Background to the study

Following the Primetime Breach of Trust programme, a commitment was made by the HSE Child & Family Services and the Department of Children & Youth Affairs to publish inspection reports online.

Early Childhood Ireland wanted to ensure that this happens in an effective, transparent and fair manner. We conducted an online survey to assess the issues involved for our members.

In total 1,078 early childhood care and education services replied to this survey with a good geographic spread across the country.

- While 36% had an inspection this year; for 39% their last inspection was in 2012; 16% had their inspection in 2011; 6% in 2010; with the remainder having theirs in 2009, 2008 and prior to that.

- Only 34% of respondents submitted a right of reply in their most recent inspection report.

- 75% say that if given the opportunity to submit their right to reply pre their inspection report going on line they would.

- 82% of crèches and preschools surveyed welcome inspections going on line. The comments (over 450 comments were given) indicate that even more early childhood care and education providers would welcome the reports going online if:
1. The inspection process and reporting system included a 'right of reply' including follow up visits and amended reports.
2. Distinctions were made in reports between major and minor noncompliance.
3. There was greater focus in the reports on quality of care and well-being of the children.

**Profile of Survey Respondents**
Of the 1078 Early Childhood Care and Education Services that were accounted for in the survey, **39.2%** were fulltime services, **76%** ran sessional services and **25%** ran a part time service. The figure below graphically depicts the breakdown of services who participated in the survey.
The table below shows that the majority of services that completed the survey came from Dublin City with 126 (12%), County Cork with 86 (8%), Fingal with 78 (7%) and Kildare with 68 (6%). Every county was represented in the survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Carlow</th>
<th>Cavan</th>
<th>Clare</th>
<th>Cork city</th>
<th>Cork county</th>
<th>Donegal</th>
<th>Dublin city</th>
<th>Dun Laoghaire</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.02%</td>
<td>1.39%</td>
<td>1.95%</td>
<td>1.95%</td>
<td>7.98%</td>
<td>3.43%</td>
<td>11.97%</td>
<td>3.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fingal</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.24%</td>
<td>1.39%</td>
<td>3.80%</td>
<td>3.62%</td>
<td>6.31%</td>
<td>1.86%</td>
<td>2.41%</td>
<td>0.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limerick</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.25%</td>
<td>1.11%</td>
<td>3.06%</td>
<td>2.04%</td>
<td>5.94%</td>
<td>1.11%</td>
<td>1.39%</td>
<td>1.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roscommon</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.02%</td>
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<td>1.30%</td>
<td>1.58%</td>
<td>3.71%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wicklow</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.9%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Year of last inspection

While 36% had an inspection this year; for 39% their last inspection was in 2012; 16% had their inspection in 2011; 6% in 2010; with the remainder having their in 2009, 2008 and prior to that.
Do you know that inspection reports will be on line within next 3 weeks?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>90.1%</td>
<td>971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Did you know that it is your 'most recent report' that will be online?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td>923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Did you submit a right of reply to your most recent report?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
<td>715</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If given the opportunity would you submit a right of reply before this report goes on line?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>74.6%</td>
<td>804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Findings

We can see from the tables above that most people were aware that the inspection reports were going online, and that it would be their most recent report. If given the opportunity 75% said they would submit a right of reply before their report goes online.

82% of survey respondents welcome the reports going online, but the majority of comments suggest that those who answered no would be happy for the reports to go online but were cautious in light of the current inadequacies and inconsistencies of the inspection process and reporting system. The majority of comments indicated that there needs to be more emphasis on the quality of care and well being of the child in the inspection process, rather than a focus on the more structural service details, administration and regulation. Many survey respondents suggested that there should be more differentiation in the reports between minor and major non compliances, as the seriousness and importance of the non compliance differs significantly, i.e. ‘I agree they should be online but I think the inspectors and process of inspection needs to be reviewed and amended accordingly’ Many of the respondents also commented that the inspection methods and reporting were inconsistent between counties, and that the content may be hard to understand for parents who aren’t familiar with the reporting and inspection process and regulations. Some of the early childhood care and education providers in the survey hadn’t been inspected in 4 years, and 25% hadn’t had an inspection since 2011 or before, which means that their service may have changed/improved since then and the report doesn’t give a current up to date picture, so they may be at a disadvantage.

There were over 450 comments provided, these are summarised into the following major themes:

1. Quality
2. Right to reply  
3. Major versus minor compliance  
4. Transparency, standardisation and an accessible format  
5. Length of time since last inspection

**Quality**

The most prevalent theme from the comments was that the emphasis of the inspection process and reports should be on the quality, care and well-being of the child and not just on structural and safety tick boxes.

“We were not inspected on regulation 5 as there was no pre-school officer in our area at the time of our inspection and this is the point we would clarify in a right to reply. (We were inspected by 2 environmental health officers)”

“Inspections should be about the quality and care of the service we provide and not about a bit of dust behind a radiator or a cobweb in a corner of a ceiling. The inspectors should be from the ‘Childcare’ Profession who understand the Early Years Curriculum and the Siolta Quality. They should also listen to the explanations given and not just mark a service non-compliant - they just tick boxes without understanding the quality of the services”

“The inspection reports focus mainly on the facility- size and structure, equipment, first aid and fire safety and qualifications all of which are important and relevant. They do not reflect the level of care children receive in each facility and so can’t accurately report on this which in my experience is what is of paramount importance and concern to parents”. 

“The inspection reports don’t reflect in any way the Care and love and personal attention given to children in a home from environment. Most parents would want their children to receive love and tender care most of all in a safe and stimulation environment and the reports does not reflect any of these areas. There is more emphasis on structure and regulations than the love care and fun children need at such a young age and play is so important. A file full of the best paper work with all the boxes ticked made look great but useless and doesn’t mean the children are receiving loving good quality care. More qualification and
regulations want change this. A person working in childcare needs to have a suitable personality, and love children. The wages are very poor so it's not for money one works in this business. Don't feel reports going on line will make any difference”.

“I think the reports as they stand do not give a fair representation of the quality of care given to children so although I welcome them going on line I think the format needs amending”.

Qualifications of Inspectors

Ideally the inspectorate should include early year’s professionals that can recognise and interpret Regulation 5. For example under current inspection a blown light bulb is a non-compliance which hardly carries the same relevance or importance of the latest horrific events displayed on the breach of trust programme.

“I don’t agree, at all, with the current inspections process. Send me an educator to evaluate me as an educator ... Not a nurse. I have a degree in early childhood education and a primary teaching degree ... I wouldn’t walk into a hospital to assess a nurse!”

“I don’t welcome reports going online under the present circumstances. Inspections being carried out by health nurses and environmental health officers, not including early childhood specialists or similar. We need inspectors to have qualification in Ecce thus emphasis would not be placed on petty things but rather on what is important to the holistic development of the child”.

The inspection reports need to focus on the positives as well as the negatives

“In Ofsted good practice is commended, This is not the case in Ireland only inadequacies are highlighted. Also quality is subjective and true quality cannot simply be judged by a tick list”.

“A grading system needs to be introduced for this especially now we have Aistear as a baseline”.

“I agree they should be online but I think the inspectors and process of inspection needs to be reviewed and amended
accordingly”.

“Also acknowledgements of good practice are not documented on reports so again it reads as a very negative document”.

Right to Reply

The comments indicated that the majority of services were happy for the reports to go online, but that they should be given a 'Right to Reply' to go with the reports.

“Although I replied to my report which was loaded with inaccuracies, no written amendment of the report was issued. The result of a follow up visit was never confirmed in writing either. I have no faith in the veracity of the reports in my area and am willing to sue the HSE if I am slandered or libeled in the publishing of the original report without amendments”.

“I am happy the reports are going on-line but do not agree that when non-compliances have been rectified with proof to the HSE this is not being published. Therefore the service is on-line as non-compliant until the next inspection”.

“I have fixed any issues raised in my last report but didn’t do a formal reply to confirm. Had I known the reports were going online I would have made a formal reply? Putting the reports up without replies from services gives a total unbalanced view of the situation. Plus, the reports cannot cover the most important aspects of childcare like patience, kindness, fun, understanding etc. They only give a snapshot of one day or part of one day. Right to reply, must also focus on quality, The report must be transparent”.

“I think it is only a matter of time before someone sues the HSE as this type of information, if incorrect, has the potential to seriously damage a service ie. In most of our reports over the years there has been ‘contraventions’ that have been factually incorrect eg. They told us the sleep room was the incorrect temperature (turns out they were incorrect in the recommended temperature ranges) this despite the fact that there was no children sleeping in the sleep room. We replied with the correct information and got a reluctant re-issued report. I hope everyone challenges reports that are incorrect”.
Major versus minor compliance

A number of early childhood care and education providers were concerned that there is no distinction in the reports between a major and minor non-compliance.

“Current format of report reads very badly where a relatively minor occurrence reads as non-compliant. It will be hard for parents to distinguish the level of seriousness re non-compliance”.

“Breaches in inspection reports should be listed as /minor / moderate / major to indicate level of severity of non-compliance”.

“I wish the reports were more detailed for parents to show that non-compliance are non-child related, e.g. light bulb failure. I would also like all inspectors to be consistent”.

Timeframe

Some respondents suggested that a timeframe to correct non-compliance should be implemented and an updated report when this is done.

“Services should be given the opportunity to address minor non compliancy issues and this should be noted in the final report before it is published”.

“I do feel that services should be given a time frame to have the opportunity to correct any non-compliances and that this update/correction to the non-compliance should also be posted on the same report with the date that it was corrected. I also feel that there should be a clear explanation of non-compliance available on the report so that parents can clearly understand what the service was noted non-compliant for”.

“There must be a system put in place by the HSE to update the reports on line as soon as they have been submitted evidence
Online Inspection Reports

of correction of non-compliants rather than leaving them on-line until the next visit which could be another 2-3 years”.

“I only agree to this if people are given a specified time to rectify any non-compliance's and that they be included in the report”.

Transparency, standardisation and an accessible format

“While I welcome online reports I do feel that the reports need to be fair and assessed on set criteria where there is no room for personal opinion and where the questions on the report are not open to the inspectors personal interpretation which differs from inspector to inspector and from area to area”.

“Reports need to be written in a way that are accessible to parents. I would like it explained in a user friendly manner, suitable for parents to understand without having to refer to each section in the Child Care Regulations handbook”.

“Am hoping that the system is explained to people reading the reports as in some places (the service) they may be considered non-compliant for paperwork, but this doesn’t reflect the care for the children which is the main priority. I do agree that the paperwork is important but sometimes the children get forgotten in the process”.

“The layout of a report needs to be changed. It is not very user friendly”.

“I would be happy for future reports to go online if they are clear to parents and people who would not be familiar with the sector to understand properly. It should be made clear on the reports whether non-compliance is a minor or major infraction. Also a follow up report should be done and published so that the public can see that unintentional infractions are corrected. I am also concerned that I haven’t been inspected for 3 years. There have been a lot of changes in that time so I may not be up to standard on some but this is unintentional and I welcome inspections to keep me up to date. Parents may also choose to go to a facility that has a more recent inspection”.

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“Inspections should be the same countrywide and not depend on the individual inspector’s discretion”.

“ Transparency for parents is the best thing and reports online may help more parents to have confidence in their chosen childcare centre and feel free to ask more questions regarding the on-going care of their child”.

Length of time since last inspection

From the survey question on when respondents had last had an inspection above, we can see that 25% have not had an inspection since 2011 or before. This does not give a current up to date reflection of the service.

“Because it is nearly a year since my report I feel it is now not a true reflection on a small amount of the report. but overall I don’t have a problem with report going on line..”.

“I feel that it is unfair to be putting up our last report as it was in 2009. I feel that myself and my playschool has come a long way since 2009 and even though my inspection was ok at the time I think it should be a recent report that should be displayed”.

“The report only gives a snapshot of the service and never goes into detail on the type of care and education is given to children. Non compliance on issues like paint work and scuffed skirting boards are ridiculous”.

“I am also concerned that I haven’t been inspected for 3 years. There have been a lot of changes in that time so I may not be up to standard on some but this is unintentional and I welcome inspections to keep me up to date. Parents may also choose to go to a facility that has a more recent inspection”.

Other issues arising

More support needed

‘.. Also inspections need to be a support to each setting rather than something to be feared.’
'This industry urgently needs high quality, local accessible & affordable training, where people can continue to work & access a blend of part-time education for their FETAC level 7 this could assist with the development of a local infrastructure for the industry regarding mentors & tutors. We have 3 x Level 6 at present trapped due to these issues 'by circumstances'.

'Yes, it is time we were treated as co professionals and inspections were used as a support system to assist everyone be compliant not a stick to beat and berate providers who may be providing high quality experiences for children but omitted replacing a socket or not quite worded a policy to the inspectors liking. 86 percent mon compliance in Kildare implies really poor practice or perhaps an inspection system that needs serious overhauling. In Ofsted hood practice is commended this is not the case in Ireland only inadequacies are highlighted. Also quality is subjective and true quality cannot simply be judged by a tick list.'

Increase funding in the sector along with support for continuous training.

Online reports are a good thing

'I think it's great reports will be on line, it gives parents an opportunity to get a better idea of facility before they enrol their child.'

Confidentiality of past employees

I worry about the confidentiality of past employees as they are named in the report. Surely staff member's name's are to be allowed some confidentiality. Also I'm concerned that there has not been enough explanation to parents about the childcare regulations

A review of the system and a more cohesive approach is needed

Ireland is trying to run before it can walk, the workforce have gone from being Childcare .... to Educators & Carers in 3 years, yet we are open to an unannounced inspection. Disparity between the HSE's rulings & ECI rule of thumb can be worrying for providers & prove time consuming when legal matters are conflictive. I look forward to seeing a more cohesive approach towards resolving quality & development issues so that we can all learn together & share ownership.
I agree they should be online but I think the inspectors and process of inspection needs to be reviewed and amended accordingly

**Recommendations**
Every early childhood care and education provider knows that a strong partnership with parents is a vital part of their role as parents are the most important people in a child's life. Open communication with parents is crucial and we have strongly advised providers to share and explain their inspection reports with parents along with their ethos, curriculum and routine. The posting of inspection reports online has cut out this vital communication between providers and parents and we wanted to ensure that this happens in an effective, transparent and fair manner.