![cecde — Centre for Early Childhood Development & Education]

síolta
The National Quality Framework
for Early Childhood Education

HANDBOOK

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Foreword

When the Minister for Education and Science launched the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in October 2002, we began a journey without precedent in Ireland.

The task to develop a framework of quality across the whole field of early childhood education and for children from birth to six years of age was ambitious, and to accomplish it in three short years was seen by some as impossible. A number of contributing factors allowed us to deliver this framework in a comprehensive and timely manner.

First of all, we relied on the strengths of a large number of committed partners in an intensive and far-reaching process of continuous consultation. In fact, this framework has hundreds, if not thousands, of authors throughout the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland. The consultation process was not just limited to the Consultative Committee of over fifty participating organisations, but reached much further, involving many individual parents and professionals who gave their time and expertise enthusiastically and freely. From the beginning of the process, we established and developed a common ground among these very diverse interests and facilitated opportunities and forums for exchange and debate.

Secondly (perhaps most importantly), we started from a perspective which puts the rights and needs of the child first, reflecting the common cause of all those involved in early childhood care and education in Ireland. This perspective transcended the many differences between settings, philosophies and interests.

Thirdly, we firmly based the framework on up-to-date Irish and international policy, practice and research. This evidence-based approach and our openness to challenge and debate has led to a high degree of confidence in our work.

The Framework is uniquely Irish and explicitly positioned in contemporary Ireland, recognising not only her cultural and linguistic heritage, but also economic and demographic change. It understands quality as a dynamic concept, constructed and reconstructed by many participating actors, including children, in an ever-changing society.

In order to underline and highlight the unique character of the Framework we call it *'Síolta'*. *Síolta* is the Irish word for seeds. It expresses the potential of childhood and of this Framework to grow and succeed. It relates to the metaphor of the 'Kindergarten' as a place of care and education, and the role of the educator as a skilful gardener. Most of all, it relates this modern Framework to what has gone before and to the rich heritage of modern Ireland.

Directing the process leading to *Síolta* has been an immensely exciting experience for me personally and professionally. The close work with a truly wonderful team has been a great privilege and I would like to thank my colleagues at the CECDE for their commitment and dedication. Without the unwavering support and expertise of the Department of Education and Science and the members of our Board of Management and Steering Committee, we could not have completed *Síolta* and I would like to thank them for that. Our cooperation with a very wide range of supportive partners in Ireland and abroad has been both enjoyable and educational and I am grateful for their valuable contributions and belief in the success of the project.

Finally, on behalf of the CECDE Board and staff, I wish to dedicate *Síolta* to all young children in Ireland.

Heino Schonfeld
Director CECDE

Acknowledgements

The publication of *Síolta* would not have been possible without the sustained support and positive contributions of a wide range of organisations and individuals. The CECDE would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the continued enthusiasm and commitment of the early childhood care and education (ECCE) community in Ireland. This community has risen once again to the challenge of developing policy which will support and enhance the provision of quality services for our youngest children. The opinions, views and suggestions of this broad and varied constituency were represented to the CECDE through the membership of our Consultative Committee. These organisations provided us with valuable insight into the multiple dimensions of quality that exist in ECCE services in Ireland and contributed significantly to achieving balance and equity of focus in the Framework materials. The individuals who represented these organisations worked tirelessly to fulfil their brief of mediating the development of the Framework for their individual constituencies. In addition, several organisations shared specific materials which assisted us in identifying policies and procedures and legislation and regulation relevant to ECCE settings. A special mention is also due to the members of our Expert Working Group on Irish Language Translation who have not only ensured that the Irish language version of the Framework is relevant and meaningful, but have also contributed significantly to the development of common terminology relevant to ECCE in Ireland. The realisation of our Programme of Work owes much to the CECDE Board of Management and Steering Committee who have provided invaluable experience, expertise and wisdom in a consistent and generous manner. And finally, we acknowledge the efforts of many individuals in the Department of Education and Science for their professional assistance. We hope that the publication of *Síolta* will renew and reinforce the commitment to quality, already so evident in the ECCE sector in Ireland.

Acronyms

ADM	Area Development Management
BCCN	Border Counties Childcare Network
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science
DHC	Department of Health and Children
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
DSCFA	Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEA	Early Childhood Education Agency
EECERA	European Early Childhood Educational Research Association
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IMEB	Irish Montessori Education Board
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
IPPA	IPPA, The Early Childhood Organisation

NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCNA	National Children's Nurseries Association
NCO	National Children's Office
NDA	National Disability Authority
NDP	National Development Plan
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NESF	National Economic and Social Forum
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NQF	National Quality Framework
NVCC	National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative
NVCO	National Voluntary Childcare Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
QE	Quality in Education
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Introduction

Welcome to *Síolta - The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (NQF).* The materials presented in this pack represent the edited work of a wide range of stakeholders in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector in Ireland.[1] The creative process, which has resulted in this publication, has spanned three years, 2002 – 2005, and has been both a challenging and rewarding endeavour.

Introduction

The publication of *Síolta* contributes significantly to the realisation of the central objective of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn*, published by the Department of Education and Science (DES):

> The objective of this White Paper is to facilitate the development of a high quality system of early childhood education. Achieving this objective requires progress across a wide spectrum of areas, including curriculum, training and qualifications and the quality and quantity of inputs (staff, equipment and materials).
> (DES, 1999a:43)

This seminal policy document led to the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) under the management of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra. A comprehensive Programme of Work was agreed with the DES for the CECDE (CECDE, 2001), which focused on the following three objectives:

- To develop a quality framework for early childhood education;

- To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs and;

- To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) as envisaged by the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a).

Síolta fulfils the first of these objectives and presents a prototype of the NQF in early childhood education.

The contents of *Síolta* have been designed to assist all those concerned with the provision of quality early education in Ireland to participate in a developmental journey towards the improvement and enrichment of young children's early, and arguably most critical, life experiences.

Ready to Learn identified clearly that early education takes place in a wide variety of settings in Ireland and indeed highlights the important fact that, "*...we must recognise that young children have needs for both education and care and that the focus can never be exclusively on either.*" (DES, 1999a:3).

This is reflected in the CECDE brief as stated in the agreed Work Programme which, when referring to the development of the details of the NQF, states:

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

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

- A support for individual professional practice and development;

- A focus for team work and team development;

- A tool for management, strategic planning and policy development;

- A common base for the interactions of a varied team of professionals.

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

Terminology

As already stated, a central premise of *Síolta* is that care and education are inextricably linked factors in the young child's learning and development. In Ireland, the term 'early childhood care and education' (with the acronym 'ECCE') has gained currency and has been used widely in discourse relating to early childhood education. This term has gained strong endorsement from the diverse range of stakeholders in the provision of services for young children, as it reinforces the inseparable nature of care and education essential to the provision of quality early learning experiences. The term also has a unifying influence for all those adults engaged in the provision of services and can be identified with, regardless of the context for practice. For these reasons, the CECDE has adopted the term 'ECCE' throughout all publications associated with the development of *Síolta*.

The contents of the pack collectively form a prototype for a national quality assurance process for ECCE settings in Ireland. It is hoped that this prototype will, in the coming months and years, form the basis for practical implementation of the vision of quality in early childhood education contained in *Síolta*. This is a vision in which all children are afforded equity of access to early education opportunities that enrich their lives and contribute positively to their optimal well-being, learning and development.

Contents of the pack

Síolta is a dynamic and evolving Framework. It will be updated regularly, initially as a result of the findings of a pilot process, but in the longer term to reflect the changing nature of the ECCE sector in Ireland. It is designed to be useful for both practitioners (individually and in teams) and quality support personnel who will participate in the implementation and assessment process.

The *Síolta* pack contains a number of elements. These include this introductory handbook, four wirobound manuals, a poster and leaflet relating to the twelve Principles of Quality. Also included is a CD ROM which contains all the previous materials and the four research 'pillars' which provide the main supports for the development process.

Introductory Handbook

The sections of this handbook are as follows:

- **Section one – Context for *Síolta*** – briefly considers the current national and international context for quality in ECCE that has informed the development of *Síolta*. This has been framed within the three broad areas of policy, practice and research.

- **Section two – Process of development** – overviews the process by which *Síolta* was developed. This includes the production of the 'four pillars of research' and the extensive process of consultation undertaken within the ECCE sector.

- **Section three – Characteristics of *Síolta*** – describes the unique features of *Síolta* which have been central to the development process and which will be key to its successful implementation.

- **Section four – Assessment of quality discussion paper** - presents a possible model for assessment within the context of *Síolta*. It is intended to stimulate debate on this important issue, which will be necessary for the pilot implementation process.

- **Section five – Supporting quality discussion paper** - summarises evidence gathered through literature review and consultation exercises in relation to mechanisms and best practice for supporting quality in early

childhood education provision.

- **Section six – Conclusion**

- **Glossary** – contains definitions of a number of key words as they are used in the context of *Síolta*.

Wirobound Manuals

This Framework is designed to allow ECCE settings to evaluate their level of quality provision and to determine the quality of the service they are providing. Within this context, *Síolta* will recognise elements of practice that are successful within the setting as well as identifying aspects in need of attention and improvement. In this way, it acts as a tool to promote continuous quality improvement and planning.

The wirobound user manuals contain the core elements of *Síolta* that will be used by practitioners. Each manual focuses on one of the following settings:

- Full and Part-time Daycare

- Sessional Services

- Infant Classes

- Childminding

The manuals have been designed to be as user friendly and navigable as possible and each is prefaced by clear instructions for use. The content of each manual includes the following:

Principles of Quality

The twelve Principles and their accompanying Explanatory Notes are the ultimate benchmark for all quality practice and service provision in early childhood education.

Standards of Quality

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

Components of Quality

These provide quality indicators for all practitioners in implementing *Síolta*. The Components relate directly to the Standards and act to break them down into more focused and specific parts.

Signposts for Reflection

These act as self-reflection guidelines for practitioners to think about current practice, and to identify elements that are positive as well as those in need of attention. They have been designed to support the process of dialogue referred to earlier in relation to the achievement of the Standards. They can be used by individual practitioners or by groups/teams that are planning for an entire setting. Where applicable, the Signposts for Reflections have been mediated across three age ranges, namely birth to eighteen months, twelve to thirty-six months and two-and-a-half to six years. These Signposts for Reflection and accompanying 'Think about' lists are only provided as examples or prompts. They are not in any way exhaustive and it is expected that all those engaging with *Síolta* will add their own based on their practice, and in effect, personalise them to their own particular context.

Resource section

At the end of each manual, we have inserted a brief resource section. This suggests several sources of materials and information to support practitioners as they work with the various aspects of *Síolta*. It includes advice on relevant publications and videos, support materials, courses, website addresses in Ireland and abroad, and contact details of ECCE organisations that may be of help or interest. This section is not exhaustive; rather, it forms a solid basis of resource

materials which, it is anticipated, will be added to and personalised by practitioners and settings as they work through the materials.

Note on cross-referencing

The Standards and Components individually contribute to the achievement of quality. However, it is important to remember that they have been designed to work collectively towards the achievement of quality in all aspects of practice in ECCE settings. As you read through the materials, you will notice symbols **⊙ See** *that will identify opportunities to consult or cross-reference to another Component, which also has relevance to the Component you are reading.*

For example, you might be focusing on a Component that relates to Play and because of the importance of Interactions in the provision of quality play experiences, you will be prompted to cross reference to a Component on Interactions **⊙ See 5.2** *for additional support and information.*

The ultimate objective of these materials is to promote a holistic approach to quality provision and practice. Therefore, we encourage you to recognise their interrelated nature and make use of this unique feature to conduct a comprehensive review of your practice.

Appendices

There are three Appendices in each manual:

- **Appendix 1** gives a sample list of Policies and Procedures for settings to draw on.

- **Appendix 2** gives a sample list of Legislation and Regulation as a guide for settings in considering how legislation and regulation applies to the setting context.

- **Appendix 3**, the National Framework of Qualifications Grid of Level Indicators, is included as information on the way in which the various training and qualification levels of those working within the ECCE sector fit together within the Framework devised by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI).

Additional materials

These materials have been included within the pack to support the usage and sharing of *Síolta* with as broad an audience as possible. They include:

- A *Síolta* **poster** (in both Irish and English) containing the Principles of Quality. This is accompanied by a flyer for parents or other interested stakeholders.

- A **CD–Rom** containing a wealth of valuable information relating to the production of *Síolta*. This includes the text of the four pillars of research, and the entire contents of the pack, which can be downloaded and/or printed off.

DIVERSITY

VALUE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

2

3

4

5

AS PARTNERS

Section One
Context for the Development of *Síolta*
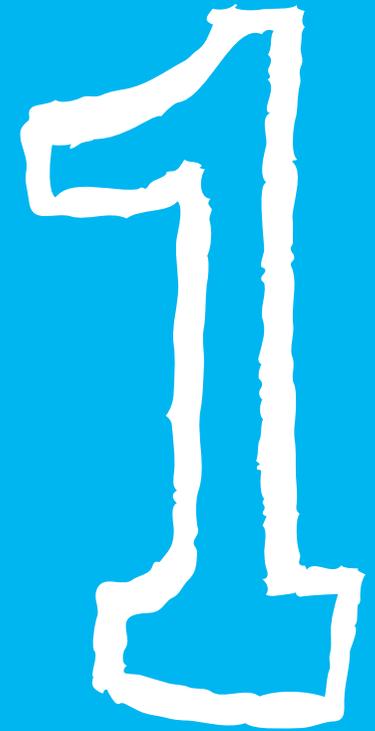
Section One
Context for the development of *Síolta*

The development of *Síolta* is timely in the Irish context. It marks a milestone in the quest for quality early childhood education provision for our youngest children that has been underway in Ireland in recent years. The CECDE has endeavoured to capture this dynamic momentum for quality within the ECCE sector, and informed by international models of policy, practice and research, has created a National Quality Framework unique and appropriate to the Irish context. This section briefly outlines the context for the development of *Síolta*, focusing on historical, national and international dimensions.

Historical perspectives on 'Quality'

The term 'quality' was not a common word in the lexicon of ECCE services until recently, mainly within the last decade (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004). Our concept and understanding of quality in ECCE services is context-linked and time specific, and this understanding is constantly evolving. This progression in understanding is influenced and tempered by a wide array of factors, including political, social, religious, economic and cultural developments.

Traditionally, the care and education of young children were viewed as separate entities, with 'care' occurring primarily in the child's home and 'education' beginning with the infant classes of the primary school. State supported ECCE services were rare and were largely targeted at children who were disadvantaged or at risk. It is now widely acknowledged and accepted that care and education are *"…inextricably linked…"* and inseparable elements in the life of the child (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 1999:45).

The period 1960-1990 marked an increased interest in ECCE for a number of reasons. Firstly, research was providing unequivocal evidence of the importance of quality ECCE as an important element in enabling all children to realise their full potential, with particular benefits accruing to children affected by disadvantage. With Ireland's accession to the European Economic Community in 1973 and increased linkages to international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Irish policy and practice slowly became more influenced by European and international developments. Increasing urbanisation resulted in families often residing in towns and cities away from the extended family that had proven such an important aspect of ECCE provision in previous decades. Education in this period was increasingly perceived as an investment in the individual and in society, and as an integral prerequisite of economic prosperity.

Current perspectives

However, it is essentially since 1990 that public and official attention has been paid to quality ECCE in the Irish context. Two separate issues have largely fostered this growth in interest. The first of these is the recognition of the value of ECCE to all children, particularly those with special needs and those affected by disadvantage. Secondly, the growing participation of women in the workforce owing to unprecedented economic growth catalysed interest in the provision of services. In turn, policy can be classified into two categories; the first is equality driven and focuses on facilitating female participation in the workforce and the second is based on the intrinsic value of ECCE. The tension between these two issues is often evident within Irish ECCE policy, practice and research.

There are three main government departments with responsibility for ECCE services in Ireland, namely the DES, the Department of Health and Children (DHC) and the DJELR.

All have produced or been involved in landmark publications in recent years, establishing national policy for ECCE services. Overall government policy is cognisant of the importance of ECCE to the economy and society. For example, ECCE is included in the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (Government of Ireland, 1999a), Ireland's *National Development Plan 2000 – 2006* (NDP) (Government of Ireland, 1999b), in the *Agreed Programme for Government* of the current coalition government (Department of An Taoiseach, 2002) and in the current Social Partners Agreement, *Sustaining Progress* (Department of An Taoiseach, 2003).

Changing family forms have also impacted upon the experiences of children in these formative years, with a greater diversity in family compositions which differ from traditional 'nuclear' families. There has been a concentrated number of key socio-economic and cultural developments in Ireland in recent years, which have had a profound effect on the configuration of Irish society. In societal terms, this period witnessed great advancements in the recognition of the rights of children. Most notable is the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations [UN], 1989), ratified by Ireland in 1992, as well as the establishment of a number of child advocacy groups to campaign for the rights of children. There has also been a tangible shift in Irish policy and practice relating to the position and treatment of children in society.

Demographics and statistics

In 2004, Ireland's population exceeded four million for the first time since the late nineteenth century. Approximately 10% of this population is composed of children from birth to six years of age (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2005a). Recent trends towards increased urbanisation have continued apace, while approximately 30% of children are born to lone mothers. Increased economic prosperity has also impacted on the percentage of women in the workforce, particularly those with children. In the last decade, the percentage of women in the workforce has

increased from 41.4% in 1995 to 55.8% in 2004 (CSO, 2005a:33). More notably, 76.8% of women aged 25-34 are now in employment, an increasing number of these being the mothers of young children (CSO, 2005c:Table 9). Growing prosperity has increased our attractiveness to foreign national workers and others, enhancing the cultural and ethnic diversity of Irish society. This sustained economic growth has led to a position whereby Ireland has the second highest GDP per capita within the EU (CSO, 2005a:18). Despite this prosperity, Ireland still has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the EU, with 14.6% of children living in consistent poverty in 2003 (CSO, 2005b:4).

In line with these economic changes, the social fabric of Irish society has also been transformed. Within the last decade, divorce has been legalised, the influence of the major churches on Irish people has declined and there is a general trend towards a more secular society. The impact of the media and globalisation, particularly targeted at young children, has increased significantly, while Information and Communications Technology (ICT) permeates all aspects of work and leisure. Recent high profile sex abuse cases involving children have accentuated the need for improved care and protection systems for children.

National policy context

A number of landmark policy documents and decisions in recent years have been informed by, and indeed catalysed, Irish society's view of children. The recent CECDE publication, *Insights on Quality* (CECDE, 2004b), is testimony to the wealth of documentation that has been generated in the Irish context since 1990 on the issue of quality. This vibrancy is particularly evident in the years since the millennium, reflecting the sector's endeavours to provide the highest quality services. This section will briefly address the key milestones in this journey towards quality, while further information and analysis are provided within the aforementioned CECDE publication, *Insights on Quality*.

These include:

1990 - 2000

- Ireland's ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1992 (UN, 1989).

- The *Child Care Act (1991)* (Department of Health [DoH], 1991) and the associated *Child Care (Preschool) Regulations* that apply to all preschool settings (with the exception of childminders caring for three or less children (excluding their own) in their own home and Early Start) (DHC, 1998).

- The establishment of the Children's Rights Alliance in 1993.

- The Report of the Commission on the Family, *Strengthening Families for Life* (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs [DSCFA], 1998).

- The *Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* (Coolahan, 1998).

- The enshrining in legislation of the *Education Act* (DES, 1998) and the *Education (Welfare) Act* (DES, 2000), which underpins all aspects of practice in primary schools.

- The White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a).

- The introduction of the *Revised Primary School Curriculum* in infant classes (DES, 1999b).

- The *National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999).

- The formulation of guidelines for the protection and welfare of children in the form of *Children First* (DHC, 1999) and *Our Duty to Care* (DHC, 2002).

2000

- The National Children's Strategy, *Our Children, Their Lives* (DHC, 2000).

- The establishment of the National Children's Office (NCO) in 2000.

- The inception of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) (2000).

2001

- The enshrining in legislation of the *Children's Act, 2001* (DJELR, 2001).

- The creation of the NQAI and its associated awarding bodies, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

- The establishment of a network of City and County Childcare Committees in 2001-2002.

2002

- The publication of the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002).

- The establishment of the CECDE.

2003

- The appointment of an Ombudsman for Children.

- The foundation of the Family Support Agency.

2004

- The publication by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) of *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004).

- The inception of the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (DES, 2004c).

- The OECD *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* (DES, 2004b).

2005

- The establishment of the National Council for Special Education.

- Publication of *Early Childhood Care and Education Report* (NESF, 2005) by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF).

This impressive range of policy publications and initiatives serve as markers on the landscape of evolving attitudes and increasing provisions for children in society. They also act as a rich source of data and expertise from which to build future ECCE provisions. However, despite this impressive number and range of publications, and policy and practice initiatives, much remains to be achieved in relation to the provision of quality services for our youngest children. The recent NESF report (NESF, 2005:33) highlights *"…a picture of relative inaction, peripheral implementation and drift"* in relation to the implementation of such policies in the Irish context and the need to devise implementation and coordination strategies to realise such policy objectives. In this context, the NESF proposes a *'Policy Framework'* for ECCE for the period 2005-2015. Integral to this plan is the principle of quality services and the NESF calls for a regulatory framework for the ECCE sector, within which the existing regulations and the provisions of *Síolta* will be integrated (NESF, 2005:73).

Most notably within the national context, the DES, through the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a), brought the matter of quality to the fore of policy. Issues of quality were an integral element of this White Paper, which recognised the complexity of identifying and measuring the static and dynamic variables of quality, and the many perspectives from which quality could be viewed (DES, 1999a:53). *Ready to Learn* proposed the introduction of a Quality in Education (QE) mark for services reaching agreed quality standards. The White Paper on Early Childhood Education specified the inclusion of curriculum and methodology, qualifications and training, and inputs as quality standards, and *Síolta* has developed these recommendations.

The Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999b) emerged at a similar time as the White Paper on Early Childhood Education and is of particular relevance as approximately half of all four year olds and virtually all five year olds are enrolled in the infant classes of primary schools to

which this curriculum applies (DES, 2004a:15). Quality is cited as the first key issue in primary education and the importance of the curriculum for quality services is stressed (DES, 1999b:26 Introduction). In 2004, the NCCA produced *Towards a Framework for Early Learning – A Consultative Document*, with the aim *"…to provide all children with appropriately enriching, challenging and enjoyable learning opportunities from birth to six years."* (NCCA, 2004:14) The NCCA curricular framework and *Síolta* will complement one another in the attainment of quality services for our youngest children. More recently, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) cites early childhood education as an integral feature of ensuring educational inclusion for all (DES, 2005).

Ireland's participation in an OECD Review of ECCE is also further evidence of the societal interest in improving the range and quality of services. This was acknowledged by the Minister for Education and Science in the Foreword to the OECD *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland:*

> *Research has shown that access to quality pre-school services plays a vital role in preparing children for entry into primary education. It also has potentially significant long-term benefits both to the individual and society.* (DES, 2004b:Foreword)

The OECD Review praised many aspects of provision in Ireland, including the presence of an active voluntary and community sector, a well-established early education network within the infant classes of primary schools and a strong spirit of partnership at local level. However, it also identified a number of weak elements within the system, with recommendations focusing on aspects of coordination, access and quality. In relation to quality, the OECD review reiterated the importance of:

> *The formulation of a common Quality Framework for centre-based programmes for young children, focusing on agreed standards for services. A Quality Framework would include a description of what families can expect from centres, whether public or private…*(DES, 2004b:9)

National practice context

The ECCE sector in Ireland is characterised by a diversity of service provision for children from birth to six years, which has been noted as a major strength in relation to parental choice. This range of services and settings includes, for example, childminding, nurseries, crèches, playgroups, grúpaí naíonraí[2], preschools, and the infant classes of primary schools. These settings have evolved from a variety of traditions and origins and operate under the auspices of different philosophies, yet are united by their core remit, which is the care and education of the young child. The majority of these settings (with the exception of schools and certain childminders) are regulated by the *Childcare (Preschool) Services Regulations* (DHC, 1998). The infant classes of the primary school, catering for the majority of four and five year olds, are legislated for by the *Education Act* (DES, 1998) and the *Education (Welfare) Act* (DES, 2000). At present, there is little linkage or points of reference between these two systems of regulation and inspection.

With the exception of the infant classes of primary schools, the majority of these services are community/voluntary or private in nature. They are funded by fees or by support from a range of government departments, most notably the DHC and the DJELR. The DHC is involved in the delivery of preschool services to a targeted number of children affected by disadvantage or at risk. Furthermore, the DHC inspects the implementation of the Preschool Regulations in the aforementioned ECCE settings. The main focus of the regulations is on the health, safety and welfare of the child and in ensuring compliance with legislation.

The DJELR is primarily involved in ECCE through its equality remit in relation to the participation of women in the workforce. In 1999, it produced a comprehensive *National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999), some recommendations of which are being implemented through the EOCP. During the period 2000-2006, the EOCP is providing €449 million

2. Irish language preschools

to develop childcare, to improve its quality, to increase the quantity and to introduce a coordinated approach to service delivery (DJELR, 2004:11). A specific strand within the EOCP, to which €85 million has been allocated, is devoted to the improvement of quality in ECCE settings through the provision of education and training and the establishment of support networks for childcare providers (Area Development Management [ADM], 2003). This strand is being primarily implemented through supporting the members of the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative (NVCC)[3] and a network of thirty-three City and County Childcare Committees.

The DES provides a number of preschool facilities on a targeted basis for children affected by, or at risk of, disadvantage, most notably the Rutland Street Project, Traveller Preschools and Early Start, and is also responsible for the infant classes of primary schools.

Community and Voluntary Organisations

The last decade has witnessed the development of a wide range of out of home ECCE services, largely in the community/voluntary and private sector. These include childminding, day fostering, grúpaí naíonraí, playgroups, crèches, community playgroups, day nurseries and preschools. Traditionally, this non-statutory element of ECCE services has remained under-resourced and under-developed and the current infrastructure is still in an embryonic stage. Membership organisations have been established to support those providing services, and most membership organisations are now involved in greater cooperation through their participation in the NVCC. These have been instrumental in providing supports and producing documentation to promote quality services among their members (see CECDE, 2004b).

Recent developments in the ECCE sector in Ireland have involved a number of these organisations developing and implementing quality assurance and quality improvement programmes. These have been largely funded under

3. Members of the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative are: Barnardos; Children in Hospital Ireland; Childminding Ireland; Forbairt Naíonraí Teo; IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation; Irish Steiner Early Childhood Association; National Children's Nurseries Association and St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland.

the EOCP (2000-2006). While the composition and implementation style of these various programmes may vary somewhat, an examination of their content and *modus operandi* by the CECDE revealed remarkable consistency and consensus in their core processes (CECDE, 2004b:81). *Síolta* has built on this existing consensus to ensure that the expertise developed within the ECCE sector is harnessed and utilised in the quest to ensure quality services for our youngest children. Moreover, it will act as a common reference point and framework within which the variety of other assurance/improvement initiatives can operate.

The CECDE has been delighted with the overwhelmingly positive response of the sector to the development of *Síolta*. From the outset, the CECDE has received tremendous support from the entire sector and has, in turn, provided a forum for the debate of many issues of quality at various conferences and seminars. Of particular note was the CECDE International Conference in Dublin Castle in September 2004, entitled *Questions of Quality* (CECDE, 2005a). This brought together a multiplicity of national and international perspectives on quality in ECCE and proved to be an invaluable process for the CECDE in the development of the Framework.

National research context

Research on ECCE in Ireland has traditionally been under-developed and under-resourced. The CECDE *Audit of Research* noted that all recent government publications in relation to ECCE contain *"…the issue of quality as an integral element."* (CECDE, 2003a:52). However, in relation to research focusing specifically on the topic of quality, there has been very little activity in the Irish context. The audit revealed that of the 1,082 publications listed, only fifty-three related directly to the issue of quality. This is surprising considering the high level of debate surrounding quality in Ireland, much of which is unsubstantiated by indigenous research. The CECDE Research Strategy (CECDE, 2003b) has begun to address this lack of research by completing, commissioning and

supporting research projects regarding quality. This is mirrored in the publication of a set of child well-being indicators (NCO, 2005) and other research by government departments and agencies.

Additionally, there has been an upsurge in interest in the issue of quality in the wider research community, as is evidenced by the increase in recent research publications on quality cited in *Insights on Quality* (CECDE, 2004b:87-97). Furthermore, the revival of the OMEP Ireland conference since 2002 and the expansion of similar fora for the sharing and dissemination of information have enhanced the utility and accessibility of such information. Ireland's hosting of the European Early Childhood Educational Research Association (EECERA) Conference in September 2005 is further evidence of the growing prominence of the research context. This has coincided with increased opportunities for postgraduate training and education in ECCE in a number of third level colleges and universities, increasing the pool of research expertise available in Ireland.

International context

The rising profile of ECCE in Ireland is reflective of international trends. This was acknowledged by the OECD Report, *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001:135), which highlighted that *"…quality is high on the agenda…"*. International research, most importantly longitudinal studies, has proven the link between quality provision and long-term positive developmental outcomes for children (Sammons *et al.*, 2002; Mooney *et al.*, 2003). The benefits of ECCE in relation to positive social, educational and emotional outcomes, in alleviating the detrimental effects of poverty and disadvantage and in promoting equal opportunities for men and women have ensured its prominence in the policies of many countries (Martin, 2001).

One of the pillars of research underpinning the development of *Síolta* was an international review of quality in six countries, *Making Connections* (CECDE, 2004c). This study of the international context reveals the range

and breadth of models of ECCE provision in operation, each functioning with high degrees of success in their respective jurisdictions. The review revealed that there is no single utopian model in evidence and that it is the business of each country to develop an ECCE system consonant with its unique situation. For example, a model completely successful in one context may be completely unsuited to another, and while one can learn lessons from other jurisdictions, the importation of foreign models is highly inadvisable. Some of the overall lessons to be learned, elements that are common to the attainment of quality internationally, include the following:

- A coordinated policy framework;

- The use of a broad and flexible definition of quality that takes into account the various perspectives of stakeholders;

- The presence of an assessment framework that is advisory and empowering;

- The engagement and involvement of all stakeholders;

- The close involvement of, and partnership with, parents;

- The provision of a support infrastructure that ensures quality is achieved and maintained;

- A focus on the training and qualifications of practitioners;

- An integrated approach towards children affected by disadvantage or who have special needs (CECDE, 2004c).

Furthermore, the review identified a quality continuum evident across the six countries reviewed, ranging from poor quality provision to high quality universal ECCE services. Norway and Sweden, who now have an enviable ECCE system, have progressed along this continuum over recent decades to achieve their current position. While ECCE services in Norway and Sweden are largely unregulated at present, this follows a period of strict centralised regulation, which impacted positively on their quality. This allows such countries to focus increasingly on the dynamic elements of quality as the standard of the static variables is now assured. Ireland, and other countries within the review, are at an earlier stage of

development on this continuum. *Síolta* has taken cognisance of this continuum of development, showing awareness of Ireland's current position along the continuum and also plans for the further progression of ECCE services.

In addition, Ireland has participated in a number of cross-national reviews in relation to ECCE that have yielded valuable data in this regard (CECDE, 2004b:37-39).

Summary

Síolta is published at a time when national and international attention is focused as never before on the issue of quality ECCE services, and their role in enhancing the lives of our youngest children. It distils and captures the concerted momentum of the ECCE sector in recent years towards the attainment of quality and provides a reference point for all those involved in ECCE services in this quest. Great strides have been made in the last decade towards the provision of a policy, practice and research context that supports quality provision for our youngest children. However, Irish investment in ECCE services rests at less than 0.2% of GDP, well below the EU average (OECD, 2004). Ireland has been an active partner in the European Union in recent decades and has signed up to the conclusions of the Barcelona European Council (2002) to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between three to six years of age, and to 33% of children under three years of age (DES, 2004b:20). While much has been accomplished, Ireland is committed to achieving much more in the years ahead, a commitment that will be to the benefit of all the children of Ireland, and ultimately to society as a whole.

Section Two
The Development Process

Section Two
The Development Process
The 'Four Pillars of Research'

The CECDE *Programme of Work* outlined a three-year work programme based on the objectives and functions of the CECDE (CECDE, 2001). As one of these core objectives, the production of a National Quality Framework for ECCE in Ireland has involved a significant body of research and development work and has, in particular, yielded the production of four specific pieces of research. These were identified as instrumental in underpinning the development of *Síolta*, as represented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Elements of research underpinning *Síolta*

The main focus of the four pillars of research was on quality in the Irish context, while an international perspective was also included to flavour the Irish viewpoint. An outline of the four pillars is provided here, while the full text of each is available on the CD Rom contained in this pack or at **www.cecde.ie**. The four pillars are as follows:

- *Talking About Quality* is the report of a nationwide consultation undertaken by the CECDE in late 2003 (CECDE, 2004a). Approximately four hundred stakeholders (including practitioners, parents, policy-makers, researchers, health professionals and students) in the ECCE sector were consulted on all aspects of defining, assessing and supporting quality in Ireland.

- *Insights on Quality* is a review of all aspects of policy, practice and research in relation to quality in Ireland since 1990 (CECDE, 2004b). It examines in excess of three hundred publications from both statutory and non-statutory agencies and draws implications and recommendations for the development of *Síolta*.

- *Making Connections* is an international review of quality in ECCE relating to six countries worldwide, namely; Norway, Sweden, Germany, Portugal, Northern Ireland and New Zealand. It examines all aspects of policy, practice and research in these countries on a thematic basis and concludes with implications for the development of *Síolta* in the Irish context (CECDE, 2004c).

- *Early Childhood in Ireland – Evidence and Perspectives* is a thematic consideration of child development and learning in Ireland based on an extensive literature review (CECDE, 2005b).

While important and valuable publications in their own right, collectively these documents provide a solid foundation of research evidence on which to base the development and implementation of *Síolta* in the Irish context. They were written and researched with this end focus in mind and are tailored to inform the work of the CECDE in achieving this core objective.

The development of *Síolta* addressed three distinct, but interrelated, elements:

- The development of a core set of agreed Principles, Standards and Components, which collectively define quality in the Irish context;

- The development of proposals for assessment/evaluation in the context of the implementation of *Síolta*;

- The development of a discussion document on supporting quality in the context of the implementation of *Síolta*.

Note on CECDE Consultative Committee

Before describing the key elements of the development process, it is helpful to outline the primary structure put in place by the CECDE to facilitate the consultative process with the ECCE sector. In September 2003, the CECDE Consultative Committee was inaugurated. The Consultative Committee consists of fifty representative stakeholders in the ECCE sector and its function is to advise on the work of the CECDE (see Appendix 1). For the purpose of consultation on the NQF, the Consultative Committee had three specific functions:

- *To represent the views of stakeholder groups;*

- *To mediate the NQF consultative process to colleagues/members on behalf of the CECDE;*

- *To maintain a practice focus within the NQF.*

While our direct consultation was with fifty stakeholder representatives, it is evident that wider consultation took place within these organisations in furnishing the CECDE with feedback on the various elements of the NQF, as well as submissions on supporting quality (see Section Six). Some organisations, for example, forwarded the draft documents to their entire membership for comment, while others held focus groups or seminars to elicit the views of members.

Development of the Principles of Quality

Once the research evidence had been gathered, the CECDE began a meta-analysis of the collective findings and implications in order to establish the core principles for the development of *Síolta*. This involved the generation of in excess of four thousand key words, which were subsequently grouped thematically into ten overarching categories. These categories were then used to identify the Principles of *Síolta*, while the rich array of associated words gathered formed the basis of the vocabulary used within the Principles and Explanatory Notes.

Consultation process

Once the Principle Statements and Explanatory Notes were generated, a meeting of the CECDE's Consultative Committee was convened in November 2004. The proposed timeline and process of developing *Síolta* was outlined at this meeting and the role of the Consultative Committee was detailed and agreed upon. Figure 2 below illustrates the timeline for the development of *Síolta*.

Figure 2: Consultation timeline 2004-2005
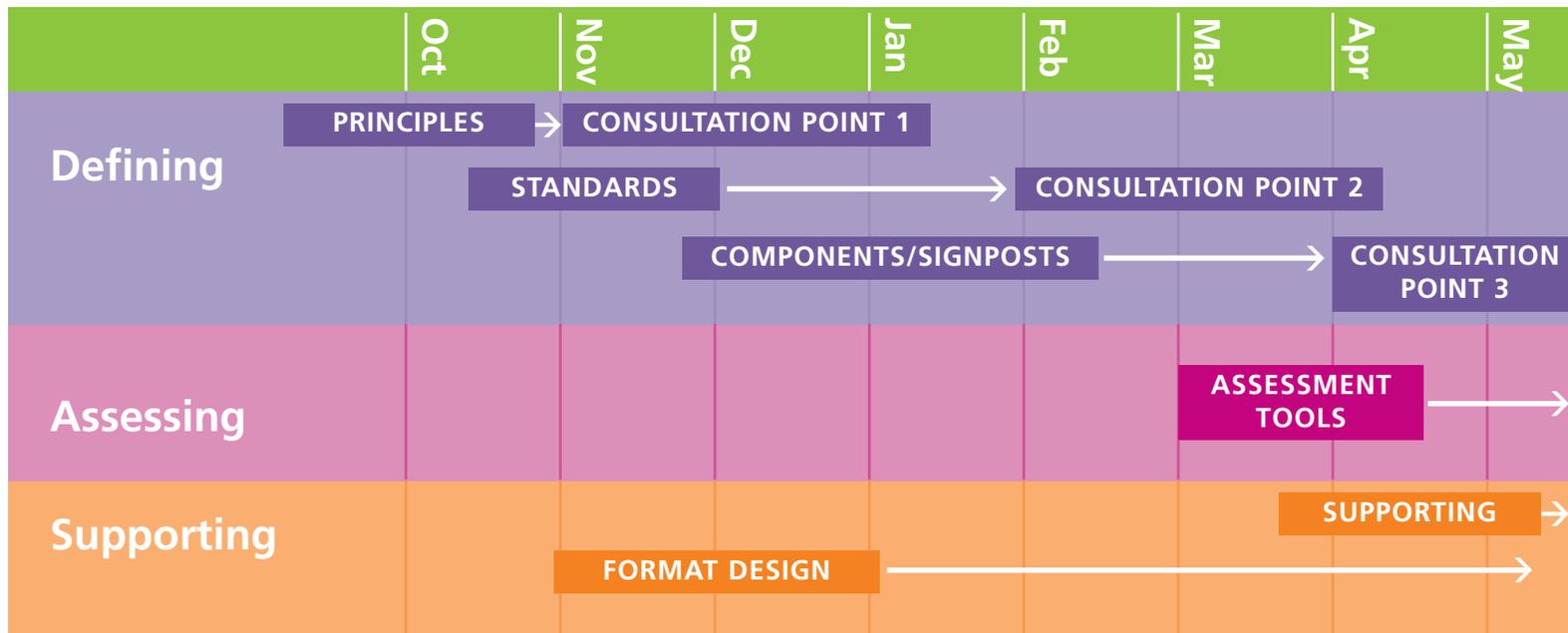
As illustrated, *Síolta* has been developed in relation to the three strands of defining, assessing and supporting quality. This approach evolved from initial consultation with the ECCE sector, who identified these as the overarching variables contributing to the achievement of quality in early childhood education settings (CECDE, 2004a).

The main focus of the initial stages of the development process concentrated on the definition of quality, namely identifying and agreeing the Principles, Standards and Components of Quality.

The draft Principles were circulated to all members of the Consultative Committee in early December 2004, with a return date of mid-January. Feedback could be returned in hardcopy or through a specially developed online facility. The response rate was very satisfactory at 48%, as was the high level of agreement with the Principles which emerged.

A number of organisations suggested word changes within the Principles and the Explanatory Notes, a process that greatly enriched and strengthened their meaning and clarity. As a result of the feedback, two additional principles were added to the original ten, while the wording of many was changed to reflect the views of the sector. At the second meeting of the Consultative Committee regarding *Síolta* in early March, detailed feedback on this process was provided and a forum for discussion and debate facilitated in relation to the revised Principles.

Development of the Standards

In tandem with the revision of the Principles, the CECDE continued the process of developing the draft Standards of Quality. These represent the practical translation of the vision, contained in the Principles, into the reality of practice. The Standards were generated based on a further analysis of the findings/implications of the four pillars of research. This process identified sixteen key areas of practice. These were proofed against a sample of national and international quality assurance/improvement programmes to confirm the comprehensiveness of the Standards.

Following the Consultative Committee meeting in early March 2005, at which the Standards were introduced, each Consultative Committee member was forwarded the draft Standards on which to consult with her/his organisation. Upon request, Consultative Committee members were also provided with an Irish translation of the materials to facilitate the wider consultative process within their own constituencies.

This second phase of consultation yielded a response rate of 58%, with a very high level of consensus on the sixteen proposed Standards. The process undertaken in incorporating the feedback on the Standards was identical to that for the Principles. While the titles and wording of many of the Standards were altered based on the feedback, no additional Standards were requested.

Components of Quality and Signposts for Reflection

Once again, while members of the Consultative Committee were considering the Standards, the Components of Quality and Signposts for Reflection were being developed. The Standards were further broken down into a number of Components to facilitate implementation in practice. The Signposts were generated to inspire reflection on the provisions of the Components. A number of national and international models of quality assurance in ECCE, identified within the four pillars of research, were also reviewed during this process to ensure compatibility with current practice.

The Components and Signposts for Reflection were disseminated to all members of the Consultative Committee in May 2005 by hard copy and as a link to the CECDE website. The response rate from the Consultative Committee to the consultation on the Components and Signposts for Reflection was a very gratifying 54%. Given the extensive

nature of the materials disseminated in this phase of the consultation, and also the difficulties in conducting internal consultation with their colleagues/members, it was anticipated that the response rate might be lower than in previous phases. The achievement of such a high response rate clearly indicates the strong commitment of the ECCE sector in Ireland to the attainment of quality in ECCE service provision. In addition, there is ample evidence that many organisations also conducted widespread consultation with their memberships, thus broadening the scope of the participative process.

In addition to wording changes, other themes that emerged from the feedback included:

- Reducing the number of Signposts for Reflection - although this was often accompanied by a request to include a number of new Signposts specific to particular organisations! These conflicting requests were dealt with by increasing the number of 'Think about' boxes and reducing the number of Signposts for Reflection.

- Personalising the language used to each of the settings so that it would have greater resonance with all those engaging with the Framework within a diverse array of settings.

- Overall, there was general agreement with the inclusion of all Components within *Síolta*, and beyond a number of wording changes and the merging of two Components within the Standard on Environments, the essence of the original Components remained intact.

Parental consultation

A specific and focused consultative process was undertaken with parents in March 2005 in recognition of their primary role in the care and education of their children. This consultation represented an additional strand of consultation with parents, who are also represented on our Consultative Committee. This process identified key issues for parents in

relation to quality ECCE services. Feedback was also provided on the Principles and Standards of the NQF, which had already been developed at this time. The outcomes of the parental consultation will be published in the near future.

Translation into Irish

The CECDE has been committed from the outset to ensuring accessibility to all stakeholders within the ECCE sector to our body of work, including the provision of Irish translations. Consequently, the translation of the materials became an integral element in the development of *Síolta* to ensure the English and Irish versions were published simultaneously. Once consensus on the Principles was achieved, they were translated and published on our website. Upon request, the draft Standards were translated before consultation as they were more directly pertinent to everyday practice and so required practical consultation with members using the Standards through Irish. Once the changes and amendments were entered following this consultation, a final draft was once again translated. All draft Components were also translated to enable consultation in the Irish language, as were the Signposts for Reflection for Sessional services, which relate to naíonraí settings. A similar process was then engaged upon, whereby the final draft, incorporating the revisions highlighted in the consultation process, was once again translated.

Expert Working Group

Another important initiative of the CECDE was establishing an Expert Working Group on Irish, which consisted of CECDE staff members, a translator from the DES and an Irish language expert with expertise in ECCE (see Appendix 1). The role of the Expert Working Group was to review the translations to ensure they reflected the high degree of complexity in the shades of meaning used within *Síolta* and to review the terminology used. This group met on many occasions to ensure that the detail we had endeavoured to include in English was not lost in the Irish translation, and

that it was accessible and comprehensible to all stakeholders in the ECCE sector.

Design of *Síolta*

In recognition of the high priority given to making *Síolta* materials as user friendly as possible, the CECDE engaged the services of a design company to progress the publication of the National Quality Framework. The CECDE emphasised a number of important qualities which the design of the NQF should promote, such as clarity, ease of use and that it should be engaging and presented in an attractive format. In addition, the materials should be durable, easily identified, clearly organised, simple to use and easy to photocopy.

Summary

The development of *Síolta* has been characterised by a systematic and rigorous process of research and consultation. The research has focused on both the national and international context for quality in ECCE, and reflects best policy, practice and research in the sector. The consultative process has been extensive in nature and has spanned the entire development process. This process has been documented and published to ensure transparency and openness in relation to all aspects of the development of the Framework.

Section Three
Characteristics of *Síolta*
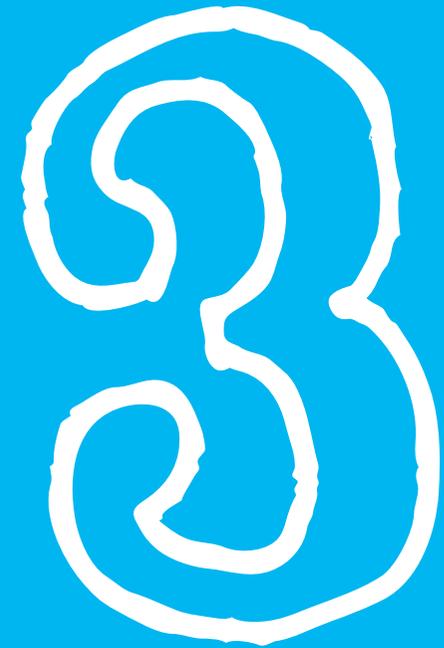
Section Three
Characteristics of *Síolta*

Síolta has a number of key characteristics, which are of importance in gaining an understanding of how the Framework operates. These characteristics ensure that the vision of the Framework can be realised and have the maximum beneficial outcomes for all ECCE stakeholders.

■ All elements of *Síolta* are **interconnected and interrelated**, and must not be viewed in isolation from one another. The Principles, Standards and Components of Quality work together to form a coherent definition of quality in ECCE settings, while assessment and supporting mechanisms will also contribute to the achievement and maintenance of the vision of quality articulated in the Principles.

■ **Accessibility** is a core feature of the Framework. The contents of *Síolta* have been written in a clear and unambiguous manner to promote widespread understanding and engagement by all users. It has been designed to be easily navigated by all practitioners, through a system of colour-coding and clear instructions for use. Furthermore, it has been translated into Irish to ensure easy application in Irish-medium settings.

■ *Síolta* is **process as opposed to product-focused**, and reflection on practice is an integral element of the Framework. This ensures that the emphasis in *Síolta* is on the ongoing journey of working towards quality practice. The Framework serves as a developmental tool within this process, which further informs and develops practice.

■ *Síolta* **builds upon existing national expertise** and experience and serves to accelerate the momentum towards the attainment of quality so clearly in evidence within the ECCE sector. As it is built upon existing national and international policy, practice and research, it provides a reference point for other national and international quality initiatives.

■ **Equality** is a core characteristic of *Síolta*, and each Standard has been equality-proofed in line with the Principles.

■ **A universal approach** is adopted in *Síolta* towards all children. All children and adults are accorded equal status within the Framework, with an emphasis on the abilities and strengths of each and every child and adult.

■ The process of devising *Síolta* has been characterised by **openness and transparency**. This has been underpinned by extensive consultation with all stakeholders, both prior to and during the development process, the results of which are published or readily available.

■ *Síolta* reflects a positive emphasis on **diversity**, evident in the concern for the interests of minority groups and the recognition of cultural identity.

■ *Síolta* is designed to be **inclusive** and applicable to all children aged from birth to six years in Ireland. It focuses on each and every child's potential to develop and learn in the early years.

■ The Framework **acknowledges, values and supports all adults** working with children in the early years.

■ **Flexibility** is an intrinsic feature of *Síolta*. This ensures that it is applicable and adaptable to a wide variety of situations and contexts, and to a wide variety of individual and team users.

■ And last, but by no means least, *Síolta* is **challenging**.
It requires:

– That we strive to achieve more than minimum
standards;

– Dynamic and ongoing discussion, debate
and development whilst at the same time
ensuring consolidation and mainstreaming of
our positive achievements;

– That we ensure core values and principles are
rigorously upheld whilst embracing the rich diversity
of approaches to achieving this;

– That we develop the professionalism and professional
status and identity of those who work with young
children, whilst ensuring that none of our existing
and invaluable expertise is lost or alienated;

– That each and every one of us is brave enough
to open up our practice to the scrutiny of others
in the anticipation that such sharing will yield
dividends in terms of support for our own
professional development.

Section Four
Assessing Quality

4

Section Four
Assessing Quality
Rationale

The main rationale for assessment within *Síolta* is found in the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a). A core principle of this document is the recognition of the fact that the quality of service provision is of critical importance in the lives of young children and their families (DES, 1999a:43). To support the development of quality services, it was proposed to devise a national quality assurance system, which would be mandatory for all state funded services and voluntary for all other services. Assessment would form an essential part of this system and would ultimately lead to an award where providers reach pre-determined quality standards.

It is evident from the White Paper on Early Childhood Education that achieving recognition through an award mark will involve participation in a developmental process that will require support and guidance (DES, 1999a:121). It was envisaged that assessment associated with an award system would take account of the developmental processes that services were engaged in:

> *Inspectors will also assist providers to attain the QE [Quality in Education] standards by identifying the areas where improvements are required and by suggesting approaches which providers could take to achieve the improvements.*
> (DES, 1999a:121)

Such a developmental model is not without precedent in Ireland. Many of the community and voluntary organisations (see Section Two) operate a support system for providers engaged in meeting their own specific quality criteria (CECDE, 2004b). International quality assurance schemes also employ developmental models of quality assessment and assurance (CECDE, 2004c). Australia and New Zealand have some of the more evolved statutory models of quality assurance whilst, in

the USA, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has also developed a programme, which has been widely adopted (NAEYC, 2005; National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc., 2004a; 2004b; 2004c).

Síolta has drawn on both national and international models of assessment for quality in ECCE. It has also been informed by the national consultation research conducted by the CECDE, which asked for specific opinion about assessment in ECCE in Ireland. The outcomes of this consultation revealed that there was strong agreement that any assessment of quality must be informed by the multiple dimensions of, and perspectives on, quality itself. In addition, great emphasis was placed on the need for both internal and external assessment, and on both formative and summative assessment processes. The importance of openness and transparency in assessment processes to ensure validity and reliability and 'fairness' of the criteria for quality was emphasised (CECDE, 2004a).

Assessment processes

Assessment for quality within *Síolta* will play a fundamental role in stimulating and reinforcing change processes. In many contexts, we can observe that what is to be assessed will drive the nature of practice. This statement regarding curriculum reform also has resonance for quality development:

> *Assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog. If we want to see real curriculum reform, we must simultaneously achieve reform of assessment practices.* (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992:29)

It is essential therefore that assessment practices focus energies on developments which realise the vision of *Síolta* as articulated in the Principles, Standards and Components.

Figure 3 opposite illustrates the NQF quality spiral which envisages the quest for quality in ECCE services as a continuous process stimulated and reinforced through cycles of assessment, development and action.

Figure 3: The *Síolta* quality improvement spiral
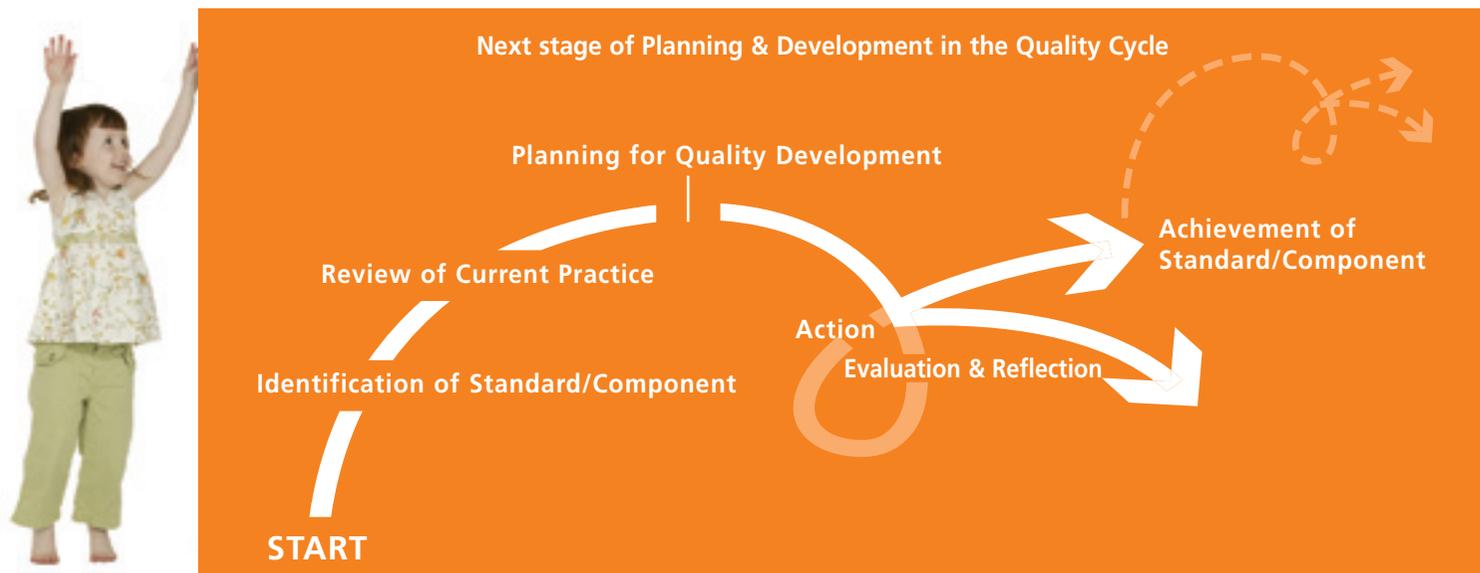
Assessment within *Síolta* may be loosely categorised, depending on time or context, as being formal or informal, external or internal. Whilst each of these descriptors can be associated with distinctive characteristics, as outlined below, it is important to note that in the context of *Síolta*, they are interdependent and of equal value.

Formal assessment is planned, conducted at regular intervals, documented and results in summary data being generated. This type of assessment is associated with inspection or validation systems that culminate in the making of an award. In the case of *Síolta*, it refers to the achievement or completion of a process, e.g., a particular Component or Standard or ultimately to an award.

Informal assessment will also contribute significantly to achieving these targets or goals; however, it is much more likely to be continuous, self reflective or discursive. Again,

whilst it may involve keeping records, these are more likely to be narrative and provide information for either the individual or group on progress towards the achievement of goals and objectives.

A balance between external and internal assessment processes was highlighted through consultation with stakeholders in the ECCE sector, as critically important in the development of quality provision (CECDE, 2004a).

External assessment is understood to represent the considered findings of outside parties on internal practices. It could be argued that parents engage in some form of external assessment of services when exercising choice of ECCE setting for their child. The act of enrolling a child in an ECCE setting may indicate that the parent has conducted a form of external assessment based on any number of personal criteria. However, whilst there may be correlation

between parental choice and the quality of the service, it must be noted that constraints upon parents (such as geographical location, accessibility or affordability) may exert more influence than the perceived quality of the service. More commonly, external assessment will take the form of statutory inspection systems or evaluation and monitoring processes by individuals or agencies such as training supervisors, funding bodies, etc. It is necessary that such external assessment is perceived to be consistent, objective and fair. To this end, it must be based upon open and transparent criteria and processes and should be conducted by suitable, qualified persons. In addition, it should take account of the variety of approaches to assessment which may be employed in the achievement of quality.

Internal assessment refers in general to reflective processes which can be conducted by an individual practitioner, by groups and/or teams within settings and even by a cluster group of settings who have formed an alliance towards the development of quality practice. A wide range of methods may be employed, e.g., observation, action research, journal keeping, etc. However, regardless of the methods, the information generated will usually contribute to a developmental dialogue on the processes of service provision.

Síolta as a framework for assessment

Síolta is designed to facilitate and support all forms of assessment. The richness and diversity of practice in ECCE in Ireland cannot be appreciated through a narrow assessment lens. Multiple assessment methods will be necessary and it is envisaged that an essential aspect of the proposed support model for quality (see Section Six) will focus on preparing practitioners and assessors to engage with a wide variety of assessment methods and approaches. This flexibility regarding the ways in which practitioners assess and evaluate their service is only possible because of the strength and solidity of the core elements of *Síolta*, i.e., the Standards and Components of Quality. These are the benchmark for all assessment and, as such, will inform and be the focus of developments in practice.

For example, an individual practitioner, keen to assess her/his own practice may draw on a range of assessment data. These could include keeping a practice journal, inviting peer observation, participating in formal educational examinations or testing. As long as the benchmark for assessment in all of these processes is the core Standards, then the data will provide valuable evidence for the practitioner on her/his level of performance in relation to *Síolta*. Indeed, it is good practice to draw upon more than one source of assessment data as consistency across all methods means the overall outcome of assessment is more likely to be accurate and reliable. Figure 4 opposite represents this central premise diagrammatically.

Figure 4: The relationship between assessment methods and the Standards of Quality

Proposed model for assessment under *Síolta*

The following section discusses processes that should be included in any possible model for assessment in the context of *Síolta*. It is understood that at this stage of development of the NQF, assessment processes are not fully finalised and will benefit from discussion and consultation with stakeholders. However, these suggestions do reflect a synthesis of best practice both nationally and internationally in relation to assessment that foster developmental processes of change towards the achievement of quality.

Stages of assessment

There are a number of distinct processes that services could engage with in relation to assessment under the NQF. These processes could include:

- Registration;

- Evidence collection and portfolio building;

- Validation.

Each of these processes is explored opposite.

Registration

At this point, service providers are indicating their interest in engaging with *Síolta*. Information giving more details of the initial assessment processes may be sent to the service provider and may include:

- Overview of the NQF process;

- Set of Principles, Standards, Components and Signposts for Reflection appropriate to the type of setting;

- Guidelines for evidence collection;

- Application form for registration.

On receipt of such materials, the service provider is able to read and reflect upon the Standards. Clear guidelines would be necessary at this point to assist the provider to decide whether to proceed with registration. These guidelines should include:

- The minimum requirements for registration;

- Evidence of compliance with relevant legislation and regulation;

- Details regarding the content of the portfolio of evidence to support the application for registration.

To complete any registration process, it is envisaged that it would be necessary to conduct a baseline external assessment visit to the setting. On the basis of this visit, the setting would be given a baseline rating and, providing it met the minimum requirements and wished to continue with the NQF process, formal registration would be completed.

Assessment scale

The successful implementation of Síolta will require assessment decisions to be made regarding a setting's implementation of the Standards and Components of Quality. The scale outlined below is one possible mechanism for achieving this objective:

*Level 1. There is **no** observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.*

*Level 2. There is **some** observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.*

*Level 3. There is **significant** observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.*

*Level 4. There is **extensive** observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.*

This scale should facilitate implementation of the Quality improvement spiral. (see Figure 3)

Evidence collection process

In order to achieve the Standards and Components of Quality, a setting must be able to produce a portfolio of evidence which can be externally assessed. It is envisaged that completion of such a portfolio would require external support. A discussion on the possible nature of these supports is included in the next section.

Validation processes

The final process in the quality assurance model relates to external validation of the internal quality development processes. In addition to the review of the portfolio of evidence submitted by the setting, other validation activities could include interviews, observations and review of documentation, etc. These validation processes would culminate in the production of both summative and formative reports. A summative report is based upon the awarding of merit according to scale (see assessment scale). In addition, a formative report, presented as a narrative, should focus on areas of strength and target areas for future development within the setting. At this point in the process, a decision may be made regarding the making of an award.

Summary

This discussion has been based on widespread consideration of established views in both national and international literature and extensive consultation with a broad range of stakeholders on best practice in relation to assessment processes in support of quality in ECCE settings. It is anticipated that the next phase of the development of *Síolta* will facilitate further refinement of this model towards the implementation of *Síolta* in a pilot process.

Section Five
Supporting Quality

Section Five
Supporting Quality
Introduction

The CECDE has recognised, from the earliest stages of the development of *Síolta*, that practitioners should receive support in engaging with the Framework in pursuit of quality improvement. This has been made very clear throughout the four pillars of research, already described in Section Three, and in the very structure devised for the Framework, namely, Defining, Assessing and Supporting Quality. The CECDE has always promoted an integrated and holistic view of quality, in which all stakeholders have a part to play in ensuring quality services for our youngest children. We do not view the provision of such high quality services as the responsibility of practitioners alone, but as a mutual effort, undertaken co-operatively and involving all facets of the system – individual, local, regional and national. All of our efforts must be focused firmly on the child, whose well-being lies at the heart of quality practice.

Elements of Support

This analysis takes as its starting point the results of the consultation seminars which the CECDE held in late 2003 (CECDE, 2004a). Participants were asked to enumerate the elements of support required to enhance quality provision, and the outcome of their responses is illustrated in Figure 5 opposite.

Figure 5: Supporting Quality – Consultation Findings
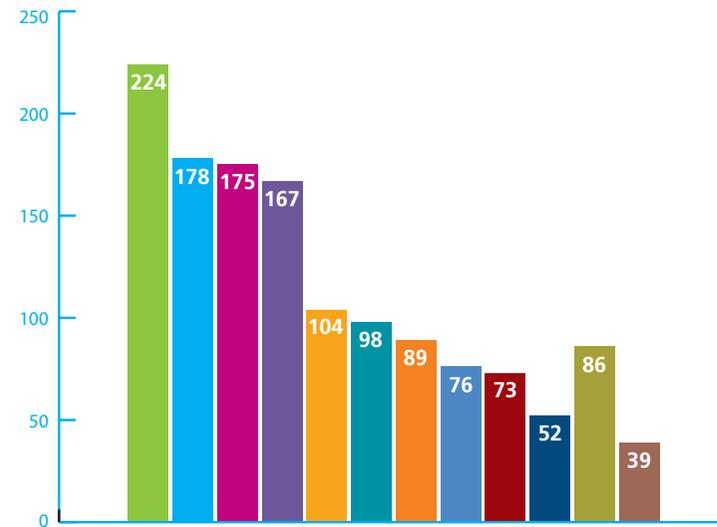
Legend:
- Funding/Financial Support
- Professional Development
- Staff Training and Qualifications
- Networking & Mentoring
- Standards/Guidelines/Regulations/Curriculum
- Resources & Equipment
- Government Supports/Political Commitment
- Availability of Information
- Parental/Community Involvement
- Time for Teamwork
- Other
- Don't know/No Reply

Source: CECDE (2004a:15)

For the purposes of establishing a comprehensive picture of current views from practice, policy and research in ECCE, this initial analysis was augmented with information from a number of other sources. The implications for supporting quality which emerged from the research undertaken for the national review (CECDE, 2004b), the international review (CECDE, 2004c) and the review of child learning and development (CECDE, 2005b), were considered. Input from a number of other recent and relevant policy documents, for example, the OECD report (DES, 2004b), the report of the NESF (NESF, 2005) and DEIS (DES, 2005), has also been considered. Finally, as part of the CECDE consultation process on the development of *Síolta*, submissions were requested from the Consultative Committee on the subject of the supports members viewed as necessary to the implementation of the Framework. These four sources - consultation, research, current analysis and submissions - are synthesised here to provide information on the supports for quality provision deemed necessary by the wider ECCE sector.

From this analysis, two separate levels of support were identified. The first concerns the macro level of support for quality and highlights issues that need to be addressed at national level, and which are identified as fundamental to the overall development of quality ECCE provision in Ireland. The second relates more specifically to supports which stakeholders have identified as necessary in order for practitioners and services to successfully implement *Síolta* in practice settings.

National Issues

Funding

In the course of the CECDE consultation with stakeholders in the sector, and reflecting a major concern among providers, funding and financial support emerged as the main support required to promote and safeguard the delivery of quality provision. Participants proposed a number of ways in which this could be facilitated, including direct funding for childcare, capital grants, capitation grants and tax arrangements. The OECD (DES, 2004b) has, likewise, emphasised the economic and social benefits of investing in ECCE, and have recommended a shift in investment towards services for young children in Ireland, while pointing out the costs of not doing so.

Consistent with this view, the CECDE analysis of quality related material in the national context noted that sustained long-term commitment to adequate financial supports (on the part of the State) emerged as essential to the development of quality ECCE service provision. Throughout our consultation process and in our national review, it has been acknowledged that Ireland has started from a very low base-line investment and that substantial improvement has taken place in the past number of years.

Implications for *Síolta*

The implementation of *Síolta* will require adequate funding, with security of funding assured into the future, in order to enable services to engage fully, and with confidence, in the quality development process.

Co-ordination

Participants in the consultation seminars acknowledged the critical influence that government policy and practice exerts upon the provision of ECCE services. They highlighted the significant improvement in recent years in the priority afforded to ECCE in policy commitments by a number of government departments, in particular, the DES, DHC and

DJELR. However, there were calls for the implementation of policies already devised or ratified by the government, a call reiterated by the NESF (NESF, 2005).

In addition, participants were anxious to see greater coordination between government departments and organisations dealing with ECCE. This latter point has gained prominence in recent times. The OECD, in particular, has drawn attention to the gains which would accrue to Ireland by taking an integrated approach to ECCE. The OECD proposes, in fact, that one ministry or designated funding and policy agency be the focus for such integration, as is becoming the norm in many OECD countries (DES, 2004b). Additionally, the CECDE international review has identified that, among the six countries surveyed, a clear, coherent co-ordinated policy framework is essential for the promotion of quality ECCE (CECDE, 2004b). The White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a) also supports the need for such coordination of ECCE provision. The White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a) also supports the need for such coordination of ECCE provision. Indeed, the CECDE was established as the forerunner of the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA), as posited in the White Paper.

Implications for *Síolta*

Síolta will be supported by designating a lead Department or agency with responsibility for driving forward implementation in the context of co-ordinating existing infrastructure to meet programme requirements.

Training and qualifications

Levels of staff training and qualifications are recognised internationally as a major contributor to, and support for, the quality of service provision (CECDE, 2004c). Training and qualifications encompasses pre-service education, leading to accredited and standardised qualifications, and continuing professional development.

Issues of concern for the ECCE sector in this area include access to education and training and flexibility of training pathways. As described by the participants in the CECDE consultation seminars, this must involve access to ongoing training and development for practitioners which dovetails with their work and personal commitments (CECDE, 2004a). Flexibility in the provision of continuing professional development is important, with measures such as release time from work, as well as the provision of modular or part-time courses. Such a professional development infrastructure would permit a career path to be clearly identified, attracting and retaining young practitioners and strengthening the emerging identity of the ECCE sector.

The CECDE's national review concurred with the views expressed by the participants in the consultation seminars. Furthermore, it identified the availability of a qualified workforce with clearly defined career structures, good terms and conditions of employment and regular opportunities for continuing professional development as fundamental to the development of quality in ECCE (CECDE, 2004b). Considerable activity is underway in this regard – the NQAI and the Awarding bodies HETAC and FETAC, who have responsibility for setting standards for national awards in all fields of learning, are developing policies and procedures to resolve many of the concerns raised in relation to access to and participation in education and training. These agencies have also been engaging with the CECDE in regard to the specific requirements of the ECCE sector. While the baseline level of pre-service education amongst a significant proportion of practitioners in the ECCE sector remains low, the NESF has noted improvements in recent years as practitioners have engaged with additional training. This report also notes, however, that difficulties persist with regard to access, flexibility and the accreditation of prior learning (NESF, 2005). Currently, as the OECD has pointed out, staff may - or may

not - have one of a variety of qualifications achieved through various courses, accredited or not, delivered by a range of training providers (DES, 2004b). However, as the White Paper on Early Childhood Education stated, any changes to the requirements regarding qualifications must be phased in over time, to ensure that practitioners with considerable expertise developed through experience have the opportunity to gain the qualifications that reflect that expertise (DES, 1999a).

Implications for *Síolta*

The training and qualifications levels of practitioners will impact on the capacity of services to engage with the quality improvement process. A related programme of professional development will support the implementation of *Síolta*.

National practice frameworks

The potential role of national frameworks in the support of quality in early childhood education provision emerged in the course of the CECDE consultation with stakeholders in ECCE. The NCCA, in their consultation document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004), has also noted that the development of such a framework is an important step in supporting existing ECCE services. The potential of practice frameworks was identified in relation to the need for harmonisation of practice in the ECCE sector. Shared benchmarks were identified by participants as central to ensuring that all children had an equivalent experience of quality in all early years' settings. This last view is very clearly incorporated into *Síolta*, as the Principles, Standards and Components of Quality are common to the four settings to which the Framework applies. In fact, in the case of this particular identified need, considerable progress has been made: A National Quality Framework is now available and work is continuing on a national Framework for Early Learning.

Implications for *Síolta*

A synergy of both the Framework for Early Learning and *Síolta* will provide a coherent context for quality practice with young children.

Parental and community involvement

It is clear from the discussion on parental and community involvement and the relationship between ECCE services, the family and the community, that a clear consensus emerged about the ecological nature of the relationships between all three. As a measure of the commitment shown by the ECCE sector to, in particular, parental involvement, participants in the consultation held that parents would need to be supported to actively participate in this role. DEIS (DES, 2005) renews the DES commitment to supporting parents in their children's learning and development. The White Paper on Early Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a), emphasises the importance of partnership with parents, and highlights their position as the prime educators and experts on their children, while the *National Children's Strategy* (DHC, 2000) proposes that the family should be supported and empowered within the community. The Standards on both 'Parents and Families' and 'Community Involvement' in the NQF establish these aspects of practice as central to quality provision.

Implications for *Síolta*

Specific measures will be required during the implementation of *Síolta* to make sure that services and children can benefit from the contribution of parents and families, and that services can contribute to their communities and, in turn, gain from the relationship.

Data strategy

The need for a national data strategy to gather and provide accurate, reliable information to support the development of all aspects of ECCE emerged from the national review relating to quality. The CECDE had identified the same need in *On Target* (CECDE, 2004d) following an audit of

services targeting disadvantage among young children in Ireland. Similarly, the OECD has pointed to the challenge for Ireland to develop reliable statistics and data on young children (DES, 2004b). Such data is necessary for the co-ordination of policy and provision and, most importantly, will make children in the birth to six years age group visible within society.

Implications for *Síolta*

The optimal allocation of resources in support of *Síolta* can be made more effective in the context of a national data collection system, focused on young children from birth to six years, providing reliable information to facilitate planning and policy development.

Research, evaluation and dissemination

A number of the submissions received by the CECDE in relation to supporting quality recommended making up-to-date research and information available to practitioners. Such information is viewed as essential for ongoing professional development. Structures to facilitate this are suggested in the following section. Information will also be required on the Framework itself. A comprehensive and long-term research project will be necessary to ensure the validity of *Síolta* in the Irish context. This research should include:

- A comprehensive evaluation of the impact of *Síolta* at all levels of provision and practice;

- A report of children's experiences of and views on the Framework;

- Mechanisms to facilitate practitioners responses to the implementation of *Síolta*.

The evaluation project should reflect all perspectives on quality, in keeping with the CECDE Research Strategy (CECDE, 2003b) and should report at agreed intervals. Information gleaned from evaluation should be shared with the ECCE

sector and the implications for practice debated widely. The CECDE Audit of Research, which is updated on a regular basis, has revealed significant knowledge gaps on quality practice in ECCE in Ireland and has recommended that this situation be redressed in order to support the development of quality practice into the future (CECDE, 2003a). *Síolta* provides an excellent opportunity to focus research and evaluation efforts on issues of quality and to use this information to inform policy and practice in ECCE in Ireland.

Implications for *Síolta*

A long-term evaluation programme, providing evidence of best practice and quality improvement methods, will be essential to support the effective implementation of *Síolta*.

Suggestions for specific supports for services and practitioners implementing *Síolta*

The following suggestions for specific supports for services implementing the Framework are gleaned from the submissions received from the CECDE Consultative Committee as part of the consultation process on the development of *Síolta*. There was a general view that any supports offered must, ultimately, help services achieve the measures of quality outlined within *Síolta* and must relate closely to the assessment processes associated with establishing levels of achievement in this regard. In the absence of agreed processes related to assessment, the nature of these suggested supports for the implementation of *Síolta* is, therefore, general.

Support and advice

Settings and practitioners engaging with *Síolta* will need support and advice during the implementation process. A number of suggestions were made through the submissions on how this could be achieved. Great emphasis was placed on the availability of on-site support from an advisor with practice experience and expertise. Additional suggestions

included telephone support, where the advisor would be available to respond to telephone queries from settings and practitioners.

Information services

There are a number of possibilities for the provision and dissemination of information to services engaging with *Síolta*. The first possibility is a dedicated web page on the *Síolta* website. These web-based supports could offer, among other things, access and links to online resources and downloads to support various aspects of practice. Another possibility is a dedicated newsletter for services taking part in the implementation. The content could include information from the various *Síolta* Networks (see below), contributions from services and practitioners taking part, and ideas and information for working with children. As a further support to implementation through the provision of information, the CECDE will publish additional materials to support various aspects of practice, e.g. assessment, play and parental involvement. Dissemination of information could take place through providing access for settings and practitioners to seminars on specific issues related to *Síolta* at local, regional and national level. Such seminars might also facilitate networking, another aspect of the supports suggested for *Síolta*.

Networks

Opportunities for networking among practitioners was emphasised in several of the submissions, and, again, there are a number of possibilities for facilitating such activity. For example, an on-line network, with a link from the dedicated web page, would allow settings and practitioners implementing *Síolta* to engage in dialogue with each other, to share information, ask questions and exchange ideas. This could be a solution for services that operate in rural or isolated areas, or where population density does not support sufficient service numbers to enable meetings.

Where meetings are possible, there are already many examples of practitioner networks under the auspices of statutory or voluntary groups. Quality support networks, or cluster groups, are another possibility, where practitioners from all setting types can meet to exchange information, share expertise, engender new ideas and promote co-ordinated approaches. To promote cohesion, both the quality support networks and the on-line networks will run in parallel, with information shared across both.

Summary

This section on the possibilities for the provision of supports for the implementation of *Síolta* has drawn on the views of stakeholders, policy analysis, CECDE research and the submissions of members of the CECDE Consultative Committee. It considers the variety of measures which experience and current practice indicate will be central to the successful implementation of *Síolta*. It reiterates the view that the implementation of quality improvement processes is a project which must include all stakeholders across the ECCE sector, and not just practitioners. Supporting quality must be a shared effort with the ultimate goal of providing our youngest children with the best services possible.

Section Six
Conclusion
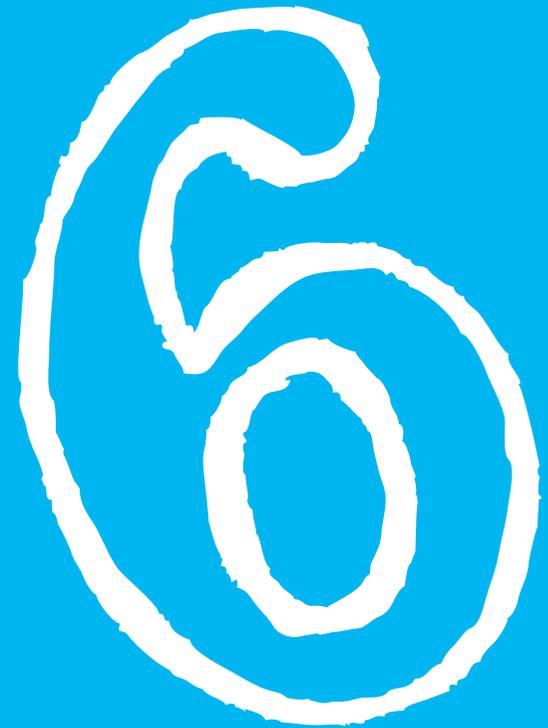
Section Six
Conclusion

The contents of this handbook have been designed to present a broad overview of the context, process of development and possibilities for future implementation of *Síolta - The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. It has clearly articulated the commitment of the CECDE to evidence-informed policy development. Furthermore, it has defined this evidence in terms of consultation, and review of policy, practice and research in both the national and international context. The openness and transparency of this development process has promoted a sense of ownership among the wider ECCE sector. The inclusion of preliminary discussion documents on the issues of assessing and supporting quality will facilitate the continuation of this sector-wide consultation and collaboration.

The publication of *Síolta* marks a positive milestone in the dynamic evolution of the ECCE sector in Ireland. It is a unique document, representing as it does the consensus of an unprecedented number of those involved, whether directly or indirectly, in the provision of ECCE services. Undoubtedly there remains a great deal of work to do in order to realise the potential for change contained within these documents. However, the preparation and publication of these materials ensures that such work can begin to proceed in a coordinated and cohesive manner. The CECDE looks forward with anticipation to this future work. The support we have received, in the first instance from the DES and, in the wider sense, from the membership of our Consultative Committee and the ECCE community of practice they represent, has been a decisive factor in the achievement of our *Programme of Work* to date. With the continuation of such support, we can continue the collaborative processes that have produced these materials, and ensure that they make a real and positive impact on the quality of young children's experiences in their earliest and formative years.

Glossary | Appendix | References

Glossary

Adult
The term is used inclusively in the Framework to describe the range of adults (parents/guardians, professionals, extended family, etc.) who interact with the child/children. On occasion, specific titles such as practitioner or teacher are used in certain contexts within specific settings.

Care and education
This Framework considers care and education to be interdependent experiences in the life of the young child.

Child/children
The Framework is concerned with **all** children between the ages of birth and six years, irrespective of ability, ethnicity, socio-economic status, background, family status, or any other defining term. This is described as a universal approach, and for the Framework means that all children are included in its provisions.

Community involvement
Community involvement, within the Framework, refers to cohesion and links between and among individuals, families, services and agencies within the local community and wider society.

Competent learner
Within the Framework, the child is viewed as having learning skills and capacities from birth. These skills and capacities can be enhanced through her/his interactions with family, peers, adults and the wider world.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
The ongoing updating of skills and knowledge that is required for successful professional practice. (DJELR, 2002:36)

Curriculum
This refers to all learning experiences, whether formal or informal, planned or unplanned, which contribute to a child's development. (NCCA, 2004:2)

Developmentally appropriate
Activities are developmentally appropriate when they reflect a child's particular age and stage of development. (NCCA, 2004:2)

Diversity
Within the context of *Síolta*, this term is used to describe differences in individuals by virtue of gender, age, skin colour, language, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, religion, race or other background factors such as family structure, economic circumstances, etc.

Early childhood
For the purposes of this Framework, early childhood refers to the period from birth to six years of age.

Equality
Equality, in the context of this Framework, is characterised by respect, commitment to partnership and equitable treatment for all children and adults. Specifically in relation to children, it means that all children should be able to gain access to, to participate in and to benefit from early years services on an equal basis, *"…irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status."* (UN, 1989:Article 2)

Family
In the context of the Framework, the family is considered in terms of relationship to the child. With reference to the Commission on the Family, the child's connection to the family is on the basis of birth, adoption or placement. The family, as it relates to the child, is characterised *"…by its members together assuming responsibility for the care and support of each other, particularly children…and by the sharing of time and resources which promotes intimacy and belongingness."* (DSCFA, 1998: 625)

Holistic
In the context of the NQF, this means that the various aspects of child development and learning are inter-dependent and inter-related.

Identity and belonging
Identity refers to the identifying characteristics, behaviours and understandings which children may have, sometimes uniquely and sometimes shared with others. Shared identities enable children to develop a sense of belonging or a close relationship with or affinity to a particular group. (NCCA, 2004:2)

Interactions
Interactions, in the context of the Framework, refers to the exchanges (verbal, non-verbal, physical, planned, spontaneous, etc.), which take place at any stage during the daily routine between all those (children and adults) present in the setting.

Key worker
A key worker is the adult designated as the primary carer, providing continuity and security of attachment for the child.

Parent
The term parent includes all parent(s)/guardian(s) of the child.

Partner/Partnership
In the context of the NQF, this means interacting with another individual or individuals (adult or child) with regard and respect for the rights of the other(s), recognising their different, but complementary, roles.

Pedagogy
Pedagogy, in the context of the NQF, refers to a holistic approach to child learning and development which embraces both care and education.

Philosophy
In the context of the NQF, a philosophy is an expression of the values and principles underpinning the work in the ECCE setting.

Play
Play, in the context of the NQF, encompasses all activities and opportunities for engaging with the environment (both materials and people), which extend the child's learning, development and creative potential.

Policy/policies
For the purpose of the NQF, policies are agreed written statements that determine practice in any given Standard area.

Practitioner
In the context of the NQF, the term practitioner is used generically to mean any adult working in a paid capacity in an ECCE setting.

Procedure
A procedure is an agreed practice relating to specific activities that take place on a regular, ongoing and foreseeable basis in all settings, e.g., going outdoors.

Process/processes
The term process, in the context of the NQF, relates to the constant and continuous nature of the interactions taking place throughout the setting on a daily basis. These are not necessarily planned but may take place in the context of agreed policies, e.g., informal meetings with parents.

Qualification
An award which is conferred, granted or given by an awarding body and which records that a learner has acquired a standard of knowledge, skill or competence (NQAI, 2005).

Reflective practice
This refers to a style of working in an ECCE setting that involves regular and rigorous review of practice through reflection.

Setting
The range of places in which ECCE services for children aged birth to six are operated, including crèches, nurseries, playgroups, the infant classes of primary schools, childminders and Montessori schools.

Special needs
Children with special needs in the context of the NQF are, *"…those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, or for whom the education which is generally provided in the classroom is not sufficiently challenging."* **(Department of Education, 1993:18)**

Stakeholder
In the context of the NQF, stakeholders are those individuals, groups, organisations, etc., with an involvement or interest in early childhood care and education.

Transitions
Transitions refer to the movement/transfer of a child/children into, within and from a situation or setting.

Well-being
Well-being refers to all aspects of the physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual health and well-being of the child, which are essential foundations for early and all subsequent learning. (NCCA, 2004:3)

Whole-child perspective
The National Quality Framework adopts a whole child perspective consistent with the National Children's Strategy. (DHC, 2000:24)

Appendix 1
Membership of Committees
Consultative Committee

1. Ballymun Partnership [from March 2004]

2. Barnardos

3. Border Counties Childcare Network

4. Childminding Ireland

5. Children's Research Centre

6. Children's Rights Alliance / Children in Hospital Ireland

7. Combat Poverty Agency

8. Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta Teoranta

9. Cúram / WITH [from January 2005]

10. Department of Education and Science

11. Department of Health and Children

12. Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

13. Department of Social and Family Affairs

14. Disability Federation of Ireland

15. Dublin Institute of Technology

16. Foras Áiseanna Saothair

17. Forbairt Naíonraí Teo

18. Forum of People with Disabilities

19. Further Education and Training Awards Council

20. High/Scope Ireland

21. Higher Education and Training Awards Council

22. IMPACT

23. IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation

24. Irish Association for Teachers in Special Education

25. Irish Farmers' Association

26. Irish Montessori Education Board

27. Irish National Teachers' Organisation

28. Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association

29. Mary Immaculate College of Education

30. National Association for Intellectual Disability in Ireland

31. National Children's Office

32. National College of Ireland

33. National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism

34. National Disability Authority

35. National Federation of Voluntary Bodies

36. National Forum of Preschool Inspectors

37. National Parents and Siblings Alliance

38. National Parents Council – Primary

39. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

40. National Children's Nurseries Association

41. OMEP Ireland

42. Pavee Point

43. Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development

44. Southern and Eastern Regional Assembly

45. St. Nicholas Montessori Society

46. St. Patrick's College of Education

47. Traveller Preschool Teachers' Association

48. Treoir

49. University College Cork

50. Vision in Childcare [from February 2004]

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