

Setting up a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care in Bulgaria ***(REFORM/SC2020/059)***



D9. National Quality Framework

Proposal for a National Quality Framework in ECEC in Bulgaria

1. Enabling factors

The reform of early childhood education and care is being supported by the European Union through the Structural Reform Support Programme¹. Under this programme, the European Commission provided technical support for the development of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). This has been done through the implementation of the project "Setting up a national quality framework on early childhood education and care" (REFORM/SC2020/059). The proposed framework includes a set of indicators and criteria for monitoring and evaluating the quality of ECEC. These measures will support the self-assessment carried out by kindergartens, schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education and nurseries. They are included in this proposal.

The aim of the project 'Setting up a national quality framework for early childhood education and care', which was carried out between September 2020 and October 2022, is to support:

- a better understanding of how Bulgaria's institutions can improve quality through a review of ECEC governance and provision. This would be based on existing policies, and the development of effective tools b(/vhfor their implementation;
- the development, after a broad consultation process, of a National Quality Framework for ECEC with a set of related indicators and benchmarks which reflect the Bulgarian context;
- a preliminary evaluation of a draft National Quality Framework and indicators. These have been piloted in several kindergartens, nurseries and in a group for compulsory pre-school education in school. Using this evaluation, an action plan for the implementation of the framework will be developed. This will include recommendations on how to assess and monitor ECEC quality.

There is widespread agreement that high-quality early childhood education and care can build the foundations for success in later life in terms of education, well-being, employability and social inclusion. This is why ECEC is particularly important for disadvantaged children. High-quality ECEC is an efficient and effective investment in education and training.

The proposal for a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care has been developed based on the expertise and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders, including experts from the education, health and social services sectors. The Framework uses the five quality dimensions identified in the European ECEC Framework (*access, staffing, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, governance and funding*) and builds on the strengths of the Bulgarian ECEC system.

¹https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/structural-reform-support_en

The starting point for the development of this proposal has been the two reports produced as part of the project. These reports analysed the current ECEC situation in Bulgaria² and the national and regional ECEC policies in other European countries³.

2. The current situation in relation to ECEC in other European countries

In the 1990s the focus of EU-level policies was on improving access to ECEC by applying a European benchmark to track the coverage of children aged between four and compulsory school age in the education system. Most EU-level actions have been aimed at increasing the number of places in institutions and pre-school education providers. The focus on quantitative provision sought to increase the number of children able to access ECEC.

In more recent years, the European focus has shifted from providing access to ECEC to improving the quality of services. This led to the introduction of the European Quality Framework for ECEC. This was developed by a thematic expert working group set up in 2012 as part of the Education and Training 2020 work programme.

The systematic work of Member States to meet quantitative targets and qualitative targets has led to the creation of national policies to support children's development in the first years of life. These national policies have been supported by the adoption of the Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems in May 2019. This Recommendation provides general guidelines for the implementation of the European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. It includes different approaches to the development of high-quality provision which can be adapted at the national level to reform ECEC provision structures, the quality of ECEC processes and the outcomes of the services provided. The European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care provides guidance on the development and maintenance of early childhood education and care systems based on ten quality statements. These are structured around five dimensions: access, staffing, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding.

A review of Member States' policy changes shows that most targets have been related to access, staffing and the curriculum. In these three dimensions, the European Quality Framework has been used to change ECEC policy and practice in Member States. These policy changes have focused on:

Access: the availability and affordability of ECEC services. There has been a particular focus on tackling inequalities arising from a geographically uneven distribution of services, and from the difficulties experienced by vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in gaining access to services;

Staffing: increasing the status of the ECEC professions by making employment and retention more desirable. These policy changes include more opportunities for upgrading the initial vocational qualifications, providing professional support to less qualified staff (e.g. educators and helpers) and improving working conditions;

Educational content/curriculum: the design and implementation of improved pre-school curricula (especially for children aged from three to six). These revised curricula pay more attention to children's transition to primary school; and strengthen the cooperation between central and local authorities (including the involvement of different stakeholders) in the development of ECEC curricula.

²Analytical Report on the quality of early childhood education and care in Bulgaria, currently an internal document.

³ Report on relevant examples from European countries on raising the quality of early childhood education and care, currently an internal document.

The two dimensions in the European Quality Framework which are covered to a lesser extent are monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding.

This confirms that the European Quality Framework can be analysed and applied in the context of each Member State. It is a shared reference framework that encourages dialogue on the definition of quality and supports consultation on how to reform early childhood development. The analysis of other European countries' recent experiences identified several areas where new initiatives can be used to support the development of a quality framework in Bulgaria:

- The adoption of a shared vision for early childhood development that covers all children from birth to compulsory school age. A shared vision emphasises the importance and essential nature of ECEC policies. It also highlights the interconnectedness and interrelation with other policy areas affecting children. A shared vision which can be applied and used in all ECEC services is a significant step towards achieving a quality-oriented culture where ECEC is accessible to all children;
- Establishing a common understanding of what provision and which settings are part of an ECEC system;
- Developing and using a standardised self-assessment process which aligns with an external evaluation process;
- Defining and adopting a common understanding of how to measure the quality of early childhood education and care. This includes establishing a limited set of statements with relevant indicators to measure the most important aspects of quality.
- Recent work⁴ by a European ECEC working group identified the value of a single set of competences to describe the requirements and expectations for ECEC practitioners, staff, managers and directors.

3. The current situation in relation to ECEC in Bulgaria

At the start of this project, there was an objective analysis of how decisions could be made in relation to the development and implementation of a National Quality Framework for ECEC. This analysis covered the ECEC system and structures which are defined in the national regulatory and strategic frameworks. The extent to which the ECEC system in Bulgaria aligned with each dimension in the European Quality Framework for ECEC was considered. This analysis also identified the strengths and problematic areas in the structure of the ECEC system. The following is a summary of the main findings from this analysis.

3.1. Access

The availability and accessibility of ECEC for all children differs across the country. There is an uneven distribution of ECEC places in different types of communities. Children's access to ECEC depends on their parents' or family residence, status and/or ethnic-cultural affiliation. Access to ECEC in Bulgaria is not based on demographic data, nor the needs and desires of families. To ensure better planning for improved access to ECEC services it is important to assess the needs of families. The regulatory and strategic framework does not

⁴ Early childhood education and care. How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff: final report, 2021. <https://op.europa.eu/fr/publication-detail/-/publication/47ba3c3a-6789-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>

provide choice for parents to choose different forms of services, except where there are regulated nurseries, kindergartens and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education with compulsory pre-school education groups.

Parents' involvement in ECEC settings' decision-making processes, children's activities and the learning environments is only legally guaranteed in the kindergartens. The transition of children from their home environment to the kindergarten/nursery has been guaranteed by Ordinance No. 5 of 2016 on pre-school education. This is only applicable to kindergartens.

Kindergartens have a statutory system for improving the qualifications and professional skills of staff. This system supports staff working with children with additional needs, with disabilities, with different ethnic backgrounds, bilingual children, and children for whom Bulgarian is not their mother tongue. A similar system has yet to be developed for staff working in nurseries – although there are examples of individual practice in some settings.

3.2. Workforce

A requirement for relevant degree-level educational qualifications for kindergarten directors and pedagogical staff has been introduced in the legal framework of pre-school education. For non-pedagogical staff no specific requirements are required.

In the healthcare system, professional staff are required to complete a degree (ISCED 6) which focuses on the medical functions of the personnel, rather than young children's upbringing, education and care. These regulatory requirements apply to directors of nurseries, medical and pedagogical staff. They do not cover support staff.

There are regulations which cover the working conditions for ECEC staff in kindergartens. These include the physical environment, the provision of material and the financial and non-financial incentives for those working in the education system.

3.3. Educational content

The curriculum and methodological provision for children aged between 3 to 7 years are covered by regulations. There are state standards for pre-school education, and kindergartens develop and implement their programmes based on these standards. A system of programme developing leads to a comprehensive approach to child development based on pedagogical interactions and a common goal. Learning materials, developed and approved in accordance with the state educational standards for pre-school education, are provided for children of all age groups. This approach of legally approved standards which form the basis for programmes and methodologies is not required for staff working with children under three years of age.

In kindergartens, rather than nurseries, there is a requirement to support children's acquisition of learning and to promote their cognitive and non-cognitive development through a systematic use of play, learning from experience and social interactions.

The European Quality Framework envisages a curriculum which is applied in collaboration with children, staff and parents. This requires staff and managers to reflect on their own practice. This expectation is only in place for kindergartens.

3.4. Monitoring and evaluation

The monitoring and evaluation of kindergartens includes external and internal evaluation, and includes the participation of families. The results of this monitoring and evaluation are not sufficiently used at local, regional and/or national level to plan further improvements in the quality of policies and practices. The external evaluation of educational institutions covers the educational processes and governance. It is based on agreed criteria and indicators that can be improved when necessary. Annually, the National Inspectorate of

Education publishes a report which informs each ECEC setting about the outcomes of their evaluation. At the institution level, these evaluations provide specific recommendations on how to improve the quality of ECEC.

For nurseries and nursery groups in kindergartens, there are no monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in the legislation. Unlike kindergartens, there are no legally prescribed obligations for external or internal evaluation. However some elements of the European Quality Framework (e.g. the curriculum and staff training to work with young children and support their development) are included in monitoring and evaluation.

From a legal perspective, nurseries and kindergartens are obliged to follow child protection principles and participate in the prevention of violence and harassment against children.

3.5. Governance and financing

The ECEC sector is governed by the Ministry of Health (MoH), the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP). The legislative and regulatory requirements relating to the roles and responsibilities of settings in each of the three sectors are clearly defined but they are different. The ECEC policies developed through each governance structure are not coordinated. Structural and organisational features in ECEC governance of the health system and the education system lead to significant differences in ECEC practice. The characteristics of each sector, how the governance is interpreted and the content of the requirements do not ensure continuity between different types of institutions.

From the governance perspective each sector's ECEC policies are insufficiently coordinated and connected. There are sector-specific regulations and policies which do not always refer to each other. They are not related to other sectors in terms of goals, principles, approaches and the vision for ECEC. However, some parts of the legislation provides for cross-sector interaction and coordination when there is work on a specific policy (e.g. in the Social Services Act). This integrated approach towards regulation has not been introduced in every legal act and it is not the agreed policy and way of working in each part of the ECEC system. Bulgaria lacks a set of comprehensive and coherent public policies to link ECEC with other sectors which have an interest in the wellbeing of young children and their families.

Overall, there is no indication of a shortage of funding for core activities in nurseries and kindergartens. However, improving the quality of the ECEC system requires targeted funding through national programmes or changes to the financial standard. There is no evidence of budgetary coordination between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Science, in terms of staff salaries or policy objectives for ECEC.

3.6. General considerations

Nurseries, kindergartens and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education are the main (public) institutions providing ECEC before the start of compulsory school education. The organisation and activities of nurseries, kindergartens and schools with groups or compulsory pre-school education are regulated in various pieces of legislation. These regulations deal with the governance and organisation of activities in nurseries and pre-school education.

Kindergartens and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education provide education, training, socialisation and care from pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff who apply the state educational standard (SAR) for pre-school education, as well as other SARs which regulate their activities.

The implementation of a national quality framework for the ECEC system would enable the creation of consensus and agreement among researchers, educational experts, parents, professional associations and NGOs active in this field. It would set out policies and conditions that would lead to improved educational and care practices within early childhood services and the ECEC system. This would lead to an increase in the quality of the services provided and to a common understanding of the requirement to provide high quality services in all the structures of the ECEC system.

The quality of ECEC is a multidimensional concept which has been widely discussed and debated over the years.⁵ Quality is constantly evolving; its roots are set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in Bulgaria's Guide to General Comment No. 7 (2005) on the implementation of the rights of the child at an early age.

There is a common understanding among practitioners, politicians and researchers that the quality of ECEC is infused with cultural values and evolves through negotiation between different stakeholders. The three main pillars of quality identified in the scientific literature are structural, process and outcome quality.⁶

Providing access to education and care services is not enough if it is isolated and not complemented by the provision of high quality in the structures and processes used in all institutions working with children in early age⁷.

Structural quality refers to how the ECEC system is designed and organised. It includes provisions relating to opening and closing times, accreditation, staffing, curriculum development, funding, the teacher-children ratio, arrangements to ensure that all children have access to services; children are treated fairly and in accordance with their individual needs, as well as health and safety requirements⁸.

Process quality looks at the practices and approaches which inform the relationships and interactions between staff members and children, as well as between children themselves. It also includes the role of play in the curriculum; the relationships between staff and families; and the extent to which care and education are integrated⁹.

The creation of an ECEC quality framework in the Bulgarian context is based on:

- the development of a shared vision for the whole ECEC sector and range of services;
- the agreement on how to monitor the implementation of the objectives set out in the vision,
- indicators to provide information on progress and problem areas;
- a decision to set targets as part of an implementation plan;
- the reporting of the system's success in relation to the indicators and any targets which are set as part of an implementation process

The co-creation and testing of the proposed National Quality Framework for ECEC provided an opportunity to develop and evaluate the most appropriate indicators to measure success and the most appropriate reporting mechanisms. This process was based on an agreement about the general objective (or vision) for developing a high quality ECEC system which covers and applies to all children from birth to school entry.

⁵Ishimine, K., Tayler, C. & Bennett, J. (2010) Quality and Early Childhood Education and Care: A Policy Initiative for the 21st Century. ICEP 4, 67–80, URL: <https://doi.org/10.1007/2288-6729-4-2-67>

⁶Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD (2015) Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Review – Norway. Available at: https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/6372d4f3c219436e990a5b980447192e/oecd_Norway_ECEC_review_final_web.pdf

⁷Structural characteristics and process quality in early childhood education and care: A Literature Review, OECD Working Paper on Education No. 176, Paris Publishing House (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/edaf3793-en>)

⁸Ibid.

⁹Structural characteristics and process quality in early childhood education and care: A Literature Review, OECD Working Paper on Education No. 176, Paris Publishing House (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/edaf3793-en>)

The proposed National Quality Framework for ECEC will enable national, regional and municipal institutions to establish an environment in which they can develop and provide high quality early childhood education and care, and take greater responsibility for the quality of provision.

4. The scope and vision of the National Quality Framework for ECEC

During the development of the National Quality Framework for ECEC, the need to cover all ECEC institutions was identified, as well as the difficulty of including informally provided services. In this regard, the proposal for the National Quality Framework for ECEC includes:

any regulated service providing education and care for children from birth to compulsory school age.

Institutions providing ECEC services include all municipal, state and private kindergartens and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education with compulsory pre-school education groups, as well as all municipal, state and private (licensed) nurseries. Services outside this definition (e.g. unregulated providers, parental cooperatives, unlicensed day-care centres and babysitters) could be added to the scope of the National Quality Framework for ECEC once the status and regulation of these types of services have been specified.¹⁰

Any reform of the ECEC system is based on the creation of a vision for its development. The vision covers all children from birth to the start of primary education and all forms and types of regulated education and care services. It can be implemented in all sectoral policies. All stakeholders, united by shared goals, values, principles and a common understanding of a high quality ECEC system, would be involved in the implementation of the vision.

The proposed vision puts the child and their development at the centre of all ECEC processes. Based on the experience gained during the pilot programme and the productive cooperation between the institutions and organisations involved in developing this quality framework, the shared vision of quality ECEC is based on the understanding that:

*"High-quality early childhood education and care in Bulgaria supports the well-being and the social, emotional, cognitive, mental and physical development of **all children**. It is based on effective partnerships with families and is available and equally accessible for all children from birth to primary school age. Each child in Bulgaria is entitled to high-quality early childhood education and care, which includes preparation for the transition to primary school."*

5. Principles which support the National Quality Framework for ECEC

The vision for high quality ECEC is in line with the principles in the European Quality Framework, and matches many other European countries' aspirations for their ECEC provision. The National Quality Framework for ECEC should continue to evolve, support the establishment of a single ECEC system and be based on the following principles:

¹⁰These non-regulated ECEC services may apply the Quality Framework on a voluntary basis after the Quality Framework has been introduced to the regulated ECEC services.

- high quality ECEC is crucial in promoting children’s development and learning and, in the long term, enhancing their educational chances;
- the involvement of parents and the family as partners is key to ensuring an optimal environment for children's growth and development. Parents and families are responsible for the well-being, health and development of their children;
- high-quality ECEC should put the child at the centre of provision, with a focus on their rights¹¹ and active involvement, and respect for their views;
- high quality ECEC requires increased coordination, continuity and synchronisation of measures across all responsible authorities, institutions and stakeholders.

6. Statements to support the National Quality Framework for ECEC

The national quality framework aligns with the ideas in the European Quality Framework and includes a set¹² of statements describing a high quality ECEC system. These statements define the quality of ECEC. The implementation of the National Quality Framework aims to support the achievement of these statements:

European dimension of quality	Statements in the National Quality Framework for ECEC
Access	<p>Statement 1: ECEC which is available and affordable to all families and children</p> <p>Statement 2: ECEC which encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity</p> <p>Statement 3: ECEC which meets the needs and desires of families and children in relation to ECEC</p>
Staffing	<p>Statement 4: Well-qualified staff whose initial and ongoing training enables them to fulfil their professional role</p> <p>Statement 5: Staff who are provided with supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents and the family</p>
State quality standards for ECEC programmes (this dimension is labelled as ‘curriculum’ in the EU Quality Framework)	<p>Statement 6: Educational content based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches which enables children to reach their full potential, and addresses their social, emotional, cognitive and physical development and their well-being.</p> <p>Statement 7: Educational content that encourages staff to support children's development and abilities, collaborate with colleagues and parents, and conduct critical assessment and self-assessment.</p>
Monitoring and evaluation	<p>Statement 8: Monitoring and evaluating which enables the collection of information at the relevant local, regional and/or national level to support the process of planning policies and measures to enhance quality.</p> <p>Statement 9: Coordinated monitoring and evaluation</p>

¹¹Based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Convention on the Rights of the Child and other legal standards. For more information, visit <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/>

¹²Ten of these eleven statements are in the EU’s Quality Framework for ECEC. The additional statement for Bulgaria is Statement 3.

	systems for the protection of the rights and best interests of the child at the institutional, municipal and regional levels
Governance and funding	<p>Statement 10: Stakeholders, who have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities and a willingness to cooperate with partner organisations.</p> <p>Statement 11: A regulatory framework, funding and regular reporting that support universal access to high-quality ECEC</p>

7. National-level indicators

A set of national indicators have been selected and piloted. They support the measurement of progress in each dimension of quality. They are each based on:

- a clear definition;
- data which can be collected in a relatively simple and consistent manner in order to avoid additional burdens on institutions;
- the ability to be measured in each kindergarten and nursery (in order to provide a complete and accurate picture of the quality of ECEC);
- enabling the collection, analysis and reporting of data at the kindergarten and nursery level, at the municipal, (regional) and national levels.
- providing information on the most pressing need for changes to the ECEC system.

The following national indicators will measure quality in each of the five dimensions:

1. The share of children in Bulgaria (measured separately for those aged from birth to three years old; and for those older than three years old to primary school age) who attend ECEC regularly;
2. The share of qualified ECEC staff who receive support¹³ for their professional development¹⁴ in line with the nationally agreed competencies for ECEC staff;
3. The share of institutions providing education content that enables children to reach their full potential. (The implementation plan would need to include an agreed measure of potential based on children's social, emotional, cognitive, mental and physical development);
4. The share of ECEC providers using data to improve the quality of ECEC. (Providers could use administrative, pedagogical and other data including data from parents¹⁵);
5. The share of the gross domestic product invested in ECEC

These five **national indicators** would give an overall picture of the quality of ECEC provision. As part of an implementation strategy it is possible for the national authorities to set a target for each of these indicators. The targets could be based on European Union average figures (e.g., the percentage of gross domestic product invested in ECEC increases by 0.2% per annum) until it meets the European Union average. These targets would need to be defined and adopted together with the endorsement of this proposal.

¹³See the annex to the National Quality Framework for a definition of 'support'

¹⁴See the annex to the National Quality Framework for a definition of 'professional development'

¹⁵Or a guardian or another person taking care of a child

8. The self-assessment of quality at the municipality/institution level

In addition to the national indicators, it is possible to describe the quality of provision at the municipal and institutional level. These descriptions support the monitoring and subsequent improvement of the quality of ECEC. The following proposals cover structural and process quality. It will be important to provide training on the use of these indicators in order to support their implementation. They are structured according to the five dimensions of quality set out above. At this stage, the measurement of the outcomes/results of high quality ECEC provision is not planned, but this can be considered in relation to school readiness.

Based on consultations with the members of the Working Group and the feedback from the participants in the piloting of the draft National Quality Framework, some of the indicators **(in bold)** are more appropriate for data collection at the municipal level. The remaining ones support self-assessment of quality at the ECEC setting level.

8.1. Access

At the municipal level, the following indicators set out the characteristics of high quality provision.

- **The share of children in Bulgaria (aged from birth to three years old, and older than three years old to primary school age) who attend ECEC regularly¹⁶;**
- **The share of children for whom an accessible and state-subsidised place for early childhood education and care is available.**

To support the self-assessment of each setting's quality in relation to **access**, it is worth considering how kindergartens, nurseries and schools with groups or compulsory pre-school education:

- provide opportunities for every child and their families to participate regardless of their sex, ethnicity, mother tongue, social status, or additional needs.
- take into account the needs and desires of families and encourage their participation in the ECEC process
- take account of the needs and desires of children, stimulate and encourage their active participation and holistic development
- provide play-based learning environment which is up-to-date, well-maintained and well-planned, safe, stimulating, inclusive and secure

The value of high-quality ECEC for all children, particularly those with additional needs and those whose families are from socially disadvantaged communities is extremely high. Increasing the percentage of children whose families are able to use an accessible and state-subsidised place within the ECEC system strengthens social cohesion and provides more opportunities for all children in society particularly those from disadvantaged groups. The proposals for self-assessment highlight the importance of family involvement and children's views in the ECEC process, as well as the creation of affordable and stimulating environments. Guidance on each of these proposals for self-assessment can be developed as part of an implementation plan.

8.2. Workforce

¹⁶See the annex to the National Quality Framework for a definition of 'regularly'

The staff involved in the ECEC system need the right mix of competences to work with 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. At the municipal level, the following indicators set out the characteristics of high-quality provision.

- **The share of staff working directly with children who have completed professional education based on the requirements which are relevant to their position in the respective institution.**
- **The percentage of ECEC leaders and professionals 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 in the system of pre-school and school education;**
- **The average ratio of children to staff working directly with them.**

To support the self-assessment of each setting's quality in relation to **the workforce**, it is worth considering:

- the percentage of professionally-qualified ECEC staff who receive support¹⁷ for their professional development¹⁸ in line with the nationally-agreed competences for ECEC staff;
- the ratio of children to professionally qualified staff working directly with them;
- the time allocated to staff to prepare, reflect and improve the quality of their practice (i.e., time when staff are not working directly with children).

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 comprehensive development.

8.3. Educational content

The educational content (including the standards and ECEC programmes) should include common goals, values and approaches which reflect society's expectations about the role and responsibilities of ECEC settings in encouraging children's development. At the municipal level, the following indicator sets out one characteristic of high quality provision.

- **The percentage of ECEC providers using a formal, approved or compulsory framework which complies with state ECEC quality standards.**

To support the self-assessment of each setting's quality in relation to **the curriculum**, it is worth considering the extent to which:

- the curriculum provides educational content that enables children to reach their full potential including their social, emotional, cognitive, mental and physical development;
- staff use a child-centred, play-based curriculum.
- The setting provides constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) which foster mutual respect, sensitivity and teamwork and are based on explicit policies, & procedures.

¹⁷See the annex to the National Quality Framework for a definition of 'support'

¹⁸See the annex to the National Quality Framework for a definition of 'professional development'

- staff plan educational content based on information (feedback) from children, parents and colleagues in order to systematically improve practice.

A well-balanced combination of education and care can promote children's well-being, their positive self-image, and their physical, social, mental 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.

8.4. Monitoring and evaluation

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 and families and provide assurance to local communities. All stakeholders, including the staff, should be involved in monitoring and evaluation activities. At the municipal level, the following indicators set out the characteristics of high quality provision:

- **The share of ECEC providers using administrative, pedagogical and other data to improve the quality of ECEC, including data from parents¹⁹;**
- **The share of ECEC institutions with publicly available information on the quality of their provision²⁰.**

To support the self-assessment of each setting's quality in relation to **monitoring and evaluation**, it is worth considering the extent to which the existing monitoring and evaluation systems:

- report on children's achievements and support children's development;
- report on the quality of the relationships between staff and children, leading to its enhancement.

Every ECEC institution should, as a minimum, collect and use data to inform improvements in the quality of their provision. The information and data from monitoring should be used to analyse and assess the quality of ECEC provision, and plan and carry out improvement activities at the institutional level.

8.5. Governance and funding

Indicators in this area emphasise the importance of how ECEC institutions are managed and governed in order to meet the needs of children and their families. This includes the provision of accurate information; establishing and developing partnership arrangements with parents; and a focus on children's needs and child development. At the municipal level, the following indicators set out the characteristics of high quality provision.

- **The share of ECEC settings using a formally agreed partnership model with parents and other stakeholders;**
- **The share of municipalities which report they have developed and implemented a cross-sectoral governance system covering all aspects of ECEC provision.**
- **Compared to the previous year, the percentage of ECEC settings in the municipality that receive (at least 10%) additional funding to support disadvantaged children and their families.**

¹⁹Or a guardian or another person taking care of a child

²⁰See the annex to the National Quality Framework for a definition of 'publicly available'.

To support the self-assessment of each setting's quality in relation to **governance and funding**, it is worth considering:

- the development of an ECEC policy on governance and funding at the setting level, which includes monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of the annual budget.

The governance and funding dimension of quality is best measured at the system level through the national indicator set out above. This helps to highlight how well the different elements of the ECEC system are synchronised - how well are the education, health and social protection services aligned in order to promote the needs of each child.

9. Measuring quality through the National Quality Framework for ECEC

The national quality framework includes three aspects of measurement:

- five national indicators;
- municipality-level descriptions of quality;
- support for ECEC settings' self-assessment of quality.

Taken together, these measures at the kindergarten/nursery/school, municipal and national levels provide a clear picture of the quality of ECEC provision. The quality framework relies on ECEC settings, municipalities and national organisations working collaboratively to support implementation.

The national indicators

The measurement of the national indicators should be based on official statistics as well as data collected by each kindergarten/nursery/school covered by the framework. To support the generation of these quantitative data and to ensure comparability and consistency, additional guidance for the national indicators will need to be prepared. These guidelines should include detailed information on how kindergartens, nurseries and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education can measure each indicator.

By an agreed date each year, each provider's records on the national indicators would be sent to the municipalities. The data from the ECEC providers would be combined with data held by the municipalities (generated using a range of instruments and resources) to produce the municipality-level measurement of the indicators. For example, kindergartens and nurseries should collect data on the number of children who regularly attend the institution. Each municipality will hold data on the number of children in its area and this will allow calculating the percentage indicators. Municipalities will need the capacity and expertise to combine and analyse data from kindergartens, nurseries and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education.

The municipality would send data on the indicators to the regional and national authorities by an agreed date each year. The regional and national authorities will build the capacity to combine and analyse the data from the municipalities and identify regional and national trends. At the national level, a "dashboard" will be prepared annually to demonstrate the achievements against the five national indicators in the proposed National Quality Framework. The municipalities may decide to produce their own annual 'dashboard' to demonstrate the achievement of local kindergartens, nurseries and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education in relation to the agreed indicators.

The municipalities should be required to check a sample of the ECEC providers' responses in order to build trust in the data, verify the accuracy of the data, and analyse the effectiveness of the accompanying guidance. During their visits, inspectors can discuss the approaches adopted by kindergartens, nurseries and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education to collect and analyse data on these agreed indicators and share good practices to promote and support progress.

The municipality-level descriptions of quality

In addition to sending data on the national indicators, each kindergarten/nursery/school covered by the framework would be asked to send data on the indicators of high quality (these are identified in bold above). This data, alongside the national indicators, could be included in any dashboard produced by the municipalities. As with the national indicators, the municipalities should be required to check a sample of the ECEC providers' responses in order to build trust in the data, verify the accuracy of the data, and analyse the effectiveness of the accompanying guidance.

ECEC settings' self-assessment

Information collected by the ECEC settings to support their self-assessment would remain with the providers. The data would support internal processes and improvement, and each provider would decide how to share their information with parents, staff and other stakeholders.

The implementation of the National Quality Framework should lead to the updating of existing approach to measuring the quality of ECEC services. It would simplify the existing system, reduce the administrative burden on individual kindergartens, nurseries and schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education, respond to local situations by using a limited number of indicators. In addition, this update would highlight the responsibilities and roles of each organisation in the ECEC sector.

The implementation of the Framework requires and would lead to improved cooperation and coordination between kindergartens/schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education, nurseries and local and national institutions. Implementation will need to be supported through the development of an inter-institutional mechanism This will need to include agreement on how the data from kindergartens, nurseries, schools with groups for compulsory pre-school education and municipalities is analysed, verified and evaluated; and how this data is used for policy improvement and development of the ECEC system.

Glossary of terms

'Regularly' from the proposal relating to access

(i.e. The share of children in Bulgaria (aged from birth to three years old; and those older than three years old to primary school age) who attend ECEC regularly)

The Working Group should provide an agreed definition of 'regularly', measured either as:

- Specified in Ordinance №5 / 03.06.2016 on preschool education
- Children who attend an ECEC provider for at least 12 hours per week for six weeks can be said to be attending 'regularly'.
- Or enrolled children who have an average attendance for the school year above 67%.

'Support' from the proposal relating to 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 proposal relating to 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 proposal relating to 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.