

CONTEXT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN IRELAND

In the last decade or so there have been many significant developments in the early childhood sector at local, national and European Commission levels.

Preschool Regulations were first introduced in Ireland in 1996. These regulations were revised in 2006 and have now been further revised in the [Child Care Act 1991 \(Early Years Services\) Regulations 2016](#) and the [Child Care Act 1991 \(Early Years Services\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2016](#). In 2018, Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate developed the [Quality and Regulatory Framework \(QRF\)](#), which sets out the core regulatory requirements for compliance with the Early Years Regulations 2016. The Quality and Regulatory Framework applies to all registered Early Years Services. It sets out, in a clear way, the requirements for statutory compliance for providers of services, the stakeholders and parents/guardians to help them understand how the Early Years Regulations 2016 are interpreted in practice by the Early Years Inspectorate and how to comply with the Regulations.

There have also been some very significant changes in Irish and international laws in relation to children's rights. The Early Years Regulations 2016 and these other legal changes, as well as other important developments, have made a significant impact on what providers of early years care and education services are required to do and wish to do, to meet higher standards of quality in developing and providing safer, more efficient and more effective services for children and families, and to ensure that children's rights are protected.

The developments and changes have also brought many and varied new supports to early years providers and educators to help meet these requirements and expectations.

The developments which impact on service provision for young children include:

- The development of [Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education](#) (CECDE, 2006) and the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP).
- The introduction of [Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework](#) (NCCA, 2009).
- [Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children & Young People 2014-2020](#) (DCYA, 2014).
- The establishment of [Tusla, the Child and Family Agency](#) (2014) and the subsequent nationalisation of the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate
The development of the online [Aistear Síolta Practice Guide](#) (NCCA, 2015), a quality practice resource which is directly accessible to all providers, educators and parents.

- The introduction of the new [Early Years Education Inspectorate](#) (EYEI) at the Department of Education and Skills (2015).
- The creation of the national [Better Start Quality Development Service](#) (2015) and [AIM the Access and Inclusion Model](#) (2016).
- The National Síolta Aistear Initiative (2016), which is guided and overseen by a steering group from the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Better Start.
- The coming into operation of the [Child Care Act 1991 \(Early Years Services\) Regulations 2016](#) and the [Child Care Act 1991 \(Early Years Services\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2016](#) (DCYA, 2016).
- The requirement under the Early Years Regulations 2016 for services to be registered with Tusla.
- The development of the [Quality and Regulatory Framework \(QRF\)](#) 2018 by the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate.
- We are awaiting the launch of the first national Early Years Strategy in development by DCYA.

All of these positive developments have brought important new understandings, expectations and incentives for service providers to review, evaluate and update their operating processes, policies and procedures.

They have also brought many valuable supports for services to inform their policy development and to enhance their practice in all areas.

It is important to note that all of these relatively recent developments keep the child at the centre of quality practice and recognise the significance of quality early childhood experiences.

Awareness of all developments in the early years sector is important when developing policies and procedures and all service policies should reflect all of the most up-to-date developments, knowledge and information.

Supports for Early Years Service Providers

Tusla and the Quality and Regulatory Framework

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency was established on the 1st January 2014 and is the State agency responsible for improving well-being and outcomes for children.

The Agency operates under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, a progressive piece of legislation with children at its heart, and families viewed as the foundation of a strong healthy community where children can flourish.

Partnership and co-operation in the delivery of seamless services to children and families are also central to the Act.

("About Us | Tusla - Child and Family Agency", 2018)

Tusla is the regulatory agency responsible for inspecting preschools, play groups, crèches, day-care and similar services which cater for children aged from birth to six years.

On 4 May 2016, The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs published the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. The Early Years Regulations provide for preschool services, that is, those services catering for children under the age of six years who are not attending primary school. The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Amendments) Regulations 2016 were published on the 20th December 2016. These Regulations are known as the Early Years Regulations 2016.

Part 12 of The Child and Family Agency Act amends the Child Care Act 1991 (as inserted by section 92 of The Child and Family Agency Act) known as Part VIIA, which sets out the supervision of Early Years Services including inspections and registration.

Tusla National Early Years Inspectorate, is responsible for ensuring that early years provision is delivered in accordance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 and the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Amendment) Regulations 2016.

Tusla is also responsible for the registration system of early years service providers, which commenced in 2016. It is a legal requirement for all early years services proposing to operate, to make application under section 58D(2) of The Child and Family Agency Act 2013, at least three months before they intend to commence operation (except in the case of a Temporary early years service, in which case at least 21 days' notice must be given).

A registered provider must operate in accordance with the statutory requirements of the State as set down in the Early Years Regulations 2016 and Part 12 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 (Article 58 G). Providers have a right of reply to any non-compliance to the regulations identified on inspection and to registration decisions.

One of the requirements for registration is to ensure that the policies, procedures and statements of the service specified in Schedule 5 of the Early Years Regulations 2016 are in place.

For more information see <http://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/early-years-quality-and-regulatory-framework/>

City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) and Voluntary Childcare Organisations (VCOs)

City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) are funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and act as local agents for the DCYA in the administration of aspects of national early years education and care programmes. The CCCs provide supports to providers with the early years care and education initiatives. The CCCs have a local focus and knowledge which is helpful in providing supports for the development and sustainment of early years services.

The CCCs provide:

- Supports for the delivery of DCYA national programmes;
- Supports to local service providers and parents on national programmes and service quality in keeping with national frameworks and policy objectives;
- Co-ordination and provision of training; and
- A local centre of advice, information and support for all early years education and care and school age services related issues.

Voluntary Organisations that support Early Years Education and Care Providers include:

- Barnardos
- Early Childhood Ireland (ECI)
- National Childhood Network (NCN)
- Childminding Ireland
- Gaelscoileanna Teo.
- Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association
- St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland

City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) and the Voluntary Organisations (VCOs) work together locally and nationally to support early years education and care service providers (and school age service providers) to improve the quality of their services. CCCs and VCOs provide this through a variety of mechanisms such as information, resources, mentoring, advice and training to service providers. They promote and support implementation of the national frameworks that improve the quality of service delivery.

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was developed by the CECDE (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education) and published in 2006. Its purpose is to provide a national quality framework for all types of early childhood settings in Ireland and includes a Quality Assurance Programme (QAP). Síolta represents the edited work of a wide range of stakeholders in the

ECEC sector in Ireland and extensive consultation with the sector played a key role in its development.

Síolta (meaning 'seeds' which symbolises the opportunity for growth) comprises 12 Principles of quality and 16 Standards of quality which support settings to define, assess and implement quality practice. Síolta is based upon national and international research. It addresses **all** dimensions of practice from providing quality environments for young children's learning and development, to fostering high quality, positive relationships, to organisation, planning, evaluation and professional practice.

One of the purposes of Síolta is to act as a tool for policy development and to promote common understandings among those who influence the early experiences of young children such as those who are engaged in the process of developing policies for early years services.

Síolta can add value 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

Since December 2008, the Early Years Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills (co-located in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs), has been responsible for the implementation of Síolta.

Elements of Síolta

Síolta comprises three main elements as outlined below:

1. Principles of Quality – There are 12 Principles and these provide the overall vision of the Framework.
2. Standards of Quality – The 16 Standards cover all of the areas of practice that are addressed and translate the vision of quality contained in the Principles into the reality of practice.
3. Components of Quality – The Components provide quality indicators for implementing Síolta. They relate directly to the Standards and act to break each standard area of practice down into more focused and specific parts. The Components of Quality are each further explained by a set of Signposts for Reflection and 'Think-about's'. The Signposts for Reflection act as self-reflection guidelines for early years educators to focus their thinking about current practice, and to help identify elements of their practice that are positive, as well as the elements in need of further development. The 'Think-about's' support educators in early education settings to become aware of and critical of their practice.

The Síolta Standards

1. **Rights of the Child**
Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she or he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her or his own development and learning.
2. **Environments**
Enriching environments, both indoor and outdoor (including materials and equipment) are well-maintained, safe, available, accessible, adaptable, developmentally appropriate, and offer a variety of challenging and stimulating experiences.
3. **Parents and Families**
Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.
4. **Consultation**
Ensuring inclusive decision-making requires consultation that promotes participation, and seeks out, listens to and acts upon the views and opinions of children, parents and staff, and other stakeholders as appropriate.
5. **Interactions**
Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.
6. **Play**
Promoting play requires that each child has ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and meaning making in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and alone, where appropriate.
7. **Curriculum**
Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.
8. **Planning and Evaluation**
Enriching and informing all aspects of practice within the setting requires cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation undertaken on a regular basis.

9. Health and Welfare
Promoting the health and welfare of the child requires protection from harm, provision of nutritious food, appropriate opportunities for rest, and secure relationships characterised by trust and respect.
10. Organisation
Organising and managing resources effectively requires an agreed written philosophy, supported by clearly communicated policies and procedures to guide and determine practice.
11. Professional Practice
Practising in a professional manner requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition, it requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported ongoing professional development.
12. Communication
Communicating effectively in the best interests of the child requires policies, procedures and actions that promote the proactive sharing of knowledge and information among appropriate stakeholders, with respect and confidentiality.
13. Transitions
Ensuring continuity of experiences for each child requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents and, where appropriate, relevant professionals.
14. Identity and Belonging
Promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practice that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self- and group-identity, and have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others.
15. Legislation and Regulation
Being compliant requires that all relevant regulations and legislative requirements are met or exceeded.
16. Community Involvement
Promoting community involvement requires the establishment of networks and connections evidenced by policies, procedures and actions which extend and support all adults' and children's engagement with the wider community.

The Síolta Principles

The following are the 12 Principles of Síolta:

1. Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.
2. The child's individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood experiences.
3. Parents/guardians are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her or his well-being, learning and development.
4. Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the well-being, learning and development of the young child.
5. Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education.
6. Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated.
7. The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her or his well-being, learning and development.
8. The safety, welfare and well-being of all children must be protected and promoted in all early childhood environments.
9. The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental.
10. The provision of quality early childhood experiences requires cooperation, communication and mutual respect.
11. Pedagogy¹ in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education.
12. Play is central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child.

¹ Pedagogy is a term that is used to refer to the whole range of interactions which support the child's development.

The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP)

Following the introduction of the Síolta Quality Framework, the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) was introduced to allow early years settings to engage in a process of self-assessment and quality development, using the Síolta framework in a formal and structured way. The Síolta QAP is a strengths-based approach to using Síolta that supports early years services to self-assess and develop the quality of their practice and provision over a period of time.

Settings engaging in the QAP work through a series of 10 steps with the support of a Síolta Aistear Mentor as shown in Table 1 below.

Stage A: Registration
1. Registration
2. Allocation of Síolta Mentor
3. Introduction to Síolta QAP (materials and processes)
Stage B: Self-assessment (Baseline) and Quality Improvement
4. Baseline Assessment
5. Action Planning
6. Developing Quality & Portfolio Building
7. Portfolio Review and Submission
Stage C: Validation
8. Validation
9. Certification
10. Renewal

Table 1 Stages of the Síolta QAP

The Síolta Aistear Mentor's role is to facilitate the process of implementing the Síolta QAP by:

- Providing mentoring support.
- Encouraging and supporting reflective practice.
- Supporting settings through the QAP processes – self-assessment, action planning, development work and portfolio building (including evidence collection).

Implementing the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme requires a commitment from early years teams, but it has many benefits including:

- Delivering the best possible service to children and families.
- More effective early learning experiences for children.
- Seeing familiar things in new ways.
- Personal and professional development for all team members.
- A shared understanding within teams and enhanced teamwork.
- Continuous quality improvement.

The final stage in the Síolta QAP (Stage C as shown in Table 1) is validation, where a service's self-assessed ratings and accompanying portfolio of practice (including evidence) are reviewed by an external validator. The validator is assigned by the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) at the Department of Education and Skills. A portfolio review, combined with a validation visit to the early years setting, forms part of the validation process. The QAP is completed when a setting is issued with a validation certificate by the EYEPU which gives details of the levels of quality they have achieved for each of the 16 Síolta Standards.

For more information on Síolta and the Síolta QAP see www.siolta.ie

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, introduced in 2009, focuses on quality learning experiences in all settings for children aged from birth to six years. Aistear describes the types of learning, the dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding, that are important for children in their early years, and offers ideas and suggestions as to how this learning might be nurtured. The Framework also provides guidelines on supporting children's learning through partnerships with parents, interactions, play and assessment.

In supporting children's early learning and development, Aistear:

- Identifies what and how children should learn, and describes the types of experiences that can support this.
- Makes connections in children's learning throughout the early childhood years and as they move from one setting to another.
- Supports parents as their children's primary educators during early childhood, and promotes effective partnerships between parents and educators.
- Complements and extends existing curricula and materials.
- Informs practice across a range of settings, disciplines and professions, and encourages interdisciplinary work.

Aistear is based on 12 principles of early learning and development. Each principle is presented using a short statement. This is followed by an explanation of the principle from the child's perspective. This explanation highlights the adult's role in supporting children's early learning and development.

Aistear presents children's learning and development using four themes. These are:

- **Well-being** – Well-being focuses on developing as a person. It has two main elements: psychological well-being (including feeling and thinking) and physical well-being
- **Identity and Belonging** – This theme is about children developing a positive sense of who they are and feeling valued and respected as part of a family and community

- **Communicating** – This theme is about children sharing their experiences, ideas, thoughts and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes
- **Exploring and Thinking** – This theme is about children making sense of the things, places and people in their world

Each theme begins with a short overview of its importance for children as young learners. The theme is then presented using four aims, which are, in turn, divided into six learning goals. Each theme offers some ideas and suggestions for the types of learning experiences that adults might provide for children in working towards Aistear’s aims and goals. These ideas and suggestions are known as sample learning opportunities.

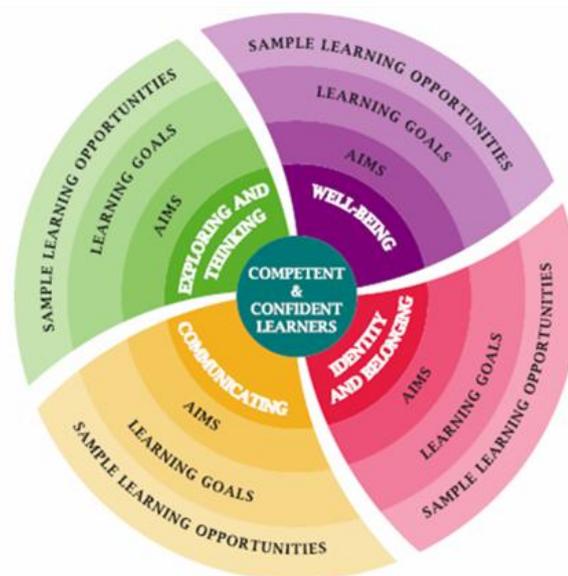


Fig 1: Aistear Themes

For more information on Aistear see <http://www.ncca.biz/Aistear/>

The two national Frameworks – Síolta and Aistear – are very important and both play a significant role in helping to improve the quality of children’s early and most critical, life experiences. Síolta and Aistear have different aims and purposes. Used together they provide the frameworks within which to support the development and quality of practice for all who care for and educate children aged from birth to six years in Ireland. The effective implementation of these two practice frameworks will ultimately result in ‘better outcomes and brighter futures’ for all Irish children.

The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide

The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* is an online resource that supports educators and parents in using Aistear and Síolta together to develop the quality of their curriculum and, in doing so, to better support children's learning and development.

The Practice Guide includes a range of resources to help early years educators to critically reflect on curriculum and to identify what works well. These resources can also help to identify priorities for development and to plan actions for positive change. They can be used for on-going review, development and quality enhancement.

While the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* supports some key elements of quality practice and is an extremely useful resource for early years services, it does not support all of the elements of quality practice that are covered in the Síolta quality framework. It is important to be aware of this and to consider all of the elements of practice that are included in the Síolta framework (all 16 Standards) when developing and implementing policies and procedures.

The Practice Guide can be accessed online at www.aistearsiolta.ie

Better Start Quality Development Service

Better Start Quality Development Service was established in 2015 by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and is hosted by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). It brings an integrated national approach to developing quality in early years education and care, working in collaboration with City and County Childcare Committees and National Voluntary Organisations to ensure that children in Ireland benefit from high quality early years services.

The work of Better Start is underpinned by the Síolta quality framework, the Aistear curriculum framework and the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*.

Better Start Quality Development Service provides an Early Years Specialist team to work directly in a mentoring capacity with early years services, complementing and adding to other quality resources and supports such as training, continuing professional development programmes, networking, cluster-type support groups and individual or team-based development work provided by the City and County Childcare Committees and the Voluntary Organisations such as Barnardos, Early Childhood Ireland and the National Childhood Network.

For more information on Better Start see <https://www.pobal.ie/BetterStart/Pages/Home.aspx>

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) works to improve the quality of learning for children and young people in Irish schools, centres for education, early years settings providing State funded early childhood care and education for children from 2 years 8 months until they enrol in primary school and other learning settings. Essentially, the work of the Inspectorate is concerned with improving the quality of learning for children and young people in these settings. Inspection programmes are designed to evaluate key aspects of education provision in the educational setting inspected and to promote improvement in that setting. Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) is carried out in accordance with section 13(3)(b) of the Education Act 1998 and in line with a Memorandum of Understanding between the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the Minister for Education and Skills and the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills. Early Years settings, funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to deliver the universal free early childhood care and education (ECCE) Programme, are also obliged, under the terms of their grant agreement, to facilitate inspection by the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate (DCYA 2018 section 8.1).

Early Years Education Inspection evaluates the nature, range and appropriateness of the early educational experiences for children participating in the ECCE Programme. The EYEI model of inspection is based on a quality framework informed by the principles of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, and Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, as well as national and international research related to early childhood education and inspection

The principles underpinning the EYEI quality framework include the following:

- Early childhood is a significant and distinct time which must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.
- High quality educational experiences in early childhood contribute significantly to life-long learning success.
- Children's well-being and holistic educational development should be supported in early childhood in accordance with their needs.
- The role of the practitioner in early-years settings is central.
- Children should be active agents in their learning and development, and enabled to achieve their potential as competent, confident learners, through high quality interactions with their environment and with early years educators.
- Children's strengths, needs, opinions, interests and well-being are integral to the early education provided for them.
- Play is central to the learning and development of young children.
- Each child has their own set of experiences and a unique life story. The child's identity as an individual and as a member of a family and wider community is recognised.

- The role of parents as children’s primary educators is recognised and supported.
- Early Years Education Inspection takes cognisance of context factors related to the early years setting, including socio-economic circumstances.

The EYEI model is designed to support the ongoing development of quality in early years settings through the provision of support and advice to educators about how children’s learning experiences and achievements can be developed or improved. It supports self-evaluation and review processes in services and complements other national measures to support continuing improvement in early education provision, for example, the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*.

The EYEI model is used to provide evaluative information, advice and support regarding the quality of education provision in an early years setting with reference to:

- The quality of the context to support children’s learning and development.
- The quality of the processes to support children’s learning and development.
- The quality of children’s learning experiences and achievements.
- The quality of management and leadership for learning.

(Department of Education and Skills, 2018)

Access [A Guide to Early Years Education on Inspection \(EYEI\)](#)

The National Síolta Aistear Initiative

The National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI) is funded by DCYA and was established in 2016 to provide central support and coordination of Síolta and Aistear development and implementation across the early childhood sector.

The National Síolta Aistear Initiative is overseen by a steering group of representatives from the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and from Better Start.

The Initiative is led by the national Síolta Coordinator (DES) and the national Aistear Coordinator (NCCA), working in close collaboration to coordinate effective roll out of the NSAI

The national Síolta Coordinator is based in the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) of DES and is responsible for coordinating the development and implementation of Síolta and the QAP. The Aistear Coordinator is based in NCCA and is responsible for the development of Aistear CPD and the ongoing development of the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide.

The Initiative has a strong focus on the integration of Aistear and Siolta, and works in partnership with a range of stakeholders. Siolta Aistear mentors from City and County Childcare Committees, National Voluntary Organisations and Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programmes provide training, mentoring and coaching supports to early years settings to support them to implement both frameworks.

Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children & Young People 2014-2020

At national policy level, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children & Young People 2014-2020*, published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2014, is the first overarching national policy framework for children and young people which sets out the Government's key commitments to children and young people. The purpose of this policy framework is to coordinate policy across Government to achieve better outcomes. The vision of *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* is:

...for Ireland to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future.

There are strong messages in this vision which are directly relevant to early years service providers, including:

- A commitment to protect the rights of children and to listen to them.
- A commitment to value and support children and young people for who they are today, as well as for what they will become in the future.

European Commission - European Cooperation in Education and the Place of Early Childhood Education and Care

In 2011, the European Commission published a key 'Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care'. In 2017, in its Communication on 'Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture', the European Commission described the vision of a European Education Area in which high quality, inclusive education, training and research are not hampered by borders and people can benefit from the rich educational offer in the Union. High quality early childhood education and care is a part of this vision as it lays the foundation for further learning and formation of identity and citizenship.

The European Commission recognises that the early years are the most formative in human life and they greatly influence people's education, employment and integration prospects. The European Pillar of Social Rights underscores that children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.

On 22 May 2018 the European Commission communicated a Proposal for a European Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems².

The aim of this proposal for a Council Recommendation is to support Member States in their efforts to improve access to and the quality of their early childhood education and care systems, while recognising that Member States are primarily responsible in this area. The proposal seeks to:

- Develop a common EU-wide understanding of what constitutes good quality service provision. This in turn will support national reforms and promote social inclusion by facilitating the exchange of experience and good practice.
- Support EU Member States in their efforts to improve access to and quality of their early childhood education and care systems. This includes making EU funding available for improvements in the availability and quality of services and reviewing benchmarks and targets.

The proposal puts forward the EU Early Childhood Education and Care Quality Framework. The Quality Framework provides key principles and a European approach to high quality early childhood education and care systems

It comprises 10 quality statements which are structured along five broader areas of quality: access, workforce, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding.

The 10 quality statements describe the main features of high quality services as identified in practice. The quality framework is a governance tool aimed at providing orientation for the development and upholding of early child and education systems.

To enable self-assessment and further reflection, it also provides a list of indicators that can be used at national, regional or local level.

The framework's main objective is to provide good quality early childhood education and care for all children and its development is guided by the following principles:

- High quality services are crucial in promoting children's development and learning and, in the long term, enhancing their educational chances;
- Parents' participation as partners of such services is essential - the family is the most important place for children to grow and develop, and parents (and guardians) are responsible for each child's well-being, health and development;
- Early childhood education and care services need to be child-centred, actively involve children and acknowledge children's views.

You can see the framework at

https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/ecec_en_annexe_proposition_part1_v5.pdf

² Brussels, 22.5.2018 COM(2018) 271 final 2018/0127 (NLE)