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AI sheet

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work, I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used before, and after use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence

Quality in early childhood education is a multidimensional concept that encompasses both structural quality including adult–child ratios, staff qualifications, physical environments, and leadership and process quality, which refers to the lived experiences of children: the interactions, relationships, emotional climate, and pedagogical practices that shape their daily learning (OECD, 2018; Slot, 2018). High-quality provision is not defined by isolated features but by how these elements work together to create environments where children feel secure, engaged, and able to explore. Quality is important because early childhood is a period of rapid brain development, during which children’s experiences have a profound and lasting influence on cognitive, social, emotional, and physical outcomes. High-quality settings provide rich opportunities for language development, problem-solving, self-regulation, and social competence skills that form the foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing (Melhuish et al., 2015).

Evidence from large-scale longitudinal studies, such as the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project, demonstrates that children who attend high-quality early years settings show stronger outcomes in literacy, numeracy, and social development well into later schooling, with the greatest benefits seen for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sylva et al., 2010). This highlights that quality is not only a matter of individual development but also a driver of equity, reducing early gaps in attainment and supporting social mobility. International research reinforces this, showing that high-quality early childhood education contributes to improved health, reduced need for later interventions, and long-term economic benefits for society (Heckman, 2011). We know that quality matters for children because consistent empirical evidence links high-quality interactions particularly warm, responsive, and cognitively stimulating adult–child engagement to positive developmental trajectories (Hamre, 2014). Observational tools such as CLASS and ECERS have repeatedly shown that process quality, especially the quality of interactions, is the strongest predictor of children’s outcomes, more so than structural features alone (OECD, 2018). Policy frameworks, including the Curriculum for Wales and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, further emphasise that

children have a right to environments that nurture curiosity, relationships, and wellbeing, underscoring the moral and societal imperative of ensuring access to high-quality provision. Although definitions of quality vary across cultures and contexts, there is broad consensus that what ultimately matters is the quality as experienced by the child the extent to which they feel valued, supported, and empowered as active participants in their learning (Gromada & Richardson, 2021). Taken together, decades of research, policy guidance, and developmental science provide compelling evidence that high-quality early childhood settings are essential for supporting children's holistic development and for building fairer, more inclusive societies.

High-quality early childhood provision is widely recognised as multidimensional, encompassing both the process quality of children's day-to-day experiences and the structural or organisational quality that underpins practice (Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). Because no single tool can capture this complexity, using additional methods and frameworks is essential for developing a holistic understanding of quality. In Wales, two influential tools the Early Years Wales quality frameworks and the SSTEWS (Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing) Scale offer complementary insights into different aspects of provision. Reflecting on their combined use highlights the benefits of adopting a multi-tool approach to quality improvement, particularly within the policy expectations of the Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises children's rights, holistic development, and the centrality of relationships and responsive pedagogy (Welsh Government, 2020).

The SSTEWS Scale focuses on the relational and pedagogical dimensions of practice, examining how adults support children's thinking, language, problem-solving, and emotional wellbeing (Howard *et al.*, 2018). These elements are strongly linked to children's developmental outcomes, with research consistently showing that warm, attuned, and cognitively stimulating interactions are among the most powerful predictors of learning and wellbeing (Hamre, 2014; Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). SSTEWS therefore provides detailed, fine-grained evidence of what children experience in real time. This aligns closely with the Curriculum for Wales emphasis on learner-centred practice, enabling adults to create emotionally secure, engaging environments that support the Four Purposes. The strength of SSTEWS lies in its ability to make the

invisible visible highlighting subtle aspects of pedagogy that may otherwise go unnoticed and supporting reflective dialogue and targeted professional development.

In contrast, Early Years Wales quality frameworks take a broader organisational perspective. They examine leadership, safeguarding, policies, staff development, partnerships with families, and the overall ethos of the setting. These frameworks ensure that provision is aligned with Welsh Government expectations, including the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) Quality Framework, which emphasises rights-based, inclusive, and holistic practice (Welsh Government, 2023). While SSTEW focuses on the micro-level of interactions, Early Years Wales frameworks focus on the macro-level systems that enable high-quality practice to occur. They help settings evaluate whether the structures, values, and processes that underpin daily practice are robust, coherent, and supportive of staff. This is essential because high-quality interactions do not happen in isolation they are shaped by leadership, staffing, training, planning, and organisational culture.

Comparing the two tools highlights their complementary nature. SSTEW provides insight into the lived experience of the child, capturing the emotional climate and the quality of adult–child interactions. Early Years Wales frameworks provide insight into the organisational conditions that support or constrain those experiences. SSTEW tells us what is happening in practice, while Early Years Wales frameworks help explain why it is happening. For example, SSTEW might reveal that adults are not consistently extending children’s thinking, while the organisational framework might show that staff lack planning time, training, or leadership support—factors that directly influence practice. Using both tools together therefore strengthens the reliability of quality evaluations and supports more targeted, meaningful improvement.

Each tool also has limitations, which further reinforces the value of using multiple methods. SSTEW, for instance, does not assess leadership, staff wellbeing, or organisational culture, and because it captures a snapshot in time, it may not reflect typical practice. It also requires trained observers, which can be resource-intensive. Early Years Wales frameworks, on the other hand, may not capture the subtle relational and pedagogical nuances that occur moment-to-moment. They can become compliance-driven if used superficially, and they do not directly measure

children's emotional experiences or the quality of interactions. These limitations highlight the risk of relying on a single tool, which may lead to an incomplete or distorted understanding of quality.

To improve provision meaningfully, settings need information about both process quality and organisational quality. This includes children's lived experiences, the quality of adult-child interactions, emotional wellbeing, leadership, staff development, curriculum implementation, and family partnerships. SSTEWS provides detailed insight into interactions, emotional climate, and cognitive challenge, while Early Years Wales frameworks provide insight into leadership, planning, safeguarding, and organisational culture. Together, they offer a comprehensive picture of the ecosystem that shapes children's learning and wellbeing.

The information generated by these tools can be used to drive quality improvement in several ways. It can inform staff training and coaching, guide adjustments to planning and routines, strengthen leadership and organisational systems, and support reflective dialogue across the team. Importantly, both tools encourage practitioners to move beyond compliance towards a culture of inquiry, where quality is continuously co-constructed through reflection, collaboration, and intentional action. This aligns strongly with the Curriculum for Wales, which positions practitioners as co-constructors of learning and emphasises the importance of reflective, responsive pedagogy.

The information gathered from tools such as the SSTEWS Scale and the Early Years Wales quality frameworks is used to drive meaningful improvement by informing reflective practice, professional learning, and strategic decision-making. Evidence from SSTEWS helps practitioners understand the quality of adult-child interactions, emotional wellbeing, and cognitive challenge, enabling teams to identify specific pedagogical strengths and areas for development that directly influence children's lived experiences (Howard et al., 2018). In contrast, information from Early Years Wales frameworks highlights organisational factors such as leadership, planning, safeguarding, and staff development, helping settings understand the structural conditions that support or constrain high-quality practice (Welsh Government, 2023). When combined, these insights allow practitioners to make targeted changes to the learning environment, daily routines, and curriculum implementation, ensuring that

improvements are grounded in both process and organisational quality. This evidence is also used to shape professional development, guide reflective supervision, and support collaborative dialogue across the team, creating a culture of inquiry and continuous improvement. Importantly, using this information helps settings align their practice with the Curriculum for Wales, ensuring that children experience emotionally secure, engaging, and developmentally rich environments that support the Four Purposes (Welsh Government, 2020). In this way, the information generated by these tools becomes a catalyst for sustained, evidence-informed quality enhancement across the whole setting.

Tools and methods such as the SSTEWS Scale and the Early Years Wales quality frameworks drive quality by making practice visible, generating evidence that supports reflective improvement, and ensuring alignment with national expectations for early childhood education. Observational tools like SSTEWS highlight the quality of adult–child interactions, emotional wellbeing, and cognitive challenge factors strongly associated with children’s developmental outcomes (Siraj *et al.*, 2015; Howard *et al.*, 2018). By identifying specific strengths and gaps in pedagogical practice, SSTEWS enables practitioners to refine their interactions, deepen sustained shared thinking, and create emotionally secure environments, all of which contribute to higher process quality. In contrast, organisational tools such as Early Years Wales frameworks drive quality by strengthening leadership, safeguarding, planning, and staff development, ensuring that the structural conditions necessary for effective pedagogy are in place (Welsh Government, 2023). These frameworks support settings to embed reflective cultures, improve governance, and align provision with the Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises responsive, child-centred practice and the Four Purposes (Welsh Government, 2020). When used together, these tools create a cycle of continuous improvement: evidence from observations informs professional learning, organisational systems are adapted to support better practice, and changes are monitored over time. This integrated approach ensures that quality is not viewed as a checklist but as an ongoing, collaborative process grounded in research, reflection, and children’s rights.

In conclusion, both the Early Years Wales quality frameworks and the SSTEWS Scale play essential but distinct roles in driving high-quality early childhood provision. SSTEWS strengthens process quality by illuminating the depth of adult–child

interactions, emotional wellbeing, and opportunities for sustained shared thinking—elements consistently linked to positive developmental outcomes (Siraj *et al.*, 2015; Howard *et al.*, 2018). Early Years Wales frameworks, in contrast, reinforce organisational quality, ensuring that leadership, safeguarding, planning, and professional learning systems are robust and aligned with national expectations, including the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2023). When used together, these tools provide a comprehensive understanding of both the lived experiences of children and the structural conditions that shape those experiences. This integrated approach supports a culture of reflective practice, continuous improvement, and rights-based pedagogy, enabling settings to create emotionally secure, engaging, and developmentally rich environments where all children can thrive. Ultimately, the synergy between these tools ensures that quality is not viewed as a single measure but as an ongoing, evidence-informed process grounded in children's wellbeing, learning, and holistic development.

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