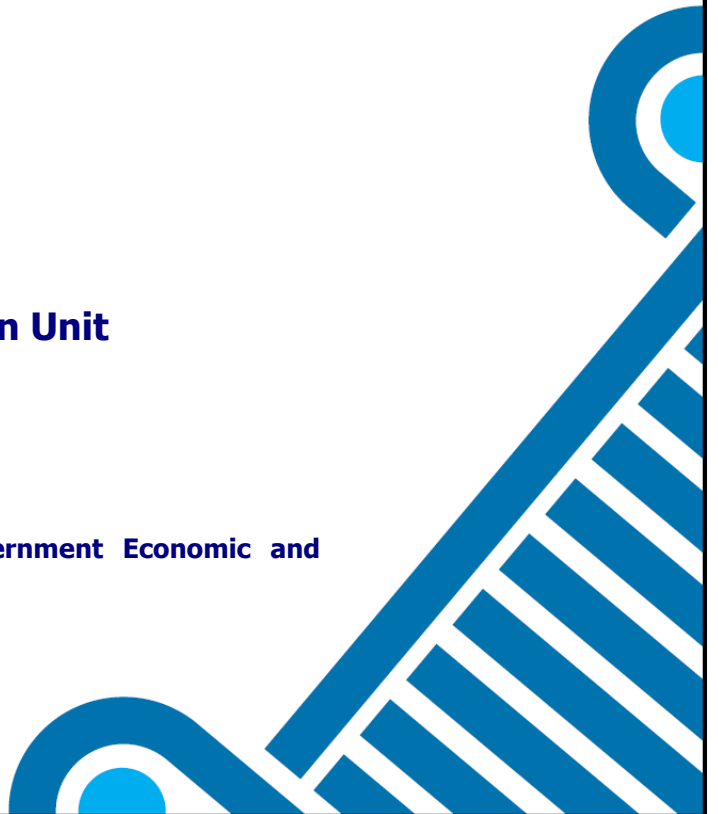


# **Focused Policy Assessment of Early Childhood Education and the ECCE Scheme**

**Central Expenditure Evaluation Unit**

**The CEEU is a unit of the Irish Government Economic and  
Evaluation Service (IGEES)**



## Summary

The purpose of this focused policy assessment (FPA) is to examine the 'early childhood education' element of the *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)* scheme in the context of the recommendations set out in the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*.

The ECCE scheme, and in particular the literacy and numeracy element, has significant potential.

The quality of the service provided will be an important influence on how well the goal of improving the communication and oral-language competence of young children and their readiness to develop early mathematical language and ideas is achieved.

There is evidence of progress in terms of the actions relating to the three elements of quality examined in this paper, especially evident in the area of qualifications of the ECCE practitioners. To ensure that the other quality related actions (the educational programme and the use of assessment, monitoring and reporting) impact on the quality of the service provided, it will be important to:

- gather evidence with regard to adherence to the curriculum framework,
- set out the relationship between the curriculum framework and the anticipated benefits, and
- monitor and record the use by ECCE practitioners of the various tools, guides and other mechanisms that have been introduced to enhance the quality of the ECCE scheme.

Doing so will support future evaluation work on the effectiveness of this programme.

This Focused Policy Assessment has been carried out by the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform's Central Expenditure Evaluation Unit (CEEU), which is a part of the Irish Government Economic & Evaluation Service, in accordance with the provisions of the Public Spending Code. It does not necessarily reflect the policy position of the Government or the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Further information on the Public Spending Code is available at <http://publicspendingcode.per.gov.ie>

# 1 Overview

The purpose of this focussed policy assessment (FPA) is to examine the *Early Childhood Care and Education* (ECCE) scheme in the context of the recommendations set out in the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* (hereafter the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*).<sup>1</sup>

The ECCE scheme is administered by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs (D/CYA). Under the ECCE scheme, private providers of childcare and pre-school education services are paid capitation for each enrolled child. The cohort of eligible children is restricted to those aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months.

This paper is concerned with the 'early childhood education' element of the ECCE scheme, and in particular the progress made with regard to the implementation of the recommendations relating to literacy and numeracy as outlined in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*. (See Appendices A – E.)

This FPA is not an evaluation of the:

- ECCE scheme as a whole, which is broader in scope than the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*;
- *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, which is broader in scope than the early years education and the ECCE services are only one element of wider public and community services referenced in the actions; or
- All recommendations relevant to the Department of Children & Youth Affairs as set out in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* – See Appendix F for other actions outlined in the Literacy & Numeracy Strategy.

The education element of the ECCE scheme has been emphasised since the scheme was first announced in the April 2009 Budget, when the then Minister for Finance, Mr

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Children & Youth Affairs does not accept that the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* is an appropriate context in which to set an FPA of the ECCE programme and strongly questions the appropriateness of this approach. The Department of Children & Youth Affairs notes that the ECCE programme commenced in January 2010 and delivered a major policy objective. While the ECCE programme was unrelated to the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, published by the Department of Education & Skills in June 2011, its existence enabled the Department of Children & Youth Affairs to subscribe to a number of commitments which could be delivered through participating early years services. The Department of Children & Youth Affairs works collaboratively with the Department of Education & Skills and would be strongly supportive of their efforts to improve training provisions for this sector. The Department of Children & Youth Affairs is wholly responsible for the ECCE programme and its development and is required to meet all funding requirements from within its own Vote.

Brian Lenihan TD, stated that “pre-primary education significantly enhances the subsequent educational achievement of students and in turn increases the return for State investment in education generally”.

The education element of the ECCE scheme has also been emphasised by D/CYA in its Statement of Strategy:

Support children and young people so that they can fully engage in active learning, including through the provision of high-quality early childhood care and education, youth services and addressing issues of school attendance and participation. (Strategic Objective 5)

In relation to this Strategic Objective, an Output of D/CYA is:

The implementation of funded early childcare/early childhood education programmes that deliver quality early childhood experiences for children and sustain the viability of the service provision (Programme for Government).

Documents published by D/CYA states that the ECCE is designed to make early learning in a formal setting available to eligible children (the starting point of their educational and social development outside the home) and to provide age-appropriate activities and programmes in the year before they start primary school. D/CYA also notes that children who avail of pre-school education are more likely to be ready for school and a formal learning and social environment.<sup>2</sup>

In 2011, the Department of Education & Skills (D/ES) published the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* and it sets out a variety of recommendations and commitments that refer directly to the provision of early childhood education. In preparing the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, officials in D/ES worked closely with colleagues in the D/CYA in addition to consulting with staff with specialist expertise at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Educational Research Centre (ERC), Drumcondra and the Teaching Council as well as undertaking close analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> See Department of Children & Youth Affairs *Guide to the ECCE Programme and Administrative Procedures* and *Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Guide for Parents*.

written submissions and meeting with over sixty organisations to hear more about their suggestions and to examine the key proposals that they had made. (*Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, 2011: 8)

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011: 14) notes that improving literacy and numeracy standards is “an urgent national priority for the Minister for Education & Skills and the Government” and that the Government will:

- “clarify what we expect children to learn and develop in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings, ..., in order to prioritise the learning of literacy and numeracy”;
- “create a culture of continuous improvement in ECCE settings ...” and
- “improve the professional skills of those who teach in our ECCE settings and schools in the teaching of literacy and numeracy, in planning and delivering rich learning activities, in assessing and monitoring progress, and in using assessment information to inform the next steps for learners.”

In setting out its goals, the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011: 17) differentiates between early childhood, primary and post-primary levels and states that during the period of the strategy the intention is to improve outcomes at early childhood level:

Improve the communication and oral-language competence of young children in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings and their readiness to develop early mathematical language and ideas.

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011: 27) states that:

The introduction in 2010 of the Free Pre-school Year in Early Childhood Care and Education Programme, administered by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs, has been a major achievement with the potential to make a considerable difference to the learning of our children. Almost every ECCE setting is participating in the programme and 95 per cent of children are benefitting from the pre-school year.

As part of the 2011 Comprehensive Review of Expenditure, D/CYA in its Expenditure Report (2011: 12) noted that “the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2010 takes

the ECCE programme as its main starting-point for early learning and early intervention”.

This paper begins by providing a brief overview of the key policy developments in this area and then focuses on the quality of the ECCE scheme as a pre-school education programme, in particular the qualifications of the service providers, the programme that they are required to deliver and the role of assessment in providing an effective educational service.

## 2 Background to the Early Childhood Education

### 2.1 Development of Early Childhood Education Policy in Ireland

Significant policy work was carried out in the decade or so prior to the introduction of the ECCE Scheme, including the *Forum Report on Early Childhood Education* (1998), a *White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (1999), the *National Childcare Strategy* (1999) and the *National Children’s Strategy* (2000). In 2004, the OECD undertook a thematic review of early childhood policy in Ireland and identified core features of Irish early childhood care and education system and proposed changes as well as examples of successful practice in other countries. The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) (2005) evaluated the implementation of policy in the area and concluded that for 1998-2005 there had been little progress.

According to D/CYA, the introduction of the ECCE scheme transformed national social policy in relation to the provision of childcare as, for the first-time, the objective of the investment was the impact on children. Prior to that, D/CYA notes that, with the exception of targeted programmes delivered by D/ES, the main focus was on the provision of places. In particular, D/CYA notes that the focus of the statutory regulations introduced in 1997 was on the structural quality of the settings (i.e., environmental health and safety) and that the revision of the regulations in 2006/7 gave limited attention to the issue of programme quality with staff qualifications and curriculum content left vague and undefined, with monitoring provided by an

inspectorate that did not have a pedagogical background to evaluate and assess educational content.

In more recent years, the development of the ECCE scheme and the publication of the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* reflect changes in both the national and international policy contexts from a focus on enabling parents, in particular mothers, to participate in the labour market to one which reflected the research evidence recognising early childhood care and education as essential supports for optimising children's full potential.

## **2.2 Benefits of Early Childhood Education**

Cognitive ability is held to be more adaptable early in the life cycle. Research shows that access to high quality services that contribute to improving cognitive ability early in life impact on a person's abilities to acquire skills later in life.<sup>3</sup>

The question of whether or not the provision of early childhood education should be targeted appears to be contested. Some suggest that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from pre-school education. D/CYA notes that evidence suggests disadvantaged children fare best within a universally provided service rather than targeted provision. In terms of conducting future evaluations of this programme it would be important that D/CYA set out quantitative evidence of the socio-economic background of the participating children to show that the service is not being delivered in an overly homogenous setting. (Something that would be associated with the targeting of the scheme.)

Others suggest that targeted provision does not meet the criteria of quality and efficacy and would not be in keeping with relevant European Union policy recommendations such as those agreed at the 2002 Barcelona Summit.<sup>4</sup> (It should be noted that the text of the latter relates to female labour participation and the

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<sup>3</sup> See Heckman (2008) and Doyle's (2012) summary of the research in this area (for information, key references are included in the bibliography to this paper).

<sup>4</sup> At the 2002 Barcelona Summit, the European Council set the targets of providing childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years of age and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age. The D/CYA notes that the universal free pre-school provision has allowed Ireland to meet the first target by the 2010 deadline.

provision of childcare rather than the development of young children's cognitive abilities and the provision of pre-school education.)

The 2011 European Commission Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) recognised the role of ECEC as part of the general educational continuum and put the child into the focus of the policy considerations. The Commission pointed out that the most successful systems are accessible high-quality ECEC that provide universal entitlement for all children from a very young age to integrated services, including effective curricular frameworks, competent staff and governance and funding arrangements necessary to deliver them. (COM (2011) 66final)

Furthermore, D/CYA suggests that the vision of early childhood care and education as advocated through the European Commission, and supported by research evidence, is that of 'progressive universalism' which identifies that all children should have access to quality early childhood provision with additional supports provided for those children who may struggle to achieve equitable access, participation and outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

D/CYA states that it is committed to providing the ECCE programme on a universal basis. The resources provided cover the payment of capitation to service providers and the administration costs of the scheme. D/CYA notes that the current economic circumstances have hindered the implementation of the pre-school element of the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*. D/CYA notes that its work to incrementally support and improve quality in the early years sector, through the ECCE programme, has been hampered by the lack of resources made available to the Department for this element of the ECCE programme.

While the appeal of universal provision is strong, there is a risk that the available resources may be spread too thinly. The limited resources available to the Irish Government, and the constraints on public expenditure associated with the EU Fiscal

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<sup>5</sup> The Social Investment Package in 2013 contained a Recommendation on investing in children that put great emphasis on ECEC for disadvantaged children. (C (2013) 778). In an Irish context, the D/ES notes that the school system provides universal education which is supplemented by additional supports targeted at those most in need, such as, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, the School Completion Scheme, and the school meals programme.



Rules<sup>6</sup>, mean that it may be necessary to consider other methods of enhancing the quality of the educational element of the ECCE scheme, in particular the elements relating to literacy and numeracy.

## 2.3 Framework for Early Childhood Education

The development of early childhood care and education in Ireland has been supported by two frameworks - *Síolta* and *Aistear*.

*Síolta* is the *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* and is designed to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education settings.

*Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland and addresses issues related to supporting children's wellbeing, learning and development and provides a comprehensive set of information, guidance and practical tools.

D/CYA notes that since the introduction of the ECCE programme, participating services have been required to adhere to *Síolta* and *Aistear*. D/CYA took this approach on the basis of their quality and appropriateness for the sector. D/CYA states that *Síolta* and *Aistear* prepare children for learning and for school by providing a framework within which a range of programme content can be delivered rather than setting a prescriptive approach which would not be appropriate for this age cohort.

## 2.4 Public Investment in Early Childhood Education

Under the ECCE scheme, private providers of childcare and pre-school education services are paid capitation for each enrolled child. The total number of children participating in the ECCE scheme has increased from 63,844 in 2010/11 to 65,878 in 2012/13 (an increase of 3.2%).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Within the Eurozone, public expenditure is constrained by the 'Expenditure Benchmark' under the Stability and Growth Pact so that expenditure as a percentage of GDP cannot grow faster than the average medium term potential growth rate of the economy.

<sup>7</sup> The cohort of eligible children is restricted to those aged more than 3 years and 2 months and less than 4 years and 7 months at 1 September of the relevant year.

In 2014, some €175 million has been provided for the ECCE pre-school year programme; this is unchanged from the allocation provided for 2013. Compared to 2011, the first full year of the scheme, the allocation has increased by 7.4% (from €163 million).

A higher rate of capitation is payable to pre-school service providers where all pre-school leaders delivering the pre-school service have a minimum of Level 7 on the NFQ or equivalent in childhood / early education and have 3 years' experience working in the sector, and where all pre-school assistants in the service hold a relevant major award in childcare / early education at Level 5 on the NFQ or its equivalent.<sup>8</sup>

The number of enrolled children on whose behalf the higher capitation rate is paid has increased from 12,097 (in 2011/12) to 15,286 (in 2012/13) or from 17.8% of all participating children to 23.2%.

The total cost of payments under the higher capitation rate have increased by 23% since 2011/12.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 Analytical Approach

The OECD (2012: 9) notes that the quality of an early childhood education programme is an important element in determining whether or not the programme's intended benefits can be realised.

Similar to the elements identified by the European Commission as being associated with high-quality early education, the OECD (2012: 24) has set out a range of 'policy levers' that would contribute to providing an appropriate programme:

- Set out quality goals and regulations,
- Design and implement curriculum standards,
- Engage families and communities,

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<sup>8</sup> A reduction in the higher capitation rate of 2.7% was introduced from September 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Analysis based on data provided by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs.

- Advance data collection, research and monitoring, and
- Improve qualifications, training and working conditions.

The OECD (2012: 9) notes that setting out explicit quality goals and minimum standards helps enhance quality in this sector.

In order to examine the early childhood education element of the ECCE scheme in the context of the recommendations set out in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, this paper focuses on three elements that are important to the issue of providing a quality service, the:

- qualifications of the service providers,
- educational programme provided, and
- assessment, monitoring and recording.

This paper examines progress made to date on relevant recommendations set out in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*.

The data is based on updates provided by D/CYA and D/ES to the recommendations outlined in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*.

## 4 Findings of Assessment

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011: 17) sets a clear goal of improving the communication and oral-language competence of young children in early childhood care and education settings and their readiness to develop early mathematical language and ideas. The quality of the service provided will be an important influence on how well the goal is achieved, in particular, the qualifications of those providing the service, the programme that is provided and the use of assessment and monitoring to inform the service provided to children and to measure progress.

## 4.1 Qualifications of the Providers

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011: 27) notes that the role of the adult working in ECCE settings is critical to ensuring positive experiences and outcomes for children's learning well-being and development.

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011) sets out a number of recommendations as to how the training of service providers might be improved to encourage and support upskilling, especially in the area of literacy and numeracy and the use of assessment in order to support enhanced literacy and numeracy provision, including for children with additional learning needs. Appendix A outlines these recommendations and the progress to date as reported by both the D/CYA and D/ES.

### Qualification requirements

The Government has increased the qualification requirements of ECCE practitioners. Since September 2012, pre-school year leaders must hold a certification for a major award in childcare / early education at a minimum of Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications of Ireland (NQF) or an equivalent nationally recognised qualification or a higher award in the childcare / early education field. (Early Years Education Policy Unit, 2011: 5). These qualification are based on the professional practice standards as set out by *Síolta*.

By 2015, all pre-school leaders will have to have a minimum Level 6 qualification and that all assistants will have to have a minimum Level 5 qualification.

To support staff in early years' services who need to up-skill to meet the new requirements, in March 2014, the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs announced the launching of a 'Learner Fund' totaling €3m over two years.<sup>10</sup>

### Qualifications of those working in the sector

Significant progress has been made in terms of increasing the levels of qualifications of those working in the sector. Data provided by D/CYA on the qualifications of

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<sup>10</sup> The fund will be administered by Pobal with the help of local City and County Childcare Committees and will be used to subsidise the cost for eligible learners to undertake accredited Level 5 and Level 6 FETAC courses provided by certain approved training providers expected to commence in September 2014.

leaders of ECCE programme service providers shows that over the last few years, the distribution of qualifications amongst pre-school leaders has moved from a position in 2010/11 when 15% had less than Level 5 qualifications to 2012/13 when all but one service provider have qualifications of at least Level 5. There has also been an increase in the number of leaders in receipt of the higher capitation which suggests that there has been an increase in the number of leaders with a Level 7 qualification or higher. Similarly, the 2011 survey by Pobal (2012) of providers of early childhood care and education found that the vast majority of ECCE programme providers had at least one staff member qualified to at least FETAC Level 5 and that just over a third had at least one staff member qualified to at least FETAC Level 7.

However, it is more difficult to find information on the mix of skills that the children encounter within ECCE settings (leaders and their assistants). The Pobal (2012: 34) survey provides information on all providers of early childhood care and education rather than on those that are part of the ECCE programme. Within this broader setting about a quarter of the staff for whom information was provided did not reach the FETAC Level 5 qualification and of these 27% (or 1,130 staff) had no childcare awards, 30% (or 1,250 staff) had awards from non-accredited childcare courses and 29% (or 1,180 staff) had a FETAC Level 4 award with the remainder having childcare awards accredited abroad but it was unclear as to how these equated to the FETAC qualifications.

D/CYA stresses that the higher qualified staff attracting the higher capitation rate must work directly with the children at all times during the ECCE settings and that if this rule is not observed services will lose the higher capitation rate.

In terms of understanding this element of the service provided, it would be useful if data on the level of compliance with this were made available as it has not been possible to determine from published reports the degree to which this is the case.

In addition, it will also be important to understand the level of use by ECCE practitioners of the various guidance and resources that are being prepared as part of the implementation of the *Literacy & Numeracy Strategy*.

## Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE Sector

The *Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE Sector* (2010: 6-14) found that there were issues around the provision of training, in particular, the quality and relevance of courses, flexibility in terms of how training and education is delivered, the cost of courses, recognition of prior learning and experience and clear path to career progression. The *Workforce Development Plan* (2010: 13) also observed that for some employed in the sector there were issues regarding poor records of academic achievement though noted that the up-skilling that has taken place in recent years would indicate that education and training providers have taken account of these issues. Appendix B sets out the progress that has been made in terms of addressing each of these issues.

### Purpose of improving qualifications

The changes in qualifications of ECCE practitioners outlined earlier suggest that the structure of the capitation payments has been successful in incentivising an increase in the capacity of the workforce. D/ES notes that increasing the qualifications levels of those working in the early years' sector is not the intended outcome. Instead, the intended outcome is their acquisition of the skills and knowledge they require to work effectively in this sector. D/CYA states that the qualifications of staff are testimony to their capacity to deliver appropriate programme content.

While it is clear that the capacities of those working in this sector have increased, it is not sufficient in itself to assume that a higher level of service will result as a consequence of increased qualifications. The relationship between quality of service and higher qualifications is surely influenced by having in place an effective educational programme and the associated defined standards that ECCE practitioners are expected to work to as a result of their qualifications.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The D/ES notes that its investment in post-graduate qualifications in such areas as Special Needs, Management and Leadership, and Mathematics for Teaching is based on the premise that higher qualified people will deliver a higher level of service.

## 4.2 Educational programme

### Pre-School Curriculum

As noted earlier, *Aistear* is the national curriculum framework for children aged 0 to 6 years and is intended to be used in early years' settings. ECCE participating services are required to adhere to *Síolta* and *Aistear*. The framework was developed by the NCCA to be flexible enough to accommodate the different curricula that are used in this sector, including Steiner and Montessori.

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011) sets out a number of recommendations regarding curriculum practice. Appendix C outlines these recommendations and the progress to date as reported by the relevant Departments.

D/CYA notes that D/ES and the NCCA are currently working on a new Practice Manual for *Síolta* and *Aistear* to be used in ECCE settings from September 2014. D/ES notes that the NCCA has worked with 7 early years' services to develop *Aistear-in-Action* which is intended to be a toolkit for early years' providers. In addition, D/CYA notes that it is establishing a new mentoring service for early years' services in 2014 to provide further supports in the implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear*.

D/ES notes the introduction of a *National Quality Support Service* which will work with early years' settings to strengthen the quality of provision.

### Services being provided

In supporting the implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear*, D/CYA notes that it funds:

- 8 National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOS) – to support the implementation in their member services participating in ECCE scheme; and
- 33 City and County Childcare Committees.

D/CYA states that it is supported in this work by the D/ES Early Education Policy Unit which is co-located within D/CYA.

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011: 48-49) acknowledges that within early childhood care and education settings there is a diversity of curriculum practice and little or no understanding about the degree to which the key ideas and messages contained within the *Aistear* framework are reflected in children's experiences in these settings.

As part of its annual compliance visits to assess whether or not providers are compliant with the guidelines set out in broad principles framework *Síolta*, Pobal undertook an examination of the awareness of providers of both *Síolta* and *Aistear*. While nearly all respondents were aware of both, "awareness" does not provide any information on the degree to which providers are implementing the guidelines.

### Importance of an Educational Programme

It is important that the benefits associated with the ECCE scheme are clearly stated and that data is provided to show how these benefits are realised, including those relating to improving the communication and oral-language competence of young children in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings and their readiness to develop early mathematical language and ideas.

It is important that the relationship between the service provided and the stated benefits should be clearly outlined.

It would be anticipated that D/CYA and D/ES would address these issues in their on-going evaluation of the ECCE programme.

In terms of understanding the impact of educational programme elements of the service, it will be important to determine the level of adherence with *Aistear* and the level of use of the various tools, mentoring service and *National Quality Support Service* that have been developed and put in place.



## 4.3 Assessment, Monitoring and Reporting

### Importance of assessment, monitoring and reporting

The OECD (2012: 13) notes that the use of data, research and monitoring are powerful tools for improving children's outcomes and driving continuous improvement in service delivery.

D/ES notes that Government policy has concentrated on assessment of school going children and that there has been no history of assessment within the early year's sector.

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011: 75) encourages practitioners in early childhood care and education to use various assessment approaches as they enable young children to learn. In particular, to identify children's learning needs as early as possible as evidence-based systems can provide information that gives important early indicators of each child's development, allowing issues to be addressed early, thus ensuring that they do not become a barrier to learning as a child progresses. D/CYA states that it will support ECCE services to engage in 'assessment for learning' and 'assessment of learning' training to enable them to adopt these approaches and improve quality of service delivery.

D/ES notes that this remains a challenge and would involve 'early years' practitioners and primary care teams working closely together.

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011) sets out a number of recommendations regarding assessment and monitoring. Appendix D outlines these recommendations and the progress to date as reported by the relevant Departments.

### Communication of key information

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011: 78) acknowledges that there are weaknesses in how information about children is transferred, if at all, between ECCE settings and primary schools. (See Appendix E for related recommendation.)

Such sharing of information would ensure that when learning needs are identified that appropriate learning opportunities are provided including the provision of intervention at an earlier stage in ECCE settings and/or in junior infants. At present, such interventions are provided at the senior infant stage which may be too late for many children, particularly when it is shown that learning problems stem from difficulties associated with oral language development. (*Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*, 2011: 49)

### Importance of assessment and communication

The absence of age appropriate assessment, and the introduction of appropriate methods of communication, is associated with the risk that the information and processes necessary to ensure improved outcomes for children, as well as better service delivery, will not be realised.

In terms of understanding the impact of these elements of the service, it will be important to determine the level of use of the range of strategies and assessment tools that are being developed and the level of compliance with the requirement from 2014 to complete and provide written reports on children to their school of transfer.

At a later date, D/CYA and D/ES ought to be in a position to examine how the transfer of such information has impacted on educational outcomes.

## 5 Conclusions

The focus of this paper is with the 'early childhood education' element of the ECCE scheme, and in particular with the progress made with regard to the implementation of the recommendations relating to literacy and numeracy as outlined in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*. The education element of the ECCE scheme has been emphasised since the scheme was first announced in April 2009. In 2011, D/ES published the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* and set out a variety of actions specifically addressed to the provision of early childhood education. The development of the ECCE scheme and the publication of the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* reflect a growing emphasis both nationally and internationally on early

childhood care and education as essential supports for optimising children's full potential.

The *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* sets a clear goal of improving the communication and oral-language competence of young children in early childhood care and education settings and their readiness to develop early mathematical language and ideas. The quality of the service provided will influence how well the goal of improving the communication and oral-language competence of young children and their readiness to develop early mathematical language and ideas is achieved.

The paper examined updates provided by D/CYA and D/ES regarding progress made to date on recommendations set out in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* that relate to three elements important to providing a quality pre-school service:

- qualifications of the service providers,
- educational programme provided, and
- assessment, monitoring and recording.

There is some evidence of progress on each of the three elements of quality though this is more clearly evident in the area of qualifications of ECCE practitioners. In terms of ensuring that the other recommendations in the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* impact on quality, as outlined above, it will be important that evidence is gathered with regard to the adherence to the curriculum framework, the relationship between the curriculum framework and the anticipated benefits, and the use by ECCE practitioners of the various tools, guides and other mechanisms that have been introduced to enhance the quality of the ECCE scheme. Doing so will support future evaluations of the effectiveness of this programme.

The ECCE scheme, and in particular the literacy and numeracy element, has the potential to be an important first year of education for many tens of thousands of Irish children.

## Appendix A

### Qualifications of ECCE Practitioners

<b>Recommendation in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Responsible for action and indicative date) (page number in Literacy and Numeracy Strategy)</b>	<b>Update Provided by the Department of Children &amp; Youth Affairs and / or the Department of Education &amp; Skills</b>
<p>ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT THE UPSKILLING OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE) PRACTITIONERS</p> <p>Ensure that the training and education courses completed by those entering the ECCE workforce include units on both content and pedagogical knowledge in literacy (including oral language and a focus on additional language learning) and numeracy by working with relevant accreditation bodies (D/ES and D/CYA - indicative date: 2012 – 2013) (p.29)</p>	<p>The ETBs have been asked to include the module on Literacy and Numeracy in their Level 6 Course and, from 2015, it will be mandatory for early years practitioners in receipt of State funding.</p>
<p>Continue to provide incentives for the continuing professional development of ECCE practitioners in state-funded ECCE settings by continuing to link higher capitation rates for pre-school services with higher qualification rates (D/CYA - indicative date: continue existing incentive and adjust incrementally) (p.29)</p>	<p>The Institutes of Technology are conducting a review of all of their early childhood degree programmes to determine their compatibility with national policy objectives and it was anticipated that this would be completed by the end of 2013.</p> <p>The higher capitation rate continues to be linked to higher qualifications.</p> <p>In 2011, the Department supported a sponsored training programme for ECCE staff, to assist them to meet the programme's qualification requirements and is again doing so in 2013/2015 with the introduction of increased qualification requirements for the ECCE programme and a minimum requirement for early years' services generally.</p>

<p>Work with relevant bodies to ensure that there is sufficient training provision to enable formal qualifications in early literacy and numeracy development be made a requirement for all ECCE leaders in state-funded ECCE settings (D/ES and D/CYA - indicative date: 2015) (p.29)</p>	<p>There is sufficient capacity within the ETBs.</p>
<p>Increase the minimum qualification requirements for ECCE practitioners involved in the delivery of state funded ECCE programmes (D/CYA - indicative date: incremental over period of Strategy) (p.29)</p>	<p>Minimum qualification requirements are being increased with effect from 2014 for newly contacted services and from 2015 for existing contracted services.</p>
<p>FOCUS THE PROVISION OF DEPARTMENT-SUPPORTED CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS ON THE TEACHING OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY AND THE USE OF ASSESSMENT</p> <p>As resources permit, extend the availability of support from DEIS advisors to ECCE settings linked the DEIS primary schools. (D/ES – indicative date: as resources permit) (p.37)</p>	<p>This is unlikely to happen in the immediate future with the resource constraints that DES are operating under.</p>
<p>Provide detailed guidance and resources to ECCE practitioners on best practice in the teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy through handbooks, online courses, digital and other resources. (D/ES in conjunction with NCCA, education centres and other CPD providers – indicative date: 2014 and following years) (p.37)</p>	<p>These are being developed through a group drawn from the NCCA, the CCCs and the VCOs and will be delivered in 2014.</p>
<p>Facilitate the provision of CPD at a cross-sectoral level (e.g., ECCE practitioners and primary teachers) where feasible to promote co-operation and shared understanding. (D/ES</p>	<p>The State has not funded CPD for the early years' sector. CPD for teachers is delivered through the Education centres and through on-line courses provided by colleges. How</p>

<p>and D/CYA – indicative date: as resources permit) (p.37)</p> <p>CONTINUE TO SUPPORT ENHANCED LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROVISION FOR STUDENTS FROM SOCIALLY, ECONOMICALLY AND EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS</p> <p>Ensure that all initial teacher education courses and ECCE training programmes include mandatory modules to enable teachers and ECCE practitioners to address the specific literacy and numeracy learning needs of students from disadvantage backgrounds (D/ES in conjunction with the Teaching Council and Awarding Bodies - indicative date – from 2013) (p.68)</p> <p>Incentivise ECCE practitioners in state-funded ECCE settings to engage in continuing professional development to enhance their ability to address the literacy and numeracy learning needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (D/CYA - indicative date: from 2013) (p.68)</p> <p>REBALANCE THE SUPPORTS MADE AVAILABLE TO ADDRESS THE LITERACY AND NUMERACY LEARNING NEEDS OF ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE (EAL) STUDENTS</p> <p>Ensure that all initial ECCE training programmes include mandatory modules to enable ECCE practitioners (a) to address the specific literacy and numeracy learning needs of such students and (b) to raise awareness among ECCE practitioners that some migrant students will be receiving informal support in</p>	<p>CPD at a cross-sectoral level can be facilitated needs to be planned in detail.</p> <p>The Institutes of Technology have been asked to identify how their programmes are mediated for children at risk of educational disadvantage.</p> <p>State funding hasn't been allocated for CPD for early years practitioners.</p> <p>The Institutes of Technology have been asked to identify how their programmes are mediated for migrant children.</p> <p>Some equality/diversity training has taken place in the early years' sector funded through Dormant Accounts. There is an</p>
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their mother tongue in out-of-school educational settings (D/ES and Awarding Bodies - indicative date: from 2013) (p.69)

CONTINUE TO SUPPORT ENHANCED LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS, INCLUDING STUDENTS OF EXCEPTIONAL ABILITY

Ensure that all initial teacher education courses and ECCE training programmes include mandatory modules to enable teachers and ECCE practitioners to address the specific literacy and numeracy learning needs of students with special educational needs (D/CYA and Awarding Bodies - indicative date: 2013) (p.70)

Incentivise state-funded ECCE practitioners to engage in continuing professional development to enhance their ability to address the specific literacy and numeracy learning needs of students with special educational needs (D/CYA - indicative date: 2013) (p.70)

evaluation available.

DES and DCYA will continue work with the Awarding bodies to promote the inclusion of mandatory modules in ECCE training programmes.

The ETBs are the main provider of training courses at Levels 5 and 6. At the moment, there is insufficient expertise within the ETBS to deliver courses that would allow practitioners to address the specific needs of students with special educational needs.

There is no State funding for CPD for early years practitioners

## Appendix B

### Issues highlighted in the Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE Sector

<b>Issue highlighted</b>	<b>Update by D/ES on actions to date</b>
Flexibility in terms of how training and education is delivered (allow for people already in the workplace who are unable to attend full-time courses).	<p>Models of delivery that have been developed include an Assessment of Learning model implemented in Whitehall VEC for adult learners.</p> <p>A number of the Institutes of Technology have also developed courses for graduates in, for example Social Care to backfill the missing pedagogical elements of their original degree programme.</p>
The cost of courses.	This continues to be an issue.
Recognition of prior learning and experience.	<p>In general, education and training providers struggle with RPL because it is time consuming, expensive and they have concerns over the integrity of their awards. This is not confined to Early Childhood Care and Education courses.</p> <p>For a learner to provide documented evidence of their experiential learning is also onerous and time consuming.</p>
Quality and relevance of courses.	<p>Common Award Standards in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) at Levels 4, 5 and 6 on the NFQ were published by the Further Education and Training Awards Council in March 2011. The old awards in Childcare were phased out.</p> <p>After December 2012, only the new Common Award Standards in ECCE were accredited by FETAC. Programmes of learning developed</p>



<p>Learner support – many engaging in courses, particularly at the lowest levels on the NQF, have poor records of previous academic achievement and literacy and language supports were identified as being important as well as mentoring and guidance.</p> <p>Clear path to career progression.</p>	<p>to meet these award standards incorporate national practice frameworks (Síolta and Aistear) and reflect national policy objectives and should ensure that graduates of these programmes are more prepared to enter the workforce.</p> <p>The ETBs centralised their programme development under the Common Award Standards so all ETBs should be delivering to the same standard.</p> <p>This should be dealt with by the Training Provider.</p> <p>Occupational profiles are set out in the 2002 <i>Model Framework Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector.</i></p>
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## Appendix C

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### Education Programme

<p><b>Recommendation in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy</b></p> <p>MONITOR AND REVIEW CURRICULAR PRACTICE IN ECCE SETTINGS OVER TIME</p> <p>Identify the scope of curricular practice in the sector by surveying settings participating in the universal free pre-school year programme (D/CYA - indicative date: 2012-2013) (p.53)</p> <p>Review the effectiveness of different curricular practices in the delivery of <i>Aistear</i> in the universal free pre-school year programme (D/CYA - indicative date: 2013) (p.53)</p> <p>CONTINUE TO SUPPORT ENHANCED LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL</p>	<p><b>Update Provided by the Department of Children &amp; Youth Affairs and / or the Department of Education &amp; Skills</b></p> <p>There is data available through the returns submitted by early years' settings.</p> <p>In 2011/2012 DCYA and DES worked on an ECCE joint inspection initiative which involved both the DES and HSE Inspectorates in a move towards a broader evaluation model for ECCE services including curricular practice.</p> <p>This work is feeding into the on-going evaluation of the ECCE programme and incremental developments for 2014/2016.</p> <p>An inspectorate should be able to evaluate the effectiveness of different curricular practices in the delivery of <i>Aistear</i> but the current HSE pre-school Inspectorate don't have that pedagogical background.</p> <p>The D/CYA have asked DES to carry out inspections in 2014 focussing on educational outcomes.</p>
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<p>NEEDS, INCLUDING STUDENTS OF EXCEPTIONAL ABILITY</p> <p>Promote the use of available guidelines and online resources for ECCE settings on best practice in supporting the needs of students with special educational needs (D/ES, teacher education and continuing professional development providers - indicative date: 2011)</p>	<p>Mary Immaculate have guidelines and resources available on the inclusion of children with special needs. These were funded by the Department of Education and Skills and form the basis for a Special Purpose Award in inclusive education.</p>
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## Appendix D

### Assessment and Monitoring

<b>Recommendation in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy</b>	<b>Update Provided by the Department of Children &amp; Youth Affairs and / or the Department of Education &amp; Skills</b>
<p>IMPROVE THE ABILITY OF TEACHERS AND ECCE PRACTITIONERS TO USE ASSESSMENT APPROACHES AND DATA</p> <p>Ensure that all initial teacher education courses and ECCE training programmes include mandatory modules to enable teachers and ECCE practitioners to use a range of assessment approaches to (a) inform the planning of subsequent steps in students' learning of literacy and numeracy, i.e. assessment for learning approaches, (b) monitor effectively learners' achievements in literacy and numeracy, i.e. assessment of learning approaches, (c) document students' learning in literacy and numeracy and report to parents, other teachers and other professionals as appropriate and (d) identify specific learning needs (D/ES - indicative date: 2013) (p.80)</p>	<p>At Level 6, there is a mandatory component on curriculum which includes the following learning outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ learning contexts which support children's well-being, identities and belonging consistent with relevant legislation and national practice guidelines</li><li>▪ range of strategies to facilitate assessment for learning</li></ul>
<p>Incentivise state-funded ECCE practitioners to engage in continuing professional development to enhance their ability to use a range of assessment for learning and assessment of learning approaches (D/CYA - indicative date: 2014) (p.80)</p>	<p>There is no State funding for CPD for early years practitioners.</p> <p>DCYA will support ECCE services to engage in AfL and AoL training to enable them to adopt these approaches and improve the quality of service delivery.</p>
<p>IMPROVE THE USE OF ASSESSMENT INFORMATION TO SUPPORT BETTER TEACHING AND LEARNING IN LITERACY AND NUMERACY FOR INDIVIDUAL</p>	

<p>STUDENTS</p> <p>Support the development and publication of assessment tools to assist ECCE practitioners to monitor and report on the progress that children in ECCE settings are achieving (D/ES and D/CYA - indicative date: from 2012) (p.81)</p>	<p>DCYA is working with DES/NCCA to develop a common practice manual to support the Aistear curriculum and Siolta Framework and which will be common to both ECCE and infant class children and provide additional linkages between ECCE and schools.</p> <p>Assessment tools are being developed in the sector through a number of sources. E.g., the National Early Years Access Initiative funded programme in the NCI has produced a tool for Assessment of Early Maths Skills and Concepts. There is an evaluation available.</p>
<p>CONTINUE TO SUPPORT ENHANCED LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROVISION FOR STUDENTS FROM SOCIALLY, ECONOMICALLY AND EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS</p> <p>Improve the skills of teachers and ECCE practitioners in assessing, monitoring and recording literacy and numeracy outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (D/ES - indicative date: from 2012-13) (p.68)</p>	<p>The upskilling of early years' practitioners has been identified as a major factor in improving early years provision and measures are being put in place to ensure that this upskilling takes place.</p>
<p>CONTINUE TO SUPPORT ENHANCED LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS, INCLUDING STUDENTS OF EXCEPTIONAL ABILITY</p> <p>Improve the skills of teachers and ECCE practitioners in assessing, monitoring and recording literacy and numeracy outcomes of</p>	<p>This is likely to be pushed out to 2015 when Level 6 becomes a mandatory requirement.</p>

students with special educational needs (D/ES - indicative date: from 2012-13) (p.70)	
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## Appendix E

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### Communication

<p>IMPROVE THE USE OF ASSESSMENT INFORMATION TO SUPPORT BETTER TEACHING AND LEARNING IN LITERACY AND NUMERACY FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS</p> <p>Improve arrangements for the transfer of information about the progress and achievement of children between all schools and state-funded ECCE settings by requiring all ECCE settings to provide written reports in standard format to schools to which students transfer (reports to be provided following admission of student to the new school) (NCCA to develop suitable reporting templates and make available online – indicative date 2012-14; D/ES and D/CYA to make transfer of information a requirement – indicative date: 2013-15) (p.82)</p>	<p>DCYA will liaise with DES and the NCCA to prepare for a requirement, from 2014, that ECCE services complete and provide written reports on children to their school of transfer.</p> <p>Donegal CCC will be presenting their work on transitions to the NCCA before the end of 2013.</p>
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## Appendix F

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<b>Recommendation in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy</b>	<b>Update Provided by the Department of Children &amp; Youth Affairs</b>
<p>PROVIDE ADVICE AND INFORMATION TO PARENTS TO ENABLE THEM TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND NUMERACY DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>Provide all parents with information and on-line resources about activities that they can use to support their child's oral language development, literacy and numeracy from birth. (DC&amp;YA in co-operation with the NCCA and Library Services – indicative date: by 2014) (p.22)</p>	<p>During 2012/13, D/CYA worked with the D/ES Early Education Policy Unit, the NCCA and Library Services to develop on-line materials to assist parents in developing their children's oral language development, literacy and numeracy from birth to be used in a co-ordinated campaign using the D/CYA's support network of the City and County Childcare Committees and the 8 National Voluntary Childcare Organisations as well as its links with the 4,300 early childhood care and education services which participate in the ECCE programme.</p>
<p>IDENTIFY AND LEARN FROM EFFECTIVE INITIATIVES THAT ENABLE PARENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING AND LEARNING AND THAT STRENGTHEN LINKS BETWEEN HOME, ECCE SETTINGS AND SCHOOLS</p> <p>Learn from ways that the existing early intervention pilot programmes supported by the Department are overcoming barriers to literacy and numeracy development in disadvantaged communities.</p> <p>Build on the evaluation and development work of the CES through the work of the Children's Services Committees (CSCs) to</p>	<p>Evaluation of the outcomes from the 3 projects undertaken as part of the Early Intervention Programme initiative during 2008/2013 have been largely completed and interventions which were found to be effective will be supported in up to 10 additional areas in 2014-2016 under the new Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme which is being implemented by DCYA.</p>



<p>secure better literacy and numeracy outcomes by integrating services and interventions at local level.</p> <p>Involve schools and ECCE settings in parental and wider community initiatives that promote and support the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills (DCYA – indicative date: on-going) (p.24)</p> <p>SEEK TO TARGET AND COORDINATE SUPPORT FOR INITIATIVES THAT ENABLE PARENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING AND LEARNING AND THAT STRENGTHEN LINKS BETWEEN HOME, ECCE SETTINGS AND SCHOOLS</p> <p>Continue to support family literacy initiatives in socially and economically disadvantaged communities (such as those served by DEIS schools); in allocating support, priority will be given to projects (at early years and school level) that have been evaluated and proven to be effective through evaluation (DCYA – indicative date: on-going) (p.24)</p> <p>Over time, seek to co-ordinate expenditure by state agencies and bodies to prioritise initiatives that enable parents, families and communities to support children's well-being and learning and that strengthen links between home, ECCE settings and schools (DCYA – indicative date: 2016 and following) (p.24)</p> <p>DEVELOP AND PROMOTE MODELS OF GOOD</p>	<p>It is also proposed to mainstream some of these interventions from 2014 where cost effective.</p> <p>The CSCs are being developed to co-ordinate integrated service delivery at local level and should assist in this mainstreaming process, as will the Department's links to the 4,300 services in the ECCE programme.</p> <p>This links back to the targets associated with the mainstreaming of effective outcomes from programme initiatives, in particular the design of the ECCE programme, to incrementally develop on a two year cycle (2010/2012, 2012/2014, etc).</p> <p>The DES commitment/target, to co-ordinate expenditure and initiatives to strengthen links between home, ECCE settings and schools during 2012-2014, will link into this work.</p>
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<p>PRACTICE THAT ENABLE PARENTS, FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, ECCE SETTINGS AND SCHOOLS TO WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT LITERACY AND NUMERACY ACQUISITION</p> <p>Engage with a wide range of child and family support agencies to disseminate information to parents and families on promoting the development of literacy and numeracy skills (D/CYA – no indicative date) (p.25)</p> <p>Develop, in co-operation with the library service, models of engagement between schools, ECCE settings and libraries, to include areas such as selection and provision of materials, library membership schemes and planned library visits (D/ES and D/CYA – no indicative date) (p.25)</p> <p>Use existing networks to encourage sharing of best practice in literacy and numeracy and numeracy development between groups of schools and ECCE settings in local areas (D/ES and D/CYA – no indicative date) (p.25)</p> <p>CONTINUE TO SUPPORT ENHANCED LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROVISION FOR STUDENTS FROM SOCIALLY, ECONOMICALLY AND EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS</p> <p>Encourage the management of ECCE settings and schools and their communities to put in place procedures to facilitate schools and ECCE settings to work collaboratively with parents to improve literacy and numeracy learning (D/ES &amp; D/CYA – indicative date: 2012/2013) (p.68)</p>	<p>As part of its commitment to support implementation of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and meet the targets which identify specific roles for the DCYA, the Department will work with DES to disseminate resource materials through child and family support agencies, libraries and ECCE services, as well as to parents, and to establish networks at local level which link home, ECCE settings and schools.</p> <p>Collaboration between ECCE settings, schools and communities is a common theme to all actions to implement the Strategy.</p>
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CONTINUE TO SUPPORT ENHANCED LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS, INCLUDING STUDENTS OF EXCEPTIONAL ABILITY

Encourage the management of ECCE settings and schools and their communities to put in place procedures to facilitate schools and ECCE settings to work collaboratively with parents to improve literacy and numeracy learning (D/ES & D/CYA – indicative date: 2012/2013) (p.70)

Collaboration between ECCE settings, schools and communities is a common theme to all actions to implement the Strategy.

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