

AI Cover Sheet

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Cover sheet

Presentation given on 18th March and recording on One Drive- Timing: 31 minutes
04 Seconds

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ECEY6011- Leadership and Management for systems of quality

Rachael: Prynhawn, da everyone and thank you for joining this meeting. As a Flying Start pre-school setting caring for twenty-eight children with four adults, it is important that we come together and reflect on a previous Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) recommendation as part of our preparations for the upcoming inspection and commitment to quality and continuous evaluation (CIW, 2023). In my role as Nursery Manager and Person in Charge, I am responsible for making sure we meet statutory requirements but more than that, I want us to have a culture where improvement is embedded in everything we do (Welsh Government, 2022; Welsh Government 2015). That includes ensuring quality assurance processes help us meet the Child Minding and Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010 and the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare (Welsh Government, 2023) especially standards 1, 2 and 3. All this feeds into the Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS), which requires us to demonstrate progress against previous recommendations (CIW, 2023; Welsh Government, 2022; Regulations and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016). It is also important that our SASS reflects more than one point of view and for this reason it is strengthened by contributions from our ALNCo, Well-being Lead and Curriculum Lead ensuring evidence is multi-layered and shaped by different perspectives, reducing bias and capturing all elements of our setting (Moss, 2016).

Helen: Picking up from this, as Curriculum Lead, I see my role as supporting the operational leadership by ensuring reflective processes, documentation and best practice are aligned with the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) expectations (CIW, 2023). A central tool for this is the Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS). This is a statutory tool used by the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) to monitor, evaluate and plan the regulations for childcare and play setting across Wales. The National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, Welsh Government (2023), make it clear that providers must maintain consistent quality, strong safeguarding, and meaningful experiences for children. The Welsh Government emphasises the importance of having high-quality, child-centred early years provisions, especially

through Flying Start (Welsh Government, 2021). I am happy to say that we have collaboratively created a culture where quality assurance is ongoing, as opposed to it only being embedded when an inspection is imminent.

Mary: Building on this from my perspective as wellbeing lead, as we prepare for inspection by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), it is important to reflect honestly on what the inspection framework is asking of us. CIW increasingly places wellbeing at the centre of its judgement of quality, focusing on whether children feel safe, valued and emotionally secure within the setting (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2023). This shift prioritises the lived experiences of children, rather than simply reviewing policies (Ofsted, 2019). However, it also raises questions about whether everyday practice genuinely supports wellbeing or demonstrates compliance. It is equally important to recognise that staff wellbeing underpins children's wellbeing, as secure and responsive relationships are central to development (Bowlby, 1969). Prioritising both children's and staff wellbeing therefore creates a more nurturing environment (Department for Education, 2021).

Acklima: From an additional learning needs perspective, my role as the Additional Learning Needs Coordinator involves ensuring that systems are in place to identify and support children who may be experiencing additional learning needs within flying start (Department for Education, 2022). This is to ensure that children with ALN can experience high quality provision. The EPPE study by Sylva *et al.* (2004) highlights that high quality early years settings are significant and can have a lasting positive impact on children's learning and development. One area I have recently been reviewing is how effectively the setting supports children who may be experiencing speech and language delays. This is particularly relevant within our early years setting, where early communication development plays an important role in supporting children's well-being, social interaction, behaviour and learning (Bain, James and Harrison, 2015). This aligns with the Quality-of-Care Review, particularly the environment, children's care and development and wellbeing CSSIW (2016a). Care Inspectorate Wales (2025) consider the quality of the environment and how effectively practice supports children's care and development, with an expectation that providers reflect on and improve their practice through self-evaluation, as set out

under the (Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016). In response to this, I have reviewed how the learning environment supports children's communication to increase their overall well-being in the setting and the wider community. This demonstrates quality improvement through reflective practice as guided by Quality-of-Care Review (CSSIW, 2016b).

Rachael: To support quality beyond the basic statutory requirements, we use the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Quality First Framework and Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being (SSTEWS) Scales. CIW evaluates settings against four inspection themes: Well-being, Care and Development, Environment, and Leadership and Management (CIW, 2023). They want to see not only compliance but clear evidence of high-quality interactions, purposeful experiences and good leadership (CIW, 2023; Welsh Government, 2022). Research from EPPE (Sylva *et al.* 2004) and SEED (Melhuish *et al.* 2017) demonstrates responsive interactions, skilled staff and reflective practice have the greatest impact on children's language, social development and self-regulation. This evidence shapes how our staff approach quality assurance, and we prioritise collaborative planning and reflective discussions as part of our everyday practice. This reflects the relational pedagogy highlighted by Dahlberg *et al.* (2013), ensuring we work consistently towards early intervention and improved outcomes for children and families. The SASS plays an important role in evidencing compliance, with the Child Minding and Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010, and the National Minimum Standard requiring us to reflect on staffing, safeguarding, training and the quality of care and play experiences in line CIW expectations for self-evaluation. While it supports transparency and encourages settings to evaluate their practice, there is a risk that it is becoming compliance driven unless supported by confident leadership and reflective culture (Hadley *et al.* 2015). To avoid this, our SASS brings together the voices and evidence of all stakeholders, providing an accurate and balanced representation of our setting (Moss, 2016).

Helen: Linking to this as a member of this team, a key aspect of how quality is achieved is through systematic planning. Planning within an early year's provision is a continuous cycle of observation, reflection, adaption and evaluation. It supports us

to design experiences based on a child's developmental needs and levels of engagement (Smidt, 2023). The CIW inspection framework plays an important emphasis on how a setting gather and use evidence of children's well-being and involvement. Observations provide this evidence which helps support planning (CIW, 2023). Additionally planning serves as a core component of quality assurance as it provides an organised method for assessing daily practice within our provision.

Mary: I agree and in essence, CIW is asking whether quality is visible in children's daily experiences rather than only in documentation. This is what I have been reviewing recently, in line with a wider shift in Welsh childcare policy towards outcome-focused evaluation, where the emphasis is on what children actually experience rather than whether settings have the correct policies in place (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2023). While this approach is valuable, it also highlights an important tension: compliance does not automatically equate to quality (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2023). A setting may meet every regulatory requirement yet still fall short in the emotional climate it creates for children (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Osgood, 2006).

Acklima: And that's particularly important for children with additional needs. The statutory framework guiding this work includes the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018, which emphasise early identification and person-centred planning approaches when supporting children with ALN. This means we should recognise when children may be experiencing difficulties with communication and adapt their practice to support participation. This also links to the Equality Act 2010, which requires early years providers to make reasonable adjustments so that children with additional needs are not placed at a disadvantage. It also meets national minimum standard 4 - in our setting on meeting individual needs (Welsh Government, 2023) Within practice this has involved the use of Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) which is a system that uses pictures to support children who have difficulty in speech, which Helen has included into her planning alongside the curiosity approach.

Rachael: As part of a wider approach to this, we use NDNA Quality First Framework as a whole setting self-evaluation tool. It supports us to drive quality, strengthen

inclusive practice and ensures all children experience consistent, high-quality provision (NDNA, 2024; Welsh Government 2022). However, it does require staff time to complete reflective audits and leadership time to collate evidence which can add workload pressures in an already stretched Flying Start Workforce according to Ofsted (Welsh Government, 2024). It also focusses on broad areas of provision across the setting and does not capture the relational and interactional pedagogy that Cliffe and Solvason (2023) emphasize are central to early years learning.

To address the limitations of NDNA, we complement it with the SSTEWS Scales which provide insight into the quality of interactions, emotional well-being and children's engagement. SSTEWS is linked to children's language, problem-solving, emotional security and engagement (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023; Howard *et al.* 2018) and is grounded in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of adult-child interactions in extending learning (Vygotsky, 1978). The focus on emotionally responsive, respectful interactions also aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly children's rights to express their views, be listened to and experience nurturing, supportive relationships (UNCRC, 1989). While SSTEWS supports the identification of strengths and gaps in responsive pedagogy to inform targeted improvements enhancing children's communication, confidence and ability to regulate their emotions. It is a time intensive tool that requires highly skilled observers. For this reason, we use external Teacher Advisors support to complete formal observations, ensuring reliability, reducing internal bias and preventing over or under reporting practice. Staff, however, still need strong observational skills to interpret findings and embed improvements. Without appropriate training, practitioners may misinterpret complex adult-child interactions, which can compromise both the reliability and validity of the data collected (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). Additionally, the evaluative nature of SSTEWS may position practitioners as subjects of assessment rather than participants in reflective practice. This can lead to performative behaviours, where staff modify their interactions in response to being observed, thereby limiting authenticity and reducing the accuracy of findings (Osgood, 2006; Bradbury, 2019). Without a supportive and psychologically safe culture, the tool risks generating data

that reflects perceived expectations rather than genuine practice, weakening its effectiveness as a measure of quality. (Brodie, 2019)

By bringing together NDNA, SSTEWS and practitioner's daily observations and monitoring tools, we gain a rounded understanding of quality in our setting and where we need to improve. This feeds into our Setting Improvement Plan and our SASS, keeping evaluation purposeful and aligned with CIW expectations. This also responds to Welsh Government's Evaluability Assessment, which highlights the need for more robust monitoring systems within Flying Start to evidence impact on children's outcomes (Welsh Government, 2016).

Helen: Building on Rachel's work around quality, within my role, I work closely with staff to ensure they are supported and understand the four inspection themes well-being, care and development, environment and leadership and management, are aligned with daily practice CIW, (2023). In a recent audit, it was highlighted that some areas lacked opportunities for sustained shared thinking. This was identified through planning reflections, in which staff observed that children were engaging in surface-level play without more complex cognitive challenges. To support this, I have embedded elements of the Curiosity Approach (2021) within these areas. By using open-ended exploration and natural materials. This has enhanced children's independence, curiosity and well-being, which aligns with the CIW's Well-being and Care and Development themes (Welsh Government, 2016). This approach also aligns with National Minimum Standard 3 (Physical Environment), which requires environments to be stimulating, well-resourced and responsive to children's developmental needs, and National Minimum Standard 9 (Improving Quality), which emphasises reflective practice and continuous improvement. However, although the Curiosity Approach offers valuable opportunities for child-led play, it is not without criticism. Some argue that natural environments can run the risk of becoming performative if not supported by trained teachers. O'Donnell, (2020) states that natural environments can become visually pleasing rather than educational if practitioners are not intentional in their interactions. Tovey (2020) reinforces this by stating that Froebelian practice requires skilled practitioners who can balance

independence and careful guidance; without these opportunities, sustained shared thinking may be missed.

Mary: Yes, this highlights an important distinction between quality and standards. The National Minimum Standards (NMS) outline expectations for safeguarding, staffing, leadership and the learning environment, but are explicitly framed as minimum requirements rather than indicators of excellence (Welsh Government, 2016). Meeting them demonstrates compliance, not necessarily high-quality provision. Research consistently identifies practitioner knowledge, reflective leadership and the quality of adult–child interactions as the key determinants of quality (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002).

From my wellbeing lead perspective, this distinction is critical. Regulatory frameworks provide a baseline for safety and accountability but do not capture the relational and emotional aspects of practice that underpin children’s wellbeing (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; OECD, 2019). For example, while Standard 2 of the NMS focuses on safeguarding and promoting wellbeing, policies alone cannot ensure that staff feel confident and emotionally supported to implement them effectively. Similarly, training does not guarantee improved practice unless it is embedded within reflective supervision and a supportive professional culture (Welsh Government, 2016).

Leadership is therefore central to quality. Effective leaders create opportunities for reflection, dialogue and shared learning, while maintaining oversight of CIW inspection areas, including wellbeing, care and development, leadership and management and environment (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2023). Reflective tools such as the Leuven Scale support this process by focusing on children’s wellbeing and involvement as indicators of effective provision (Laevers, 2017). However, such tools rely on practitioner interpretation and may overlook wider structural factors. They should as we do with our flying start provision, therefore be used as part of a broader, reflective approach to evaluating quality (Pascal and Bertram, 2019; OECD, 2019).

Acklima: This reflective approach to quality assurance also links closely to my role. A Communication Friendly Environment checklist audit was recently carried out (Worcestershire Speech, Language and Communication Pathway, n.d.). An audit is a process used to review current practice, identify areas for improvement and support changes to improve quality (Hut-Mossel et al., 2021). An audit checklist supports this process by providing a structured way to review practice and gather evidence (Stendard, 2022). The checklist helped me reflect on whether the environment was giving ALN children regular opportunities to communicate, for example, it considers whether visual supports such as PECS were available. This supported high quality provision through reflective self-evaluation of the environment to improve children's well-being by meeting their communication needs (CSSIW, 2016b). However, this checklist audit also has limitations, as it highlighted the availability of resources without showing how effectively they are used in everyday practice and therefore requires professional judgement to interpret findings accurately (Boritz and Timoshenko, 2014). Parental feedback was therefore considered essential in gain a better understanding and strengthening my finding as it provided additional information on children's communication at home and the wider community. Parent feedback can provide valuable insight into children's development, as according to Welsh Government (2025) families know their child best and can help us understand their needs and how to support them effectively. This is supported by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) REPEY study which highlights that parents provide important insights into children's development beyond the setting, which informs responsive and child centred practice. This reflects the importance of partnership working highlighted in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, which emphasises collaboration between services and families when supporting children's needs. This meets the national minimum standard 6 for partnership working with parents (Welsh Government, 2023) This aligns with the Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS), which requires us to use parental views and to demonstrate quality and improvement (CSSIW 2016b).

Rachael: To facilitate meaningful improvement, I implement a distributed leadership model, engaging closely with key members of the team to promote collaborative

monitoring. This approach drives high quality on a daily basis ensuring strategic and operational practice work together to secure positive outcomes (Government Office for Science, 2023; Spillane *et al.* 2001). However, multiple tools can easily become compliance driven and a paperwork exercise unless supported by clear processes and shared responsibility. Therefore, working as a team to interpret the evidence and ensure continuous improvement supporting shared accountability, reflective culture and helps maintain high-quality across out setting (Siraj and Kingston, 2015).

Helen: I agree and in practice I have improved our internal procedures to gather evidence. We now combine data from staff reflection talks, parent questionnaires, and parents' evenings, along with pupil voice observations and multi-agency input. Each method has advantages and disadvantages. However, triangulation ensures validity. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods of data (Carter *et al.*, 2014). As curriculum lead, I must ensure that the curriculum choices and environmental improvements reflect the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, and the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), with child-led planning, floor books and sustained shared thinking strategies to ensure that children's voices directly influence our provision.

Additionally, planning allows us to monitor children's well-being and participation. The Leaven Scale are one tool that staff can use to assess levels of engagement and modify experiences accordingly (Laevers, 2017). However, the Leaven Scale has several limitations that call into question its effectiveness as a stand-alone indicator within an early year setting, despite being a popular tool for evaluating a child's engagement and Well-being. It is argued that the scale oversimplifies the learning process. MacRae and Jones, (2020) have criticised the Leaven scales for turning complex relational and culturally contextual experiences into numerical ratings.

This aligns with the National Minimum Standards (NMS 1) Welfare of the Child) ensuring children's rights and well-being are central. NMS 3 (Physical Environment) to ensure environments support high-quality play and NMS 9 (Improving Quality) demonstrating continuous improvements. However, planning is not without its obstacles. Planning can become overly compliance driven and procedural

particularly during an impending inspection this is one obstacle we have found as a setting during previous inspections. This can lead to documentation overshadowing practice (Bradbury, 2019). To prevent this, we have simplified planning formats and incorporated reflective discussions with colleagues ensuring that planning remaining meaningful and child centred. The Welsh Government, (2022) emphasise that flying start settings must be able to demonstrate a strong culture of reflective practice. A theoretical framework like Bruner's concept of the spiral curriculum reinforces this by stating that children revisit ideas at increasing levels of complexity. Something that can only be accomplished by careful progressive planning.

However, it must be noted that planning can unintentionally force inequalities if practitioners fail to differentiate for children with ALN. This is why we have made sure that our planning format is adaptable which ensures that the planning for the provision is inclusive and in line with CIW expectations. We now incorporate community-based opportunities directly into planning this is in accordance with CIW's proposal to improve our impact on the local community on children's experiences. This has involved visiting the local library, local walks around the neighbourhood and interacting with community workers. This has further embedded the children's sense of belonging and reflect Welsh Government expectations for community- connected early years practice (Welsh Government, 2021).

Acklima: I agree Helen and inclusive approach also relies on working closely with parents. As part of the reflective practice and quality assurance, meetings were arranged with parents to discuss their views. Meeting has a range of purpose, including responding to questions, planning and problem solving. Structured and well evaluated meetings can support ongoing improvement, which are key elements of quality assurance (Belisle, Paquet and Lafranchise, 2022). However, research found that gaps in parents' knowledge of developmental milestones, may delay recognising concerns and seeking support (Alghamdi et al., 2023). Addressing these gaps supports the quality-of-care review focus on well-being and development, helping to ensure concerns are identified early and support is put in place promptly (CSSIW

2016a; CSSIW 2016b). All flying start staff were asked to promote key messages about speech, language and communication development to families. This involved all Flying Start practitioners signposting parents to other agencies such as Speech and language therapist, health visitors, early language development services and family support workers (Welsh Government, 2024). Overall, this contributes to high quality provision through collaboration, early identification and effective support.

Mary: All of this links closely to wellbeing as a marker of quality. It is essential to recognise that children's wellbeing is closely connected to staff wellbeing. Research highlights that emotionally responsive practice is only possible when practitioners feel supported, valued and psychologically safe within their workplace (OECD, 2019). However, from our experience within setting it has been highlighted that stress, workload pressures and burnout can significantly undermine adult-child interactions, affecting practitioners' emotional responsiveness, patience and consistency (Education Support, 2021). This raises an important question that I consistently ask staff: how can practitioners create emotionally secure environments for children if their own wellbeing is not prioritised?

Although, assessing staff wellbeing is complex. Unlike children's wellbeing, which can often be observed through behaviour and engagement, practitioner wellbeing is shaped by interconnected structural and relational factors. These include workload, staffing levels, leadership quality, supervision, professional development opportunities and organisational culture (Day *et al.*, 2007; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). Such factors directly influence practitioners' capacity to provide emotionally attuned care, suggesting that wellbeing should be understood as a systemic, rather than individual, responsibility.

Tools such as surveys, wellbeing audits and reflective supervision can provide insight into practitioner wellbeing, although they depend on honest disclosure within a psychologically safe culture (Education Support, 2021). Research from the Effective Early Learning Environments (EFFE) and Researching Effective Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education (REFFE) projects highlights that high-quality provision is associated with reflective professional cultures, collaborative

dialogue and supportive leadership (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Pascal and Bertram, 2019). However, critical perspectives argue that within highly regulated accountability systems, such processes risk becoming performative rather than meaningful (Osgood, 2006; Bradbury, 2019). Similarly, practitioners may feel pressure to present an idealised image of wellbeing rather than openly discuss challenges, limiting the authenticity of evaluation (Osgood, 2006; Bradbury, 2019).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory helps to explain interdependence, emphasising the importance of the microsystem in shaping development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Practitioner wellbeing directly influences children's daily experiences, meaning the two cannot be separated. This is particularly significant within Flying Start settings, where children may experience socio-economic disadvantage (Welsh Government, 2022). In these contexts, emotionally secure environments and consistent relationships are essential, yet they rely on practitioners being emotionally resourced and supported.

Theoretical perspectives reinforce the importance of relational quality. Maslow (1943) highlights the need for safety and security before learning, while Bowlby (1969) emphasises secure attachments. Vygotsky (1978) situates learning within social interaction, and Bronfenbrenner (1979) positions development within interconnected systems. Together, these perspectives suggest that quality is fundamentally relational rather than procedural. (Bowlby, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

However, tensions arise when wellbeing becomes an inspection indicator. There is a risk that settings begin to perform wellbeing rather than embed it authentically. Accountability systems may encourage practitioners to prioritise inspection expectations over genuine need, increasing workload and reducing autonomy (Osgood, 2006; Bradbury, 2019). Ultimately, prioritising both staff and children's wellbeing enables a more authentic and sustainable approach to quality, grounded in relationships rather than compliance (OECD, 2019).

Rachael: In summary, our preparation for the upcoming CIW inspection is rooted in a strong, reflective culture that places quality at the heart of our practice. We aim to ensure that high standards are not only met but consistently part of children's daily experiences. Using tools such as SASS, NDNA Quality First, SSTEW and ongoing audits, we have developed a multi-layered approach to self-evaluation that captures the voices of staff, children and families. Our distributed leadership model ensures shared responsibility for maintaining and improving practice, supported by clear strategic direction. We have strengthened planning, inclusive provision and communication support, particularly for children with additional needs, while embedding wellbeing for both children and staff. By triangulating evidence and maintaining honest reflection, we are confident that quality remains central to our provision, driving continuous improvement and positive outcomes for all. Thankyou for all your hard work and continued support.

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