external, expert validator. This review, combined with a validation visit to the early years setting, forms part of the validation process which is completed when a setting is issued with a validation certificate detailing the ratings they have achieved for each Síolta Standard.

In keeping with the development of all other elements of Síolta, the validation processes and tools were subjected to extensive research and consultation. This process was completed in May 2011 and will be part of the field test for the evaluation.

Implementation of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP)

In early 2009, an implementation model for the Síolta QAP was developed which involved working with a range of organisations that had the expertise and capacity to allocate a staff member to take on the role of the Síolta Coordinator and who were able to engage with and 'recruit' early years settings into the field test for the Síolta QAP. The following organisations are participating in the field test:

- Barnardos
- Border Counties Childcare Network
- Childminding Ireland
- CDI Tallaght
- Daughters of Charity
- Irish Pre-school Play Association¹
- Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association
- National Children's Nurseries Association²
- Preparing for Life, Darndale
- Youngballymun

A total of 25 Síolta Coordinators have been trained across all organisations. They, in turn, have recruited a diverse group of early years settings in urban and rural areas with the table below showing the location of these settings. A wide range of settings are involved including crèches, Pre-schools, playgroups, infant classes in primary schools, Early Start, HSE nurseries etc. These settings also represent a diverse range of curricular and pedagogical approaches including Steiner, Montessori, High/Scope, and the infant curriculum in primary schools. All early years settings volunteered to participate in the field test for the Síolta QAP on the understanding that it would be part of a developing process that would also be evaluated.

Table 1: Distribution of early years settings in the Síolta QAP Field Test.

| County | Number of services engaging formally with Síolta QAP |
|-----------|--|
| Carlow | 0 |
| Cavan | 0 |
| Clare | 6 |
| Cork | 13 |
| Donegal | 8 |
| Dublin | 54 |
| Galway | 2 |
| Kerry | 0 |
| Kildare | 7 |
| Kilkenny | 4 |
| Laois | 0 |
| Leitrim | 0 |
| Limerick | 4 |
| Longford | 0 |
| Louth | 1 |
| Mayo | 1 |
| Meath | 0 |
| Monaghan | 2 |
| Offaly | 1 |
| Roscommon | 9 |
| Sligo | 0 |
| Tipperary | 1 |
| Waterford | 15 |
| Westmeath | 6 |
| Wexford | 1 |
| Wicklow | 2 |
| Total | 137 |

Subsequent to the initiation of the Síolta field test, a number of other organisations and individual and groups of ECCE settings expressed interest in the implementation of the Síolta QAP. While this enthusiasm is very welcome, the expansion of the implementation model is dependent on the outcome of the evaluation process and it has been agreed not to expand implementation until then.

Development of the Síolta Coordinator's Role

The Síolta QAP has been designed to promote quality improvement in early years settings by encouraging the development of environments

¹ Irish Pre-school Play Association and National Children's Nurseries Association are merging to become Early Childhood Ireland in 2011.

² Ibid

which are characterised by:

- Democracy and respect
- Partnership (with children, staff, parents, families and community)
- Reflection in and on practice
- Creativity and research
- Documentation and planning.

The goal of the Síolta QAP is to foster the development of an organisational culture which empowers both the setting and the staff to take ownership of and drive quality improvement as a continuous feature of everyday practice. Intrinsic motivation is an essential ingredient for achieving meaningful and lasting change, whether that is in an individual or organisation. The role of the Síolta Coordinator therefore is to mentor, guide and enable staff and other significant adults (e.g., members of management boards, parents) who are actively involved in the daily operation of the early years setting to achieve autonomy in relation to quality improvement. In other words, a good Síolta Coordinator will aim to become progressively redundant as she/he succeeds in promoting the skills, knowledge and therefore independence of the staff in the early years setting. In many ways, the challenge for the Coordinator is to mirror the type of good pedagogical practice that we advocate for early childhood education; a partnership approach that is respectful of the contribution of all parties, which builds on the skills, strengths and interests of the staff in the early years setting and which is well planned and documented. All Síolta Coordinators have had to meet strict qualification (a bachelor degree in ECCE or higher) and experience (minimum of five years direct experience of ECCE service delivery) criteria in order to be selected for this role. As the role is central to the success of the Síolta QAP, it will be evaluated as part of the national evaluation process.

Completed Síolta Validations

To date, three early years settings have completed the full Síolta QAP. The first was an infant class in a Gaelscoil in west Dublin and the next two were both pre-schools based in north County Dublin. Validation visits to the two pre-schools took place in June 2011 and the school visit is to take place once the new school year has settled. The standard of portfolio material submitted by all settings to date has been very high and certainly

made the validation process very straightforward. These first validations were carried out by staff in the Early Years Education Policy Unit, however, it is envisaged that existing Síolta Coordinators, once appropriately prepared, will conduct future validation processes - not of course for those services they have mentored through the Síolta QAP. Over the summer break, a number of other settings have indicated their readiness to submit Quality Portfolios for validation in the near future and so a busy time is ahead.

National Evaluation of the Implementation of the Síolta QAP

The implementation and evaluation of Síolta in practice fulfils two separate but equally important objectives;

- To test the reliability and validity of the Síolta Standards and Components across the diverse range of early years settings.
- To evaluate the tools, materials and processes associated with supporting the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme.

Whilst Síolta has established a strong content validity through the extensive research and consultation processes that led to its development, the Standards and Components must be robust and relevant enough to lead to the improvement of quality in practice in all the diverse situations and settings that characterise the early years sector in Ireland. We also need to understand how best to support the translation of the national vision for quality in early years settings that Síolta expresses, into the everyday, lived reality of children and staff in those settings. The national evaluation was put to tender at the end of 2010 and was awarded to Goodbody Economic Consultants earlier this year. The final evaluation report is due by the end of 2011.

Informal Activity Related to Síolta

In addition to the implementation and evaluation of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme, we are aware that a wide range of other activities are taking place across the country to assist and support early years settings to use Síolta as a support for developing the quality of their practice and provision. Much of this activity is being supported by the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) and in June 2011, Waterford County and Roscommon CCCs conducted a review

and evaluation of Síolta activity in their areas. It is apparent that a great deal of commitment and effort has been invested in both these counties by early years practitioners and this is to be welcomed and commended as such activity will build strong foundations for any participation in more formal activities into the future.

Síolta and the Free Pre-school Year

With the introduction of universal pre-school provision, there is a requirement that services ‘*..deliver on a programme of activities that adheres to the Principles of Síolta...*’ Whilst this is a very broad statement and only requires early years practitioners to be able to discuss the Síolta Principles and how they are incorporating them into practice in their setting, it is a very positive first step in ensuring that Síolta has a practical influence on the quality of early childhood education experiences for young children. Delivering high quality early childhood care and education in Ireland is not an option, it is an imperative. We are all aware of the substantial body of research evidence which tells us that poor quality provision can be detrimental to children’s well-being, learning and development. The establishment of the Free Pre-school Year by the State recognises the value and importance of high quality provision for all children and Síolta and *Aistear*, the early Childhood Curriculum Framework, are the national practice guidelines that provide detail on how to deliver on that quality agenda.

Síolta and Qualification requirements for the Free Pre-school Year

The qualification requirements for Pre-school Leaders delivering the ECCE Scheme have been informed by the nationally agreed Standards of Síolta. Specifically Standard 11, Professional Practice states:

Practising in a professional manner requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting.

Síolta challenges all staff to achieve a minimum qualification of a major award at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Staff in supervisory roles should have achieved a Level 6 qualification and those in management roles

should be at Level 7 or above. These standards have translated into the qualification requirements for the ECCE Scheme as follows:

Pre-school year Leaders must hold a certification for a major award in childcare/early education at a minimum of Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications of Ireland (NFQ) or an equivalent nationally recognised qualification or a higher award in the childcare/early education field.

A higher capitation grant is also available to sessional playschool settings where the following qualification criteria are met.

...all the Pre-school Leaders in the service hold a bachelor degree in childhood/early education (minimum of Level 7 on the NFQ or equivalent) and have 3 years experience working in the sector, and where all the Pre-school Assistants hold a relevant major award in childcare/early education at Level 5 on the NFQ or its equivalent.

Síolta and Common Award Standards for Early Childhood Education

The Síolta materials have contributed to the development of new Common Award Standards at NFQ Levels 4, 5 and 6. These award standards in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) were developed and published by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) on March 1st 2011. The old awards in Childcare will be phased out. After December 2012, only the new Common Award Standards in ECCE will be accredited by FETAC. Programmes of learning developed to meet these new award standards will incorporate national practice frameworks (Síolta and *Aistear*) and will reflect national policy objectives, thereby, ensuring that graduates of these programmes are fully prepared to enter the workforce. Training providers have begun to develop new programmes to meet these award standards and subject to validation by FETAC, the first of these, the FETAC Level 5 Major Award in Early Childhood Care and Education, will come on stream through the VECs before the end of 2011. The changeover to the new award standards is a very positive and welcome development. They promote consistency in quality, content and delivery of programmes of learning leading to these awards nationally, their practice focus ensures that graduates are fully prepared

to enter employment upon graduation and their structure ensures that core knowledge and skills are developed across all levels of qualifications which in turn allows for the establishment of clear professional pathways into and through the profession. For further information on Common Award Standards in Early Childhood Care and Education see www.fetac.ie.

Síolta and Aistear

Síolta is one of a number of distinct policy initiatives which are being developed to support the improvement of quality in practice in ECCE settings in Ireland. However, whilst distinct, all these initiatives are interconnected and cooperation across the range of organisations responsible for their implementation in practice is a strong feature. *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework has been developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Whilst Síolta addresses quality across all dimensions of practice in an ECCE setting, *Aistear* specifically addresses issues related to supporting children's wellbeing, learning and development and provides a comprehensive set of information, guidance and practical tools in this regard. Despite the different focus and processes associated with each framework, they are very complementary in nature and together constitute essential 'pillars of quality' in ECCE settings in Ireland. The NCCA have developed a network of *Aistear* Tutors who are supporting infant teachers in primary schools in their use of *Aistear*. An online *Aistear* Toolkit has also been developed and provides easy access to a valuable range of resources to support implementation. It is planned that these will be added to in the coming months. For further information see www.ncca.ie/aistear

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

On July 8th 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairí Quinn, launched *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People*. This publication is a milestone in the development of the early years sector in Ireland as it recognises the critical role played by experiences in early childhood in the development of literacy and numeracy skills. A number of recommendations refer directly to the importance of high quality early education

provision. Core principles of Síolta and *Aistear* are referenced throughout the document including partnership with parents, the centrality of play and interactions in early childhood pedagogy and the key role of the skilled and qualified adult. The Strategy can be viewed on www.education.ie

Conclusion

Since the publication of the Síolta Principles, Standards and Components of Quality in June 2006, many developments have impacted on the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland. The introduction of a universal free Pre-school year, the introduction of qualification requirements for Pre-school Leaders, the development of Common Award Standards for education and training programmes and the inclusion of early childhood care and education in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy have all served to increase awareness and appreciation of the importance of quality in all its dimensions in early years settings. Síolta provides an important set of evidence based and nationally agreed guidelines that can ensure that we understand and recognise the indicators of quality in early years practice and provision which confirm that we are 'on track' regardless of the path we have chosen to achieve our goals. The next steps in the development of Síolta are to complete the field test and evaluation, share the findings with the sector and incorporate the learning from these processes into plans for the future. Much has been achieved in recent years in relation to the development of an agreed vision for high quality practice in ECCE. Our new agenda must now be to consolidate these achievements and continue to build capacity across the entire early years sector so that we are ready for the challenges to come.

Early Years Education Policy Unit
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