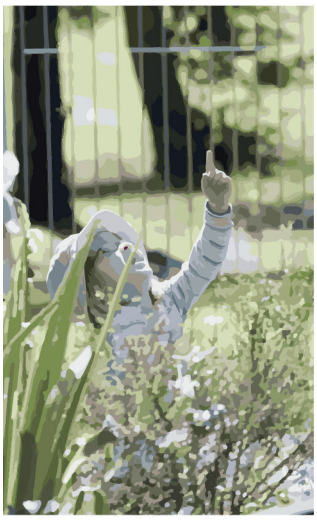

Stories of assessment

PSC National Alliance

Thank you
to all the education and care services
who shared from their stories of assessment
and rating visit.

The Professional Support Coordinator (PSC) is an initiative funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) under the Inclusion and Professional Support Program.

Feedback and queries should initially be directed to the Professional Support Coordinator in your region. Further information can be sought by contacting DEEWR.

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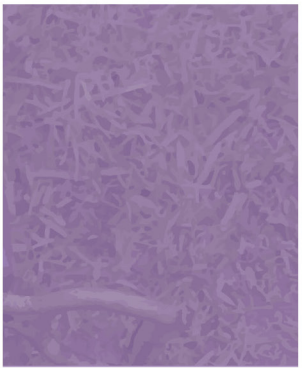


A centre-based service

for children birth to 12 years - semi-rural location

Can you tell us about your assessment visit?

The day started with a tour around the centre which allowed an opportunity for us to express what is unique about us and to introduce the educators to the assessors. Nerves were apparent for all parties involved at this point.

One person moved around the building while the other assessor remained in the office most of the day as support.

On the first day the assessors spent approximately an hour in each of the rooms. They observed the lunch routine, nappy routine and moved down to the OSHC program at about 3pm.

The second day the assessors started by observing the before school care program then moved to the Long Day Care rooms again. It was on the second day that some pre-arranged time was spent in the office with the director and her support person. This time was spent talking about the management side of things in particular areas 6 and 7. Included in the discussion was; governance of the service, mentoring, staff professional learning and appraisals, management of roster, policies, workplace health and safety and staff files. This was also an opportunity for the assessors to ask any questions about anything they had not been able to observe.

On the third day the assessors observed educators meet and greet children and families and the early morning transitions. There was time spent in the kitchen area looking at menus and gathering evidence. Assessors also spent time in the programming sessions with educators asking questions of them both at this time and in the room.

There was surprise at how little time was spent looking at paperwork such as indoor/outdoor checklists.

As a team, how did you prepare for the assessment visit?

The educators utilised staff meetings to explore and evaluate each other's rooms and white boarded reflective questions which in turn fed into the *Quality Improvement Plan*. The white board proved to be a great tool for some of the quieter staff and it also gave people time to think a little longer and deeper about practice. The director also held a one on one meeting with each educator, bringing in the lunch cover half an hour earlier to facilitate this.

The director shared with educators a reflection on practice and the journey on a weekly basis.

Questionnaires were sent to families which gave the service a different perspective; were they meeting the client's requirements?

How were staff and educators feeling prior undergoing assessment?

By the time the visit rolled around the team was feeling confident, they felt they had worked very hard and made a lot of positive changes.

How are staff and educators feeling post your assessment visit?

After the assessment visit was complete the team all went off to dinner together to celebrate!!
At times throughout the process there was a recurring question in educators minds *"Was it enough? Was it going well or not?"* This question remained at the end of the visit as there is only limited feedback given on completion of the visit compared to the report received at the end of the visit in the previous quality assurance system.

What advice would you give to other services to prepare for assessment?

Something that the director felt they may do differently next time, would be to spend more time with the assessor on the initial tour around the service, elaborating on strengths and processes.

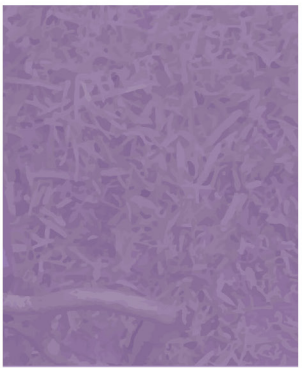
It was felt that a key strategy that they will continue to build on was 'making learning visible on the wall'. They will also continue to reflect at staff meetings and hold one on one ½ hourly meetings; this was seen as a good opportunity for everyone to be heard and feel valued.

What would they change? For ongoing practice and service delivery this will be better answered when the final report is received and they can use this as a factor in their reflection for improvement.

A change the director would make for the assessment visit would be to be more aware of individual educators need for support on the day; maybe staying a little closer to give them more confidence.

Important factors the director would like to share with others undergoing the process:

- Be confident;
- Know your stuff;
- Be prepared;
- Be open minded as it is a very different process than the previous quality system;
- It was good to have a debrief (going out to dinner as a team) after the process; and
- Do what you do and do it well.



A centre-based service

for children 2 to 5 years - located 10km from a capital city

Story 2

Can you tell us about your assessment visit?

The service is new and had not been through the previous accreditation system as a team, though there were members that had been through all or part of that process at other services they had previously worked for.

The director felt the visit earlier in the year by the Authorised Officer focusing on prescribed information and the *Quality Improvement Plan* was supportive.

Leading up to the assessment the team felt confident and very prepared. They were striving for exceeding. A conversation with the Regulatory Authority leading up to the visit did put this goal into some perspective and they were aware that with the bar for quality being raised that a 'working towards' decision could also be a reality.

To prepare for the visit the service engaged an early year's consultant through PSC who spent time at the service with educators supporting them to identify strengths and needs which enabled them to prioritise goals and devise a plan of action. A professional learning session on reflective practice and some one on one mentoring followed. The team also participated in professional learning on articulating practice. The service found this an exceptionally valuable exercise.

Staff meetings which extended to dinner afterwards contributed to building a strong team, increasing collegiality, trust and respect.

The Educational Leader works on the floor in the ratio, as does the Director. These leaders of the service have a strong commitment to the service philosophy; it is important to them that all educators in the team buy into this philosophy and have complete respect for the children. Leaders are present to consistently relay corrective feedback and guide practice. Although there is a niggling thought that there is a possibility this could be interpreted as nagging, they feel that ultimately the outcomes for children are more important. The understanding of why there are consistent reminders about practice was also addressed through the professional learning on reflective practice; building trust, communicating honestly and critically assessing each other's practice.

Articulating practice was also a focus of professional learning for all members of the team.
It was important to this service that all members of the team were on board for all learning opportunities and contributed to the team. Butchers paper was placed on the wall in the staff room and educators asked to record what they felt the service was good at and what they needed to work on. This assisted in determining the direction of learning.

During the assessment visit there were understandably nerves, though it was noted that this appeared to be true for everyone including the assessors. An example of this was at the beginning of the first day there was a bit of 'standing in the doorway'.

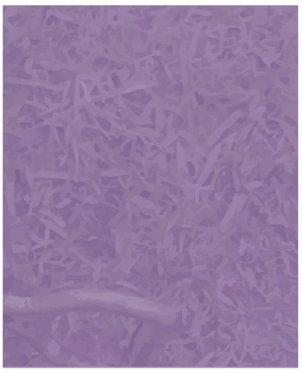
When the educational leader was articulating aspects of practice, in particular documentation she was unsure if she was giving enough evidence in the answers to the assessors. On reflection she wondered if she had specifically linked her answers to the standards would this have streamlined the process?

This was a recurring theme from all of the educators throughout the process, due to the limited amount of feedback that is given. Educators reported that they were unsure if they were giving enough information or the information that was being sought when answering questions.

There was a feeling that as a service they wanted to show more, tell more, and share more of the curriculum with the assessor. Perhaps this stemmed from the amount of evidence being collected from observation of practice rather than the experience they may have had with the previous system.

What advice would you give to other services to prepare for assessment?

The strategy that the service felt served them best and that they would advise others going through the assessment process to adopt - You should strive for your practice to be the best it can be every day for children.



A family day care service

regionally located 380 km from a capital city

Can you tell us about your assessment visit?

We had two assessors for our assessment visit and we were surprised by how nervous they seemed at the beginning. The first few hours were quite full on, with the assessors going through lots of paperwork. They asked a lot of specific questions and spent a lot of time asking questions about our recruitment and induction processes. They also asked lots of questions about our approach to programming and documentation with the EYLF.

They spent a few hours with the Approved Provider going through governance management information, then spent time with myself (the FDC manager), the Educational Leader, and then with our administrative staff.

We were really surprised by the level of knowledge that the assessors had of our QIP, they referred to it quite often during the assessment visit. They were very interested in our philosophy and how we came about developing it. They asked lots of questions around the statements in our philosophy.

Then they went out into the field – they spent a total of 3 days visiting educators. The assessors visited an educator in each postcode. The assessors had already established their own list of educators that they wanted to visit. They visited a range of educators with 2 years, 5 years, 12 years and 15 years' experience.

With each of the educators that they visited, the assessors made them feel at ease and they were also very respectful of the children. This was an area that we gave our feedback on after the assessment visits were completed and the assessor's response was that it was important to them because they were not only visiting a service, but also the educator's home. They asked each educator targeted questions – not all the same.

Some examples of the questions they asked were:

- How do we get families input? How do we disseminate information to them?
- Questions on how the educators reflect and document. The assessors gave really positive feedback on how impressed with how embedded the EYLF was in the educators

- How does the educator manage an injured child and the reporting process?
- Enrolment process – how do educators receive children into their care?
- How does the educator handle a complaint?
- How to they manage to maintain adequate supervision?
- How do the educators encourage healthy eating?
- Questions around practice such as managing safe storage of medication;
- How often does the educator receive a visit from management?
- How is the service philosophy reflected in the educators practice?
- How is sustainability practiced within each service?

During the assessment visit the assessors explained that they wouldn't provide any feedback to us unless there was a compliance issue that needed to be addressed immediately.

However, after the visits were completed, I did receive a phone call from the assessors just calling to clarify some areas to get more in depth details.

As a team, how did you prepare for the assessment visit?

In preparing for the assessment visit, we made sure that we visited the educators a couple of times, this was more to prepare the children for the visit, so that they would feel comfortable with additional adults in their environment. We also wanted to make sure that the educators would feel confident in answering questions about their practices.

The main area that we focused on with our educators was training around the EYLF. Each of the educators participated in three training sessions on the EYLF, because we felt that this was an area that we really wanted the educators to develop their confidence in.

How were staff and educators feeling prior undergoing assessment?

We were all a bit nervous about the assessment visit, mainly because we had such a short time to get prepared. We felt a lot of pressure (being one of the first to have to submit our QIP). Even though we were confident in our practices we were unsure about what our overall rating would be. Even up until we finally received the report we were not 100% confident of the result.

Were there aspects of the visit that you feel you will be better prepared for next time?

No, not at all – I think we were as prepared as we could possibly have been and wouldn't have done anything differently. We were pleasantly surprised by how respectful the assessors were with the children. They would interact with them, but also stand back and observe. They actually complemented the educator's interactions with the children really well.

What was key to demonstrating to the assessor that you were complying with the National Regulations and demonstrating the Standards?

I think the key for us was that the educators were confident in their practices and were able to articulate it. With everything that we included in our QIP – we knew that we had the evidence to back it up. Our QIP tells a story about our service – it has been written in more of a narrative format. We were also able to include the feedback from our families, as we regularly survey our families. We included their positive comments and also included the areas for improvement.

The feedback from the assessors was that they were very impressed with how well the EYLF and sustainability practices were embedded in each of the services. They were very impressed with the way that our educators documented the program and even took copies of some of their documentation.

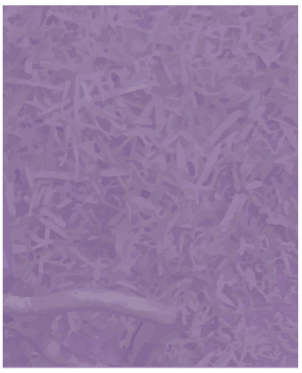
They also commented on how consistently the educators implemented their routines with their children and this really showed through the interactions that the educators had with the children in their care.

How are staff and educators feeling post your assessment visit?

We are all feeling very relieved and also very proud of our achievements. It has reaffirmed what we already knew and it is fantastic to finally get the recognition for the quality of the practice/care that all of our educators have with our children and families. We had a little celebration last week with all of our educators!

What advice would you give to other services to prepare for assessment?

I think that the best advice I would give to other services preparing for their assessment would be to make sure that you know your service and know your service well. I think it is really important also to make sure that you if you say that you do something, that you have the evidence to back it up, and also that you have identified goals that are real and achievable and that you can demonstrate that you are working towards achieving them.



A family day care service

regionally located 7 km from a capital city

Story 4

Can you tell us about your assessment visit?

On the day of assessment the assessor arrived at the head office and three family day care educators were selected by the assessors in consultation with the scheme, endeavouring to cover a sample of the ages and types of care offered by the scheme.

The assessors spent the time with the educators in their homes and following them (in their own car) when they were transporting; picking up or dropping off children from home or school. The educators reported that they felt a lot more comfortable than they had expected, and where they had feared that maybe the assessor would be imposing, in reality they came to see it as an opportunity to show what they do, why they do it and how much value they place on the service they provide for families and children. The scheme feels they provide a service that is unique to their context and were eager to share this with the assessors.

As a team, how did you prepare for the assessment visit?

To prepare for the assessment visit, compulsory meetings were held every Saturday. Educators made this commitment to the process and engaged in collaborative conversation and explored the practical application of the learning frameworks, quality standards and regulations. Newsletters were distributed to the educators every 2-3 months.

How were staff and educators feeling prior undergoing assessment?

Getting closer to the assessment educators became anxious. The scheme addressed specific concerns of the educators, putting support strategies in place i.e. educators with English as a second language were offered a translator for the day if they were chosen to be assessed. When the time came for the assessment they felt prepared and there were no surprises.

What was key to demonstrating to the assessor that you were complying with the National Regulations and demonstrating the Standards?

The self-assessment and resulting *Quality Improvement Plan* had been a good guiding tool.

How are staff and educators feeling post your assessment visit?

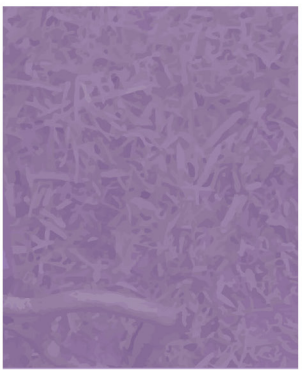
After the visit the educators felt exhausted and excited, they also felt more confident and validated in their practices. The scheme felt some of the key aspects for success were thorough paperwork, following policies and procedures and for field workers to check in on this consistently over time.

What advice would you give to other services to prepare for assessment?

The scheme is waiting for the draft report to feedback on and the final report to use as input for any future changes to practice or service delivery, though they fully believe that everyone always needs to improve.

The schemes advice to others would be:

- To spend time with educators explaining and monitoring requirements;
- Ensure documentation is correct, corresponding and contextual to your educators; and
- Focus on the outcome. There seems to be fewer questions to be asked of the educator if the assessor can observe the outcomes.



An outside school hours care service

located 11 km from a capital city

Can you tell us about your assessment visit?

We had our assessor attend our after school program on for an afternoon and before school care the following morning. The assessor then stayed for about an hour after the morning session to discuss what she had seen, etc.

As a team, how did you prepare for the assessment visit?

We have 5 members on staff and fortunately we have worked together for quite a few years so our preparation was quite easy. We have been through the assessment process and a couple of spot checks in the past so to be honest this process is more relaxed and less stressful.

Our assessor was very friendly and relaxed which put us all at ease. I had spoken with her before the visit and she explained the process and then a follow up letter arrived outlining what would happen. The main point highlighted was that the staff would be asked “Why are you doing this/that?" Really, all this means is that you have to justify why you have a set activity, etc. It has to be driven by the child. Our program is initiated by the child but I didn't have written documentation to support this.

The assessor was very helpful in suggesting options for us to cover this area. We have since sent home a survey for all children and parents to fill in with ideas and suggestions for activities plus a checklist of what we now offer. I would have sent over 60 home and we have received 8 back. This isn't unexpected at all and part of the reason why I didn't bother but there must be ‘proof’ that parents and children have been given the opportunity to have a say. I had spoken with my staff and fortunately we didn't have to change anything prior to the visit.

Once again the most important thing is to make sure that the children initiate everything. We had an Olympic Games afternoon organised and we had posters within the centre which children had written on suggesting games so we had used this to set our activities. One of the children asked if we could swap one for another and instead of saying "no" I suggested he go and ask all the children and then we could decide. This was given a big tick of approval from the assessor.

How were staff and educators feeling prior undergoing assessment?

I believe we were well prepared as the staff have worked here together for years. We told the children about the visit and made sure they understood how important this was for us. We went through our routines with them - roll call, handwashing, etc. and talked about how important it was to stick with these routines - basically making sure they all were aware.

I believe this was really important and we did have the children asking us about the assessment. There was only one area that I hadn't thought about. I have 2 young males employed, who do an absolutely fantastic job playing sport games every afternoon. One young male was asked, *"What would you do if there was a situation that needed reporting?"* (mandatory reporting). He had done the course but as Director I haven't followed up with the process of what to do. He did panic a bit and the assessor gave him 2 options - phone or tell me. Probably something he would do if the situation arose but I hadn't thought to go through any of this with him. Otherwise I think we were prepared well enough just by doing what we always do.

Were there aspects of the visit that you feel you will be better prepared for next time?

Our assessor went through the standards with us and she did a lot of observing and note taking throughout the visits. We didn't specifically have to justify how we were meeting the standards. The key is definitely making sure that you have clearly stated on your QIP what you have not done yet.

How are staff and educators feeling post your assessment visit?

To be honest we were relieved once it was done but haven't really talked about it since. We are yet to receive our feedback. The assessor did say that we rated highly on our interaction with the children and parents, which to me is the most important aspect but I expect us to fall into the 'working towards' category as there are still a few policies to be written, etc.

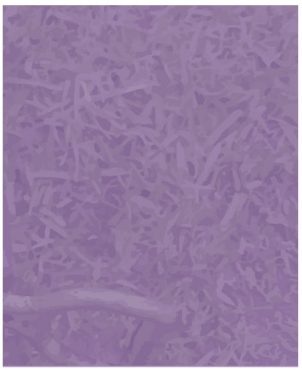
What was key to demonstrating to the assessor that you were complying with the National Regulations and demonstrating the Standards?

The best thing we did to prepare for the visit was to work as a team and inform the children about the assessment and what it all meant. We will continue to operate as we are but I know as Director I now have a lot more regular paperwork to do to stay on top of all expectations.

What advice would you give to other services to prepare for assessment?

My best advice to others is to make sure you have paperwork to justify everything you do. Send surveys home even if you know you may not get results. Make it obvious that the children have a big part of the program. We have big pieces of paper on the walls for the children to write their ideas onto. The children help serve the food and then help do the dishes as well. Every child has a 96 page A4 book for them to write/ draw in. We also take a lot of photos to put into this book.

As for their personal learning program, this book is part of it then I have a *'What about me'* sheet for them to fill in and on the back the staff can write comments about this child and this is kept in a file if parents wish to see it. This is one area that I believe takes a lot of my time and also there will be children that will take home a blank book at the end of the year because it is their choice to play outside or even inside but not to do what they consider schoolwork. Once again it is their choice!



A centre-based service

located 27 km from a capital city

Story 6

Can you tell us about your assessment visit?

As the first service in our region to undergo the new Assessment and Rating process under the NQS, we were diving into the unknown. Our expectations of this new process and all that we had heard and read caused some excitement among our team, in that what we were doing day to day would be the real grounding for the assessment.

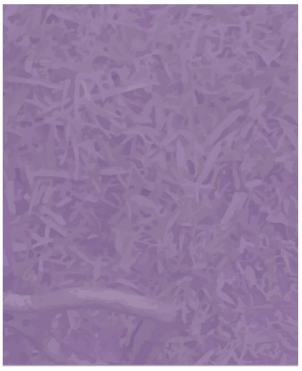
The assessors showed their commitment to the whole process from the moment we received first notification of submitting our QIP. They answered all our questions, and were keen to share and collaborate with us as the assessment progressed.

How were staff and educators feeling prior undergoing assessment?

During the visit, the educators felt completely at ease, and were easily able to share their knowledge and practices. It was refreshing to note that paperwork and policies were referred to as a confirmation of practices, rather than being used as the foundation for the assessment. The assessors also worked closely from our QIP and were able to validate areas we had identified as our strengths, as well as see the work we had done towards areas in our QIP. Having officers come to assess us, who we already had a relationship with, made it very easy to communicate, and the ability to be able to speak with them before, during and after the visits was refreshing.

How are staff and educators feeling post your assessment visit?

Our summary of the process... we felt validated and recognised and WE LOVED IT! Well done to all involved!



A centre-based service

regionally located 1,300 km from a capital city

Can you tell us about your assessment visit?

Like many educators out there, we began the process of the assessment visit with some uncertainty. Although we have undergone years of validation under NCAC, this was a new process incorporating many changes and was a new challenge which basically, scared the pants off us all! But we were also eager to go through the process and have the uncertainty eased, so although we were scared, we were determined to give it a go on the basis that we were to be the 'trailblazers' into the new world of assessment within early childhood education and care.

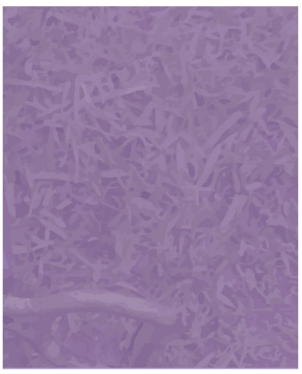
The lead up to the big days was stressful due to the unknown, as the NQF has many elements for which the assessor has to observe, discuss and sight. Over the many months leading into the assessment, we realised many of these elements in the NQS and EYLF were open ended, allowing our individuality but with the opposing facet that therefore, the interpretation and outcome could be influenced by the lens of which they are viewed.

The day arrived and so did our assessor. She began the first day of her two day visit and you could immediately see that it was going to be a different process from the validation visits of old. The assessor spoke to us like we were people that she was interested in and she shared information about her hobbies and her family with the educators that helped them relax. She asked questions in a non-threatening manner, joked around, shared ideas and stories, and even explained to the educators, that by changing something ever so slightly would bring about a change of result. Like what we do with the children, focusing on the strengths, the assessor spoke to and praised the educators for what they were doing well and gently guided them by offering suggestions for areas they weren't so strong in. As management of the centre, we thought this was great as many times in our roles, we are told by validators of what had been observed occurring or not occurring in a room, but the actual educators involved were never told. The change in this procedure was good and gave ownership to those in the rooms straight away.

The assessor spent a large amount of time in each room before moving on to the other over the 2 days. The educators felt at ease and talked freely with her. For the afternoon of day 2, the assessor spent time talking to the Director and Coordinator about many of the elements within documents - policies/procedures/routines/ community involvement/sustainability and much more. We had already organised a lot of paperwork that we would normally send into the Regulatory Authority for licensing under the old system to be available, so we offered for the assessor to take this with her which allowed her more time to talk to us and view the practices and procedures happening in the centre. The assessor rang us once after the visit to clarify a procedure, again embodying the strengths based partnership that the NQS has promoted.

What advice would you give to other services to prepare for assessment?

On reflection, our educators in the centre enjoyed the process and wondered why they were afraid in the first place. Many are looking forward to building on this initial relationship with our assessor, where she can come back and see improvements and growth in their own and the centres practices. It is certainly exciting times ahead and from our experience, we feel that it is something we can all look forward to with a little more confidence.



An outside school hours care service

regionally located 130 km from a capital city

Story 8

Can you tell us about your assessment visit?

The assessors did two days at the service and had a one hour conversation with the coordinator of the program before the session. The process wasn't as daunting as we expected. We were bombarded with a lot of questions that could be a bit tricky when you have one ear and eye on the children and trying to answer the assessors.

The assessors were focussed on asking questions and gathering as much information as they could in such a short time. Management and leadership appeared to be the big areas as well as the partnerships with the school, the program and management. They discussed possible staffing issues, medical forms and medical action plans, ensuring that children's records were complete and the nominated supervisor and the educational leader letters were stored on file.

They referred to the QIP throughout the time they were at the service. There was sufficient time for discussion during the process and the assessors compiled questions after the first day and asked them the following day the educators felt there were a lot of questions.

The assessors were aware the educators were nervous and acknowledged that fact. They allowed the staff time to answer questions and attend to children if needed. We found them very supportive.

What advice would you give to other services to prepare for assessment?

As a team we were well supported by management. We talked about the possible questions the assessors would ask and discussed areas that we could challenge. We talked about the QIP and ensured that all educators had an understanding of the content. We laid down some team rules that if you didn't know the answer to a question that you would answer with 'Can I think about that for a minute and get back to you?' and that it is ok to take time to answer questions.

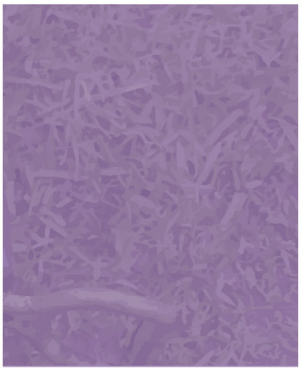
The service was very prepared but some of the processes weren't clear to educators such as: when a parent enquires about placing their child in the service, what questions are asked, who do they ring, what goes in the enrolment pack and what happens after the family has completed all the paperwork?

How were staff and educators feeling prior undergoing assessment?

Very nervous! The program had gone through under NCAC Quality Assurance a couple of times previously and knew what to expect but of course with a new system there is always an element of uncertainty.

What advice would you give to other services to prepare for assessment?

Be ready for the observations the assessors take of the educators interacting with the children, the discussions they had with the children and the information you have displayed in the service. The key is not to hide anything and have all your information displayed or available so the assessors can flick through it or read it on the wall. It is better to have lots of information than not enough because then you can talk about it and explain the process to get the point across.



From a Regulatory Authority

Can you tell us about your training?

In May 2012 education and care assessors attended the Assessment and Rating (A&R) training across the state.

We participated in training with our lead assessors. The training included review of the *National Quality Standard* as well as the opportunity to view vignettes of practice. We learnt to start focusing our NQF lens - to ensure that we were all rating what we were seeing at the same level. We also learnt about the policies relating to the A&R process such as inconsistent quality and minor adjustments.

Intensive testing followed, where we watched several 20 minute videos, gathered evidence, read background information sheets and then rated each standard according to what we had seen, heard and read.

We are proud to say all of our assessors passed the test in the first round.

Can you tell us about the assessment and rating process?

The first of our A&R processes were initiated in March, so *Quality Improvement Plans* started flowing in by May. At this stage we began reading the QIPs and reviewing service history. We began making phone contact with services about 2 weeks prior to their visit to make a time to arrive and any other housekeeping issues, and answered any questions the service might have had.

On the days of our first visits in June, we were all quite nervous and a bit anxious about being in the service and employing our new skills in real life. It was reassuring for us to have one of our colleagues come along and be our support for the visit as it assisted to have someone to discuss things with and a second pair of eyes to help gather meaningful evidence.

Each service is very different in how they provide education and care for children, and we are developing the skills and questioning techniques we need to gather the evidence we require to be able to rate the service accurately. We are all working on developing strategies for not distracting from service's delivery of programs, making sure we choose our times wisely for talking with educators and causing minimal disruption in rooms. It will take time for us, as with services, to be able to comfortably and consistently be using and understanding new language and concepts.

We are all beginning to find our own ways of gathering evidence. Some assessors are using the printed instrument and writing, others are using an iPad and typing and some are using cameras, voice recorders and smart pens to complement their written evidence.

The end of the visit is proving to be very different for us under this new system. We are unable to give the service an indication of a rating until we have gone back to the office and pulled all of the evidence together and assessed our findings against the descriptors in the A&R instrument. We are often seeing lovely services with fantastic things happening in the program - however we are unable to express these things at the end of the visit as it may give the service a false impression of their rating. It is important to remember that the visit is not the end of the 20 week Assessment and Rating Process; there are still several steps to work through prior to a rating being given.

We as assessors are also on a path of continuous improvement, and like everyone else, we will critically reflect on our practice as assessors before our future A&R visits.

Notes