



# A quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors:

## Introduction

**September 2025**



## About this framework

This self-evaluation framework supports quality improvement in early learning and childcare (ELC) settings. It can be used by all ELC services. This includes childminders and school age childcare providers.

The Care Inspectorate and His Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) will use the framework for the inspection of ELC settings, ensuring that these inspections are thorough and focused on enhancing the quality of care and education provided.

Where an ELC setting provides Gaelic Medium Education HM Inspectors will continue to use the [advice on Gaelic education](#) alongside this framework. This will reflect the distinctive features of Gaelic Medium Education, such as total immersion and rights-based approaches.

This rights-based framework provides a holistic approach to assessing care, play, and education. It contains quality indicators which support reflection. These can help you identify practice that works and areas that need improvement.

At the heart of the Care Inspectorate and HM Inspectors work is ensuring that children are:

- safe and protected from harm
- cared for and able to thrive
- offered high-quality learning and development opportunities

The Care Inspectorate and HM Inspectors will use the framework to work with ELC services and sector-wide bodies to enhance the quality and effectiveness of self-evaluation.

# Framework quality indicators

Quality indicators can help you to evaluate performance at every level. You should use evaluations from all headings to consider opportunities for improvement. Quality indicators may help you to understand the difference you are making, what you need to do next, and how to make positive changes.

The quality indicators are grouped under four important headings:

- leadership
- children thrive and develop in quality spaces
- children play and learn
- children are supported to achieve

The framework offers quality indicators for the following sectors:

## **Early learning and childcare**

The quality indicators for ELC should be used for all provision types, except for childminding and school age childcare services.

## **Childminding**

HM Inspectors and the Care Inspectorate agree that childminders who deliver funded or non-funded care should self-evaluate against the quality indicators found within the childminding-specific content. This means that childminders providing funded care do not need to self-evaluate against any additional quality indicators in the wider framework or other sector specific content.

Childminders delivering school age childcare can also self-evaluate their service using the quality indicators within the childminding sector specific content.

## **School age childcare**

The quality indicators for school age childcare should be used by services providing out-of-school care.

# Principles of this framework

The framework is underpinned by the principles of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and the [Health and Social Care Standards](#).

## UNCRC principles

This framework reflects a commitment to ensuring that children grow up loved, safe, respected, and supported to achieve their full potential. This rights-based approach underpins how services deliver for children and how inspectors evaluate quality. This framework considers four general principles of children's rights:

**Non-discrimination:** children are protected from discrimination and treated fairly.

**Best interests of the child:** when making any decision, adults must do what is best for children rather than themselves. This includes governments and businesses. In every inspection, the welfare and rights of children will be central.

**Survival and development:** children must be supported to grow up into what they want to be without harmful interference.

**Respect for children's views:** children have opinions that must be taken into account.

## Health and Social Care Standards

The Health and Social Care Standards are a set of principles and outcomes that guide all health, social care and social work services in Scotland, including all early learning and childcare services. Consideration should continue to be given to the Health and Social Care Standards alongside this framework. These standards must be used to ensure babies, children and young people receive high-quality, compassionate care that is right for them.

The Health and Social Care Standards are intrinsically linked to [The Promise](#) and [The Pinky Promise](#), which is Scotland's commitment to ensure that all babies, children and young people grow up "loved, safe and respected so they can realise their full potential". Careful consideration of The Promise has been taken when creating this framework.

## The self-evaluation process

The framework contains quality indicators that focus on specific areas of practice. They can help you identify strengths in the ways you are currently working. They will also highlight ways to improve outcomes for children and their families.

Self-evaluation will help you explore your progress, development and practice. The self-evaluation process uses evidence to reflect on achievements. It will also help you develop action plans for improvement. Self-evaluation is a key component for improvement. Inspectors will consider aspects of your self-evaluation as part of the inspection process.

The process of self-evaluation is part of a wider quality assurance approach. It requires a cycle of reflection based on the following three questions:

1. How are we doing?
2. How do we know?
3. What are we going to do now?

It is important for self-evaluation to be manageable. You should consider which areas you wish to evaluate and why. Use evidence to support your analysis.

Self-evaluation can also be a forward-looking assessment. Consider any factors that might affect improvement. Such factors might include staff changes, restructuring or financial constraints.

# Roles and responsibilities of inspectors

The Care Inspectorate has statutory obligations under [section 53 of the Public Services Reform \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#) to carry out inspections of all ELC and school age childcare settings that are registered with them.

The Care Inspectorate will inspect all children's services whether or not the setting delivers the funded entitlement for ELC. The aim of inspection is ensuring all children, whatever their age or setting type, have the highest quality care, play and learning experiences.

Scottish Ministers' powers relating to the inspection of educational establishments and services are set out in [section 66 of the Education \(Scotland\) Act 1980](#). Inspections of educational establishments are carried out by HM Inspectors.

The Education (Scotland) Act 2025 received Royal Assent on the 6 August 2025. Once in force, it will change the statutory framework for inspection of educational establishments and services. This framework aligns with current legislation and is adaptable to future statutory requirements.

Both inspectorates will retain their current roles and responsibilities. The Care Inspectorate will continue to inspect all ELC settings, including childminders and school age childcare settings, whether or not they provide funded ELC. HM Inspectors will inspect settings providing funded ELC (other than childminders).

## Inspection

This shared framework supports a more coherent and consistent approach to inspection across Scotland. The Care Inspectorate and HM Inspectors will use the framework for the inspection of ELC. This includes inspections they undertake independently and when they work together as part of a shared inspection.

The Care Inspectorate will apply this framework within their inspection and regulatory role to ensure all elements of funded or unfunded ELC, childminding and school age childcare receive the highest standards of care and learning.

HM Inspectors will continue to evaluate the quality of children's educational experiences in accordance with current legislative requirements. In some settings, HM Inspectors may refer to additional national advice to support inspection activity. This includes guidance on Gaelic Medium Education, and additional support needs, where relevant. The framework has distinct quality indicators for the inspection of education. HM Inspectors will use these quality indicators to inspect settings providing funded ELC (other than childminders).

Both organisations have safeguarding responsibilities. The Care Inspectorate has core assurances that they inspect against at every inspection. An element of the core assurances is safeguarding. HM Inspectors will consider whether educational settings have adequate arrangements in place to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

## The six-point scale for evaluation

The six-point scale is a tool for evaluating the quality indicators. It is used by HM Inspectors and the Care Inspectorate for reporting on the outcomes of inspections. Local authorities and other governing bodies may choose to use it for the purpose of national and/or local benchmarking across a number of settings. It is not necessary for individual settings to measure themselves against the six-point scale although they may choose to do so to help evaluate and understand their performance.

### **Level 6: Excellent**

This means that aspects of the setting's work are outstanding and sector leading. The experiences and achievements of all children are of a very high-quality. This represents an outstanding standard of provision which exemplifies exceptional best practice. It is based on achieving equity and inclusion. Settings show a deep professional understanding which is worth sharing to support sector-wide improvement. It implies that very high levels of performance are sustainable and will be maintained.

## **Level 5: Very good**

This means that there are major strengths in this aspect of the setting's work. There are very few areas for improvement, and any that do exist do not significantly diminish children's experiences. An evaluation of very good represents a high standard of provision for all children. There is an expectation that the setting will make continued use of self-evaluation to plan further improvements. The setting will work towards improving provision and strive to raise performance to excellent.

## **Level 4: Good**

This means that there are important strengths within the setting's work; however, some aspects could benefit from improvement. The strengths have a significantly positive impact on almost all children. The quality of experiences is diminished in some way by aspects in which improvement would be beneficial. The setting should seek to improve further the areas of important strength and also take action to address the areas for improvement.

## **Level 3: Satisfactory/adequate**

This means that strengths in this aspect of work just outweigh the weaknesses. These strengths may have a positive impact on children's experiences; however, children only access a basic level of provision, which constrains the overall quality of their experiences. Practice at this level may be tolerable in particular circumstances, for example, where a service or partnership is not yet established or is in the midst of major changes. Continued performance at this level should not be considered acceptable in the long term. The setting needs to build on their strengths to improve practice, creating positive experiences and better outcomes for all.



## **Level 2: Weak**

This means that there are some strengths, but there are important weaknesses within this aspect of the setting's work. These weaknesses, either individually or collectively, are sufficient to diminish children's experiences. Improvements must be made as a matter of priority. Without improvement the welfare, safety or learning and development of children may be compromised, or their individual needs not met. Weak performance requires prompt improvement action. Structured and sustainable improvements must be prioritised.

## **Level 1: Unsatisfactory**

This means there are major weaknesses in critical aspects of performance which require immediate, remedial action to improve experiences and outcomes for children. These weaknesses may relate to care, play, or learning, and are likely to result in children's welfare, safety, or learning being compromised by risks or deficiencies that cannot be tolerated. Those accountable for carrying out the necessary actions for improvement must do so as a matter of urgency. Children must be protected and their safety, wellbeing and progress in learning and development improved. This will require focused support from senior managers in planning and carrying out the necessary actions to effect improvement. This will usually involve working alongside other staff in other settings or agencies.

## Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate will begin to use the new framework for inspection from September 2025.

With help from stakeholders, we have compiled some [frequently asked questions \(FAQs\)](#) on the Care Inspectorate website. Answers address some of the points raised with us so far. We will keep these FAQs updated as new questions arise.

This framework replaces both How good is our early learning and childcare and A quality framework for daycare of children, childminding and school age childcare.

Both inspectorates will engage with settings to support them to become familiar and confident in using the new framework for self-evaluation.

## Contact information

### Care Inspectorate

Compass House  
11 Riverside Drive  
Dundee  
DD1 4NY

**Telephone:** 01382 207100

**Email:** [enquiries@careinspectorate.gov.scot](mailto:enquiries@careinspectorate.gov.scot)

**Website:** <http://www.careinspectorate.com/>

### Education Scotland

Denholm House  
Almondvale Business Park  
Livingston  
EH54 6GA

**Telephone:** 0131 244 4330

**Email:** [enquiries@educationscotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@educationscotland.gsi.gov.uk)

**Website:** [www.education.gov.scot](http://www.education.gov.scot)

[The quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors](#) is also available online.

