The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is the national body guiding the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood education and care. Part of ACECQA's role is to publish, publicise and analyse the results of assessments of early childhood education and care services around Australia, using the NQS as the new benchmark.

The NQF has replaced the licensing and quality-assurance systems of state and territory regulatory authorities, although the assessments are still conducted by the authorities. Assessments against the NQS are designed to serve two purposes: first, promoting continuous quality improvement; and second, promoting transparency and accountability by making ratings available to the public. Starting on 1 May 2013, ratings are published in registers on the ACECQA website and on the government's My Child website (www.mychild.gov.au). Ratings must also be displayed at the entrance to all early childhood service premises.

External assessment is nothing new for early childhood education and care services, but assessment against the NQS is part of a distinctly new era—inspiring for some, daunting for others. This e-Newsletter explains the quality assessment process and gives first-hand accounts from three early childhood services.

The ratings system

Ratings against the NQS fall into four categories:

- Exceeding NQS
- Meeting NQS
- Working towards NQS
- Significant improvement required.

Services rated Exceeding overall are eligible to apply for the highest rating level—Excellent. The Excellent rating is not awarded as part of the standard assessment process; it is only available on application to ACECQA.

The assessment process takes a stringent approach to the ratings: if a service fails to meet just one of the 58 elements of the NQS, the highest rating it can receive is Working towards. In order to be judged as Meeting the NQS in any of the seven Quality Areas, a service must be assessed as meeting each of the standards, and each of the elements, within that Quality Area. To be rated as Exceeding a Quality Area, a service must be judged as Exceeding at least two standards in that Quality Area, and all other standards in the area must be Meeting the NQS.

The overall rating summarises a service's performance across the seven Quality Areas. The ratings at the Quality Area level provide a more detailed picture of how the service is operating. For example, services rated as Exceeding the NQS in three Quality Areas will receive an overall rating of Meeting the NQS (provided all other Quality Areas are assessed as Meeting the standard). Only services that meet a ‘2+2’ benchmark will be rated as Exceeding. This means that a service must be Exceeding the NQS in at least four Quality Areas, and at least two of those areas must be from the following list:

- QA1—Educational program and practice
- QA5—Relationships with children
- QA6—Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
- QA7—Leadership and service management.
First ratings released

On 1 May 2013, ACECQA released the first round of quality ratings for early childhood services, as well as a snapshot report on services rated up to 31 March 2013. The report covered the 13 per cent of Australia’s nearly 13,000 approved services that had been rated to date, and the news—so far—is good. More than half of the services met the National Quality Standard: 33 per cent were assessed as Meeting the NQS and 22 per cent were Exceeding it. A further 44 per cent of services were rated as Working towards the standard. Around the country, just nine services received the lowest rating (Significant improvement required).

Some of the services assessed as Working towards the NQS were found to have exceeded the NQS in one or more of the seven Quality Areas. Nationwide, the Quality Area most commonly rated as Exceeding was ‘Relationships with children’ (QA5); the areas most commonly rated as Working Towards the NQS were ‘Education program and practice’ (QA1) and ‘Physical Environment’ (QA3) (ACECQA, 2013a, p. 7).

Regrettably, much of the media coverage of the ratings demonstrated a poor understanding of the ratings scale and of the NQF. ACECQA views the Working towards rating as ‘an important part of the successful transition to new and higher standards’ (ACECQA, 2013c).

Some regulatory authorities were certainly expecting ratings to be far below similar measures under the previous accreditation system. In an information brochure for parents, the NSW Department of Education and Communities explains that the previous accreditation system for early childhood services was very different: in NSW, the old system resulted in almost 90 per cent of services receiving a ‘high quality’ rating. The department cautions that ‘we shouldn’t expect that this will automatically translate into an Exceeding National Quality Standard rating in the new system’, for the simple reason that ‘the benchmark has been lifted and this means that the new quality standards are harder to achieve’ (NSW Government, 2013).

Regulatory authorities are aiming to have all approved services in Australia assessed before 2016; the national register will be updated each week, adding ratings against the NQS as they are finalised.

The assessment process

The state and territory regulatory authorities began rolling out the assessment process in mid-2012 (later in Western Australia, due to the later passage of enabling legislation). Some authorities started with just one service type, others asked services to volunteer for assessment. In all cases, regulatory authorities were required to follow the processes agreed by all jurisdictions, which look like this:

1. Quality Improvement Plan (QIP): Self-assessment, reflection and preparation of a QIP provide the basis for the entire process.
2. Notification: The assessment begins with a letter from the regulatory authority. Within five weeks, the service must provide a copy of its QIP. The authority then sends the date of the assessment visit. Visits are usually scheduled for six weeks after receipt of the QIP.
3. The visit: Assessors visit the service. Visits usually last at least six hours at centre-based services, and might run over two days at large centres. For family day care services, there are visits to more than one site, lasting around two to three hours in each location, with another several hours at the scheme office. Assessors may identify ‘minor adjustments’ the service could make, which may improve its rating.
4. Preliminary rating and report: Around three weeks after the visit, the service receives the draft assessment report and rating, and has ten working days to respond.
5. Final rating and report: Around eight weeks after the visit, the service receives the final report and rating. Within 14 days, the service may lodge a request for review of the assessment.

Are you Excellent?

For services that receive an Exceeding rating, there is one final rung on the ladder, if they choose to climb it. The highest rating in the NQF is Excellent, and it can only be awarded by ACECQA. The Excellent category is designed to showcase and celebrate the highest quality practice in the sector. Applicants for an Excellent rating need to fill in a form and provide a written statement and evidence about how their service ‘exemplifies and promotes exceptional education and care’ at least three of six areas of practice. They should show how their service demonstrates leadership that contributes to the development of a community, local area or the wider sector, and how they demonstrate commitment to sustained excellent practice through continuous improvement and comprehensive forward planning.
Case studies

In the ACT, assessment ratings have been released for 46 services. The overwhelming majority—72 per cent—received a rating of Working towards the NQS, with the remaining 28 per cent Meeting or Exceeding the standard. We talk to three ACT service directors about their experiences of assessment.

Calwell Early Childhood Centre: Working towards the NQS

When Rebecca Burgess started work as Director at Calwell Early Childhood Centre in June 2012, she had only a few months before the centre’s first quality assessment. But she was better prepared than most. A very recent early childhood education graduate, and with experience working in early childhood education and care administration, Rebecca had been immersed in the philosophy of the NQS and knew how to apply it. She got to work right away on the QIP for Calwell, and made it a joint exercise.

‘We got staff to make a wish list of things that they wanted for improvement for the centre, had lots of discussions and then it was just a matter of putting it into the template,’ says Rebecca.

Once she was notified of the assessment, Rebecca ensured that the collaboration continued: ‘I read a lot about ACECQA, I printed out the assessment and rating tool, I gave it to every staff member. I got them to reflect on their own practices and their own knowledge. I got each and every one of them to write notes ... I read through everybody’s and then we looked at training, where people needed the extra help,’ she says.

As for the visit, ‘it absolutely was not stressful at all,’ Rebecca insists. The two assessors needed less than six hours for their visit, and provided a report that was fair and contained useful pointers on where to focus future efforts at the centre. For Rebecca, the entire process of implementing the NQS and being assessed against it has been ‘very positive, very useful’.

What advice would you give to services awaiting assessment? ‘Reflect on your own practices—each and every person needs to do that. Don’t stress too much. Use it as a positive tool and work for improvement. Don’t get negative and don’t take it personally.’

Lyons Children’s Centre: Meeting the NQS

Janine Beaumont is Director of Lyons Children’s Centre, which forms part of the Lyons Early Childhood School. For Janine, the path to meeting the NQS was made much smoother by the high level of knowledge among educators: ‘Many of our educators were studying, they were all getting saturated with information, and it was perfect timing,’ she says.

But when it came to preparing the centre’s QIP, Janine made sure she was across the issues first. ‘I was on annual leave, so I took it with me, and I took my time. I slowly started addressing the things that I could as a director and I felt really comfortable knowing that we were in the process of addressing most quality areas or we were already practising them.’

When the team began collaborating on the QIP and implementation, Janine threw out the process of monthly meetings and began holding an all-staff meeting every Monday morning: all of the team leaders one week, and all support staff the next. The meetings focused on a different aspect of the NQS, and took the approach of ‘acknowledge our strengths first,’ says Janine.

When it came time for the assessment visit, the assessor even sat in on the weekly meeting. ‘She was able to observe and document and question. She could see that we were doing all our reflective practices and she was able to tick off a lot of boxes,’ says Janine.

What advice would you give to services awaiting assessment? ‘What are you doing well? Start from where you are at and get feedback from your own school or centre community, parents, educators, and from the children. Really be paying attention, though, and be honest about where you need to improve. Don’t try to dismiss something that’s been a thorn in your side for a long time. Now is the time to address it. And have an attitude of ‘This is fantastic!’ because this is going to improve everyone’s standard.’
Lollipop Children’s Centre: Working Towards the NQS

The staff at Lollipop Children’s Centre in Woden faced some formidable challenges in getting to grips with the NQS and preparing for assessment. For starters, 19 of the 60 places at the centre are reserved for occasional care, creating a bustling environment and a very large group of children and families using the centre. On top of that, Lollipop was in the very first group of services assessed, in early 2012.

Director Nicole Metcalfe explains: ‘To be honest, it was extremely rushed for us. We’d started looking at the EYLF, and then we found out we were going to be assessed.’

Not surprisingly, Nicole leapt into preparation of the QIP as a priority, but found it a big task. ‘Lollipop’s policies and procedures hadn’t been updated in almost 12 years, so I had to rewrite every policy,’ she explains. ‘It was pretty horrible, actually! But in saying that, it was a big learning curve.’

Working on the centre’s policies was essential, but it left little time for other things. ‘We met Quality Area 7,’ Nicole says, ‘but I didn’t have the time, as director, to be working with the staff and ensuring that they were aware of their role and the fact it’s changing. And changing behaviours is hard.’

The assessment visit at Lollipop lasted two days, but Nicole found it a very ‘stand back and look’ experience, rather than the interactive process she’d been hoping for. She puts that down to the fact that the assessment process was new and untested, and is pleased that she maintained contact with the assessor after the visit, to get more detailed feedback on priority areas.

‘When I first received the report, I was in tears,’ Nicole says. ‘It probably took me two weeks to actually tell the staff, because I had to read the report and understand it. But once you actually read it—for some areas, there might have been six indicators and we met five of them. So we had to portray it that way. But the staff certainly needed to hear about where things have to change. To me, that was a good thing to work on.’

What advice would you give to services awaiting assessment? ‘Just do your best. It’s great if you get Meeting, but if you don’t, that’s life, that’s all part of it. You work towards your next assessment and you improve in the areas that you didn’t get through on. So don’t stress about it—it’s not the end of the world.’

References