

The logo for Tusla, featuring the word 'TUSLA' in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The 'i' in 'Tusla' has a dot above it. The background of the entire page is a vibrant blue with abstract, wavy shapes in shades of teal and yellow at the bottom.

An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

Children's Services Regulation

Tusla Early Years Inspections-Parents Consultation

This report has been prepared by Research Matters Ltd (www.researchmatters.eu) on behalf of Tusla – Child and Family Agency.

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Foreword

Tusla – Child and Family Agency, through the Early Years Inspectorate, is the independent statutory regulator of early years services in Ireland and has responsibility for inspecting preschools, play groups, nurseries, crèches, day-care and similar services that cater for children aged 0–6 years. The role of the inspectorate is to promote and monitor the safety, quality of care, and support of the child in early years provision in accordance with the regulations.

As a parent or guardian, choosing an early years childcare service for your child is often one of the first and possibly one of the most significant decisions you will make. It is important that parents can be confident that the early years service they choose for their baby or young child is a safe and nurturing place, where the child can grow and develop to their full potential.

The involvement of parents in their child's care and education is crucial to the development and wellbeing of the child; thus, the importance of including the voice of parents/guardians in the early years regulatory process in Ireland is a key objective of the inspectorate.

Therefore, it is with great pleasure that I present this report on consultation with parents about Tusla early years inspections. The report presents parents' views of Tusla's inspection of early years services and their views on reflecting the voice of parents in the inspection process. The consultation focused on three key areas:

- The issues parents think are important to inspect in early years settings
- Parents' awareness, knowledge and requirements in terms of regulatory inspection
- Whether parents should have a voice in early years inspections and if so how this could best work.

Parents identified safety as being paramount to their child's wellbeing in addition to highlighting the importance of their child being happy and well cared for in an early years setting. Parents told us that they had limited awareness of Tusla's role as the statutory regulator of early years services and were unaware that service inspection reports are publicly available on the Tusla website. In response to the feedback, Tusla has introduced a number of additional supports for parents. This includes a new forum where parents can provide feedback on the service their child attends. It will for the first time provide a way for parents to share their positive experiences with their service; and will also allow parents to flag any areas of significant concern which may result in an inspection of the service being undertaken.

I would like to thank and acknowledge all those who assisted us with this project. We are very grateful to the providers and personnel in the early years services who arranged for us to meet with groups of parents. A special word of thanks to Childminding Ireland and Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta for their assistance. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Sinead Hanafin, managing director of Research Matters Ltd, for assisting with the consultation and in producing this report.

We are particularly grateful to the parents who gave of their time and shared their knowledge with us; we especially appreciate their willingness to do so with honesty and openness. Their valuable input will ensure that parents will now be given an opportunity to contribute to the inspection process going forward.

Fiona McDonnell

National Service Director of Children's Services Regulation

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Section 1:

Context for this consultation

The Child and Family Agency, through the Early Years Inspectorate, is the independent statutory regulator of early years services in Ireland and has responsibility for inspecting pre-schools, play groups, nurseries, crèches, day-care and similar services which cater for children aged zero to six years. The role of the Inspectorate is:

‘To promote and monitor the safety, quality of care and support of the child in Early Years provision in accordance with the Regulations. The Inspectorate implements its role by assessing applications for registration and by inspecting Registered Services.’

The purpose of regulatory inspection under the 2016 Early Years Inspectorate regulations is to determine the extent to which:

- The service is well governed
- The health, welfare and development of each child is supported
- Children are safe in the service
- The premises are safe, suitable and appropriate for the care and education of children

The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 and the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Amendment) Regulations require all early years services in Ireland to strive to achieve full compliance across all early years regulations.

Involvement of parents in early years care and education

The involvement of parents in their child’s care and education is widely considered to be crucial to the development and well-being of the child, and a number of large scale studies, including meta-analyses, has shown a strong association between the level of parental involvement and academic outcomes for children^{1,2}. This involvement is both constitutionally and strategically embedded in the Irish context for early years care and education. Article 42 of the Irish Constitution recognises the family as the primary and natural educator of the child. This role is explicitly acknowledged in strategic developments relating to early years care and education, most recently in the Quality and Regulatory Framework (Tusla, 2018)³. Examples include the Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy⁴ where children’s outcomes are identified as being improved in situations where parents are involved, and ‘First Five A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families’⁵ where opportunities for

¹ Domina, Thurston. 2005. “Leveling the Home Advantage: Assessing the Effectiveness of Parental Involvement in Elementary School.” *Sociology of Education* 78 (July): 233–249.

² Jeynes, William H. 2012. “A Meta-analysis of the Efficacy of Different Types of Parental Involvement Programs for Urban Students.” *Urban Education* 47 (4): 706–742.

³ <https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/early-years-quality-and-regulatory-framework/>

⁴ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2013) Right from the Start: report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy. Dublin, Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

⁵ Government of Ireland (2018) First Five A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families’. Dublin, Government of Ireland.

active participation by parents in the curriculum is identified as one aspect of the essential components good quality services (p.88). The importance of parents in the practice of early years care and education is also explicitly recognised and for example, the Aistear Síolta practice guide identifies ‘building partnerships with parents’ as one of six interconnected curriculum pillars. This guide provides practical ideas and suggestions to help practitioners build good relationships with parents and families and give ideas on how to involve them in the early childhood setting.

Voice of parents in regulation

A recommendation that the voice of parents/guardians in the early years care and education regulatory process in Ireland⁶ has, similar to other jurisdictions, been under consideration and is part of an increasing awareness of a continuum of involvement of key stakeholders in decision-making about service provision. Gallivan, et al., (2012)⁷ note that different understandings and interpretations of involvement, engagement and participation can result in different goals and outcomes by different groups of stakeholders, resulting in barriers to achieving meaningful and successful outcomes. The term ‘*user involvement*’ has been defined by the World Health Organisation (2002)⁸ as

‘a process by which people are enabled to become actively and genuinely involved in defining the issues of concern to them, in making decisions about factors that affect their lives, in formulating and implementing policies, in planning, developing and delivering services and in taking action to achieve change’

Tusla early years inspectorate recognises the importance of providing opportunities for parents to give their views and view it an important step in involving parents in the decision making processes relating to of their child’s experience in the early years environment. This consultation builds on a previous consultation with parents in respect of the quality and regulatory framework.

Overview of structure of report

The following section, Section 2, presents the methodology relating to the consultation and includes the aim and objectives, overall approach adopted, ethical and other issues considered and limitations arising. Section 3 presents the findings about issues of importance to parents to be included in the inspection process, awareness and knowledge about early years inspections, views on parental involvement in early years inspections and other issues arising. Section 4 is the final section of the report and presents the summary, conclusions and recommendation

⁶ Hanafin S. (2014) Report on the Report on the Process of Pre-school Inspection Practices as documented in inspection reports. Tusla, Dublin.

⁷ Gallivan J, Kovacs Burns KA, Bellows M, Eigenseher C. The many faces of patient engagement. J Participat Med. 2012 Dec 26; 4:e32.

⁸ 25. World Health Organization. *Community Participation in Local Health and Sustainable Development: Approaches and Techniques*. Copenhagen, Denmark: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2002. European Sustainable Development and Health Series,

4. <http://www.euro.who.int/document/e78652.pdf>. Accessed August 01, 2019.

Section 2: Methodology

This section presents the aim and objectives of the research along with a description of the methods used for data collection, data analysis and integration. It also considers ethical issues arising. Finally, it outlines the accuracy and validity of the findings as well as limitations arising.

Aim and objectives

This study was commissioned by Tusla Child and Family Agency's Early Years Inspectorate and the overall purpose of the project was to carry out a consultation process with parents to

- a) ascertain parents' understandings, knowledge and requirements in terms of regulatory inspection; and
- b) identify parents' views on parental involvement in, and contribution to, the inspection process including how this might be achieved.

Objectives

The objectives of the consultation were to:

1. carry out a consultation with parents to ascertain their views about the role of the Early Years Inspectorate
2. identify how parents wish to be communicated with in respect of inspections taking place in their childcare facility
3. identify key areas for communication with parents
4. make recommendations for engaging with parents in the process of inspection

Process

A qualitative approach, based on focus group interviews, was adopted to the process of consultation and ensured the discussions with parents were not pre-determined but rather emerged from parents themselves. This approach benefits from the dynamics of the interaction of responses through a facilitated discussion that allows for dissent and agreement.

Participants

There is no national structure in place to directly contact parents of children attending registered early years services. In order to ensure the target audience of parents attending registered early years services was identified in an objective way, every provider included in the Early Years Inspectorate database of early years service providers was issued with an invitation asking them to indicate whether they would be interested in taking part in the process. This approach had a number of benefits as follows:

- There was an equal opportunity for parents from all services to take part
- The objective approach ensured that bias was minimized
- It provided a mechanism for ensuring that services were aware that the Inspectorate intended to consult with parents

The following approach was adopted:

1. The Inspectorate issued an invitation letter via email to all registered providers explaining that the Inspectorate wishes to engage with parents on issues relating to regulation and the work of the Inspectorate.
2. The letter explained that a researcher would meet with a number of groups of parents to ascertain their views about inspection.
3. The invitation letter specifically asked if their service would be in a position to arrange for a researcher to meet with six to eight parents at their service.
4. A total of 66 early years services responded to the request and a stratified random sample, taking account of geographic region, service size and type, was taken.

In total, nine focus group discussions were carried out across a range of services, including childminding and Naíonraí. The focus group with parents whose children attended Naíonraí (early years service provided through Irish in the Gaeltacht area) was hosted by Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta and this took place at a central location and was conducted through Irish. The focus group discussion with parents whose children attend childminders was conducted in the home of one childminder.

The findings from the report are now presented and these are followed by a summary, conclusion and recommendations arising.

Each focus group included four to ten participants and in total, 70 parents took part in the consultations (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of parents who took part in consultation

Focus Group	Female parents	Male parents	Total
1	6	1	7
2	4	1	5
3	5	0	5
4	11	0	11
5	7	1	8
6	3	1	4
7	10	1	11
8	6	3	9
9	8	2	10
Total	60	10	70

Information was provided about the age and number of children attending the service by 51 parents and of these, 41 (80%) had one child attending, and seven parents (14%) reported two children attending. The remaining parents reported they had more than two children attending the service. The ages of the children attending the service ranged from under 1 year to 7 years and the average age of those attending was 3.25 years.

Consultation process

The process of consultation was underpinned by best practices in the area of group discussion and ensured that participants felt welcomed and respected, were comfortable with each other, and that each participant had a voice.

Prior to the group discussion, each participant was provided with information and asked to sign a consent form.

Data preparation

All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The anonymisation of the interview data involved removing all personal information (e.g. names and locations) and the assignment of pseudonyms. Where necessary, the qualitative data were edited to safeguard participants' anonymity, but it has been ensured that this has not distorted their data or changed the key messages that emerged.

Data analysis

- Following all interviews, notes were written up within 24 hours, which provided an opportunity to reflect on the process of the interview.
- Each audio file was listened to at least three times, which provided an opportunity to become familiar with the nuances and content of each interview.
- Information from the focus group with parents whose children attend a Naíonraí was translated into English.
- All audio files were transcribed, and memos were made as a means of capturing ideas, views and intuitions at all stages of the data process.
- Following transcription, each transcript was read through several times to get an overall sense of the data.
- The data were then imported into NVivo, where data coding took place. Open coding, where a provisional name is given to each category, was used, and a compare-and-contrast approach was adopted to form categories, establish the boundaries of the categories and assign data segments.
- Following this, data related to each category were retrieved and a narrative around each segment was created.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues were considered and addressed throughout the project, particularly in areas of confidentiality, anonymity and data protection. Confidentiality requires that research data that include identifiable information on participants will not be disclosed to others without the explicit consent of the participants. Only the minimum amount of personal data required was sought, and personal data were not used for any purpose other than that specified at the time of collection. Written informed consent was sought for all participants taking part in interviews. All data were anonymized and all research outputs were checked carefully to ensure that no individual is identifiable. In addition, all appropriate steps were taken to ensure both the quantitative and the qualitative data were held in a secure way. This included the removal of direct identifiers, the use of pseudonyms and the use of technical means to break the link between data and identifiable individuals. Both system and physical security safeguards were put in place to ensure the data are protected.

Accuracy and validity of the findings

Validity and accuracy in any research are affected by a number of factors, including the appropriateness of the focus, the approach and methods, the availability of data, and the capacity of the data to support valid findings. This study collected new data using qualitative methods, and best practices were adhered to. These data came from group interviews and all necessary steps were taken to explore the nature and substance of the issues emerging. These

practices lend credibility to the findings. The accuracy and validity of the findings were strengthened by the inclusion of a range of geographical and service types. This enabled the consistency of the findings to be tested.

Limitations

This research took place over a relatively short time period with parents who were happy with the services their children were attending. It is noted, however, that a small number of parents had experience of other services they were less positive about and many participants identified areas that they would, or could have concerns about. In that regard, areas identified by parents are likely to be an accurate reflection of the issues arising. As with all research of this nature, however, the data represent the views of key stakeholders, and these may not necessarily accord with the views of all stakeholders.

Section 3: Findings from the consultation

This consultation set out to answer three particular questions and these are:

1. What issues do parents think are important to inspect in early years services?
2. Are parents aware of, and knowledgeable about, early years inspections?
3. Should parents have a voice in early years inspections, and if so, how best can that be taken into account?

Findings in respect of these three issues are now presented.

Overview

Key Point



Parents were overwhelmingly positive about their own service

Parents taking part in the focus group discussions were overwhelmingly positive about their own service and several commented in that regard. Parents said *'I could not praise them highly enough', 'we're very, very impressed and very happy', 'if I had any more children they'd all come here', 'the kids, my kids certainly, they just love it here', 'this place should win an award', we're just very happy with the level of service', the provider 'is like a mother to them so, I am very happy'*. One parent said

"I thought yeah, would I trust these people? Not, would I trust the management with my child is one thing, but these actual people minding my child, am I going to trust them? And, I felt that bond straight away, I felt at ease."

At a different focus group, the following iteration took place

Participant 1: They talk about the teachers at home and you know what I mean, they talk about them affectionately. Just so you know there's a bond between them, which is really nice.

Participant 2: They act on things, when you do voice your opinion that it's not swept under the carpet.

Issues parents think are important to inspect in early years services

Many parents highlighted a number of different areas they wanted the inspector to take account of and these reflect the main areas currently inspected by the Early Years Inspectorate under the four broad areas of:

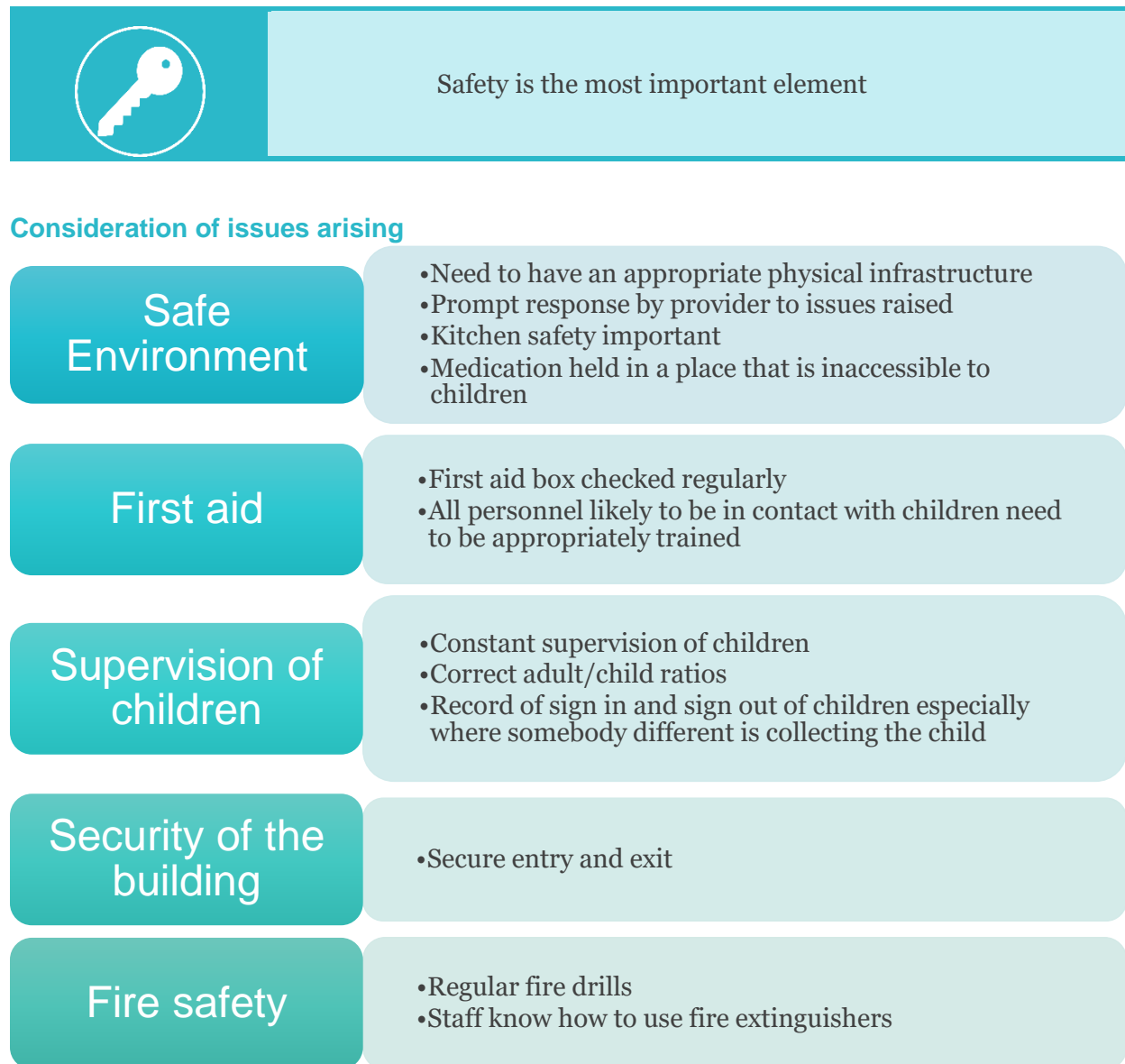
- Safety
- Health, welfare and development of the child

- Governance
- Premises and facilities

Safety

Issues arising in respect of safety are now presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Key points relating to safety



Several parents highlighted safety noting it is the ‘*number 1 thing*’ and ‘*It is always about the safety issues first*’ although it was also acknowledged that accidents happen ‘*because kids are kids and they’re going to fall and get a bump*’. One parent said

“Well, you’re leaving your kids in here in the morning you know, you would want to hope that they’re safe, that when you come back in the evening, you should have the whole child in one piece.”

Another parent said

“Safety as well, in the facility and the people who work here. You're leaving your kids here, it's eight o'clock until five, six whatever time it may be. So, you trust the people that are, number one minding your kids. And, in general if you walk around you feel like it's secure, nobody can get in. It's a secure facility, the rooms are nice, they're age appropriate, they're not going to get hurt. Just that they're safe really, that's the thing.”

Five specific areas highlighted in respect of safety are presented in Figure 1 (safe environment, first aid, supervision of children, security of the building and fire drills) and findings relating to these are now presented.

Safe environment

It was acknowledged that ‘the kids can bring their own madness’ and because of that it is critical to ensure the physical infrastructure is appropriate. At one group, a parent suggested those in the group

“Just have a quick look around. Do things look like they're always been taken care of? Everything is always being taken care of properly which is nice.”

One parent noted that the response by the provider to a problem identified was very important and that any breakages should be repaired very quickly. This parent went on to say

“I've never seen anything broken. Kids break stuff, so stuff has to be getting broken. And if I never see it that means someone's dealing with it properly.”

Another parent speaking about a childminding service said

“Like when I first started, I spotted the baby monitor was on because there was a baby asleep. And there was the fire hazard stuff and the gate on the stairs. Stuff I didn't even have in my house, at the time... So maybe the inspection process should make sure those monitors and gates are there.”

One parent reported having moved their child from one service to another because of safety concerns saying

“I was coming from a situation that I didn't like [in terms of safety]. So one of the things I always look at and maybe it's just me, but if there's loose wood or loose fittings around... Obviously it should never be in any child's space. But that's the kind of stuff that I was looking for... Some of that can be done in terms of the physical layout and physical maintenance.”

Others provided examples of issues they considered to be safe including the way the kitchen is laid out and having medication cabinets out of reach.

First aid

There was some agreement that staff should be appropriately trained in first aid and it was recommended that this training take place on a regular basis and is ‘not just a once off’. It was also suggested that everybody would need to be training in ‘managing kind of first aid problems’ from ‘the management right down to the cleaners’ because anyone in ‘this type of environment needs to have the skills to be able to immediately respond to the child’ and ‘when you're working with little children, accidents happen every second day’. While one parent suggested that all personnel should be trained in CPR and in choking prevention and treatment, others noted they would be ‘looking to make sure that at least one is CPR trained’.

One parent also highlighted the importance of health and safety saying that inspectors should monitor

“if the first aid box is checked regularly if God forbid there's some need for it but you know the stuff is there because it's checked. It's not that ‘Oh we ran out.’ It's just proper management.”

Supervision of children

The appropriate supervision of children at all times was identified as being very important and it was suggested that even when going to the toilet, ‘there needs to be someone present in the bathroom’. Some parents spoke about having the ‘*correct number of adult to children ratio*’, with one parent saying

“Supervision would be the number one, staffing ratios. If it's not overcrowded, and the children have the freedom to move around and be supported and supervised. That would be my main concern.”

Other parents drew attention to the importance of the child being ‘signed in’ on arrival and ‘signed out’ when leaving and it was noted in their own services that when they collected their child ‘*you come in, you sign in and when we collect them, you sign out*’. The importance of this was also highlighted in circumstances where a person other than the parent might be collecting a child and it was suggested that in addition to the service having a process in place for ensuring only legitimate people collected the child, that the staff should

“look out if someone else is collecting them, to make sure that the child knows who it is... That they say to the teachers their names and things.”

Security of the building

The extent to which the building in which the service is provided is secure was identified as very important, both from the perspective of people entering the service and children leaving the service. One parent compared their current service with one they had previously visited saying

“And the first day we went up to go look... And we walked in the back door. It wasn't locked. Nobody stopped me. Nobody... Whereas here, you know coming into this system. The back has one door in and that's the access.”

The importance of this area was also identified by another parent who said

“they're really strict about making sure the door is closed all the time when you leave and when you come in because where you have children, they just walk out. So I think that's really good the way the door is managed here.”

This was reiterated by another parent who said

“The main thing for me is that it is locked securely, there is signing in and out. Nobody knows the codes, it's not just people walking in and out... if somebody comes who has not been mentioned to collect your child that day, they can't collect them... So, for me that's a big thing with my kids, just that they're safe in general in their environment.”

Fire drills

Regular fire drills were also highlighted as important and having a procedure in place around it. One parent said

“I also think the inspector needs to check if people know how to use a fire extinguisher. Because the thing is you can have a fire extinguisher there and then go, ‘Oh God, what do we do?’ That there is a procedure to get the kids out.”

Another parent noted that their child

“was coming home at the beginning and was telling me they were doing the fire drills. I was like ‘That’s great’ because at that age it’s not easy to organise them so if they know what they’re doing, they’ll get it faster. Do you know what I mean? If they all panic. Do you know what I mean? It’s good to instil it early so that they’ll know what to do if God forbid anything does happen.”

Summary

In summary, parents highlighted the importance of their child’s safety within early years services and identified a number of specific areas that inspectors should focus on in inspections. These areas include the environment, first aid, supervision of children, security of the building and fire drills.

Health, welfare and development of the child

Children's health, welfare and development were also identified as key areas for inspection and parents identified a number of areas that they would like inspectors to focus on. One parent said 'the atmosphere would be the number one for me' while another noted

"It's like, any place you enter, you know straight away don't you, you feel it. It is lovely here, it is lovely, and welcoming and everybody's very nice. The kids are happy. I think that's number one."

Key areas identified are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Key areas identified in respect of the health, welfare and development of the child

Children are appropriately cared for	Children get into a good routine
	Cleanliness and good hygiene is visible in the service
	Infection control systems are in place
	Nutritious food is prepared and provided
	Nappy changing and toileting practices are appropriate for child & include handwashing
Service meets the needs of the child	There is a good atmosphere
	Children are happy
	Children with additional needs are supported and included
Good relationships are in place	Good relationships between parents and staff
	Good interactions between staff and children
	Good engagement between children
Educational activities supports development	Children have a range of experiences
	Creative and stimulating approaches to learning are adopted
	Structured approach to activities
	Adequate equipment is available and maintained
	Children are prepared for transition to primary school

A focus on the extent to which the service is meeting the needs of the child

Key Points



- There is a good atmosphere
- Children are happy
- Children with additional needs are supported and included

It was suggested that children's needs are central in the delivery of an early years service and that staff need to be aware of children's needs throughout the day.

Child happiness

A number of parents indicated that inspectors should look at whether children are happy in the service (*'if they're happy, we're happy'*) although it was highlighted in one focus group that this could be challenging:

Participant 1: I don't know, how do you inspect the happiness?

Participant 2: There's no real piece of paper to write that down, is there?

Participant 3: There's no box to tick for that.

Participant 1: I know, and the kindness of the staff - how do you inspect that, I don't know?

A parent taking part in another focus group noted that

"There was never a problem with them coming in or crying in the morning or any of that... 'They're running in there.'... But for me to know that they were happy here, that's the most important thing."

One parent noted that inspectors would be able to see if children are happy because

"First off kids are either laughing or you know happy. You can tell straight away obviously. Somewhere that has a nice atmosphere.... There's no craziness, even if there's a baby bawling it's no big deal... They just get on with it and... nothing is a problem."

Children with additional needs

It was also highlighted that particular care should be taken to support children with additional needs. It was highlighted that these children should be integrated with the other children in the service and treated with respect by the service. It was recommended that the inspector should take account of that noting that

"They should be treated in exactly the same way as everybody else, but given what they need according to their needs."

One parent gave the following example which occurred in a service she used to attend saying

"There was a little child in that room who had Down's Syndrome and at the end of the year, the lady [provider], she comes over and she just goes, 'God I'd such a hard year like, oh Lord.' But it was extra work, you know, she saw it. Whereas I'd say, I'd say here like, they're actually interested in [name of child] and trying to bring him/her in. S/he's not like a burden or s/he's not extra work for them. S/he's part of the whole classroom and they try to integrate him/her so much. So I'd say like, they're... miles, miles, miles ahead."

The parents at this focus group noted that it was important that

"they're [children with special needs] not singled out, they're in the group... because kids... they don't notice anything."

Good relationships

Key Points



There are good relationships between:

- parents and staff
- staff and children
- between children

There was a substantial commentary on the relationships within the service, between the parents and staff, the children and staff and between children themselves.

Relationship between parents and staff

Many parents commented on having very positive experiences and of being in a service where the staff are friendly and approachable and they care about the children. One parent highlighted this saying

“You just know that they really want to support your child... it makes such a difference. Because you know when you're dropping your child like, the staff are there who want to work with them. They're not just there for their wage at the end of the week. They're there because they like working with children and because they're trained and this is what they want to do.”

Other parents highlighted getting a ‘good vibe’ when they arrived at the service noting that the staff ‘say hello to everybody’ and they ‘know the parents’ names as well as the children’s. The following iteration took place at one focus group:

Speaker 5: *It's like they're invested in you and your children.*
Speaker 3: *Yeah not just your children.*
Speaker 1: *They're actually kind of looking out for you as well as for your children.*
Speaker 4: *You're not just a number.*

Another parent highlighted that in their service, they were always given time to discuss issues of importance to them noting

“They give you their time. I know obviously sometimes a person can be busy and you might have to come back a little bit later, that could happen in any situation, but like the vast majority of time they give you their time and there's no rush about it and you can talk it through with them and there's not a problem, which is really excellent.”

Other parents gave examples of situations arising where the service had gone well beyond what was expected in terms of the support provided. One person spoke about a significant family incident that had arisen and noted that the personnel in the service

“they were absolutely amazing with my children actually. She took my children home with her and she fed them and kept them while we were dealing with everything. They were very kind and I'll never forget it. They just treated my children like their own.”

Interaction between staff and children

Several comments were made about the interaction between staff and children and good interactions between them were highlighted as essential to the health and development of the child. One parent said

"[name of child] keeps hugging [name of person] before s/he leaves... I just know that they care about the children."

Another parent supported this saying

"I think it's more about the person, how do they treat them? What's important at the end of the day, it's how they treat the kids. It might just be 'hi' but if he's just walking in and nobody is looking at him. How do I walk away?"

Yet another parent said

"I like this place. The staff are very comfortable. They interact with the kids."

Engagement between children

At one focus group parents said it was important for the inspectorate to look at how children get on with each other in the service. One parent said

"If I was the inspector I think I would be looking at [how children are playing with each other]... I think when they're playing, the kids with each other, I think that's a really good sign that they're happy."

Educational activities

Key Points



- Children have a range of experiences
- Creative and stimulating approaches to learning are adopted
- Structured approach to activities
- Adequate equipment is available and maintained
- Children are prepared for transition to primary school

Several comments were made about the activities that take place in early years services and parents recommended that inspectors ensure that children have a diversity of experiences (*'they don't keep them in one area'*) and staff working there **make sure they get** 'a well rounded experience so that they're learning'. While one parent said that for younger children it is important that *'they just sit down and sing a song with them'*, a number of parents drew attention to the need for all children attending the service to be stimulated and their learning supported. One parent noted that

"The thing is that they're being stimulated - they obviously don't need to write a thesis to leave here right? A couple hours a day they're learning the numbers, that they're learning letters, learning numbers. That they're not just going outside which is fine for a day and that they don't have videos everyday but that... they are being stimulated."

Others noted that *'kids are all different in their own little way, so I like to see their needs are being met'*, noting that a routine and structure are *'very important'* and that they are in a *'play-based environment [where they are] learning and developing independent skills'*. Parents at one service noted *'for the afterschool, they give the kids a bit of responsibility'* and that this helps with the child's development.

Another parent highlighted the importance of checking the equipment available for children to ensure that all the correct pieces are present (e.g. with jigsaws) so that children can complete a task. Another parent noted that it was important that

"The toys are maintained. If something is broken it's either fixed or replaced or taken away."

Others identified specific components of the activities undertaken by the children as being particularly good and examples given are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Examples of activities



"I thought the butterfly thing was brilliant...They had caterpillars that turned into butterflies. They do loads of activities where they're learning but not realising it."



"They come home and they've got the chart made with all the planets on it, so you know that they're being stimulated..."



"It's nice to know that they are here, and they are looked after, and they are given stuff to do and stuff that they can do, and learn something from it...I wouldn't have time to teach her/him the days of the week because we are just in the door and out the door."

Adopting a structured approach to activities

Some parents spoke about having a structured and incremental approach to educational activities within the service. One parent whose child was attending a sessional service said

"I like to see that they're busy and don't just want to think that they're dropped at the door, and they're in and... I'll be back in three hours and they will just be doing their own thing for the three hours. I want to see that there are activities set out, that there is organization and planning for them and that the environments are laid out. Obviously free play and outdoor play and stuff but, I'd like to see it as a learning curve and a learning experience for them."

One parent suggested that an older child had learnt more while attending a sessional service because there was a clear focus on 'learning the ABCs' through phonetics noting that

"S/he enjoyed it. S/he loved doing phonics. Whereas it's a different system this time around so I think from our perspective, myself and my wife's, I think we kind of liked that s/he did the phonics because it's a big step going from here to primary school."

Another parent, however, said

"I do agree with having some form of structure' but we are 'throwing too much at them... it's just my opinion, throwing too much at them when they're so young and when you have it too structured the social and emotional development isn't at the forefront... It gets stunted a bit."

A small number of parents noted the service was using the Aistear curriculum with children while others spoke about the Montessori approach.

Preparation for transition to primary school

A number of services taking part in this consultation were part of the ECCE scheme and consequently, preparing children for transition to primary school was identified as important. It was suggested that the inspection should look for evidence of this type of preparation taking place. It was noted in one service that

“To make the transition as positive as can be, they've even introduced a small school... blackboard and uniform.”

Another parent attending the group discussion noted

“They really do prepare them I think for school and for life. It's not just minding them like.”

Some parents wondered whether there was a particular level the child had to be at before going to primary school and asked whether their child had to know ‘a certain amount’ before making the transition.

Care of the child

Key Points



- Children get into a good routine
- Cleanliness and good hygiene is visible in the service
- infection control systems are in place
- Nutritious food is prepared and provided
- Nappy changing and toileting practices are appropriate for the child and include handwashing

Four issues were raised in respect of the care of the child and these related to getting the child into a routine, hygiene, nutrition and toileting.

Getting into a routine

A number of parents welcomed the routine children develop when attending an early years service. One parent said

“They have their little ways. They go in and they take out their water bottle and they put their lunch bag in the fridge and they hang up their coat. Little routines that help them settle in the morning. That's effective especially for the kids.”

Another parent at the same focus group highlighted that this routine

“actually filters through to primary school as well because [name of child] now, I see him/her, s/he takes off his/her coat and the little tag at the back, s/he picks that straight away and it goes on the hanger.”

Hygiene

Several parents commented on the importance of the service being clean (cleanliness is a biggie; you want the place clean, that's the number one; hygiene, if it's dirty, it's a problem) and one parent said

“If the place is clean, there's a good chance everything's working and fixed around that.”

Lack of cleanliness of the service was identified as a reason for moving from one provider to another as highlighted in the quote below:

"I took [name of child] out of a crèche that was filthy dirty. And every time s/he came home, the next day that s/he would have kind of the runs [diarrhoea] from eating in the crèche... So I was kind of terrified with the food. And all the stuff outside, you know a lot of bouncy things, they were black... Like really dirty."

In contrast to that experience, another parent highlighted the cleanliness of the service they were currently attending saying

"I've been here a few times because my little one is still not settling... But when I've been here... you see them, they're constantly washing... Like the dishwasher's going. She [the provider] might say, okay today let's take all this off the shelf. And they go through everything [and clean it]."

Other parents highlighted specific areas where they felt cleanliness was very important with one parent noting that although food wasn't cooked on the premises, there was a lot of cleaning before and after children ate. One parent highlighted the importance of ensuring the toilets were kept clean while another noted that

"For me as well, it's not that there's one member who's a cleaner. It's everybody's stuff... Because everybody gets into it, like it's just part of the day routine though. The place is kept tidy and neat."

Another parent highlighted the potential for children getting infections noting that

"[name of child] is the whole time getting infections and you know, chest infections and colds and all that. Now, you know, it wasn't anything to do with here - it's just children that age they - it's the dirt as well as all the colds and germs that are going around with people, you know, so you'd want to [make sure everywhere is clean]."

One parent cautioned about a service s/he went to see that appeared too clean saying

"It's just, it was perfect. Everything was immaculate... But everything was just clean, pristine, put it away, everything was put away cleanly, and perfectly in little boxes and shelves and everything else... that turned me off the place... Too much posh... So it doesn't need to be like that in my opinion. If there is a bit of dirt on the floor, there's probably a little bit normal, a little bit better."

Another parent noted that there can be chaos but

"it's organized chaos... it's clean mess... It's not like there's paint all over the floor all the time, you don't see all the paint left around the place and not cleaned."

Nutrition

Several parents commented about the importance of the food children are given. The following iteration which took place in one service highlights this:

Parent 1: *The food that they're given here is very wholesome. It's all home cooked and the children are very well fed and it's all hand sliced and baked.*
Parent 2: *And plenty of it too.*
Parent 1: *They get plenty and they're very well nourished.*

A parent in another service noted

"There's a chef here. I walked by there yesterday morning, there was a pile of peppers that high..."

Another parent highlighted that the nutrition offered was

“a major positive for me as well, the food. When [name of child] comes home, s/he'll sit with us for meal time but if s/he doesn't eat, I'm not worried because I know s/he's been fed and fed well.”

It was noted that in some childminding services parents bring the food for the children and it was highlighted as both a positive and a challenge as the following iteration shows:

Parent 1: *They might have something on a Friday, she might just have something easier on a Friday. But Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, it could be shepherd's pie, it could be curry, it could anything. It's dinners.*
Parent 2: *You don't have to pack a lunch box, no?*
Parent 1: *No...*
Parent 2: *Our lad has a lunch box all right. We make his own dinners at the weekend.*
Interviewer: *You make dinners for him?*
Parent 2: *Yeah we make the whole lot, basically.*

Toileting

There were some comments about toileting and nappies. First it was highlighted that where children are in nappies, they need to be changed regularly and dirty nappies need to be properly disposed of (*‘That they're not left lying around’*). Other parents noted *that ‘that's a great peace of mind and s/he's always been clean and nappy changed’*. Handwashing for staff and children after using the toilet was also identified as important and an understanding of infection control highlighted. One parent noted

“they teach them here like you know, about germs and stuff like that, which I think is great because even [name of child] would be coming home and s/he'd be saying like, you know, s/he'd be telling you all about knowing the germs.”

Some challenges were highlighted, however, and these related to a general rule where children that are not toilet-trained are usually not eligible to avail of the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme which provides a pre-school service free of charge to all children within the qualifying age range (2 years and 8 months) for a set number of hours over a set period of weeks for two years. It was suggested that in some services children have to be toilet trained in order to avail of these places and this created problems. At one focus group, there was agreement that *‘you can't force a child to toilet train’* and

“You can't make a child toilet trained... You can but it's not going to end well. There's going to be a longer process instead of leaving them until when they are ready.”

It was also noted that in some services, they ‘won't change a nappy... they'd have to call you to come in’.

Summary

In summary, four main areas were identified in respect of the health, welfare and development of the child and these were the importance of meeting the needs of the child (including having a focus on children's happiness and integrating children with additional needs); care of the child, particularly getting into a good routine, hygiene, nutrition and toileting; good relationships between parents and staff, children and staff, and children themselves considered as one area; and educational activities including having a structured approach to activities and preparation for transition to primary school.

Governance of the service


Three main issues were identified in respect of the governance of the service (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Issues relating to the governance of the service

Personnel working in the service	Staff qualifications and suitability for working with children
	Ability to identify issues arising
	Key person in place
	Staff garda vetted
	Continuity of staff
Communication about the service	Communication about the service prior to attending
	Information available on an ongoing basis through a variety of means
	Knowledge of all personnel working in the service at all times
Communication about the child	Day to day activities and developments
	Personnel working in the service sharing expert views and opinions about the child
	Communication about incidents

The findings relating to these are now presented.

Personnel working in the service

Key Points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personnel working in service are key to quality • Personnel need to have appropriate qualifications and suitability for working with children • Role of staff in identifying issues arising • Key person system in place • All personnel are Garda vetted • Continuity of staff is important and lack of continuity has an impact on children • Good staff conditions and relationships are important to ensure retention
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The people who work in the service were identified as the key to good quality and a number of issues were identified including, staff qualifications and the capacity of individuals to work with children, continuity of staff and issues relating to child protection.

Staff qualifications and suitability for working with children

Some parents indicated that they assumed everybody is ‘*appropriately qualified*’ and it was suggested that everyone working in early years services should have a basic level of training. One parent noted

"The last thing I want to do is hand my child over to somebody that I'm second guessing if they're qualified or I'm second guessing are they going to be happy, or content? Are they going to be changed? Are they going to be fed? You know, things like that because they're very precious and you're not just going to hand them off to anybody."

Parents also highlighted the challenges of taking care of children and consequently felt it was very important that personnel working in early years service should be properly trained. One parent said the inspectorate should check that

"people know what they're doing and how they deal with your kids, because I see they know how difficult they are and keeping my own patience so, I can imagine if you have [more than 10] all day, how hard it can be so, yeah. That people are trained and how to deal with it, yeah."

It was also highlighted that staff should be up to date in their practice with one individual saying

"But, you want to make sure that they're up to date. You want to make sure that they've been trained properly, that they know how to handle children, that they know how to deal with children. Because every child is different."

While accepting that qualifications were very important, one parent noted that the inspectorate should also take account of

"the way they [staff] are. It's more important than what's written in a piece of paper. To me."

One parent suggested that it would be nice to see if there are qualifications that someone specialised in, 'maybe some focus on special needs' or 'speech development' so that staff complement each other.

Being able to identify problems arising

One parent spoke about the importance of the role of the staff in identifying issues with children saying

"So I think that's important and if there's a child with special needs in the class or anything like that... the parent might not even know that the child has special needs but maybe that there are signs that they [the staff] might recognize you know, things like that."

This was reiterated by another parent who said

"Because you know especially with autism and things like that... maybe a parent may have noticed something but can't put their finger on it. So maybe with a child care worker... they notice different tendencies when they're interacting with children or that they don't interact with children."

It was also noted that staff might be able to identify when children may be in vulnerable situations at home and that 'children are very vulnerable'.

Key persons

Having a key person was identified as the norm in a number of services who took part in this project and this was identified as a positive feature of the service

"I just go to [name of key person] and I ask her how s/he's doing and so it's good to be able to do that because... I want to make sure [of] his/her development, that I want to watch out for him/her."

Garda vetting

Several individuals spoke about the need for all staff to be Garda vetted. One parent said

“[the inspectors should] make sure that the staff are all Garda vetted, licensed and things like that, so make sure that it's that they're safe to be around the kids.”

Another parent highlighted the importance of ensuring that staff are Garda vetted even if they are only there for a short time. One parent drew attention to students saying

“Students coming in, they should be Garda vetted... you don't know who they are sometimes, and that kind of concerns me a bit because you don't know anything about their background. And they're in here with the kids.”

Another parent drew attention to the importance of all personnel in the service being Garda vetted noting that anyone working in the service ‘I think should be Garda vetted because they're in here with the kids’.

Continuity of staff

It was suggested that inspectors should be aware of the length of time personnel worked at a service and a number of parents reported the thing they liked best about the service was that ‘all the staff were here for a long time’ and there was a ‘lot of continuity’, ‘very little change’ and ‘stability and having the same staff is important’.

Impact of continuity of staff on children

Parents pointed out that continuity of staff was very important for children with one parent noting their child ‘whatever room s/he'd go into s/he always gets very attached to whoever was there’. Another parent said

“You want to make sure that the staff are going to be happy and content looking after [name of child]... And that they stay as well. That they don't want to use this as a stepping stone onto something else.”

Others identified areas such as working times and staff getting sufficient and appropriate breaks as areas for the inspector to consider. One parent said

“It's hard work on Saturday and Sunday at home with your own child so, I can only imagine how hard it is all time, with other people's.”

One parent noted, however, that there was an issue for her child where

“You know, I used to find [name of child] used to love the start of the week... and s/he used to hate the end of the week because there was different staff... Like s/he'd... run into the room at the start of the week. And at the end of the week then, the difference... s/he'd be clinging onto you.”

It was also noted that when staff were in place a long time and ‘people haven't taken all their children away’ that was a good sign.

Conditions to ensure retention of staff

A number of comments drew attention to the relationship between the way staff are treated and them being likely to remain in the service. One parent said

“I think just to have the staff happy is so important and to have them interested. Because if they're not happy, they're not going to stay...”

It was suggested that the Inspectorate should check that

“the staff are being looked after well enough by the management. That there's adequate staff, that there's enough time for people to have breaks’.”

Another parent suggested that the Inspectorate should look at the rewards system in place in a service and the conditions and ensure they are ‘good for staff’ including that

“somebody working [in a named child's room] wouldn't feel isolated. The government just need to assess the working conditions - not just the physical conditions but the whole environment.”

Communication about the service

Communication was identified as critically important and two main foci were identified. These were communication about the service itself and communication about issues specific to their child.

Key Points



- There is a need for communication about the service prior to attending
- There is a need for information about the service on an ongoing basis through a variety of different means
- Parents need to have knowledge about all personnel working in the service at all times

Parents highlighted the dilemmas and challenges they experience in placing their child in an early years setting and having knowledge of what to expect, and, of what is happening, in the service were both identified as helpful for them. It was highlighted that

“Families are smaller. So the communications are more important... it's not just that the children are more unfamiliar with the surroundings, the parents are also more unfamiliar with the surroundings as well. And everything is newer.”

Communication prior to attending the service

Several services provide a manual/handbook when the child enrolls and one parent said

“We got a very thorough manual at the beginning, which was fantastic so if you had any [queries], you know the way you might forget about things you can always go back to that. That's very helpful now I thought.”

Another parent highlighted their handbook included information about ‘the policies and rules’ and this was very helpful. The importance of this was explained by one parent who noted

“[name of child] was my first coming to [early years services]. I was very nervous about the whole thing but I did find the transition incredibly smooth and I think it's because of that [preparation]. There was no ambiguity. It was there, what to expect, the times, a rough outline of what was going to happen throughout the day.”

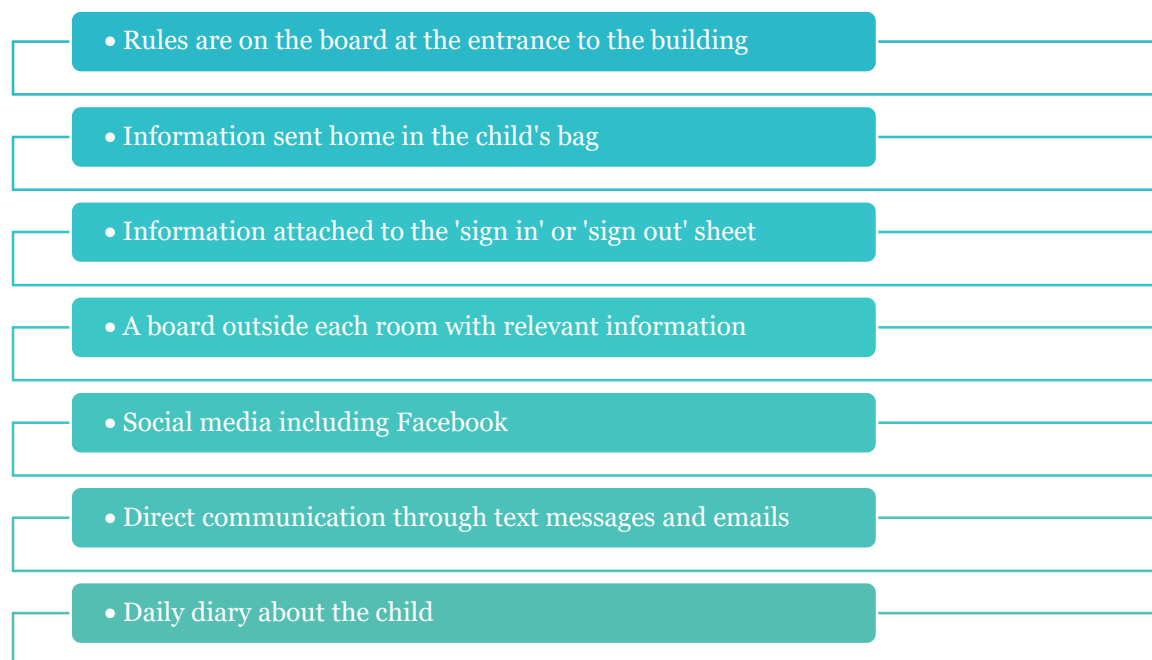
Making information available on an ongoing basis

Ongoing information was also highlighted as important and examples given included where there might be the curriculum being followed for the following week or unanticipated issues such as an outbreak of diarrhoea or measles. One parent said

“The communication to be fair has been handled very well during the year and if things change, we are informed. It's very important.”

Parents identified a number of different ways in which the information is shared (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Ways in which the information is shared



Communication about personnel working in the service and in contact with their children

Having knowledge about personnel working in the service was also identified as important. One individual reported there is ‘a picture of all the staff and their position within the service, and what room they are in’. This was identified as being very important and especially so in situations where children being dropped off or collected where parents may not necessarily meet the staff directly involved with the child. Others highlighted the importance of knowing what kind of qualifications personnel working in the service hold.

Parents also spoke of the importance of knowing who was interacting with their child during the day. One parent noted

“Because we have to have huge trust in the decisions that are made, but it's one of the things. As you said, ‘When you hear names you haven't heard before’... I suppose, at an organisational level as a recommendation it's just making sure that when new staff come on board that there is some way in which parents are notified.”

Some parents gave examples of ways in which they knew about staff, including through notice boards where a photograph of every member of staff was provided. Others highlighted that when staff went on a course or received a new qualification, they were told about it in the newsletter they received from the service. Others, however, noted that they were not always notified about a new member of staff with one person saying

“The majority of the time when there's new people, we're not notified about new people.”

It was highlighted that parents needed to know who was in contact with their child and that the service ‘was a gatekeeper’ to new people being introduced to their child’s life when they were there.

This issue was identified as particularly important with childminders where one parent said

“But definitely, at the beginning I was quite uptight. I asked her if people were in the house, I'd like to know. Not that they're Garda vetted but if somebody pops in, that I know who's around the child. Just when it's a baby and they just can't tell you who they've met.”

Communication about the child

Parents also identified the importance of good communication in respect of their own child, including their day to day life, ongoing development and interests, and, where particular issues arise.

Key Points



Parents want to be communicated with about the

- day to day life of their children
- expert views and opinions of personnel
- any incidents occurring and the management of these incidents

Communication about the day to day life of their child

Being able to talk to personnel about their child was identified as very helpful for parents. One parent noted that

“The communication really helps. If you can't feel like you can go and talk to them, that would be massive. It would really make things hard if you thought you couldn't approach them to talk to them about anything that would be really hard.”

This was reiterated by others who noted that in addition to being able to communicate with them that action was taken in response to that. One parent noted

“They act on things, when you do voice your opinion, that it's not swept under the carpet.”

The use of a daily diary was identified as a positive aspect of the care and one parent whose child attended a childminder said

“[name of service provider] has always been great at writing down her/his day...There's a diary. We didn't ask about a diary but [name of service provider] told us to bring in a diary and we have all the days, every day s/he's there. There's a history. It's very good.”

Another parent said

“I thought it was a great idea because, at the start, we didn't know what times to do things ourselves. We were all over the place. I just look at the diary and follow [name of providers] feed times and nappy changes and it's all timed. Wet nappy, dirty nappy, breakfast and lunch. That was all [name of providers] idea.”

Another parent who didn't realise the childminder had continued to take note of her child's daily routine noted

“s/he had an allergic reaction one day and I brought him straight to the doctor, and [name of provider] gave me this list going out the door of absolutely everything s/he'd eaten all that day. Down to the ingredients. So then it had been continuously maintained which was great, it's just I had never looked for it.”

Sharing information about child's development

A number of parents identified information they were provided with about their child on an ongoing basis and this was identified as being very helpful in getting an understanding of their child's development over time. One parent said

"So it's really important that the feedback too, that they're coping and I know that when [name of child] is older, they do kind of the scale... If s/he had some sort of learning experience, they'd write it down and they'd give a little score on it."

One example of the information about the child's development provided was being told

"We noticed that [name of child] was using his right hand today. He was able to connect this piece to this and this shows that his cognitive development is coming along' and they'll do a big assessment... and you get to revise it and sign it maybe twice a month. Yeah, it's lovely."

Other examples were given of children having

"scrap books with all the different paintings and they give them to you at the end of the year like... I think that's great because you can even see kind of, from the start of the year to kind of the end of the year, how the colouring and stuff is going and the whole lot like."

This was also identified by parents in another focus group where one parent said

"We got home a book of his/her activities and there were pictures and this is what s/he did such and such a day. It was their comments on how s/he interacted or if s/he didn't interact... we had it for a night and then sent it back in. I didn't realize I was going to get it, I thought 'Geez, this is brilliant.' It was photos of him/ her and what s/he did..."

Sharing expert views about child

It was noted that personnel working in early years service have a lot of expertise and one parent noted

"they work with children day in and day out and most of them are parents as well, so they see it from both sides... it's great feedback from them, because they're used to watching children and seeing how different children progress in different ways."

Another parent gave an example of seeking advice from staff about whether their child was ready to go to school noting

"like if I was thinking of sending him/her this year, that you could come and ask, 'Do you think s/he's ready?', not just learning ways but socially. They would know from looking after him/her whether s/he's ready or not, but they would advise you, and of course it's up to you what you do after that but at least you know that they can tell you, they can help you, if you're indecisive about it."

It was also highlighted that staff would point out areas to work on and one parent spoke of her experience with her child where the staff member had said *'She likes to play by herself'*. This comment was then followed up by the staff member with a number of suggestions and activities, which, in agreement with the parent, led to engaging the child more in group activities. The parent said

"I've seen a massive difference in him/her the last couple months. Instead of just going in and running to the kitchen or whatever play thing s/he's at, /she's interacting more with the kids now."

The parent went on to say

"Would I have spotted that? I probably would have but it was nice to see someone else caught that at the same time and mentioned it, and said it. So communication wise, that was good."

Communication around incidents

It was highlighted that it is important for parents to know if their child has had an incident at the service *'because you could go home and it could be a lot worse with the after symptoms'*. A number of parents noted, however, that if their child had an accident at the service

"you're always given a detailed report and you read it. And then you sign a sheet. Then you know if anything happens to them that the proper protocol is being adhered to."

Another parent gave an example of where another child had pushed their child and

"s/he ended up falling, s/he ended up kind of hitting her/ his head off a chair going down, and ended up with a black eye. Now they rang us straight away and I thought that was good, you know that I was able to come down because s/he was, you know what I mean, he was like s/he was shaking, you know what I mean."

Another parent also highlighted the importance of staff in services being honest with them saying

"I think the candidness of the staff as well [following an incident]... There was no panic, the lads [who] dealt with [it] aren't making a big deal out of it so they're not upsetting [name of child]. The professionalism of dealing with it, telling the parent 'This happened' and it's done and it's dusted."

It was recommended that the Inspectorate look at 'the incident reports' which would provide information on areas that might be a risk for children so that they would 'look and see what could be changed'.

Summary

In summary, three main issues were identified in respect of the governance of the service. The first issue related to the personnel working in the service, and their qualifications and suitability for working with children, as well as the continuity of personnel. Parents identified being suitably qualified including being able to identify issues arising as well as being Garda vetted in this. Continuity of personnel, including retention issues and the allocation of a key worker to each child, were identified as important.

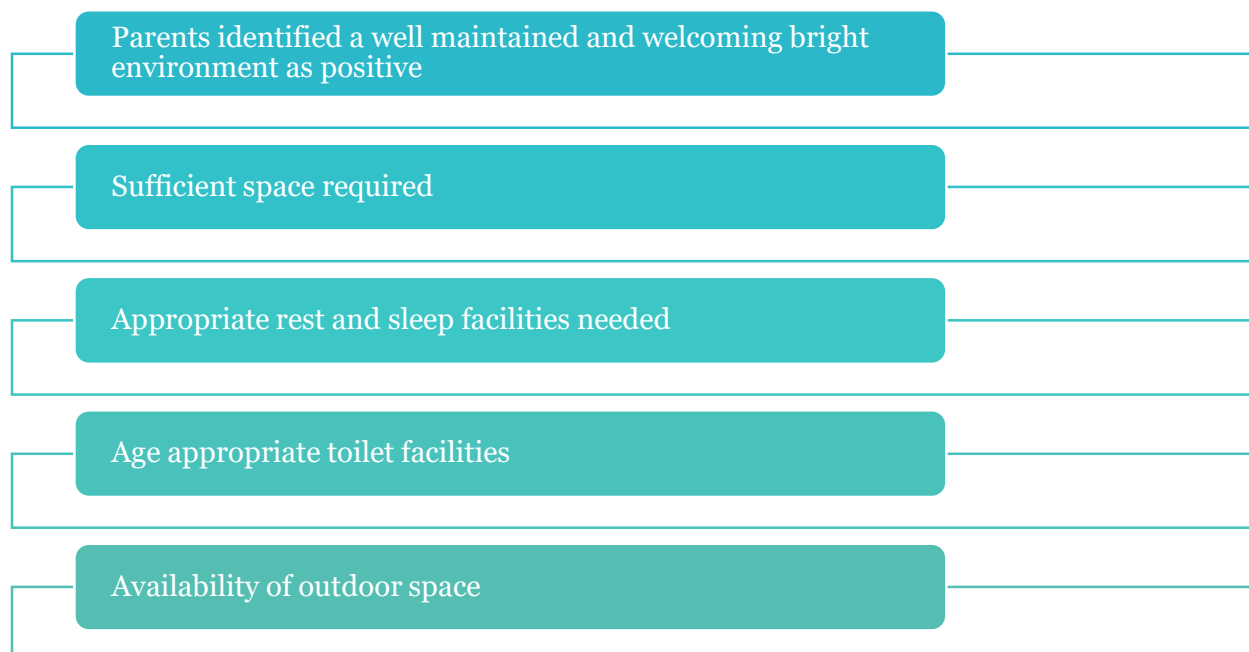
The second issue related to communication about the service and this included the need for communication prior to attending, the importance of information on an ongoing basis through a variety of means and knowledge of all personnel working in the service at all times.

The third issue related to communication about their individual child, including their day to day activities and development, the expert views and perceptions of personnel working with their child and any incidents occurring and the management of these.

Environment

Figure 6 presents the main issues arising in respect of the environment and it should be noted that there was relatively little commentary about this area.

Figure 6: Key points relating to the environment



The final area parents identified as important to inspect related to the environment. But relative to other areas, such as the health, welfare and development of the child, issues relating to the environment attracted little commentary. One parent noted that

“You'd want it maintained. You'd want it bright and cheerful and stuff for them. You're not going to send them into somewhere that's old and mouldy or that hasn't been looked at in years.”

Having sufficient space available and the sleeping area for children attracted some commentary and issues relating to toileting and the outdoor space were also mentioned.

Having sufficient space

Having sufficient space (‘spacing is a huge aspect I think’; ‘having a proper size’; ‘it's huge up there and I mean, the environment is amazing’) was identified as very important. One parent said

“I couldn't believe how big it was... Because the other place that I used was just one small full room... I just thought it was really, really big, like loads of toys, and the colours, and it just... I'd never seen one this big. I'm just used to one room.”

Another parent noted that the same service allowed for children ‘to roam between rooms’ saying

“It's child-led, like they can do what they want. Like go from this room to that room, they're not stuck in a room all day.”

Rest and sleep facilities

There was general agreement that having an appropriate area for children to take naps was important and hygiene was identified as particularly important as highlighted in the following iteration:

Parent 1: I'd be thinking, is it like musical chairs in the cot? That one child's in it and gets picked up and another child goes in. That the children are in the one cot but at different times.

Interviewer: And do you think that's okay? Do you think they should have their own cots?

Parent 2: Not their own cots but well, hygiene. If a child has a bug and in the one cot, the healthy child is going to get the bug as well then. That's a thing that I'd be thinking of.

One parent in a childminding situation also focused on this area saying

"I've a big thing about that because it's in somebody's house. Where are the cots kept? Who's in the bedroom when the child's in the bedroom? That's probably an advantage of an unannounced visit, that if your child's in bed, that an inspector can see if the monitor's on, this is where the child is."

One parent gave an example of a previous childcare service saying

"But when the kids were sleeping, there would have [been] three or four travel cots. They were all literally pushed into the room and they were all put to sleep. It was just that area and that was it."

Toileting areas

One parent drew attention to the toileting facilities and noted that they should be 'age appropriate' noting that in their service

"even down to the toilets like the toileting, they have small ones here as opposed to the large average sized toilet. I hadn't seen that until I had come here."

Outdoor area

While there was some commentary about the importance of children being able to play outside, there were only a small number of remarks about the space itself such as 'I think an outdoor area is very important'; 'And the outdoor area I thought was brilliant', there's a nice outdoor space'.

In summary, issues relating to the environment attracted little commentary from parents and in general, it focused on the space available and the nap area where overcrowding and hygiene were identified as the main concerns. Both the toileting area and outdoor play area were mentioned as important.

Unacceptable practices

While parents who took part in this consultation were overwhelmingly positive about the service their child attended, they were able to identify areas that were of significant concern and that they would consider to be totally unacceptable within a service. These are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Unacceptable practices

Children not happy

- If children do not want to go into the service after a settling in period
- Children left crying and not comforted

Poor safety

- Dangerous material being accessible to children
- If they can open the door and walk out

Poor nutrition

- Where the children won't eat the food and are going home hungry

Personnel in the service don't know your name

- If personnel meeting the parents regularly don't know their name

Parents not allowed free access to the service

- If you are made to wait at the door when dropping off or picking up a child

Somebody hurting the child

- If one of the adults trusted with your child did something harmful to them

Important issues identified by parents which inspectors should focus on inspection.

In summary, parents identified a number of issues of importance to them that inspectors should focus on. These included the safety of children, which was identified as paramount, and a number of specific areas were identified including the environment, first aid, supervision of children, security of the building and fire drills.

The area attracting the most commentary related to the health, welfare and development of children. In summary, four main areas were identified in respect of the health, welfare and development of the child and these were the importance of meeting the needs of the child (including having a focus on children's happiness and integrating children with additional needs); care of the child, particularly getting into a good routine, hygiene, nutrition and toileting; good relationships between parents and staff, children and staff, and children themselves considered as one area; and educational activities including having a structured approach to activities and preparation for transition to primary school.

Three main issues were identified in respect of the governance of the service. The first issue related to the personnel working in the service, and their qualifications and suitability for working with children, as well as the continuity of personnel. Parents identified being suitably qualified including being able to identify issues arising as well as being Garda vetted in this. Continuity of personnel, including retention issues and the allocation of a key worker to each child, were identified as important. The second issue related to communication about the service and this included the need for communication prior to attending, the importance of information on an ongoing basis through a variety of means and knowledge of all personnel working in the service at all times. The third issue related to communication about their individual child, including their day to day activities and development, the expert views and perceptions of personnel working with their child and any incidents occurring and the management of these.

The final area relating to the environment generated the least amount of commentary and issues identified as relevant for inspection related to having sufficient space available and ensuring overcrowding does not take place. Sufficient sleep and rest areas as well as the toileting area and outdoor place area were both mentioned. A small number of issues were identified as being completely unacceptable and these were the children not happy there following a settling in period, poor safety, poor nutrition, where personnel do not know parent's names, where parents are not allowed free access to the service and where someone hurts the child.

Awareness about early years inspections

The second area of interest in this consultation was the awareness parents have about early years inspections. The findings relating to this issue are now considered.

Key Points



- There is some awareness that services are 'checked'
- This awareness is mainly by parents who work in a health or social care area or through observation of the impact of inspection
- There are expectations that services are inspected

Issues arising

A small number of parents indicated they were aware that *'crèches are checked'*, they *'all have to meet certain criteria'*. In general, however, there was very poor knowledge about early years inspections and parents said they were *'oblivious'* to them, are *'only vaguely aware'* and *'it's not something that's ever crossed my mind'*. There was, however, an expectation that inspections do take place and a number of parents spoke about this saying *'you would expect it'*, *'obviously I assume that there would be regulatory bodies of the crèches and of the schools and all those various day cares.'* One parent said

"It's funny for me, because it was really important that my service was registered. But at the same time I had no idea that these reports [were available]... I just had faith in the system that when it was being registered, that monitoring was happening."

Some parents indicated they were aware of inspections because of their own background in health, education or social care where inspections are common. One parent highlighted that the inspection report had been put on display and consequently s/he was aware of the inspection. A small number of other parents indicated they knew about inspections because of a direct or indirect impact on the service and examples of these are presented in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Examples of direct or indirect impacts of inspections

Practices and procedures in the service

- *I suppose when you look around the playschool, there's a lot of safety information, and even in the toilets - it's like cleanliness and stuff like that, and I assume that if you have all that kind of information available that you are getting inspected. Because otherwise why would you keep all these high standards really? And plus they need funding as well, I know that.*

Information about inspection shared by provider

- *I know she did stuff. I know somebody came because she told us... I didn't see them [the inspector] coming or going.*

Direct impact of the inspection on individual child

- *My son was in the baby room, he'd only sleep in the lie down chairs. So, I had to fill out the notes and sign them off saying that that was his way [in case there was an inspection].*

Recommendations for raising awareness

Recommendations

- Greater visibility and rebranding of Early Years Inspectorate needed
- Information needed about the Early Years Inspectorate
- Communications from Early Years Inspectorate need to be in Plain English

It was recommended that the Early Years Inspectorate make themselves more visible and rebrand themselves. One parent said

“It's just making themselves more visible. Just be more visible. Like we just said, to me Tusla is child protection, so it is making yourself more visible... It is knowing what is Tusla, and where does the early years service kind of sit within it. And what's it for.”

It was recommended that when providing information to parents, Tusla needs to do it in ‘Plain English’. One parent said

“And I just think that would help to inform people as you said in simple kind of language that everybody understands. It doesn't have to be complicated, but just to know what the organisation is, what it does, and what role does the early years service play as opposed to the rest of the organization.”

Another parent suggested the development of a short information leaflet to be given to parents in an early years service, saying:

“Like a two-page document or something, [to be put in] the information pack when you join... Straight away, in the pack, and then you go ‘Oh, what's this?’ At least you then have it in your brain, so if you need to then call, they shouldn't be like ‘Oh, what's that?’ So you would have heard at one stage, even if you didn't absorb it, you have it in your Filofax at home...”

This was reiterated by another parent who said

“Maybe when children are first accessing services a little information about [it in] their booklet or sheet that's given to them to say, you know. This is what happens. This is who we are. This, you know. This service was inspected. Here's where you can access the reports and if you've any problems contact Tusla.”

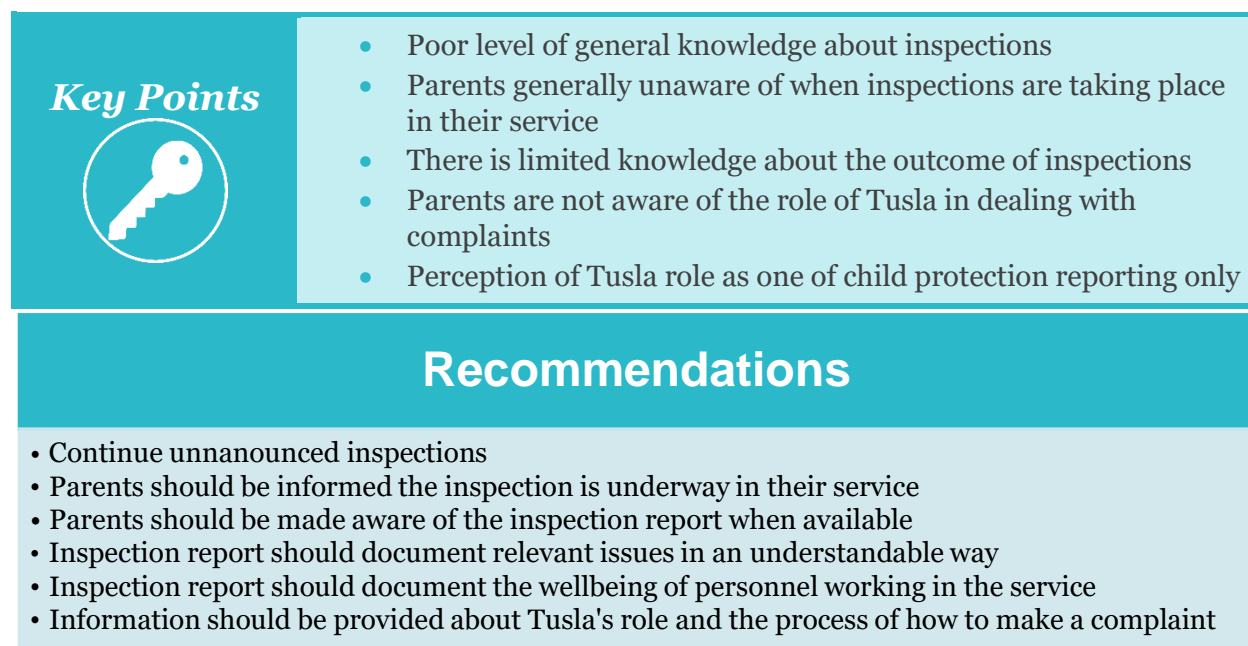
Summary

In summary, while there is some awareness that services are ‘checked’, this awareness is limited and is mainly by parents who work in a health or social care area or those who observe practices in a service arising as an impact of the inspection. There are, however, strong expectations that services would be inspected and it was strongly recommended that there be greater visibility of the service Inspectorate and inspections taking place and communication around this be in Plain English.

Knowledge about inspections and the Inspectorate

Figure 9 provides an overview of the key points and recommendations made by parents in respect of knowledge about inspections and the Inspectorate.

Figure 9: Knowledge about inspections and the Inspectorate



Overview of issues arising

As outlined earlier, while there was an expectation that early years services are regulated and inspected, there was a very low level of awareness or knowledge about how and when they take place. It was suggested that parents should be made aware by the Early Years Inspectorate of the Inspectorate and their role and function. One parent stated:

“Well, this is what we do. We do view crèches, we do it as frequently as we can. There's no harm educating them... It's nearly like, even an ad or an advertisement or anything...”

It was pointed out that the information arising from an inspection about a service would be most helpful prior to enrolling your child, and parents asked questions such as

“If you were looking for a crèche, like the way some of us, like, can you go on and see if that crèche passed their licence? Look it up online before I come here?”

Another parent said

“I suppose if there was like some kind of national register of services where you would just click and then you know. This tells you what's in your local area.”

It was pointed out by another parent in that group that that facility is in place but it was clear that there was a general lack of awareness by parents on this, and other groups about the current online availability of information including inspection reports (<https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/creche-inspection-reports/>).

Knowledge about the timing of the inspection

Only one parent involved in this consultation was aware of when an inspection had taken place noting that this was because the inspector was present when s/he collected his/her child from the service. Parents asked questions about whether they were supposed to be informed when an inspection was taking place. One parent said

“if Tulsa come here to do an inspection, do we get an email to say this is now live... the inspection I mean?”. Another parent asked ‘do they tell the parents... or is there a letter [given to the child] going home?’”

It was highlighted that most inspections are unannounced and take place without any notification to the provider and that heretofore, there has not been any direct communication with parents about inspections. Parents welcomed the unannounced nature of inspections (*‘I think that it's great that it's unannounced... I think it's important that it is unannounced’*). It was also noted, however, that parents would welcome an opportunity to know the inspection is underway and a number of comments were made about this.

Recommendations for informing parents when an inspection is taking place

It was recommended that parents be informed about when an inspection was taking place and some suggestions were made in that regard. One parent said

“it would be important to put a notice up on the door, so that when people are coming in at 12 or 1 or 2 or 3 to say Tulsa is inspecting the service today.”

The following iteration took place at another focus group discussion

Participant 1 I don't see why a text message couldn't go to parents.

Participant 2 I suppose if the inspector announced that morning, that's something. They then have a chance to say, ‘here, they're coming’ and that's it. More so, that even two hours’ notice or something. They can't do much in two hours, they can't fix everything in two hours if the place is in a state.

Recommendations

- Parents should be informed when an inspection is underway in their service
- Unannounced inspections are welcomed and should be continued
- Communication needs to be in Plain English

Knowledge about the results of the inspection

While there was not a consensus about whether parents would be interested in, or would want to access, the results of an inspection, in general, parents recommended that once an inspection is complete and the information is available, that parents should be aware of it. One individual said

“After that, it's up to the parents then like, do you know? If you have a look online after the inspection and just say [the inspection report notes] you have this or that needs to be done.”

Others suggested that the responsibility for disseminating the information about the inspection report should lie with the service provider with one person noting

“The service could turn around and say in an email or something, ‘Look this was recommended, what do you as parents of the facility think about this?’ Then you’re working with each other.”

Another parent noted that a copy of the inspection report was on the notice board in their service although parents hadn’t looked at it. One parent in that group said

“And I suppose part of that is we trust [name of provider] that if there’s a problem it will be fixed, or if there’s an issue that she’d kind of bring it to your attention.”

One parent noted that even if a report was available, s/he wouldn’t have any interest in reading it saying *‘I wouldn’t have gone looking for your report even if I knew it existed’*. Another parent was dubious about whether a report could capture the essence of a service saying

“There’s no writing on paper to say how happy your kids are or, how good a job people are doing.”

Inspection reports

The following iteration took place in response to a question of what parents would look for in an inspection report

Participant 1: Well I suppose just to see what points they had fallen down on and is there something, I suppose, we could do.

Participant 2: To help, d’you know. Right there’s things we could do as well, as well as our children who use the service can do. That’s I suppose the main thing I’d look at. I’d also be looking at their health and safety, but that’s just me.

Participant 4: I knew that the reports were there.

Interviewer: You knew they were there?

Participant 4: So, yeah I’d be interested just from, I think it’s interesting to see a different perspective on things and what happens during the day and from an outside body.

It was also suggested, in addition to looking at the relevant areas, the inspection report should include something about the wellbeing of the staff. One person noted

“I just think that that should be part of the job. Just to give a little back to the staff. That there should be, it should be factored into their working - even if it’s just a reflective practice or something for them, even team building. Whatever it is, that just helps the staff be able to come in and manage children all day long.”

Recommendations

- Parents should be made aware of an inspection report when available
- The inspection report should document issues arising in an understandable way
- The inspection report should document the wellbeing of personnel working in the service

Recommendations about sharing information about the results of the inspection

While some reservations were expressed, it was generally recommended that information about the inspection be shared with parents. Ways in which parents could be informed about the inspection having taken place are presented in Figure 10.

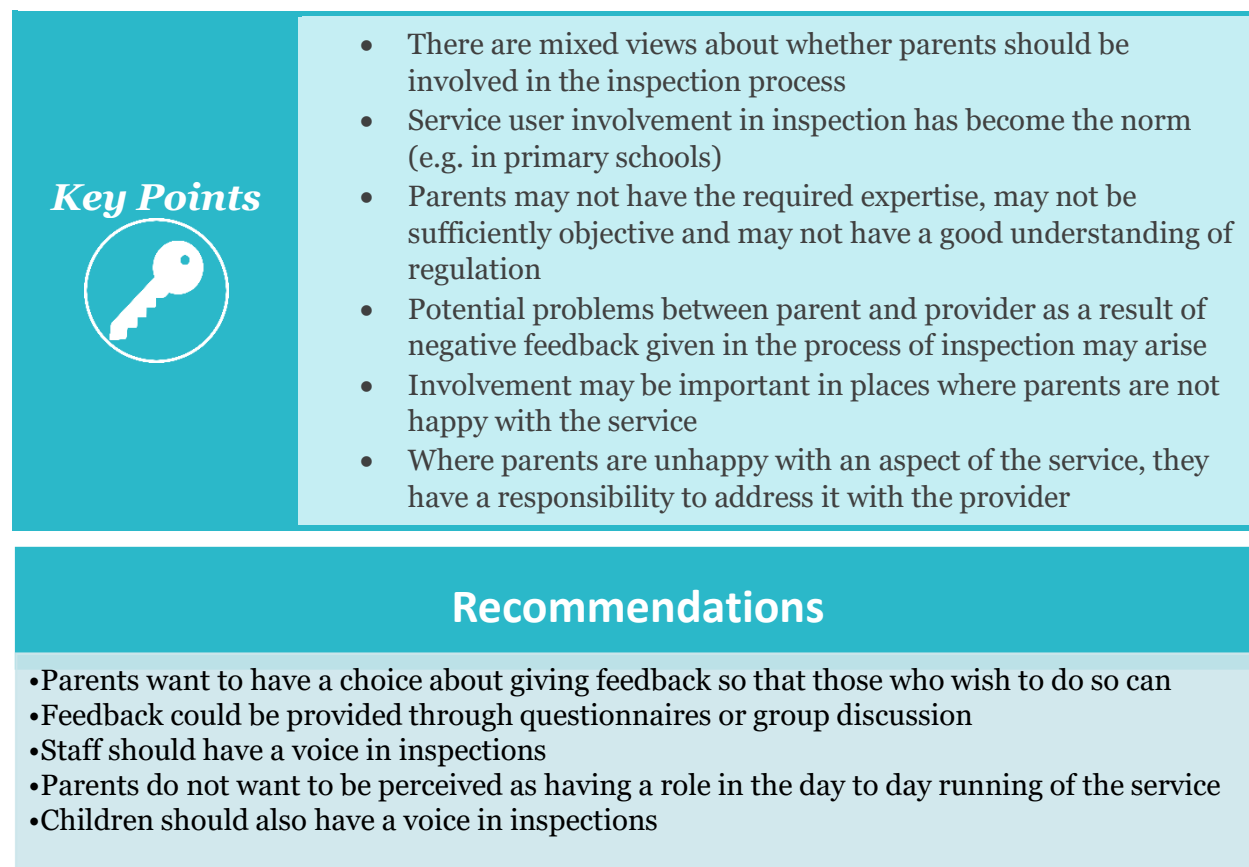
Figure 10: Mechanisms for sharing information about the findings of the inspection

Recommendations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask the provider to put up a notice at the door giving information on the results• Send out a notice to parents that the inspection report is now available to view online• Put the report on the noticeboard within the service• Ensure parents know where to access the online inspection reports	
Summary	<p>In summary, there are low levels of parental awareness about inspections taking place and about the availability of inspection reports. There is, however, an assumption by parents that inspections do take place and that early years services operate within a regulatory context.</p>

Parental involvement in early years inspections

The final question to be addressed in this consultation relates to the inspection process and a range of views were recorded. It is clear that there is not a consensus as to the role parents should play. Figure 11 summaries the key issues and recommendations made by parents.

Figure 11: Views on parental involvement in early years inspections



A core question guiding this consultation related to parents' role in inspections and there were mixed views about whether parents should be involved in the process. There were differing views on this and these are now considered - some parents felt it was important to involve parents in the inspection of services while others were strongly opposed to it.

Important to involve parents

Key Points



- Parents want a choice about giving feedback to the Inspectorate
- Service user involvement in inspection is the norm (for example primary school inspections)
- Children's voices should also be reflected in the report

It is important to highlight that parents taking part in this consultation were very happy with the services they were provided with and did not raise any issues of concern throughout the process. In that context, a number of parents indicated they would welcome an opportunity to 'give feedback to inspectors' noting

"I'd love to give feedback, yeah. Well, I've nothing but positive [things to say] and you'd love to give that affirmation back to [name of provider]. To say actually, we think you're doing a really good job and for her to know that."

Other parents highlighted that service user involvement in inspections and regulations is the norm saying

"In primary schools it's the norm that the parents are brought in and they're invited to give feedback. The same should be in the early years setting as well. Parent's voice is important, you know."

Another parent reiterated the importance of parent's voice saying

"It's not how do they do their job, I think it's... we want to know that they are safe. That they are well looked after and I'm pretty sure they have structures that they follow..."

One parent suggested that in addition to parents, children's voice should also be taken into account and reflected in the reports

"Look it makes sense, is even the voice of the children reflected in these reports? You know you have to ask that as well if they're being accurately represented, their views being represented. And that's not just maybe a three or four year old child that's able to maybe string ten, twenty words together you know. You look at all the non-verbal interactions and the kind of, the comfort the children find in certain individuals, like the voice of the child is very, very important in that."

This parent went on to say

"Parallel to their voice is our voice, as the paying customer, it's very important, I suppose to reflect our views in that, how happy we are, because I'm sure if we weren't happy we'd be very quick to say that, you know it's very easy to complain. It can be quite difficult to praise."

Reasons for not being involved

Key Points



- Parents may not have the required expertise, may not be sufficiently objective and may not have a good understanding of regulation
- Parents do not want to be perceived as having a role in the day to day running of the service
- Potential problems between parent and provider may arise as a result of negative feedback given in the process of inspection
- Involvement may be important in places where parents are not happy with the service
- Where parents are unhappy with an aspect of the service, they have a responsibility to address it with the provider

Many parents, however, were of the view that they did not have a role in inspections. Of particular concern was whether parents would have ‘the expertise’ to know what was appropriate or not. This viewpoint was raised in a number of groups. One parent said

“There's so much behind inspections and regulations. And, parents just aren't aware of that level. ...it's very hard to try and get an opinion when you're not familiar with something and, you don't know the facts of it. It's hard to get that opinion, it's not just a personal thing from home in your experience. And again, once your child moves, you're only learning the next step, you're only learning the ratio, the room, the level of what they're doing. You're learning as you move [through] each room.”

Another parent highlighted that different parents have different approaches and this could be problematic. One individual said

“Every parent is different and every parent has different values and different priorities for their child. So I think you could go completely off the scale. Maybe by way of reference, possibly, but I think everybody wants different things for their children.”

The following iteration took place at one focus group:

Participant 1: I personally would be happy enough even just reading [a report], I don't know whether I want to get involved... I suppose more than anybody else, you don't really have the time either, time is a huge factor. But, I suppose -

Participant 2: It's not your level of expertise.

Participant 1: That's it, exactly.

Participant 2: What you might think is A okay, might go completely against every regulation that ever existed. But, this is how you would be looking after your child.

It was also suggested that it can be difficult for parents to be objective noting

“See people have already picked as well. People think they made the right decision. So they're going to question presumably whether they made the right decision. There's an element of that. Nobody came here by accident. There's plenty of options for my [child]. So if you haven't picked here. You're going to presume that you've made the right decision. Your answers are predicated on that decision already. So yeah, it is difficult for parents to be... objective.”

Potential negative impacts

Some parents were concerned about the impact on personnel at the service of parental involvement and were strongly of the view they should not have a role in inspections, particularly in determining the *'day to day running of the place'*. One parent said

"It's up to them, they're going to run it the appropriate way and to each and every child's needs. That's how they're trained. So I don't think parents should have too much of a say in how they run their service... I don't think that parents should undermine the trained workers by telling them how to do their job. We chose to send our children here to have them bring our children to a certain level of development. And then to go back and tell them how to do their job?"

Some concerns were also identified about the potential for creating problems between the parent and provider as a result of feedback given. One individual said

"Where the issue is in terms of getting parents involved that might be problematic would be situations where parents felt like in some way that their kids' continuing presence at the service was in some way conditional on them giving a good report."

Another individual noted that

"So the real value is talking to people who have left services. I wouldn't stay here if I wasn't happy. So they're the kinds of things that need to be inspected. And maybe if any of us had gone to a number of services, you'd have more idea of what was important."

May be important in places where parents are not happy with everything

Several parents highlighted their satisfaction with the service their child experienced and did not feel they would have anything to comment on noting *'here like, we're so well off with it'* and *'we don't have to worry about it'*. One participant said:

"I think it's probably difficult right now because you know when your child is actually, explicitly happy in a place and you are genuinely pleased with relationships and everything, it's kind of hard to push that all away."

Others highlighted the potential challenges some parents experience and some examples were given of concerns parents had posted on Facebook with one parent saying *'oh God like, the poor parents that are leaving their kids in places that they're not [happy with]'*. This viewpoint was reiterated by another parent who said

"It would be no harm that if your child was in a place where they were unhappy or you were concerned that they were being mistreated or that there was a terrible approach to behaviour management or relationships weren't being worked on, I think that would come to the fore in a questionnaire."

Parental responsibility

Some issues arising from the discussion related to the role of parents in situations where they are unhappy about an aspect of the service provided for their child and it was strongly suggested that parents had a responsibility to do something if they were not happy. One parent said

"you don't want to ruffle any feathers but still have to be a grown up, you still have to be comfortable, if you're going to say something."

This was reiterated by another parent who said

“If they're not happy, then it's up to you as an adult to talk to the teachers. They're professionals, they've been trained. If you can't talk to them, that's kind of your problem as an adult, as a parent. If you're not happy with them, then you should know where to go from there.”

It was accepted that some parents might find it difficult to make a complaint within the service and this is highlighted in the following quote where a parent said

“In general staff are going to want to make the service better. Sometimes, some parents, have no problems approaching people regardless but there are some that [are] I won't necessarily say shy, but awkward about approaching people, so I know you have to take responsibility for your whatever, but I think in that sense it might help a little bit. It has to be made aware that it's all for the good of the service and the good of the children at the end of the day. It's not to try and slate an individual. The purpose of it has to be clear.”

Another parent highlighted the importance of dealing with the service directly where there are issues arising saying

“I think it's better to deal with it directly. And if you didn't get anywhere with it because you have to give them the opportunity to deal with the situation, but if they're not happy about you, you have your rights to do that. It really is your rights. I just think I'd feel better for the place to work properly, and for that line of communication to stay open, I'd feel better to kind of deal with it head on.”

This was also highlighted by a parent in another focus group who said

“Obviously, if I have a concern here, your first stop is [name of owner], or whoever is your contact and then I suppose you could [go further] if you weren't happy.”

This was reiterated by participants in another group where it was noted that

“We complain, well we can complain. If there's nothing done about it then we'll have to go somewhere else. So it's good to know that there's somewhere else where you can go... with the problems so if you can't get rid of the problem I have to take my child off from here and bring him somewhere else.”

Recommendations relating to parental involvement

Recommendations

- Parental involvement can take place at the time of the inspection or at a time outside the inspection
- Questionnaires could be used to provide feedback
- Group discussion can also be used to provide feedback
- Opportunities to provide feedback outside the inspection process would be welcomed
- Parents should have knowledge about how to make a complaint about a service

Methods

Two main methods for feeding into an inspection were identified and these were through the use of a questionnaire or through a group discussion. Pros and cons to both were identified. Two main ways in which parents could feed into an inspection were identified and both these referred to the provision of information to the Inspectorate. One parent said

"I'd happily do a survey as I say, [name of provider] does a fantastic job here, she's so amazing."

Another parent suggested that a questionnaire would be too much like 'ticking boxes' and it would be better that

"the parents be brought in, maybe not on every inspection because, I'm assuming it's pressure enough on the girls [staff working in the service] here at times ... never mind parents on top of that."

This approach was reiterated by another parent who said

"I'm just thinking of a place where that might not be the best, like when you go in on the day, like the NCT now, when you [go] in on the day everything might look rosy in the garden but behind it all the parents mightn't actually be happy with certain things. It mightn't necessarily be a complaint, but it could be just something in general that wouldn't be right in the place but meeting the parents, they might help that way."

Another parent said

"I don't know necessarily that you need to be doing your own report on it as well (laughing) if you know what I mean, it seems like you're doing someone else's job then. Just that you are aware that you can contact."

Parental involvement outside the time of inspection

While there was little agreement about whether parents should have a voice in the inspection process, there was some agreement that it would be important to know that the Early Years Inspectorate had a role in dealing with complaints that could not be resolved at local level. There was agreement, however, that the internal processes within the service were the first line with one individual noting

"Obviously, if I have a concern here, your first stop is [name of owner], or whoever is your contact and then I suppose you could [go further] if you weren't happy."

There was almost complete lack of awareness of the role of the Early Years Inspectorate in dealing with complaints about early years services and comments such as '*I wouldn't have known*', '*I would have just gone directly to the service*' were made. One parent said

"So then if there's an issue within an early years service, in my head I'd be going 'So what number do I ring?' That's not clear to me. So for me, that's a point, right?... So if you did want to ring Tusla about something, anything, that wasn't [a] child protection issue, who do I ring? Where are they located? At the moment I don't know the answer to that."

Parents also agreed, however, that it was important to be able to contact someone if they were unhappy with an aspect of the service although it was also suggested that

"it would be important that you'd be able to contact someone if you had a concern. That you knew who you could contact. That you knew the office number that deals with your area, that you knew that you could contact them."

There was, however, some concern that Tusla was associated only with child protection reporting and parents may not feel comfortable making a complaint to them. The following iteration took place at one focus group

- Participant 1: *I think it's important to have a forum where parents have an opportunity if they have concerns and if they didn't feel comfortable going directly to the facility that there is... that it's not, you can't talk to Tusla because then you're reported.*
- Participant 2: *Exactly. That's it.*
- Participant 1: *And I don't mean that in a negative way*
- Participant 2: *It is.*
- Participant 3: *Bad press that comes with Tusla.*

Others pointed out that in their service they would have no difficulty in getting any issue they were concerned about addressed but that it might be a 'different situation' in other services. It was recommended that if there is a problem, that a parent would have a place to go to make a complaint and the following parent said

"So the level for my little princess is up there. I might be too high for everyone else. There is a difference in level there, but it is important that we know where to go. If the system is doing something incorrect then parents should be able to correct that system. If they do see something that's out of whack, it makes sense to have somewhere to go."

Summary

In summary, an analysis of the findings relating to parent's involvement in inspections shows that there are mixed views about whether parents have a direct role in providing information at the time of inspection. While some parents highlighted the normalisation of this practice in other settings (e.g. primary schools), some concerns were raised. These concerns included inadequate expertise in the area of inspection and regulation, insufficient objectivity, potential problems arising from negative feedback and a concern that parents may be perceived as taking on a role in the day to day running of the service. It was highlighted, however, that parents should have the option of giving their views about the service, and methods through which this could take place include questionnaires or group discussions. In addition, it was suggested that opportunities to provide feedback outside the inspection process would be appropriate. While it was noted that if parents are unhappy with any aspect of the service they have a responsibility to raise the problem with the provider in the first instance, it was also strongly suggested that parents should be aware of the role of Tusla in dealing with complaints.

Other issues arising

Three additional issues arose during the course of the consultation and these were as follows:

System of recognition for excellent services

The need to consider a system of recognition for those services who provide an ‘excellent service’ as highlighted in the following iteration:

- Participant 1: Say, if an establishment passed everything, should they get some sort of recognition for that? Just say here, we'll say, passed all inspections all that sort of stuff. Because, I think if as a parent that you saw that, it won awards...*
- Participant 2: The Q mark, yes that's it exactly. You would go for, if you were deciding on child care and if you saw that they had that.*
- Participant 3: ISO or that sort of thing.*

Costs of early years childcare

The cost of childcare was raised by a number of parents and it was noted that

“I mean, the whole cost is huge, it really is. And even obviously when you get to the three hours, holy God the difference it makes is unreal. You go from it being more than most people's mortgages to being still a hell of a lot of money but... And you don't mind sometimes, here would probably be a little bit more expensive than other places but, you don't mind paying for it as well but, you just feel as if the government could do another bit of that.”

Involvement in planning of additional houses

Concerns were raised in one area about a number of new housing developments taking place that are likely to result in families with young children who are likely to need childcare moving into the area. It was highlighted in that area that there is already a limited availability of childcare places so that new parents coming to the area would find it difficult to get a place for their child. It was suggested that there is a role for the Early Years Inspectorate in highlighting the need for childcare when new houses are being developed.

Section 4: Summary, conclusions and recommendations

This report has presented the findings from a consultation with 70 parents whose children attend early years services. The purpose of the consultation was to ascertain parents' views, understanding, knowledge and requirements in terms of regulatory inspection. The consultation answers three key questions and these are:

1. What issues do parents think are important to inspect in early years services?
2. Are parents aware of, and knowledgeable about early years inspections?
3. Should parents have a voice in early years inspections, and if so, how best can that be taken into account?

Issues of importance to inspect in early years services

Summary: An analysis of the findings from the consultation identified a range of areas parents felt the Inspectorate should examine and these areas broadly reflect the 2016 regulations under which the Inspectorate carry out their work. A summary of key issues arising are now presented.

1. **Safety:** Parents highlighted issues relating to safety as paramount to their child's wellbeing and many parents identified this as the most important issue for inspection. Specific areas identified are the environment, first aid, supervision of children, security of the building and fire drills.
2. **Health, welfare and development of child** Four main areas were identified in respect of the health, welfare and development of the child and these were the importance of meeting the needs of the child (including having a focus on children's happiness and integrating children with additional needs); care of the child, particularly getting into a good routine, hygiene, nutrition and toileting; good relationships between parents and staff, children and staff, and children themselves considered as one area; and educational activities including having a structured approach to activities and preparation for transition to primary school.
3. **Governance:** Two main issues were identified in respect of the governance of the service. The first issue related to the personnel working in the service, their qualifications and suitability for working with children, as well as the continuity of personnel. Parents identified being suitably qualified including being able to identify issues arising as well as being Garda vetted in this. Continuity of personnel, including retention issues and the allocation of a key worker to each child were identified as important. The second issue related to communication about the service and about their individual child, including their development and any incidents arising. Information about staff wellbeing should be incorporated into the inspection report.
4. **Environment:** Issues relating to the environment attracted little commentary from parents and in general, it focused on the space available and the nap area where overcrowding and hygiene were identified as the main concerns. Both the toileting area and outdoor play area were mentioned as important.

Conclusion:

- There is substantial overlap between the areas identified by inspectors in inspection reports and the issues of importance to parents. This is particularly the case in respect of children's safety, their health, welfare and development, governance of the service and the environment within which the service operates.

Recommendation: The overlap between the issues identified by parents and that undertaken as part of inspections is significant. It is worth noting, however, that issues relating to the environment attracted the least amount of commentary from parents and some consideration of this should be given when presenting reports on specific services.

Awareness and knowledge of early years inspection

Summary: The findings show that, while there is an assumption that inspections do take place and that services operate within a regulatory context, there is a dearth of awareness about them and about the availability of inspection reports. Where parents were aware of early years inspections, it was generally because of a range of practices and procedures in the service that were assumed to be a regulatory requirement- because a provider had shared information with the parents about an inspection or because of a direct impact of the inspection on a child.

Conclusions:

- There is a need for parents to have a greater knowledge and awareness about the regulatory Early Years Inspectorate.
- There is a need for parents to be given information about an inspection taking place in the service their child attends.
- There is a need for parents to be informed about when a report on the service their child attends is published.

Recommendation: It is recommended that steps be taken to ensure that all parents whose children attend an early years service are provided with information about the inspectorate and the inspection process. Ways in which this can be done include the provision of a short, plain English leaflet that sets out the key elements of the early years inspection process including who the Inspectorate are, the regulatory requirements, inspection process, complaints management and availability of inspection reports as well as contact details for the inspectorate. This could be developed in consultation with parents. A thorough broader branding of the inspectorate should be undertaken through creating opportunities to raise awareness of the Inspectorate at various fora.

Parents should have knowledge about the timing and process of an inspection taking place in their service as well as knowledge about the results of the inspection. It is strongly recommended that parents be informed about when an inspection is taking place and that an opportunity to provide feedback to the inspector about the service is made available for those who wish to do so.

It is also recommended that parents be informed about the publication of the report of the inspection of their service.

Parents' involvement with the Early Years Inspectorate

Summary: An analysis of the findings relating to parental involvement in inspections shows that there are mixed views about the involvement of parents in the inspection process. Some parents suggested that parents and children should have some involvement in inspections while others were opposed to any involvement. This was due, in part at least, to a sense that parents did not have the requisite expertise to identify incorrect or inappropriate practices. It was also due to strongly held views that if parents have a problem with a service, it is their responsibility to bring this forward to the provider and ensure the issue is resolved.

Conclusions:

- It is concluded that parents would welcome information about when and how an inspection is taking place in their service, for example by text message from the provider and /or a poster displayed on the day of inspection about the results of the inspection and about where to make a complaint in the event of a problem arising that cannot be resolved at local level.
- The views in respect of parental involvement in the process of inspection are more varied and while some parents would welcome an opportunity to give their views to the inspector at the time of an inspections, others may not wish to do so.

Recommendations:

1. Parents should be informed about when an inspection is taking place in their service. Ways in which this may be done can include a text message from the provider to let parents know and a notice in a prominent place in the service that can be seen by parents. Other mechanisms should also be considered in consultation with providers.
2. Parents should be aware of the outcome of an inspection that has taken place in their service. A mechanism through which this can be done (e.g. a summary circulated by the provider) should be agreed in consultation with providers.
3. Parents should be aware of where to access inspection reports about a service. Information about how to do this should be provided by Tusla as part of a general information communication about the inspectorate.
4. Providers should be encouraged to direct parents to the inspection report on their service at the time of enquiry about the service.
5. Parents attending early years services should be given information about where they can make a complaint about a service and about the process to be followed in such an event. This information can be provided as part of the overall information to be provided to parents about the inspectorate.
6. Parents attending early years services should be offered the choice of sharing their views on the service with the inspectorate.
 - a. Some consideration should be given to how a meeting with the inspector at the time of the inspection could take place. Some challenges will need to be overcome in the context of the unannounced nature of the inspections.
 - b. A suggestion box should be made available at the service, where suggestions could be collated at the time of inspection.
 - c. A short questionnaire based on the findings from this consultation on issues of importance to parents should be made available at the time of the inspection. Issues

- relating to anonymity and integration of findings with the findings of the inspectorate should be addressed.
- d. Consideration should be given to collating parents' views at a time outside the inspection. This could be done in a way similar to the UK Ofsted parent views (access at: <https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/login?destination=give-your-views>). This approach should be monitored and made explicit that it is not a mechanism for complaints.
 7. Some consideration should be given to recognising 'excellent services' and the involvement of parents in the selection and awarding of these. These awards could potentially be developed and implemented by a non-governmental organisation operating in the childcare area.

