

Quality in the Early Years often refers to how good provision is. However, researchers acknowledge that no single definition exists, as perceptions vary widely among individuals and societal groups (Palaiologou, 2023). Terms such as quality assurance, quality control and quality time have been introduced, reflecting attempts to standardize practices, however the field is constantly changing and evolving and the nature of what constitutes good provision is subjective and historically contested.

Traditional research often classifies quality into two primary dimensions. Structural quality and process quality. Structural quality encompasses the administrative and environmental framework, such as ratios, staff qualifications, working conditions, group sizes and health and safety protocols. Process quality focuses on the pedagogical elements, focusing deeper on the national curriculum, which in non-maintained settings is the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings. This curriculum is part of the broader Curriculum for Wales framework, which was introduced in 2022 to replace the Foundation Phase (Hwb, 2022).

Scholars emphasise the importance and deep interrelation between these two dimensions. Structural quality enables higher quality pedagogical interactions, while these goals often dictate the necessary structural requirements. Policy frameworks often rely on these metrics to assess provision standards. Education Development Trust's (EDE) dedication to early childhood education is rooted in a clear mission: to transform the professional landscape of the early years sector through rigorous, evidence-based training programs such as the Early Years professional Development Programme (EYPDP) as well as the National Professional Qualification for Early Years Leadership (NPQEYL). By empowering practitioners to utilize research-driven, play-centred and highly interactive pedagogical methods, the trust ensures that every child receives the best possible start in life (Education Development Trust, 2024).

High-quality provision within early years settings is crucial, because it directly shapes children's brain development. This helps foster vital cognitive, social and emotional skills during the most formative years of a child's life. Government frameworks shape early childhood education, through these mandates often face critique for ignoring local nuances and the complexities of individual settings. A study conducted by Cottle and Alexander (2011) shows that practitioners internalize government standards for quality through their own histories, professional training and unique site-specific conditions. The study also shows that conflicts arise between rigid national expectations and the fluid, organic needs of children, which suggests that uniform policies may overlook critical development experiences in practice. The study also shows that practitioner experiences shapes the practical application of government quality standards within diverse educational settings today.

By law, non-maintained settings in Wales must adhere to the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Regulated Childcare, to ensure the safety and quality for children under the age of 12. The Curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery Settings framework provides a standardized, developmentally appropriate foundation for early education providers in Wales, supporting settings to deliver high-quality learning. The curriculum aims to foster specific child attributes, such as: ambitious learners, enterprising contributors, ethical citizens and healthy individuals. The curriculum also aims to foster high-quality learning by utilizing five interdependent developmental pathways, which must be addressed collectively to ensure that progress is authentic and well-rounded. These include: belonging, communication, exploration, well-being and physical development (Early Years Wales, 2022). Quality in early childhood education is ensured by providing practitioners with tools and resources that allow them to continue with their professional development.

The National Minimum Standards (NMS) apply to services catering for children up to the age of 12, replacing the 2016 framework to ensure high-quality, safe and nurturing provision. The Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) acts as the primary regulatory body responsible for enforcement. Providers are expected to move beyond minimum compliance by utilizing the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) framework to demonstrate commitment to continuous quality enhancement. In addition to quality improvement, the NMS states that providers must also maintain clear documentation, including a Statement of Purpose, formal contracts and robust safeguarding records. New training mandates exist for Paediatric First Aid and safeguarding. Providers must ensure staffing ratios are balanced with management needs, and all personnel must undergo comprehensive vetting, including enhanced DBS checks (Welsh Government, 2023).

Staff and practitioners in Wales go above the Minimum Standards, by pursuing higher-level qualifications. Management also ensure this in play settings, by ensuring more than 50% of staff are qualified, and participating in Social Care Wales's induction frameworks. Additionally, providers actively focus on nurturing 'rich experiences' rather than just supervision, aiming to foster a sense of belonging and cultural pride in modern Wales. Settings in Wales go above the minimum standards by rigorously self-assessing against CIW frameworks, seeking professional advice from outside agencies, and actively implementing feedback from children and parents to drive improvements throughout the setting.

Management and administrative staff will often adopt higher-level safeguarding training, with specialized staff being able to advise colleagues and apply legal standards to complex situations. By 2050, the Welsh Government aims to have a million Welsh speakers nationwide. In compliance to this policy, many settings are now actively

embedding the Welsh language into daily activities. This is a key area where practitioners often exceed minimum cultural expectations. Following the Social Care Wales Code of Professional Practice, staff focus on enabling individuals to achieve what matters to them, rather than just meeting basic needs (Welsh Government, 2023).

Care Inspectorate Wales is an independent regulator for social care and childcare in Wales, which functions as the essential, independent regulator responsible for overseeing social care and childcare throughout Wales, which includes fostering and adoption services, childminders, full and out of school care and day care services for under 12's, and more. Their primary mission involves the rigorous registration and inspection of services to ensure they consistently meet high safety and quality benchmarks (Ombudsman, no date).

As an agency acting on behalf of the Welsh Ministers, the organisation provides critical assurance regarding the quality, safety and legislative compliance of social care and childcare services throughout Wales. The body holds the authority to decide which entities may legally provide care services within the sector. Beyond individual service oversight, the agency actively inspects and drives improvements in both regulated service providers and local authority social service departments. Comprehensive national reviews of social care services are conducted to identify systematic trends, operational challenges, and areas requiring strategic intervention or policy reform (Care Inspectorate Wales, no date).

Care Inspectorate Wales fosters organizational values such as a caring approach, ensuring all interactions with service staff, users and partners are rooted in compassion and approachability. Operations are guided by a commitment to being consistent, impartial and inclusive, ensuring each setting inspection is conducted without prejudice or bias. The agency maintains high ethical standards, emphasizing honesty and trustworthiness in every regulatory decision. Staff from the organisation are expected to be skilled, knowledgeable and innovative, utilizing their expertise to drive higher standards across the sector. As well as these, the organisation also fosters an environment of respect, by actively listening to concerns, engaging with stakeholders, and valuing the diverse perspectives of everyone involved in the sector.

During inspections in early years settings, the voice and well-being of the children are at the centre of every decision, utilizing a rights-based approach which leads to positive outcomes and user feedback. Care Inspectorate Wales use the collection of data and analysis as the bedrock of all operations, allowing the agency to identify trends, to share insights and inform wider Welsh Government policy. CIW is able to use the data collected, to assist the setting in making improvements which improves the quality assurance of provision given.

By adopting a proportionate approach, CIW prioritizes inspection resources toward areas where risks are highest, and where intervention will yield the most meaningful improvements. Again, this allows many settings across the country to thrive above the National Minimum Standards. The effectiveness of the CIW relies on strong, trust-based relationships with the Welsh Government, local authorities and health boards to reduce regulatory duplication and promote a cohesive systems approach. Regular self-assessment ensures that methodologies remain flexible, allowing for integration of feedback and the adjustment of practices to meet emerging societal needs.

Care Inspectorate Wales allows practitioners to share their views, thoughts, feelings and opinions on various aspects of the job, including the working environment, the people they work with, as well as the people they work for, in a respectful, professional manner, which gives CIW what they need to take into consideration environmental, social, economic states of the setting in order to develop a report that allows them to receive feedback, as well as being provided with tools to ensure progress is maintained. CIW allows practitioners and leaders to develop their settings above the National Minimum Standards, by providing feedback and guidance within their report.

Estyn (2020) views self-evaluation as an integral, non-negotiable component of daily professional life, ensuring that staff members engage in consistent reflection rather than periodic or performative assessment. This is similar to how Care Inspectorate Wales offer self-assessments to their settings and offer staff the chance to honestly reflect on their workplace, performance, and professional development. The strategy of self-evaluation relies on a diverse, multi-layered evidence base that incorporates formal data metrics alongside qualitative insights gathered from key stakeholders, such as parents and guardians, children and professional partners. A cornerstone of this strategy is the mechanism of self reflection, where leadership and practitioners engage in honest, regular dialogues to deconstruct observed practices. Similarly to how inspectors from CIW would ask practitioners during their visit, self-evaluation gives practitioners the comfort of being able to be honest about their practice, areas for concern and strengths.

The self-evaluation allows practitioners and leaders to distinguish between urgent pedagogical adjustments and long-term development goal. Categorising findings is a method in which goals can be prioritised by urgency, allowing quality to be raised one area at a time. The Self-Evaluation Framework serves as a foundational tool for Early Years practitioners to critically analyse their provision, celebrate successes, and identify pathways for ongoing professional development and institutionalised growth. By utilising this format, settings can effectively highlight their unique strengths and demonstrate the high-quality care and education they provide to children on a daily basis. The process acts as a roadmap for progress, allowing managers to pinpoint exact

areas that may require enhancement and document a clear, actionable plan for achieving those improvements over time. This aligns with the core values of Care Inspectorate Wales, however, it could be argued, that self-evaluations are easier on the workers as the stress of an outside agency may produce something similar to the Hawthorne effect, and practitioners may tell outside personnel what they want to hear, rather than being truthful and honest.

A robust self-evaluation framework provides tangible documentation for inspectors, offering a transparent window into the setting's operations and ensuring that claims about practice are supported by concrete, real-world examples. Effective self-evaluation encourages all participation from all stakeholders, including parents, children and practitioners, fostering a culture of collective responsibility for the quality of the environment. Again, this is similar to how Care Inspectorate Wales ensures honest collaboration.

One of the main differences between Care Inspectorate Wales and self-evaluation is that as of April 1, 2026, self-evaluation is no longer compulsory, however it is still important to note that while reflection remains a core expectation of quality assurance, the formal completion of a specific SEF template is not a mandatory requirement mandated by Ofsted. Care Inspectorate Wales is still compulsory for all non-maintained settings. Although the template has been removed from old legislative bodies, it is noted that practitioners are still required to demonstrate a continuous, ongoing process of reflection that leads to measurable improvements in provision (Teach Early Years, no date).

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