

High-quality early childhood education is fundamental to children's lifelong learning, wellbeing, and development. In Wales, standards for non-maintained nursery settings are governed by statutory frameworks, including the Child Minding and Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010, the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for Children up to the Age of 12 Years (Welsh Government, 2016), and the Care Inspectorate Wales Quality Framework (2023). These frameworks establish minimum expectations for safeguarding, care, leadership, and the learning environment. However, while such regulation ensures baseline quality and accountability, it does not in itself guarantee excellence. Increasingly, research suggests that high-quality provision is characterised not by compliance alone, but by reflective practice, professional collaboration, and continuous improvement.

This paper critically examines the benefits of adopting additional quality assurance approaches in the nursery that extend beyond statutory requirements. It focuses on both voluntary quality assurance frameworks, such as the Wales Pre-school Providers Association Quality for All Mark, and research-based tools, including the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWS) Scale (Siraj, I., Kingston, D. and Melhuish, E. (2015)). Drawing on a professional discussion within a non-maintained nursery setting, the paper analyses how leadership, continuous professional development (CPD), and stakeholder engagement contribute to a shared and evolving understanding of quality. It argues that meaningful quality emerges not from inspection readiness, but from an embedded culture of reflective, ethical, and child-centred practice.

(Effective leadership and management in the EYFS 1, n.d.) states that effective leadership is central to sustaining and enhancing quality within early years provision. This highlights the crucial role leaders play not only in maintaining standards but in shaping a culture where continuous improvement is prioritised. Statutory frameworks require providers to evaluate their services, with Regulation 16 mandating a formal quality-of-care review and written report. Similarly, the Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS), submitted to Care Inspectorate Wales, ensures accountability across key quality domains by requiring settings to evidence their practices, outcomes, and areas for development. These processes provide an essential structure for consistency and safeguarding; however, on their own they risk becoming procedural if not underpinned by reflective leadership.

As illustrated in the meeting, leadership within the setting moves beyond procedural compliance to become a dynamic and reflective process. Rather than viewing SASS as a one-off

accountability exercise, it is embedded into ongoing practice as a working document that informs decision-making and improvement planning. Within the setting, SASS is not treated as static but as a tool for continuous improvement, enabling leaders and practitioners to revisit, adapt, and refine their approaches in response to children's needs and stakeholder feedback. Monthly staff meetings further strengthen this process by providing a structured space for professional dialogue, where practitioners are encouraged to critically reflect on their practice, share experiences, and collaboratively identify areas for development.

This approach fosters a culture of shared responsibility and professional ownership, where quality is co-constructed rather than imposed. It also demonstrates how statutory requirements can be reinterpreted as opportunities for professional inquiry and growth, rather than administrative obligations. In this way, leadership becomes transformative, bridging the gap between compliance and meaningful quality enhancement, and ensuring that evaluation processes actively contribute to improved outcomes for children rather than simply evidencing practice for inspection purposes.

However, this transformation is not without tension. Scholars such as (Ball, 2015 and Power, 2024) argue that quality assurance systems can contribute to an "audit culture," in which measurable outputs, documentation, and performative accountability take precedence over professional judgement and relational practice. This critique is particularly significant within early years settings, where the complexity of children's learning, development, and wellbeing cannot be easily reduced to quantifiable indicators. The risk, therefore, is that practitioners may prioritise producing evidence for inspection over engaging in meaningful, responsive interactions with children. While the setting demonstrates resistance to this through reflective dialogue, collaborative leadership, and shared professional inquiry, the underlying tension between accountability and authenticity remains present.

Significantly, the setting extends its quality review to include environmental sustainability, aligning practice with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. This development illustrates a shift from compliance towards ethical responsibility, where quality is understood not only in terms of regulatory standards but also in relation to broader social, cultural, and environmental impact. By embedding sustainability within quality assurance processes, the setting demonstrates a more holistic and forward-thinking approach to early years provision. Leadership, therefore, becomes transformative, embedding values, critical reflection, and long-

term thinking into everyday practice, rather than focusing solely on short-term inspection outcomes.

Research-based tools such as the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWS) Scale further contribute to this expanded understanding of quality by providing a structured framework for evaluating the depth of interactions, the emotional climate, and the richness of learning experiences within early years environments. Unlike statutory frameworks, which focus primarily on minimum standards and compliance, SSTEWS offers deeper insight into the processes that underpin children's learning and development. This enables practitioners to reflect not only on what is provided, but on how effectively children are supported to think, explore, and engage.

The nursery demonstrates strong alignment with SSTEWS principles in practice. For example, the setting's emphasis on outdoor learning and Forest School approaches creates opportunities for sustained shared thinking, as children actively engage in exploration, problem-solving, and collaborative play. These experiences encourage dialogue between practitioners and children, supporting language development and critical thinking. Furthermore, the use of natural loose parts enhances creativity and cognitive flexibility, reflecting research evidence that open-ended materials promote deeper, more meaningful learning. Such approaches highlight how research-based tools can enrich practice beyond statutory expectations, while also reinforcing the importance of balancing structured evaluation with professional judgement and contextual understanding.

Digital tools, such as iPads used for observation, also support reflective practice by enabling practitioners to document and respond to children's interests in real time. However, the discussion critically acknowledges that the use of technology may also present challenges. Overreliance on digital devices particularly in outdoor environments risks reducing opportunities for physical activity, environmental engagement, and meaningful interaction. This highlights an important limitation of research-based tools: while they provide structure and objectivity, they must be applied with professional judgement to avoid narrowing practice.

The primary advantage of SSTEWS lies in its ability to provide objective benchmarking and developmental insight, supporting targeted improvement. However, its reliance on scoring systems can lead to the over-quantification of complex relational processes, potentially overlooking the unique context of individual settings. This reinforces the need to balance structured evaluation with reflective, context-sensitive practice. Importantly, these approaches

align with the Welsh Government's Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (2024), which emphasises wellbeing, engagement, and authentic learning. By integrating SSTEW principles, the setting enhances its ability to deliver meaningful, child-centred experiences that extend beyond statutory expectations.

Continuing professional development (CPD) represents a key mechanism through which quality is actively constructed and sustained. As highlighted by Lois and Ella, CPD within the setting moves beyond compliance to function as an embedded system of quality assurance.

Welsh Government (2018) Training initiatives, such as Additional Learning Needs (ALN) development, enable practitioners to identify and respond to children's individual needs, supporting inclusive practice in line with Welsh legislation. Similarly, investment in Forest School leadership reflects a commitment to innovation and curriculum enrichment.

These examples demonstrate how CPD contributes directly to improved outcomes for children, rather than simply meeting regulatory expectations. This approach aligns with the principles of Quality First, promoted by the National Day Nurseries Association National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) (2022), which emphasises reflective leadership, staff empowerment, and evidence-based practice.

Practitioners are encouraged to take ownership of their development, contributing to a culture of shared responsibility and continuous improvement. Furthermore, CPD practices reflect key research, including the Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. and Bell, D. (2002) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*, which highlights the importance of skilled practitioners in facilitating sustained shared thinking. Similarly, *Guiding the Young Ones* (2025) underscores the role of knowledgeable adults in supporting children's development.

However, there are limitations. CPD opportunities may be constrained by time, funding, and accessibility, potentially leading to inconsistencies in staff development. Additionally, while training is undertaken, its impact is not always systematically evaluated. This raises questions about whether CPD is sufficiently research-informed and outcome-focused. The adoption of structured frameworks, such as the WPPA Quality for All Mark Wales Pre-school Providers Association (WPPA) (2022), could address these limitations by making CPD more explicit, measurable, and accountable. Through evidence portfolios and reflective evaluation, such frameworks ensure that professional learning translates into demonstrable improvements in practice.

During the meeting it was highlighted the importance of parental and child voice as central to quality enhancement. Alanis emphasises the role of parents as co-educators, with communication strategies such as digital platforms, surveys, and informal interactions facilitating ongoing collaboration. This approach aligns with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which affirms children's right to be heard, as well as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which promotes inclusive, participatory approaches to wellbeing. Importantly, this represents a dimension of quality that extends beyond statutory compliance. While safeguarding and data protection remain essential, they do not in themselves ensure meaningful relationships. In contrast, relational approaches based on trust, communication, and emotional connection create the conditions for children's wellbeing and effective learning. By embedding parental and child voice into practice, the setting moves beyond checklist-driven inspection readiness towards a more holistic and responsive model of quality. This demonstrates that genuine quality is co-constructed through relationships, rather than imposed through regulation.

Voluntary frameworks and research-based tools add significant depth to the quality domains assessed by Care Inspectorate Wales Care Inspectorate Wales (2023). While statutory frameworks provide essential structure and accountability, approaches such as the Quality for All Mark Wales Pre-school Providers Association (WPPA) (2022) and SSTEWS enhance reflective practice, professional ownership, and understanding of children's experiences. However, these approaches are not without limitations. They require time, training, and financial investment, and may lead to duplication of evidence.

There is also a risk that multiple frameworks increase workload without necessarily improving practice if not implemented thoughtfully. Despite these challenges, their value lies in supporting cyclical self-evaluation. When embedded into everyday practice, reflection becomes an ongoing professional habit rather than a response to inspection. This represents a shift from compliance to continuous improvement, where quality is dynamic, context-driven, and ethically informed.

This paper has critically demonstrated that achieving high-quality early years provision requires approaches that extend beyond statutory compliance. While regulatory frameworks ensure minimum standards, they must be complemented by voluntary quality assurance models, research-based tools, and reflective professional practice. Frameworks such as the WPPA Quality for All Mark and SSTEWS provide valuable mechanisms for deepening reflection, enhancing pedagogy, and supporting continuous improvement. However, their effectiveness

depends on thoughtful implementation and critical engagement. Ultimately, quality in early years settings is not defined solely by inspection outcomes, but by the extent to which practice is reflective, inclusive, and responsive to children and families. By embedding a culture of continuous self-evaluation, supported by research and collaboration, settings can move beyond compliance towards sustained, meaningful quality enhancement.

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