



Australian Children's
Education & Care
Quality Authority

Guide to Assessment and Rating for Services

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Guide to Assessment and Rating for Services

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About this document

The National Quality Framework

In December 2009, all Australian governments, through the Council of Australian Governments, agreed to a partnership to establish a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (National Quality Framework).

The Australian Government and state and territory governments recognise the importance of increasing their focus on the early years to ensure the wellbeing of children throughout their lives and to lift the productivity of our nation as a whole. The drive for change is based on clear evidence that the early years of children's lives are very important for their present and future health, development and wellbeing.

The National Quality Framework aims to raise quality and drive continuous improvement in education and care services through:

- the *National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care (National Quality Standard)*
- a national quality assessment and rating process
- streamlined regulatory arrangements
- a new national body jointly governed by the Australian Government and state and territory governments—the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)—to oversee the new system.

The new system replaces state and territory licensing and quality assurance processes.

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to assist approved education and care services (services) to understand the assessment and rating of services against the National Quality Framework, including the *Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 (National Law)* and the *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011 (National Regulations)* which incorporates the *National Quality Standard*.

Services may refer to this document during their preparation for the assessment and rating process.

It is critical that services are aware of the steps in the assessment and rating process to ensure that they fulfil their obligations under the *National Law* and the *National Regulations*.

How this document is organised

The *Guide to Assessment and Rating for Services* includes:

- an overview of assessment and rating
- a table with detailed information regarding the process
- information on what happens before, during and after the assessment and rating visit
- some notes pages for services to jot down any reminders or comments relevant to their service.

National Quality Standard document suite

The suite of documents and tools in place to support the *National Quality Standard* is as follows:

National legislative framework	
<i>Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010</i>	For authorised officers and services
<i>Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011</i>	For authorised officers and services
National approved learning frameworks	
<i>Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia</i>	For educators
<i>My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia</i>	For educators
Guides	
<i>Educators Belonging, Being and Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia</i>	For educators
<i>Educators' My Time, Our Place: Educators' Guide to the Framework for School Age Care in Australia</i>	For educators
<i>Operational Policy Manual for the Regulatory Authorities.</i>	For authorised officers
<i>Guide to Assessment and Rating for Services (this document)</i>	For services
<i>Guide to Developing A Quality Improvement Plan</i>	For services
<i>Guide to the Education and Care Services National Law and the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011</i>	For services
<i>Guide to the National Quality Standard</i>	For services and authorised officers
<i>Promoting Collaborative Partnerships Between School Age Care Services and Schools</i>	For school age care services and schools
Quality assessment tools	
<i>National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating Instrument</i>	For authorised officers and services

Assessment and rating overview

The purpose of the assessment and rating process is to determine whether and at what rating level services meet the *National Quality Standard* and the requirements of the *National Regulations* (section 133(1)).

A key focus of the National Quality Framework is to promote continuous quality improvement. From 2012, services covered under the *National Law* will begin to be assessed and rated by authorised officers from the relevant regulatory authority in each state and territory.

The National Quality Standard defines the standards and elements that are assessed and rated

The *National Quality Standard* (schedule 1 of the *National Regulations*) sets a new national benchmark for the quality of education and care services. It will also give services and families a better understanding of a quality service. This will enable families to make informed decisions about the services providing education and care to their child. The *National Quality Standard* is a key aspect of the National Quality Framework.

The development of the *National Quality Standard* was informed by research on best practice and the way in which high-quality education and care contributes to positive outcomes for children. It comprises quality areas, standards and elements. The seven quality areas in the *National Quality Standard* are:

QA1	Educational program and practice
QA2	Children's health and safety
QA3	Physical environment
QA4	Staffing arrangements
QA5	Relationships with children
QA6	Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
QA7	Leadership and service management

The *National Quality Standard* contains 18 standards with two or three standards in each of the seven quality areas. These standards are high-level outcome statements. Each standard contains a number of elements that describe the outcomes that contribute to the standard being achieved. There are 58 elements in total.

National Regulations determine how services are assessed

The *National Regulations* outline the assessment and rating process for education and care services. They set out the requirements for preparation and review of the Quality Improvement Plan (part 3.1), the different rating levels that may be given to a service (part 3.2), the process for completing assessments and determining a rating (part 3.3) and the process for review of ratings (part 3.4).

Quality Improvement Plans are integral to the process

An integral part of the assessment and rating process is the Quality Improvement Plan. The Quality Improvement Plan documents the outcome of a service's self-assessment and quality improvement planning process. Services evaluate their current practice against the *National Quality Standard*, identify their strengths and areas they should improve.

The *National Regulations* require that the approved provider ensures a Quality Improvement Plan is prepared for the service that:

- includes an assessment by the provider of the quality of the practices of the service against the *National Quality Standard* and the *National Regulations*, and
- identifies any areas that the provider considers may require improvement, and
- contains a statement of the philosophy of the service (regulation 55).

The approved provider must also review and revise the Quality Improvement Plan for the service having regard to the *National Quality Standard*:

- at least annually, and
- at any time when directed by the regulatory authority (regulation 56).

The approved provider must submit the current Quality Improvement Plan to the regulatory authority on request (regulation 56).

In the case of new services, the approved provider must submit the Quality Improvement Plan to the regulatory authority within three months of the grant of the service approval (regulation 55).

It is also a condition of a service approval that the Quality Improvement Plan is kept at the service, and is made available on request to parents of a child who is enrolled at the service or who are seeking to enrol a child at the service, and for inspection by the regulatory authority (regulation 31).

While it is important for services to reflect on practice, policies and procedures against the seven quality areas of the *National Quality Standard* and related regulatory requirements, there is no expectation that all 18 standards and 58 elements will be addressed in the Quality Improvement Plan. It is intended that services will prioritise areas for improvement against the seven quality areas of the *National Quality Standard* and the related regulatory requirements.

The rating system

The *National Quality Standard* is accompanied by a national quality assessment and rating process that reflects a national approach to the assessment and reporting of the quality of services across the variety of service settings.

The *National Regulations* prescribe the five rating levels within the national quality assessment and rating process (regulation 57).

- *Significant Improvement Required* (regulation 59)
- *Working Towards National Quality Standard* (regulation 60)
- *Meeting National Quality Standard* (regulation 61)
- *Exceeding National Quality Standard* (regulation 62)
- *Excellent* (the criteria for this rating level is determined by ACECQA — see section 153 of the *National Law*).

Assessing approved education and care services

The *National Regulations* also prescribe what the regulatory authority must consider for the purposes of assessing a service (regulation 63).

The regulatory authority must consider:

- the current Quality Improvement Plan for the service, and
- any rating assessment history of the service, including any records of previous rating assessments made under the *National Law*, and
- the service's history of compliance.

The regulatory authority must arrange for an assessment and rating visit by an authorised officer:

- in the case of a centre-based service, of the service premises, and
- in the case of a family day care service, of one or more approved family day care venues or family day care residences.

In addition, the *National Regulations* provide that the regulatory authority may consider a range of information when determining a rating, including:

- any relevant information disclosed to the regulatory authority by a government department, public or local authority, state or territory regulatory authority or the relevant Commonwealth department
- any information available to the regulatory authority about any steps taken by the service to rectify any matters identified during the rating assessment
- information relating to any other quality assurance or registration process under an education law applicable to the service
- in the case of a service that provides education and care to children in the year that is 2 years before grade 1 of school, whether the service facilitates access to a preschool program as set out in regulation 62(2).

Review of ratings

Internal review of ratings by regulatory authority

The *National Law* (sections 141-143) and the *National Regulations* (regulation 68) provide for an approved provider to request a review of a rating determined for a service. The request must be made in writing to the regulatory authority within 14 days after the approved provider receives the rating notice. The request must set out the grounds on which a review is sought and be accompanied by the required information set out in the *National Regulations*, including a prescribed fee.

The review of the rating assessment must be conducted:

- by a person not involved in the original assessment and rating of the service
- within 30 days, unless extended with agreement of the approved provider and the regulatory authority, or if a request for further information is made.

The person conducting the review may request further information from the approved provider or anyone involved in the original assessment.

Following the review, the regulatory authority may confirm or amend the rating levels (by quality area or overall rating or both) and must give the approved provider notice in writing of the outcome of the review (including any revised rating levels) and the reasons for the decision made, within 30 days.

If no application is made for further review within 14 days of the internal review decision, the rating levels set out in the notice may be published.

Further review by ratings review panel

In addition, the *National Law* (section 144-145) and the *National Regulations* (regulation 69) allow for an approved provider to apply to ACECQA for a further review of a rating determined for a service. An application for further review can only be made on the grounds that the regulatory authority did not appropriately conduct the assessment processes for determining a rating level, or failed to take into account or give sufficient weight to special circumstances or facts existing at the time of the rating assessment.

An application for further review must be made within 14 days after the decision of the regulatory authority's internal review is received by the approved provider and be accompanied by the prescribed fee. The ACECQA Board will convene a ratings review panel to conduct the review.

The ratings review panel must make a decision within 60 days to confirm or amend the rating levels (by quality area or overall rating or both). The panel must give the approved provider notice in writing of its decision and the reasons for the decision within 14 days.

Assessment and rating process

The following table outlines the national quality rating and assessment process for evaluation of services against the *National Quality Standard* and *National Regulations*. It is designed to be a cooperative process with opportunities for services to discuss how they are meeting the *National Quality Standard* and enhancing outcomes for children.

Timeline	Step	Process
Week 1*	A: Notice of visit	<p>The approved provider receives a letter from the regulatory authority notifying of the four week period in which the assessment and rating visit will occur.</p> <p>The regulatory authority requests that the approved provider submits a copy of the service Quality Improvement Plan within three weeks. The regulatory authority may also request additional service specific information.</p>
Week 3	B: Quality Improvement Plan	The approved provider submits the Quality Improvement Plan to the regulatory authority.
Weeks 5 - 8	C: Visit occurs	<p>For all service types, the regulatory authority will give the approved provider at least five days notice of the visit. For family day care services the regulatory authority will give between 0-5 days notice of the educator sample to be visited.</p> <p>The authorised officer may give some general comments at the time of the visit but will not give an indication of the service rating. Feedback may include the opportunity to make minor adjustments to the service operation within specified areas and timeframes to address concerns identified at the visit. For further information on the minor adjustments policy refer to the <i>The Assessment and Rating chapter of the Operational Policy Manual for the Regulatory Authorities</i>.</p>
After the visit		
Approx. 3 - 5 weeks after the visit date	D: Draft report	<p>The approved provider is issued the draft report.</p> <p>The approved provider has 10 working days to provide feedback on any factual inaccuracies in the report and provide evidence to support their feedback.</p>
Approx. 5 - 7 weeks after the visit date	E: Feedback due	Feedback on the draft report is provided to the regulatory authority. If no feedback is provided, the report is final and the notice of final ratings is issued to the approved provider.

Timeline	Step	Process
Approx. 8 weeks after the visit date	F: Final report	If feedback is provided on the draft report, this is considered by the regulatory authority, the report is then finalised and the notice of final ratings is issued to the approved provider.

* Note that the timeframes given in the table are guidelines only.

Once the report is finalised and received by the approved provider, the 14 day period in which a review can be requested commences. If the notice is sent electronically, the 14 days run from the day that it is sent. If posted, the 14 days run from the fourth day after the notice of ratings was posted.

The assessment and rating visit

Before the assessment and rating visit

Each service is unique and the ways in which the elements, standards and regulatory requirements are met will be determined by the service context, including the service environment, the needs, interests and abilities of the children attending the service, and the needs of families and the wider community.

Before visiting the service, authorised officers take the time to understand the service's context by reviewing service information and the service's current Quality Improvement Plan.

Before the visit, the approved provider determines who should be the key contact person. For example, this may be the approved provider themselves, a person with management or control, a nominated supervisor or certified supervisor.

During the assessment and rating visit

Collecting evidence to determine ratings using 'observe', 'discuss' and 'sight'

Authorised officers follow a uniform process when gathering the evidence required to assess and rate a service. They use 'observe', 'discuss' and 'sight' techniques to assess the service against each element of the *National Quality Standard* and the *National Regulations*.



Observe. The authorised officer observes what children, families, educators, co-ordinators and staff members are doing (for example, engaging in caring, friendly and respectful interactions). It is recognised that the authorised officer may not be able to obtain evidence through observation of all of the standards and elements at the time of the assessment.



Discuss. The authorised officer may engage with the key contact person, educators, co-ordinators, family day care educator assistants or staff members about the practices within the service.



Sight. The authorised officer sights documentation required by the *National Law* and *National Regulations* and other documentation as evidence to support particular practices at the service.

The *Guide to the National Quality Standard* provides authorised officers with detailed assessment guidance. Guidance is listed by element.

Communication during the assessment and rating visit

The authorised officer will introduce themselves to the key contact person and provide an overview of the visit, reiterating the three dimensions of observation, discussion and sighting of documentation.

The authorised officer conducts the visit in a manner that ensures their actions minimise disruption as much as possible to practice unless they consider there is an unacceptable risk to the safety, health or wellbeing of any child or children being educated and cared for by the service.

The authorised officer informs the key contact person when they are taking breaks and observes normal arrival and departure courtesies each day, especially if they are visiting for more than one day.

At the end of the visit the authorised officer provides the key contact person with broad verbal feedback about the visit, explaining that no indication of the rating can be given until all components of the process have been drawn together.

The authorised officer informs the service that a draft report with ratings for all quality areas and an overall rating will be provided approximately three to five weeks after the visit and that the approved provider will have 10 working days to provide feedback on any inaccuracies in the report.

After the assessment and rating visit

After an assessment and rating visit occurs, activities are undertaken by the regulatory authority to finalise the assessment report and the ratings. These include:

- considering evidence provided by the approved provider where there has been an opportunity to make minor adjustments¹
- determining the ratings, including assessing inconsistent practice² where applicable.

Determining the ratings

Services need to meet the *National Quality Standard* for:

- **all elements within a standard** to meet that standard
- **all standards within a quality area** to meet the *National Quality Standard* for that quality area.

In determining the rating regulatory authorities may also consider the service's history of compliance.

Five rating levels

There are five rating levels within the national quality assessment and rating process.

The following table demonstrate how the authorised officer determines ratings by assessing each element against the *National Quality Standard* to determine if it is met or not met. They use this information to rate each standard and quality area to determine the overall rating.

1 For further information on the minor adjustments policy refer to the *Assessment and Rating chapter of the Operational Policy Manual for the Regulatory Authorities*.

2 For further information on assessing inconsistent practice refer to the *Assessment and Rating chapter of the Operational Policy Manual for the Regulatory Authorities*.

Rating levels				
Task	<i>Significant Improvement Required</i>	<i>Working Towards National Quality Standard</i>	<i>Meeting National Quality Standard*</i>	<i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i>
1. Assess each element as ‘met’ or ‘not met’ and the relevant regulations	A <i>Significant Improvement Required</i> rating may be given for a quality area. See below.	Assess each element as ‘met’ or ‘not met’ and determine compliance with the relevant regulations.		
2. Rate each standard	A <i>Significant Improvement Required</i> rating may be given for a quality area. See below.	Apply <i>Working Towards National Quality Standard</i> if the education and care service does not meet one or more elements or relevant regulations. The service does not meet the standard.	Apply <i>Meeting National Quality Standard</i> when all elements and relevant regulations are met. The service meets the standard.	Apply <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i> when all elements and relevant regulations are met. The service exceeds the standard.
3. Rate each quality area	A <i>Significant Improvement Required</i> rating may be given for a quality area stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> if the education and care service does not meet that quality area or a relevant regulation for that quality area in a way that the regulatory authority is satisfied constitutes an unacceptable risk to the safety, health or wellbeing of any child or children being educated and cared for by the service (regulation 59(1)).	A <i>Working Towards National Quality Standard</i> rating may be given for a quality area stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> if the education and care service does not meet a standard in that quality area or a relevant regulation for that quality area but is not rated as <i>Significant Improvement Required</i> (regulation 60(1)).	A <i>Meeting National Quality Standard</i> rating may be given for a quality area stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> if the education and care service meets the standards and relevant regulations for that quality area (regulation 61(1)).	Subject to the criteria below, an <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i> rating may be given for a quality area stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> if the education and care service exceeds the standards for that quality area and complies with the relevant regulations for that quality area (regulation 62(1)). Criterion 1: An <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i> rating may only be given for the educational program and practice quality area of the <i>National Quality Standard</i> for an education and care service that educates and cares for children who are in the year that is 2 years before grade 1 of school if the service either:

Rating levels				
Task	<i>Significant Improvement Required</i>	<i>Working Towards National Quality Standard</i>	<i>Meeting National Quality Standard*</i>	<i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i>
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> provides a preschool program, or has a documented arrangement with an approved provider of another education and care service to provide a preschool program and informs parents of this arrangement (regulation 62(2)). <p>Criterion 2: An <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i> rating may be given for a quality area stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> if all standards in the quality area are at least <i>National Quality Standard</i> and at least two of the standards in the quality area are rated <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i>.</p>
4. Determine overall rating	If an education and care service has a <i>Significant Improvement Required</i> rating for any quality area stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> , the overall rating is <i>Significant Improvement Required</i> (regulation 59(2)).	If an education and care service has a <i>Working Towards National Quality Standard</i> rating for any quality area stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> but does not have a <i>Significant Improvement Required</i> rating for any quality area, the overall rating of the service is to be <i>Working Towards National Quality Standard</i> (regulation 60(2)).	If an education and care service has a rating for each quality area stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> that is <i>Meeting National Quality Standard</i> or <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i> but does not satisfy the requirements of regulation 62 for an overall <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i> rating, the overall rating of the service is to be <i>Meeting National Quality Standard</i> (regulation 61(2)).	<p>The overall rating of an education care service is to be <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i> if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The education and care service has an <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i> rating for all quality areas stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i>; or The education and care service has: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – An <i>Exceeding National Quality Standard</i> rating for 4 or more quality areas stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> at least 2 of which are among the following quality areas: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> educational program and practice relationships with children collaborative partnerships with families and communities leadership and service management, and – a <i>Meeting National Quality Standard</i> rating for each other quality area stated in the <i>National Quality Standard</i> (regulation 62(3)).

* Services with an overall rating of *Meeting National Quality Standard* may have a rating of *Exceeding National Quality Standard* in a number of quality areas.

Further information

For further information on the assessment and rating process services can view the *Guide to Developing a Quality Improvement Plan*, the *Guide to the National Quality Standard* and the *National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating Instrument*. Authorised officers from state and territory regulatory authorities use the instrument to document the assessment and rating of a service. This document also forms the template for the final report to the service.

Services can also view the *Assessment and Rating chapter of the Operational Policy Manual for the Regulatory Authorities* which guides authorised officers in the assessment and rating of services.

Your notes
