

Setting up a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care in Bulgaria

(REFORM/SC2020/059)



D11. Action Plan

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1 Introduction to the project

1. Bulgaria has requested for technical support to address three interlinked challenges in its early childhood education and care sector. The first challenge concerns comparatively low enrolment rates. The share of children between the age of four and compulsory schooling age (7) is comparatively low (89.3% in 2014) and has decreased over recent years (83.9% in 2018). For children aged 0-3 participation in ECEC in Bulgaria improved over the same period (from 7% to 9.4%). However, this figure is still far from the original Barcelona target of 33% enrolment (now 50%¹) for children under 3. Access to early childhood education and care is even lower among children from disadvantaged and vulnerable families, particularly Roma children. The second challenge is to match the expansion of the ECEC sector in recent years with increased quality standards across the system. This is closely linked to the third challenge: governance and quality assurance in what is currently a split system. While crèches (for children aged 0-3) are under the authority of the Ministry of Health, kindergartens (for children aged 4-7) are managed by the Ministry of Education and Science. Bulgaria now seeks to improve and coordinate its ECEC sector to ensure a level playing field, so that all children begin primary school with the tools they need to succeed later in life. This project supports those efforts.

2. Bulgaria's reform of early childhood education and care is being supported by the European Union through the Structural Reform Support Programme². As part of this programme the European Commission is providing technical support for the development of **a single national quality framework** for early childhood education and care (ECEC).

3. To support this two-year initiative, the European Commission's contractor (ICF) set up a project team of Bulgarian and international experts, which worked closely, and in partnership, with the national authorities and stakeholders to support the co-creation and testing of a draft national quality framework for ECEC. The development of this national quality framework was guided by a steering committee and working group³; informed by discussions with national stakeholders; and supported by the team's analysis of the current arrangements for ECEC in Bulgaria and other European countries.

4. The national quality framework aligns with the EU Quality Framework set out in the Council Recommendation on high quality ECEC systems adopted by Education Ministers on 22 May 2019⁴. It has been specifically tailored to the Bulgarian context, and is accompanied by a set of indicators which could be used to monitor and evaluate the quality of ECEC services, and support the self-evaluation of ECEC institutions. The project set out to achieve the following outcomes:

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/1_1_196909_prop_rec_bar_en_0.pdf

² https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/structural-reform-support_en

³ The steering committee's and the working group's membership were established in Order № RD09-2809 on 09.10.2020 and Order № RD 09-67 on 06.02.2021 of the Minister of Education and Science.

⁴ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01))

- the Bulgarian authorities have gained a better understanding of how they can improve quality in ECEC by reviewing modes of governance and provision, developing effective tools and aligning relevant policies;
 - a National Quality Framework for ECEC has been created, together with a set of related indicators and benchmarks. These tools are based on the European Quality Framework and have been tailored to the Bulgarian context through a broad consultative process;
 - the quality framework, indicators and benchmarks⁵ have been piloted in selected settings and promoted to a broad stakeholder audience. An action plan for the implementation of the tools has been developed, including recommendations for a system of evaluation and monitoring of quality, as well as its alignment with reforms in related policy areas.
5. The project has included three main phases of activity:
- Phase 1 - an analysis of the current governance arrangements and policies relating to the quality of ECEC in Bulgaria and a review of good practice from other European countries;
 - Phase 2 - a partnership approach to the co-creation of a National Quality Framework through virtual study visits to other European countries, stakeholder workshops, and discussions with the working group;
 - Phase 3 - testing and refining the ideas in the draft National Quality Framework through establishing and evaluating a pilot programme, the development of this action plan and a national conference to promote the Quality Framework.

⁵ During the process of cocreation of the National Quality Framework, it was decided to focus on indicators and not to pursue targets or benchmarks at this stage.

Summary of the recommendations

6. This proposal for an action plan draws on the evidence gathered throughout the project and outlined above. It is based on the introduction of a National Quality Framework for ECEC in Bulgaria (Annex B). To support the implementation of this framework, the project team is making six recommendations as set out below. Each recommendation can be introduced if the following practical, intermediate steps are taken.

Table 1 Recommendations and intermediate steps

Recommendation	Intermediate steps
<p>Develop and promote a vision for high quality ECEC which is based on the rights and needs of children and families, and the National Quality Framework</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Establish mechanisms to monitor the objectives of individual ECEC settings. ii. Establish the legislative basis for implementing a new ECEC vision. iii. Develop a wide range of activities to promote the shared vision for ECEC across the sector.
<p>Develop a <u>single ECEC sector</u> to cover all contexts and all children from birth to the start of primary school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The role and function of settings covered by the National Quality Framework are updated to reflect the vision for ECEC. ii. Establish clarity over which organisation(s) are responsible for supporting the National Quality Framework's implementation. iii. Establish staff training programmes to enable existing staff to revise their practice in line with the expectations of a single ECEC sector.
<p>Strengthen the role and responsibilities of parents in all ECEC settings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Include in the plans of implementation of the Strategical Framework on Education 2030 actions to support a strengthened role of parents and families in the governance and management of ECEC settings covered by the scope of the National Quality Framework. ii. Establish processes for monitoring and recording the involvement of parents.

	<p>iii. Include in the plans of implementation of the Strategical Framework on Education 2030 actions to raise parents' awareness and promote the value and importance of high quality ECEC.</p>
<p>Introduce a well-resourced monitoring and evaluation system based on indicators to measure the quality of ECEC provision at setting, municipal, regional and national level</p>	<p>i. Establish a technical working group to produce guidance on each indicator in the National Quality Framework.</p> <p>ii. Organise a second pilot programme to finalise the indicators, and identify examples of effective practice in self-assessment.</p> <p>iii. Develop a self-assessment approach which is based on the agreed indicators and aligns with the external assessment processes.</p>
<p>Increase national awareness of the importance of high quality ECEC provision based on the National Quality Framework</p>	<p>i. Establish and fund an extensive network of activities to support professional learning, the exchange of good practice and engagement with the National Quality Framework.</p> <p>ii. Provide support to ECEC leadership teams to introduce the National Quality Framework.</p> <p>iii. Establish a communications strategy to publicise data and information on the quality of provision at the setting, municipal and national level.</p>
<p>Create publicly available reports which use everyday language to describe the quality of ECEC provision at the setting, municipal, regional and national level</p>	<p>i. Work with the statistical, regional and local authorities to establish the most effective ways for setting-level data to be collated and analysed in order to produce concise and transparent reports on the quality of ECEC.</p> <p>ii. Create a new common ECEC data base at national, regional and local level to support the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the ECEC sector.</p> <p>iii. Provide technical and professional guidance, mentoring and coaching to support all communities engaged in</p>

	implementing the National Quality Framework.
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Preparing this proposed action plan

7. The project team worked closely, and in partnership, with the national authorities and stakeholders to support the co-creation and testing of a draft National Quality Framework for ECEC.
8. The analysis of the current arrangements in Bulgaria conducted in the first phase of the project set out to:
 - examine the regulatory framework and the implementation of the five dimensions of the EU Quality Framework for ECEC (these dimensions cover access, staff, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding);
 - assess the extent to which the ten quality statements in the EU Quality Framework have been achieved in Bulgaria;
 - identify existing good practice;
 - identify gaps and possible shortcomings for delivering ECEC;
 - develop a set of recommendations which could provide the basis for developing a National Quality Framework for ECEC.
9. The analysis of Bulgaria's approach to ECEC (based on interviews, surveys and desk research) highlighted the absence of a unified system. ECEC was not considered as one sector for all children aged from birth to the start of primary school. The divisions in the ECEC system demonstrate a lack of synchronisation in standards, methods and approaches. This inhibits the creation of an holistic system which can support the development of children and strengthen collaboration with families. The different priorities, objectives and expectations of the distinct and separate age-based provision in the ECEC system have a negative impact on the quality and the quality assurance of the service. The analysis highlighted the value of creating a coherent and unified ECEC system. This could include:
 - developing common ECEC objectives for settings and services;
 - supporting national and system-level reform in order to address the quality of the service offered in the ECEC sector;
 - monitoring and evaluating the impact of a National Quality Framework on the quality of ECEC provision.
10. The subsequent review of ECEC in other European countries considered relevant practice in 18 national systems where a quality framework had been developed. Each system is at a different level of maturity in relation to the EU Quality

Framework. This analysis facilitated a 'compare and contrast' approach to informing potential policy options in Bulgaria.

11. A two-day peer learning event enabled policy experts from Bulgaria and three other countries⁶ to exchange information and consider how to measure the quality of ECEC provision. The discussions considered the following questions:

- how is quality defined in different ECEC systems?
- how is quality measured in different ECEC systems?
- how are indicators and data used in different ECEC systems?

12. This proposed action plan has further been informed by discussions of the national quality framework in the steering committee and the working group, consultation with stakeholders, and feedback from the participants in the pilot programme. The steering committee included representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Health⁷, the European Commission (DG REFORM) and the project team. The committee met on seven occasions between October 2020 and June 2022. It reviewed all aspects of the project and provided strategic guidance on the production of project reports, the development of the National Quality Framework and indicators, and all aspects of the pilot programme.

13. The working group included more than 40 representatives from different organisations in the ECEC sector in Bulgaria. They met on seven occasions between April and December 2021. The group discussed the development of a shared vision for ECEC and Bulgaria's application of the five dimensions in the EU Quality Framework for ECEC. The group discussed possible indicators which could be used to measure the quality of ECEC or measure system changes which would support the implementation of the National Quality Framework.

14. In addition, this proposal for an action plan was informed by stakeholder meetings in December 2021 and April 2022. The stakeholder workshops included the pilot organizers and participants, in addition to the working group members. The discussions focussed on:

- the development of the proposed National Quality Framework and draft indicators, and possible approaches to implementation;
- how best to organise a pilot programme;
- the next steps and involvement of stakeholders.

15. Following agreement on a draft version of the National Quality Framework (see

⁶ Ireland, Sweden and Lithuania.

⁷ The Ministry of Education and Science invited the Ministry of Health to nominate representatives for the Steering Committee. Written nominations were provided but due to the political changes and the intensive COVID environment, consultation with Ministry of Health representatives took place on ad hoc basis.

Annex A), the team organised a pilot programme. This sought to evaluate potential issues and benefits arising from implementation, and to collect feedback from ECEC providers. The pilot programme involved 10 local teams⁸ from ECEC settings and key partners from the local and regional ECEC authorities, parents, supporters and community members such as NGOs. The analysis of the pilot programme (based on 26 settings⁹) produced the following results:

- a clear definition of what constitutes quality, and the elements of quality, in the Bulgarian ECEC system;
- identification of the key stakeholders who can contribute to increasing the quality of provision in ECEC settings;
- a set of ideas on how to use the experience of the three international examples (see paragraph 13) to support ECEC reform and improvement;
- a self-assessment tool based on the draft National Quality Framework which can be used by ECEC settings;
- substantial feedback on the draft National Quality Framework.

16. The National Quality Framework for ECEC forms the basis for this proposed action plan. The project team facilitated a discussion of each section of the proposed framework in the working group. The action plan is based on two particularly important aspects of the framework: the scope and vision. The scope of the National Quality Framework¹⁰ is defined as:

any regulated arrangement which provides education and care for children from birth to the compulsory primary school age - regardless of the setting, financial arrangements, opening hours or programme content.

This covers the majority of ECEC settings and services such as early years education institutions; ECEC provision in schools; and health, social and family services. It includes all public kindergartens and private kindergartens licensed by the Ministry of Education and Science, public nurseries and all private nurseries licensed by the Ministry of Health¹¹. Decisions on which services to include in the scope of the National Quality Framework will need to be made by the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

17. The National Quality Framework, and this action plan, are based on the following

⁸ In addition to the ten settings selected by the project team, a further 16 settings were selected by UNICEF and the Trust for Social Achievement (TSA) to test the draft National Quality Framework, independently from the project pilot but according to the same methodology.

⁹ *ibid* footnote 9

¹⁰ See Annex A for full details of the national Quality Framework

¹¹ At a later date provision which is outside this definition (e.g. family day-care, unregulated provision, parents' cooperatives, unlicensed day-care centres and childminders) could be added to the scope of the National Quality Framework if there is a change to the regulations. (Family day care covers the independent provision of pre-school education as regulated by Article 18 of Ordinance No 5.)

vision¹² for ECEC in Bulgaria:

High quality early childhood education and care in Bulgaria supports all¹³ children's well-being and their social, emotional, cognitive, psychological and physical development. High quality ECEC is built on effective partnerships with parents and families. It is equally available and accessible to all children from birth to the age at which they enter primary school. Every child in Bulgaria has the right to a high quality ECEC service which includes preparation for transition to a primary school.

The proposed action plan

18. This proposed action plan includes six recommendations which, when taken together, could significantly enhance the existing quality of ECEC provision in Bulgaria. The recommendations, based on the EU Quality Framework for ECEC and the ECEC context in Bulgaria, cover all aspects of provision and will have an impact on all organisations and stakeholders involved in ECEC provision or policy. The first three recommendations are strategic and focus on the underlying philosophy, rationale and purpose of ECEC provision. They place children and their families at the centre of provision, and support the design of services around their rights, needs and expectations. The other recommendations are more operational and focus on strategic reform in the ECEC sector. The six recommendations are to:

1. develop and promote a vision for high quality ECEC which is based on the rights and needs of children and families, and the National Quality Framework;
2. develop a single ECEC sector to cover all contexts and all children from birth to the start of primary school;
3. strengthen the role and responsibilities of parents in all ECEC settings;
4. introduce a well-resourced monitoring and evaluation system based on indicators to measure the quality of ECEC provision at setting, municipal, regional and national level;
5. increase national awareness of the importance of high quality ECEC provision based on the National Quality Framework;
6. create publicly available reports which use everyday language to describe the quality of ECEC provision at the setting, municipal, regional and national level.

19. Each recommendation is independent of other national initiatives in ECEC, and they could each be implemented at a time to suit the Bulgarian national authorities. However, existing national policies and funding programmes (e.g. those based on the European

¹² See Annex A for full details of the national Quality Framework

¹³ In line with the European Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019/C 189/02), all children includes: children with diverse backgrounds and special educational needs, including disabilities, avoids segregation and incentivises their participation, regardless of the labour market status of their parents or carers. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01))

Structural and Investment Fund, and the Recovery and Resilience Facility) may have a direct or indirect impact on the quality and quantity of ECEC provision..

The proposed actions (recommendations)

Recommendation 1:

Recommendation	Intermediate steps
<p>Develop and promote a vision for high quality ECEC which is based on the rights and needs of children and families, and the National Quality Framework</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Establish mechanisms to monitor the objectives of individual ECEC settings. ii. Establish the legislative basis for implementing a new ECEC vision. iii. Develop a wide range of activities to promote the shared vision for ECEC across the sector.

Description of the recommendation

20. The project team’s analysis of the current arrangements of ECEC highlighted the different objectives and aims of individual ECEC settings and services. This makes it harder for children to have equal access to quality ECEC services; to move seamlessly from one institution to another; to build on their previous development and achievement; and to quickly adapt to different approaches to learning. It also makes it harder for parents to trust the ECEC system; to know what to expect from individual ECEC providers; and for staff to professionally develop, collaborate or change employers. A new vision, based on the rights and needs of children and families, should be an important strategic and central to the reform of the quality of the ECEC system.
21. As set out in paragraph 16, the National Quality Framework describes a shared vision which places the rights¹⁴ and needs of children at its centre. This type of vision offers greater certainty and more clarity in relation to what is expected from ECEC settings. It more easily enables support services, training providers and authorities to harmonise and coordinate their work.
22. A shared vision for high quality ECEC has to be communicated and promoted to all organisations providing a service (e.g. individual settings; parents’ groups; providers of initial and continuing education/training; municipal and regional authorities; government agencies and inspectorates; national, regional and local stakeholders). The development and promotion of the clear expectations set out in the National Quality Framework are important aspects of strengthening the quality of ECEC provision and provide the basis

¹⁴ The EU and EU countries must respect, protect and promote children's rights. All EU policies that have an impact on children must be designed in line with the best interests of the child. https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child_en

for more accurate and reliable approaches to monitoring and evaluation (see Recommendation 4).

Intermediate steps

23. The proposed vision builds on the EU Quality Framework and the current priorities of many ECEC settings, municipalities and authorities. Legislation or a nationally-approved Government Plan (which would be capable of adaptation to meet local circumstances) would support the ECEC sector in its implementation of such a vision. The monitoring and inspection arrangements which are currently used to review the quality of provision would need to be adapted for ensuring the implementation of the vision for ECEC.
24. To encourage and support the adoption of a shared vision for the whole of the ECEC sector, a wide range of activities can be introduced. These could include staff development and training at the setting and municipal level, changes to the current initial education/training programmes, changes to the State Quality Standards for ECEC, an increased focus on the importance of high quality provision (as part of the communications strategy described in recommendation 5) and the promotion and use of the vision for all children aged from birth to the start of primary school.

Outputs and outcomes associated with the recommendation

25. The long-term success of this recommendation (after four years) would be an increase in the quality of ECEC as measured by the indicators set out in the National Quality Framework. Success in the short and medium term should be measured as follows:
- in the short-term (six months following implementation):
 - i. new legislation or a Government Order has ensured there is clarity in relation to the aims of all ECEC provision;
 - ii. new or updated government publications describing how the new vision for ECEC can be used at the setting and municipal level to improve the quality of provision;
 - iii. parents' organisations, ECEC settings and stakeholders are aware of the new policy.
 - in the medium term (between six and 24 months following implementation):
 - i. organisations have aligned their aims, objectives, internal processes (e.g. self-evaluation and children/adult relationships) and mission to reflect the vision in the National Quality Framework. These changes have taken place in most regional, municipal and local contexts;
 - ii. inspection and monitoring systems have been updated to reflect the change.

Resources

26. The decision to create a shared vision for ECEC would lead to gradual changes in the sector. Change would be slow as individual organisation would be invited to review and amend their aims and objectives. The costs would not be significant and the following

should be considered:

- cost of dedicated ministry staff time as there is a need for extensive liaison between different ministries, regional and local authorities, and national agencies;
- the costs associated with changes at the regional, municipal and local levels;
- the cost of staff time and the costs associated with change in each ECEC setting;
- communication and information costs associated with revising and distributing official guidelines, publicity and advice on ECEC.

Timeline

27. This recommendation should be the first to be implemented. It is part of the process of introducing a National Quality Framework and indicates the intention to strengthen the quality of provision. This recommendation could lead to changes in every ECEC setting (though many setting could already have aims and objectives which align with the new vision). As such it should be introduced when there is governmental consensus on the value and benefits of an agreed and shared vision for the sector.

Risks and mitigation measures

28. The following table sets out the main risks and mitigations for recommendation 1.

Risk	Likelihood	Significance	How the Bulgarian Authorities can mitigate and manage the risk
The proposed vision will change the focus of the work of a large number of ECEC providers, particularly nurseries - and this encounters resistance	Low	Medium	Information and guidance as part of the communications campaign (recommendation 5) Examples of existing practice are publicised to show there are various ways of offering ECEC services which are in line with the vision Increase awareness of the benefits of focusing on the rights of the child and the nurturing care framework ¹⁵ as one way to ensure children's holistic development
There is a lack of clarity in relation to what the vision means in practice	Low	Low	Examples of existing practice are publicised (these may be collected during a reformed monitoring and evaluation process as described in Recommendation 4) to show there are

¹⁵ <https://nurturing-care.org/resources/bulgaria/>

			various ways of offering ECEC services which are in line with the vision
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Recommendation 2:

Recommendation	Intermediate steps
<p>Develop a single ECEC sector to cover all contexts and all children from birth to the start of primary school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The role and function of settings covered by the National Quality Framework are updated to reflect the vision for ECEC. ii. Establish clarity over which organisation(s) are responsible for supporting the National Quality Framework's implementation. iii. Establish staff training programmes to enable existing staff to review their practice in line with the expectations of a single ECEC sector.

Description of the recommendation

29. A National Quality Framework can help synchronise existing ECEC provision by establishing a set of shared expectations for services provided to all children aged from birth to the start of primary school. Currently different parts of the ECEC sector have different expectations, objectives and approaches. Establishing a unified ECEC system would support initiatives to treat early childhood (from birth to the start of primary school) as a critical period for the development of every child respecting the different age specific stages in children's learning, development, care and socialisation. On this basis, a wide range of activities can be deployed to support children's holistic development from birth to the start of primary schooling, and strengthen collaboration with families.
30. Creating a single ECEC sector would affect all institutions and services providing or supporting ECEC. The creation of a common and shared National Quality Framework would require a change in the role of nurseries as they would be asked to support all aspects of children's development including their health, education and care. Kindergartens would be asked to support children's full developmental potential irrespective of their place of living, developmental difficulties, ethnic background or family environment.
31. Treating all ECEC provision (as set out in the scope of the National Quality Framework in paragraph 15) as one system will improve children's transition and continuity between different institutions; lead to the establishment of shared goals and objectives; and ensure children's learning, care, social and psychological development is central to the activities of every ECEC setting. It can also lead to greater collaboration between organisations in the children's sector.

32. The creation of a single ECEC sector would affect regional, municipal and local structures. These changes would be seen wherever two or more organisations have responsibility for the quality, governance, funding, management or leadership of ECEC settings.

Intermediate steps

33. The creation of a unified system can be most easily achieved through the **establishment of a single, national organisation with responsibility for all ECEC provision** for children from birth to the start of primary school. Such a national organisation could have a regional and local structure. However, it may not be easy to achieve this objective immediately, and there may be a need for interim arrangements where a unified ECEC system could be led by one, two or more government departments; inspected by one, two or more agencies; and supported by one, two or more departments in municipal and regional authorities. The important aspects of a single system are the sector's commitment to a shared vision (see recommendation 1) and the implementation of a National Quality Framework.
34. It will be important to update the role and function of individual settings and organisations to reflect the changes associated with the creation of a single ECEC sector. This could be achieved through legislation, a Government Order or amended regulations associated with inspection and monitoring of the quality of provision.
35. The creation of a single ECEC sector will be seen through the actions and practices of staff. In some ECEC settings, the proposed vision for a single sector, will lead to significant change. Staff will need professional development and support so they can feel part of the move towards a unified sector (see recommendation 5).

Resources

36. The development of a single sector would be a strategic change to how ECEC is organised. It would affect all aspects of provision. The costs which should be considered include:
- cost of the time for ministry staff with responsibility for enhancing quality in ECEC. There is a need for extensive liaison between different ministries, regional and local authorities, and national agencies (particularly if there is a decision to pass new legislation or prepare a Government Order on the structure and governance of the ECEC sector);
 - the costs associated with creating an organisation with responsibility for overseeing a single ECEC sector. This could involve significant changes at the regional, municipal and local levels;
 - the costs associated with supporting a professional ECEC community which feels part of a single ECEC sector and shares a common vision on quality;
 - communication and information costs associated with revising and distributing official guidelines, publicity and advice on ECEC.

Outputs and outcomes associated with the recommendation

37. The long-term success of this recommendation (after four years) would be an increase in

the quality of ECEC as measured by the indicators set out in the National Quality Framework. Success in the short and medium term should be measured as follows:

- in the short-term (six months following implementation):
 - i. information and guidance materials on ECEC have been updated to reflect the new policy on ECEC;
 - ii. parents' organisations, staff in ECEC settings and stakeholders are aware of the new policy.
- in the medium term (between six and 24 months following implementation):
 - i. organisational change, possibly as a result of legislation or a Government Order, has taken place in most regional, municipal and local contexts;
 - ii. inspection and monitoring systems have been unified and updated to reflect the change.
 - iii. there is a significant increase in engagement and awareness among ECEC staff and key stakeholders.

Timeline

38. This recommendation can be introduced at any time. It has the potential to create significant reform of the existing governance and organisational arrangements. As such it should be introduced when there is consensus on the value and benefits of a unified system. It should be noted that other European countries currently use a wide range of ECEC governance structures including split, integrated and mixed systems¹⁶.

Risks and mitigation measures

39. The following table sets out the main risks and mitigations for recommendation 2.

Risk	Likelihood	Significance	How the Ministry of Education and Science can mitigate and manage the risk
Ministries have different views on the desirability and feasibility of creating a unified ECEC sector	Medium	Medium	<p>Detailed and regular discussions with other ministries</p> <p>Establish a working group with representatives from all ministries to discuss the creation of a unified ECEC sector</p> <p>Announcement on changes are made by all the ministries with responsibility for ECEC provision</p>

¹⁶ See, for example, figure 7 in Eurydice's briefing paper on Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe, 2019 <https://eurydice.ba/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Eurydice-Brief-Key-Data-on-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Care-in-Europe.pdf>

Some parts of the ECEC sector, or ECEC staff or leaders, resist the change	Low	Low	<p>Training materials and opportunities for the development of ECEC staff and leaders</p> <p>Changes to the initial training programmes</p> <p>Communications strategy (see recommendation 5)</p> <p>Invest in building a new professional community</p>
The creation of a unified ECEC sector takes longer than expected	Medium	Low	The communication strategy emphasises the 'direction of travel' and accepts change will take time

Recommendation 3:

Recommendation	Intermediate steps
Strengthen the role and responsibilities of parents in all ECEC settings	<p>i. Create a national strategy to support the strengthened role of parents and families in the governance and management of ECEC settings covered by the scope of the National Quality Framework.</p> <p>ii. Establish processes for monitoring and recording the involvement of parents.</p> <p>iii. Establish a national strategy to raise parents' awareness and promote the value and importance of high quality ECEC.</p>

Description of the recommendation

40. The project team's analysis highlights the extent to which parents face difficulties in relation to ECEC. By considering Bulgaria's progress in relation to how the five dimensions in the EU Quality Framework affect parents, the project team noted that:

- there are no measures for assessing parents' needs and for planning ECEC services based on the desires of families. The regulatory and strategic framework do not provide parents with a choice between different forms of services;

- parents have a lack of choice in relation to different forms of ECEC service. There are differences in the coverage and net enrolment rates in nurseries and kindergartens, and insufficient measures to increase parents' access to provision;
 - parents' involvement in decision-making is legally guaranteed in relation to kindergartens but it is not legally regulated in relation to nurseries;
 - there is a substantial need to stimulate and support parental involvement in ECEC settings . There is currently very little awareness on the benefits of involving parents as partners in ECEC management.
41. ECEC settings and services are designed and delivered to support children and their families. This affects how each setting's provision is organised (e.g. opening hours, group sizes, the 'curriculum' content); the accessibility, availability and affordability of ECEC provision; and parents' role in the management and governance of each setting.
42. The quality of ECEC provision can be enhanced through the development of strong partnerships with families and local communities. In the best situations, parental involvement extends beyond membership of an advisory group, visiting the ECEC setting, donating resources and volunteering to help and support children during an ECEC activity. Such enhancement can support efforts to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion which is needed in Bulgaria.
43. Parents and families should work in partnership with ECEC staff to support the learning and development of their children. They should be able to expect that their views on the organisation of their children's ECEC setting are taken into account. This could involve taking on a governance role; an advisory role in managing the setting; or becoming involved in decisions relating to the ECEC 'curriculum' and pedagogy. They can expect to receive regular feedback on the progress and development of their children. These changes will encourage and promote parents' engagement and contribution to children's development and increase parents' perceptions of the value of ECEC.
44. Currently some parents appear to show little interest in, and do not value the benefits of ECEC for their child(ren)'s development. A better understanding of the wide range of family environments can help ECEC services respond to the needs of children and strengthen parents' engagement.

Intermediate steps

45. This recommendation is based on a different way of seeing and valuing the contribution of parents and families who wish to become more involved in the work of ECEC settings. Their role will vary between individual ECEC settings and depend on parents' level of interest and commitment. As such there can be no standard way of organising or managing or encouraging parental involvement. In order to strengthen the role of parents, a set of minimum expectations could be included in a national strategy which is implemented at regional, municipal and local level.
46. The monitoring and inspection arrangements which are currently used to review the quality of provision would need to be adapted to ensure that parents and families are fully involved in all aspects of the ECEC setting's practice.

47. The importance of parents and families' contribution to the quality of ECEC practice, and their role in individual ECEC settings, could be part of the communications strategy and a comprehensive capacity building programme to support the implementation of the National Quality Framework. This strategy (based on recommendation 5) and other capacity building activities and strategies would promote the value and importance of high quality ECEC, and emphasise the contribution of parents and families.

Outputs and outcomes associated with the recommendation

48. The long-term success of this recommendation (after four years) would be measured by the percentage of ECEC settings (covered by the scope of the National Quality Framework) which had established governance arrangements where parents and families were fully involved in strategic and operational decisions. Success in the short and medium term should be measured as follows:

- in the short-term (six months following implementation):
 - i. a national strategy for parents and families has been drafted and is ready for consultation;
 - ii. parents' organisations, ECEC settings and stakeholders are aware of the new policy.
- in the medium term (between six and 24 months following implementation):
 - i. a national strategy for parents and families has been launched; published and is beginning to be used;
 - ii. regional and local authorities have adapted the national strategy to meet their own circumstances and priorities, and are encouraging ECEC settings to use the strategy;
 - iii. concrete actions associated with the national strategy are being implemented. This includes concrete activities, national support programmes or other policy measures involving parents, such as examples of the sharing of professional challenges.
 - iv. inspection and monitoring systems have been updated to reflect the change.

Resources

49. The decision to strengthen the role and responsibilities of parents and families would lead to gradual changes in the governance and management of individual ECEC settings. Change would be slow as individual organisations would be invited to review and amend their own arrangements. The following costs should be considered:

- the costs associated with a consultation on the details of a national strategy for parents and families;
- cost of staff time in regional and local authorities to contextualise a national strategy;
- the costs associated with changes to the monitoring and inspection arrangements;
- the cost of staff time and the costs associated with change in each ECEC setting;

- the costs involved in implementing any concrete activities or policy measures defined;
- the communication and information costs associated with revising and distributing official guidelines, publicity and advice on parents' and families' roles.

Timeline

50. This recommendation can be introduced at any time. It is part of the process of strengthening the role of parents and families in all ECEC settings covered by the National Quality Framework. This recommendation could lead to change in many ECEC setting. As such it should be introduced following a national consultation with ECEC settings, parental organisations and stakeholders at the municipal, regional and national level.

Risks and mitigation measures

51. The following table sets out the main risks and mitigations for recommendation 3.

Risk	Likelihood	Significance	How the Ministry of Education and Science can mitigate and manage the risk
It is difficult for every ECEC setting to increase the role of parents	Medium	Low	<p>Enabling regional and local authorities to contextualise the national strategy</p> <p>Consultation on a draft national strategy for parents' and families' involvement</p> <p>Provide resources for an expert team to provide support on policy design and implementation in this area</p>
Parents welcome their greater role in the governance of ECEC settings, but they feel their involvement is not taken seriously	Medium	Low	<p>Publicity campaign, including examples of best practice as part of the communications strategy in recommendation 5.</p>

Recommendation 4:

Recommendation	Intermediate steps
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<p>Introduce a well-resourced monitoring and evaluation system based on indicators to measure the quality of ECEC provision at setting, municipal, regional and national level</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Establish a technical working group to produce guidance on each indicator in the National Quality Framework. ii. Organise a second pilot programme to finalise the indicators and identify examples of effective practice in self-assessment. iii. Develop a self-assessment approach which is based on the agreed indicators, aligns with the external assessment processes.
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Description of the recommendation

52. The project team’s report on the current arrangements in Bulgaria¹⁷ highlighted significant issues associated with both the internal and external monitoring processes which support the quality assurance of ECEC provision. The current arrangements are not sufficiently resourced to monitor the quality of the whole ECEC system in a holistic and timely manner; the expectations placed on ECEC settings to monitor the quality of their provision are currently too demanding; and the provision of data is neither synchronised nor sufficient to develop policy options or improve practice.
53. The introduction of a National Quality Framework provides an opportunity to introduce a well-resourced and unified system for monitoring and evaluating the quality of all ECEC settings. Part of this system is the use of indicators; the production of accurate and reliable data; and national arrangements to report on the quality of provision.
54. The quality of ECEC provision is monitored through self-assessment internal to settings, external quality assurance or both. Individual settings, municipalities and external teams use different processes and methods for monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision. The harmonious interplay of these complementary processes, by contrast, would encourage and support ECEC settings to assure the quality of their provision. The creation of a standardised approach to an annual self-assessment exercise, based on the indicators in the proposed National Quality Framework, can support all ECEC providers to consider the quality of all aspects of their provision. In addition, a standardised approach to reporting on the indicators can help to enhance transparency and consistency.
55. Self-assessment processes support setting leaders in managing and improving ECEC quality. By monitoring the quality of existing provision, each ECEC setting can be encouraged to:
- use a standardised approach to reporting on the quality of provision (through an agreed ‘dashboard’ based on the indicators);
 - develop an annual improvement plan with agreed actions which can be reviewed through internal and external processes.

¹⁷ Ibid footnote 2

56. The external assessment of the quality of all ECEC settings covered by the scope of the proposed National Quality Framework is an important aspect of creating transparency, accountability and a drive for further improvement. External quality assurance (whether undertaken by municipal, regional or national organisations) is most successful when the monitoring activities align with the standardised internal approach to self-assessment and when the process and results are used to improve practice. The indicators in the proposed National Quality Framework provide the basis for both this internal and external process of monitoring the quality of ECEC provision.
57. The pilot programme, in line with the views of the working group and Steering Committee, focused on the 23 indicators which had been identified and discussed during the development of the draft National Quality Framework. From this long-list, the project team identified twelve core indicators. A second, complementary, pilot would provide an opportunity to:
- focus exclusively on the core indicators and examine how they can be used to support self-evaluation and quality improvement;
 - develop technical guidelines on how each core indicator could be used in a wide range of ECEC settings, including nurseries and kindergartens;
 - identify the most reliable, valid and accurate data collection processes for each core indicator.
- A second pilot would support the development of an implementation plan, and confirm that a wider range of ECEC settings are able to provide good data on the core indicators.
58. The core indicators proposed will form the basis of the external monitoring and reporting on the quality of provision. In addition to the core indicators, a large number of optional indicators were discussed during the pilot programme. These optional indicators can be used by ECEC settings, municipalities and other authorities to support internal self-assessment.

Intermediate steps

59. A second pilot programme enables the authorities to focus exclusively on the twelve core indicators and the feasibility and ease with which ECEC settings can use these indicators to support self-evaluation and generate accurate and reliable data. The project team's pilot programme provided an opportunity to refine the list of potential indicators which had been identified and discussed by the working group.
60. To strengthen the use and understanding of the twelve core indicators, and how they can be applied in **all** ECEC contexts and settings, the project team recommends that a technical working group should be established to produce guidance. This technical group should be asked to consider definitions and the range of ways that data can be collected in order to produce setting, municipal and regional 'dashboards' on the quality of provision.
61. Following the second pilot and agreement on the core indicators, the draft self-assessment templates and the approach used during the project team's pilot programme, can be

revised and aligned with the external monitoring and assessment processes.

Outputs and outcomes associated with the recommendation

62. The long-term success of this recommendation (after four years) would be measured by the production of accurate, reliable and comparable data on the quality of ECEC. This quality would be reported through the use of a standardised 'dashboard' based on the agreed set of core indicators. Success in the short and medium term should be measured as follows:

- in the short-term (six months following implementation):
 - i. the second pilot programme finalises a set of core indicators;
 - ii. a technical working group is established. This group will need to be well resourced to provide on-going and timely technical assistance and support which supports the work to build a culture of quality;
 - iii. a draft 'dashboard' which could be used to report on the quality of provision.
- in the medium term (between six and 24 months following implementation):
 - i. the technical working group produces draft templates to illustrate how the quality of ECEC could be reported through the use of a standardised 'dashboard';
 - ii. alignment between the internal self-assessment and external monitoring processes;
 - iii. resourcing enables a sufficiently large sample of ECEC settings to be externally monitored every year.

Resources

63. The decision to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of ECEC provision, and the use of a core set of indicators, is a significant commitment. Change would be gradual as the external monitoring arrangements will need to be developed, and existing arrangements enhanced, to ensure a sizeable sample of ECEC settings can be reviewed each year. The following costs should be considered:

- the costs associated with organising and analysing a second pilot programme;
- the costs associated with establishing and supporting a technical working group;
- cost of staff time in the inspectorates(s) regional and local authorities to ensure a sizeable sample of ECEC providers can be monitored each year;
- the costs associated with changes to the monitoring and inspection arrangements to reflect the use of indicators;
- the cost of staff time and the costs associated with change in each ECEC setting;
- communication and information costs associated with revising and distributing official guidelines, publicity and advice on the use of indicators.

Timeline

64. This recommendation should be introduced starting with a second pilot. This second pilot, based on the core indicators of the National Quality Framework, is expected to take six months. The guidance from the technical working group, and the changes to the external

monitoring and reporting processes can begin once the results of the second pilot have been analysed and agreed.

Risks and mitigation measures

65. The following table sets out the main risks and mitigations for recommendation 4.

Risk	Likelihood	Significance	How the Ministry of Education and Science can mitigate and manage the risk
The indicators are difficult to implement in every setting	High	High	The second pilot can be used to test the twelve core indicators
There is uncertainty about how to measure each indicator in order that the data can be reliably used at the setting, municipality and national level	High	High	Establish a technical working group
The workload associated with changing the existing quality assurance systems (based on internal self-assessment and the 'dashboard') to reflect the indicators and the National Quality Framework	Medium	Medium	Advice from the technical working group

Recommendation 5:

Recommendation	Intermediate steps
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<p>Increase national capacity-building and awareness around the importance of high quality ECEC provision based on the National Quality Framework</p>	<p>i. Establish and fund an extensive network of activities to support professional learning, the exchange of good practice and engagement with the National Quality Framework.</p> <p>ii. Provide support to ECEC leadership teams to introduce the National Quality Framework.</p> <p>Establish a communications strategy to publicise data and information on the quality of provision at the setting, municipal and national level.</p>
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Description of the recommendation

66. The project provided an opportunity to discuss the idea of a National Quality Framework. However, the development of a common understanding of the implications of a National Quality Framework will need a considerable amount of national, regional and local activity. In particular, staff across all the ECEC settings covered by the scope of the National Quality Framework will need to be informed of this development and have an opportunity to engage in professional learning.
67. This recommendation highlights that staff in ECEC settings need support as well as information. For some parts of the ECEC sector, the proposals in the National Quality Framework will challenge current practice and create new expectations and requirements. Individual members of staff, ECEC leaders and authorities will expect to receive guidance and support on how they should adjust their current practice (e.g. through the greater involvement of parents; new arrangements for self-assessment; how best to collect reliable data on the indicators; the use of the 'dashboard' etc.)
68. Developing a cost-effective national communications and training plan is an important aspect of implementation. The size and diversity of the ECEC settings covered by the scope of the National Quality Framework emphasises the need to focus on key decision-makers and leaders. In practice this will require a focus on ECEC setting leaders in order for them to 'cascade' their training and learning through their organisation. This type of 'trickle-down' process will help to ensure the training is relevant and valuable in each context - this is particularly important in a split ECEC system where the needs of staff in individual ECEC settings are diverse.
69. Other cost-effective approaches include maximising the amount of information and training materials which is available on-line, and developing resources based on a 'train the trainer' model. If ECEC leaders are to be expected to provide information, training and support to their staff, they will need to receive training and learning resources which can be customised to meet the needs of their context.

Intermediate steps

70. The development of a national communications strategy would focus on the benefits of providing data and information on the quality of provision at the setting, municipal and national level. This strategy's target audience would be those with an interest in the quality of ECEC provision i.e. ECEC staff and leaders; municipalities; ECEC stakeholders and parents. Any communications strategy should be accompanied by a national staff training plan. The introduction of the National Quality Framework will lead to changed expectations for all those working in the sector.
71. A national training plan (based on on-line guidance and 'train the trainer' and cascade models) will need to be comprehensive and include:
- i. a wide range of funded activities which support professional learning, the exchange of good practice and staff engagement;
 - ii. the provision of technical and/or financial support to ECEC leadership teams to introduce the National Quality Framework to their staff;
 - iii. conferences/seminars for regional and municipal leaders in order for this information to be shared with individual ECEC settings and leaders;
 - iv. on-line guidance on all technical aspects associated with the collection and reporting of data relating to the core indicators.

Outputs and outcomes associated with the recommendation

72. The long-term success of this recommendation (after four years) would be measured by the number of ECEC settings using the National Quality Framework. Success in the short and medium term should be measured as follows:
- in the short-term (six months following implementation):
 - i. a series of events for regional and municipal leaders has been organised;
 - ii. materials to promote the National Quality Framework have been produced;
 - iii. a strategy with concrete actions and/or national programme to support ECEC leaders has been developed.
 - in the medium term (between six and 24 months following implementation):
 - i. all ECEC settings have received information and guidance on the National Quality Framework;
 - ii. all ECEC setting leaders have been offered an opportunity to receive training and advice on the National Quality Framework and the use of the indicators;
 - iii. a national strategy to promote the value and importance of high quality ECEC, as measured by the National Quality Framework, has been implemented.
 - iv. concrete actions associated with the promotion and communication of the National Quality Framework are being implemented. This includes concrete activities, national support programmes or other policy measures involving ECEC leadership teams.

Resources

73. The costs of promoting a National Quality Framework, and supporting the ECEC sector, can vary significantly depending on the number and range of activities. The following costs should be considered:

- the costs of providing ECEC leadership training and advice;
- the costs associated with developing a 'brand' for the National Quality Framework;
- the costs associated with producing guidance, information and support materials;
- cost of staff time in national, regional and local authorities to support staff training and the development and implementation of a national communications strategy.

Timeline

74. This recommendation can be introduced gradually following a decision to adopt the National Quality Framework. The two aspects of the recommendation (communications and training) can be developed consecutively or concurrently.

Risks and mitigation measures

75. The following table sets out the main risks and mitigations for recommendation 5.

Risk	Likelihood	Significance	How the Ministry of Education and Science can mitigate and manage the risk
The cost of supporting the whole ECEC sector are too high	High	Low	Make full use of online provision and 'cascade' models of support
There are 'hard to reach' areas of the ECEC sector that are less interested in the development of a National Quality Framework	Medium	Low	Develop a 'train the trainers' model in order that regional and municipal authorities to reach out to all ECEC settings in their areas

Recommendation 6:

Recommendation	Intermediate steps
Create publicly available reports which use everyday language to describe the	i. Work with the statistical, regional and local authorities to establish the most effective ways for setting-level data to be

<p>quality of ECEC provision at the setting, municipal, regional and national level</p>	<p>collated and analysed in order to produce concise and transparent reports on the quality of ECEC.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii. Create a new common ECEC database at national, regional and local level to support the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the ECEC sector. iii. Provide technical and professional guidance, mentoring and coaching to support all communities engaged in implementing the National Quality Framework.
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Description of the recommendation

76. Publicly available reports including information about the current state of ECEC in different settings can be beneficial to all stakeholders involved in ECEC delivery (at the setting, municipal, regional and national levels).
77. Parents and families are interested in the quality of provision, particularly the ECEC setting attended by their child(ren). Reports on quality can be designed and written to enable every potential reader to find out whether an ECEC setting offers high-quality provision. Based on the indicators in the National Quality Framework, these publicly-available reports can be succinct and easily understood. A similar approach to ensuring clarity and transparency can be used for annually-available reports on quality at the municipal, regional and national level. All reports can be made available through a web-site dedicated to ECEC quality. (This could be hosted by an existing national organisation).
78. The use of core indicators enables authorities and settings to produce reports using a nationally-agreed template. A key aspect of this recommendation is the expectation that these reports on quality would be publicly available as this provides an opportunity to enhance transparency and establish more accountability.
79. Agreement on the core indicators of the NQF ensures that data on the quality of provision in individual ECEC settings can be amalgamated at the municipal, regional and national level. To ensure consistency, accuracy and reliability the technical working group (see recommendation 4) would provide guidance to ECEC settings and municipalities on how to define and measure each indicator.
80. The development of a standardised way of describing the quality of provision (see recommendation 4) provides an opportunity to produce an annual 'dashboard' of data. The same dashboard could be developed for use at the setting, municipal, regional and

national level¹⁸. A dashboard could include data from an individual organisation (setting, municipality, region) and the relevant national data. This would enable parents and others with an interest in the quality of ECEC to understand the success of each setting, municipality and region compared to the national average. The municipalities and national authorities will need the capacity and expertise to combine and analyse data from ECEC providers.

Intermediate steps

81. One advantage of using a core set of indicators is the ability to collate data from all ECEC settings in a municipality and region. Gaining agreement on how and when this data is collected, collated and analysed will be an important pre-condition for reporting on the quality of ECEC provision. It may be possible that, on an agreed date each year, each provider's records on the core indicators would be sent to the municipalities. The data from the ECEC providers would be combined with data held by the municipalities (generated from a range of instruments and resources) to produce the municipality-level measurement of the indicators. For example, the ECEC providers should be asked to keep records on how many children attend ECEC regularly. Each municipality will hold data on the number of children in the area and this will enable percentage figures to be calculated.
82. In a similar way each municipality could send data on the indicators to the regional and national authorities on an agreed date each year. The regional and national authorities will need the capacity and expertise to combine and analyse the data from the municipalities and identify regional trends. The national authorities would be responsible for producing an annual 'dashboard' to show the achievement against the indicators in the National Quality Framework. The municipalities would be invited to produce an annual 'dashboard' to show the achievement of local ECEC settings and services.
83. The public reporting on the quality of provision will need expert advice from communications and technical experts. It will be important to work with the statistical, regional and local authorities to establish the most effective ways for setting-level data to be collated and analysed in order to produce concise and transparent reports on the quality of ECEC.
84. Transparency will be enhanced if it is easy for parents, settings, researchers and others to easily find information on the quality of provision. This could be through the creation of a common ECEC data base which provides easily understood information at the national, regional and local level.

Outputs and outcomes associated with the recommendation

85. The long-term success of this recommendation (after four years) would be measured by the production of accurate, reliable and comparable data on the quality of ECEC as measured by an agreed set of core indicators. Success in the short and medium term should be measured as follows:

¹⁸ Additional statistics may be needed for the regional and national dashboard e.g. government funding for ECEC with trends over time.

- in the short-term (six months following implementation):
 - i. there is agreement from municipal and regional authorities to develop a simple to understand, standard template for the reporting of ECEC quality;
 - ii. the technical working group's remit includes reference to the production of a standard template based on the core indicators.
- in the medium term (between six and 24 months following implementation):
 - i. a draft version of the 'dashboard' is available for internal, confidential use;
 - ii. consideration is given to whether targets or benchmarks should be established to support a gradual improvement in the quality of provision.

Resources

86. The publication of easily understood data would support gradual change in how individual ECEC settings plan and deliver their provision. Although change could be slow, as individual organisations would be invited to reflect on their own quality in relation to local, regional and national averages, a national dashboard or database could be set up more quickly to offer stakeholders an overview of changes in the sector. The following costs should be considered:

- the costs associated with the technical working group;
- cost of staff time in regional and local authorities to prepare their dashboards based on collated data;
- the cost of staff time and the costs associated with change in each ECEC setting;
- the cost of developing the quality dashboards information systems and the web-based cost of hosting them;
- communication and information costs associated with publicising and promoting the quality dashboards

Timeline

87. This recommendation should be introduced in a two-step process: the first step would be based on providing information on quality for internal use only; the second step would be to make the data publicly available.

Risks and mitigation measures

88. The following table sets out the main risks and mitigations for recommendation 6.

Risk	Likelihood	Significance	How the Ministry of Education and Science can mitigate and manage the risk
It proves difficult to find simple and	Low	Low	The technical working group will be invited to advise on this issue

everyday language to describe the quality of ECEC provision			
ECEC settings, staff and others resist the publication of comparable information on the quality of provision	Medium	Medium	Comparable data would not be the focus of the reports. The intention would be to support improvements in quality and self-reflection

Potential for implementation

Summary of the timelines for all the recommendations

89. The project team proposes the gradual introduction and use of all aspects of the National Quality Framework. Following the national conference in September which will outline the work on this project and the recommendations, the project team proposes:

- an early ministerial announcement in January 2023 on the plan to develop and use a National Quality Framework;
- a second, larger-scale, pilot of the National Quality Framework and indicators from January to April 2023;
- analysis, dissemination and reporting on the second pilot in June 2023;
- the introduction of the scope and vision of the National Quality Framework from September 2023;
- during the first year of implementing the National Quality Framework (September 2023 to July 2024) all the data from the self-assessment process is used to refine the core indicators, agree definitions and ways of measuring and recording data relating to the core indicators. Data from the indicators would not be published during this year - they would be used to support self-assessment and monitor how well the core indicators are understood and can be measured reliably and consistently in all ECEC settings covered by the scope of the National Quality Framework;
- from September 2024 all aspects of the National Quality Framework can be introduced.

90. The project team believes it will be important to monitor how well the National Quality Framework is working. Consequently, after two years of operating in full, it will be beneficial to complete an evaluation of the National Quality Framework's implementation. This evaluation, undertaken by representatives from the Working Group which developed the National Quality Framework, would produce a report for review by ministerial officials.

91. Beginning in September 2026, the evaluation team's terms of reference could consider:

- changes to the scope of the National Quality Framework;
- changes to the core indicators;
- the effectiveness of the communications and training plans which support the use of the National Quality Framework;
- whether to introduce targets or benchmarks for individual settings, municipalities and regions.

Challenges relating to implementation

92. This proposed action plan is based on system-wide reform in the ECEC sector. Implementing large-scale change will be challenging. Consequently, the project team believes it will be helpful to assign responsibility for implementation to one organisation (preferably this organisation can cover all the different sectors involved in ECEC provision). This could be an existing national agency, or it could be a new organisation which represents different ministries, local authorities and those with an interest in the quality of ECEC provision.
93. There are other challenges relating to implementation e.g. agreement by all the ministries with responsibility for ECEC provision; the need to organise further discussions with stakeholders; the costs associated with reforming the ECEC system; the current capacity of the ECEC system; and how best to establish clear expectations.

Conclusions

94. ECEC continues to be a priority for education and training systems throughout Europe. The Council Resolution¹⁹ on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) highlights that 'quality early childhood education and care plays a particularly important role, and should be further reinforced as a basis for future educational success'.
95. The project team's discussions with the steering committee, the working group, stakeholders and representatives from ECEC settings highlight the level of interest and support for a move towards a unified ECEC sector based on the implementation of a National Quality Framework.
96. The project team believes that the introduction of the National Quality Framework will have a significant impact on the quality of ECEC provision, provide more support to parents and families, and promote social inclusion and children's development.

¹⁹ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b004d247-77d4-11eb-9ac9-01aa75ed71a1>

ANNEXES

Annex 1 Draft National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

These indicators were considered during the pilot phase. They form the basis for the creation of core and optional indicators which could be used by all ECEC settings and/or municipalities covered by the scope of the quality framework.

Access

- The percentage of children for whom an accessible and state-subsidised place is available
- The percentage of children in Bulgaria (aged from birth to the age of seven) who attend ECEC regularly²⁰
- The percentage of ECEC facilities reporting their services take full account of families' needs and desires in relation to the education and care of child/ren.

The EU's Quality Framework emphasises the value of high quality ECEC for all children, particularly those with additional needs and those whose families are from socially disadvantaged communities. Increasing the percentage of children whose families are able to use an accessible and state-subsidised ECEC place strengthens social cohesion and provides more opportunities for all children in society particularly those from disadvantaged groups. The members of the working group emphasised the family-oriented nature of ECEC services.

Staff

- The percentage of staff working directly with children who have completed professional education based on the national competences which are relevant to their position in an ECEC setting
- The percentage of professionally-qualified ECEC staff who receive support²¹ for their professional development²² in line with the nationally-agreed competences for ECEC staff;
- The percentage of ECEC leaders working in an ECEC setting who demonstrate the agreed national competences
- The average salary of professionally-qualified ECEC staff employed in the public sector as a percentage of the average salary of a primary school teacher
- The average ratio of children to staff working directly with them
- The average ratio of children to professionally trained staff working directly with them
- The percentage of qualified ECEC staff working directly with children who have received at least three months' relevant work experience as part of their initial training programme
- The percentage of ECEC settings which allocate time for staff to prepare, reflect and improve the quality of their practice (i.e. time when staff are not working directly with children)

²⁰ See Glossary of Terms below for a definition of 'regularly'

²¹ See Glossary of Terms below for a definition of 'support'

²² See Glossary of Terms below for a definition of 'professional development'

Staff need the right mix of competences to work with young children. This is crucial for the provision of high quality ECEC because it enables staff to contextualise their pedagogical practice and adapt it to meet the diverse needs of children and families. Investment in the systems which support staff (both the existing workforce and those who are new to the profession) leads to improvements in quality, strengthens staff motivation and retention, and improves children's development.

State quality standards for ECEC programmes

- There is an official, approved or mandatory curriculum framework for ECEC.
- The percentage of settings or services (providing ECEC to children aged from birth to the start of primary school) using an approved curriculum which complies with state ECEC quality
- The percentage of ECEC settings using a curriculum which requires staff to use information from the feedback of children, parents and colleagues to systemically improve practice

The curriculum (the state standards for ECEC programmes) should set common goals, values and approaches which reflect society's expectations about the role and responsibilities of ECEC settings in encouraging children's development. A well-balanced combination of education and care can promote children's well-being, positive self-image, physical development and their social and cognitive development. Children's experiences and their active participation should be highly valued, and the significance of learning through play should be understood and actively supported.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Information on the quality of the ECEC system is used as the basis for improvement
- The percentage of ECEC settings with publicly available²³ information on the quality of their provision
- The percentage of ECEC settings with monitoring systems which report on age specific competences for children in order to promote the best interests of the child.
- The percentage of ECEC settings with effective monitoring systems which report on the quality of the relationships between staff and children
- The percentage of ECEC settings which use administrative, pedagogic and other data to improve the quality of their provision including data from the parents/carers and family members.

Monitoring and evaluation must respect and meet all the legal requirements associated with the use of personal data. The aim of monitoring and evaluation is to support children, families and communities. All stakeholders, including ECEC staff, should be involved in

²³ See Glossary of Terms below for a definition of 'publicly available'.

monitoring and evaluation activities. Every ECEC setting should, as a minimum, collect and use the same set of data to inform the improvement of the quality of their provision. The information and data from monitoring needs to be used to analyse and evaluate the quality of provision and make improvements at the setting and system level.

Governance and funding

- The percentage of ECEC settings using a formal set of procedures to work in partnership with parents and other stakeholders
 - The percentage of gross domestic product which is invested in ECEC
 - The percentage of municipalities which report they have developed and implemented a governance system covering all aspects of ECEC provision
- The percentage of ECEC settings whose strategic plans include the monitoring and reporting on the use of their annual budget

The first indicator emphasises the importance of ECEC settings responding to the needs of parents/carers and stakeholders in relation to the education and care of the child/ren. This is part of a process of ensuring ECEC services provide accurate information, establish and develop partnership arrangements with parents and focus on children's needs and child development. The second indicator focuses on public expenditure on ECEC - it excludes families' expenditure on ECEC.²⁴ The third indicator highlights the increased synchronisation of the three parts of the ECEC system – education, health and social protection. It encourages the development of one ECEC system which is based around the needs of each child. . The fourth indicator considers the effectiveness and impact on quality of the investments in the ECEC system.

²⁴ This indicator is used in many countries and there is data from OECD (2020) Education at a Glance, Paris: OECD. Table B2.4. Page 185. Financing of ECEC, URL: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2020_7e21871e-en#page8

Glossary of terms used in the core indicators

'Regularly' from the proposed indicator on access

(i.e. the percentage of children in Bulgaria aged from birth to the age of seven who attend ECEC regularly)

A child who attends an ECEC provider for at least 12 hours per week for six weeks can be said to be attending 'regularly'.

'Support' from the proposed indicator on staff

(i.e. the percentage of professionally-qualified ECEC staff who receive support for their professional development)

Support for ECEC staff should be free and easily accessed. It could be based on professional mentoring, coaching, advice, supervision, observation or training. A member of staff (assistants, practitioners and leaders) can be said to be receiving 'support' if there is at least one hour of support each week over a six month period.

'Professional development' from the proposed indicator on staff

(i.e. the percentage of professionally-qualified ECEC staff who receive support for their professional development)

Professional development should be free and easily accessed. It could be formal or informal support or training. It could be provided by colleagues in the ECEC setting, ECEC managers or external organisations. A member of staff can be said to have received 'professional development' if the support is based on their role, their personal development, or their skills and competences.

'Publicly available' from the proposed indicator on monitoring and evaluation

(i.e. the percentage of ECEC settings with publicly available information on the quality of their provision)

Up-to-date information on the quality of ECEC provision (based on the indicators in this quality framework) is available to parents, potential users of an ECEC setting, ECEC staff and other stakeholders. An ECEC provider can be said to have made this information publicly available if it is available on the provider's (or municipality's) website or published each year.

Staff working directly with children

Staff, who may be paid or volunteers, may have a pedagogical and medical background. They can be professionally qualified, work in a support or assistance role, work full-time or part-time, and be based inside or outside the ECEC setting.

Staff relationships with children

"The interactions between children and adults affect each child's development and learning. Child-adult interactions have to be handled in a sensitive manner and be based on children's emotional and cognitive needs which take account of their viewpoints and initiatives. High quality interactions have a positive impact on the development of children's social and academic skills and motivation.