

## Introduction

This document provides an overview of the activities of the Early Years Education Policy Unit, Department of Education and Skills and the Childcare Directorate, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, in relation to *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. It specifically addresses the following:

- **National Evaluation of the Implementation of the *Siolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP)**
- **Validation – the final stage in the *Siolta* QAP**

In April 2011, the Department of Education and Skills commissioned Goodbody Economic Consultants to carry out an evaluation of the initial implementation of the *Siolta* QAP. The final report from Goodbody was submitted in December 2011 and a summary of the key content of this report is provided below. The full report is published online and can be accessed on [www.dcyia.ie](http://www.dcyia.ie)

## Overview of *Siolta*

The publication in 2006 of *Siolta*, 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 consists of:

- 12 Principles which are the benchmark for all quality practice and service provision in early childhood education;
- 16 Standards which cover the areas of practice to be addressed and translate the vision of quality contained in the Principles into the reality of practice; and
- 75 Components which provide quality indicators for all practitioners in implementing *Siolta*. The Components relate directly to the Standards and act to break them down into more focused and specific parts.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings can engage with *Siolta* on a formal or informal basis. Informal use of *Siolta* usually involves using the resource materials developed as part of the framework, e.g., *Siolta* Setting Manuals, Research Digests etc., as tools for internal review of practice. Formal engagement means participation in the *Siolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), with the support of a *Siolta* Coordinator/Mentor. The *Siolta* QAP is a structured three stage process that culminates in a setting completing and submitting a quality portfolio for external validation.

## Overview of Field Test Implementation of *Siolta*

In 2009, Voluntary Childcare Organisations were invited to participate in a field test of the *Siolta* QAP. In order to do so each organisation had to be able to nominate staff who met required experience and qualification criteria to become *Siolta* Coordinators/Mentors. In November 2009, a four day induction course was held for the staff taking up the Coordinator role. A further six Continuing Professional Development (CPD) days have been provided since the initial induction.

The recruitment of ECCE settings to participate in the *Siolta* QAP field test began early in 2010. By July 2011, a total of 134 settings were participating in

the field test. The profile of the settings is diverse across a range of variables including size, type of provision and educational attainment profile of the staff, e.g., 60% of settings are community/voluntary and 30% are private settings. Approximately one in five settings employ between 1 and 5 staff directly in the provision of care and education to children. One in three settings employ between 11 and 20 staff while approximately 30% of settings employ more than 20 staff in a similar capacity.

## Key messages from the evaluation

### 1. Diversity of approaches

Despite the structured nature of the *Síolta* QAP, the evaluation showed that in supporting settings through the QAP process, Coordinators adopted different approaches ranging from very directional and hands on to semi-directional semi-supportive. The different approaches adopted were to a large extent influenced by the level of Coordinator resources made available, e.g., number of weekly hours available to support settings and geographical area covered.

### 2. Extent to which Quality Improvement has Taken Place

Quality improvement activities were reported across all settings. However, as with the implementation strategies, the 134 participating settings reported differing experiences which reflected the diverse capacity to engage with the *Síolta* quality assurance materials and processes. For example, some settings needed a lot of support to develop their understanding of quality in their context and to develop basic concepts and skills associated with the QAP while others reported significant progress in the implementation of quality improvement actions. The extent to which settings have been able to benefit from the QAP process has been influenced by the levels of support and guidance that *Síolta* Coordinators have been able to deliver.

Several factors were identified which both enabled and impeded the progression of settings through the QAP process. In addition to intensive Coordinator support, factors included capacity, motivation, commitment of staff, availability of supports to staff and availability of managerial staff to support the process. Impeding factors included time required to dedicate to the process, interpretation of *Síolta* guidance, open-ended nature of *Síolta* and lack of buy-in from some staff.

### 3. Effectiveness of Support Guidance and Materials

ECCE settings and their Coordinators/Mentors made extensive use of the *Síolta* support guidance. Where settings experienced difficulties with the language used in the *Síolta* manuals, increased Coordinator support was required. In some cases this was reported as leading to frustration among setting staff and inhibiting settings to work independently through the process.

### 4 *Síolta* Principles, Standards and Components

The content validity of *Síolta* was tested in the field as part of this implementation process. In the main, there was a high level of support among Coordinators and ECCE settings in terms of the relevance of contents of the *Síolta* Framework. However, there was some frustration expressed by staff in ECCE settings due to perceived repetition across the Components. It was suggested that this could be avoided by a consolidation of some Components without affecting quality improvement outcomes.

### 5 *Síolta* QAP - Structure

The researchers identified that Coordinators adopted various methods to support the implementation of the QAP. This can be partly attributed to the field test nature of *Síolta* implementation, the lack of prescription in the support documentation regarding Coordinator/setting interaction and the relative complexity of the actions/activities involved at each stage. It was suggested that the provision of greater detail regarding how each step of the *Síolta* QAP is to be supported by the Coordinator would be beneficial and would support a common approach to Coordinator interaction with ECCE settings.

Further guidance is required in terms of how baseline assessments are to be completed. Researchers found that some ECCE settings spent significant amount of time working through baseline self assessment on all *Síolta* Components before progressing to any action planning for quality improvement. Other Coordinators skipped the baseline assessment step and moved straight to action plans and quality improvement work. The researchers suggested that ECCE settings would benefit by completing the QAP process on a Standard by Standard approach.

## 6. Self Assessment Tool

The research process included a test of the reliability of the *Síolta* Self Assessment Tool (SAT). Analysis of baseline assessments of settings participating in the field test was encouraging in respect of the level of consistency associated with the ratings completed by the settings. However, an experiment to establish inter rater reliability was less encouraging due to modest inter-rater agreement. The researchers suggest that this may be attributed to the lack of training and experience of the Coordinators in the use of the SAT and recommendations for future roll out of *Síolta* include the implementation of intensive Coordinator training, involving workshops where a common view on the level of quality associated with each rating can be agreed.

## 7. Mediation through Implementing Bodies

The implementation of the *Síolta* QAP was mediated through a range of different organisations which had the potential to reduce the level of control over the nature and practices of implementation, e.g., Coordinators were nominated by their organisations on the basis of the prescribed qualification and experience criteria but were not interviewed for the posts. The researchers concluded that while Coordinators may have been influenced in their approach to implementing the *Síolta* QAP by their experiences working within their parent organisations, it is not considered likely that an open recruitment process would have resulted in different outcomes. However, in order to minimise any possible effects on the QAP in terms of Coordinator backgrounds, the provision of more intensive training to ensure a common understanding of *Síolta* and the QAP is recommended. It is also suggested that more detail should be provided on the Coordinator role and responsibilities to promote consistent implementation.

## 8. Coordinator Mentoring Model

A key issue to address in the context of any future roll-out of *Síolta* is the appropriateness of the Coordinator/Mentor role. The researchers considered that mentoring is an essential feature of the *Síolta* QAP as it encourages the settings to engage in the process of quality development

and develop the core skills necessary to ensure that the capacity and commitment for sustained quality improvement is developed and embedded in the ECCE setting. Any alternative approach would involve a more prescriptive model of quality assurance (e.g., based upon checklists). This would potentially give ECCE settings more independence while working through the quality improvement process, however, it would not deliver on the capacity development. If the mentoring approach is maintained, it will be necessary to provide more intensive Coordinator induction training. Additional recommendations in relation to the future development of the mentoring role in the *Síolta* QAP included: more prescriptive manualisation of the steps involved in the QAP; that consideration be given to the development of a role for a coordinator of the coordinators who would provide ongoing support; liaison with the HSE Inspectorate in order to avoid conflict between Coordinators and Inspectors in respect of the contents of the *Síolta* Framework and the Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006.

## 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 understood by 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 beginning the QAP process should be provided with a Coordinator-Setting plan, agreeing 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 *Siolta* 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 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006 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.

## Conclusion

The national evaluation of the *Siolta* QAP was conducted in parallel with the ongoing development of the programme in the field. The parallel nature of the evaluation and implementation processes also meant that many ECCE settings were at an early stage in the *Siolta* QAP and indeed the final stage of the *Siolta* QAP was only developed fully at the end of 2011. In any future development of *Siolta*, provision for evaluation and review which will build upon this initial evaluation process will be essential.

## The *Siolta* Validation Process

Validation is the third and final stage of the *Siolta* QAP (see below):

The stages of the *Siolta* Quality Assurance Programme

### Stage A Registration

1. Registration
2. Allocation of *Siolta* Mentor
3. Introduction to *Siolta* QAP (materials and processes)

### Stage B Self-assessment (Baseline) and Quality Improvement\*

4. Baseline Assessment
5. Action Planning
6. Developing Quality and Portfolio Building
7. Portfolio Review and Submission

### Stage C Validation

8. Validation
9. Certification
10. Renewal

\* Note: these steps are not linear in nature and settings may engage in them simultaneously

In the context of the *Síolta* QAP, validation is the external verification of the internal self assessed quality ratings presented by the ECCE service in their Quality Portfolio.

Someone who is expert in the type of ECCE service participating in the *Síolta* QAP but not familiar with the specific setting being validated will review the self assessed ratings and the evidence contained in the *Síolta* Quality Portfolio; will carry out a visit to the setting and observe practice to help her/him decide whether the evidence contained in the *Síolta* Quality Portfolio and available through on-site observation of practice supports the self assessed quality rating. In other words, is the *Síolta* Quality Portfolio an accurate representation of actual practice?

To-date, twenty ECCE settings have completed the full *Síolta* QAP and submitted their portfolios to the Early Years Education Policy Unit through their *Síolta* Coordinators/Mentors. The following four settings have been validated and received their *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme Record of Validation Certificates:

- Moatview Early Education Centre, Darndale, Dublin
- Little Friends Playgroup, Swords, Dublin
- Ballygall Community Playgroup, Ballygall, Dublin
- Luttrellstown Tots, Castleknock, Dublin

These first validation visits were carried out by staff in the Early Years Education Policy Unit and were instrumental in facilitating the development of the *Síolta* Validation Processes and Manual. Since the beginning of 2012, an increasing number of ECCE settings have reached the final stage of the QAP and are ready to submit their Portfolio for validation.

To expedite the validation of ECCE settings who had participated in the field test of the *Síolta* QAP it was decided that the most efficient way of creating a panel of additional Validators would be to approach the organisations who participated in the *Síolta* field test to see if they had the capacity to allow staff who met the qualification experience criteria to take on the role of *Síolta* Validator. The response was very positive and sixteen staff drawn from the ranks of

existing *Síolta* Coordinators attended the validation induction programme on 14<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> February 2012. Completion of this induction programme will be complemented by shadowing and close monitoring of validation activities by the EYEPU. It is anticipated that the remaining participants in the field test of the *Síolta* QAP will proceed to submit quality portfolios in the coming months and a review and evaluation of the validation tools and processes will be conducted. Once complete, the research and development phase for the *Síolta* QAP will be concluded.

---

Early Years Education Policy Unit  
February 2012