

Evaluation of Initial Implementation of Síolta

Final Report

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The development of Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, arose from one of the main objectives of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn, published by the then Department of Education and Science (DES) in 1999, namely:

The objective of this White Paper is to facilitate the development of a high quality system of early childhood education.
(DES, 1999a:43)

The White Paper led to the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), set up under the management of the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra. The Programme of Work which was agreed with the then Department of Education and Science for the CECDE, focused on the following three objectives:

- The development of a quality framework for early childhood education;
- The development of targeted interventions on a field test basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs and;
- The preparation of groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA).

The Síolta Framework was published by the CECDE in 2006 following three years of research and consultation. This was in response to the first of the CECDE's objectives, and outlined a prototype of a National Quality Framework (NQF) for Early Childhood Education. The Síolta Framework comprises a number of distinct elements, namely:

- a set of Principles, Standards and Components that set out a vision of early childhood care and education (ECCE) quality practice and provision;
- a set of processes and tools to be implemented by settings participating in Síolta;
- the role of Síolta Coordinator; and
- a system of validation to ensure that quality is achieved.

As a National Quality Framework, Síolta was designed to be usable by a broad variety of ECCE setting types including crèches, playgroups, childminding settings and infant classes in primary schools. Síolta addresses all dimensions of ECCE provision and practice from the indoor and outdoor environments to

the interactions between those participating in the service and the wider community in which the setting is located.

ECCE settings can engage with the Síolta Framework on a formal or informal basis. Informal engagement involves ECCE practitioners receiving Síolta resource materials and applying them within their own setting at their own pace. Formal engagement with Síolta involves an ECCE setting implementing the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), with the support of a Síolta Coordinator. The Síolta QAP comprises a structured 12-step process that culminates at the point where settings submit a quality portfolio that is assessed by a Síolta validator.

In 2009, a structured field test of Síolta commenced in three Dublin based Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes (PEIPS) and a number of the Voluntary Childcare Organisations (VCOs). Throughout the report the term ‘implementing bodies’ is used to refer to the PEIPs and VCOs participating in the field test. As the field test approaches its end point, the Department have commenced an evaluation to draw out lessons learnt. The focus of the evaluation required by the Department is on formal engagement with Síolta and specifically on Steps 4 to 9 of the QAP process. Effectively this is the part of the QAP between the point when the setting meets their Síolta Coordinator to the point where the setting submits their quality portfolio for validation.

1.2 Study Objectives

As per the terms of reference for the evaluation, the evaluator has been charged with:

- Assessing the extent to which engagement with the Síolta QAP has supported participating ECCE settings to develop the quality of their practice.
- Testing the reliability and validity of the Síolta assessment processes and instruments across the range of ECCE settings. In assessing reliability, the Evaluator was expected to conduct analyses to establish inter-rater reliability and internal consistency.
- Evaluating the role of the Síolta Coordinator in supporting Síolta. In particular, the Evaluator was to identify and consider the following:
 - a) The profile, recruitment, induction, on-going support and management of Síolta Coordinators;
 - b) The salient characteristics of the Síolta Coordinator – ECCE setting relationship including the frequency and pattern of contacts, the intensity/depth of the mentoring relationship (including the types of activities and discussions in which they engage) and the duration of the relationship;
 - c) Contextual factors that impact on the effectiveness of the Síolta Coordinator – ECCE setting relationship; and

- Identifying the critical factors that facilitate or inhibit the effective implementation of Síolta.

and making relevant recommendations to inform:

- The review and refinement of Síolta materials and processes;
- The development of the support structure for Síolta; and
- The refinement of the Síolta Coordinator role.

1.3 Methodology

The approach adopted to complete this Study has included a variety of evaluation methodologies, including:

- Reviewing relevant literature and documentation

This task involved reviewing all of the relevant information and data held centrally by the Early Years Education Policy Unit.

- Convening a Coordinator Workshop

It was considered essential to consult at a general level with the Síolta Coordinators at an early stage of the evaluation process, owing to the central role held by Coordinators in the implementation of the field test. With this in mind, Goodbody held a two hour workshop session with Síolta Coordinators early on in the evaluation process.

- Conducting Surveys

A postal survey was administered to all 134 ECCE settings engaging with Síolta on a formal level in July 2011. Separately, an electronic survey was administered to the Síolta Coordinators.

- Carrying out Case Studies

Seven detailed case studies were carried out of ECCE settings that are formally engaged with Síolta. The settings chosen to participate in the case studies reflect the diversity of existing early childhood education provision in Ireland, taking account of:

- Settings in rural and urban areas;
- Disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged settings;
- Settings catering for children with special needs or culturally diverse groups;
- Diverse language settings;
- Settings that are community, voluntary or private; and,
- Settings employing various curriculum approaches and ethos.

The case studies involved detailed consultations with the relevant Síolta Coordinators as well as setting staff. The case studies included one Síolta Coordinator from each of the six participating Voluntary Childcare Organisations¹ as well as one Prevention and Early Intervention Programme.

- Implementing an Experiment to Determine the Reliability and Consistency of the Síolta Self Assessment Tool

An experiment was organised and conducted which involved sending four Síolta Coordinators into three settings (unknown to them) to implement the Self Assessment Tool by rating the settings in terms of a select number of Síolta Components. Again, the settings chosen to participate in the experiment reflect the diversity of existing early childhood education provision. Completion of the experiment enabled an evaluation of the reliability and consistency associated with the Síolta Self Assessment Tool.

The wide range of research methodologies and strategies employed ensured that all stakeholders' views were represented, whilst taking account of the various contextual factors influencing participation in the field test.

1.4 Report Layout

The Report is organised as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the ECCE sector in Ireland as well as an overview of the research, practical initiatives and policy developments that have promoted quality within the sector. Section 3 sets out an overview of the Síolta Framework, and the elements that comprise it. Sections 4 and 5 describe the field test implementation of Síolta to date, including an assessment of the extent to which there has been adherence to the Síolta guidance, and an assessment of progress that has been made in the implementation of the field test. Sections 6, 7, and 8 are concerned with presenting the views of key participants in the field test with respect to the Síolta processes, tools, support guidance, as well as the Coordinator mentoring system. An assessment of the effectiveness of the Síolta process, tools, support guidance and Coordinator mentoring system are also provided. Section 9 sets out the findings of the experiment with respect to the Self Assessment Tool. Finally, the conclusions and recommendations are presented in Section 10.

¹ The participating Voluntary Childcare Organisations include Barnardos, BCCN, Childminding Ireland, Irish Preschool Play Association, Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association, and National Children's Nurseries Association, as per the Request for Tenders document.

2. Background to Síolta

2.1 Introduction

The period 1960 - 1990 witnessed an increased interest in early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland. Interest in this area was driven by demographic changes which saw a significant increase in the number of children aged between 0 and 6 years, together with increases in the female labour force participation rate. At the same time emerging research was highlighting the importance of ECCE in terms of realising the potential of children in their later years.

In this Section, an overview of the ECCE sector in Ireland is presented in terms of the types of service provision available. This is followed by an overview of research, practical initiatives and policy developments that have promoted quality provision and practice within the sector in recent years.

2.2 ECCE Sector in Ireland

2.2.1 Profile of ECCE Sector Size

The ECCE sector in Ireland is characterised by a variety of setting and service types. The range of services and settings include: nurseries, crèches, playgroups, naíonraí, preschools, childminding services, as well as infant classes in primary schools. With the exception of the infant classes in primary schools, ECCE services are generally centre-based or provided by childminders operating in their own homes. The centre based services are either private (generally funded by fees) or community/voluntary in nature (funded to a large extent by support from government departments).

2.2.2 Profile of ECCE Service Types

As noted above, the ECCE sector in Ireland is characterised by a diversity of setting and service types, including:

- **Full time Day Care:** often referred to as crèche or nursery, a full day care service refers to a pre-school service offering a structured day care service for pre-school children for more than 5 hours per day; which may include a sessional pre-school service for pre-school children not attending the full day care service.
- **Part Time Day Care:** refers to a pre-school service offering a structured day care service for pre-school children for a total of more than 3.5 hours and less than 5 hours per day and which may include a sessional pre-school service.

Typically full time and part time day care premises are broken down into various rooms, including:

- a baby room, catering for children from approximately 4 to 12 months;
- a wobbler room catering for children from approximately 12 months to 2 years of age;
- toddler room catering for children from approximately 2 years to 3 years;
- playschool catering for children approximately 3 to 4 years of age;
- Montessori catering for children for 4 to 5 years; and
- after school care providing afternoon care for school age children.

The day care services may offer a programme that is guided by a number of philosophies including Montessori, HighScope, Play based, Steiner, Waldorf, and Naíonra.

- **Sessional Care:** refers to a pre-school service offering a planned programme to pre-school children for a total of not more than 3.5 hours per session (generally a morning or afternoon session). Sessional pre-school services include: Pre-Schools, Playgroups, Montessori, Steiner groups, and Naíonra. Generally, children catered for include those in the 2-6 years age bracket. Younger children may also be catered for.
- **Childminding Service:** Childminders provide an alternative form of full day childcare provision, by providing childcare services in their own homes or in the children's home.
- **Infant classes in Primary School:** children in Ireland can attend primary school from the age of four until twelve. Although compulsory attendance does not start until six years of age, traditionally the majority of four and five year olds have enrolled in infant classes in primary school.
- **Drop in Care:** A pre-school service in a drop-in centre is a service where care is provided for pre-school children for not more than 2 hours while the parent/guardian is availing of a service or attending an event.

2.3 Quality in ECCE Provision

Since the late 1980s and the early 1990s there has been a growing preoccupation with quality within the ECCE sector in Ireland as evidenced through a series of research, practical implementation initiatives and policy developments, a high level summary of which is set out here.

2.3.1 Research on ECCE Quality

Since the 1990s a sizeable body of work with the purpose of defining quality within the ECCE sector has been undertaken by a number of organisations including the Voluntary Childcare Organisations. This activity includes:

- *‘Towards Quality Daycare – Minimum Quality Standards in a Nursery’*, which was produced by the National Children’s Nurseries Association (NCNA) in 2003, outlining a number of aspects of quality within services;
- *Quality Discussion Paper* (2001), which was produced by the IPPA in 2001 (and revised and reissued in 2002) and sets out the core constituents of quality from the point of view of children, from the perspective of the setting, of management and of staff;
- *‘Choosing Childcare – Solving our Childcare Problems’*, produced by Childminding Ireland setting out the characteristics of a quality childminding service;
- *‘Out Door Play: Designs and Benefits’*, produced by the Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN) outlining the characteristics of quality outdoor play areas; and
- Guides prepared by Barnardos on the establishment of quality childcare services and how to recruit quality personnel.

2.2.2 Quality Improvement Initiatives

In addition to producing the research publications mentioned above, many VCOs were also actively supporting quality through quality implementation initiatives, often with the support of Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) funding. Quality initiatives included:

- In 2001, Barnardos, in association with FAS, developed *‘Assuring Quality: Manual for Assessment of Community Employment Projects Providing Early Childhood Services’*. As part of this initiative, programme development plans were to be produced to support the implementation of changes needed within identified ECCE services.
- The Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN) developed a Quality Assurance Programme for sessional pre-school services, which involved childcare providers in the production of a portfolio of evidence on the quality of their service.
- Childminding Ireland was involved in the development of Quality Indicators in family based daycare services.

- High Scope Ireland developed a High Scope Accreditation Pack, which involved settings in a series of stages, including the use of a Programme Quality Assessment Tool. High Scope Assessors then carried out site visits to assess the settings against a range of quality criteria.
- In 2000 the (Irish Pre-School Play Association) IPPA produced a quality assessment tool: Quality Indicators for Childcare Services. The tool identified a set of quality indicators under six heading areas: physical environment; activities and experiences; adult-child interactions; partnerships with parents; observation and assessment; and staff and management. In 2002, the IPPA established a Quality Improvement Programme containing a number of different elements including training workshops, on-site support, and evaluation assessment.
- In 2004 the National Children’s Nurseries Association (NCNA) published its Centre of Excellence Award, which involved an assessment and validation system for NCNA members providing excellent standards of care. The Award involved service providers completing a self-evaluation profile by assessing and rating themselves; and submitting a profile for an assessment visit from external validators.

The approach to ensuring quality within the sector was thus a relatively fragmented one, with the approaches and perspectives on quality criteria varying according to the philosophy and practice of the various VCOs.

2.2.3 Policy Developments promoting Quality in ECCE Sector

From a policy perspective, there have traditionally been a large number of governmental departments and agencies involved in the area of ECCE service provision in Ireland. In terms of ECCE quality, there has historically been three main departments active in its promotion, namely the Department of Justice and Equality (previously the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform); the Department of Education and Skills (previously the Department of Education and Science); and the Department of Health and Children (previously the Department of Health).

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established in June 2011 and now has responsibility for the development of harmonised policy and quality integrated service delivery for children and young people, including pre-school children.

Department of Health and Children

With the introduction of the Child Care Act 1991, the Health Service Executive (HSE) was charged with ensuring the health, safety and welfare of pre-school children attending services. The provisions of the 1991 Act relating

to ECCE services were given effect by virtue of the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations 1996 and more recently the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006 and the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) (Amendment) Regulations 2006.

Under the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006 and the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) (Amendment) Regulations 2006 (hereto referred to as “the Regulations”) pre-school care providers are required to notify the HSE that they are providing services². The Regulations also set down the standards of health, safety and welfare that must be in place before such services can be provided. There are specific legal requirements covered in the Regulations for all of the following areas:

- Health, welfare and development of the child
- First aid and medical assistance
- Management and staffing
- Behaviour management
- The number of pre-school children who may be catered for
- Keeping a register of pre-school children
- Records
- Providing information for parents
- Fire safety measures
- Premises and facilities including heating, ventilation, lighting,
- Sanitary accommodation
- Equipment and materials
- Food and drink
- Safety measures
- Facilities for rest and play
- Furnishing of information to the Health Service Executive (HSE)
- Insurance
- Inspection (which is carried out by the HSE)

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs now has responsibility for the Regulations and for developing policy in this area. The HSE is required to inspect and regulate pre-school childcare services.

Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

One of first major policy documents relating to Childcare in Ireland was produced by DJELR in 1999: the *National Childcare Strategy* (1999). The Strategy acknowledges the importance of quality in terms of the provision of ECCE services at both structural and setting level, and identifies the components of a quality service in terms of characteristics such as play, the environment, equipment and resources, training and qualifications of

² School age childcare services and childminders caring for three or fewer pre-school children do not come under the Pre-School Regulations. A ‘pre-school child’ is a child who is under six years of age and who is not attending a national school or a school providing education similar to a national school.

personnel, parental involvement as well as interactions between children and adults.

The DJELR also administered the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme, which provided funding for the development of childcare, to improve quality, to increase the quantity and to introduce a co-ordinated approach to service delivery. The County Childcare Committees (CCCs) were established at local level to achieve these objectives and funding was channelled to the sector through the VCOs, to address quality at national and local level.

Department of Education and Skills (DES)

A National Forum for Early Childhood Education was convened in 1998. At the Forum there was consensus among participants that there could be no one standard of excellence that could encapsulate quality across all service provision types, but instead a set of core criteria should be identified towards which services could strive. The consultative process of the National Forum supported and underpinned the DES White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* which was published in 1999. *Ready to Learn* stressed the importance of high quality services for young children, and outlined the need to define, assess and support the more dynamic and intangible aspects of quality not governed by regulations, including adult-child interactions, training and qualifications, parental involvement and the appropriateness of activities for children.

Ready to Learn proposed the introduction of a Quality in Education Mark (QE) for services reaching agreed quality standards. The establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) was proposed by the White Paper to fulfil many of its objectives and recommendations. The Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education (CECDE) was established in October 2002 as a seed agency to the ECEA. A body of work was agreed with the Department for the Centre, including the development of a quality framework for early childhood education.

Over the period 2003 – 2005 the CECDE engaged in a body of research and development work which underpinned the production of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Four specific pieces of research were produced, including a review of all aspects of policy, practice and research in relation to ECCE quality in Ireland; and a research report on the consultation processes that were held by the CECDE with the ECCE sector in 2003. As part of the consultations, approximately four hundred stakeholders (including practitioners, parents, policy-makers, researchers, health professionals and students) were consulted on all aspects of defining, assessing and supporting ECCE quality provision. In September 2003, a CECDE Consultative Committee was inaugurated, consisting of fifty representative stakeholders from the ECCE sector, charged with advising on the work of the CECDE by representing the views of stakeholder groups. Throughout the development of the National Quality Framework over the 2004 – 2005 period, the Consultative Committee provided direct feedback from the sector in terms

of the contents of the Framework, including the wording used therein. After three years of research and development, a prototype of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, *Síolta*, was published by the CECDE in 2006.

Síolta was developed as a dynamic and evolving Framework that would be updated initially as a result of the findings of an initial field test of the process, but in the longer term to reflect the changing nature of the ECCE sector in Ireland.

2.2.4 Policy Developments promoting Quality post the publication of *Síolta*

Since the publication of the *Síolta* Framework, there have been a number of key developments in terms of promoting quality provision within the ECCE sector. These include:

- The *National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010*, published by the Office of the Minister for Children and the Department of Health and Children which aimed to further develop the childcare infrastructure in Ireland via investment in the *National Childcare Investment Programme 2006 – 2010*, a programme of investment in childcare infrastructure;
- The publication of an *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Aistear)*, by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009; and
- The publication of a *Workforce Development Plan* for the ECCE sector by DES in 2010, which sets out a number of objectives aiming to up-skill the existing ECCE workforce and ensure that those who enter the workforce in the future are appropriately prepared for their roles.

2.4 Summary

There has been increased interest in the ECCE sector in Ireland over the last forty years as a result of significant demographic changes including increases in the number of children aged 0 to 6 and increases in the labour force participation rate of women. At the same time emerging research has highlighted the importance of ECCE in terms of realising the potential of children in their later years.

Since the late 1980s and the early 1990s there has been a growing focus on promoting quality within the ECCE sector in Ireland as evidenced through a series of research; practical initiatives; and policy developments. Much of the research and practical initiatives were undertaken by the Voluntary Childcare Organisations, with the support of Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme funding. Since the late 1990s there have been a number of key policy developments that have promoted quality within the ECCE sector in Ireland. Key among these has been the publication of *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, by the CECDE in 2006.

3. Overview of Síolta

3.1 Objectives of Síolta

Síolta was developed as a National Quality Framework (NQF) for the ECCE sector in Ireland.

Essentially Síolta is a developmental tool, the purpose of which is to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of ECCE practice in settings where children aged from birth to six years are present. The overall aim is the incremental improvement of quality of ECCE service provision.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the Síolta Framework quality spiral, which shows the pursuit of quality in ECCE settings as a continuous process, implemented through cycles of assessment, development and action.

Figure 3.1: Síolta Quality Improvement Spiral



Source: Department of Education and Skills

3.2 Elements comprising Síolta

The Síolta Framework comprises Principles, Standards and Components of quality; a range of processes and tools – including a system of assessment; the role of Síolta Coordinator; and the leadership of the Early Years Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills.

These core elements of the Síolta Framework are explained through a series of supporting documentation, which are made available to participants in the Síolta Framework. The key supporting documentation includes:

- The Síolta User Manual appropriate to the setting type
- The Síolta Coordinator Manual
- An Overview of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme
- The Síolta Self –Assessment User Guide and Tool
- The Síolta Portfolio Building Guide
- The Síolta Resource Guide

3.2.1 Principles, Standards and Components

The Principles, Standards and Components outlined in the Síolta Framework are three separate, but interrelated, elements. The 12 Síolta Principles that encapsulate the overall vision of the Framework are set out in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1: Síolta Principles

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

The 16 Síolta Standards cover the individual areas of ECCE practice and translate the vision of quality contained in the Principles into the reality of ECCE service provision and practice. The 16 Standards are set out in Appendix A2.1.

The 75 Components relate directly to the Standards, and in effect break them down into more focused and specific parts. Each Standard has between one and eight Components. For example, the ‘Rights of the Child’ Standard has three Components, as set out in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Síolta ‘Rights of the Child’ Standard and related Components

Rights of the Child		
Ensuring that each child’s rights are met requires that he/she is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in his/her own development and learning		
Component 1.1	Component 1.2	Component 1.3
Each child has opportunities to make choices, is enabled to make decision, and has his/her choices and decisions respected.	Each child has opportunities and is enabled to take the lead, initiate activity, be appropriately independent and is supported to solve problems	Each child is enabled to participate actively in the daily routine, in activities, in conversations and in other appropriate situations, and is considered as a partner by the adult.

The Components within each Standard are further explained by a set of ‘Signposts for Reflection’ and ‘Think-about’s’ which act as prompts of what quality service in relation to the various Components might look like. Where applicable, the Signposts for Reflections are varied to be of relevance to three age ranges, namely birth - 18 months, 12 - 36 months and 2½ - 6 years.

The relationship between the Síolta Standard, Components, Signpost for Reflection and Think-about’s is illustrated in Table 3.3 which sets out, in relation to Standard 1 (Rights of the Child), one of its Components (1.1) and its associated Signposts for Reflection and Think-about’s. As shown in the Table, even within the one Component of one Standard there are a sizeable number of service provision areas for settings to think about.

Table 3.3: Síolta ‘Rights of the Child’ Standard and related Components, Signposts for Reflection and Think-about

Rights of the Child		
Ensuring that each child’s rights are met requires that he/she is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in his/her own development and learning		
Component 1.1		
Each child has opportunities to make choices, is enabled to make decision, and has his/her choices and decisions respected.		
Signposts for Reflection (Birth–18 months) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How do you match your care routines to the child’s own routine and needs? ▪ How does the child’s key worker let other people know about the child’s preferences? 	Signposts for Reflection (12-36 months) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How do you foster each child’s sense of control over her/her daily experiences and activities? 	Signposts for Reflection (2.5–6 years) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As per 12 – 36 months
Think-about (Birth–18 months) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identifying/recording/reviewing child’s preferences ▪ Child’s preferences regarding security objects, naps times, things to look at, things which hold his/her attention etc. ▪ Appropriate choices a child can make as she/he gets older, around food, play etc. 	Think-about (12-36 months) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Opportunities for the child to have choices and make decisions ▪ Challenges for the adult/setting in respecting the child’s choices and decisions ▪ Achieving a balance between child-chosen (directed) and adult-chosen (directed) activity ▪ Ensuring that the level of choice is appropriate to the child ▪ Opportunities for the child to plan activities ▪ Enabling children with language and communication difficulties to share their plans ▪ Challenges for the adult in enabling the child with special needs ▪ Opportunities for the child to review her/her plans and activities ▪ Catering for the child’s interests 	Think-about (2.5–6 years) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As per 12 – 36 months

It was intended that settings engaging with Síolta would reflect on the ‘Signposts for Reflection’ and ‘Think-about’s provided, and personalise them to their own particular setting. In this way, it was intended that settings would use them as guidelines to think about their own practice and identify elements that are positive as well as those in need of attention. It was not intended that the ‘Signposts for Reflection’ and ‘Think-about’s would be looked upon as an exhaustive list of the attributes of quality practice under each Component heading. Rather the reflective approach adopted within Síolta, which requires settings to consider what constitutes quality under each Component heading in their own particular setting, was adopted as part of the Síolta Framework to ensure settings would develop an understanding of the concepts and rationale behind quality provision and practice, an understanding that would be lacking if a more tick-box exhaustive list approach was used.

A number of the 75 Components within Síolta are related. For example, because environments are important in the provision of quality play experiences, Components within the ‘Environment’ Standard are related to Components within the ‘Play’ Standard. These relationships are identified within the Síolta User Manual with the usage of ‘see’ cross-referencing links, where readers are pointed in the direction of Components of relevance to the one they are reading.

The Principles, Standards, Components, Signposts for Reflection, and Think-about’s are set out in the Síolta User Manual. Four Síolta User Manuals are available, as follows:

- Full and Part Time Daycare User Manual;
- Sessional Services User Manual;
- Childminding User Manual; and
- Infant Classes User Manual.

Practitioners implementing Síolta can choose the manual of most relevance to their particular setting to work with.

3.2.2 Síolta Processes

ECCE settings can engage with Síolta on a formal or informal basis. Informal engagement involves providing Síolta resource materials to ECCE practitioners who apply them within their own setting at whatever pace they see fit. A number of ECCE practitioners that have engaged informally with Síolta have attended Síolta information workshops throughout the country.

Formal engagement with Síolta involves an ECCE setting implementing the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), supported by a Síolta Coordinator.

The ‘Overview of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme’ and ‘Síolta Portfolio Building Guide’ supporting documents set out the Síolta guidance with respect to the Síolta processes.

Síolta Quality Assurance Programme

The Síolta QAP comprises a twelve step process which is completed over the course of three stages of engagement, namely:

- Registration;
- Self-Assessment and Quality Improvement; and,
- Validation.

The three stages and twelve steps are summarised in Table 3.4 and explained in more detail below. It was envisaged that the QAP steps would be completed over an 18 month programme cycle period.

Table 3.4: Síolta Quality Assurance Programme

Stage 1: Registration	1. Expression of Interest
	2. Registration
	3. Síolta Implementation Toolkit
	4. Introduction to Síolta Coordinator
	5. Introduction to Síolta QAP (materials and processes)
Stage 2: Self-assessment and Quality Improvement	6. Baseline Assessment
	7. Action Planning
	8. Developing Quality & Portfolio Building
	9. Portfolio Review and Submission
Stage 3: Validation	10. Validation
	11. Recognition
	12. Renewing the Award

Step 1: Expression of Interest

As part of Step 1 settings would submit an Expression of Interest outlining their interest in participating in the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP).

Step 2: Síolta Implementation Toolkit

In response to the completed Expression of Interest, the setting would be provided with the Síolta Implementation Toolkit, which includes:

- An Overview of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme
- The Síolta User Manual appropriate to the setting type
- The Síolta Self –Assessment User Guide and Tool
- The Síolta Portfolio Building Guide
- The Síolta Resource Guide
- A Registration Form

Step 3: Registration Form

Having reviewed the Síolta Implementation Toolkit, settings ready to engage with the QAP would complete and submit their Síolta QAP Registration Form.

Step 4: Mentor Introduction

Having submitted their Síolta QAP Registration, a Síolta Coordinator would make contact with the setting and arrange an introductory meeting. The Coordinator role would involve supporting the setting to work through the QAP, via:

- Mentoring
- Networking
- Assessing
- Supporting

Step 5: Familiarity with Processes

The Síolta Coordinator would at this point take the setting through the range of materials and processes forming the Síolta QAP, and mentor the setting on skills such as reflective practice, evidence-gathering and completing the Síolta Self-assessment Tool.

Step 6: Baseline Assessment

Over a short period of time, the setting, with the support of their Coordinator, would complete a baseline assessment of quality practice within their setting. The baseline assessment would represent a snapshot of current practice within the setting. Completing the baseline assessment would involve completing the Self-assessment Tool in relation to the 75 Síolta Components. The Self-assessment Tool contains four sections, namely:

- Section A – identifying the Standard and Component
- Section B – rating the setting on a scale from 1-4 in relation to the specified Component

- Section C – describing quality and quality practice to support the rating level chosen in Section B
- Section D – listing the evidence and documentation that will be gathered by the setting to support Sections B and C. This evidence will be attached to the submission for validation.

The initial completion of the Self-assessment Tool would involve the setting sitting down as a team, reviewing and reflecting on the level of quality and quality practice relative to each of the 75 Síolta Components. It was to be carried out so that the setting could identify its strengths and weaknesses, and decide on an appropriate programme of quality improvement (action planning in Step 7). It would provide a benchmark against which settings could look back and see progress made.

Step 7: Action Planning

Once the baselines have been completed, the Síolta Coordinator supports the setting in developing action plans. The action plans describe:

- the development work the setting intended to carry out over the subsequent 18-month period;
- the evidence gathering required to support the practice described in the completed Self-assessment Tool;
- a timeline for the collection of evidence; and
- realistic deadlines for all of the above.

If it is found that the deadlines do not fall within an 18-month period, then the setting may at this point decide to opt out of the programme until a further date.

Step 8: Developing Quality and Portfolio Building (this step would potentially take place alongside step 7)

Portfolio Building

When completing the Self-assessment Tool the setting would identify the evidence that would be used to support the level of quality and quality practice identified (Section D). This evidence must be gathered, organised and submitted with the setting's submission for validation. At this stage in the QAP process, the setting gathers this evidence (a Portfolio of Evidence). The evidence may take the form of one folder; individual folders for each Standard, or a box containing evidence referenced in the final self-assessments.

Developing Quality

Development work refers to the lists of actions identified in the action plans in Step 7, which will take place within the setting with the purpose of developing the quality of service provision. Settings would choose one Síolta Standard or Component to work on and gradually work their way through all 16 Standards. The development work would involve identifying goals; naming actions; and listing the resources required to reach the specified goals.

Step 9: Portfolio Review and Submission

Settings having completed Steps 4 to 8 will review and update their Self-Assessment Tool. At this stage the setting will:

- ensure that all 16 Síolta Standards and 75 Components have been completed;
- examine and revise each individual Component within the completed Self-assessment Tool to ensure that all development work has been included and reflects the level of quality in the setting;
- attach all relevant portfolio documentation and evidence to support the submission; and
- submit the quality assurance application.

Step 10: Validation

When the setting submits their completed quality portfolio, an external validator will then be assigned to carry out a validation visit. The validator (not previously known to the setting) will visit the setting on an agreed date to carry out observations which will allow them to compare the information they observe and gather against the information the setting has submitted through the Self-assessment Tool and Portfolio of Evidence. The validation visit will conclude with an open discussion of the validation findings.

Step 11: Recognition

Upon completion of Step 10, a decision will be made on whether or not the setting's self-assessment can be validated as an accurate reflection of its level of quality practice. If the setting disagrees with the validation decision, an appeal system will be available.

Step 12: Renewing the Award

The validation of the self-assessment process and quality portfolio will be valid for a period of up to three years. Once that period expires, the setting will need to re-register with the Síolta QAP for renewal of this validation.

3.2.3 Síolta Tools

Self Assessment Tool

The successful implementation of the Síolta QAP requires assessment decisions to be made by settings regarding their level of quality and quality practice vis-à-vis the Síolta Standards and Components. The Self Assessment Tool is used by settings as part of this assessment-making decision process. It is used initially at the baseline assessment stage (step 6) and again prior to the submission of a quality assurance application (Step 9).

The Self-assessment Tool contains four sections:

- **Section A** – naming the Standard and Component
- **Section B** – rating the setting on a scale from 1-4 for the Component
- **Section C** – describing quality and quality practice to support the rating level chosen
- **Section D** – listing the evidence and documentation that supports Sections B and C. This evidence will be attached to the final submission of the Self Assessment Tool.

As part of Section B a four level rating system is applied, where settings award themselves one of four ratings with respect to the 75 Síolta Components. The four rating levels awardable are as follows:

Level 1: Level 1 is applicable if there is no observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.

Level 2: Level 2 is applicable if there is some observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.

Level 3: Level 3 is applicable if there is significant observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting, but with some issues outstanding.

Level 4: Level 4 is applicable if there is extensive observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of this Component within the setting.

Settings agree on a rating level on the basis of collective discussions within the setting. As part of the Section C the setting describes the practice that corresponds to the chosen rating level, while as part of Section D the setting identifies the evidence and documentation that supports the chosen rating.

The ‘Síolta Self–Assessment User Guide’ supporting document provides settings with guidance in terms of how to use the Self Assessment Tool, together with exemplars of each rating level.

3.2.4 Coordinator Role

The role of the Síolta Coordinator is central to the implementation of the Síolta QAP, as the role involves supporting settings through the 12 QAP steps as well as facilitating the development of key skills within the setting such as reflective practice, completing the self assessment tool and portfolio building.

In relation to Steps 4 – 9 of the QAP, the role of Coordinator, as set out in the supporting documentation, involves:

- Meeting with and getting to know the setting; ensuring that all staff are briefed on what is involved and their role; agreeing to a minimum amount of contact time with the setting; and supporting the setting in becoming familiar with the supporting Síolta documentation;
- Supporting and mentoring setting staff in the development of key skills in the areas of reflective practice, portfolio building, and self-assessment as required;
- Assisting settings to complete baseline assessments, ensuring there is input from all staff, and that completed assessments are an accurate reflection of where the setting stands in relation to the Standards and Components;
- Assisting settings to develop action plans for each Standard, built upon reflection, discussion and consensus, with identified timelines and priority areas for improvement;
- Assisting settings to develop their practice in relation to each Standard through the provision of mentoring support, establishing and facilitating support networks, the formation of cluster groups, and assisting settings source suitable training; and
- Assisting the setting to review and update their self assessment tool prior to submitting their application for validation.

A core element of the Síolta QAP is the quest to develop a culture within the setting where staff take ownership of, and drive quality improvement as a continuous feature of their everyday practice. A key role of the Síolta Coordinator therefore is to mentor, guide and enable staff to achieve autonomy in relation to quality improvement. As such, it was envisaged that the Síolta Coordinator would become progressively redundant as they promoted the skills, knowledge and therefore independence of the staff in the setting.

To be eligible to become a Coordinator, candidates had to meet an established set of criteria as determined by the Early Years Education Policy Unit within the then Department of Education and Science. The criteria included holding

at a minimum a Level 7 qualification in early childhood care and education/cognisant discipline or equivalent. Candidates also had to have at

least three years experience working with pre-school children; excellent interpersonal, communication and presentation skills; excellent organisation and ICT skills; and the ability to work flexibly with diverse settings.

The Síolta Coordinator Manual provides Coordinators with practical guidance on the role of the Síolta Coordinator in the Síolta QAP.

3.3 Role of the Department

The Early Years Education Policy Unit within the Department of Education and Skills has supported the implementation of the field test through:

1. The provision of necessary documentation to participants, including:
 - The Síolta Manuals
 - The Síolta Implementation Toolkit
 - Other support documentation
2. The provision of on-line support (Síolta Website);
3. The provision of induction training for Síolta Coordinators;
4. The provision of Continued Professional Development (CPD) days for Síolta Coordinators;
5. The provision of overall guidance and direction in terms of its implementation;
6. The provision for, and direction of, accreditation.

3.4 Summary

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, was published by the CECDE in 2006. Síolta was designed as a tool that would be used by ECCE settings to help them define, assess and support the development of quality across all aspects of their service provision.

The Síolta Framework comprises 12 Principles, which encapsulate the overall vision of the Quality Framework; 16 Standards which cover the individual areas of ECCE practice such as Play, Interactions, Transitions, Environments and so forth; and 75 Components which set out detailed indicators of aspects of quality in respect of all 16 Standards.

The approach to quality improvement, as set out in the Síolta Framework, involves settings implementing a 12-step quality assurance programme (QAP) with the support of a Síolta Coordinator. As part of the 12 step QAP process settings complete an initial brief assessment (baseline assessment) of their setting with respect to the aspects of quality as set out in the 75 Síolta Components. The Síolta Self Assessment Tool is used by settings as part of the assessment making decision process, and involves the setting awarding themselves one of four ratings with respect to the 75 Síolta Components.

On the basis of the results of the baseline assessments, the settings prepare action plans of areas where quality improvement is required; complete development work (as identified in the action plans); gather a portfolio of evidence; before completing final self assessments, where the rating level awarded is reviewed. Towards the end of the QAP, the setting submits their final self assessments with their portfolio of evidence to be validated by an external validator.

As part of the Síolta Framework guidance documentation is available to both settings and Coordinators, including:

- A Síolta User Manual which sets out the Principles, Standards and Components of quality;
- A Síolta Coordinator Manual;
- An Overview of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme;
- A Síolta Self Assessment User Guide and Tool;
- A Síolta Portfolio Building Guide; and
- A Síolta Resource Guide.

4. Description of Field Test Implementation

4.1 Introduction

The implementation of Síolta, as a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, is an objective of the National Childcare Strategy (NCS) and the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP). As previously outlined in Section 2, a number of the VCOs had their own quality frameworks and accreditation systems in place prior to the publication of Síolta. In moving towards one quality Framework which would be implemented in the different childcare settings, the VCOs, which are funded under the NCIP, were asked in 2009 to identify how some of their existing resources could be deployed to implement the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme from the 1st of January 2010.

In this Section a detailed description of the initial implementation of Síolta is set out. The description includes:

- an overview of the recruitment of Síolta Coordinators within the implementing bodies;
- an overview of the recruitment of settings to participate in the field test;
- a profile of both Coordinators and settings participating in the field test;
- a summary of the approaches adopted to implementing the QAP; and
- an assessment of adherence to the Síolta guidance.

4.2 Recruitment of Síolta Coordinators

Since December 2008, the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills has been responsible for the implementation of Síolta. In 2009 the VCOs were asked to nominate staff meeting minimum experience and qualification criteria to take up the role of Síolta Coordinator. A number of VCOs put forward a list of candidates to the Early Years Education Policy Unit. Having reviewed the candidate profiles against the established criteria, 17 VCO staff members were allocated to the role of Síolta Coordinators in late 2009³.

To a large extent the Síolta Coordinators were already involved in one of more of the following types of activities within their employer organisation:

- The provision of ongoing support to member ECCE settings;
- The provision of training to ECCE settings;

³ At this point both Young Ballymun (in Ballymun) and Programme for Life (in Darndale) had separately recruited a Síolta Coordinator to work on an exclusive basis with settings within their respective areas. The employer bodies in each case were Barnardos and Programme for Life respectively. In each case the recruitment process was overseen by staff within the EYEPU.

- Development work with ECCE settings;
- The implementation of internal Quality Assurance Programmes and/or validation.

As such, the taking-up of the Síolta Coordinator role which involved mentoring and supporting settings in the development of quality practice, was not considered a major shift in terms of their daily work activities.

In November 2009⁴, a four day⁵ induction course was held for the Síolta Coordinators, so that by the end of 2009 there was a central cohort of trained Coordinators ready to recruit settings to the field test. Table 4.1 sets out, by implementing body, the number of staff assigned to the Coordinator role. In addition to the VCO Coordinators, three Síolta Coordinators are operating in three Dublin based Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes, namely: ‘Preparing for Life’, ‘youngballymun’ and the ‘Childhood Development Initiative’ in Tallaght. In the case of Young Ballymun and the Childhood Development Initiative, the Síolta Coordinator position has been funded by Barnardos and the NCNA respectively. Just one Coordinator is working on a full time basis. For the most part, persons implementing the Coordinator role are allocating an agreed proportion of their working week to the role.

Table 4.1: Distribution of Implementing Bodies by Number of Síolta Coordinators

Implementing Body	Total No. of Coordinators
Barnardos	5
Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN)	2
Childminding Ireland	1
Irish Preschool Play Association (IPPA)	4
Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association (ISKA)	1
National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA)	3
PEIP Ballymun*	1
PEIP Darndale**	1
PEIP Tallaght***	1
Total	19

Source: Department of Education and Skills

* The youngballymun Coordinator is employed by Barnardos

** The Preparing for Life Coordinator is employed directly by Preparing for Life /Northside Partnership

*** The Tallaght Coordinator is employed by the NCNA

⁴ Prior to the November 2009 induction course, there had been an earlier 4-day induction course held in March 2009. It had been organised primarily for the PEIP Ballymun Síolta Coordinator, however the VCOs were invited to send observers to the course – as it was envisaged at that stage that they would have a future role in the roll-out of Síolta.

⁵ A follow up fifth day of induction training was provided in February 2010.

4.3 Recruitment of Settings

As originally designed, there were three stages which settings participating in the Síolta QAP would work through (see section 3.2.2). As part of Stage 1, settings would be recruited to the QAP by voluntarily registering their interest in the QAP and, upon receiving the supporting guidance documentation, take the decision to proceed or not with the QAP. Settings deciding to proceed would then be assigned a Síolta Coordinator.

In reality, the recruitment of settings to the field test has occurred differently. Each implementing body has adopted their own approach to recruiting settings, as illustrated in Table 4.2. The approaches varied in terms of:

- Which settings were targeted – while some implementing bodies held public meetings and asked for expressions of interest from any settings interested in formal participation in the QAP (usually with some geographical restrictions), others restricted participation to their own member groups;
- The type of settings recruited – while some implementing bodies recruited community/voluntary settings only, others were open to working with private and community settings;
- The Coordinator:setting ratios implemented - while a number of implementing bodies decided on a fixed number of settings that each Coordinator would mentor, others left it to the Coordinator's discretion to decide how many settings would be supported through the QAP;
- The extent to which an open door policy was implemented – most implementing bodies adopted an approach where settings were recruited at the start of the field test and no further settings were recruited thereafter unless perhaps to replace settings dropping out of the QAP process; however a small number of implementing bodies adopted an open door policy where new settings were brought on board as they expressed interest in participating in the field test.

Table 4.2: Summary of Approaches adopted by Implementing Bodies to Recruitment of Settings

Implementing Body	Ongoing recruitment of settings	Eligible settings	Type of Settings	Fixed Coord:Setting Ratio	Geography Restrictions
Barnardos	No – initially replaced settings dropping out	All services	Community	No	Mixed
Border Counties Childcare Network	No – just to replace settings dropping out	All services	Mix of private and community	No	Yes
Childminding Ireland	Yes	Members	Private	No	No
Irish Preschool Play Association	No – initially replaced settings dropping out	All services	Mix of private and community	Yes (2 full day care and 6 sessional)	Yes
Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association	Yes	Members	Mix private and community and schools	No	No
National Children's Nurseries Association	No	All services	Mix of private and community	Yes (8, advised to get balance of setting types)	Yes
PEIP Ballymun	Yes	All services	Community	No	Yes
PEIP Darndale	Yes	All services	Community & Early starts	No	Yes
PEIP Tallaght	No	All services	Community	Yes	Yes

The recruitment of settings was thus somewhat staggered as each implementing body operated their own approach to recruiting settings. Notwithstanding the variety of approaches adopted, with the exception of those implementing a continuous open door policy, the recruitment of settings had broadly occurred by April 2010.

Table 4.3 sets out the number of settings participating in the field test, by each implementing body, at July 2011, which totalled 134. Table 4.4 sets out a distribution of the settings by the length of time they have been participating in the QAP. As set out in Table 4.4, 89 per cent of settings had been participating in the field test for 13 months or more at July 2011.

Table 4.3: Distribution of Settings by Implementing Body

Implementing Body	Total No. of Settings	% Settings
Barnardos	29	21.6
Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN)	8	6.0
Childminding Ireland	12	9.0
Irish Preschool Play Association (IPPA)	30	22.4
Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association (ISKA)	3	2.2
National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA)	23	17.2
PEIP Ballymun*	7	5.2
PEIP Darndale**	10	7.5
PEIP Tallaght***	12	9.0
Total	134	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants analysis of Departmental data

Table 4.4: Distribution of Settings by Length of Time participating in QAP

Number of Months	% of Settings
Less than 6	0.9
7 – 12	10.3
13 – 18	75.2
19 – 24	13.7
Greater than 24	0.0
Total	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants analysis of Departmental data

Since the commencement of the field test the Department has required the implementing bodies, with the exception of the PEIPs, to implement a tracking process. As part of the tracking process, each Coordinator provides the Department on a quarterly basis with qualitative and quantitative information, including:

- The ECCE settings they are supporting;
- The setting’s level of engagement with Síolta and their progress through the Síolta QAP;
- The types and levels of supports being provided to the settings; and
- Any resources that have been developed to support the settings

4.4 Profile of Coordinators

In this Section, a profile of Coordinators participating in the field test is presented, in terms of their start date; the nature of their employment contracts; and the proportion of their working week taken up by their Coordinator work.

Over half (55.6 per cent) of the Síolta Coordinators have been working as Coordinators since 2009 or before. One-third of Coordinators took up the position in 2010.

Table 4.5: Distribution of Coordinators by Date Commenced Employment as a Síolta Coordinator

Start Date	No Coordinators	% Coordinators
2009 (first half)	2	11.1
2009 (second half)	8	44.5
2010 (first half)	5	27.8
2010 (second half)	1	5.6
2011	1	5.6
Not stated	1	5.6
Total	18	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Coordinators

All Coordinators, with the exception of one, are working in a part-time capacity as a Síolta Coordinator. For the most part Síolta Coordinators are splitting their working week between their Coordinator role and other positions within their employer organisations.

There is significant variation among part-time Coordinators in terms of the proportion of their working week being taken up by their Coordinator work, ranging from 18 to 95 per cent (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6: Distribution of Coordinators by Proportion of Working Week taken up by Coordinator Role

Proportion of Working Week	No Coordinators	% Coordinators
17.5	1	5.6
30.0	3	16.7
33.0	2	11.1
40.0	1	5.6
45.0	1	5.6
50.0	6	33.3
70.0	1	5.6
75.0	1	5.6
95.0	1	5.6
100.0	1	5.6
Total	17	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Coordinators

4.5 Profile of Settings

In total, 134 settings were participating in the field test in July 2011. Owing to the ongoing recruitment of new settings and the decision by some settings not to continue their participation in the field test, this number has fluctuated throughout the field test.

Table 4.7 presents an overview of the size profile of settings participating in the field test in terms of the number of staff they employ in the direct provision of care and education to children. As outlined in the Table, approximately one in five settings employ between 1 and 5 staff. One third of the settings employ between 11 and 20 staff while approximately thirty per cent of settings employ more than 20 staff in a similar capacity. On the basis of the data provided in the setting survey, it was found that 44 per cent of staff work up to four hours daily, with the remaining 56 per cent working in excess of four hours daily.

Table 4.7: Distribution of Settings by Number of ECCE Staff Employed

No Staff	% Settings
1-5	21.8
6-10	16.3
11-20	32.5
21-50	26.9
50+	2.5
Total	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Settings

Sixty per cent of the settings participating in the field test are community/voluntary based organisations. Thirty per cent are private businesses, and the remainder are represented by school-based settings.

Table 4.8: Distribution of Settings by Type of Organisation

Type Organisation	% Settings
Community/Voluntary based organisation	60.5
Private business	30.6
School	5.6
Other*	3.4
Total	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Settings

* The other types of organisations refers to a VEC service and a community-based school

The majority (60 per cent) of settings are active in the provision of pre-school services. Thirty-seven per cent of settings are providing full-time daycare services, while thirty-three per cent of settings are providing an afterschool care service. Half of the settings participating in the field test are providing more than one type of ECCE service (see Table 4.10). One in four of the settings are offering four or more types of services to children attending their service.

Table 4.9: Distribution of Settings by Type of ECCE Services Provided

Service Type	% Settings
Pre-school	60.2
Full-time daycare	37.2
Afterschool care	33.1
Playgroup	29.5
Part-time daycare	28.8
Childminding in your home	4.5
Infant classes in primary school	4.4
Childminding in child's home	1.5
Breakfast club	1.2
Drop in childcare	1.1

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Settings

Table 4.10: Distribution of Settings by Number of ECCE Services Provided

Number of Services	% Settings
1	50.0
2	22.2
3	7.8
4	16.3
5	3.7
Total	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Settings

Since the commencement of the field test, some settings have decided to cease their participation in Síolta. At July 2011 there were in total 28 settings that had commenced, but were no longer pursuing Síolta, representing a drop-out rate of approximately 17 per cent. (See Section 5.5 for details of the reasons provided for settings deciding not to progress with the process).

4.6 Approaches to Implementing Síolta

This Section is concerned with providing an overview of the manner in which the Síolta QAP has been implemented by Síolta Coordinators in the settings participating in the field test. Owing to the fact that there has been a variety of approaches adopted, presented below is an overview of the key dimensions across which approaches have varied.

4.6.1 Level of Coordinator Resources Made Available

The level of resources made available to implement the Síolta Coordinator role has affected how Síolta has been implemented across settings participating in the field test.

The time each Coordinator has had available to support settings has been determined by a number of factors including the number of settings they are mentoring and the number of hours they allocate weekly to Coordinator work. In some instances, the geographical spread of settings has also impacted on the amount of time each Coordinator has had available to support their settings.

Table 4.11 sets out the distribution of Coordinator setting ratios. As outlined in the Table, there is significant variation in the number of settings being mentored by each Coordinator. There are instances of Coordinators mentoring two settings and instances of Coordinators mentoring ten or more settings.

Table 4.11: Distribution of Coordinators by Number of Settings currently Mentoring through QAP

No Settings	No Coordinators	% Coordinators
2	2	11.1
3	1	5.6
4	1	5.6
5	1	5.6
6	1	5.6
7	7	38.9
8	2	11.1
10	1	5.6
12	2	11.1
Total	18	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Coordinators

In addition to varying Coordinator-setting ratios, the nature of Coordinator employment contracts and more specifically the proportion of working weeks allocated to Coordinator work has impacted on the implementation of Síolta.

While the vast majority (94 per cent) of Coordinators are working in a part-time capacity, some have contracts that allocate 18 per cent of their working week to Síolta duties, while other Coordinators allocate 95 per cent of their working week to their Síolta Coordinating duties (see Table 4.6).

In addition, some Coordinators are working in localised areas, where the settings they are supporting are located in close proximity to one another. However, there is also an instance of one Coordinator supporting settings located in areas spanning from Waterford in the South East to Donegal in the North West. In a large number of cases, Coordinators are supporting settings located within either a single county or small number of counties.

4.6.2 Type of Interaction with Settings

Coordinators have adopted different approaches to working with their settings, in terms of the level, type and intensity of support they provide. A taxonomy of Coordinator support models is provided below:

Directional hand-holding approach: Some Coordinators have implemented a directional ‘hand-holding’ approach with settings. In this instance the Coordinator provides detailed instructions to the setting on the tasks they need to complete, for example a detailed list of the types of evidence they need to gather under each Síolta Standard, and at times works with the setting in completing the task. In this scenario, the setting is reliant on the Síolta Coordinator for detailed instructions when completing elements of the Síolta QAP steps. This approach is at variance with the approach specified in the QAP guidance in so far as settings are not being equipped with the skills necessary to work independently through the QAP (see Section 3.2.2)

Semi-directional intensive support approach: Some Coordinators have implemented an approach where they provide intensive one-to-one support and guidance to their setting staff on the various steps in the QAP. As part of this approach, the Coordinator provides one-to-one consultations with staff on the contents of each Standard and Component. The Coordinator also provides one-to-one consultations with setting staff on how to complete each step of the QAP process, including how engage in reflective practice, complete baseline assessments, action plans, gather evidence and so forth. The setting staff is left to prepare its baselines, action plans, gather evidence and is provided with detailed one-to-one feedback from their Coordinator each step of the way. In some instances, the Coordinator takes on the active role in assisting the setting, for example they may assist the setting type and/or collate the work prepared by the setting. In this scenario, the setting is initially very reliant on the Síolta Coordinator for instructions and detailed feedback on work completed, but as the setting progresses through the QAP they are likely to develop skills that will enable them to work increasingly independent of their Síolta Coordinator. This approach is more compliant with the approach specified in the QAP guidance documentation. However, the level of Coordinator support provided may exceed that originally envisaged in the guidance.

Semi-directional semi-supportive approach: A third model of support (the most common) relates to Coordinators that give guidance to settings on each aspect of the QAP. The guidance is delivered in (cluster) group sessions, where groups of settings are present, often on a monthly basis. The cluster groups may take the format of information dissemination on behalf of the Coordinator, or may be more interactive in nature where settings play an active role in learning from each other. As part of the group sessions, the Coordinator gives the settings tasks to complete, such as preparing descriptions of their settings in relation to a Standard (which will form part of their baseline assessments). The settings prepare the descriptions in their own time at their own pace. The Coordinator then visits the setting (usually at one monthly intervals) to provide feedback with respect to the work they have completed. This approach, which is also more compliant with the Síolta guidance, results in settings that are less reliant on their Síolta Coordinator, but the settings generally work through the QAP steps at a slower pace, owing to the lower levels of one-to-one Coordinator support available.

4.6.3 Adherence to Síolta Guidance

Quality Assurance Programme Steps

Coordinators have adopted varying approaches to completing the Síolta QAP steps 6-9 with their settings. A small number of Coordinators have adhered fully to steps 6-9 as laid out in the Síolta Toolkits (see Section 3.2.2). As such, they have supported their settings to complete baseline assessments for each Component within each Standard; followed by action plans, quality development work and evidence-gathering, before finally completing final self-assessments for each Standard.

Other Coordinators have completed the Síolta QAP steps 6 – 8 (encompassing baseline assessments, action plans, portfolio building & development work, followed by final self assessments) for a particular Standard, before moving on to complete the same steps for the next Standard.

In some cases the QAP steps have been adjusted in the following manner:

- some Coordinators have considered that the initial emphasis placed on the baseline assessments to be too abrupt, and have focused instead on developing the understanding of quality among settings by engaging the settings in activities that help them understand quality provision while also giving the settings an opportunity to record evidence;
- some Coordinators have considered that some of their settings have not needed the structure inherent in QAP steps, and have skipped the baseline assessment step and moved directly to identifying gaps, and doing development work, with a view to completing the final self assessments using the self-assessment tool for the first time at the end of the process.

Timelines

It was envisaged that settings participating in the QAP process would complete their baseline assessments in a short space of time, with the support of their Síolta Coordinator. In all cases, settings that have completed baseline assessments have spent a significant amount of time completing them relative to that envisaged in the guidance. This has been the result of the widespread interpretation of baseline assessments as having to contain detailed descriptions of all aspects of service provision under each Standard and Component heading. As such, the task of describing the service at this intricate level of detail (75 Component areas) has taken significantly longer than was envisaged in the Síolta guidance. In some cases settings have completed their baseline assessments within an 8/9 month timeframe, in other cases Coordinators are still working with settings to complete baselines, 18 months after they commenced them. The varying amount of time allocated to the completion of baseline assessments is explored further in Section 6.3.

Implementation of Self Assessment Tool

The approaches taken to implementing the Síolta Self Assessment Tool with setting staff has varied across the settings participating in the field test. In some cases:

- the setting manager has completed the rating exercise in isolation from other members of staff in the setting;
- the setting manager has completed the rating exercise with the support of their Síolta Coordinator, where discussions were held between the two to determine the appropriate ratings to allocate to the setting under each Component heading;
- setting staff played an active role in determining a rating for the setting - in this scenario staff were given responsibility for particular Components and implemented the Self Assessment Tool with the support of their Coordinator for the particular Component(s);
- the setting manager completed the ratings, distributed them to setting staff for comment and adjusted them based on any feedback received;
- the rating exercise has still not been completed, rather the setting has focused on completing the description element of the baselines assessments and evidence gathering.

Involvement of Setting Staff in QAP Process

The manner in which the Síolta QAP has been implemented has varied across settings according to a number of factors, including:

- The driving force behind the implementation of Síolta in the setting;
and

- The extent to which all setting staff were involved in the implementation of Síolta.

In some instances the setting manager has been the main driving force behind the implementation of the Síolta QAP. This has been the case more often in settings where there is a full-time administration managerial role, where the manager has had more time to take on a larger share of the paper work element of the Síolta QAP. In other instances, the setting manager is the driving force in the process, but the work involved has been allocated between all setting staff. In other instances, the manager has taken a back seat approach to the implementation of Síolta; rather it is setting staff (often those in managerial positions within the setting rooms) that have been given responsibility for implementing the Síolta QAP in their respective rooms.

4.7 Summary

A field test implementation of Síolta commenced in 2009, when voluntary childcare organisations in receipt of NCIP funding, were asked to deploy some of their existing staff resources to take up the role of Síolta Coordinator. In November 2009, a four day induction course was held for Síolta Coordinators, so that by the end of 2009 the trained Coordinators were ready to recruit settings to field test the implementation of Síolta.

For the most part Síolta Coordinators are operating in a part-time capacity by allocating a fixed proportion of their working week to their Coordinator duties as agreed with their employer organisation. The proportion of working weeks allocated to Coordinator work varies significantly and ranges from 18 per cent to 95 per cent.

Each implementing body adopted their own approach to the recruitment of settings to the field test. Approaches varied according to a number of criteria including: the Coordinator-setting ratio implemented; the types of settings recruited (community or private); and the extent to which an open door policy to recruitment was implemented. By June 2010, the majority of settings participating in the field test had been recruited.

In total, 134 settings were participating in field test in July 2011. Owing to the ongoing recruitment of new settings and the decision by some settings not to continue their participation in the field test, this number has fluctuated throughout the field test.

Sixty per cent of settings participating in the field test are community/voluntary, while 30 per cent are private settings. Using staff numbers as a proxy for size, approximately one in five settings are small in scale employing between 1 and 5 staff. One third of the settings employ between 11 and 20 staff, while approximately 30 per cent of settings employ more than 20 staff.

Coordinators have adopted different approaches to the implementation of the QAP with settings, ranging from very directional hands-holding approaches

(where settings are reliant on their Coordinator for detailed instructions when completing the QAP) to more semi-directional semi-supportive approaches (where settings rely on their Coordinator for clarification around aspects of Síolta and the QAP, but work independently through the QAP steps). Coordinators have also varied in terms of the extent to which their approaches have adhered to the Síolta guidance.

Over the course of the field test the key divergences from the Síolta guidance identified include:

- The provision of a type of ‘hand-holding’ mentoring support by some Coordinators that has not been conducive to the development of autonomy in settings, in terms of their participation in the QAP;
- The amount of time spent completing baseline assessments;
- The interpretation of baseline assessments as having to contain detailed descriptions of all aspects of service provision in settings;
- The omission of the baseline assessment step;
- The completion of the entire 12-step QAP process for an individual Standard at a time;
- The non-involvement of setting staff in the SAT rating process;
- The non-involvement of setting staff in the QAP process.

5. Progress in Implementation

5.1 Introduction

This Section takes a look at the progress that has been made by settings participating in the field test, in terms of where they currently stand in the QAP process; the degree to which participation in the field test has led to the achievement of greater levels of quality practice within the settings; as well as a summary of the key enabling and impeding factors reported in terms of the implementation of the QAP to date by settings.

5.2 Stage of the QAP Process

As part of the Coordinator survey, Coordinators were asked to specify where their settings stood in relation to the Síolta QAP. This information was provided by the Coordinators in relation to 104 settings. According to the data provided, one in ten (11 per cent) settings are completing baseline assessments, and have yet to commence development work. Thirty-eight per cent of settings are completing their baseline assessments and have commenced development work. Forty-five per cent of settings have completed their baseline assessments in full and have commenced development work. Just two per cent of settings have submitted a portfolio for validation.

Table 5.1: Distribution of Settings by Stage in the QAP Process

	% settings
Completing BA (no development work commenced)	10.6
Completing BA and have commenced development work	37.5
Completed BA (no development work commenced)	4.8
Completed BA and have commenced development work	45.2
Validation Stage	1.9
Total	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Coordinators

Among the settings participating in the field test, approximately 70 per cent are implementing the Full QAP (i.e. all 16 Síolta Standards). 30 per cent of settings are implementing some, but not all, of the 16 Síolta Standards.

Table 5.2: Distribution of Setting by Completion Full or Partial Síolta QAP

Level	% Settings
Full (all 16 Standards)	69.4
Partial (some, but not all 16 Standards)	30.6
Total	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

5.3 Results of Baseline Assessments

Table 5.3 sets out the proportion of settings that have completed baseline assessments of each individual Síolta Standard. It should be noted that in supporting the completion of baseline assessments by settings, some Coordinators asked for setting feedback in terms of which Standards they would complete first. Other Coordinators decided themselves on the order in which Standards were completed, grouping Standards that are strongly related.

As outlined in the Table 5.3, the largest proportion of settings have completed baseline assessments of the ‘Environments’ Standard (87 per cent), followed by the ‘Rights of the Child’ (79 per cent) and the ‘Parents and Families’ (79 per cent) Standards. The Standards for which baseline assessments have been completed by the least number of settings include the ‘Planning’ (49 per cent) and the ‘Evaluation and Organisation’ (49 per cent) Standards.

Table 5.3: Proportion of Settings completing Baseline Assessments of each Standard⁶

Standards	% Settings
Rights of the Child	78.7
Environments	86.9
Parents and Families	78.7
Consultation	65.6
Interactions	72.1
Play	78.7
Curriculum	68.9
Planning and Evaluation	49.2
Health and Welfare	60.7
Organisation	49.2
Professional Practice	54.1
Communication	55.7
Transitions	57.4
Identify and Belonging	67.2
Legislation and Regulation	55.7
Community Involvement	52.5

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

A summary of the results of the rating exercise, completed as part of the baseline assessments, for all settings, is set out in Table 5.4. Across all settings, a total of 2,814 Components were rated, using the Self Assessment Tool. As outlined in Table 5.4, on average 4 per cent of the total ratings completed were at Level 1 rating, 18 per cent were rated at Level 2, and the largest proportion (56 per cent) were rated at Level 3. Just over one in five (22 per cent) of all the Components rated were awarded a Level 4 rating.

⁶ 61 settings provided details of the results of their completed baseline assessments

Table 5.4: Summary of Rating Levels Awarded across all completed Baseline Assessments

Rating Levels	% of all Baseline Assessments
1	4.4
2	18.3
3	55.7
4	21.6

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants analysis of Setting Survey

Table 5.5 sets out the average rating awarded across each Standard. These ratings were determined by averaging the ratings awarded by each setting across the Components in each Standard, and then averaging the results across all settings. From Table 5.5, it is evident that there is a high level of clustering around Level 3 in terms of the ratings awarded by each setting.

It is notable however, that the average rating levels awarded to Standard 4 (Consultations) and Standard 8 (Planning and Evaluation) are lower relative to other Standards. These results are credible as consultations and planning and evaluation are areas that would not traditionally have been high on the list of priorities in ECCE settings.

Table 5.5: Average Rating awarded to 16 Standards as part of Baseline Assessments

Standard	Average Rating
1	2.9
2	3.0
3	2.9
4	2.7
5	3.1
6	3.1
7	2.9
8	2.5
9	3.0
10	2.9
11	3.0
12	3.0
13	2.9
14	2.9
15	3.1
16	2.9

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants analysis of Setting Survey

Appendix A1.1 sets out the average proportion of ratings awarded at each level (across all settings) for each of the 75 Síolta Components.

Tables 5.6 and 5.7 set out the lowest and highest performing Components respectively. The lowest performing Components were determined by combining level 1 and 2 ratings for each of the 75 Components and then ranking them accordingly. The highest performing Components were determined in a similar fashion by combining the level 3 and 4 ratings for each Component before ranking.

As outlined in the Table 5.6, the largest proportions of settings have rated themselves low (at level 1 or 2) in relation to ‘Planning and Evaluation’ Components, followed by ‘Consultation’ Components. Thereafter, settings have rated themselves low in terms of Component 13.4, which relates to the maintaining of policies and procedures around ‘Transitions’.

The highest performing Components relate to ‘Interactions’ (among children themselves as well as among children and adults), and ‘Play’ (having appropriate equipment and dedicating appropriate time to play) as illustrated in Table 5.7. Thereafter, settings have rated themselves highest in relation to the management of financial resources (Component 10.3) within the setting and promoting healthy eating habits (Component 9.4) among children.

Table 5.6: Lowest Performing Components in completed Baseline Assessments

Standard	Component	1 and 2 %
Planning and Evaluation	8.1 Each Standard area of practice is reviewed regularly through appropriate and tailored processes of observation, planning, action and evaluation	42.8
Planning and Evaluation	8.2 The setting has established and documented review structures	42.8
Planning and Evaluation	8.3 There is a mechanism in place to ensure that review processes lead to changes in practice	42.8
Planning and Evaluation	8.4 The outcomes of review structures and processes are recorded, stored and shared, as appropriate	42.8
Consultation	4.2 The setting acts upon contributions to decision-making processes and strategies for the development and delivery of the service from a wide range of interested stakeholders, as appropriate	37.8
Consultation	4.1 The setting actively invites contributions to decision-making processes and strategies for the development and delivery of the service from a wide range of interested stakeholders	36.8
Transitions	13.4 The setting has written records of all policies, procedures and actions regarding transitions within the setting, and makes them available to all stakeholders	34.4
Parents and Families	3.3 Staff are responsive and sensitive in the provision of information and support to parents in their key role in the learning and development of the child	31.1
Community Involvement	16.1 The setting has gathered and made available a comprehensive range of information on resources at local, regional and national levels.	31.0
Professional Practice	11.3 The supports and promotes regular opportunity for practitioners to reflect upon and review their practice and contribute positively to the development of quality practice in the setting.	29.1

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants analysis of Setting Survey

Table 5.7: Top Performing Standards and Components in Baseline Assessments

Standard	Component	3 and 4 %
Interactions	5.1 Each child is enabled to interact with her/his peers and wit children of different ages in pairs, small groups and, to a lesser degree, in large groups.	90.5
Interactions	5.5 Interactions between the adults within, and associated with the setting, act as a model of respect, support, and partnership for the child.	90
Play	6.4 Each learning areas and each activity in the setting has plenty of equipment and materials for the child.	89.4
Play	6.1 The child spends a significant amount of time in the setting at play/exploration, and these and other playful activities are central to the daily routine.	87.3
Play	6.6 The child has opportunities for play/exploration with other children, with participating and supportive adults and on her/his own, as appropriate.	86.7
Health and Welfare	9.4 The setting is proactive in supporting the development of healthy eating habits in children whilst supporting their enjoyment and appreciation of eating as a positive social experience	85.7
Organisation	10.3 The management of financial resources within the setting is efficient, effective and ensures the sustainability of the service.	85.7
Interactions	5.2 Each child receives appropriate support to enable her/him to interact positively with other children	85.4
Interactions	5.3 The adult uses all aspects of the daily routine (both formal and informal) to interact sensitively and respectfully with the child`	85.4
Health and Welfare	9.7 The setting ensures that all adults and children are prepared for emergency situations	85.3

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants analysis of Setting Survey

5.4 Outcomes of Síolta QAP

As outlined in Section 3.1, through participation in the Síolta QAP it was envisaged that settings would develop the level of quality of their ECCE service. It was also envisaged that settings would develop skills in a number of key areas, including reflective practice, self-assessment and evidence gathering, with a view to achieving autonomy in relation to the quality improvement process.

Improvement in ECCE Quality Provision

When questioned about the extent to which participation in the Síolta QAP has contributed to the improvement of quality within their setting, 27 per cent of settings strongly agreed that this has been the case. Fifty five per cent of settings stated they agree with the assertion, while 18 per cent of settings were neutral or disagreed with this assertion. Larger settings, with more than ten staff, were also more likely to be of the view that Síolta has contributed to the improvement of quality in their setting (See Table 5.9).

Table 5.8: Distribution of Settings by their Agreement with Statement that Participation in Síolta has contributed to the Improvement of Quality in their Setting

Level of Agreement	% settings
Strongly agree	26.7
Agree	55.0
Neither agree nor disagree	15.6
Disagree	2.7
Total	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

Table 5.9: Size of Settings by their Agreement with Statement that Participation in Síolta has contributed to the Improvement of Quality in their Setting

No staff in setting	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree %	Total %
<=5	28.2	51.3	15.4	5.1	100.0
6-10	22.2	55.6	22.2	0.0	100.0
>10	27.3	68.2	4.5	0.0	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

Settings in receipt of higher levels of face-to-face support from their Coordinator were also more likely to be of the view that Síolta has contributed to the improvement of quality in their setting.

Table 5.10: Amount of Coordinator Support received by Setting's Agreement with Statement that Participation in Síolta has contributed to the Improvement of Quality in their Setting

Coordinator Support	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Total %
Up to 5 hrs	22.4	61.2	16.3	100.0
6 - 10 hrs	36.4	45.5	18.2	100.0
>10 hrs	37.5	62.5	0.0	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

Community and voluntary settings were more likely to be of the view that their participation in Síolta has contributed to the improvement of quality within their ECCE setting. Thirty per cent of private businesses and forty per cent of school settings are neutral or disagree with the assertion that participation in Síolta has contributed to the improvement of quality in their school. The corresponding proportion of community/voluntary settings is 12 per cent.

Table 5.11: Type of ECCE Setting by Setting's Agreement with Statement that Participation in Síolta has contributed to the Improvement of Quality in their Setting

Type of ECCE Setting	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree %	Total %
Community/Voluntary based organisation	22.0	66.0	10.0	2.0	100.0
Private business	30.4	39.1	26.1	4.3	100.0
School	20.0	40.0	40.0	0.0	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

Evidence gathered over the course of the case studies suggest that there have been varying experiences among settings in terms of the extent to which participation in the Síolta QAP has contributed to the improvement of quality practice within settings. As part of the case studies many settings reported having implemented some changes to aspects of their service provision, and attributed them to their participation in Síolta. These changes include: rearranging room plans; involving children more in the planning of activities; creating detailed job descriptions for staff members; creating like/dislike forms

for children; posting information of relevance to parents in readily available locations within setting; forming relationships with primary schools; and forming stronger relationships with the local community generally. One case study setting reported having implemented improvements to their practice but was unsure if the changes could be attributable to their participation in Síolta QAP. Some of the study settings were still at the baseline assessment stage, and hence had not reached the point where development work had taken place.

As part of the case studies the view was confirmed that settings in receipt of more intensive Coordinator support are generally further progressed in the Síolta QAP process and hence more likely to have reached the point where more quality development work has taken place.

All settings reported being very reliant on their Coordinator's support, in terms of progressing through the QAP. The anticipation that Coordinators would become increasingly redundant as settings become increasingly proficient in the areas of reflective practice, self-assessment, evidence gathering and portfolio building, has not materialised.

As part of the Coordinator survey, the Coordinators were asked to identify the extent to which they agreed with the assertion that: "The Pilot implementation of the Síolta QAP to date has contributed to the improvement of quality across participating ECCE settings". The assertion engendered a high level of support among the Coordinators. Ninety-four per cent of Coordinators agreed with the statement, the remaining six per cent were neutral. In the comments provided by Coordinators to this question, some Coordinators stated they can see clear improvement in the level of quality service provided by the settings they are mentoring. A large number of Coordinators stated that their settings are beginning to recognise what quality means and reflect on the level of quality service they are providing. Accordingly, the implementation of quality improvements is the next step for these settings. Some Coordinators stated that quality improvement has occurred at different levels in different settings.

Development of Key Skills

When questioned as to the extent to which they felt they have developed skills in the key areas of reflection, self-assessment and evidence gathering, the views of settings were as set out in Table 5.12. Higher proportions of settings reported having developed skills in the areas of reflection and self-assessment relative to evidence gathering. This is conceivable considering some settings have not moved past the baseline assessment and action planning steps.

Table 5.12: Distribution of Settings by Extent to which have Developed Key Skills

Level of Development	Reflection	Self Assessment	Evidence Gathering
Well developed	46.4	30.7	22.8
Adequately developed	37.1	45.7	33.3
Partially developed	11.3	18.3	27.5
Minimal development	2.6	3.8	12.7
Unsatisfactory development	-	-	2.3

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

Table 5.13 sets out the extent to which settings have developed key skills distinguishing settings by their size. As illustrated in the Table, larger settings (with more than ten staff) are more likely to have developed reflection and self assessment skills relative to their smaller setting counterparts. However, the converse was found with respect to evidence gathering skills, where smaller settings, with ten or fewer staff, were more likely to have developed skills in this area.

Table 5.13: Distribution of Settings by Size and by Extent to which have Developed Key Skills

	Reflection		Self Assessment		Evidence Gathering	
	<= 10 staff	>10 Staff	<= 10 staff	>10 staff	<= 10 staff	>10 staff
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Well developed	42.4	59.1	26.7	40.9	24.6	22.7
Adequately developed	42.4	31.8	53.3	31.8	36.1	27.3
Partially developed	11.9	9.1	16.7	22.7	27.9	27.3
Minimal development	3.4	0.0	3.3	4.5	9.8	18.2
Unsatisfactory development	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.6	4.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

5.5 Factors affecting Progress

Over the course of the evaluation, the Síolta Coordinators and settings were provided with the opportunity to provide feedback in terms of the key factors that have both enabled and impeded the field test implementation of the Síolta QAP.

Impeding Factors

As part of the setting survey, settings were provided with a list of potential impeding barriers, and also given the opportunity to identify ‘other’ factors, as appropriate. In the responses provided, the lack of time available to dedicate to implementing Síolta was overwhelmingly identified as the main barrier impeding setting’s progression through the QAP. Ninety-eight per cent of respondent settings identified the lack of time as a barrier. The importance of the time issue was confirmed through the case study visits, where setting staff made repeated references to the difficulties they face finding staff time to contend with the reflection and paper work element of the Síolta QAP.

Issues with staff/skill shortages and understanding the contents of the Síolta manuals were each also identified as barriers by one in four settings. The issue with respect to staff/skill shortages relates to the difficulties encountered freeing up staff time to dedicate to Síolta, as well as the difficulties encountered by Full Day Care services in particular finding time to bring all setting staff together to work through the QAP. The issue with the contents of the Síolta manuals is two-fold. Setting staff reported problems interpreting some of the language used in the manuals. At the same time, they have had issues with the open-ended nature of the Síolta Standards and Components. Previous experience of other quality assurance programmes has meant settings are accustomed to more tick-box like approaches to quality development. The ‘reflection’ piece implicit in Síolta was missing from these quality assurance programmes. Settings that are experiencing difficulties deciphering the language used in the Síolta manuals are doubly frustrated by its open-ended nature.

Lack of buy-in from staff was identified as a barrier by 17 per cent of settings. Of relevance here is perhaps the issue of Community Employment (CE) personnel who, because of the often transitory nature of these employment contracts, may not be as committed to the process as more permanent staff members.

Seventeen per cent of settings also referred to the ‘costs’ involved in participating in Síolta as a barrier. Costs include the cost of attending workshops/cluster group meetings, which for some settings in rural areas are significant (one setting reported travelling 70 km twice monthly), as well as photocopying and printing costs.

In addition to the above, a lack of descriptive/report writing and computer skills has resulted in increased workloads for some staff implementing the QAP.

The Coordinators, for their part, were almost unanimous in referring to the amount of time settings have had to commit to implementing Síolta as the main impeding factor for settings. Other contributory factors cited by Coordinators include the scale of detail included in Síolta; the fact it has been a field test and thus new to all involved; and the language used in supporting documentation which has had to be mediated in some instances. Other factors cited by Coordinators include:

- The scale of the amount of paperwork;
- Staff changes;
- Lack of staff non-contact time/daily workload demands;
- Staff under-going own training – not having time;
- Lack of ability by staff to transfer theoretical framework and 'see' it in practice;
- Reliance on Community Employment staff;
- Funding/sustainability issues;
- Lack of reflective/articulation skills;
- Too few contact hours with Coordinator;
- Lack of funding for training; and
- Lack of writing skills.

In total, 28 settings, or 17 per cent of settings, commenced but later stopped pursuing their participation in the QAP process. When asked to provide details in relation to why some settings stopped their participation on the process, one of the most common reasons identified related to settings not moving past the initial stages of Síolta as well as settings not having enough time to dedicate to the process. Other reasons identified related to staff difficulties/changeovers and setting personnel circumstances changing.

Enabling Factors

In addition to identifying impeding factors, the settings and Síolta Coordinators also identified factors that have facilitated progression through the QAP.

From the settings perspective, 50 per cent of settings referred to the information seminars (i.e. cluster group sessions and workshops) convened by their Coordinator as useful. Forty-one per cent of settings identified the networking opportunities (afforded by the cluster groups/seminars/workshops) as a useful support. Thirty-one per cent of settings identified the practical materials and resources as a support to them. In addition, one in four settings referred to the assistance provided by their Coordinator as an important source of support.

Table 5.14: Distribution of Settings by the Factors Identified as Supporting the Implementing of Síolta

Supports	% Settings
Information Seminars	51.3
Networking	40.9
Access to practical materials and resources	30.8
<i>Other</i>	
Coordinator support	26.5

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Settings

From the Coordinators' perspective, when asked to identify why some settings were progressing through the QAP faster than others, the contributory factors identified were as set out in Table 5.15. They are presented in decreasing order, so that those identified by the largest number of Coordinators are presented at the top of the Table. The main issues identified by Coordinators relate to the capacity of staff (which is influenced by their previous experiences of other QAP processes) within the setting and the levels of motivation and commitment to the process that exists within the setting. Other key influencing factors cited include the availability of supports (non-contact time/financial/time-in-lieu) for staff to support the time they dedicate to the process; the knowledge base of settings at the start of the process; and the availability of a manager/administrator with time to dedicate to driving the process.

Table 5.15: Factors Contributing to Faster Progression through Síolta QAP

Contributory Factors

Staff capacity/education levels/training (more articulate)

Motivated committed staff with interest in quality/continued professional development/training

Supports for staff time inputted to process (provision for non-contact time/financial/time in lieu)

Starting knowledge base in setting in terms of understanding of quality

Manager with time and capacity to drive Síolta/paid administration time

Existence of supportive Committee

More coordinator support/on-site visits

Whole centre approach

Participation in previous QAP

Size of service

Stability in terms of funding

Organised structured regular non-contact time meetings

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Settings

5.6 Summary

Among the 134 settings participating in the field test at July 2011, one in ten settings were completing their baseline assessments, and had yet to commence development work. Fifty per cent of settings had completed their baseline assessments in full, and had yet to commence, or had commenced development work.

At July 2011, a total of 2814 Components had been rated by settings as part of completed baseline assessments, using the Self Assessment Tool. Across the rated Components, there was a clear tendency on the part of settings to allocate a level 3 rating. In total 56 per cent of all ratings were Level 3 ratings. Just 4 per cent were Level 1 ratings.

The areas of practice where settings have been more likely to rate themselves low (Level 1 or 2) include ‘Planning and Evaluation’; ‘Consultations’ and

some aspects of 'Transitions'. Conversely, the areas of practice where settings have rated themselves the highest (Level 3 or 4), relate to aspects of 'Interactions' (among children themselves as well as among children and adults), and 'Play' (having appropriate equipment and dedicating appropriate time to play).

Eighty-two per cent of settings either strongly agreed or agreed with the assertion that participation in the Síolta QAP has contributed to the improvement of quality within their setting. As well as improving the quality aspect of their service provision, settings participating in QAP reported the development of skills in the areas of reflection, self assessment and evidence gathering. Settings reported higher confidence levels in terms of their reflection and self-assessment skills, relative to evidence gathering.

While there was consensus among Coordinators that the field test of the QAP has contributed to the improvement of quality across participating settings, a large number of Coordinators stated that their settings are just now beginning to recognise what quality means and reflect on the level of quality service they are providing.

Several factors were identified by both settings and Coordinators as having impeded as well as enabled progression through the QAP by participating settings.

The main enabling factors identified include: the capacity of staff within the setting; the levels of motivation and commitment to the process that exists among setting staff; the availability of supports (non-contact time/financial/time-in-lieu) for staff to support the time they dedicate to the process; the knowledge base of settings at the start of the process; and the availability of a manager/administrator with time to dedicate to driving the process.

The main impeding factors identified include: the amount of staff time required to dedicate to the QAP (and in particular the lack of non-contact time); difficulties interpreting the Síolta guidance; the open-ended nature of Síolta; lack of buy-in from some setting staff; the costs associated with participation (e.g. travel, photocopying); and a lack of descriptive writing and/or computer skills among some setting staff.

6 Effectiveness of Síolta Processes

6.1 Introduction

This Section presents the views of key stakeholders with respect to the Síolta processes, including:

- the Principles, Standards and Components which set out the aspects of quality as covered in the Síolta Framework;
- the 12 Step QAP process; and
- the mediation of Síolta through the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations.

The views were captured as part of the Coordinator Workshop; the setting and Coordinator surveys; as well as the detailed case studies that were carried out over the course of the evaluation. This Section also presents an assessment of the effectiveness of the Síolta processes over the course of the field test.

6.2 Principles, Standards, and Components

The Principles, Standards and Components, Signposts for Reflection, Think Abouts and the cross-referencing links comprising the Síolta Framework are described in Section 3.2.1.

6.2.1 Coordinator Views

When questioned as to their opinions with respect to the level of detail inherent in the Síolta Framework, two-thirds of Coordinators agreed with the statement that “the 16 Standards and corresponding 75 Components present a definition of ECCE quality provision in an appropriate amount of detail”. Eleven per cent of Coordinators were neutral with respect to this statement, while one in five Coordinators disagreed with it. In their comments provided in relation to this statement, half of the Síolta Coordinators made reference to room that exists to consolidate some of the Síolta Components. Box 6.1 sets out three examples of Component groupings within Síolta Standards where there is perceived room for consolidation owing to the overlap/repetition that exists across the aspects of ECCE service provision covered in the Components.

Box 6.1: Components that could be Consolidated

Standard	Components that could be consolidated
Environments	2.1 The indoor and outdoor environment is well planned and laid out to accommodate the needs of all children and adults in the setting
	2.2 The environment (including equipment and materials) is adaptable for, and accessible to, all children and adults within the setting
	2.3 The indoor and outdoor environment is well maintained and ensures comfortable and pleasant surroundings for children and adults
Play	6.2 When the child is engaged in play/exploration, the equipment and materials provided are freely available and easily accessible to her/him
	6.4 Each learning area and each activity in the setting has plenty of equipment and materials for the child
Planning and Evaluation	8.1 Each Standard area of practice is reviewed regularly through appropriate and tailored processes of observation, planning, action and evaluation
	8.2 The setting has established and documented review structures

In addition to the perceived overlap across Components, some Coordinators also made reference to the fact that a number of the aspects of service provision covered in the Sfolta Framework are already covered as part of the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations. Under the Regulations, HSE Inspectors have responsibility for inspecting pre-school settings in relation to a

number of practice areas to ensure the health, safety and welfare of children. The areas inspected include for example: staff child ratios; aspects of the environment such as facilities for rest and play; record keeping procedures; safety measures; and the provision of food and drink. Because these aspects are covered also in the Síolta Framework, a number of Coordinators are of the view that this is an unnecessary duplication of work for settings. According to the Coordinators who raised this issue, settings participating in the Síolta QAP should at a minimum be compliant with the Regulations; and as such, it is an unnecessary doubling of workloads requiring settings to complete the QAP process in relation to aspects of service provision already covered as part of the Regulations.

6.2.2 Settings Views

When questioned in relation to the level of detail inherent in the Síolta Framework, just over half (56 per cent) of settings participating in the field test are of the view that the entire contents of the Framework are relevant. Thirty-two per cent of settings consider most of the contents to be relevant, while 12 per cent consider just some of the Framework contents to be relevant. See Table 6.1.

Table 6.1: Distribution of Settings by their Views regarding the Contents of Síolta

Views	% Settings
All of it is relevant	55.9
Most of it is relevant	32.3
Some of it is relevant	11.8
None of it is relevant	0.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

Settings in receipt of higher levels of support from their Síolta Coordinator were more likely to consider its contents relevant.

Table 6.2: Views of Settings around the Relevance of the Contents of the Síolta QAP by Amount of Coordinator Support Received

Coordinator Support	All of it is relevant (%)	Most of it is relevant (%)	Some of it is relevant (%)
Up to 5 hrs	49.0	40.8	10.2
6 - 10 hrs	81.8	18.2	0.0
>10 hrs	87.5	12.5	0.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

Throughout the case study visits and as part of the setting survey, a large proportion of settings made reference to the perceived repetition/overlap that exists across the Síolta Components. In fact, when asked to specify the aspects of Síolta that are not working well, the second most common factor identified by settings related to the level of repetition and overlap that exists across Síolta Components.

In addition to the repetition across Components, settings also reported frustration with respect to the open-ended nature of the Síolta Standards and Components. Owing to the fact that settings are more accustomed to tick-box like quality assurance programmes, some settings have become frustrated with the ‘reflection’ element inherent in the Síolta Framework owing to the difficulties experienced freeing up staff to engage in reflective practice.

6.3 Twelve Step QAP Process

The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme was developed to allow ECCE settings to engage formally with the Síolta Framework. The QAP process is set out in detail in Section 3.2.2.

6.3.1 Coordinator Views

In providing their feedback with respect to the Síolta QAP, the views of Síolta Coordinators can be grouped according to whether they relate to the approaches taken to implementing the QAP steps; or the elements comprising the QAP steps themselves (i.e. baseline assessments, action plans and so forth).

Implementation of QAP Steps

Síolta Coordinators have taken differing approaches to implementing the QAP with settings to those laid out in the Síolta Toolkits.

One of the main reasons provided for this has related to the field test nature of the current implementation of Síolta which has been interpreted by many Coordinators as providing freedom to tailor the QAP in a way that is appropriate to the settings they are supporting. One Coordinator took the view that settings which have highly educated staff and which have experience of other quality assurance programmes do not need the structure inherent in the QAP steps, and the approach adopted with such settings has been to skip the baseline assessment step and move directly to identifying gaps, and doing development work, with a view to completing the final self assessment for the first time at the end of the process. Another Coordinator stated that the immediate emphasis placed on baseline assessments was too abrupt, and that an approach that involved illustrating the core elements of quality to settings prior to asking them to assess themselves was more beneficial. It was noted by some Coordinators that the flexibility that has occurred during the field test period, where Coordinators have been able to tailor their individual approaches to meet individual setting needs, has been very important.

For those Coordinators that have supported settings in the completion of baseline assessments, the approach taken to completing baseline assessments has been to complete detailed inventories of all aspects of practice under the Síolta Component headings. Owing to the number of Components involved (75), and the general lack of paid non-contact time for staff in many settings, this has resulted in settings spending significantly longer than envisaged in the guidance completing their baseline assessments.

A number of Coordinators reported finding the implementation of a Standard by Standard approach, where settings complete one Standard in its entirety from baseline assessment through to final assessment, before commencing the next Standard, to be more beneficial from the setting's perspective, as with this approach settings have been able to see more immediate outcomes, in terms of the time and effort put into the Síolta process.

One Coordinator stated that if observation reports from Coordinators or qualified others could be used as evidence this would speed up the implementation of the evidence gathering step among settings.

Elements Comprising Síolta QAP

Notwithstanding the variety of approaches taken by Coordinators to implementing the Síolta QAP, Coordinators reported high levels of support in terms of the appropriateness of the core elements comprising the QAP (i.e. self-assessments, action planning, evidence gathering, and portfolio building with the support of a Coordinator). As part of the Coordinator survey, 83 per cent of Coordinators agreed strongly with the assertion that these core elements of Síolta represent the best approach to developing quality among ECCE practitioners. One in ten

Coordinators were neutral, while just 6 per cent disagreed with the assertion. According to one Coordinator, while the QAP process as it exists might be slow, ‘it represents the approach most likely to yield long-term quality improvement changes’ in settings. The importance of the setting’s ownership over the quality improvement process, which is inherent in Síolta, was emphasised by some Coordinators.

Notwithstanding the high level of support for the elements comprising the QAP, a number of Coordinators did state they would like to see the emphasis on the baseline assessment reduced, so that settings could move more quickly to the quality development work and ultimately see the benefits of the effort put into Síolta much quicker.

6.3.2 Settings’ Views

Implementation of QAP Steps

According to some settings, the Síolta process as it currently stands in the Toolkits is too prolonged resulting in a long period elapsing before the efforts put into the Síolta QAP are realised. This is because settings have to complete 75 baseline assessments and 75 development of actions before any development work takes place as per the current Síolta guidance.

Settings expressed the view that the implementation of the QAP on a Standard by Standard basis is more beneficial, as settings can see the impacts of the time they have put into Síolta much quicker. The Standard by Standard approach is also favoured as it means settings can work on developing the quality of their setting while the knowledge acquired with respect to a Standard area is fresh in their minds. The approach laid out in the Toolkits on the other hand, has meant settings are sometimes completing development work in respect of a Standard several months after developing their understanding of quality under the Standard.

Elements Comprising Síolta QAP

As part of the setting survey, sixty-one per cent of settings stated they consider the steps (elements) comprising the Síolta QAP to be appropriate. Eighteen per cent of settings consider the steps slightly appropriate, while one in five settings are neutral or think the steps are inappropriate.

Larger settings, in terms of the number of setting staff, were more likely to be in agreement with the appropriateness of the QAP steps than their smaller setting counterparts.

Table 6.3: Views of Settings regarding the Appropriateness of the Steps Involved in the Síolta QAP by Setting Size

Level of Appropriateness	% All Settings	% <= 5 Staff	% 5 – 10 Staff	% 10+ Staff
Appropriate	61.2	53.8	68.4	63.6
Slightly appropriate	17.9	15.4	21.1	22.7
Neutral	11.9	17.9	5.3	4.5
Slight inappropriate	4.7	7.7	0.0	4.5
Inappropriate	4.3	5.1	5.3	4.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

Equally, settings in receipt of higher levels of support from their Síolta Coordinator are more likely to consider the steps involved in the Síolta process appropriate.

Table 6.4: Views of Settings around the Appropriateness of the Steps involved in the Síolta QAP by Amount of Coordinator Support Received

Coordinator Support	Appropriate (%)	Slightly appropriate (%)	Neutral (%)	Slight inappropriate (%)	Inappropriate (%)
Up to 5 hrs	62.0	24.0	10.0	2.0	2.0
6 - 10 hrs	63.6	18.2	0.0	18.2	0.0
>10 hrs	87.5	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

As part of the surveys and case studies, the main issue identified by settings with respect to the QAP steps has been the time-intensive nature of the baseline assessments, as well as the amount paper work involved in each Síolta QAP step.

Some settings also reported problems with respect to the evidence gathering step, where there is uncertainty in terms of what type of evidence is expected; what constitutes good evidence; how much evidence is required; how to reflect their setting in the evidence; and how to use the same piece of evidence with respect to more than one Component.

Many settings expressed their support for the concept of self-reflection, but reported problems finding the time necessary to bring staff together to implement it.

6.4 Mediation through Implementing Bodies

As outlined in Section 4, the field test implementation of Síolta has occurred through implementing bodies, with each implementing body adopting their own approach to re-assigning resources to fulfil the Coordinator role and thereafter recruit settings.

There have been differing approaches taken across implementing bodies, and in some instances within implementing bodies, in terms of:

- Coordinator-setting ratios, and consequently the amount of Coordinator support time available to settings;
- the approaches adopted to the completion of the QAP steps with settings;
- the level of support made available to Coordinators within their employing organisation.

Coordinator Support to Settings

While many settings reported satisfaction with the Coordinator support they have received, the majority of settings stated they would welcome more intense Coordinator support. This view is mirrored in the feedback received from Coordinators, the vast majority of which stated they would like to be in a position to provide more support time to their settings. While a number of factors are at play, (including educational attainment levels among setting staff; the availability of incentives to support staff's participation in the QAP; the availability of a full-time administrative setting manager; and so forth), the availability of intensive one to one Coordinator support was identified as a key factor enabling settings to progress at a faster pace through the QAP process.

Approaches to Implementing the QAP

The variation in the approaches adopted by some Coordinators to the implementation of the Síolta QAP has been a source of confusion and frustration for some Coordinators, as it has resulted in a situation where Coordinators are unsure of the extent to which they have freedom to tailor the QAP to their setting's needs.

Support Available to Coordinators

Presently, one of the key opportunities for the sharing of learning, resources and experiences among Síolta Coordinators has been the three Continued Professional Development (CPD) days organised by the EYEPU for Coordinators annually. Most Coordinators are of the view that additional CPD days would be very beneficial, in terms of affording Coordinators greater opportunity to discuss and identify solutions to the issues that are arising in the implementation of the Coordinator role. In addition to formal CPD days, some Coordinators have also had access to strong internal support networks within their employer organisations, which have had positive impacts in terms of sharing of learning and the resolving of issues encountered in the implementation of the Coordinator role. Some Coordinators, particularly those operating in organisations with smaller numbers of Coordinators, as well as those operating in more geographically remote areas, have reported weaker levels of internal organisational support.

As currently structured, Síolta Coordinators are employed and report to their employer implementing body manager. The implementing body managers for their part interact with the EYEPU within the Department. The Coordinators are required to complete tracking reports at four intervals annually. As part of the tracking report Coordinators provide details, in Excel format, relating to the number of settings they are supporting; the setting's progress through the QAP; and any resources the Coordinators have developed to assist in the implementation of the Coordinator role. The reports are useful in terms of providing an overview of where the field test is at, however, at present they are not completed by Coordinators operating through two of the PEIPs and they are completed to varying levels of detail by the Coordinators completing them.

6.5 Assessment of the Effectiveness of the Síolta Processes

Síolta Principles Standards Components

There was a high level of support reported among both Coordinators and settings in terms of the aspects of ECCE service provision covered as part of the Síolta Framework. One of the main issues reported with respect to the contents of the Framework has related to the fact that a number of Components cover similar aspects of service provision. This has resulted in the perception that there is repetition and overlap across Síolta Components. From the Department's perspective the overlap is considered to contribute to the integrated nature of the Framework. From the setting's perspective however, frustration has grown as settings consider they are being asked to describe the same aspect of service provision under a number of different Component headings as part of their baseline assessments. Given the nature of the ECCE sector, in terms of the

scarcity of staff non-contact time, a consolidation of Components covering similar aspects of service could significantly reduce the frustration being experienced by settings, while reducing the time required to complete the QAP, without any loss to the likely quality development outcomes in settings.

Another issue reported by some Coordinators in terms of the contents of the Síolta Framework relates to the fact that aspects of service provision covered in the Framework are already covered as part of the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations. Coordinators putting forward this view however, are forgetting the wider purpose of both the Regulations and the Framework. Whereas the Regulations are concerned with setting down minimum quality standards that all pre-school services must comply with to ensure the health, safety and welfare of pre-school children, the Síolta Framework on the other hand, is concerned with the continuous development of quality (as per the quality spiral) within the sector. As such, to the extent that aspects of service provision covered within the Regulations can be continuously improved, they have a place within the Síolta Framework. However, aspects of service provision that are covered within the Regulations where there is no room for continuous quality development could be removed from the Framework without any implications for the continued development of quality within the settings implementing the Framework. On this basis, Standard 15, which relates to the extent to which settings are compliant with all relevant national regulations and legislation could be removed from the Framework, as settings are either compliant with all national regulations, or they are not.

Quality Assurance Programme

It is clear that differing approaches have been adopted to implementing the QAP among Coordinators. The differing approaches can be partly attributed to:

- the field test nature of Síolta's implementation to date, which has been perceived by Coordinators as affording them the opportunity to adjust the QAP according to the needs of individual settings;
- the lack of prescription in the Síolta support documentation with respect to the implementation of the QAP steps and the Coordinator role - while the overall steps and the nature of the Coordinator's role in the process are clearly laid out in the support documentation, the precise manner in which baseline assessment should be completed and the precise nature of the Coordinator - setting interaction have not been prescribed in enough detail to ensure conformity in implementing the process;
- the relative complexity of the Síolta QAP process, in terms of the number of steps involved (baseline assessments, action plans, development work, portfolios of evidence, and final self assessments) is also likely to have

contributed to different interpretations of the process among Coordinators.

In a future roll out, it is considered that Coordinators and settings would benefit from a more detailed outline of the process, in the form of initial Coordinator-setting support plans, which set out in detail the nature of support that will be provided, as well as the time scale of that support. Plans of this nature will help ensure a common understanding of the QAP process and a common approach to Coordinator interaction with each setting, in terms of the amount and type of support provided.

In addition to differing approaches to the overall QAP process, Coordinators have also varied in terms of the approaches they have taken to supporting the completion of baseline assessments by settings. Some Coordinators reported having abandoned this step of the process, in favour of moving immediately to the preparation of action plans and development work. Coordinators that have adopted this approach consider themselves to have deviated away from the guidance provided in the Síolta guidance. In reality however, this approach is probably more closely aligned with that originally envisaged in the guidance, as it was never envisaged that settings would spend significant amounts of time describing every aspect of their service provision as part of their baseline assessments. Rather it was intended that settings would complete a quick review of their service provision with a view to identifying action areas required to develop the quality of their service, which is in effect what Coordinators ‘skipping’ the baseline assessment step have done. It is clear that the guidance needs to be reinforced in terms of how baseline assessments should be completed in future. This will require more detailed Coordinator training to ensure a common understanding to the amount of detail that should be included as part of the baseline assessments as well as the amount of time that should be allocated to their completion.

As currently set out in the Toolkits, the QAP process is a lengthy process in terms of settings not realising the benefits of efforts put into the process for a significant amount of time. The reason for this relates to the fact that settings must complete 75 baseline assessments and 75 action plans before any development work is completed. Settings that have deviated from this approach, and have instead completed the QAP in its entirety (i.e. baseline assessment, action plan, development work, evidence-gathering and final self-assessment) for one Standard, before moving on to the next Standard, have benefited from seeing the impacts of the efforts put into the process in a more timely fashion. It is considered that settings will benefit in the future from the implementation of a Standard by Standard approach, where settings complete the QAP process for a Standard before moving on to the next Standard. It is also recommended that it be clearly outlined as part of the supporting guidance that settings participating in the

formal QAP process have the option of completing the QAP for individual Standards on the basis of their available capacities and resources.

Mediation through Implementing Bodies

As part of the field test, Síolta Coordinators were recruited through the implementing bodies, namely the Voluntary Childcare Organisations and PEIPs. As such, those taking up the Coordinator role were, for the most part, chosen from a restricted pool of pre-existing staff resources within the implementing bodies.

It is clear that Coordinators have adopted differing approaches to the implementation of the QAP. Previous experience of their own internal quality assurance programmes, where differing aspects of quality are prioritised over others, has possibly influenced the approaches adopted by Coordinators in terms of the Standards they have chosen to implement with settings first, and the interpretations of quality that have been passed on to settings. It is not considered likely however, that the recruitment of Coordinators as part of a more open recruitment process would have resulted in a significantly different outcome, as all persons taking on the role will potentially be influenced by their previous training and experiences within the sector. The likelihood of this occurring can however, be addressed through the provision of more intensive Coordinator training to ensure a common understanding among Coordinators of the Framework and how it should be implemented within settings; as well as greater prescription of the Coordinator role.

7. Effectiveness of Síolta Guidance and Tools

7.1 Introduction

This Section presents an overview of views of key stakeholders with respect to Síolta tools and the Síolta support guidance which includes manuals, toolkits, and templates. The views were captured as part of the Coordinator Workshop; the setting and Coordinator questionnaires; as well as the detailed case studies that were carried out over the course of the evaluation. This Section also presents an assessment of the effectiveness of the Síolta guidance and tools.

7.2 Síolta Self Assessment Tool (SAT)

The implementation of the Síolta QAP requires settings to make assessment decisions regarding their level of quality practice vis-à-vis the Síolta Components, with the use of the Self Assessment Tool. Section 3.2.3 sets out the elements comprising the Self Assessment Tool.

7.2.1 Setting Experiences of SAT

Across the settings participating in the field test, different approaches have been adopted to implementing the SAT, in terms of who has carried out this key element of the Síolta QAP. In some instances all setting staff have played an active role in the rating process, in others the setting manager has completed the rating on the basis of descriptions of service provision prepared by themselves or setting staff, while in other instances it has been the Coordinator that has completed the ratings on behalf of, or in cooperation with, the setting manager/staff.

As part of their participation in the Síolta QAP, it was envisaged that settings would develop skills in a number of key areas, including self assessment using the Self Assessment Tool. On the basis of the setting survey, it emerged that 30 per cent of settings consider they have well developed skills in this area. One in five settings consider their self assessment skills to be minimal or unsatisfactory. There are several potential explanations for this. In the first instance, some settings have not reached the stage in the process where they have had to implement the SAT. For those that have however, the perceived lack of skills in this area may relate to the uncertainty that exists among some settings in terms of the levels of service provision that correspond to each of the four rating levels forming the SAT.

Table 7.1: Distribution of Settings by Extent to which have Developed Self Assessment Skills

Level of Development	Settings (%)
Well developed	30.7
Adequately developed	45.7
Partially developed	18.3
Minimal development	3.8
Unsatisfactory development	-
Total	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

In addition to uncertainty in relation to the level of service provision that corresponds to each rating level, some settings also reported uncertainty in terms of how to derive a single setting rating from their individual room ratings. Differing approaches have been adopted by settings to deriving single setting ratings. Some settings have rated each room separately under each Component heading and used the lowest level rating as the rating applicable for the setting as a whole. Others have averaged the ratings awarded to each room (rounding upwards or downwards) to arrive at a single setting rating. While others settings have chosen not to derive a rating for each room and have instead derived a rating for the setting as a whole, taking account of the different rooms in deriving at a single rating for the setting.

7.2.2 Coordinator Experiences of SAT

From the Coordinator’s perspective, there is a reported lack of confidence among some Coordinators in terms of the likelihood of the Self Assessment Tool delivering a reliable assessment of quality practice and provision in settings. As part of the Coordinator survey, half of all Coordinators were neutral with respect to the statement that “the Self Assessment Tool is likely to deliver a reliable assessment of quality”. By way of explanation for this lack of confidence some Coordinators stated that in their experience settings with a thorough knowledge and understanding of quality have been more likely to under-rate the level of quality practice of their service, while settings with less detailed understanding of quality have been more likely to over-rate their level of quality practice. While Coordinators acknowledge they have an important role to play in supporting settings to arrive at an accurate rating that reflects the true level of quality practice within the setting, it is according to the Coordinators ultimately the setting that decides on the level awarded.

In addition to the likelihood of settings over and under estimating their level of quality practice, some Coordinators also reported a lack confidence in terms of their own understanding of what levels of quality practice relate to the rating levels in the SAT. This was confirmed as part of the Coordinator survey where when asked if there were aspects of the Coordinator role where additional training would be useful, a number of Coordinators identified training on the implementation of the SAT.

7.3 Support and Guidance Material

The support materials made available to participants in the field test include the Síolta manuals, toolkits and templates. In general, both Coordinators and settings reported making regular use of the Síolta support materials and guidance. However, in some instances, settings reported using the manuals only. This may be symptomatic of the reliance settings are placing on their Coordinator, in terms of guiding them through each step of the QAP process, as opposed to looking to the guidance documentation for direction.

The templates provided as part of the support materials – which include the Coordinator visit template; baseline assessment templates; action plan template; and evidence gathering template are largely being used by settings and Coordinators. Some Coordinators reported adjusting some aspects of the templates, in particular the action plan and evidence gathering templates, to make them more user friendly. Some Coordinators have chosen not to use some of the templates, for example the Coordinator visit template has not been used by some Coordinators as they found it placed a formality on the Coordinator setting relationship that was not conducive to the building of trust.

When asked as part of the Coordinator survey if they found the Síolta support material to be accessible, user-friendly and easy to understand, just 11 per cent of Coordinators agreed this was the case, while 61 per cent of Coordinators disagreed or strongly disagreed. From the Coordinator’s perspective, the perceived convoluted nature of some of the language used in the Síolta manuals has resulted in Coordinators having to spend a lot of time breaking down and explaining the contents of Standards and Components to setting staff. Examples of Standards and Components that have needed to be dissected include:

Standard 5 ‘Interactions’ which reads as follows:

“Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity”

Component 6.3, within the Standard ‘Play’, which reads as follows:

“The opportunities for play/exploration provided for the child mirror her/his stage of development, give the child the freedom to achieve mastery and success, and challenge the child to make the transition to new learning and development”.

Another example is Component 7.4 within the Standard ‘Curriculum’, which reads as follows:

“Curriculum/programme implementation is achieved through a variety of adult strategies, close and supportive relationships in the setting and a wide range of experiences which are made available to the child”.

In addition to more accessible language, some Coordinators also expressed the need for a more detailed Coordinator manual that would provide more detailed information on all aspects of the Coordinator role, including the implementation of the SAT and the preparing of a portfolio of evidence, as well as how to deal appropriately with various issues that emerge such as poor descriptive writing skills among setting staff.

From the setting’s perspective, the difficulties experienced deciphering some of the contents of the Síolta manuals have resulted in an extended amount of time being spent by settings completing baseline assessments. This in turn has resulted in some setting staff becoming increasingly frustrated with the Síolta process, and at the same time has reduced the likelihood of settings working independently of their Coordinator.

7.4 Assessment of Síolta Guidance and Tools

Self Assessment Tool

The use of the SAT is a key element within the QAP, as its correct implementation is a pre-requisite to the successful validation of services as part of the Síolta QAP. Over the course of the field test, the implementation of the SAT has been influenced by a number of factors including:

- The variety of approaches adopted to the implementation of the SAT in settings, including situations where the setting manager has taken on the rating process in isolation, situations where all setting staff have played a role in the rating process, and situations where there has been a reliance on Coordinators to complete this element of the QAP;

- The uncertainty that exists among some Coordinators and settings in terms of understanding the level of quality practice that corresponds to the four SAT rating levels. This uncertainty persists despite the exemplars of completed Self-Assessment Tools that are provided as part of the Self-Assessment User Guide and Tool;
- The reported tendency on the part of some settings possessing a thorough knowledge and understanding of quality to under-rate themselves, and the tendency of settings with less detailed understandings of quality to over-rate themselves. In this regard it is noteworthy that, as part of the Coordinator survey, half of all Coordinators were neutral with respect to the statement that “the Self Assessment Tool is likely to deliver a reliable assessment of quality” in settings.
- The preconceptions that exist in terms of the rating levels comprising the SAT. There has been a widespread view among settings that level 1 corresponds to a failure with respect to Components being rated. This is evidenced by the fact that just 4 per cent of all ratings completed as part of baseline assessment were allocated a level 1 – the lowest rating awardable. At the same time it is evident that there has been a widespread interpretation of level 3 as being the safe option, as it represents a high level of quality service, while at the same time leaving some room for quality improvement. In total 56 per cent of all baseline assessment ratings completed were awarded level 3.

In the context of a future roll out of the QAP it is considered that the development of a rating tool with more than four rating options will help address the tendency on behalf of settings to view level 1 as a failure and level 3 as a safe option. At the same time efforts will need to be made to raise awareness among settings that the awarding of the lowest rating possible does not represent a failure on the part of the setting. Rather participation in the QAP alone is an endorsement of the setting’s compliance with minimum national standards of pre-school service provision, as per the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations.

In a future roll out there will also be a need for substantial more Coordinator training if Coordinators are to successfully support setting’s implementation of the SAT. The training will need to address issues including the appropriate approach to identifying a single rating under each Component for multi-room settings, as well as outlining how to deal with situations where settings are under/over estimating their level of quality provision.

Support and Guidance Material

Over the course of the field test, both settings and Coordinators have made extensive use of the Síolta guidance materials made available. Settings in particular have made use of the Síolta manuals, while Coordinators have been more likely to make use of the manuals, toolkits and templates.

Notwithstanding the widespread use of the supporting materials made available, settings and Coordinators have reported issues with its content. One of the main issues raised relates to the perceived ambiguous and arcane nature of some of the language used in the Síolta manuals, which has caused difficulties for settings trying to decipher its contents. This has had implications in terms of:

- Increasing the amount of Coordinator support time required;
- Increasing frustration levels among setting staff owing to the time required to decipher the elements of quality within the Framework;
- Significantly inhibiting the extent to which settings have been able to work independently through the Síolta QAP.

A review of the language used in the manual, with a view to removing elements of ambiguity and making it more easily comprehensible to its target audience will go a long way towards diminishing the frustration being experienced by settings. It will also reduce the time required by settings to progress through the QAP, while increasing the likelihood that settings will be able to work independently of their Síolta Coordinator, as they progress through the QAP process.

8. Role and Effectiveness of Coordinator System

8.1 Introduction

This Section presents an overview of views of key stakeholders with respect to Síolta Coordinator Role. The views were captured through the Coordinator Workshop; the setting and Coordinator questionnaires, as well as the detailed case studies that were carried out over the course of the evaluation. This Section also presents an assessment of the effectiveness of the Síolta Coordinator system.

8.2 Coordinator Role

As outlined in Section 4.1 the decision was taken in 2009 to roll out the field test of Síolta using the existing staff resources within the childcare bodies in receipt of funding under the NCIP. Subsequently, each implementing body adopted their own approach to re-assigning staff to fulfil the newly developed Síolta Coordinator role.

8.2.1 Coordinator Views

Coordinator Induction

In preparation for the role, Coordinators were provided with a four day induction course, and have subsequently been provided with three CPD days annually where information and training of relevance to their role has been provided. When questioned in terms of the relevancy and adequacy of the induction course provided to them, Coordinators reported higher levels of satisfaction with the course's relevancy, relative to its adequacy. See Table 8.1.

Table 8.1: Level of Coordinator Satisfaction with Induction Training Received

	Extremely satisfied %	Very satisfied %	Moderately satisfied %	Slightly satisfied %	Not at all satisfied %	Total %
Relevance	-	52.9	35.3	11.8	-	100.0
Adequacy	-	42.9	42.9	14.3	-	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Coordinators

In total, 83 per cent of Coordinators were of the opinion that there were specific areas where additional training would be useful to assist them in the implementation of the Coordinator role. Table 8.2 sets out the specific areas identified. Among the areas identified most frequently by Coordinators were ‘mentoring/coaching skills’ and ‘evidence gathering/portfolio building’ skills followed by ‘self-assessment skills’ and additional training around ‘best-practice around each Standard’.

Table 8.2: Areas where Additional Coordinator Training would be Useful

Training Type Mentioned	Number of Coordinators
Coaching/mentoring training	4
Evidence gathering/portfolio building	4
Self-assessments	3
Best practice for each Standard	3
More CPD days	1
Presentation skills	1
Validation process	1

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Coordinators

Ongoing Coordinator Support

As part of the Coordinator survey, Coordinators were asked their views in terms of the extent to which they consider enough guidance, support and direction has been made available to Sfolta Coordinators to enable them to carry out their role effectively. While 61 per cent of Coordinators agreed this is the case, almost forty per cent of Coordinators were neutral or disagreed with this view.

A significant contributor to the ongoing support provided to Coordinators has been the three annual CPD days organised and provided by the EYEPU. Coordinators reported being very appreciative of the opportunity afforded by the CPD days to interact with fellow Coordinators and flesh out their understanding of the Coordinator role. There is a high level of consensus among Coordinators that additional CPD days would be very beneficial. It was also suggested that Coordinators themselves would play a more active role in the additional CPD days in terms of sharing their experiences, best practices and identifying solutions to the issues arising in the implementation of the Coordinator role.

Table 8.3: Coordinator Views with respect to Síolta Processes and Materials

	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither agree not disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
There is enough guidance, support and direction made available to Síolta coordinators to enable them to carry out their role effectively.	0.0	61.1	11.1	27.8	0.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Coordinators

In addition to the three annual CPD days, some Coordinators have benefited from strong internal support networks within their own employer implementing body. This is particularly the case within implementing bodies employing larger numbers of Coordinators based in the same office, where exchanges of Coordinator related information takes place on a daily basis. In some cases, the implementing bodies have actively encouraged the development of internal Coordinator working groups/networks to promote the sharing of resources and experiences. This internal source of support has reduced the isolation levels experienced by some other Coordinators whose only opportunity for face to face interaction with fellow Coordinators have been the three annual CPD days.

Coordinator Sharing of Learning

Outside the opportunity afforded by the three annual CPD days, the level of across-implementing body Coordinator interaction has been quite limited. Some Coordinators have commented that initial Coordinator interaction, at the beginning of the field test, was inhibited to some extent by long-established allegiances to employer bodies, some of which had traditionally been competitors in some aspects of their work. There is a general level of consensus that more could be done to improve the level of information sharing among Coordinators, whether through additional CPD days; a dedicated Síolta Coordinator website; or a more formal communication forum⁷. It was also suggested that there is a need for the establishment of a Coordinator of Coordinators position, whose role it would be to provide guidance, support and clarity to all Coordinators in terms of all aspects of the Síolta Framework and QAP process.

⁷ An informal Coordinator forum has been set up by one of the Síolta Coordinators on Facebook. However, not all Coordinators are users of the social networking site and as such have not signed up.

Notwithstanding the perceived need for more Coordinator interaction, some Coordinators are of the opinion that as the field test has progressed that there has been a growing sense of unity among the Coordinator group and an increasing willingness to share learning and experiences.

Overlap of Coordinator and HSE Inspectorate Roles

As previously outlined, the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations outline the standards of health, safety and welfare that must be in place before pre-school services can commence in any facility. HSE Inspectors have responsibility for inspecting pre-school settings to ensure compliance with the standards set down in the Regulations. As a National Quality Framework, Síolta is concerned with the ongoing development of quality with respect to all aspects of ECCE service provision and practice, with the support of a Síolta Coordinator. Over the course of the evaluation, concern was raised by a number of Coordinators in terms of the perceived lack of clarity that exists with respect to the co-existence of the HSE Inspector and Síolta Coordinator roles, and the lack of clarity that also exists with respect to the appropriate course of action to take in situations that may arise where the views of HSE Inspectors are at odds with those of the Síolta Coordinator.

Challenging Aspects of Coordinator Role

When questioned as to the most significant challenges they have faced in their capacity as Síolta Coordinators, the most common challenges identified include:

- The field test nature of implementation which has created the perception that the ‘goalposts have been continuously moving’ in terms of what has been expected of them;
- Working simultaneously with settings with very varying capabilities;
- Managing situations where settings have over/under estimated the level of quality in their setting; and
- Providing feedback to settings where there are writing difficulty issues.

Key attributes of Síolta Coordinator

As part of the Coordinator survey Coordinators were asked their views in terms of the key attributes required to successfully under-take the Coordinator role. The attributes identified are set out in Table 8.4. While an extensive series of attributes were identified, the attributes identified by the largest number of Coordinators include: possessing a deep knowledge and understanding of the ECCE sector and quality service provision within the sector; possessing excellent communication skills; being flexible in terms of being able to work with settings with different capacities; and possessing a non-judgemental, empathetic nature.

Table 8.4: Key attributes of Síolta Coordinator

Key attributes of Síolta Coordinator

Have deep knowledge of sector, clear understanding of Síolta and what a quality service looks like

Excellent communication skills, ability to give constructive feedback

Flexibility – ability to work with different levels of need

Respectful of the diversity of approaches to childcare provision, non-judgemental, empathetic nature

Ability to disseminate information

Organisational skills/time management/planning

Motivator

Practical experience in sector

Mentoring skills

Patience

Ability to build trust

Previous experience of quality assurance process

Realistic expectations about workloads and timeframes

Ability to demonstrate and model good practice

Facilitation skills

Ability to build relationships, work in partnership

Observation skills

Confidence/Assertiveness

Analytical/problem solving skills

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Coordinators

8.2.2 Setting Views

When asked to rate their level of satisfaction with respect to the level of support provided by their Coordinator, 40 per cent of settings stated that they were extremely satisfied with the level of support they had received. A further 36 per cent of settings reported being very satisfied with the level of Coordinator support received. One in five settings reported being moderately satisfied with the support they received from their Coordinator, while five per cent of settings were slightly satisfied or not at all satisfied with their Coordinator’s level of support.

Table 8.5: Distribution of Settings by their Level of Satisfaction with their Síolta Coordinator

Level of Satisfaction	% settings
Extremely Satisfied	39.8
Very satisfied	35.9
Moderately satisfied	19.3
Slightly satisfied	3.8
Not at all satisfied	1.1
Total	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Settings

Settings have had very different experiences in terms of the intensity of support they have received from their Síolta Coordinator. This variation has been due in large part to varying Coordinator-setting ratios as well as variances in the proportion of working weeks being allocated to Coordinator duties by Coordinators. Depending on the Coordinator assigned, some settings have been in receipt of an average of 30 minutes face to face Coordinator support time monthly, while other settings reported receiving an average of 17.5 hours support time monthly. Across all settings, an average of 4.6 hours Coordinator face-to-face support time was reported by settings.

Table 8.6: Amount of Síolta Coordinator Contact Time by Implementing Body

Implementing body	Min (hours)	Max (hours)	Mean (hours)
Barnardos	1.0	6.0	3.0
BCCN	1.0	4.0	2.8
Childminding Ireland	0.5	3.0	1.5
IPPA	3.0	17.5	7.2
ISKA	2.0	8.0	4.3
NCNA	1.0	6.0	3.3
PEIP Ballymun	6.0	16.0	13.0
PEIP Darndale	2.5	9.0	5.1
PEIP Tallaght	1.0	3.0	2.0
All	0.5	17.5	4.6

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants Survey of Settings

Settings in receipt of mentoring support from Coordinators allocating higher proportions of their working week to the Coordinator role were more likely to be extremely satisfied with their Coordinator support.

Table 8.7: Setting's Level of Satisfaction with their Síolta Coordinator by the Proportion of Coordinator's Working Week allocated to Coordinator Role

Level of Satisfaction	Proportion of working week		
	<=40 %	41-75 %	76+ %
Extremely Satisfied	25.0	46.2	85.7
Very satisfied	37.5	33.3	14.3
Moderately satisfied	28.1	17.9	0.0
Slightly satisfied	9.4	0.0	0.0
Not at all satisfied	0.0	2.6	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants survey of Settings

In addition to face to face support, 88 per cent of settings stated there were other forms of contact with their Coordinator which they found useful, including telephone support (66 per cent) and email support (71 per cent).

Settings in receipt of more intensive Coordinator support are generally progressing faster through the QAP than settings in receipt of lower levels of support, and also tend to exhibit a greater tendency to be on top of the QAP process. Notwithstanding this, all settings reported being very reliant on their Coordinator's support in terms of progressing through the QAP. This reliance has been all the more accentuated by the difficulties experienced by settings deciphering some of the language used in the Síolta manual. The anticipation that Coordinators would become increasingly redundant as settings become increasingly proficient in the areas of reflective practice, self-assessment, evidence gathering and portfolio building, has not materialised.

8.3 Assessment of Effectiveness of Coordinator System

A key issue to address in the context of any future roll out of Síolta is the appropriateness of the Síolta Coordinator mentoring role which is part of the formal implementation of the Síolta QAP. Throughout the evaluation settings have reported a heavy reliance on their Coordinator, while settings in receipt of higher levels of Coordinator support have generally progressed faster through the process than settings in receipt of lower levels of support. In this context, and considering the open ended nature of Síolta where a level of interpretation of the Síolta Standards and Components is required, together with the relatively complex 12-step process involved in the QAP, it is considered that an element of Coordinator mentoring will be necessary as part of a future roll-out of the Programme.

The Síolta Coordinator mentoring model is a resource intensive model. This creates a major resource issue in terms of a wider implementation of Síolta by settings in the sector on the basis that there are approximately 4,250 settings⁸ participating in the Free Pre-School Year Scheme. An approach that combines a substantial increase in Coordinator numbers as well as a greater targeting of Coordinator resources will be necessary. In this regard, consideration will have to be given to the implementation of an initial assessment of setting's level of quality service provision with a view to prioritising their participation in the QAP, or the targeting of smaller settings (with limited staff resources to allocate to the Síolta QAP process) or settings in disadvantaged areas.

While the mentoring approach is the preferred option, an alternative approach which could be considered would be to adopt a more prescriptive (tick-box like)

⁸ This figure does not include the 3,165 primary schools and circa 20,000 childminders providing ECCE services.

approach within the National Quality Framework. A more prescriptive approach would mean settings could work independently through the quality improvement process, as no interpretations of quality on behalf of the setting would be required. This approach would involve settings receiving an inspection visit once they had completed the process. However, in order to encourage the engagement of settings in the process of quality development, and to ensure the long term sustainability of quality development within the sector, the less prescriptive mentoring approach is the preferred option.

In the eventuality that the mentoring approach is maintained, it will be necessary as part of future roll outs of the Programme to provide more intense induction training to Coordinators around areas including mentoring skills; portfolio building; implementing the Self Assessment Tool; and best practice under each Standard heading. There will also be a need more prescriptive guidance around the steps involved in QAP process, and the precise nature of coordinator interaction with setting. It is also recommended that consideration be given to the development of a Coordinator of Coordinators role, whose role would involve the provision of ongoing support to Síolta Coordinators.

Some Coordinators expressed concern in terms of the perceived overlap that exists in terms of the contents of the Síolta Framework and the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations. Concern was also expressed with respect to the perceived lack of guidance that exists in terms of dealing with situations where the views of HSE Inspectors are at odds with those of Síolta Coordinators.

In light of the differing functions of both the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations and the National Quality Framework, where the Regulations are concerned with ensuring minimum standards of health safety and welfare are in place in pre-school services, while the National Quality Framework is concerned with the continuous development of quality with respect to aspects of pre-school service provision and practice, it is considered inevitable that aspects of service provision covered as part of the Regulations are also found within the National Quality Framework.

In terms of dealing with situations where the views of Inspectors may be at odds with those of Coordinators, it is useful to consider situations where such ‘conflict’ may arise. As part of their inspection visits to pre-school settings, HSE Inspectors will often have to take a view with respect to the safety of aspects of a setting’s service provision and practice. For example, the Inspector will have to judge the appropriate height at which toys and play equipment should be stored safely away from children. Síolta Coordinators, by virtue of their role as Síolta Coordinators, are, in addition to safety, concerned with the promotion of the autonomy and self-development of the children, through for example including children in the

preparation of planned activities. As such, the ideal storage location for toys and equipment may in the view of Síolta Coordinators be within reach of children, a view which may be considered dangerous in the eyes of the HSE Inspector.

In the context of a future roll out of the Framework it will be necessary for liaison to take place between the EYEPU and the HSE to determine likely potential sources of ‘conflict’ with a view to avoiding situations where Coordinators are proposing quality developments that are likely to engender a negative view on behalf of HSE Inspectors. It is also recommended that Coordinators be provided with information with respect to relevant national regulations and likely conflict areas as part of their induction training, thereby preparing them for such situations that may arise.

9. Effectiveness of Self Assessment Tool

9.1 Introduction

One of the key Síolta instruments, the Self-Assessment Tool (SAT), is used by ECCE settings, supported by their Síolta Coordinator, to determine the level of service provision within the ECCE setting at both the start and the end of the QAP process. The Tool comprises a four level rating scale, as set out in Section 3.2.3. Implementing the tool involves settings awarding themselves one of the four rating levels for each Síolta Component practice area. As part of the Síolta support documentation made available, exemplars of each rating level are provided.

A key issue in the evaluation of Síolta is the consistency, validity and reliability associated with the Síolta Self-Assessment Tool ratings, where:

- *Consistency* refers to the extent to which there is consistency in the scoring of similar Components with the Self Assessment Tool;
- *Validity* refers to the extent to which the Self-Assessment Tool produces a valid approximation of the quality of the settings; and
- *Reliability* refers to the extent to which the application of the Self-Assessment Tool produces reliable measures of quality across Coordinators i.e. is the assessment repeatable in the sense of measuring quality in the same way irrespective of the Coordinator.

9.2 Level of Consistency associated with Self Assessment Tool

Each of the Standards laid down in the Síolta Framework has a number of Components. The Components belonging to one Síolta Standard may in some instances be measuring a construct of relevance to another Standard. This was illustrated in Section 3.2.1, where we saw that related Components within the Framework are highlighted throughout the Síolta manuals through the use of cross-references, where manual-users are directed to other Components of relevance to the Component they are working through. We also saw that the Components within a Standard may, in some cases, measure the same or similar construct to other Components within the same Standard.

Whether reviewing the rating levels awarded to Components linked across, or within Standards, one would anticipate finding a significant degree of consistency in the rating levels awarded. To determine if consistency exists in the manner in which rating levels were awarded by setting across ‘linked’ Components as part of their Baseline Assessments, an exercise was completed to compare the degree of correlation that exists between a group of Component-pairs where links exist,

relative to a random sample of Component-pairs where no linking may be expected. As part of the exercise, two populations were created. Population 1 comprised 22 pairs of ‘linked’ Components - where consistency would be expected in the rating levels awarded. Population 2 comprised 30 randomly chosen pairs of Components. Populations 1 and 2 are set out in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1: Populations of Paired Components used to Measure Consistency of Baseline Assessment SAT Ratings

Pairing No	Pairs of Linked Components		Random Pairs of Components	
1	2.4	9.1	1.1	2.3
2	2.7	6.4	1.3	12.3
3	2.8	9.4	2.1	7.4
4	3.3	12.2	2.8	3.1
5	6.7	7.1	3.1	13.2
6	9.1	2.4	3.4	9.4
7	11.3	8.1	4.1	13.1
8	11.5	5.3	5.5	9.1
9	12.1	3.1	5.1	4.2
10	12.1	7.6	6.3	8.4
11	12.3	10.6	6.7	15.1
12	12.4	10.2	7.1	12.3
13	16.1	12.2	7.5	11.1
14	1.1	1.2	8.1	3.1
15	2.1	2.3	8.3	7.6
16	4.1	4.2	9.3	13.2
17	5.3	5.4	9.6	6.4
18	6.2	6.4	10.1	4.1
19	7.2	7.3	10.3	13.3
20	8.1	8.2	11.2	8.1
21	9.1	9.2	11.5	2.6
22	16.3	16.4	12.1	3.2
23			12.2	16.1
24			13.4	8.3
25			13.1	6.6
26			14.1	2.2
27			14.3	9.7
28			15.1	9.5
29			16.2	11.3
30			16.4	7.3

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants

Correlation⁹ values were created for the pairs of Components within both populations. The average correlation values (r values) produced across each population are set out in Table 9.2.

Table 9.2: Correlation Values

	Population 1	Population 2
No of Pairs	22	30
Mean	.719	.562

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants

As Table 9.2 outlines, a higher level of correlation was found in Population 1 – the grouping of ‘linked’ Components, relative to Population 2. To determine if the difference in the mean correlation values is significant an Independent Sample T-test was carried out. The results are set out in Table 9.3.

Table 9.3: Results of Independent Sample T-Test

	t	df	Sig (2- tailed)	Mean Difference
Rvalues	4.722	50	0.000	0.157100

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants

The low p-value (0.000) confirms that while the absolute difference in the mean correlation values is not large, it is significant. This is encouraging from the point of view of the application of the Síolta Self Assessment Tool, as it confirms that a higher level of consistency exists where one would expect to see it i.e. in the rating levels being awarded to ‘linked’ Components.

⁹ Correlation is a statistical technique that can show whether and how strongly pairs of variables are related. The main result of a correlation is called the correlation coefficient (or "r"). It ranges from -1.0 to +1.0. The closer r is to +1 or -1, the more closely the two variables are related.

It should be noted that the outcome of this exercise may be influenced by the fact that just four levels can be awarded as part of Self Assessment Tool; this by definition, limits the level of variation possible in the ratings levels awarded.

9.3 Validity and Reliability associated with Self Assessment Tool

9.3.1 Overview

To determine the validity and reliability associated with the ratings awarded with the Síolta Self-Assessment Tool an experimental approach was adopted. The chosen experimental approach involved:

- Identifying three settings participating in the field test that had implemented the Self-Assessment Tool (the settings represented the differing types of settings participating in the field test);
- Asking four Coordinators (raters) unfamiliar with the three settings to apply Section B of the Self-Assessment Tool directly themselves in respect of 8 Síolta Components in each of the three settings. The raters applied the Tool on the basis of observation visits (of up to two days) made to each setting;
- Assessing the variation in the ratings recorded.

Over the course of the experiment each rater visited three settings and implemented the SAT in relation to the eight Components. As such, each Coordinator produced 24 ratings, and in total there were 96 Components rated.

The distribution of the ratings completed is set out in Table 9.4. As the Table illustrates, across the 96 rated Components, half of all ratings were allocated a level 3, while three quarters of ratings (76 per cent) were allocated either a level 3 or a level 4. Just one per cent of ratings were allocated a level 1.

Table 9.4: Distribution of Ratings Completed as Part of Síolta Experiment

Rating Level	No. of Ratings	% of Ratings
1	1	1.0
2	22	22.9
3	48	50.0
4	25	26.0
Total	96	100.0

Source: Síolta Experiment

The results are broadly in line with the overall distribution of ratings awarded by settings participating in the field test as part of their baseline assessments, as set out in Table 5.4.

9.3.2 Inter Rater Reliability

Inter rater reliability refers to the extent to which the application of the Self-Assessment Tool produces reliable measures of quality across raters, irrespective of the rater.

As part of the experiment, each rater completed 24 ratings. Table 9.5 sets out, across the 24 Components rated by each rater the number of instances where there was agreement among the raters on the levels awarded. As illustrated in the Table, across the 24 ratings, there were four instances where all four Coordinators were in agreement on the rating level applicable; and 8 instances where three Coordinators were in agreement.

In total, in fifty per cent of instances there was agreement among just two Coordinators in terms of the rating level awarded.

Table 9.5: Incidences where there was Agreement over the Rating Levels Awarded

No of Coordinators in Agreement	No. of Incidences	% of Incidences
Four	4	16.7
Three	8	33.3
Two	12	50.0
Total	24	100.0

Source: Síolta Experiment

Another indicator of the reliability of the ratings awarded was to determine:

- the level of agreement that exists among pairs of rater ratings; and
- the level of agreement that exists among setting and rater ratings.

Agreement among Pairs of Raters

In total, four raters participated in the experiment and as such, there were six pairs of raters as set out in Table 9.6. The probability of each pair of raters agreeing on:

- an exact rating level; and
- either a higher (3 or a 4 rating) or lower rating (1 or a 2 rating)

are set out in Table 9.6. As set out in the Table, it can be seen that the highest probability of exact agreement between the pairs of raters was found to be 63 per cent (between rater 1 and rater 4), that is to say the highest probability of two raters agreeing on an exact rating was 63 per cent. The lowest probability of exact agreement between the pairs of raters was found to be 29 per cent (between raters 2 and 3).

The probabilities of agreement between each pair of raters in terms of both awarding either a higher or lower rating are also set out in Table 9.6, and varied between 46 and 83 per cent.

Table 9.6: Probabilities of Agreement among Raters on Ratings Completed as Part of Síolta Experiment

Rater Pair	Probability of Exact Agreement %	Probability of Higher or Lower Agreement %
(Rater 1,Rater 2)	42	71
(Rater 1, Rater 3)	54	67
(Rater 1, Rater 4)	63	83
(Rater 2, Rater 3)	29	46
(Rater 2, Rater 4)	54	71
(Rater 3, Rater 4)	29	50

Source: Síolta Experiment

Agreement between Raters and Settings

As part of the experiment analysis, the probability of agreement between each setting and rater in terms of:

- awarding an exact rating level; and
- awarding either a higher (3 or a 4 rating) or lower rating (1 or a 2 rating)

was also analysed, and the results are set out in the Table 9.7. As set out in the Table, it can be seen that the probability of settings agreeing with the ratings awarded by each rater varied. In the case of setting 1, the highest probability of exact agreement between the setting and a rater was found to be 50 per cent (with rater 3). In the case of setting 2 and setting 3, the highest probability of exact agreement between the settings and a rater was found to be 38 per cent.

The lowest probability of exact agreement between a setting and a rater was found to be 0 per cent, which occurred in the case of setting 2 with rater 3; and setting 3 with rater 3.

The probabilities of agreement, on either a higher or lower rating, between the settings and raters are also set out in Table 9.7. In the case of settings 2 and 3, the highest probability of agreement between the setting and a rater was found to be 100 per cent. Across the three settings, the lowest probability of agreement between the settings and a rater was found to be 50 per cent.

Table 9.7: Probabilities of Agreement between Settings and Raters on Ratings Awarded as Part of Síolta Experiment

Setting: Rater Pair	Probability of Exact Agreement %	Probability of Higher or Lower Rating Agreement %
(Setting 1, Rater 1)	25	63
(Setting 1, Rater 2)	38	63
(Setting 1, Rater 3)	50	75
(Setting 1, Rater 4)	25	50
(Setting 2, Rater 1)	25	75
(Setting 2, Rater 2)	38	63
(Setting 2, Rater 3)	0	50
(Setting 2, Rater 4)	25	100
(Setting 3, Rater 1)	13	88
(Setting 3, Rater 2)	25	63
(Setting 3, Rater 3)	0	50
(Setting 3, Rater 4)	38	100

Source: Síolta Experiment

The final indicator of reliability analysed in relation to the Self Assessment Tool ratings, related to the probabilities associated with the higher and lower ratings awarded, that is to say, the probability that if one rater awarded a higher score, that all other raters would also award a higher score.

As illustrated in Table 9.8, it was found that there is a 38 per cent probability that where a rater awards a higher rating, that all other raters would also award a higher rating level. It was also found that there is an 89 per cent probability that where a rater awards a higher rating level, that at least three of the four raters would award a higher rating level.

The corresponding probabilities associated with the lower rating levels are also set out in Table 9.8. As the Table highlights, the probabilities of agreement associated with the lower rating levels were found to be much lower, that is to say, there is much less tendency for agreement by raters in relation to lower ratings.

Table 9.8: Probability of Raters Agreeing on Ratings Awarded

Number of Raters in Agreement	Higher Ratings	Lower Ratings
Four	0.38	0.0
At least three	0.89	0.26

Source: Síolta Experiment

9.3.3 Validity of Self Assessment Tool

Validity refers to the extent to which the Self Assessment Tool produces a valid approximation of the quality of the settings.

One measure of validity relates to the extent to which there was agreement between the four raters and the settings in terms of the rating levels awarded. Table 9.9 sets out the level of agreement in the rating levels awarded. As outlined in the Table, there was no incidence where all four raters agreed with the rating level awarded by the setting. Across the 24 Components rated by each Coordinator, there were four incidences where three of the raters awarded a rating level that was the same as that awarded by the setting. There were seven incidences where two of the raters awarded a rating level that was the same as that awarded by the setting. In the case of approximately half of the Components rated by each rater, the setting awarded a rating that was not awarded by any of the four raters.

Table 9.9: Level of Agreement between Settings and Raters on Ratings Awarded as Part of Síolta Experiment

Setting	No of Raters in Agreement				
	Four	Three	Two	One	Zero
Setting 1	0	1	4	1	2
Setting 2	0	2	2	0	4
Setting 3	0	1	1	1	5
Total	0	4	7	2	11

Source: Síolta Experiment

We saw in Table 9.9 above, that as part of the experiment there were four incidences where all four raters agreed on the rating level awardable to a Component within a setting, and 8 incidences where three raters agreed on the rating level awardable. These incidences may be characterised as ones in which the raters were secure in their assessment of quality.

In Table 9.10 below the extent to which settings were in agreement with the ratings awarded by the raters, where there was a high level of agreement among raters, is set out. As illustrated in the Table, in the case of all four incidences where all four raters were in agreement, the settings were not in agreement with the rating levels awarded by the raters. In three of the incidences, the settings awarded themselves rating levels that were higher than those awarded by the four raters, and in the other incidence the setting awarded themselves a lower rating level relative to that awarded by the four raters.

In the case of the 8 incidences where three of the raters were in agreement, in four of these incidences the settings awarded themselves a rating that was identical to that awarded by the raters. In relation to the remaining four incidences, in three of these incidences the settings awarded themselves a rating level that was higher than that allocated by the three raters, while in the remaining incidence the setting awarded themselves a lower rating level.

Table 9.10: Nature of Variability on Levels awarded by Settings and Raters as Part of Síolta Experiment

	No Raters Agree	
	4 Agree	3 Agree
Total no incidences	4	8
Identical setting rating	0	4
Higher setting rating	3	3
Lower setting rating	1	1

Source: Síolta Experiment

9.5 Assessment of the Consistency, Validity and Reliability of SAT

A key issue to address in the context of a future roll out of Síolta is the level of consistency, reliability and validity associated with the Síolta Self Assessment Tool instrument, which is implemented by settings as part of the Síolta QAP to determine the level of service provision within the ECCE setting.

On the basis of an analysis that was conducted of the baseline assessments completed by settings during the course of the Síolta field test, it was found that there is evidence of consistency in the rating levels awarded by settings across Components where one would anticipate consistency.

As part of the evaluation, an experiment was organised to test the reliability and validity associated with the Self Assessment Tool ratings. Over the course of the experiment four raters each visited three settings and implemented the Self Assessment Tool in relation to the eight Components.

As part of the experiment it was found that the inter rater reliability associated with the Self Assessment Tool is very modest. For example, it was found that in 50 per cent of cases just two of the four raters were in agreement on the rating level awardable to the setting.

Another indicator of the reliability associated with the Self Assessment Tool relates to the probabilities of agreement between pairs of raters; and between the settings and each rater in terms of the ratings awarded. An analysis of the experiment results found that across pairs of raters, the highest probability of exact agreement by a pair of raters was 63 per cent. The lowest probability of exact agreement among pairs of raters was 29 per cent. When the probability of agreement between settings and the raters was analysed, it was found that the highest probability of exact agreement between a setting and a rater was 50 per cent, while the lowest probability of agreement was zero per cent.

As part of the experiment it was found that there was a higher tendency for agreement among raters where higher rating levels (3 or 4) were being awarded. Conversely, there were lower probabilities of agreement among raters in relation to lower (level 1 or 2) ratings.

In terms of the validity associated with the Self Assessment Tool ratings, it was found that there are modest levels of validity associated with the Tool. For example, across the 24 ratings completed by each rater, there was no incidence where all four raters agreed with the rating level awarded by the setting, and there were just four incidences where three of the raters awarded a rating level that was the same as that awarded by the setting. It is considered that the variance in the rating levels awarded by settings vis-à-vis the raters is in part related to the preconceived notions held by settings in relation to the level of quality within their service. These preconceived notions are then borne out in the ratings awarded by the settings as part of their baseline and final self assessments.

It was found that there is a greater tendency for settings to allocate themselves a higher rating level relative to that allocated by the rater, but this was not universally the case.

Owing to the nature of the Framework, there will always be a subjective element associated with the rating levels awarded with the use of the Self Assessment Tool. In order to minimise the variability in the ratings awarded as a result of this subjectivity, intensive Coordinator training, where a common view on the level of quality associated with each rating level and how this understanding of quality can be transmitted to settings, should be implemented.

Consideration should also be given to the implementation of a five level rating scale, to reduce to the tendency for ratings to be plumped around Level 3. A potential rating scale might comprise the following levels of quality: very poor, poor, acceptable, good, and very good.

10. Findings and Recommendations

Overview of the Síolta National Quality Framework

The publication of Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, arose from one of the main objectives of the 1999 White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn*, namely ‘to facilitate the development of a high quality system of early childhood education’. The Framework comprises 12 Principles which encapsulate the overall vision of the Framework; 16 Standards which cover the individual areas of ECCE practice; and 75 Components which set out detailed indicators of aspects of quality in respect of all 16 Standards.

The approach to quality improvement, as set out in the Síolta Framework, involves settings implementing a 12-step Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) with the support of a Síolta Coordinator.

As part of the Síolta Framework guidance documentation is made available to both settings and Coordinators, including:

- A Síolta User Manual which sets out the Principles, Standards and Components of quality;
- A Síolta Coordinator Manual;
- An Overview of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme;
- A Síolta Self –Assessment User Guide and Tool;
- A Síolta Portfolio Building Guide; and
- A Síolta Resource Guide.

Overview of Field Test Implementation of Síolta

In 2009 the VCOs were asked to nominate staff meeting established minimum experience and qualification criteria to take up the role of Síolta Coordinator. The EYEPU considered the profile of each nominated candidate, to determine if they met established minimum qualifications and experience requirements. In November 2009, a four day induction course was held for the staff taking up the Coordinator role.

The recruitment of settings for the field test commenced in 2010. In total, 134 settings were participating in field test in July 2011. Sixty per cent of settings participating in the field test are community/voluntary, and 30 per cent are private settings. Using staff numbers as a proxy for size, approximately one in five settings participating in the field test employ between one and five staff directly in the provision of care and education to children. One third of the settings employ

between 11 and 20 staff while approximately thirty per cent of settings employ more than 20 staff in a similar capacity.

As part of the field test, Coordinators have adopted different approaches to supporting setting through the QAP process, ranging from very directional hand-holding approaches - where settings are reliant on their Coordinator for detailed instructions when completing the QAP; to more semi-directional semi-supportive approaches - where settings are reliant on their Coordinator for clarification around aspects of Síolta and the QAP but work independently through the QAP steps themselves. The different approaches adopted have to a large extent been influenced by the level of Coordinator resources made available, which in turn has been determined by the number of hours weekly Coordinators have had available to support their settings; the Coordinator – setting ratios in place; as well as the geographical area Coordinators are covering.

Extent to which Quality Improvement has Taken Place

Among the 134 settings participating in the field test at July 2011, there have been differing experiences in terms of the benefits derived from participation in the QAP process. Some settings have developed their understanding of quality service provision and practice and have accordingly implemented quality improvement developments within their settings. Other settings have reached the point where they are thinking more about quality, but have not yet commenced quality development work within their settings. Other settings are at the very early stages of the QAP process, and have yet to fully develop their understanding of quality. The extent to which Coordinators have been able to provide intensive levels of support and guidance to settings has been an important determining factor in terms of the extent to which settings have been able to benefit from their participation in the QAP.

Several contextual factors were identified by both settings and Coordinators as having impeded as well as enabled the progression of settings through the QAP. In addition to intensive Coordinator support, the main enabling factors identified include: the capacity of staff within the setting (which is influenced by previous experiences of other QAP processes); the levels of motivation and commitment to the process that exists among setting staff; the availability of supports (non-contact time/financial/time-in-lieu) for staff to support the time they dedicate to the process; the knowledge base of settings at the start of the process; and the availability of a manager/administrator with time to dedicate to driving the process. The main impeding factors identified include: the amount of staff time required to dedicate to the QAP (and in particular the lack of non-contact time); difficulties interpreting the Síolta guidance; the open-ended nature of Síolta; lack of buy-in from some setting staff; the costs associated with participation (e.g.

travel, photocopying); and a lack of writing and/or computer skills among some setting staff.

Effectiveness of Support Guidance and Materials

Over the course of the field test, both settings and Coordinators have made extensive use of the Síolta support guidance. Settings in particular have made use of the Síolta manuals, while Coordinators have been more likely to make use of the manuals, toolkits and templates. Notwithstanding the widespread use of the supporting guidance materials, settings and Coordinators have reported issues with their content. One of the main issues raised relates to the perceived ambiguous and arcane nature of some of the language used in the Síolta manuals, which reportedly has caused difficulties for settings trying to decipher its contents. This has had implications in terms of:

- Increasing the amount of Coordinator support time required;
- Increasing frustration levels among setting staff owing to the time required to decipher the elements of quality within the Framework;
- Significantly inhibiting the extent to which settings have been able to work independently through the Síolta QAP.

Síolta Principles Standards and Components

There was a high level of support reported among both Coordinators and settings in terms of the contents of the Síolta Framework. One of the main issues reported with respect to its contents however, has related to the fact that a number of Components cover similar aspects of service provision. This has resulted in the perception that there is repetition across Síolta Components which has caused frustration among setting staff who consider that they are being asked to describe the same aspect of service provision under a number of different Component headings. Given the nature of the ECCE sector, in terms of the general scarcity of paid staff non-contact time, a consolidation of Components covering similar aspects of service could significantly contribute to a reduction in the frustration levels being experienced by setting staff, while at the same time reducing the time required to complete the QAP, without affecting the quality development outcomes.

Another issue reported by some Coordinators in terms of the contents of the Síolta Framework relates to the fact that aspects of service provision covered as part of the Framework are also covered under the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations. Coordinators putting forward this view are ignoring the wider purpose of both the Regulations and the Framework. The Regulations set out minimum quality standards that all pre-school services (with a small number of defined exceptions) must comply with in terms of ensuring the health, safety and

welfare of children attending pre-school services. The Síolta Framework, on the other hand, was developed to promote the continuous development of quality (as per the quality spiral) within the sector. As such, to the extent that aspects of service provision covered within the Regulations can be continuously improved, they have a legitimate place within the Síolta Framework. However areas covered within the Regulations which are more black and white in nature, and where there is no room for continuous quality improvement, could be removed from the Framework without any implications for the continued development of quality within settings implementing the Framework. On this basis, Standard 15, which relates to the extent to which settings are compliant with all relevant national regulations and legislation, could be removed from Síolta, as settings are either compliant with all national regulations, or they are not.

Síolta Quality Assurance Programme 12-Step Process

It is clear that differing approaches have been adopted by Coordinators to supporting the implementation of the QAP within settings. The differing approaches adopted can be partly attributed to:

- the field test nature of Síolta's implementation to date;
- the lack of prescription in the Síolta support documentation with respect to the implementation of the QAP steps and the Coordinator role - while the overall steps and the nature of the Coordinator's role in the process are clearly laid out in the support documentation, the precise nature of the Coordinator - setting interaction is not prescribed; and
- the relative complexity of the Síolta QAP process, in terms of the number of steps involved.

In a future roll out, it is considered that Coordinators and settings would benefit from a more detailed outline of the process, in the form of initial Coordinator-setting support plans, which would set out in detail the nature of support that will be provided to settings, as well as the time scale of that support. Plans of this nature will help ensure a common understanding of the QAP process and a common approach to the Coordinator's interaction with each setting, in terms of the amount and type of support provided.

In addition to differing approaches to the overall QAP process, Coordinators have also varied in terms of the approaches they have taken to supporting the completion of baseline assessments by settings. In contrast to the guidance, the approach taken to completing baseline assessments over the course of the field test has been for settings to complete detailed inventories of all aspects of practice, under the Síolta Component headings. Owing to the number of Components involved (75), and the lack of paid non-contact time for staff in

many settings, this has resulted in settings spending significantly longer than envisaged completing their baseline assessments. Conversely, some Coordinators reported abandoning the baseline assessment step of the process, in favour of moving immediately to the preparation of action plans and development work. It is clear that more guidance is required in terms of how baseline assessments are to be completed. This will require more detailed Coordinator training to ensure a common understanding to the amount of detail that should be included as part of the baseline assessments as well as the amount of time that should be allocated to their completion.

As currently set out in the Toolkits, the QAP process is a lengthy process in terms of settings not seeing the benefits of efforts put into the process for a significant amount of time. The reason for this relates to the fact that, as per the guidance, settings must complete 75 baseline assessments and 75 action plans before any development work is commenced. Settings that have adopted the approach of completing the QAP in its entirety for one Standard, before moving on to the next Standard, have benefited from seeing the impacts of their efforts in a more timely fashion. It is considered that settings will benefit in the future from being allowed to complete the QAP process on a Standard by Standard approach.

Self Assessment Tool

A key issue to address in the context of a future roll out of Síolta is the level of consistency, reliability and validity associated with the Síolta Self Assessment Tool instrument. As part of the QAP, settings implement the Self Assessment Tool with the assistance of their Coordinator to determine the level of service provision within their setting. The Tool is implemented at the start of the QAP process and again prior to the putting forward of the portfolio of evidence for validation. As such it is vital that the rating levels awarded by the setting is a valid (accurate) and reliable reflection of the level of quality within the setting.

On the basis of an analysis of baseline assessments that were completed by settings participating in the field test, it was concluded that there is an encouraging level of consistency associated with the ratings completed by settings. That is to say, it was found that there are higher levels of consistency across Components where one would expect to find high levels of consistency.

The results of the evaluation in terms of both the reliability and validity associated with the Self Assessment Tool ratings were less encouraging. As part of an experiment organised and implemented during the evaluation, where four raters were asked to implement the SAT in three separate settings, it was found that the level of inter rater reliability associated with the rating levels awarded was very modest. For example, it was found that in 50 per cent of cases there was agreement by at most three of the four raters on the rating levels awarded, while

in 50 per cent of cases just two raters were in agreement on the rating levels awarded.

Another indicator of the reliability associated with the Self Assessment Tool relates to the probabilities of agreement between pairs of raters; and between the settings and each rater. An analysis of the experiment results found that across pairs of raters, the highest probability of exact agreement by a pair of raters was 63 per cent. When the probability of agreement between settings and the raters was analysed, it was found that the highest probability of agreement between a setting and a rater was 50 per cent.

In terms of the validity associated with the Self Assessment Tool ratings, it was also found that there are modest levels of validity associated with the Tool. For example, across the 24 ratings completed by each rater, it was found that there was no incidence where all four raters agreed with the rating level awarded by the setting, and there were just four incidences where three of the raters awarded a rating level that was the same as that awarded by the setting.

Owing to the nature of the Quality Framework, Coordinator support role and self-assessment process, it is inevitable that there will be a subjective element associated with the SAT rating levels awarded. In order to minimise the variability in the ratings awarded, intensive Coordinator training, involving workshops where a common view on the level of quality associated with each rating level should be implemented, where Coordinators will have practical opportunities to develop a common understanding of quality as well as develop the skills necessary to transmit that understanding of quality to settings.

Consideration should also be given to the implementation of a five level rating scale, to reduce to the tendency for ratings to be plumped around Level 3.

Mediation through Implementing Bodies

As part of the field test, Síolta Coordinators were recruited for the most part through the Voluntary Childcare Organisations. As such, those taking up the Coordinator role were chosen from a restricted pool of pre-existing staff resources within the implementing bodies. It is clear that Coordinators have adopted differing approaches to the implementation of the QAP and different approaches in terms of the sequence of Standards they have worked through with their settings. Previous experience of their own internal quality assurance programmes where differing aspects of quality are emphasised has possibly influenced the approaches adopted by Coordinators in terms of the Standards they have implemented first, and / or the interpretations of quality they have passed on to settings. It is not considered likely however, that the recruitment of Coordinators as part of a more open recruitment process would have resulted in a different

outcome, as all persons taking on the role will potentially be influenced by their previous training and experiences within the sector. The extent to which Coordinator backgrounds affects the QAP outcomes can be minimised however, through the provision of more intensive training to ensure a common understanding among Coordinators of the Framework and QAP contents, as well as through a greater prescription of the Coordinator role.

Coordinator Mentoring Model

A key issue to address in the context of any future roll out of Síolta is the appropriateness of the Síolta Coordinator mentoring role. Throughout the evaluation settings have reported a heavy reliance on their Coordinator, while settings in receipt of higher levels of Coordinator support have generally progressed faster through the process than settings in receipt of lower levels of support. In this context, and considering the open ended nature of Síolta where a level of interpretation of the Síolta Standards and Components is required, together with the relatively complex 12-step process involved in the QAP, it is considered that an element of Coordinator mentoring will be necessary as part of a future roll-out of the Programme.

The Síolta Coordinator mentoring model is a resource intensive model. This creates a major resource issue in terms of a wider implementation of Síolta by settings in the sector on the basis that there are approximately 4,250 settings¹⁰ participating in the Free Pre-School Year Scheme. An approach that combines a substantial increase in Coordinator numbers as well as a greater targeting of Coordinator resources will be necessary. In this regard, consideration will have to be given to the implementation of an initial assessment of setting's level of quality service provision with a view to prioritising their participation in the QAP, or the targeting of smaller settings or settings in disadvantaged areas.

While the mentoring approach is the preferred option, an alternative approach which could be considered would be to adopt a more prescriptive (tick-box like) approach within the National Quality Framework. A more prescriptive approach would mean settings could work independently through the quality improvement process, as no interpretations of quality on behalf of the setting would be required. This approach would involve settings receiving an inspection visit once they had completed the process. However, in order to encourage the engagement of settings in the process of quality development, and to ensure the long term sustainability of quality development within the sector, the less prescriptive mentoring approach is the preferred option.

¹⁰ This figure does not include the 3,165 primary schools and circa 20,000 childminders provision ECCE services.

In the eventuality that the mentoring approach is maintained, it will be necessary as part of future roll outs of the Programme to provide more intense induction training to Coordinators prior to their take up of the role. The initial training should cover in detail all aspects of the role to ensure a common understanding among all Coordinators as to the steps involved in the QAP process and their role therein. There will also be a need for more prescriptive guidance around the steps involved in QAP process, and the precise nature of coordinator interaction with setting. It is also recommended that consideration be given to the development of a Coordinator of Coordinators role, whose role would involve the provision of ongoing support to Síolta Coordinators.

Some Coordinators expressed concern in terms of the overlap that exists in terms of the contents of the Síolta Framework and the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations. Concern was also expressed with respect to the perceived lack of guidance that exists in terms of dealing with situations where the views of HSE Inspectors are at odds with those of Síolta Coordinators. In light of the differing functions of both the Regulations and the National Quality Framework, where the Regulations are concerned with ensuring minimum standards of health safety and welfare while the Framework is concerned with the continuous development of quality with respect to aspects of pre-school service provision and practice, it is considered appropriate that aspects of quality included within the Regulations where there is room for continuous quality improvement should also be found within the Framework.

In terms of dealing with situations where the views of Inspectors may be at odds with those of Coordinators, in the context of a future roll out of the Framework it will be necessary to liaise with the HSE to determine potential sources of ‘conflict’, with a view to avoiding situations where Coordinators are proposing quality developments that are likely to engender a negative view on behalf inspecting HSE Inspectors. It is also recommended that Coordinators be provided with information with respect to relevant national regulations and likely conflict areas as part of their induction training, with a view to preparing them for such situations that may arise.

Summary of Recommendations

In light of the findings over the course of the evaluation, it is thus recommended that:

- A review is conducted of the language used in the Síolta manual, with a view to removing elements of ambiguity and making it easily comprehensible to its target audience;

- A review is conducted of the Síolta Standards and Components with a view to consolidating Components covering similar aspects of service provision and practice;
- Standard 15, which relates to the extent to which ECCE settings are compliant with all national legislation and regulations be removed from the Framework;
- An approach where settings can complete the formal QAP process for individual Standards, on the basis of available capacities within the setting, should be implemented;
- A Standard by Standard approach should be adopted, where the Síolta 12-step QAP process is completed in its entirety for an individual Standard (or group of related Standards) before a setting commences the QAP process for the next Standard(s);
- Resources permitting, the Coordinator mentoring approach should be maintained;
- Settings commencing the QAP process should be provided with a brief Coordinator – setting implementation plan, setting out what will be required from settings over the course of the QAP process, and the nature of Coordinator – setting interactions that will take place;
- More detailed prescriptive guidance be developed outlining the precise nature of each step forming the QAP process, including the level of detail and time that should be allocated to the completion of baseline assessments;
- Coordinators undertaking the role of Síolta Coordinator should be provided with intensive training prior to commencing in the role, as part of which detailed guidance should be provided in terms of all aspects of the role. The training should include information with respect to the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations and potential conflict areas with the HSE Inspectorate, as well as how to handle conflicts that may arise. The training should also cover workshop exercises to ensure a common understanding of the quality levels associated with the Self Assessment Tool rating levels;
- Consideration should be given to the creation of a Coordinator of Coordinators role.
- Consideration be given to moving to a five-scale rating tool.

Appendices

Appendix A1.1: Distribution of Rating Levels Awarded across 75 Components

Component	Rating				No Settings
	1	2	3	4	
	%	%	%	%	
1.1	6.4	14.9	57.4	21.3	47
1.2	6.4	12.8	59.6	21.3	47
1.3	8.5	17.0	57.4	17.0	47
2.1	3.9	19.6	54.9	21.6	51
2.2	3.9	13.7	64.7	17.6	51
2.3	3.9	21.6	52.9	21.6	51
2.4	3.9	17.6	54.9	23.5	51
2.5	8.2	20.4	49.0	22.4	49
2.6	4.0	18.0	54.0	24.0	50
2.7	4.1	16.3	57.1	22.4	49
2.8	2.0	16.3	53.1	28.6	49
3.1	4.4	15.6	57.8	22.2	45
3.2	4.4	17.8	57.8	20.0	45
3.3	4.4	26.7	51.1	17.8	45
3.4	11.1	13.3	51.1	24.4	45
4.1	10.5	26.3	42.1	21.1	38
4.2	10.8	27.0	48.6	13.5	37
5.1	4.8	4.8	66.7	23.8	42
5.2	2.4	12.2	61.0	24.4	41
5.3	2.4	12.2	61.0	24.4	41
5.4	4.9	14.6	58.5	22.0	41
5.5	5.0	5.0	65.0	25.0	40
5.6	7.5	15.0	57.5	20.0	40
6.1	4.3	8.5	51.1	36.2	47
6.2	2.1	12.8	55.3	29.8	47
6.3	4.3	12.8	59.6	23.4	47
6.4	2.1	8.5	59.6	29.8	47
6.5	4.3	15.2	52.2	28.3	46
6.6	0.0	13.3	51.1	35.6	45
6.7	4.4	24.4	48.9	22.2	45
7.1	2.6	18.4	63.2	15.8	38
7.2	5.3	21.1	63.2	10.5	38
7.3	2.6	15.8	65.8	15.8	38
7.4	5.4	13.5	62.2	18.9	37
7.5	5.3	23.7	52.6	18.4	38
7.6	8.1	18.9	62.2	10.8	37
8.1	10.7	32.1	53.6	3.6	28
8.2	10.7	32.1	50.0	7.1	28
8.3	10.7	32.1	46.4	10.7	28
8.4	10.7	32.1	53.6	3.6	28

9.1	5.9	11.8	61.8	20.6	49
9.2	2.9	22.9	51.4	22.9	35
9.3	8.6	17.1	60.0	14.3	35
9.4	0.0	14.3	60.0	25.7	35
9.5	0.0	17.6	55.9	26.5	34
9.6	0.0	26.5	50.0	23.5	34
9.7	0.0	14.7	61.8	23.5	34
10.1	3.6	17.9	64.3	14.3	28
10.2	3.6	21.4	60.7	14.3	28
10.3	3.6	10.7	60.7	25.0	28
10.4	3.6	21.4	57.1	17.9	28
10.5	7.1	10.7	60.7	21.4	28
10.6	0.0	17.9	53.6	28.6	28
10.7	7.1	21.4	53.6	17.9	28
11.1	0.0	19.4	51.6	29.0	31
11.2	0.0	25.8	54.8	19.4	31
11.3	6.5	22.6	64.5	6.5	31
11.4	3.2	16.1	54.8	25.8	31
11.5	3.3	13.3	56.7	26.7	30
12.1	0.0	21.9	40.6	37.5	32
12.2	3.1	25.0	43.8	28.1	32
12.3	6.3	15.6	40.6	37.5	32
12.4	9.7	19.4	45.2	25.8	31
13.1	0.0	24.2	48.5	27.3	33
13.2	0.0	21.2	57.6	21.2	33
13.3	0.0	27.3	51.5	21.2	33
13.4	9.4	25.0	50.0	15.6	32
14.1	2.6	21.1	60.5	15.8	38
14.2	2.6	23.7	57.9	15.8	38
14.3	5.3	21.1	52.6	21.1	38
15.1	0.0	15.6	56.3	28.1	32
16.1	3.4	27.6	55.2	13.8	29
16.2	0.0	20.7	51.7	27.6	29
16.3	6.9	17.2	58.6	17.2	29
16.4	3.6	21.4	64.3	10.7	28

Source: Goodbody Economic Consultants analysis of Setting Survey

Appendix A2.1: Síolta Standards

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

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