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Analysis of European Good Practices in the Monitoring and Evaluation of Early Childhood Education and Care

For the project *"Developing a Comprehensive Framework for the Monitoring and Evaluation of Early Childhood Education and Care in the Czech Republic"*

Analysis of European Good Practices in the Monitoring and Evaluation of Early Childhood Education and Care

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Prague,
April 2024

List of Acronyms

CZ	Czech Republic
DG EAC	Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
DCEDIY	Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Ireland)
DES	Department of Education and Skills (Ireland)
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
EU	European Union
FINEEC	Finnish Education Evaluation Centre
GGD	Municipal health service (Netherlands)
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MoEC	Ministry of Education and Culture (Finland)
MoECS	Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (Netherlands)
MoER	Ministry of Education and Research (Norway)
MoESS	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (Lithuania)
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (Czech Republic)
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Czech Republic)
MoSAE	Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (Netherlands)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
TSI	Technical Support Instrument
UDIR	Directorate of Education and Training (Norway)
VVE	Subsidised pre-schools programme (Netherlands)

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1. Introduction

1.2 Purpose of the report

This report was developed as part of the *"Developing a Comprehensive Framework for the Monitoring and Evaluation of Early Childhood Education and Care in the Czech Republic"* project led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) in close partnership with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS). The project is funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument and implemented by UNICEF in cooperation with the European Commission. Based on the project's objectives of developing an M&E Framework for the Czech Republic's ECEC sector, the report examines how other European countries have designed their quality assurance and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems and processes for ECEC. Learning from other countries is a key aspect of the European Commission Technical Support Instrument project approach, and by exploring the other systems' strengths, limitations and outcomes, conclusion can be drawn to help advise the Czech Republic with respect to its reforms.

It is important to note that Monitoring and Evaluation are seen in this report as integral processes for quality enhancements within the ECEC sector, and as such are seen as qua-

lity assurance activities. At times the terms M&E and Quality Assurance will be used inter-changeably, with the assumption that M&E is only done to assess and ultimately improve quality.

1.2 Trends and emerging practices in M&E for ECEC

Monitoring and evaluation are critical components of a well-functioning quality ECEC system, as clearly stated in both the European ECEC Quality Framework and the UNICEF Build to Last Framework.

The EU Quality Framework states that countries' M&E systems should produce information at the relevant local, regional and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice, and that the best interest of the child should be at the heart of M&E processes. It adds that information should be used to encourage open exchange, coherent planning, review, evaluation, and development of improved quality of services. That information should be used to support providers, teachers, parents, and children with the overall aim of the best possible child outcomes (European Union, 2019). The Build to Last Framework sets four goals for every ECEC system to meet for quality assurance, these are (1) the existence of comprehensive standards for service quality; (2) functional quality assurance mechanisms; (3) capacity across the sector to monitor quality – at all levels, both structural and process quality; and (4) that quality monitoring facilitates quality improvements (UNICEF, 2020).

While M&E is a critical area of the ECEC systems and ECEC provision, it has not been widely researched when it comes to comparative studies and is not given the same level of attention and study as other components of the ECEC System such as curricula and workforce (OECD, 2015; Maxwell, 2022), however there has been a recent rise in interest in monitoring for the sake of ECEC quality and there are exciting policy developments emerging from this.

The evolution of ECEC services provides context to how M&E for ECEC has developed. In most European countries, ECEC services have evolved from what were initially preventative health services for children of low-income families, or childcare for working parents. These services were therefore provided by, or overseen by, the Ministries of Social Welfare / Ministries of Labour, or the Ministries of Health, especially for children aged 0 to 3 years (Vandenbroeck, 2019). Only in more recent years, starting from the 1970s, was the early learning component introduced more systematically into these young-child services. Again, this happened slowly and with a focus on the years right before grade 1 initially (Vandenbroeck, 2020). By the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st, longitudinal studies were starting to show the significant multi-faceted benefits for ECEC (Schweinhart et al., 1990; Barnett & Masse, 2007) and political and economic drivers meant that both the education and care components of ECEC were becoming increasingly recognised. As a result, it is now not only access to childcare but also its quality and ultimately the child outcomes that are a matter of national concern (Vandenbroeck, 2020).

As ECEC has evolved, our understanding of quality has also evolved. As have the methods and approaches to monitoring and evaluating services with a quality – and particularly a process quality – lens. When ECEC's purpose was health and childcare, the monitoring reflected this. Structural quality components were a priority. There were measures easily checked by statutory inspections such as the number of children in spaces, the number

of adults supervising them, the cleanliness, safeguards and means of disease prevention. With more focus on child development, child well-being and the quality of the interactions between adult and child, the methodologies, tools and systems require more nuance, which led to the exciting developments taking place in the field in response to this need.

1.2.1 A coherent approach to ECEC and the monitoring thereof for the age group of 0-6.

As ECEC has developed across different ministry systems, with the expansion of the education provision to pre-primary settings and the development of childcare in the social/labour or health ministries, the systems and processes for oversight also evolved separately with different priorities (OECD, 2013, OECD, 2015, EU ECEC Working Group, 2023a). The normative frameworks often will be different based on the phase of ECEC and the body responsible. The younger age groups are still less likely to have established curriculum frameworks, and their oversight bodies tend to have less educational and pedagogical training than those overseeing the 3+ age group (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister, 2019). Efforts are being made in reforms across Europe to consolidate and streamline the ECEC sectors (Eurydice, 2023). The development of common curricula, quality frameworks and common visions for ECEC with a smooth continuum of learning and care across the 0–6 range also requires reforms of the M&E systems. These shifts can be seen, with countries moving towards using common tools for all settings, merging inspectorates or having different bodies working together more closely, with clarified roles (Maxwell, 2022; EU ECEC Working Group, 2023a).

1.2.2 The child at the heart of quality enhancements

One of the key emerging trends in ECEC M&E has been the shift towards having a more child-centred approach in the ethos behind the M&E systems and processes (Von Suchodoletz et al., 2023). Rather than reviewing settings to ensure structural standards are met, M&E is now increasingly trying to gauge the quality of processes, interactions and the experience of the child within ECEC centres. With quality enhancement for the sake of the child being the goal (Slot et al., 2015), there has been a shift towards more holistic and comprehensive evaluation frameworks that encompass a broader range of factors beyond academic achievement. Process quality tools now play a central role in evaluating programme effectiveness, guiding continuous improvement efforts and informing policy decisions in ECEC (OECD, 2015; EU ECEC Working Group, 2022). Measuring and assessing process quality requires the involvement of professionals who are trained and knowledgeable in ECEC and requires more detailed and often qualitative tools (Douglass, 2019). All of this makes process quality indicators more complicated and more costly to measure than the structural quality ones, and in parallel studies have also found that by having strong monitoring and evaluation systems in place, process quality is heightened (Slot, 2018a).

1.2.3 Increased use of technology

Developments in technology are also reshaping M&E systems and approaches. Increasingly, countries are developing databases, websites, apps and tools that allow for efficiency, interactivity, streamlining of data sharing and the interactive use of the information generated (EU ECEC Working group, 2023a). Technology advancements and the opportunities to re-design and re-develop national and local data systems also help to support the

streamlining of ECEC systems mentioned above. Making information available online also makes it more accessible to parents and communities and helps to make assessments more transparent.

1.2.4 Broadened opportunities for internal setting evaluation and participation

Other practices which are becoming more common are the requirement and/or option for internal input / evaluation of centres and self-reflection of teachers to be included into national processes – often the making of online systems as mentioned above (EU ECEC Working Group, 2022). This gives centre leaders and educators a chance to have agency in the process while also developing their own understanding of how their practices affect process quality and child outcomes (EU ECEC Working Group, 2023b). Child and parent participation in the process is also becoming increasingly common and is encouraged by the guiding frameworks (EU, 2019; UNICEF, 2020; Maxwell, 2022).

1.2.5 Decentralisation

Finally, in some countries, efforts are also being made to decentralise ECEC and its oversight more if this has not been the case historically. As municipalities are closer to the ECEC settings and the parents, they can often play a more meaningful role in day-to-day quality enhancements risk mitigation than the central ministries or inspectorates can (Newman, 2009; Ponguta et al., 2019).

1.3 Monitoring ECEC in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, the monitoring and evaluation system for Early Childhood Education and Care is split between the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). MoLSA oversees children's groups catering to ages 6 months to 6 years, with a predominant focus on children under 3 years. Caregivers in these groups are required to hold professional qualifications. On the other hand, MoEYS manages kindergartens for children up to 6 years, where the compulsory pre-school year is fulfilled. Educators in kindergartens require a minimum qualification at the level of specialized secondary education.

Despite municipalities being responsible for public kindergartens, they are not obligated to provide childcare services for children under 3 years of age. Data suggest that such services are often missing, especially in socially disadvantaged areas, exacerbating poverty, social exclusion and low female labour force participation. While capacities for ECEC services for 0–3-year-olds are gradually expanding, there is not a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to assess access and quality for this age group, and normative frameworks for 0–3 are less developed than for the older age groups.

MoEYS has established a monitoring and evaluation system for kindergartens, integrating data on ECEC into the national education management information system. However, the division of responsibility between MoLSA and MoEYS necessitates the development of an integrated system bridging both age groups (under 3 years of age and 3–6-year-olds). This would help strategic planning, smooth transitions between ECEC services, and consistency in quality and approaches across the sector, ensuring a continuum of early education and care for young children (0–6 years) in the Czech Republic. A detailed breakdown of the current status of ECEC Monitoring and evaluation practices in the Czech Republic can be

found in the Assessment of Current Monitoring and Evaluation Practice in the ECEC Sector in the Czech Republic prepared as part of the project by the research team based at Charles University in Prague (Jana Straková, Jaroslava Simonová, Petra Holečková, Kamila Brožová).

2. Methodology

2.1   Data collection

This study uses the qualitative research method of multiple-case study analysis (Yin, 2003), examining how M&E systems are structured and implemented in European countries. It is intended to examine the cases presented here to learn from good practice and to inform the reforms of the Czech Republic. In Section 4 of this report "Considerations for the Czech Republic", the replicability of the cases and/or transferability potential for the Czech context are also considered.

The cases were selected from the pool "ECEC systems in Europe" and specifically countries in the European Union or European Economic Area. A selection criterion was developed together with the project steering committee, of which types of systems or condition would be most interesting and relevant to them to inform their reforms. The criteria included countries that have:

- ↘ achieved high ECEC quality and access or have made significant improvements in recent years;
- ↘ strong M&E systems, or relevant reforms and improvements in these systems in recent years;
- ↘ well-established tools, approaches and methodologies for M&E;
- ↘ a serious focus on both process and structural quality, with an ethos of M&E for quality enhancements;
- ↘ to a lesser extent – decentralisation of ECEC provision with oversight and quality monitoring taking place at the local level.

While not a central consideration, the steering committee was also interested to learn from some countries that have a split system with strong coordination across bodies when it comes to M&E, therefore a mix in system types was sought to ensure that both the unified and split systems were included.

A rapid desk review of systems that fit the criteria was conducted and a long list of countries was developed. The long list included Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden. Based on the review of the long list, the steering committee provided feedback on which systems it found most interesting and relevant, together with inputs from the researcher. This process reduced the long list to a short list of countries for

deeper review that represented areas of interest, a mixture of system types and relevant reforms. The short-list countries included in this report are Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway.

Based on the agreed short list, data were collected through (a) document research desk review; (b) a series of online peer-exchange sessions with technical officials from the relevant ministries in the chosen countries; and (c) key informant interviews.

The document research desk review included data on the European ECEC systems, national laws, policies, normative frameworks, inspection frameworks and data systems, reports from European and international organizations, relevant papers published in academic journals, research reports published by the EU ECEC Working Group and the review of internal reports and tools shared by ministry officials.

The peer exchange sessions were organised between ministry officials, officials of the relevant national education agencies and researchers familiar with the field, together with the Czech ministries, the project working group member in the Czech Republic, UNICEF, and the European Commission. These 3-hour technical online exchanges provided an opportunity to discuss the different countries systems as well as the developments in and key components of ECEC M&E across Europe.

Finally, the key informant interviews were held as 1:1 calls and deeper-dive discussions with ministry officials or officials of agencies responsible for ECEC M&E in the short-list countries. The initial interviewees were selected based on their official leadership roles for ECEC in their countries, and in some cases, participation in the EU ECEC working group under DG EAC. After this, a snowball sampling process was used with referrals for further interviews made by the participants (Naderifar et al., 2017). A total of 13 experts from the 5 countries were consulted.

2.2 Data analysis framework

In order to review the information systematically and comparatively on the different national systems and to facilitate the identification of good/ promising practice, a framework to guide the analysis was developed and used to structure this report.

A review of the main components that make up a well-functioning monitoring and evaluation system for ECEC was done, drawing from the EU ECEC Quality Framework, the UNICEF Build to Last Framework as well as a review of the series of reports from the EU ECEC Working Group on monitoring and evaluation of ECEC in Europe, and from OECD Starting Strong reports, policy papers and literature reviews on monitoring quality in ECEC. The key components have been synthesized in the conceptual framework below, with each element summarized in Table 1. The components should be assessed at national, sub-national level(s) and at the setting level to get a full picture of the system.

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ECEC Principles, Values and Ethos

Governance, Legislation and Funding

Quality and
Normative
Frameworks as
a Basis for M&E

Data Collection
Processes,
Tools, and
Systems

**M&E Systems
for ECEC**

Participation
and
Coordination

Leadership,
Personnel and
Expertise

National level

Regional level

Local level

Setting level

Figure 1: Components Framework for ECEC M&E Systems (author's own development)

Component	Description
ECEC Principles, Values and Ethos	The historic, political and social value and perceptions of ECEC in the country, which in turn informs the legal basis as well as the approach to M&E and intrinsic purpose for which ECEC is both offered and assessed.
Governance, Legislation and Funding	The legislation and policies which mandate ECEC service provision, broad quality factors and monitoring thereof as well as the financial flows and financial responsibilities and the bodies/authorities responsible for ECEC provision, quality assurance and M&E – and how these bodies interact.
Quality and Normative Frameworks as Basis for M&E	The documents that set the vision and plan for ECEC implementation and quality. These would include Quality Frameworks, Curricula Frameworks, M&E Frameworks, Standards, ECEC programmes/plans, etc. These can be stand-alone documents or components included within other national/regional/local documents, or within broader policies or legislation. The documentation which provides the basis for indicators against which quality is measured and assessed.
Data Collection Processes, Tools and Systems	The approaches used to collect and verify data, including distinctions between tools and processes for structural data compared to process quality data. The lifecycle of the M&E processes, what happens to the data, how they are collected, processed, used and by whom, and how often this cycle takes place for different data sets and/or settings. The tools (questionnaires, forms, feedback sessions, interviews, etc.) used for collecting data and assessing quality – used both for monitoring and for evaluations.
Leadership, Personnel and Expertise	The personnel from the national level down to the setting levels and their responsibilities vis-à-vis ECEC quality assurance and M&E. Staff members' status and needs in terms of training levels / expertise, sufficient staffing, support and any role overlap/duplication. The role of leadership in quality assurance, especially at the level of the facility.
Participation and Coordination	The levels of participation in the process, whether these are optional or mandatory, and whether they include teacher, parent, children and/or broader stakeholders. How participation is mandated and managed. What kind of coordination takes place between the different bodies and stakeholders.

Table 1: Description of M&E components for ECEC

Principles against which an M&E System should be tested/reviewed
Rights-based – Ethical data collection, ownership and use.
Child-centred – with best interest of child at the heart of the system.
Efficient and effective – both in terms of costs and human resources and being fit for purpose.
Quality enhancement focus – strengthening systems and services without being punitive.
Participatory – Provides opportunities for child as well as parent and other stakeholders participation.
Transparent and based on trust – while in line with GDPR or the relevant data protection laws.

Table 2: Principles of the fit-for-purpose M&E systems

This components framework has been reviewed by researchers working in the field of ECEC quality monitoring and has been reviewed by the project steering committee to ensure that it reflects the needs and interest areas for the Czech Republic's reforms. The framework has been designed to further unpack the broad goals and quality statements of the EU ECEC Quality Framework and the UNICEF Build to Last Framework and to help identify and structure areas of reform (EU, 2019; UNICEF, 2020).
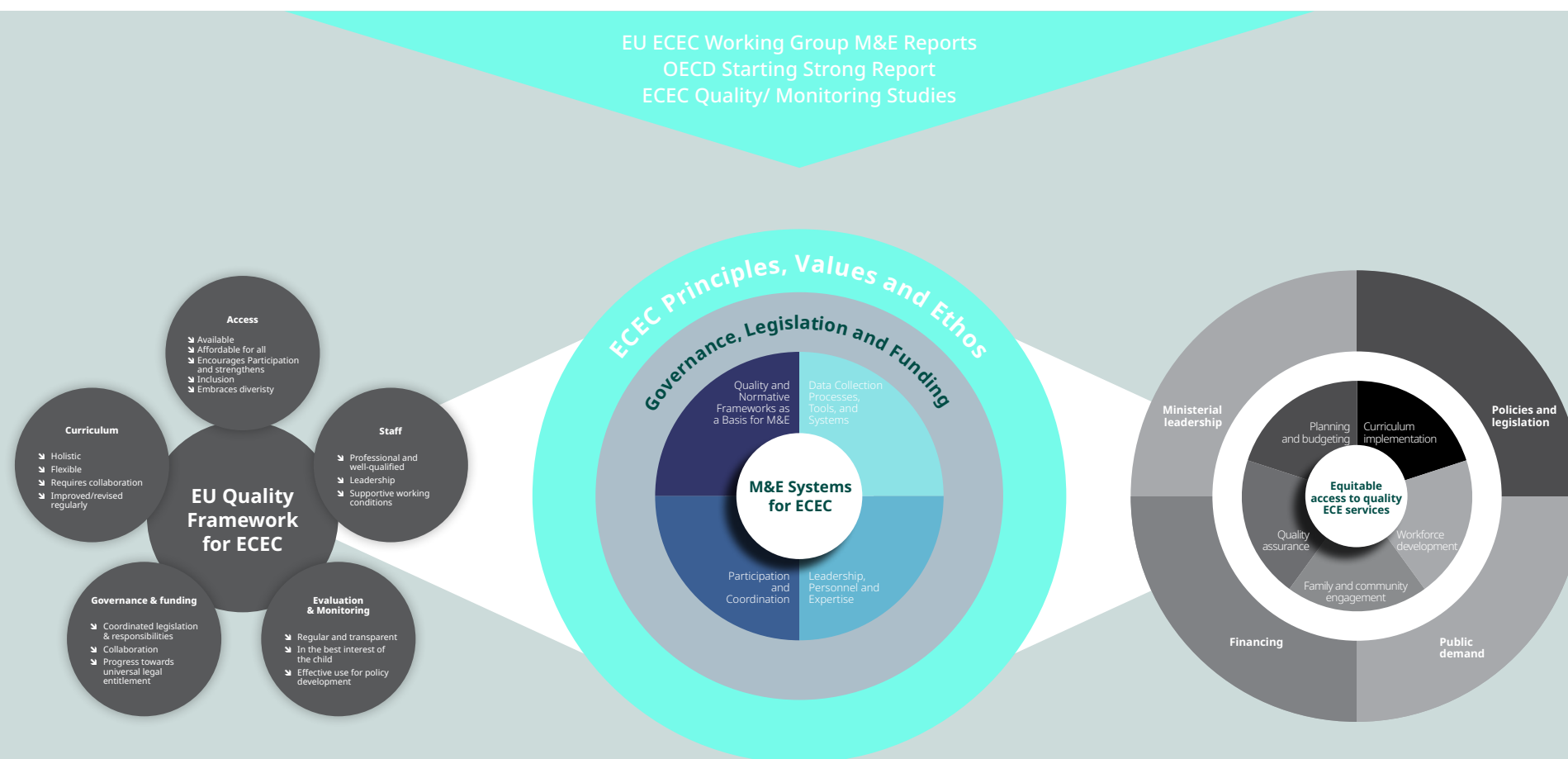

Figure 2: The Components Framework is derived from the EU ECEC Quality Framework, the UNICEF Build to Last Framework and the OECD quality and monitoring guidance for ECEC as well as key reports and studies on the subject

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3. Case Studies

3.1 Finland

3.1.1 Overview – Principles, values and ethos

There is a long history of ECEC in Finland, with the inclusion of early education within care starting from the 1860s. Due to this long history, there is a deeply ingrained culture of valuing ECEC and seeing it as an essential investment. ECEC is also seen as a key intervention to foster social cohesion. Universal right to ECEC in some form was enacted in 1990 and the duration of coverage has been expanding since then. Personal freedoms, coupled with societal responsibilities and reliance are a cornerstone of the Finnish education system and society, and these values start to be engrained in the early years; this also provides the basis for a trust-based monitoring and quality enhancement system. ECEC in Finland is highly child-centred, child-led and play-based, and Finland considers ECEC an integral part of the lifelong learning path (MoEC, 2023).

Children have a legal entitlement to ECEC from 9 months of age and at 6 years of age the pre-school programme is compulsory. Finland mostly has public, municipal ECEC provisions (76%) but there are also private offers (18%) and a few alternative provisions like family day cares (children's and parents' groups), which make up around 6% of the service offer. 90.9% of children from age 3 to the starting age of compulsory primary education are participating in ECEC. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, 74% of children between 1 and 6 years of age attend centre-based ECEC or family day care and 98.5% of 6-year-old children participate in organised learning one year before the official primary school entry age.

3.1.2 Governance, legislation and funding

The Ministry of Education and Culture is the national authority responsible for ECEC in Finland and has been for the past 10 years. The Finnish National Agency for Education plans and decides on the national core curriculum, based on which local curricula are developed. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is also responsible for inspecting the ECEC settings at national level and for supporting the organizers and the providers of ECEC services with self-evaluation tools and procedures. Municipalities have a statutory duty to provide ECEC services according to the local needs. Also at the local level, regional administrative agencies and municipalities are responsible for the licensing, approval and monitoring of the ECEC services and settings, including service quality, staff quality and child development.

ECEC in Finland is governed by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, effective as of 1 September 2018. The Act outlines provisions on every child's entitlement to ECEC, the objectives of ECEC, national core curriculum, local curriculum and the individual ECEC plans for children, the ECEC environment, involvement of children and parents, job titles and staff qualifications, maximum group size, staff-to-child ratio, multiprofessional cooperation, evaluation, and data collection and storage.

ECEC is very well funded in Finland. Around one third of the national education budget goes towards ECEC, with an annual expenditure of EUR 2.8 billion (MoEC, 2023). The fees in municipal ECEC centres and family day care premises are regulated by the Act on Client Fees in Early Childhood Education and Care (1503/2016). All children have publicly subsidized legal entitlement to the municipal ECEC services. Families pay fees according to their income. The fees in full-time municipal ECEC vary between EUR 0 and 288 per month, including meals and learning materials. Low-income families do not pay any fees. In privately-run ECEC settings, fees are usually higher. Pre--primary education is offered free of charge to all children in Finland (Eurydice, 2022).

A lot of the responsibility for quality ECEC lies with the leadership of centres and the teachers. They are trusted to develop and implement learning programmes and plans, continuously improve their knowledge and skills, keep up with developments in the sector, self assess and peer assess and to facilitate meaningful participation of children and their parents in the process (FINEEC, 2018).

3 .1.3   Quality and normative frameworks

The duties and organisation of FINEEC are laid down in the [Act](#) and [Government decree 1317/2013](#). As education providers and institutions hold the primary responsibility for quality, the majority of normative frameworks in Finland provide broad guidance for complementary additions to be added and for implementation at the discretion of the settings.

To support municipalities and providers with quality assurance and evaluation, FINEEC developed [Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care (2018)](#) (also referred to as the Finnish ECEC Quality Framework) and [the associated indicator framework.](#) The framework lays out structural and process quality indicators across domains of ECEC, and has indicators for national, local and practice levels (FINEEC, 2018).

[Finland's national core curriculum](#) addresses children from 0 to 5 years of age. During the first year of compulsory education, that is, the pre-primary year, a separate core curriculum is applied. The curriculum is goal-oriented and focuses on the development of transversal competences which will assist the child to proceed to later stages of development and learning. Exploring, experimenting and personal experience practicing on materials and things are emphasized in the curriculum. The ECEC curriculum includes five areas of learning: Rich world of languages; Diverse forms of expression; Me and our community; Exploring and interacting with my environment; and I grow, move and develop. The Finnish National Agency for Education plans and decides on the national core curriculum, based on which local curricula are developed.

3.1.4   Data Collection, tools and systems

In Finland, the oversight of ECEC services operates through a decentralized model, with regional administrative agencies and municipalities assuming key roles in ensuring quality standards. These entities are tasked with licensing, approving and monitoring ECEC services, encompassing various aspects such as service quality, staff competence and child development. Specifically, municipalities conduct rigorous inspections to ensure compliance with the minimum standards, covering areas like staff-to-child ratios, health and safety regulations, staff qualifications, materials usage and curriculum implementation. They also place special emphasis on fostering

effective teamwork, communication and the application of national pedagogical frameworks (Eurydice, 2022; FINEEC, 2023; MoEC, 2023).

The education providers and institutions themselves are primarily responsible for quality assurance. According to the law, these providers are obligated to evaluate the effectiveness of their services and participate in external evaluations. Self-evaluation practices are determined at the local level. Special focus is given to the arrangement of activities and the implementation of the pedagogy promoted by the national quality framework. The individual plan of each child should be revised at least once per year together with the guardian. While Finnish legislation requires the publication of key evaluation results, the specific means of dissemination are left to the discretion of education providers, and individual results or outcomes of settings are not shared in order to avoid ranking.

External evaluations of service quality and impact are predominantly conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). Notably, Finland has no school inspections and standardized teacher evaluations, relying instead on sample-based evaluations of learning outcomes and thematic analyses to inform educational development and policy decisions. These evaluations are designed to support learning, ensure quality assurance and provide data for evidence-based planning and policymaking.

The oversight of ECEC services also involves Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVI), the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira) and the relevant municipalities, particularly for private ECEC settings. FINEEC's guidelines and recommendations aid municipalities and private service providers in conducting systematic self-evaluations, with quality assessment encompassing structural and process-related factors at various levels. Collaboration with external experts and stakeholders ensures ongoing refinement and development of evaluation tools to support ECEC quality improvement efforts. FINEEC recently launched the VALSSI System, which is an online national quality evaluation system and an accompanying self-evaluation toolkit for ECEC settings. It provides guidance and a support system for quality management and leadership. It is designed to support informed decision-making and participative evaluation, which allows ECEC centres to reflect on their strengths, weaknesses and areas that require improvements. VALSSI takes centres and local authorities through an evaluation process cycle:
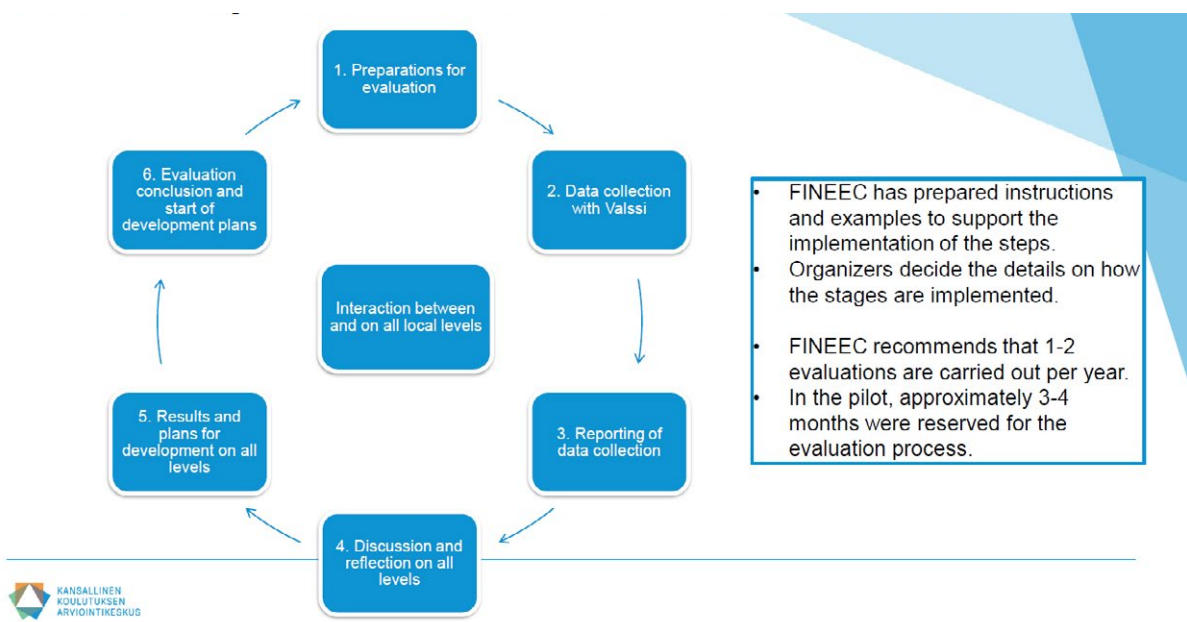

Figure 3: Evaluation process with VALSSI at the local level

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VALSSI consists of different sets of tools based on the Quality Framework that local autho-rities, centre leadership and ECEC staff can use (source: FINEEC). These include tools in the form of questionnaires for evaluating **structural factors** such as:

1. Leadership in early childhood education and care
   - Pedagogical leadership and leadership structures
2. Staff structure and resources reserved for ECEC
   - Staff's in-service training and other competence development
3. Service structure in early childhood education and care
   - Inclusiveness of ECEC
   - Local guidelines of support for development and learning
   - Local curriculum process
   - Guidance and counselling related to ECEC for parents
   - Guidance, advice and oversight related to ECEC services
   - Structures that support the start of ECEC
4. The organiser's quality management
   - Structures for evaluating and developing early childhood education and care

As well as tools for evaluation of **process factors** such as:

1. Interaction
   - Sensitive interaction and ways of expression
   - Reciprocal and linguistic interaction
   - Peer interaction, togetherness and group atmosphere
   - Interaction among staff and multidisciplinary cooperation
2. Implementation of the curriculum
   - Pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation and development
   - Play
   - Physical education
   - Many forms of expression
   - Technology education
   - Mathematical thinking
   - Environmental and sustainability education
   - Media education, multi-literacy and digital competence
3. Learning environment
   - Physical learning environment
4. Support for learning, development and well-being
   - Basic activities
   - Food education
   - Children's support
5. Educational cooperation: Interaction between staff and guardians
6. Child's experience: Supporting the child's emotional well-being and participation

Instead of focusing on learning outcomes, the objective of evaluation in ECEC sector is to promote the preconditions for children's well-being, development and learning. ECEC professionals use narrative and observational tools for this purpose and keep records for each individual child. This process is called pedagogical documentation and is the basis on which the individual plan for each child is developed. Children are also closely involved in the evaluation process using child-participation tools and practices (FINEEC, 2018; FINEEC, 2023).

3.1.5   Leadership, personnel and expertise

Although ECEC centres in Finland are encouraged to adopt a distributed leadership model, where leadership responsibilities are shared among various stakeholders, including centre directors, pedagogical leaders and teaching staff, strong and skilled leadership is a central component to the delivery of quality ECEC in Finland. Leaders have very specific job descriptions and roles, and as such Finland is introducing a leadership framework for ECEC in Finland (Hujala & Alila, 2022; Hujala et al., 2023). Internally overseen quality processes also require sufficient and highly trained staff. Currently Finland is struggling to recruit and retain sufficient staff members with the desired qualifications and relied on a significant number of undertrained staff, which is a potential risk to quality services.

3.1.6   Participation and coordination

The Finnish system is highly participatory, both between the municipality and the providers, within the settings, and between the settings and the children and families. This is engrained in legislation as well as being part of the culture of ECEC. Parents are involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation processes, ensuring their voices are heard in shaping the ECEC services. Parents and children are encouraged to participate through avenues such as parent-teacher meetings, surveys and open communication channels established by ECEC providers (MoEC, 2023). Transparency is emphasized, with evaluation results (including feedback from parents and children) required to be published.

3.2   Ireland

3.2.1   Overview – Principles, values and ethos

Ireland's ECEC sector has been undergoing a series of exciting and ambitious reforms over the past 5–7 years focusing on quality, affordability and access. Ireland's ECEC system is predominately private (99% private, with 74% of those being for-profit and 26% are non-profit, but also non-public; they are run by community-based structures) and have become increasingly costly for families, as well as having quality challenges such as recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

In Ireland, the compulsory school age begins at 6 years of age, while participation in pre-primary education is optional. However, children as young as 4 can enrol in primary schools, and currently most children start at the age of 5. Early childhood services in Ireland are predominantly provided outside the formal school system, offered by various private, community and voluntary organizations under different names such as crèches, nurseries, pre-schools, *naíonraí* (Irish language pre-schools), playgroups and day-care services (Eurydice, 2023).

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme was established in 2010. It is a universal two-year pre-school initiative accessible to all children within the specified age bracket. This programme offers children their initial structured learning experience before entering primary school. The programme operates for three hours each day, five days a week, over 38 weeks from September to June annually. Children are eligible to join if they have reached 2 years and 8 months of age by 31 August,

provided they will not turn 5 years and 6 months by 30 June of the programme year. Participation of children in the ECCE programme is 96 % (DECDIY, 2024).

The ongoing reforms are driven by a strong belief that ECEC should be firmly rooted in both early learning and care. They emphasize viewing the early years as integral to the education system and promoting strong linkages between them. Moreover, co-ordination, collaboration and meaningful engagement with stakeholders are crucial aspects of these changes. These efforts aim to foster trust and establish a system that works for all (DCEDIY, 2024).

3.2.2 Governance, legislation and funding

Ireland has a whole-of-government national strategy for young children, which pro-vides the basis of the ECEC reforms and policy in Ireland. [The First 5 Strategy](2018) envisions integrated services and holistic support for young children and their fami-lies.

There are two ministries (referred to as Departments in Ireland) responsible for ECEC, but they work very closely together. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), which assumed the current title and mandate in 2020, is responsible for the governance, oversight, policy development, funding and implementation of ECEC, including both the "ECCE" universal preschool programme and the National Childcare Scheme, which provides subsidies for ECEC provision out-side the "ECCE" preschool programme.

The Department of Education (DoE) provides the option for all children who are 4 years old and older to start primary school. In addition, the Department of Educa-tion funds some other specific ECEC provision such as the Early Start Programme, which – as an alternative to the ECCE preschool programme – offers one year of pre-school provision within schools in a small number of schools in specific disad-vantaged areas where children are at risk of falling behind. The DoE is responsible for Aistear – the curriculum framework for ECEC – and the DoE is also responsible for educator qualifications for ECEC. The DoE also has an integrated education inspec-torate with specialist early years inspectors, who inspect the learning and education elements of the ECEC setting. DoE works very closely with the DCEDIY, with a co-loca-tion agreement with the officer responsible for ECEC having physically offices in both ministries. The areas of shared responsibly become genuinely shared both in the day-to-day operations and in the planning and implementation of reforms (OECD, 2021; Eurydice, 2023; DCEDIY, 2023, 2024).

Ireland's ECEC sector is largely centralised, with no role for the municipalities, howe-ver there are local support systems including 30 county childcare committees, which are local structures but under the control of DCEDIY, and 7 voluntary childcare agen-cies. These bodies provide advice and support to ECEC providers.

DCEDIY also works closely with Pobal which is the national agency that manages the funding schemes for ECEC providers and also provides some quality support pro-grammes. There are two inspectorates in Ireland that have a role in the early years sector. The first is Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and their Early Years Inspectora-te. This is the independent statutory regulator for early years services. The education inspectorate falls under the Department of Education and as part of their teams, they have early years specialists. Their inspections are based on the implementation of the Curriculum and Quality Frameworks.

Although the system in private, it is increasingly publicly funded, with around 60% of funds going into the ECEC system being public money as of 2020 – with estimates from the ministries suggesting that this proportion has since increased, with the introduction of Core Funding in 2022. Reforms of the inspection and quality assurance system are underway, and the introduction of a new funding model for ECEC is a key part of this. The model is based on a policy proposal called [Partnership for the Public Good,](#) which recommended how public funds could be used to support the private providers more effectively and in turn strengthen quality, affordability and monitoring of the centres.

The new funding models introduced are "[Core Funding](#)", a universal fund, as well as a targeted scheme aimed to support children with disadvantages. Core Funding is not linked to children attendance, but provides additional funding directly to each ECEC service and comes with requirements to:

- ↘ freeze fees charged to parents;
- ↘ comply with new wage requirements for staff in the sector;
- ↘ introduce annual quality action plans; and
- ↘ provide more data to the Department of Education.

This new core funding is a key mechanism to both incentivise quality and to improve the information and data that the ministries have about each centre.

3.2.3 Quality and normative frameworks

ECEC in Ireland is enacted by the [1991 Child Care Act](#), and [2016 regulations](#) (with some amendments to streamline these in 2022) form the basis of Tusla inspections for compliance with the regulations (30+ including managing, staffing level, child health welfare, safety measures, child-adult interactions, space requirements, safeguarding and so on).

The daily activities in ECEC settings are guided by two main documents: *Aistear* and *Síolta*; Aistear is the [Early Childhood Curriculum Framework](#) published in 2009 by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Síolta is the ECEC quality framework.

Aistear covers ages from birth to 6 years and has four interconnected themes of "Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking" and provides guidelines on how adults should support children's development and learning across these themes. The guidelines focus principally on (a) building partnerships between parents and practitioners; (b) learning and developing through interactions; (c) learning and developing through play; and (d) supporting learning and development through assessment.

All publicly funded ECEC settings must work within the national curriculum framework, although the framework is flexible and is designed to enable settings to develop or follow their own more detailed curriculum. The children attending primary schools (including those aged 4 or 5 years) follow the primary school curriculum, but the pedagogical approaches described in Aistear are also followed in these settings for these ages. The consistent implementation of the curriculum by all settings and all professionals remains, however, is a challenge; especially in relation to the still unregulated sector of home-based ECEC providers. Aistear is implemented together with Síolta.

The Irish National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education Quality Assurance, Síolta, was adopted in 2006. Síolta is evidence-based, aims to promote quality across the whole ECEC Sector, for ages from 0 to 6 years. It has a number of objectives; to support individual professional practice and development; to promote teamwork and team development; to function as a tool for management, strategic planning and policy development; to provide a common base for the interactions of a varied team of professionals; to support formal and informal assessment processes; and to ensure common understanding of the importance of the ECEC among adults who participate in the experiences of young children, including parents.

The Irish Quality Framework provides twelve (12) quality principles and sixteen (16) national quality standards that translate the vision of quality principles into practice. Those quality standards refer to the rights of the child, environment, parents and families, consultation, interactions, play, curriculum, planning and evaluation, health and welfare, organization, professional practice, communication, transitions, identity and belonging, legislation and regulation and community involvement. Each Standard is translated into quality indicators. The framework also includes self-reflection guidelines for practitioners to assess their practice, strengths and points of improvement. Síolta is currently being revised and updated.

3.2.4 Data collection, tools and systems

The ministries have a number of mechanisms that allow them to oversee and support the quality conditions of ECEC settings including checks on compliance with the regulations, financial checks on contractual compliance for public funds, active engagement on policy revision with stakeholders, and processes of evaluation, research and data gathering. Reforms of the inspection and quality assurance system are underway. The introduction of the new funding models mentioned above is a key part of this.

In Ireland in relation to inspection and regulation in the early years there are both structural and process quality mechanisms that are used. In term of structural quality oversight, there are annual surveys to services, which include quality rated questions such as staff qualifications, working conditions and turnover. These are only obligatory for services receiving public funds, but overall, the response rate across all services is high (86%) (DCEDIY, 2024) and will increase further as completion of the survey is now a requirement for services that receive Core Funding. The Department also collects data through public funding schemes, which include information on the children/families benefiting from public funding (e.g. children with disabilities, and income levels of families).

Registration data are also gathered to ensure that minimum requirements are met, such as location and capacity of services. All services must provide such registration data to Tusla (the child and family agency), which is the independent regulator/inspector for ECEC.

In terms of process quality, there are two kinds of inspections that take place. Tusla will carry out unannounced inspection checks at all registered ECEC settings based on the regulations. An inspection report will be developed based on the visits, with a chance for the settings to provide inputs and a response to the report. These are available online. The current Tusla model sees every service getting a routine inspection every 3 years, however if there are concerns raised, Tusla can then also do risk-based inspections of

services more frequently. Tusla periodically prepares summaries of inspections, which inform policy development in DCEDIY.

The education inspectorate does pre-announced inspections that focus on the context for learning, processes to support learning, children's learning experience and the management and leadership of services. They visit a setting every 5–7 years as a standard with more frequent visits if a centre requires closer oversight. These inspections take place only at publicly funded settings. Their inspection reports are also put online. These inspections rate settings on a quality continuum from excellent to significant improvements required. The education inspectorate used to only inspect settings that offered the formal pre-school programme for children of 3–5 years of age, but they now inspect the providers of ECEC for children from 0 years. Both inspectorates also develop summary reports, documents to support quality enhancements to assist the settings and hold webinars.

Evaluations are also ongoing to support process quality – such as evaluations of the quality development services and self-evaluation tools linked to the implementation of Aistear and Síolta. Ireland is also in the process of streamlining and integrating its inspection and support structures and processes, strengthening the regulator's powers when it comes to responding to persistent or serious non-compliance with regulations, and is currently developing an improved self-evaluation system for ECEC services as part of the quality enhancement package.

3.2.5 Leadership, personnel and expertise

Ireland recognises that a skilled and committed workforce is vital for quality of the sector, and as such has developed a workforce strategy called [Nurturing Skills](https://) to systematically improve qualification levels, opportunities for career growth, and staff recruitment and retention in the sector, as workforce education levels and turnover have been a challenge. Nurturing Skills also includes commitments to strengthen training and support for leadership roles within ECEC settings, including managers and distributed leadership roles.

The Irish model also relies on skilled inspectors both in Tusla and the Education Inspectorate who have a good knowledge of ECEC and the process quality to be able to assess settings and provide them with guidance. For additional expertise and assistance in enhancing quality, the settings rely on the county childcare committees, volunteer childcare agencies and Pobal.

It is also important to note that there has been a strong ministerial leadership behind the reforms and the First 5 Strategy, and strong leadership within the technical teams in the ministries.

3.2.6 Participation and coordination

Participation and coordination at the national level have been fundamental for the transformative reforms that Ireland is currently undertaking. Participation and engagement with stakeholders have also helped to ensure that there is good faith and trust behind the reforms.

Coordination has been significantly strengthened over the years and the ongoing reforms look to further streamline the systems; participation of the ECEC workforce, parents and children in both the reforms and quality assurance is engrained in the national documents.

3.3   Lithuania

3.3.1   Overview – Principles, values and ethos

ECEC is viewed a standard part of the education system within Lithuania and the majority of children are participating in it before starting formal education. ECEC is seen through an education lens and there has been a conscious effort to not have it be perceived as just childcare. The importance of ECEC has been reinforced by the government and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MoESS), which have been making it an increasingly priority and have been making significant investments into ECEC. Enrolment rates are fairly high from an early age with 73% of 2-year-olds enrolled in ECEC, 89% of 3-year-olds and 92% of 5-year-olds (OECD, 2023). Lithuania refers for ECEC from 0–5 as pre-school; from the age of 5/6 children can start in pre--primary. From age 6, pre-primary becomes compulsory and as of 2025 there will be a place guarantee for children aged 2 years and above (Eurydice, 2023).

Pre-schools usually operate for 10 hours per day, and in order to qualify for state funding, the offer cannot be less than 4 hours per day. Around 96% of institutions belong to municipalities and 3% are private; the rest has another unique ownership structure, e.g. belonging to the central government.

3.3.2   Governance, legislation and funding

ECEC falls under the mandate of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. The Law on Education is the key document regulating education system in Lithuania. The ministry set the legislative norms for ECEC and approves the curriculum guidelines. The central government funds ECEC and is generally responsible for external asse-ssment together with the National Education Agency (NEA). The National Education Agency is also responsible for implementing education policy, developing further guidance and pedagogical documents (such as the curriculum guidelines) and also collects data on students and teachers in the ECEC settings.

Municipalities are the main owners of ECEC institutions. They allocate funding for the utilities of centres and for the educational needs because the central government funds around 80 percent of all education needs costs. They are also responsible for evaluating and assessing quality of the ECEC settings and provide pedagogical sup-port. Moreover, they are in charge of appointing the heads of the ECEC institutions. The Law on Education also states that the quality of education is the responsibility of the education provider.

Parents also pay a fee that covers meals and some educational materials in ECEC in public settings, this is on average EUR 50 per month. However, fees in private setting tend to be higher – between EUR 150 and 500 per month.

3.3.3   Quality and normative frameworks

The key documents guiding pre-primary and pre-school education in Lithuania inclu-de the Outline of Criteria for Pre-School Education Curricula (2011), which delinea-tes the main components required in pre-school education curricula and provides guidance to education providers on developing comprehensive curricula that meet specific criteria together with the Preschool methodological recommendations and

the [Description of the Achievements of Pre-school Age Children (2016).](#) These documents are valid until 31 August 2025. [Preschool curriculum guidelines](#) enter into force on 1 September 2025. They serve as a guide for pre-school educators and professionals working with young children. They provide a framework of developmental achievements and values that children typically acquire from birth to 6 years of age, emphasizing the importance of individualized learning and the role of educators in facilitating children's progress.

[Assessment methodologies](#) and tools are developed by the National Education Agency based on the legal frameworks. These methodologies are used for external and internal assessments.

3.3.4   Data collection, tools and systems

Improvement of education quality in Lithuania takes place through education monitoring, self-evaluation and school external evaluation, testing, appraisal of teaching staff and support specialists, and the assessment of child learning outcomes. This is done in a consultative way, with the school leadership submitting their annual activity report to the school community and the municipal school council for consideration.

The way schools are evaluated for their pre-school and pre-primary education programmes follows a carefully designed set of rules called the [Description of Procedures for Organizing and Executing External Quality Evaluation](#). This guideline explains who does what in the evaluation process, including the National Education Agency, school authorities, evaluators and others.

The main goal of this evaluation is to keep improving how well schools perform, focusing on what is best for the children and making sure pre-school and pre-primary education works effectively. The process follows key principles like looking at the whole picture, considering the school's specific situation, being fair and working together for better quality. The evaluation covers seven important areas, like child well-being and how the school helps children learn and grow. It is a thorough process that involves careful planning, checking how things are done in the school, writing reports and sharing the results to help everyone understand how things can be better.

There are three different types of evaluations used in this process. One is the holistic evaluation, which looks at the overall performance of the school across all areas. Another is risk assessment, which is done when there are significant concerns about a school's performance. And then there is thematic assessment, which focuses on specific aspects of pre-school and pre-primary education. These evaluations help identify strengths and areas for improvement in the school.

If a school disagrees with the evaluation results, there is a way to appeal, and a special group called the Appeals Commission looks into these cases to make sure everything is fair. The whole evaluation process is paid for by the government or can be bought from the municipality budget (if municipality needs assessment which was not planned at the national level) and is done regularly to make sure schools keep improving. If there are emergencies or unusual situations, like a pandemic, evaluations can still happen, but with safety measures in place. Overall, the goal is to work together to make sure pre-school and pre-primary education keeps getting better for everyone involved.

The National Education Agency oversees the entire external evaluation process.

Its responsibilities include drafting and approving rules and regulations for evaluator selection and evaluation procedures, training evaluators, preparing evaluation schedules, publishing evaluation reports and summarizing evaluation data for public consumption. The NEA has an external evaluator trained by the Agency to do observations, stakeholder interviews, data gathering and preparations for external evaluations.

The school authorities and both public and municipal bodies, act as the owners of schools and are responsible for proposing schools for evaluation, recommending evaluation timing, providing resources for school improvement based on the evaluation findings, and analysing the yearly evaluation results (Eurydice, 2023).

Lithuania has also been devoting efforts to strengthen its data systems for structural indicators. They have an education management information system (EMIS) across the whole education continuum starting from pre-school (which is available from 0 years of age in Lithuania). With the EMIS system, they collect detailed information about each centre, child and the educators in the institutions. The data are aggregated at the municipal level, where they are also checked, before being shared with the NEA and MoESS.

Similarly to the EMIS system, Lithuania also uses an interactive system at the centre level called e-Diary. Each preschool has to have this system, which is used to interact with parents, share information about the daily routines, the group activities and is a platform where teachers and managers can capture their plans and reflections. The e-Diary system also is a place where teachers develop "children achievement cards", which are based on the 18 areas of the curriculum; it is a place the capture and track the child's development and achievements in those areas. This cannot be seen at the national or municipal levels (MoESS, 2024).

Prior to doing external assessments, the evaluator groups will review the EMIS data and the centres will share some selected data from the e-Diaries and use them as a starting point for the evaluation. Schools can do their own internal assessments, using a [similar methodology to the external assessment.](#) This helps them to prepare, but also helps them to learn by comparing their internal assessment with the external ones.

3.3.5   Leadership, personnel and expertise

Lithuania has a policy of distributed leadership in the early childhood education community. This approach has been found to strengthen the quality of curriculum implementation (Brandisauskiene et al., 2024). Further, Lithuania has a highly trained and experienced ECEC workforce (OECD, 2017), which significantly contributes to the process quality.

3.3.6   Participation and coordination

Legal and normative frameworks make provision for the participation of school councils, teachers, staff, parents/guardians and students in the evaluation process by providing information, facilitating cooperation with evaluators, reviewing draft evaluation reports and implementing improvement plans based on the evaluation findings. However, research suggests that teachers are not always willing or able to allow meaningful parental participation and that the parents themselves may be reluctant to participate in ECEC (Brandisauskiene et al., 2024) which impacts the results of this participatory right.

3.4 Netherlands

3.4.1 Overview – Principles, values and ethos

The Netherlands has a deeply engrained belief in freedom of education, which provides a lot of space for education (and ECEC) providers to bring their own educational ethos and principles to programmes. ECEC is highly valued and used in the Netherlands and official school entry starts at the young age of 4. Prior to 4 years of age, ECEC service are both publicly and privately provided and children as young as 6 weeks can go to ECEC. From 4 years of age, children have a legal right to education which is provided in formal schools, and from age 5 this is mandatory. Prior to this, parents can choose if they wish to use ECEC services and which ones. A programme called *voor- en vroegschoolse educatie* (VVE) is a pre-school programme offered as a subsidised support measure within both schools and day-care settings to prevent educational disadvantages in children, especially those from a migrant/refugee background, from low socioeconomic status and with other risk factors (Slot, 2018b). 93.0% of children aged 3 and above in the Netherlands participate in ECEC, which is above the EU average (92.5%) (EU, DGEAC, 2023).

3.4.2 Governance, legislation and funding

There is a split system for ECEC governance in the Netherlands. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (MoSAE) and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (MoECS) share authority over children aged 0–6. The Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for setting the regulations and for overall oversight of childcare services that are outside of the formal school system. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the funding and oversight of the VVE programme and for the formal school system (Slot, 2018b).

ECEC in the Netherlands is highly decentralised with municipalities playing an important role. Municipalities are responsible for overseeing and coordinating services for young children and their families. They are responsible for allocating funding to childcare facilities offering VVE, preschools and other early childhood programmes, and they have a responsibility for overseeing monitoring and evaluation. Additionally, municipalities operate their own ECEC centres alongside privately-run facilities, providing childcare and preschool services directly to families within the community.

The municipal health service (GGD) and the Dutch Education Inspectorate are both responsible for monitoring the quality of early childhood education. The GGD inspects all ECEC settings, while the Education Inspectorate only oversees ECEC services that offer VVE and ECEC within formal schools. The GGD is supported by the Association for Public Health and Safety in the Netherlands (GGD GHOR Netherlands), which is an umbrella body that advocates for public health and safety and supports local GGDs in inspecting and overseeing childcare services for young children, ensuring compliance with all quality regulations: pedagogical quality, minimum stability and staff requirements, and health and safety. They provide training, legal guidance and other support to enhance the quality of the inspectorate overseeing ECEC facilities.

In terms of funding, ECEC services are fee-based before school entry. However, the Dutch government provides significant financial support for childcare through a benefit known as *kinderopvangtoeslag.* This benefit covers a portion of childcare costs

and is determined based on factors such as family income, the number of children and parental working hours. Municipalities receive an annual budget from the Ministry of Education to enable early childhood education in their municipality. Families with children eligible for the VVE programmes also receive financial assistance to cover the programme costs.

Primary education in the Netherlands is fully funded by the government, including the first two years (ISCED 0) for children aged 4 and 5. Education is free of charge. Publicly funded childcare subsidies are available to eligible families, enabling them to offset the expenses of childcare services provided by both public and private providers.

The Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Affairs, the Inspectorate and the municipalities all collect data about the ECEC settings.

3.4.3   Quality and normative frameworks

The main acts governing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the Netherlands include the Childcare Act, which dictates the quality, financing and oversight of ECEC outside of schools. Some quality and care elements are also enshrined in the Decree on the quality of childminder agencies, childminders and childcare facilities and the Childcare quality decision. With efforts to strengthen the quality and consistency of ECEC, two more acts, the Innovation and Quality of Childcare Act and the Harmonization of Childcare and Playgroup Work Act were promulgated in 2018 and VVE is regulated by the Decree on basic conditions for quality of pre-school education. Other relevant regulations include the Childcare Act Regulations, the Regulation on the quality of childminder agencies, childminders and childcare facilities, and regulations related to first aid at childcare settings. The Education Inspection Act governs the Inspectorate that oversees VVE as well as ECEC in formal education.

For childcare, four broad goals apply by law:

1. **Providing emotional safety for the child.** Childcare workers show respect for (the independence of) children. But also set boundaries and provide structure so that children feel safe and secure.

2. **Promoting personal qualities**. Staff members challenge children through play, so that they learn physical and mental skills as well as language skills and creative skills. In this way, children learn to function increasingly independently.

3. **Promoting social qualities.** The organization guides children in their communication with others. Through play, children acquire social knowledge and skills so that they can build increasingly independent relationships with others.

4. **Imparting norms and values.** The childcare centre encourages children to become acquainted with the generally accepted values and norms in society, such as treating others with respect.

The Netherlands has no set curriculum framework for ECEC, however, childcare providers in the Netherlands are required to create child development and learning policies in collaboration with parents' committees. These policies outline approaches to interacting with and caring for children, addressing aspects such as the group size,

age distribution, emotional security, social development, rule enforcement, outdoor activities and support provided to childcare professionals. Various initiatives in the country oversee the implementation of these policies, ensuring adherence to guidelines and promoting children's holistic development. For the funded VVE initiative a programme that stimulates development in the areas of language, arithmetic, motor skills and social-emotional development in a structured and coherent manner must be used. VVE programmes vary in scope and implementation, and they can be home- or centre-based. VVE may focus on specific developmental domains, like language, or offer a broader support, with active parental involvement. The *Piramide* and *Kaleidoscoop* programmes are the ones that are most widely used.

Inspections for ECEC services that are not in schools are set out in law by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. These are used by the GGD to guide their visits. Inspections for VVE and pre-primary education in schools use the Inspections Framework as their guidance document. The 2021 Inspection Frameworks in the Netherlands outline the approach and assessment criteria used by the Inspectorate to evaluate quality in education. Each educational sector has its own inspection framework, tailored to the sector-specific legislation. These frameworks include assessment criteria for the system, governing body and school levels as well as details on the inspection approach.

The [Inspection Framework for Primary Education](#) includes the oversight of pre--school education. The quality areas and standards are outlined as shown below:

QUALITY AREAS AND STANDARDS, PRIMARY EDUCATION, SCHOOL LEVEL	
TLP TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS	
TLP0	Basic Skills
TLP1	Curriculum
TLP2	Monitoring Pupils' Achievements and Support
TLP3	Teaching Strategies
TLP4	Planned teaching time
TLP6	Completion of Primary Education
SE SECURE ENVIRONMENT AND ATMOSPHERE	
SE1	Safety and Security
SE2	Atmosphere at School
LO LEARNING OUTCOMES	
LO1	Results
LO2	Social and Civic Skills
MQA MANAGEMENT, QUALITY ASSURANCE AND AMBITION	
MQA1	Vision, Ambitions and Goals
MQA2	Implementation and Quality Culture
MQA3	Evaluation, Accountability and Dialogue

Figure 4: Quality areas and standards for primary education (including ECEC in schools)

For each area, the basic standards of quality are described as well as the additional ambitions and statutory requirements. In order to help streamline the processes, an [intergovernmental inspection framework](#)has been developed.

3.4.4 Data collection, tools and systems

The inspections and oversight of the ECEC services differ based on whether they offer VVE or not. The Municipal Health Service (GGD) and the Education Inspectorate are both responsible for monitoring the quality of VVE. The GGD is also responsible for supervising general childcare (beyond just the VVE programme). This involves checking the following:

- ↘ Group size and the number of children per pedagogical staff member
- ↘ Training of pedagogical staff members
- ↘ Safety and health of the children
- ↘ Accommodation and furnishings
- ↘ Pedagogical policy
- ↘ Pedagogical practice
- ↘ Parental involvement and participation
- ↘ Certificates of good conduct
- ↘ Register of persons for childcare
- ↘ Contact language
- ↘ Complaints procedure
- ↘ For VVE locations, VVE programme implementation and staff requirements are checked

Those with VVE, whether in a school or a childcare setting are overseen by the Dutch Education Inspectorate. The inspectorate conducts assessments, examining both regulatory compliance and educational effectiveness. The education inspection takes place every 4 years on average, and more regularly if there are concerns or needs raised. They cover both public and private settings and as both types of settings are subsidised by municipalities, they have to admit the Inspectorate.

The assessment process involves several key components. Firstly, the Inspectorate supervises municipalities to ensure that agreements are in place to address educational disadvantages and promote equal opportunities for all children. These facilities receive signal-driven inspections, where the Inspectorate evaluates adherence to the Basic Quality Requirements for Preschool Education in line with the Inspection Framework. Quality factors include elements such as curriculum implementation, child-staff interactions, parental involvement and the overall programme effectiveness. Facilities that meet or exceed the quality factors are categorized as "Good" or "Satisfactory", whereas those falling short receive a rating of "Could do better". Self- assessment tools for teachers exist, but they are not mandatory. However, if settings wish to do so they can share these during the inspection processes.

The education inspectorate develops an inspection report which the setting can comment on and provide feedback to. The report is then made available online. If support is needed, the Inspectorate works with the municipalities, using the Inspection Framework as a basis, helping them to implement the policy. The Inspectorate encourages working according to the so-called quality cycle (Plan, Do, Check, Act). The shortcomings or issues a municipality is struggling with may be very different for each municipality, but often there are also many similarities. The Inspectorate encourages municipalities to learn from each other, by actively sharing information

from municipalities and by bringing municipalities together around specific themes. The level and type of support the settings receive from municipalities significantly differs across the country (van de Kuilen et al., 2023).

The GGD also develops a report based on their inspections to share with the settings owners. Owners can respond and may have follow-up discussions. Municipalities then assess the reports, adding their views and implementing sanctions or policy adjustments as needed. There is no ranking system; organizations are deemed either to be meeting standards ("good") or not. Inspection reports are made public online annually, with frequency adjusted based on previous findings. More extensive inspections occur if concerns arise, focusing on specific areas needing further review.

In terms of structural data, the Inspectorate issues an annual questionnaire to municipalities which collects enrolment data, number of the places available, the demographics of the children involved and so on. In addition, there is a national report developed by the Inspectorate on how municipalities fulfil their supervision role. ECEC data from the different bodies tend to be consolidated at the municipal level. However, it remains fragmented at the national level.

For longer-term and higher-level evaluations, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has the quality of childcare examined annually and this is reported on every 3 years. The Ministry of Education and the Inspectorate do studies and evaluations of education broadly, including VVE to assess quality and impact and to inform policy. This [quality monitor report](#) focuses on childcare organizations in general, and not specifically on childcare organizations offering pre-school education.

3.4.5   Leadership, personnel and expertise

Preschool inspectors under the Education Inspectorate typically come from primary education backgrounds and undergo an internship or trainee period to gain broad knowledge of the primary education system. They then receive additional training focused on early childhood education and are mentored by experienced inspectors. Their training enables them to evaluate educational learning plans and determine the effectiveness of self-created programmes.

Inspectors under the GGD have diverse backgrounds, including childcare, pedagogy, social sciences, law and healthcare. They undergo a seven-day training programme before starting work at the local government. Each situation they encounter is different, highlighting the need for adaptability and a broad skill set.

In the Netherlands, the education system relies on well-trained educators who possess a strong understanding of quality and are capable of developing and implementing suitable learning programmes. Leadership within Dutch ECEC centres plays a pivotal role in guiding the vision, mission and values of the organization. Centre directors and pedagogical leaders are responsible for creating a positive and inclusive environment where children feel safe, supported and encouraged to learn and grow. Strong leadership fosters a culture of continuous improvement and professional development.

3.4.6 Participation and coordination

The [Participation Act](#) reinforces the role of staff, parents and pupils in participation within educational institutions. Parents are considered partners in their child's education and are encouraged to actively engage with ECEC centres through regular communication, involvement in decision-making processes, and participation in activities and events. There has been a concerted effort to develop policies that include a focus on parent engagements. Parental feedback and input are solicited to ensure that ECEC services are responsive to the diverse needs and preferences of families. These are both implemented through ongoing participatory process with parents as well as through complaints mechanism. It is reported, however that teachers need more training and support on how best to work with parents to meaningfully involve them in contributing to the monitoring of ECEC and the related quality enhancements (Duursma, 2019).

Furthermore, ECEC centres often collaborate with external stakeholders, such as healthcare professionals, social services and educational experts to provide holistic support to children and families. Interdisciplinary partnerships enhance the effectiveness of interventions, promote early identification and intervention and facilitate smooth transitions between ECEC settings and other services.

3.5 Norway

3.5.1 Overview – Principles, values and ethos

The Norwegian ECEC system is based on the principle that ECEC is a universal public good and an essential part of a person's education and development path. The ECEC offered in Kindergartens (*Barnehager*) is play-based, child-centred and has high societal value. It is for children aged 0–5 and there is extensive ECEC coverage. The 2022 data show that the participation rate is 93% for children aged 1–5 years and 97% for children between 3 and 5 years according to Statistics Norway, with a fairly even split between public and private provision, as 47% of centres are public and 53% are private (MoER / Statistics Norway, 2022).

In Norway, every child over the age of 1 year has the entitlement to a place in a kindergarten. Municipalities must ensure that there are sufficient subsidised places for all children, but while the places are a statutory right, ECEC is not free of charge. However, the services are subsidised and there is a fee cap of NOK 3,000 per child per month from 1 January 2024 (EUR 256.40 as of March 2024) and NOK 2,000 per child per month that will come into force on 1 August 2024, which applies to both public and private settings. There are also regulated discounts for children from the same household and after 2 years of age, children from low-income households get 20 free hours of ECEC per week. Municipalities can also set up further discounts or support schemes at their own discretion.

In terms of the values behind monitoring and evaluation, the focus in Norway is on assessing the pedagogical practice itself and not the children, and when it does come to providing feedback on the children's performance in ECEC, the priority is their well--being over any child assessment scores (Urban et al., 2023). There has been increasing attention on enhancing ECEC quality in the Norwegian policy documents and legislation (Furenes et al., 2023).
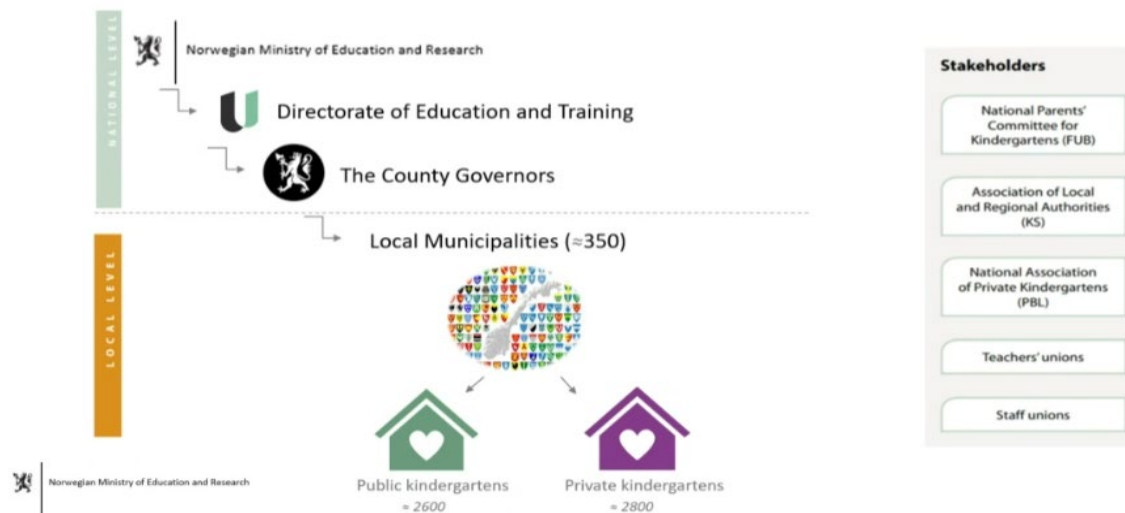
Structure of the Norwegian ECEC sector

Figure 5: The structure of the Norwegian ECEC sector (source: MoER)

ECEC in Norway falls under the Kindergarten Act of 2006 with later amendments (older English version here: Kindergarden Act of 2006, amended in 2018). The Act makes provision for the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017), which is the basis of the activities that take place in kindergartens as well as the framework for quality at the setting level.

The "Kindergartens for a New Era" 2030 Strategy has a significant focus on quality assurance, noting that there is still room for improved quality in Norwegian kindergartens – particularly the process quality. The strategy calls for "*a comprehensive review of what kind of support the nursery sector needs in the work with quality development*" as well as the development of further voluntary tools and measures to support kindergartens in quality assurance. But it also stresses that these must not be overly cumbersome or bureaucratic in nature (MoER, 2023).

In terms of funding, both public and private institutions are funded by the state and they are funded at the same level. There are fee caps as mentioned above and there are subsidies for fee reduction in place to ensure that the fees for a child in kindergarten do not exceed 6% of the household income. The funds for kindergartens primarily come from the municipality's general funding, covering around 85% of the funding. Municipalities directly fund the public kindergartens that they oversee, and they provide a grant to private kindergartens in their jurisdiction. The grant is based on a per-child rate that is calculated by the municipality based on the average operating costs within the municipality (Eurydice, 2023).

In 2006, the ECEC mandate moved from the Ministry of Family Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Research. The Education Ministry has the overall mandate for quality assurance; however, the function is decentralised to the municipalities, which are responsible for quality oversight and supporting quality enhancement of their own centres and the public providers who operate in their jurisdiction. The inspections are based on the normative and legal frameworks set out by the Ministry.

The Directorate of Education and Training (UDIR) is the implementing agency for the MoER, responsible for the development of a knowledge base and guidance resources to support the work of kindergartens and the use of the Framework Plan. UDIR developed a system for quality assurance for ECEC and the supporting documentation and tools (2012–2018). This system is now under revision. UDIR also does evalua-

tions of the sector and collects data and statistics on kindergartens.

Municipalities are responsible for overseeing the management and development of both private and municipal institutions, ensuring that they comply with the Framework Plan and the Kindergarten Act. Municipalities are directly responsible for the levels of quality of the settings that they oversee.

The kindergarten owners, management and staff also have legally defined roles. The kindergarten owners are legally responsible for the quality of the kindergarten provision (Section 7 of the Kindergarten Act). The head teacher is responsible for ensuring that pedagogical practices comply with the Kindergarten Act and the Framework Plan (regulation to the Kindergarten Act Section 2, Chapter 2: Roles and Responsibilities). The head teacher oversees the planning, documentation, evaluation and development of the kindergarten content and teaching approaches. This must be done in close collaboration with all the centre staff. The pedagogical leader implements and monitors the kindergarten's pedagogical practices and the application of the Framework Plan within the group or area they are responsible for.

### 3.5.3   Quality and normative frameworks

The Kindergarten Act and its implementing regulations as well as the Framework Plan for Kindergartens form the basis of the quality monitoring processes in Norway. The Act lays out roles and responsibilities for quality oversight and mandates the use of the Framework Plan.

The Framework Plan for Kindergartens provides centres and their leadership with a mandatory framework for the planning, delivery and assessment of activities in the settings. They are required to evaluate the quality of ECEC programmes and ensure that they comply with the national regulations. The Framework Plan establishes values, processes and learning areas, however these are broad and allow for a lot of further development and elaboration by the kindergartens themselves. The Framework Plan assumes a high level of training and skill in the settings to use and apply the Plan. The Plan states that quality requires planning, assessment, observations, record keeping and reflections on a regular and ongoing basis in the settings. These are done at the level of children groups and across the whole kindergarten and they should examine both the individual child well-being and progress and the overall quality of the service offered at the setting (UDIR, 2017). The framework plan and law both also encourage active child participation in the process. The Norwegian ECEC regulations prioritize processes and a child-centred approach, without explicit learning or skill objectives outlined.

3.5.4   Data collection, tools and systems

In 2012 the UDIR was tasked with developing a quality assurance system. This is currently under review, so the processes detailed below may soon be changed or updated. Present information on work with quality improvement can be found here and here (UDIR.no). The current description of the quality cycle includes gathering information, analysis and assessment, planning and actions.
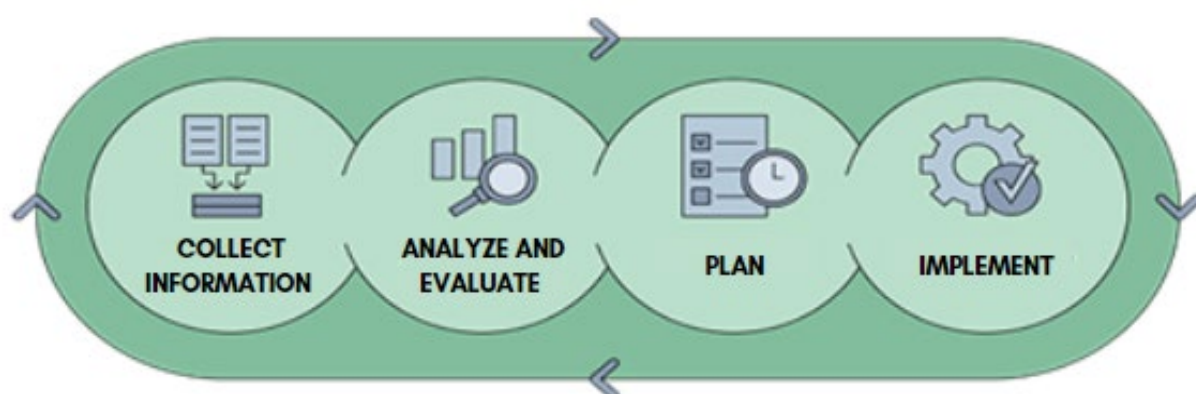
In 2012, the cycle below described quality improvement as an ongoing process of setting goals, implementing them, assessing and following up, based both on the knowledge generated through studies and evaluation of the use of different options of quality assurance tools.
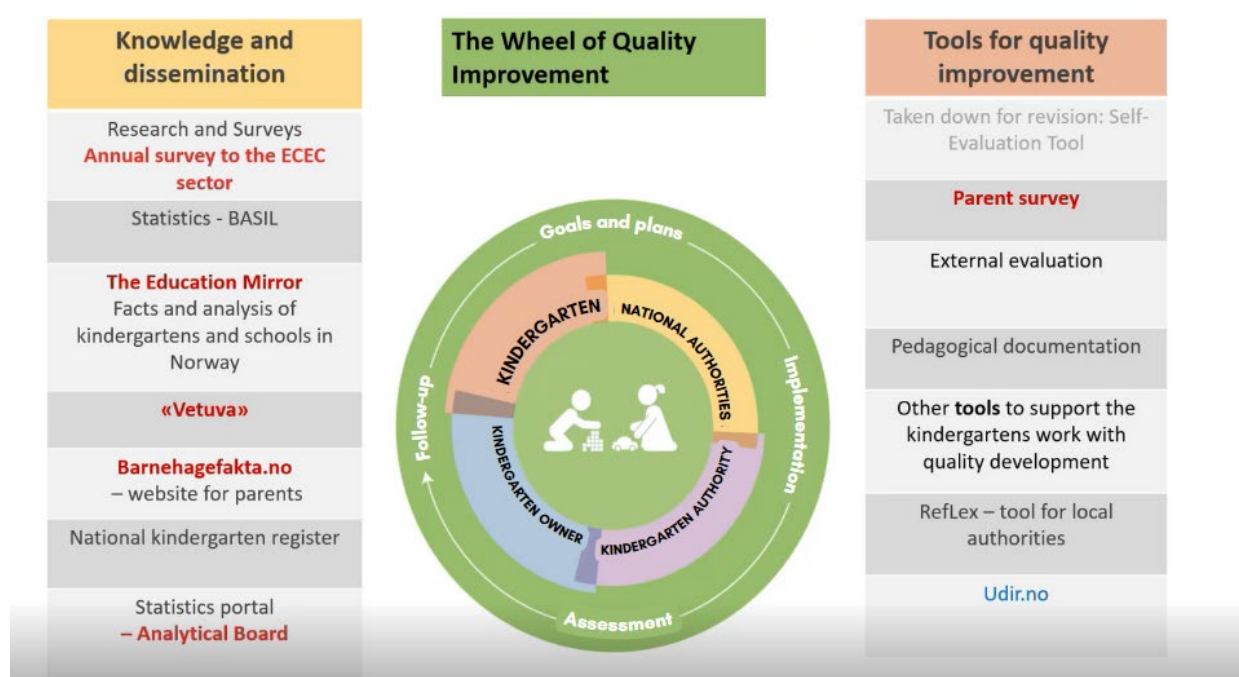

Figure 6: The Norwegian system of quality improvements – currently under review (source: MoER)

The ECEC quality system consists of development of evidence through annual surveys, statistics and research, and the provision of optional tools for quality improvements. The education system provides information about kindergartens available to parents and other interested stakeholders and can contribute to a dialogue and quality development (Eurydice, 2023; MoER, 2024). These public resources include a regular magazine with developments in kindergartens, facts on kindergartens (statistics) and evaluations and surveys, such as the parental survey, as well as the statistics portal at UDIR and a dedicated website that provides an overview of kindergartens barnehagefakta.no with indicators on each.

Municipalities are responsible for quality assurance but not required to do inspections as such or at a certain frequency, however they are expected to assess where

guidance or inspections are needed. This risk assessment is done through the information the municipality has on the kindergartens such as review of the statistics received from centres, from parents' surveys and from day-to-day contact with kindergartens.

The Framework Plan requires kindergartens to do internal quality assessments which include assessing the well-being and all-round development of the children, individually and as a group, and reviewing the overall service quality (Chapter 7). Children should be observed and assessed on an ongoing basis (UDIR, 2017). UDIR also had a self-evaluation tool called Point of View, but it is currently not in use and is being redesigned.

3.5.5 Participation and coordination

Children's participation is upheld as a fundamental right, ensuring that children have a voice in shaping their daily experiences. Children are regularly afforded opportunities to actively engage in the planning and evaluation of activities, allowing them to contribute to the collective decision-making process. Kindergartens are to be mindful of the children's different forms of expression and enable their participation in ways suited to the children's age, experience, individual circumstances and needs. It is emphasized that the weight given to children's views should be commensurate with their age and level of maturity, honouring their individual perspectives and autonomy. The text states: *"The children's views shall be taken into consideration according to their age and level of maturity. The children shall not be given responsibilities that they are not equipped to take"*. Within this ethos, kindergartens work in collaboration with families, acknowledging the importance of parental involvement in meeting children's needs for care, play and learning. By fostering a partnership between kindergartens and homes, both entities can ensure a holistic approach to child development, where play, care, learning and formative development are interwoven elements seen within the broader context of a child's well-being and growth.

Parent participation is also highly valued within the Norwegian ECEC centres. Parents are encouraged to actively engage with the kindergarten community, contributing their insights and perspectives to enrich the educational experience. Opportunities for parental involvement may include participating in parent-teacher meetings, volunteering in classroom activities and providing feedback on the kindergarten's programmes and initiatives.

3.5.6 Leadership, personnel and expertise

The system in Norway relies heavily on highly trained ECEC staff members, head teachers and pedagogical staff, who have a good understanding of how to review and assess quality, and process quality in particular. Municipalities are to provide guidance and can conduct inspections. The Framework Plan's implementation assumes that the users are skilled and knowledgeable in adapting the broad guidance for children across the 1–5 age range and with diverse needs.

4. Considerations for the Czech Republic

Based on the examples provided in the case studies of this report, consideration for the Czech Republic to take into account during its reform process have been developed. For ease of reference, the considerations are structured under the same headings as the case studies, taken from the M&E for ECEC Components Framework (see Table 1 / Figure 1). The considerations are detailed in the table below.

Component	Considerations for the Czech Republic
ECEC Principles, Values and Ethos	Learning from the high social value given to ECEC in Finland, Norway and Lithuania, undertake a concerted effort to raise the value and understanding of quality ECEC especially for the 0–3 age group. Due to the duration of maternity leave in the Czech Republic, ECEC for the 0–3 age group has not received significant attention and is therefore not highly valued in the Czech Republic.
	Ensure that all reform and developments in ECEC are child-centred and focus on quality enhancement monitoring, in line with the experiences from Finland.
	Based on the example of the "First 5 Strategy" from Ireland, create a shared vision for ECEC across the 0–6 continuum in the Czech Republic, with clear quality goals and associated targets – ensuring coherence with legislation and strategies.
Governance, Legislation and Funding	Undertake legislative reforms that create increased cohesion between ECEC under MoLSA and ECEC under MoEYS.
	In line with the above, undertake legislative reforms that aim to level the access, quality and affordability of ECEC services across the 0–6 age group.
	In the meantime, create opportunities for close cooperation and coordination of ECEC across the 0–6 continuum, learning from the Irish example. Develop a joint ECEC strategy between the relevant ministries and a shared, costed implementation plan.
	Develop a cohesive M&E Framework for ECEC across the 0–6 continuum for the Czech Republic, with common approaches to be used in different settings and phases – learning from the work done in Finland to develop a Quality Framework for ECEC, further unpacking the indicators, tools and measures.
	Continue to increase investments in ECEC, including examining opportunities to link state funding of private/community providers to quality enhancement and data sharing targets as demonstrated by Ireland with their new funding model.
	Streamline inspection and support roles across the ministries and the different ministerial agencies (such as the Czech School Inspectorate and the National Pedagogical Institute).
	Decentralise quality assurance responsibilities for ECEC to identified bodies, which could include municipalities or municipal ministerial offices (such as labour offices), providing them with training and support.
	Establish or identify independent bodies that can support quality enhancements in ECEC settings, such as the county childcare committees in Ireland.
Quality and Normative Frameworks as Basis for M&E	Expand the existing Framework Education Programme for Pre-Primary to include the younger age groups and for use in non-school settings and use this expanded Framework Programme as a basis for monitoring and evaluation, learning from Norway's Framework Plan, Ireland's curriculum and quality framework and Finland's curriculum.
	As a next step, using the expanded Framework, statutory requirements and the Child Group Standards, develop simple tools for external and internal evaluations that can be used across the ECEC settings.

Data Collection Processes, Tools and Systems	Develop a common data framework for ECEC across the two ministries and decentralised authorities ensuring that the data required for nuanced monitoring and evaluation of the services are collected and available for planning and policy development. Ensure that process quality indicators as well as structural indicators are well reflected in the framework.
	Work towards establishing a single data system for ECEC or – as an interim intervention – ensure interoperability between data sets by using standardised indicators, data collection cycles and approaches for improved compatibility of data.
	Introduce additional data collection mechanisms such as parents' surveys, teachers' self-assessment tools such as those used in Finland, Norway or the Netherlands and ad hoc thematic studies across the 0–6 continuum and regularly use data to evaluate the impact of policies and programmes, as regularly done in Norway and Finland.
	Implement policies to make data and evaluation studies more readily shared with transparency and a culture of open information for the sake of quality improvement.
Leadership, Personnel and Expertise	Strengthen and expand the inspection and quality assurance bodies to ensure sufficient staffing to support quality enhancements. Ensure these officials are trained in ECEC and have a good understanding of process quality in practice.
	Support the ECEC workforce, especially in children's groups to have access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD), guidance and support in enhancing their knowledge, skills and practice, learning from the systematic approach to this adopted in the Irish Nurturing Skills plan.
	Train and support leadership at all levels of the system to facilitate evidence-informed ECEC and the related M&E reforms, including through CPD, mentorship, study visits and country exchanges.
Participation and Coordination	Actively promote teacher, parent and child participation in the monitoring and evaluation of ECEC by allowing opportunities for their experiences and reflections to be included in the source of information reviewed in the M&E of an ECEC setting.

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Annex
Example of M&E Tools

Tool Type	Tool Use	Example
Quality framework(s)	Establish quality definitions, indicators and measures nationally and within settings	Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care (2018) (also referred to as the Finnish ECEC Quality Framework) and the associated indicator framework
Framework plans / curriculum framework	Establish learning and operational programmes and processes within ECEC settings as well as quality assurance roles that relate to curriculum implementation	The Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergarten The Finnish Core Curriculum Irish Core Curriculum and Practice Guide
Inspection framework	Guides inspections / monitoring of settings	The Dutch Inspection Framework for Primary Education. And the Lithuanian guidelines for external evaluation
Self-evaluation tools	Tools that support settings or teachers to evaluate their practice/performance internally.	PARTICIPA tools for different levels of the ECEC workforce to reflect on their practice: https://child-participation.eu/?page_id=620
Child participation tools	Age-appropriate tools and approaches to enable child participation in M&E for ECEC.	Well-being monitor, Norway: https://ellenbeatehansensandseter.com/fou-prosjekter/the-ecec-well-being-monitor/

unicef
for every child