

Chapter 49

Childcare Facilities

Childcare Facilities

49.1 The State began increasing childcare capacity from the late-1990s. At that time, the economy was experiencing high levels of economic growth, falling unemployment and increased levels of female participation in the workforce. It was recognised that, for growth to continue, any barriers to women entering the labour force needed to be addressed. One of the principal barriers in this respect was a lack of childcare provision. This was addressed through programmes designed to subvent the creation of places for the care of children.

- The first childcare programme – the ‘Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme’ (EOCP), which was in place up to 2006 was financed through a combination of Government and EU Structural Funds. Over €500 million was invested in the development of childcare under the EOCP and resulted in the creation of almost 40,000 childcare places⁴¹⁰.
- In 2006, a National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) was introduced and an amount of €75 million⁴¹¹ was allocated to that programme which was to be delivered over the five-year period 2006 to 2010.

49.2 In addition to funding the creation of childcare places through capital grants, a range of State funding has been available to assist with the running costs of service providers and to support access to childcare for certain categories of children. These included

- staffing grants⁴¹²
- reduction of fees to low income families
- childcare support for those in training and employment programmes⁴¹³
- a free year of early childhood care and education for children of pre-school age.

49.3 Childcare is provided in both community-based and private facilities. It is estimated that two-thirds of the income of community-based facilities is provided by way of State subvention.

Responsibility for Childcare Programmes

49.4 Responsibility for childcare programmes rests with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)⁴¹⁴. The day-to-day operations of the programme are managed by Pobal⁴¹⁵ on its behalf.

49.5 In addition, 33 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), established in 2001, are involved in facilitating the delivery of the NCIP. Seven National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs)⁴¹⁶ also deliver services in the area of childcare. The role of CCCs and NVCOs is outlined in Annex A.

⁴¹⁰ The Pobal Annual Report 2007 notes that 39,108 new childcare places were created under EOCP (16,714 full-time and 22,394 part-time).

⁴¹¹ The capital allocation was €357 million.

⁴¹² These were available to community-based childcare providers up until the introduction of a Community Childcare Subvention Scheme in 2008.

⁴¹³ Programmes administered by FÁS or the VECs.

⁴¹⁴ In June 2011, the newly formed DCYA took over the functions previously carried out by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). The OMCYA had in 2006 brought together relevant staff who had previously worked on a range of functions related to children in the Departments of Health and Children, Justice and Law Reform and Education and Skills.

⁴¹⁵ Pobal is a not-for-profit company with charitable status that manages programmes on behalf of the Government and the EU.

⁴¹⁶ These are generally membership-based organisations supporting different categories of childcare providers (e.g. full day care, Montessori, Náionraí). A listing of the NVCOs is provided in Annex A.

49.6 A number of national committees or groups also exist in the childcare area. These are

- The National Childcare Coordinating Committee (NCCC) whose terms of reference are to advise and assist the DCYA in relation to the childcare programme, quality issues and the development of a co-ordinated approach to childcare provision.
- A Childcare Regulations Implementation Group which met from September 2007 until the end of 2010 to provide a forum to deal with issues arising following the commencement of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations 2006.
- A Standards Working Group established in 2008 under the aegis of the Implementation Group to develop a set of national standards for service users and providers. These were published in December 2010.

Cost of Childcare Programmes

49.7 Out of the original programme allocation of €75 million, €452 million⁴¹⁷ was subsequently approved for payment. Funding of €406.7 million has been paid out up to 31 December 2010 under a range of measures encompassed in the NCIP. €1.6 million⁴¹⁸ was incurred on administration with €170 million being paid by way of capital grants and the balance by way of ongoing support.

49.8 Separately, a further €153.5 million has been paid out under an Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) introduced in 2010⁴¹⁹. Figure 192 details the NCIP provision and outlays.

⁴¹⁷ This is stated net of decommitments.

⁴¹⁸ This figure has been compiled based on an apportionment of the reported spend on administration costs by the CCCs and the NVCOs during the years 2006 to 2010. In addition, it includes the full amount paid to Pobal. It does not include any element of administration costs incurred by the CCCs and the NVCOs which were funded under the EOCP over the period 2006 and 2007.

⁴¹⁹ This includes approximately €9 million which is allocated primarily to the CCCs and the NVCOs and towards Pobal's compliance role.

Figure 192 NCIP Funding 2006 – 2010

| | Approved | Paid Out ^a | Outstanding Commitment |
|--|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| | €m | €m | €m |
| Capital ^b | 181.6 | 170.4 | 11.2 |
| Subvention and Staffing Grant | 188.6 | 165.1 | 23.5 |
| Childcare Education and Training Support | 14.4 | 6.7 ^c | 7.7 |
| City and County Childcare Committees | 40.6 | 38.3 ^d | 2.3 |
| National Voluntary Childcare Organisations | 7.9 | 7.3 ^e | 0.6 |
| Administration costs of Pobal | 17.4 | 17.4 | — |
| Childminder Development Grant | 1.0 | 1.0 ^f | — |
| Parent and Toddler Group Initiative | 0.5 | 0.5 | — |
| Total | 452.0 | 406.7 | 45.3 |

Source: Pobal

- Notes:
- a The total outlay on the NCIP and the ECCE to 31 December 2010 was €560.2 million
 - b Capital amount approved net of decommitments.
 - c Approximately €3 million was received from FÁS and the VECs in connection with this scheme.
 - d In addition, the CCCs were paid €8.8 million and €7.3 million in 2006 and 2007 respectively from EOCP funding.
 - e In addition, the NVCOs were paid approximately €3 million in each of 2006 and 2007 from EOCP funding.
 - f An unspent amount of €415,000 of the total amount paid in respect of Childminder Development Grants under the EOCP and the NCIP is due to be recouped from the CCCs.

Wider Childcare Policy Context

49.9 The NCIP is administered in the context of the National Childcare Strategy 2006 – 2010. Related objectives encompassed in the wider strategy included

- A new social inclusion programme, ‘Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools’ (DEIS) which was intended to help in meeting the educational needs of children and young people in disadvantaged communities and be implemented by the Department of Education and Skills.
- Publication of strengthened regulations for pre-school services.
- New and improved entitlements for parents. These included a new early childcare supplement of €1,000 per annum for parents, in respect of each child under six years of age, improved maternity and adoptive leave and increased maternity benefit.

Changes in Economic Conditions

49.10 Since commencement of the NCIP in 2006, the economic situation in Ireland has changed substantially. For example, over the five year period, 2006 to end 2010, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate rose from 4.4% to 13.6%⁴²⁰. GDP⁴²¹, measured at constant market prices, fell by 11.8% over the period 2007 to end 2010. Female labour force participation rates fell from 54.4% to 53.1% over the same period⁴²².

49.11 Increasing the supply of childcare facilities remained a key policy objective of Government up until early 2009. From that point onwards and in response to the decline in national economic circumstances, childcare policy changed focus. The capital funding element of the NCIP came to an end in April 2009 and the early childcare supplement was phased out from May 2009.

Chapter Focus

This chapter examines the outturn of capital investment under the NCIP, the risks to value achievement and how the delivery of childcare is administered, monitored and evaluated.

Capital Investment in Childcare Places

49.12 Under the capital programme of the NCIP, childcare providers in the private sector could apply for grant assistance of up to €100,000 towards the capital cost of developing a childcare facility⁴²³ subject to a maximum cost of €5,000 per place over five hours of care⁴²⁴. At least 25% of the total funding required for the project had to be provided by childcare providers from their own funds.

49.13 Community-based applicants could apply for capital grant assistance subject to an overall maximum grant of €1.2 million and a maximum cost per place of €24,000⁴²⁵ over 3.5 hours of care⁴²⁶. The planned public capital allocation was €357 million.

⁴²⁰ CSO Quarterly National Household Survey.

⁴²¹ Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the market value of all goods and service produced within a country in a given period.

⁴²² Female labour force participation rates rose by 13.4% when looked at over a longer period of investment in childcare – for example between 1995 and 2010 (from 39.7% to 53.1% respectively).

⁴²³ An applicant could apply for more than one grant, provided the subsequent childcare facilities were in different catchment areas and subject to an overall ceiling of €500,000.

⁴²⁴ A full-time place is classified as over five hours of care. A lesser grant equating to 50% of the grant for a full-time place was available to private childcare providers for a part-time place (3.5 to 5 hours) or for a sessional place (3.5 hours continuously per day). In exceptional cases, grants to raise the quality of an existing service to an acceptable standard were available at €5,000 per existing place up to a maximum of €100,000.

⁴²⁵ This was revised upwards in 2007 from an initial maximum cost per place of €20,000 and an overall grant ceiling of €1 million.

⁴²⁶ The maximum grant of €24,000 per place applied in the case of community-based facilities to both full-time places (greater than 5 hours) and part-time places (3.5 to 5 hours). A lesser grant equating to 50% of the grant for a full-time place was available for a sessional place (3.5 hours continuously per day). In exceptional cases, grants to raise the quality of an existing service to an acceptable standard were available at €5,000 per existing place up to a maximum of €125,000.

49.14 The targets set for the NCIP were

- the creation of an additional 50,000 new childcare places (22,000 of which were expected to be in the private sector and 28,000 in the community and voluntary sector)
- the use of approximately 10,000 (20%) of those places to cater for the 3-4 years age group with a focus on early childhood care and education
- to utilise around 5,000 (10%) of the places to cater for children of school-going age outside of usual school times.

49.15 The available documentation suggests that this initial target of 50,000 new childcare places was determined at the time of Budget 2006, based on the estimated outturn in terms of places from the proposed investment package rather than on a formal assessment of need.

49.16 There was no documented rationale that set out a basis for the split between private sector places and community-based places. Neither was the basis for the target number of new places, for the 3-4 years age group and the school-going age group, outlined.

Local Needs Assessment

49.17 When the NCIP programme was being implemented childcare needs at a local level were subjected to analysis and CCCs engaged in a mapping exercise to determine the level of childcare need in their areas. In general, this involved

- identifying through a survey of childcare providers and childminders, the existing level of childcare provision in their areas and
- using information on the projected future growth of the city or county to identify gaps in the current provision of childcare services. Existing waiting lists were also used in the assessment of needs.

49.18 However, a standardised approach to the mapping exercise was not adopted by all CCCs and, as the information used, was in general, based on the response to questionnaires, it may not have captured the full level of existing childcare provision in each city or county area. As a result, the information gathered was never summarised to give an overall national picture of the level of childcare service provision and needs identified at the time.

Project Approvals and Payments

49.19 Capital grants approved under the NCIP up to the end of 2010 amounted to €229.3 million⁴²⁷. However, of that amount, €47.7 million was decommitted leaving the net amount approved at €181.6 million⁴²⁸.

49.20 Figure 193 summarises the status of capital funding over the period to December 2010.

Figure 193 NCIP Capital Funding Position 2006 – 2010

| Facility Type | Gross Approvals €m | Decommittments €m | Net Approvals €m | Paid Out €m | Commitments at 31 December 2010 €m |
|-----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| Private | 44.0 | (9.4) | 34.6 | 34.1 | 0.5 |
| Community Based | 185.3 | (38.3) | 147.0 | 136.3 | 10.7 |
| Total | 229.3 | (47.7) | 181.6 | 170.4 | 11.2 |

Source: Pobal

49.21 The rules of the NCIP provide for the decommitment and recovery of funds allocated to beneficiaries in certain circumstances. These are

- failure to sign a contract within 12 months of the issue of a letter of grant offer or by 31 March 2010, whichever is earlier
- failure to comply with financial and statutory obligations and/or meet management and governance standards
- failure to commit funding in accordance with a specified timeframe
- failure to submit financial and impact reports
- not proceeding with a project or part of a project.

49.22 By the end of 2010 grants of €47.7 million had been decommitted equating to just over 20% of gross approvals at that date. The largest portion of decommitments occurred in 2008 and 2009.

49.23 Almost 90% of the decommitments were made for failure to sign contracts within the timelines required. Approximately 9% were decommitted following a decision of the beneficiary not to proceed as planned and the balance for failure to comply with obligations.

49.24 Overall the slowdown in programme delivery is underlined by the fact that cumulative capital project approvals are around half of the programme target and at delivery stage the drawdown of funds has also slowed. Of the outstanding commitments of €11.2 million at 31 December 2010, a considerable proportion was in breach of a two-year drawdown limit⁴²⁹. Eleven projects with undrawn allocations in excess of €100,000 at 31 December 2010 had not complied with this condition. The amount of the net capital grant approved in those cases was €9.98 million and the amount unpaid at 31 December 2010 was €5.6 million.

⁴²⁷ This included €57 million worth of capital projects which transferred from EOCP to the NCIP from 2006.

⁴²⁸ This does not include the grants approved under the Childminders Development Grants Scheme or the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative.

⁴²⁹ Grantees were required to have reported on their grant expenditure within two years of the letter of grant offer from the DCYA or 31 March 2011, whichever was earliest.

Exceptional Payments

49.25 Seven capital grants had been approved in excess of the limits allowed under the programme⁴³⁰. The amounts approved ranged from just over €1.2 million to €2 million.

49.26 The CEO of Pobal stated that in six of the seven cases, the capital funding had originally been approved under EOCP where no limit applied in relation to community based capital. Projects were planned and developed based on the approval made under EOCP. On transferring the grants to NCIP, Pobal conducted a detailed analysis of each project on a case by case basis, assessing the cost benefit of delivering the project based on the original approval versus non-delivery. On balance, it was deemed in these exceptional cases that the objectives of the programme and the needs of each area would be better served by allowing the projects to continue to completion with the original approved grants. He stated that the other case had been the subject of appropriate procedure and approval.

49.27 There were a small number of capital projects that did not proceed and upon which an outlay was incurred. For example, notwithstanding the fact that a project was not proceeded with, professional fees of €104,000 were paid out in respect of the aborted project.

Places Created

49.28 The number of places created up to the end of December 2010 was reported by Pobal as 24,356⁴³¹. According to Pobal a greater proportion of places than planned was created in private facilities and more than double the proportion of places for the 3-4 age group were provided. However, the audit found considerable inaccuracies in the database from which this information is drawn. On foot of my concerns, Pobal engaged its internal auditors to carry out an exercise to determine the accuracy of the data recorded in the Childcare Programme database. On the basis of examination of a random sample of childcare grants, the internal audit found a 4.5% error rate in the database as compared to the underlying records⁴³².

Pattern of Use of Facilities

49.29 At the level of use of the facilities, CCCs have reported a noticeable change in recent years in the type of service being provided by local childcare providers with a switch from full-time places to sessional places. This indicates a change in demand related to the increase in the number of people unemployed and the affordability of childcare.

49.30 The guaranteed income of the ECCE free pre-school year appears to have also contributed significantly to the change in the profile of demand. Under the ECCE scheme, introduced in January 2010, children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months on 1 September each year, are entitled to avail of a free pre-school place of five daily sessions of three hours per day for 38 weeks per year.⁴³³

⁴³⁰ €1.2 million for community based applicants and €100,000 for private sector providers.

⁴³¹ While data is captured on the number of places in each of the different categories of childcare provision, these are not converted to full-time equivalent places. Instead, all are treated equally for the purpose of reporting targets and delivery.

⁴³² Both the target and actual number of places are affected by the errors. The 4.5% error rate relates to target places.

⁴³³ Families may avail of the scheme within a full-or part-time childcare service, in which case a child will be entitled to 50 weeks of free pre-school provision of 5 weekly sessions of 2 hours and 15 minutes per day.

Conclusion – Childcare Capital Investment

The original target of 50,000 new childcare places was not based on a detailed analysis of childcare needs across the State and the planned split of provision between the private sector and the community sector was not based on a specific rationale.

At the level of implementation, CCCs adopted a reasonably structured approach to childcare planning, though the information used varied.

Audit testing found that the reporting of both targets and outputs of new childcare places did not accord with the underlying records and in further investigative work by Pobal, an error rate in the order of 4.5% was found in the reported numbers. This has implications for all results published to date. However, the information is sufficient to sustain some broad conclusions.

- Around 25,000 childcare places will be created under the programme.
- Within the reported output level, the structure of the programme delivered, differed from that planned. A greater proportion of childcare places has been delivered in private facilities.
- The greatest focus of delivery has been on the 3-4 age group category where half of all places are estimated to have been created compared with a planned 20%.

Due to the change in economic climate and the income guarantee associated with the sessional services of the free pre-school year, there has been a switch in the type of childcare service being provided resulting in more sessional services than full-time.

Value for Money

49.31 Achieving value for money from the capital investments involves, *inter alia*

- Matching the places created to the demand for them
- Avoiding displacement
- Ensuring that the cost of provision is in line with the planned outlay.

Take-up of Places

49.32 Based on data provided by Pobal, one out of every five places was unfilled at the end of December 2010. This implies an excess capacity of about 15,000 places in all services supported by the NCIP.

49.33 The excess capacity suggests that over half of the new places actually created by the end of December 2010 were in excess of requirement. In addition, a greater proportion of places being counted as output may be part-time or sessional places rather than full-time places as envisaged.

49.34 Based on an estimated cost per place of approximately €5,165 the estimated excess places created cost at least €75 million⁴³⁴.

⁴³⁴ Certain places created are also associated with refurbishment grants. It was not possible to definitively assess the impact of these on the cost per place. If they were all reckoned the cost would rise to €6,400 per place.

49.35 It is likely that a considerable element of the current excess capacity is due to the fact that demand is depressed because of reduced incomes, unemployment levels and the general economic climate. Pobal has stated that with the support of NCIP, the capacity and infrastructure was now in place to meet that demand when families have the opportunity and resources to translate their need into demand. At the same time providers face a challenge to maintain their operations until demand increases.

Closure of Facilities

49.36 In addition to the costs associated with expenditure in creating facilities or places in excess of need there is a likelihood that excess capacity can cause a displacement effect. While it is not possible to directly link facilities that have closed with the funding of new ones, 126 facilities that were State-subvented have closed.

49.37 Some 40 NCIP funded childcare services were known to Pobal to have ceased operations in the period 2006 to end 2010. Figure 194 provides information on those facilities. Just over €0.5 million had been paid out in capital grants to those entities, mainly to private service providers.

Figure 194 NCIP Funded Childcare Services which Ceased Operation in the Period 2006 to end 2010

| | Community Facilities | Private Facilities | Total |
|------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Number Closed | 30 | 10 | 40 |
| Number Approved NCIP Capital | 7 ^a | 10 ^b | 17 |
| Amount of Capital Approved | €1,690,365 | €607,586 | €2,297,951 |
| Amount of Capital Paid Out | €33,853 | €502,316 | €536,169 |

Source: Pobal

Notes: a Capital funding had been paid out to service providers in one of the seven cases.

b Capital funding had been paid out to service providers in nine of the ten cases.

49.38 On top of the 40 NCIP funded services which closed, a further 86 EOCP funded services closed (51 community-based providers and 35 private providers). Approximately €6.3 million had been approved in EOCP capital grants to services that closed and €3.2 million had been paid out. A further €10.9 million had been paid in EOCP staffing grants to the community facilities which subsequently closed. 18 of the above services (17 community based and 1 private service provider) are known to have merged or moved into another service following closure.

Cost Outturn against Plan

49.39 Overall, the net capital funding approved to end December 2010, at half of the original earmarked capital provision, is in line with the activity level as reported.

49.40 Sampling of grants found that none of the sample exceeded the benchmark cost per place set for the type of facilities subvented. However, subsequent to being subvented, a considerable shift occurred in the use of those places, as tracked by Pobal half-yearly financial and impact reports. Sessional use increased by 18% in community facilities and 11% in private facilities. Corresponding reductions occurred in the use of full-time and part-time places.

Conclusion – Value for Money

Some 126 childcare providers that received funding under childcare programmes are known to have closed. The total capital funding (NCIP and/or EOCP) paid out to those facilities was €3.7 million.

Based on attendance data, there are an estimated 15,000 excess childcare places in the sector. This is over half the number of new places created to end 2010 under the NCIP.

At an estimated cost per childcare place of €5,165, the cost of the places currently in excess of requirements is at least €75 million. The State faces a challenge in ensuring that this excess capacity remains available to meet future demand.

Reduced demand creates a risk that elements of the infrastructure may not be fully employed for the purposes for which it was created or that, due to demand reduction, certain subvented facilities will cease to be used.

The mix of use differs from that envisaged with more sessional use being reported in both the community and private facilities.

Administration and Evaluation

49.41 In addition to the capital funding provided to childcare providers, two schemes funded under the NCIP assist low-income parents with their childcare costs.

- The Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) – available to community-based childcare providers only⁴³⁵.
- The Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) programme – available to both private and community-based childcare providers.

49.42 In addition, an Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)⁴³⁶ scheme was introduced from January 2010, on the cessation of the Early Childcare Supplement⁴³⁷. This is available to both community-based and private childcare providers. It provides a free year of early childhood care and education to children of pre-school age.

Community Childcare Subvention

49.43 The CCS came into operation in 2008 and replaced staffing grants which had, prior to that, been paid to community-based childcare services. The CCS subvents community-based services to reduce childcare fees charged to low-income families. The subsidies are available in respect of parents who are in receipt of social welfare payments or are engaged in education, training or work experience programmes, where an underlying entitlement to a social welfare payment is established, as well as for persons in receipt of Family Income Supplement and holders of medical and GP visit cards. The subvention is paid directly to the services, with annual funding levels based on the number of qualifying parents during a reference week.

⁴³⁵ On its introduction in 2008 and up until its modification in September 2010, the CCS was generally referred to as the CCSS (Community Childcare Subvention Scheme).

⁴³⁶ Commonly referred to as 'Free Pre-School Year'.

⁴³⁷ The Early Childcare Supplement was paid to parents of children under six years of age and amounted to €1,000 per annum before being abolished from November 2009.

49.44 The financial terms of the scheme can be difficult to implement in a clear-cut way. For example, Dublin City Childcare Committee noted that there can be difficulties in collecting top-up childcare fees from some parents who are supported under the CCS. Their experience was that a community-based facility would be reluctant to terminate the service because it might not be in the best interest of the child to do so. Funding may be available from the Community Welfare Officer of the HSE in such situations.

Childcare Education and Training Support Programme

49.45 The CETS programme commenced in September 2010 and replaced previous childcare support schemes implemented by FÁS and the Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) under which qualifying students and trainees had been directly allocated childcare payments to support their childcare costs. Under the new scheme, participating childcare services are paid a weekly capitation fee in respect of each childcare place contracted with their service⁴³⁸. In return, the service is required to provide a childcare place, free of charge to the qualifying student or trainee. Childcare places are contracted by the DCYA in consultation with the CCCs on the basis of information provided by FÁS and the VECs.

49.46 The administration of this programme in 2010 has been challenging and not all places contracted under the scheme have been occupied as envisaged. The programme also ran the risk in 2010 of a funding overlap with other schemes since the Personal Public Service Numbers (PPSNs) of children availing of a place under the programme were not cross-checked with other schemes such as the CCS or ECCE schemes.

49.47 The Accounting Officer stated that the introduction of the CETS programme was challenging as there was only a period of eight weeks between sanction being given for it and its introduction. In addition, it was difficult to predict the likely take-up of CETS places around the country in September 2010 given incomplete data on the previous payments and the fact that the number of parents requiring CETS places would vary from year to year and month to month. He stated that the DCYA knew that a degree of mismatch would arise in the first period of the CETS programme and FÁS places were allocated for six months rather than twelve months for that reason as well as some places being kept in reserve. He anticipated that based on the knowledge acquired from the first period of CETS, improved administrative arrangements would apply from September 2011.

49.48 He stated that while it was not possible to cross check the PPSNs of children holding a CETS place during September 2010/August 2011, given the short period to implement the programme and the fact that places may be occupied for a period of only eight weeks, a system would be in place for the September 2011 CETS year which would collect that data.

⁴³⁸ The amount varies depending on whether it is a full-time, part-time or after-school place.

Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme

49.49 It has been estimated that 94% of those eligible to participate in the ECCE scheme availed of a place for the 2010/11 scheme year.

49.50 Services participating in the ECCE scheme are required to provide an age-appropriate educational programme for participating children. They are required to adhere to the principles of Sfolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Details of these specific frameworks are outlined at Annex B.

49.51 In addition, there are minimum qualification requirements for pre-school leaders in ECCE settings. They must hold certification of academic achievement relating to childcare or early education at a minimum of Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications of Ireland (NFQ) or equivalent. Transitional arrangements apply up to September 2012 whereby the minimum requirement will be considered to be met based on other award certifications and certain experience of working in a position of responsibility with children in 0-6 age range.

49.52 The Workforce Development Plan (WDP) published in December 2010 noted that in the region of 40% of the pre-school services workforce had not achieved basic level qualifications required for participation in the free pre-school year scheme which began in January 2010.

49.53 A higher capitation fee is payable to the provider (€400 per annum) where pre-school leaders hold a degree in childcare or early years education (minimum Level 7 on the NFQ or equivalent) and have three years experience of working in the sector and where all pre-school assistants hold an award in childcare or early education at Level 5 on the NFQ or its equivalent⁴³⁹. The Department has stated that 12% of services participating in the ECCE programme are in receipt of this higher capitation fee.

49.54 The Accounting Officer stated that between January 2010 and August 2012, an interim qualification level was being accepted for pre-school leaders and the majority of those at that level had since upskilled to a full Level 5 award. The DCYA was subsidising training for a small number who had not up-skilled, to ensure that all pre-school leaders were in a position to meet the September 2012 requirement.

Resourcing Childcare Services – Qualifications and Training

49.55 It is estimated that there are up to 30,000 staff working directly with children in centre-based settings. It is difficult to measure the employment effect of the investment in childcare infrastructure since no baseline figures were established at the outset of the programme.

49.56 While the National Childcare Strategy 2006 – 2010 envisaged that a programme of training would be developed, substantive progress was only achieved in late 2010 with the completion of the WDP.

49.57 A key objective of the WDP is to ensure that all staff engaged in the provision of early childhood care and education services for young children and their families are appropriately qualified for their role and responsibilities. Close monitoring of the implementation of the plan is required to ensure that it meets its objectives.

⁴³⁹ There is no pre-school assistant qualification requirement for the standard capitation fee.

49.58 Data reported by the CCCs and the NVCOs showed that a total of 7,446 accredited childcare qualifications were attained by individuals over the period 2006 to 2010⁴⁴⁰. It is not known how many of those trained are actually working in the childcare sector.

49.59 The HSE stated that its role in the provision and monitoring of accredited training for all staff engaged in service provision was still under development. In a climate of budget reductions and with services operating at 80% capacity, the use of untrained or partially qualified staff was, on the balance of probability, likely to increase. This would have an impact on the credibility and public perception of existing services which would, in turn, pose challenges for its inspectorate as it sought to enforce standards and regulations under the existing standardised frameworks.

Protecting the State's Investment

49.60 The State investment in childcare facilities needs to be

- protected by the taking of charges on facilities that received funding
- the subject of recovery action where services are not brought into use or ceased.

Charges on Facilities

49.61 The NCIP envisages the protection of the State's investment in capital projects with a value of €200,000 or more through a legal charge over the property to which the grant applies. This is a discretionary measure, however, and does not apply in all cases. Additionally, because of the capital amount involved (€200,000), it does not apply to private childcare providers to whom €34.1 million was paid⁴⁴¹. Information obtained from Pobal indicates that an exemption was granted in 82 cases.

49.62 A charge in favour of the Minister has been sought in the case of 105 capital projects funded under the NCIP that had capital approved of approximately €86 million. 13 of those (12%) had not yet been registered by March 2011⁴⁴². The bulk of the grants approved had been paid by early 2011.

49.63 The CEO of Pobal has assured me that the charges that have not been registered with the CRO are subject to an undertaking by the beneficiary's solicitor to register them and that Pobal have been repeatedly assured by its own legal advisors of the reliance that can be placed on the undertaking.

49.64 The Accounting Officer pointed out that a pre-requisite in all cases is that the grantee's Articles of Association are amended to ensure they have an absolute obligation to protect the interests of the Department in regard to the use of the property, or from compromising the Department's interest in the property. Once the charge is secured, the grantee's Solicitor registers the title and, subsequently, registers the charge with the CRO, to give third parties' visibility and to protect against alternative charges or judgements. He stated that the DCYA had sought a report from Pobal on the position with regard to the charges in place and their registration, in particular in regard to any delays in registration.

⁴⁴⁰ This figure may be overstated due to a possible overlap in the reporting of data on qualifications by CCCs and NVCOs. This is because training courses are sometimes delivered by a NVCO in collaboration with (or commissioned by) a CCC.

⁴⁴¹ The maximum capital grant available for a private childcare facility was €100,000.

⁴⁴² This refers to the registration of charges with the Companies Registration Office.

Recovery Action

49.65 When Pobal become aware that a facility has closed down or not been brought into use, a review of the grant is undertaken. The amount recoverable depends on the length of time that the provider remained open after the last grant payment, the amount of the grant and the length of the contract period. Pobal then write to the childcare provider requesting repayment.

49.66 Of approximately €500,000 NCIP capital funding paid to private providers whose services closed, almost €400,000 was considered to be recoverable. A total of €2,395 had been recovered at March 2011. €5,188 has been written off following agreement with the DCYA and due to the special personal circumstances pertaining to the provider. The balance is being pursued by Pobal.

49.67 Of the €3.2 million in capital funding paid to EOCP funded services which closed, an amount in the order of €300,000 was deemed recoverable. In addition, an amount of approximately €90,000 was deemed recoverable in respect of staffing grants paid to community based facilities under that programme. Pobal has recovered €45,000 against EOCP capital grants but there has been no recovery at August 2011 of the staffing grants.

49.68 In the case of other grants decommitted approximately €32,000 is recoverable from eight service providers. By the end of July 2011, funding had been returned by six service providers amounting to €64,754. The balance is being pursued by Pobal.

49.69 The Accounting Officer stated that with regard to recouping EOCP capital funding, the Department would consult with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and seek advice from the Chief State Solicitor's Office as to the most effective way to proceed against persons with moneys owed.

Evaluation of the NCIP

49.70 The National Development Plan 2007 – 2013 stated that, prior to the conclusion of the NCIP at the end of 2010, progress in addressing childcare needs would be reviewed to ensure that measures were appropriate to emerging needs and the review would inform any subsequent policy response. No such review was carried out. The Accounting Officer stated that the NCIP review was overtaken by events as the Community Childcare Subvention was introduced in 2008 and modified in 2010 and the capital programme was effectively closed to new applicants from 2008. The policy objective from 2009 onwards was to sustain existing childcare services to the greatest extent possible.

Compliance with Reporting Requirements

49.71 Childcare providers in receipt of capital funding under the NCIP are required to report to Pobal twice yearly. Only 37.5% of the bi-annual returns required for the six months to June 2010 in respect of capital projects funded had been received by the due date (16 August 2010). The compliance rate rose to 67.7% by 30 September 2010. The compliance rate at July 2011 for the December 2010 capital returns was 81%.

49.72 Childcare services in receipt of subvention funding (CCS) are required to submit reports to Pobal three times a year⁴⁴³. Pobal data indicates that only 46% of returns for the period to August 2010 had been filed by the due date (21 October 2010). The compliance rate rose to 82% by the end of November 2010. The compliance rate was 96% at July 2011 for the December 2010 CCS return.

⁴⁴³ Prior to 2010, the requirement was for quarterly returns.

49.73 The response rate to the annual questionnaire⁴⁴⁴ for 2010 was 79% when measured at April 2011. The response rate had been 70% for 2009 and 90% for 2008⁴⁴⁵.

49.74 Pobal's policy is not to pay childcare providers with outstanding reporting requirements.

Childcare Providers Information

49.75 In order to inform policy decisions and inspection programmes a comprehensive database of providers would be useful. There is no unified database of childcare providers nationally.

- Pobal has a register of all childcare providers who avail of NCIP funding (capital and subvention) and those who availed of EOCP funding in the past.
- The DCYA have details of those claiming ECCE funding since they administer this funding themselves as well as those in receipt of CCS and CETS funding.
- The HSE would be expected to have the most complete database given the regulatory requirement for notification. However, since school-age services are not obliged to register with the HSE, it does not have comprehensive information.

Key Performance Indicators

49.76 A value-for-money review of the EOCP, on behalf of the DCYA, was completed by Fitzpatrick Associates in June 2007. The review identified future performance indicators which might be used to better monitor performance of the NCIP. The new indicators recommended were focussed on more effective measurement of value-for-money and the quality of service in supported childcare facilities. In particular they focussed on funding, costs, income, staffing and quality.

49.77 Some of the key performance data recommended included

- Amount of funding invested in support of new childcare places as well as the amount of funding invested in support of existing childcare places.
- Overall staffing costs in supported childcare services (including contributions outside NCIP staffing grants).
- Staff/child ratios in place in supported childcare services (in terms of overall staff, direct childcare workers and by type of target group within service).
- Staff turnover rates in supported childcare services.
- Number of supported services with a curriculum based approach to child development in place.
- Number of supported services undertaking formal needs assessment of each child using the service.

⁴⁴⁴ Childcare providers who are in receipt of NCIP funding and are in contract with Pobal are required to complete an annual questionnaire. The period for which a service provider is in contract with Pobal depends on the net capital amount approved. The maximum period for private providers is 7 years and 20 years for community-based providers. The contractual obligations of services in receipt of only subvention funding, finish when they cease participating in the CCS.

⁴⁴⁵ Measured at April 2010 and May 2009 respectively.

49.78 Not all of the new performance indicators recommended in the value-for-money review have been monitored and reported on over the period of the NCIP. Pobal has taken steps to incorporate some of the performance indicators recommended, for example, staff turnover rates among childcare staff and overall costs associated with the operation of the childcare service for community-based services funded under the CCS. The CEO stated that the timing of the value-for-money report was not conducive to the full integration of its recommendations into the NCIP from the outset.

Inspection

49.79 Both the HSE and Pobal have roles in the inspection of childcare facilities.

HSE Childcare Inspectorate

49.80 Childcare providers are obliged under the Childcare Act 1991 to notify the HSE of their service and the Childcare Inspectorate of the HSE must visit pre-school services to ensure that the service is fulfilling its duties under the Act.

49.81 The inspection format is designed to provide an evaluation of a pre-school facility across broad categories – child/staff ratios, space ratios, rest facilities, child development, structured care programmes, food, sanitary accommodation, play facilities and development materials, general safety, first aid and records kept.

49.82 The Inspectorate has 37 Whole-Time Equivalent (WTE) Pre-School Officers/Early Years Inspectors countrywide who are responsible for standards in over 4,800 childcare facilities⁴⁴⁶. Environmental Health Officers of which there are 24 WTEs, also contribute to the inspection of pre-school services. In 2010, 3,016 facilities were inspected⁴⁴⁷. A further 612 reviews/follow-up visits were carried out as well as 774 advisory visits. The inspection reports are not published by the HSE.

49.83 Dublin City Childcare Committee stated that some childcare services in the Dublin area have not been inspected in two to three years. It considers there is a need for a more frequent standard inspection regime which makes services more accountable.

49.84 An unsatisfactory inspection report should be a key consideration when deciding whether or not to provide NCIP or other State funding to a particular childcare provider. The outcome of HSE inspections is not automatically provided to the DCYA or Pobal unless the service provider is the subject of a prosecution order. At the point of an application for capital funding however, input and feedback would be provided on a county-by-county basis by the HSE Pre-School Inspectorate.

49.85 The CEO of Pobal stated that it was in contact with the HSE Pre-School Specialist on a national basis with the intention of enhancing ongoing liaison, co-ordination and information sharing.

49.86 Responding to my enquiries, the HSE stated that it has traditionally not had standardised processes amongst its inspection teams. This had led to an inconsistency in practice nationally. Its current concerns relate to inspection frequency, publication of inspection reports and the dissemination of the outcomes of regulatory processes concerning sub-standard services. These matters are currently being addressed by its National Children and Families Social Services Office under both its quality assurance and governance roles.

⁴⁴⁶ The number of services notified to the HSE in 2010 was 4,804. (5,090 at the end of 2009).

⁴⁴⁷ 3,013 inspections in 2009.

49.87 There is as yet no specific quality assessment process for childcare services. Pre-school inspections by the HSE examine some quality aspects (under Regulation 5 of the Child Care (Pre-school) Services Regulations, 2006) but the extent of that work to date has been limited. The HSE anticipates a greater emphasis on quality with the implementation of the National Standards for Pre-School Services⁴⁴⁸ which will focus on criteria based inspection designed to achieve quality outcomes for children.

49.88 The Accounting Officer stated that an evaluation of the implementation of *Síolta* in ECCE services was underway under the Early Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills which is co-located in the DCYA. From September 2011, joint inspections of ECCE services by the Education Inspectorate and the HSE would be held.

Compliance Work by Pobal

49.89 Compliance visits have been carried out annually by Pobal to childcare providers in receipt of subvention funding (CCS). Services in receipt of funding under the ECCE and CETS schemes have since their commencement in 2010 also been subject to compliance visits by Pobal on behalf of the DCYA. A total of 2,882 compliance visits were carried out in 2010. 345 of those visits were to CCS-only funded services. The visits to ECCE participating services in 2010 covered approximately 62% of all services in receipt of ECCE funding.

49.90 The main purpose of the compliance visits is to ensure that scheme conditions are being complied with. In particular compliance visits check that

- the service actually exists
- the fee-payment policy agreed with the DCYA is being implemented
- the children who are being supported under the schemes are actually using the service⁴⁴⁹
- staff have the necessary qualifications for participating in the ECCE scheme.

49.91 There may be merit in measuring attendance over a longer period of time or at various time periods. Pobal have informed me that from September 2011 unannounced compliance visits are being introduced. The use of the prior week as the reference week is under review in advance of the next cycle of visits.

49.92 Some findings from their visits include

- 13% of ECCE funded services were non-compliant with their fee-payment policies. 'Non-compliant' means that a service is not charging fees in accordance with its own fee policy which has been approved by the CCC. It includes instances where for example, 'optional extra charges' are not properly implemented.
- when the results of all visits are combined there was an occupancy rate of only 63% of childcare places at the time of the compliance visits to ECCE services. This is based on evidence of attendance for 33,000 children out of approximately 52,000 places approved by the DCYA in the services visited⁴⁵⁰. The indications from visits undertaken from September 2010 to February 2011 are that attendances are achieving higher rates than the 63% level.

⁴⁴⁸ Published in December 2010.

⁴⁴⁹ In general, attendance in the week prior to the compliance visit would be examined.

⁴⁵⁰ Not all children attend on a 5-day basis so it is to be expected that there may be some who are not in attendance on the day of a compliance visit. In addition, the early compliance visits measured attendance against data provided by childcare providers at the expression of interest stage of the programme while subsequent compliance visits measured attendance against the formally approved number of ECCE places.

- two services were found not to be in operation.

49.93 In regard to consistency of charges, Pobal plans to report back to the CCCs and assist them in calibrating their approach on fee-payment policies in order to ensure a consistency of approach on optional charges.

Financial Reviews

49.94 The Verification Unit within Pobal's Early Education and Childcare Programme also carries out verification visits on capital projects. Capital project reviews are on a sample basis while also ensuring that all large scale projects with a capital investment greater than €200,000 are visited before they are fully paid. An average of 106 verification visits per year were carried out over the period 2006 – 2010.

49.95 The Unit is also responsible for verification visits to CCCs and NVCOs. In 2010, 26 CCC visits and five NVCO visits were carried out.

49.96 In addition, Pobal's Audit Team may carry out risk-based audits of childcare providers. These are usually based on issues which come to light on examination of monitoring reports. Two such audits were carried out in 2010.

49.97 The main issues identified during verification visits to childcare providers and CCCs and NVCOs were

- ineligible spend under programme guidelines
- tax clearance certificates not available in support of payments
- original invoices not available in support of payments
- no fixed asset register in place
- target levels not achieved
- board minutes not signed off
- non-compliance with public procurement guidelines
- internal financial procedures manuals requiring updating and/or revision
- instances of lease agreements, bank mandates, fire certificates, insurance details, copies of memorandum and articles of association, audited accounts, contracts of employment and board minutes not available for inspection.

49.98 Issues arising on risk-based audits included issues relating to public procurement, conflict of interest and the effectiveness of internal controls.

49.99 The CEO of Pobal stated that once issues had been identified the role of the verification function within Pobal was to ensure that the matters noted were addressed appropriately. The process in place escalated serious or persistent non-performance for monitoring and follow-up. Problems identified were, for the most part, addressed to Pobal's satisfaction in a timely manner.

Conclusion – Administration and Evaluation

A Workforce Development Plan published in December 2010 noted that in the region of 40% of the pre-school services workforce had not achieved basic level qualifications required for participation in the free pre-school year scheme. Transitional arrangements apply up until September 2012.

A total of 7,446 individuals are reported by the CCCs and the NVCOs to have attained an accredited childcare qualification over the period of the NCIP. The greatest proportion of awards was at NFQ Level 5 - the minimum level required for working with children under the ECCE scheme requirements.

Compliance visits by Pobal found that 13% of services were non-compliant with their own fee-payment policies.

There is a need for greater clarity with regard to the costs covered by the ECCE payment.

Compliance visits up to January 2011 found that around 63% of places funded under the ECCE scheme were occupied at the time of visits. However, the indications are that the rate has increased in the six months to February 2011.

A review of the NCIP, envisaged in the NDP, has not been carried out largely due to the fact that it had been overtaken by events and superseded by policies of sustainment and pre-school provision.

The DCYA has sought to protect the investment in childcare facilities through the taking of charges over property in instances where capital grants to the value of €6 million had been approved. Security has been taken on approximately 60% of all capital grants to community-based facilities.

There is a range of inspections and financial reviews of facilities. However, in the case of HSE inspection, the Executive has concerns with regard to inspection frequency, the publication of inspection reports and the dissemination of the outcomes of regulatory processes concerning sub-standard services.

General Views of the Accounting Officer

49.100 The DCYA held off on capital grant approvals from mid-2008 pending a Department of Finance decision to close the capital grant scheme in April 2009. The Accounting Officer stated that the early response by the DCYA resulted in capital savings in 2009/2010 amounting to €139 million and avoided the creation of 20,000 additional childcare places which would have further exacerbated the situation for existing services, as a result of the recession.

49.101 He stated that it was clear to the DCYA that the childcare sector was under severe threat from the recession and that the €500 million capital investment made under the EOCP and NCIP by that time, could be threatened. To secure the sector and the State's investment, the DCYA advocated for and achieved the introduction of the free Pre-School Year (ECCE) programme from January 2010, the earliest possible date. Further, in 2010, it revised the CCS programme to improve its targeting of low income working parents and it also introduced the CETS programme. Together, the annual support injected into the sector from the programmes amounts to €232 million at 2011 levels.

49.102 The Accounting Officer stated that the support was primarily targeted at achieving child development outcomes - through a universal pre-school year and additional support for those on low incomes - and labour market support and activation by means of all programmes but particularly the CETS. He noted that important by-products of the programmes' support for childcare, in contrast to less targeted payments to families in the previous Early Childcare Supplement, were the benefits in jobs and economic activity which were being maintained in the childcare sector. In addition, where necessary to ensure sustainability, services had been allowed to reduce their service level requirements as a short-term measure to be reviewed annually.

49.103 The Accounting Officer stated that it was considered that these measures had sustained the childcare sector to the greatest possible extent since 2010 and that, in their absence, widespread closure of services would have been inevitable. The DCYA's objective was to facilitate services to survive this period so that the infrastructure which had been built up would still be in place to meet a future increase in demand for childcare when employment levels rise. It was considered that the DCYA's ongoing monitoring of the NCIP had ensured that it responded as quickly and effectively as possible to the environmental changes.

49.104 In relation to the CCS, the Accounting Officer viewed this as a far more transparent programme than the staffing support scheme which preceded it. This was because funding was determined on the basis of the number of qualifying parents recorded in each service's return and the level of service provided to them, rather than on the basis of the capacity of the facility and the deprivation level recorded for the area. He stated that when the CCS was introduced in January 2008, significant increases and decreases in funding levels were recorded for many services.

49.105 The Accounting Officer stated that the findings from Pobal's compliance visits should be set in the context of some opposition to the ECCE programme when it was first introduced. Some services had been charging more than the ECCE capitation rate, prior to the downturn and hoped to circumvent the requirement to provide the pre-school year for free, through imposing additional charges on parents which were not optional. The DCYA, assisted by Pobal, monitored the position closely throughout 2010 when the ECCE was first introduced and many services attempted to circumvent the rules.

49.106 While there were issues of non-compliance in 2010, the Accounting Officer stated that these were found and acted upon (i.e. the service had to confirm that it would act in compliance with the programme or else the contract would be terminated. Further payments were suspended pending a satisfactory outcome). He stated that compliance was supported by the fact that each service got a Pobal compliance visit each year and that services were required to have an approved fee policy in place in advance of each contractual period which was checked during a compliance visit. He stated that there had been a significant level of complaints from parents in 2010 but very few in 2011.

49.107 In addition, he stated that prior to the ECCE programme, some services sustained high weekly prices by allowing parents to enroll their children on a pro-rata basis (i.e. for two to three days per week rather than five days). The ECCE programme had striven to move services to a five-day model and to raise parents' expectations that this should be provided. As the first pre-school year began during the academic year, this change did not fully impact until September 2010.

Conclusion

There were considerable deficiencies in the information held by Pobal on the childcare programme. These impact on reported results to date.

The programme will result in around 25,000 new places being provided with a shift in focus over the course of the programme to provision for the 3-4 age group.

At this point, an excess capacity estimated at 15,000 places has been created at a cost of at least €75 million.

The reduced demand creates the risk that elements of the infrastructure may not be fully employed for the purposes for which it was created or that due to demand reduction certain subvented facilities will cease to be used.

In addition to the non-effective costs associated with expenditure in creating facilities or places in excess of need there is a likelihood that excess capacity can cause a displacement effect. While it is not possible to directly link facilities that have closed with the funding of new ones, 126 facilities that were State-subvented have closed.

In regard to resourcing, a Workforce Development Plan published in December 2010 noted that in the region of 40% of the pre-school services workforce had not achieved basic level qualifications required for participation in the free pre-school year scheme. Transitional arrangements apply up until September 2012.

Overall, the current challenge is to sustain the services created by the State investment to the maximum extent so that the spare capacity can be available when demand increases.

In relation to its inspections, matters of particular concern to the HSE are the frequency of inspection, the publication of inspection reports and the dissemination of the outcomes of regulatory processes concerning sub-standard services.

Annex A Role of City and County Childcare Committees and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations

Payments to City and County Childcare Committees and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations accounted for over one-tenth of the total payments under the NCIP in the period 2006 to 2010.

City and County Childcare Committees

Thirty-three City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) were established in 2001, to encourage the development of childcare locally.

CCCs are the first point of contact for the provider in applying for grant assistance under the National Childcare Investment Programme. They offer a wide variety of services locally including; advice on setting up a childcare business; childcare information sessions; training courses for those considering a career in childcare; and advice and support on applying for a National Childcare Investment Programme grant. CCCs also offer services to parents, such as providing information on local childcare facilities and information on parent networks.

National Voluntary Childcare Organisations

The NCIP funds seven non-governmental National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs) in addition to a Border Counties Childcare Network. Each organisation has its own goals and strategies but each has a special interest and expertise in childcare and early learning for children.

The organisations are

- Barnardos
- Childminding Ireland
- Forbairt Naíonraí Teo
- Irish Preschool Play Association
- Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association
- National Children's Nurseries Association
- St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland.

Representatives of the NVCOs are also members of a National Childcare Coordinating Committee. This allows them to feed into national childcare policy and to coordinate the work of their own organisations accordingly.

Annex B ECCE Scheme Quality Requirements

Síolta and Aistear are quality frameworks which services participating in the ECCE scheme are required to implement. Aistear is more focused on child development while Síolta is focused on the delivery of childcare services.

Síolta

Síolta is a quality framework for all services working with children in the 0-6 age group. It was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education in 2006. It provides a framework to guide the enhancement of quality in all ECCE services. It is underpinned by 12 principles and 16 standards. The standards relate to various aspects of service delivery including the rights of the child, environment, parents and family, consultation, interactions, play, curriculum, planning and evaluation, health and welfare.

To support childcare services in implementing Síolta, co-ordinators have been appointed to provide mentoring and guidance to services who volunteer for assistance. Síolta co-ordinators are being funded through the NVCOs.

Aistear

Aistear describes the type of learning and development that are important for children in their early years and offers ideas and suggestions on how these might be nurtured. It was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Aistear uses four themes that connect and overlap with each other to outline children's learning and development. The themes are Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking.

Aistear can be used in a range of early childhood settings including children's own homes, childminding settings, full and part-time daycare settings, sessional services and infant classes in primary schools.