

Part one (speech previous year)

Good evening, thank you for attending our meeting this evening in preparation for our up-and-coming inspection.

Firstly, we will start with introductions, I am Lauren Pope, Person in charge of the setting, I'd like to welcome

The purpose of this meeting today is to meet as professionals to discuss the coming inspection of the setting and to acknowledge each intervention and that policies and regulations are up to date in line with the current (National Minimum Standards, 2010) and that staff as well as other agencies who attend the setting on a regular basis are following procedures daily. As a setting with four members of staff and sixteen children, we are here to ensure that the well-being throughout the setting is adhered to and that we as professionals are communicating and updating records and policies on a regular basis ensuring that safeguarding responsibilities are at a high standard and the forefront of everyone's daily routines, (Jahans-Baynton and Grealish, 2020). Within my role as the person in charge as well as the childcare workers within the setting it is important that we build relationships with families in our care to understand each individual circumstances and tailor advice so that we can support the welfare of children and their development as per The Children Act 1989 (Children's Rights in Wales, no date). Following this statement of responsibilities I have undertaken thorough checks with regards to children's files and that all staff members have ensured they have up to date observations on all children, including targets for progression following their screenings throughout their development. Staff files have also been thoroughly checked to ensure all staff are up to date with training with evidence of certificates present and dated, as person in charge it is my responsibility to ensure all staff have relevant training and are competent, (Saffady, 2021). Ensuring staff training is up to date holds utmost importance as it ensures that we are confident and accurate in the importance of effective sharing of information that contributes to ensuring that children and staff's health and well-being are protected, prioritising the safety needs of all children within our setting (Ball, *et al.*, 2024). Whilst ensuring that regularly monitoring all policies and procedures as they update, and all procedures and documents are correctly stored. It is also robust that information shared by staff is done so solely with the

relevant authorities. Therefore, it is essential that policies and procedures that are in place and that we as professionals are always confident in our roles and responsibilities, (Cervantes and Öqvist, 2021).

It is with utmost importance that we look at all aspects of inspection where I have previously discussed paperwork, documentation, staff, children, well-being and safeguarding there are also other elements of the setting in which need to be discussed that being the environment. The environment links with all aspects of topics previously discussed as the children and well-being and how children's voices are heard through their play and development is something we look at on a regular basis here and how we improve on giving children the experiences they want and need. Under article 13 of the UNCRC the rights of the child 'freedom of expression' and article 31 of the UNCRC the rights of the child 'relax and play' are what we look at and observe children within the setting on a regular basis to ensure their needs and wants are being met with current trends also being monitored and rolled out, UNICEF (no date). Safety within the setting is robust where I believe that staff have respect for one another and communicate effectively throughout sessions, this has come from efficiently training staff so that everyone has equal responsibilities. Gov.uk (2015) highlight that with everyone following established protocols and procedures maintaining safety amongst each other. Supporting parents and building trusting relationships to tailor support to families has improved our safety as we have had two new starters. As we are looking to expand the setting due to the expansion of flying start following articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, no date) as person in charge the leadership aspect of my role is to ensure we are improving and planning for future improvement through expansion of children and staff.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you all for attending the meeting this evening and will reconvene following the inspection to reflect on the outcome of the report so that we may be able move forward with the work and service we are providing here at the setting.

Part two (reflective paper).

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework establishes the minimum standards required to ensure children's safety, learning and development within early years settings (Department for Education (DfE), 2024). However, achieving statutory compliance does not necessarily indicate high-quality provision. Quality improvement requires ongoing reflection, professional development and evaluation of practice to ensure that children experience environments that promote wellbeing, inclusion and meaningful learning opportunities.

Additional quality assurance approaches enable early years leaders to examine provision beyond statutory expectations by identifying strengths, recognising areas for improvement and supporting practitioner development. This reflection critically evaluates two methods of quality assurance: the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale and the Environment Rating Scales (ERS). Both approaches provide valuable frameworks for evaluating quality; however, their effectiveness depends upon skilled implementation, reflective leadership and a commitment to using findings to improve children's experiences.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale

The SSTEWS Scale was developed by Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) as a research-based tool for assessing and improving the quality of adult-child interactions within early childhood settings. It focuses on five key areas: building trusting relationships, supporting communication and language development, encouraging learning and critical thinking, supporting children's agency and promoting emotional wellbeing.

A significant strength of the SSTEWS Scale is its emphasis on interactions rather than solely focusing on physical resources or outcomes. Research from the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project identified that high-quality adult-child interactions, particularly sustained shared thinking, are associated with improved cognitive and social outcomes for children (Sylva et al., 2010). Sustained shared thinking occurs when adults and children work collaboratively to extend ideas, solve problems and deepen understanding. Therefore, the SSTEWS Scale encourages practitioners to consider the quality of their interactions and how effectively they support children's thinking.

For inclusive leaders, the SSTEWE Scale provides a valuable tool for professional reflection. Leaders can use observations to identify where practitioners require further support, for example, developing questioning techniques, extending children's vocabulary or encouraging child-led problem solving. This supports a culture of continuous improvement because practitioners are encouraged to reflect on their own practice rather than viewing quality assurance as an external judgement.

The SSTEWE Scale also supports inclusive practice by recognising emotional wellbeing as central to learning. Children who feel secure and valued are more likely to engage confidently within their environment. This reflects the EYFS principle of the Unique Child, which recognises that children develop differently and require responsive support based on their individual needs (DfE, 2024).

However, the SSTEWE Scale has limitations. Observational assessments may be influenced by the knowledge, experience and interpretation of the person carrying out the evaluation. Without appropriate training, practitioners may misunderstand indicators of quality or focus on achieving scores rather than improving children's experiences. Additionally, using the SSTEWE Scale requires time for observations, feedback and professional discussion, which may be challenging in settings experiencing staffing pressures.

Therefore, the SSTEWE Scale is most effective when used as a reflective development tool rather than a performance measure. Leaders must ensure that the purpose is improvement, collaboration and professional learning rather than compliance.

Environment Rating Scales (ERS)

The Environment Rating Scales (ERS) are internationally recognised observational assessment tools designed to evaluate the quality of early childhood environments. Developed by Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2015), the scales assess different aspects of provision, including space and furnishings, personal care routines, learning activities, interactions and programme structure. Different versions exist for different age groups, including the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS).

A key benefit of ERS is that it provides a structured approach to evaluating the overall quality of an early years environment. Unlike statutory inspections, which provide an external judgement at a particular point in time, ERS can be used by leaders as an ongoing self-evaluation tool. This supports reflective leadership by encouraging practitioners to examine whether resources, routines and learning opportunities genuinely meet children's needs.

ERS can also promote inclusion by encouraging settings to consider accessibility, representation and children's individual experiences. For example, leaders may reflect on whether resources reflect children's cultures, whether children with additional needs can participate fully and whether the environment supports independence. This aligns with inclusive leadership principles, where barriers to participation are identified and addressed.

However, critics argue that environmental rating scales may oversimplify the complexity of early childhood quality. Quality is not solely determined by measurable features of the environment; it also depends on relationships, professional judgement and children's lived experiences. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2013) argue that quality should not be viewed as a fixed measurable concept but as something constructed through relationships, values and perspectives.

Additionally, ERS tools have been criticised for reflecting cultural assumptions about what constitutes quality early childhood provision. Settings serving diverse communities may need to interpret indicators carefully to ensure they remain culturally responsive rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

Consequently, ERS should not be used in isolation but alongside practitioner reflection, family feedback and children's voices to develop a more complete understanding of quality.

Critical Reflection on Quality Assurance Approaches

Quality assurance approaches such as the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) Scale and Environment Rating Scales (ERS) demonstrate significant potential in supporting continuous improvement within early years settings. Unlike statutory requirements, which establish minimum expectations for safety, learning and development, additional quality assurance methods

encourage practitioners and leaders to critically examine the depth and effectiveness of their provision. They shift the focus from simply meeting requirements towards developing a culture of professional reflection, where improving outcomes for children remains the central purpose.

A key benefit of these approaches is that they provide structured opportunities for self-evaluation. The SSTEWS Scale encourages practitioners to reflect on the quality of interactions that take place between adults and children, recognising that relationships, communication and emotional security are fundamental components of effective early years practice (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). Similarly, ERS supports leaders in evaluating whether the physical environment, resources and routines effectively promote children's independence, engagement and wellbeing (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2015). Together, these approaches offer a broader understanding of quality by considering both the learning environment and the experiences children encounter within it.

However, critical reflection requires recognition that quality assurance tools are not neutral measures of quality. Although they provide valuable frameworks, they are influenced by particular perspectives about what constitutes effective early childhood practice. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2013) argue that quality should not be viewed as a universal standard that can be objectively measured, as ideas of quality are shaped by cultural values, professional beliefs and social contexts. Therefore, leaders must avoid implementing assessment tools as rigid checklists and instead consider how indicators apply to the individual children, families and communities they serve.

Another consideration is the potential impact of accountability pressures. While quality assurance can support improvement, excessive focus on scoring, evidence collection or achieving external recognition may encourage performative practice. Roberts-Holmes (2015) highlights concern that increasing datafication within early years education can result in practitioners spending more time producing evidence of quality rather than engaging directly with children. This suggests that leaders must carefully balance documentation requirements with opportunities for meaningful interaction and professional dialogue.

Furthermore, the success of quality assurance depends heavily on leadership approaches. If practitioners perceive evaluation processes as judgemental, they may become defensive or focus on demonstrating competence rather than openly identifying areas for development. Effective leaders should therefore promote psychologically safe environments where reflection is viewed as a professional strength rather than an indication of failure. Distributed leadership approaches, where practitioners contribute to evaluating and improving practice collectively, can strengthen ownership and encourage sustainable change (Spillane, 2006).

Ultimately, quality assurance approaches are most valuable when they are used as tools for learning rather than inspection. SSTEWS and ERS can provide important evidence to guide improvement, but they should be combined with professional judgement, children's voices and family perspectives. High-quality early years provision cannot be achieved through measurement alone; it requires reflective practitioners and leaders who are committed to understanding children's individual experiences and continuously improving practice.

Conclusion

Additional quality assurance methods provide valuable opportunities for early years settings to move beyond statutory compliance and develop a sustained commitment to high-quality practice. The SSTEWS Scale and Environment Rating Scales demonstrate how evidence-informed tools can support leaders and practitioners in evaluating different aspects of provision, from the quality of adult-child interactions to the effectiveness of the learning environment. These approaches encourage reflective practice, professional dialogue and continuous improvement, which are essential characteristics of effective early years leadership.

However, quality cannot be fully captured through assessment tools or external measures alone. While quality assurance frameworks provide useful guidance, they must be interpreted alongside professional expertise, children's experiences and the perspectives of families and communities. Over-reliance on measurable outcomes may risk reducing complex early childhood experiences to simplified judgements of quality. Therefore, effective leaders should use quality assurance methods critically, ensuring they support rather than control practice.

Ultimately, the purpose of quality assurance should be to enhance children's learning, wellbeing and inclusion. When implemented thoughtfully, these approaches empower practitioners, strengthen pedagogy and contribute to creating environments where every child is recognised as a capable, valued and unique learner.

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