

Handbook on the External Review and Compliance of ChildCare Centres

Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE)

2023



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION, SPORT, YOUTH
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
DIRECTORATE FOR QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN EDUCATION

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DQSE	Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
DSWS	Department of Social Welfare Standards
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ERS	External Review Section
LRP	Legally Responsible Person
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment
MEYR	Ministry for Education, Sports, Youth, Research and Innovation
MFSS	Ministry for Family and Social Solidarity
POMA	Protection of Minors Act
QAD	Quality Assurance Department
RCS	Regulatory and Compliance Section

This handbook is designed to guide Childcare Centres through the various steps of the external review and licensing processes carried out by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE). These are informed by the principles outlined in key policy documents:

- [*A National Curriculum Framework for All \(2012\).*](#)
- [*Educators' Guide for Pedagogy and Assessment - Using a Learning Outcomes Approach: Toolkit for the Early Years Cycle \(2015\).*](#)
- [*National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services \(0-3 Years\) \(2021\).*](#)
- [*Registration Criteria for Early Childhood Education and Care Services \(0-3 Years\) \(2021\).*](#)
- [*A Quality Assurance Framework for Education in Malta \(0-16 years\) \(2023\).*](#)
- International research related to key elements of best practice in ECEC and quality assurance.

This handbook aims to answer various questions asked by service providers, parents and other stakeholders related to Childcare Centres. These include:

- Why are external review visits carried out?
- What are the core principles that guide the review team?
- What are the core values underpinning the external review visit?
- What is expected by the external review team from Childcare Centres?
- Who is the external review team?
- How is the external review visit carried out?
- How does a Childcare Centre obtain a license to operate?
- What is the procedure to lodge a complaint?
- How does a Childcare Centre obtain a license to operate?

Terminology

To support the fluency and readability of the handbook,

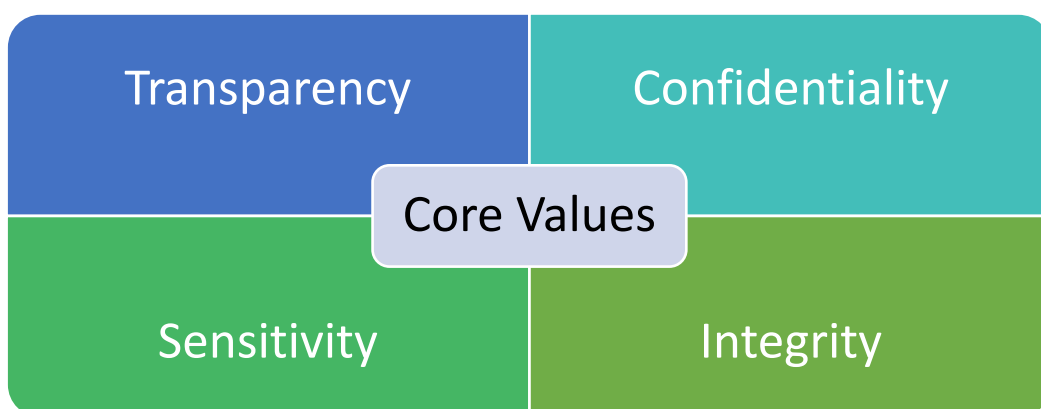
- *The term 'centre/s' is used throughout when referring to 'Childcare Centre/s.'*
- *'Babies', 'toddlers' and 'young children' are all referred to as 'children.'*
- *'Parents' and 'legal guardians' are referred to as 'parents'.*

External reviews visits are carried out to:

- Ensure that centres meet legislative and regulatory requirements.
- Provide an external evaluation of the quality of the service provision offered, according to the standards in the [National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services \(0-3 Years\) \(2021\)](#).
- Identify and affirm good practices in the quality of the learning and care provided.
- Drive improvement in the quality of the education and care provided.
- Support the centre's internal review process.
- Investigate complaints raised by stakeholders and the general public.

The officers of the DQSE are committed to a set of core values which permeate all processes and external review models. These include:

- Highest standards of professional conduct, integrity, and sensitivity during the whole process, acting in the children's best interest.
- Complete transparency and objectivity in all work processes and communications before, during and after the reviews.
- An ability to communicate in such a way as to engage all members of staff in a professional dialogue.
- Confidentiality throughout the whole review process.



An external review is effective when it is conducted in a spirit of collaboration and partnership between all members of staff of the centre and the review team. For this reason, the Legally Responsible Person (LRP), the centre manager, and childcare educators are expected to:

- Collaborate with the external reviewers during the various stages of the review process.
- Maintain an honest and positive relationship with the review team, based on mutual trust and respect.
- Engage in professional dialogue with the review team on matters relevant to the continuing improvement in the quality of the learning and care experiences of the children.
- Be committed to act on the outcomes of the external review report.

The external review is a joint exercise involving two officers from the DQSE:

a | A Compliance Officer from the Regulatory and Compliance Section (RCS) who evaluates Standards 1.1 – 1.6 of the [National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services \(0-3 Years\) \(2021\)](#).

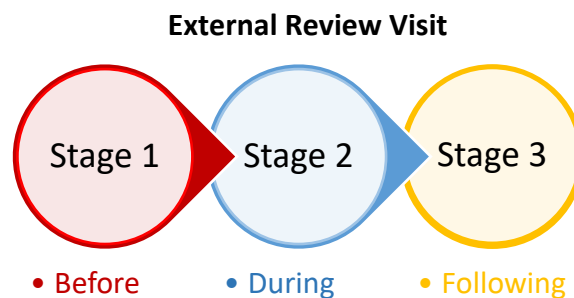
These standards are related to the *structural quality* of the centres and can be regulated and measured. Quality indicators of structural quality include staff qualifications and skills, children group size, the ratio of members of staff to children, health and safety requirements, and the policies, procedures and practices which bear a direct impact on the organisation of the centre.

b | An Education Officer from the External Review Section (ERS) who evaluates Standards 2.1 – 2.6 of the [National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services \(0-3 Years\) \(2021\)](#).

These standards are related to the *process quality* of the centres and have a direct influence on children's experiences, wellbeing, and development. Indicators of process quality include the relationships between members of staff and children, the integrated approach to learning and care, day-to-day pedagogical practices, and parental involvement.

It is expected that centres comply with the regulations and meet all standards.

The external review visit is conducted in three stages. Each of these stages is outlined in the sections below.



STAGE 1 | BEFORE THE EXTERNAL REVIEW VISIT

The LRP and/or centre manager of the centre receives an email from the RCS officer informing them that an unannounced external review visit will take place. Before the external review, the LRP is asked to submit a number of documents in preparation for the visit. In the meantime, the review team prepares for the visit by analysing documents/information about the centre. These include:

- Previous review reports.
- Registration/license details.
- Requested documents sent by the LRP/centre manager.
- Concerns/complaints received in the past.
- The centre's website (if available).
- Other relevant information.

STAGE 2 | DURING THE EXTERNAL REVIEW VISIT

An external review visit includes:

- An initial meeting between the LRP and/or the centre manager and the review team.
- A walk-through of the Childcare Centre.
- Reviewing any required documents.
- Observing and evaluating the quality of childcare provision.
- Filling in of the Business Inspection pre assessment form¹.
- Feedback session between the LRP and/or centre manager and the review team.

¹ Childcare Centres are subject to a Business Inspection. This inspection saves precious time both for the entities involved and for the business operators. Each inspectorate analyses the data received from the onsite inspection and gives a score and feedback. All the scores and feedback are presented in one consolidated report. DQSE officers are obliged to fill in the outcomes of the external review visit in the Business Inspection portal. Points are awarded for each standard in both the structure and the process quality, and an overall quality mark is awarded to the Childcare Centre after the completion of the external review visit.

AN INITIAL MEETING BETWEEN THE LRP AND/OR THE CENTRE MANAGER AND THE REVIEW TEAM

Upon arrival at the centre, reviewers present themselves and a short meeting is held to:

- Outline the review process and the structure of the visit.
- Gather information about staff absences and children present during the visit and any arising issues.
- Request available planning documents, daily routines and records of children's learning, progress, and development.
- Tackle any issues pending from pre-review desk work.

A WALK-THROUGH OF THE CHILDCARE CENTRE

The DQSE officers request the LRP or the centre manager to accompany them for a walk-through of the centre to familiarise themselves with the centre's environment.

REVIEWING ANY REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

The review team may request to see documents that support the day-to-day operation of the centre and the delivery of the learning programme. These can include the list of children attending the centre on the day of the visit, the list of registered children, evidence of planning, records of children's progress and development, and an outline of the daily routine. The review team also requests documents related to the Business Inspection process.

OBSERVING AND EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF CHILDCARE PROVISION

The review team observes and evaluates whether, and to what extent, the quality indicators of the standards below are being met:

- The Quality of the Learning Environment Standards 1.1 – 1.6
- The Quality of Learning and Care Standards 2.1 – 2.6

During their observations, members of the review team may wish to discuss any aspects related to both sets of standards with the various members of staff.

Photographs may be taken during the review visit to collect evidence.

FILLING IN OF THE BUSINESS INSPECTION DOCUMENT

The Compliance Officer fills in the Business Inspection template together with the LRP and/or centre manager. This is done to ensure compliance with legal, regulatory, and governmental requirements.

FEEDBACK SESSION BETWEEN THE LRP AND/OR CENTRE MANAGER AND THE REVIEW TEAM

The review team meets to discuss and consider the main findings from the observations and discusses their final judgements and conclusions.

The review team then holds a feedback session with the LRP and/or centre manager about the outcomes of the observations and provides them with an informed picture of where the centre stands at that point in time. Provision of feedback is an important part of the external review visit. It consists of:

- Communicating the main findings.
- Providing further opportunities for clarification.
- Discussing how the centre can improve.

This feedback helps to augment professional dialogue and facilitates the centre's professional reflection and evaluation. Both reviewers advise the LRP and/or centre manager on the way forward following the external review visit.

STAGE 3 | FOLLOWING THE EXTERNAL REVIEW VISIT

THE EXTERNAL REVIEW REPORTS

The review team compiles two reports after the visit:

- The External Review Report for Childcare Centres.
- The Business Inspection report.

Both reports provide objective, evidence-based judgements about the quality of the learning environment and the quality of the learning and care provided by the centre gathered before and during the review visit. It affirms those aspects of practices which are working well and identifies priorities for improvement. Points are awarded for the *Quality of the Learning Environment* and the *Quality of Learning and Care*, and an overall quality mark is awarded to the centre. The outcome of the external visit impacts the licence of the centre.

Following the review visit, the Compliance Officer sends an email to the LRP and/or the centre manager with the External Review Report for Childcare Centres compiled by the Education and Compliance Officers. The Business Inspection report may be accessed by the LRP through the centre's Business Inspection portal.

FOLLOW-UP ON THE DQSE'S EXTERNAL REVIEW REPORT FOR CHILDCARE CENTRES

The LRP and/or centre manager should carefully consider what is outlined in the different sections of the report, namely, *Findings (including good practices)*, *Required Actions* and *Actions to be given priority* as a means of improving the quality provision of the centre. The LRP, in collaboration with the centre manager and members of staff, are expected to start addressing the *Required Actions* and the *Actions to be given priority* as identified in the report. If the report requires any evidence of action taken, the LRP and/or centre manager needs to submit the information/documents/photos to the officer indicated in the email by the stipulated time-frame.

The external review report should be used to inform the internal review process of the centre to set plans for improvement and development. The LRP and/or centre manager may wish to access assistance from support/mentoring services provided by MEYR through the Education Officers (Early Years) or other sources of support and advice when planning and implementing improvement.

When an external review report indicates that standards are not met and further action needs to be taken by the centre to ensure that quality issues are addressed, a temporary license is issued. Other unannounced visits can be carried out by the review team until the centre addresses the required actions indicated in the report and reaches the expected quality as indicated in the *National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0-3 Years)*.

The Regulation and Compliance Section (RCS) is responsible for the licensing of Childcare Centres and for carrying out subsequent compliance check visits for quality assurance purposes. The sub-sections that follow explain the processes related to obtaining a licence.

7.1. PRE-LICENSING PHASE

The pre-licensing phase is an important step in establishing a Childcare Centre. This phase ensures that all necessary compliance measures are met before proceeding with licensing. Below are the key steps involved in this process:

Initial Guidance and Support:

The Regulatory Compliance Section (RCS) is the first point of contact for information and guidance for anyone considering opening a Childcare Centre.

Interested parties may make enquiries either by phone on 25981400 or by email on customercare.dqse@gov.mt.

Feasibility Assessment:

Before formally submitting the application to the Planning Authority, we encourage potential applicant to consult with the Department of Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) via email.

The DQSE is committed to providing timely feedback and assessing the feasibility of the potential childcare property.

Collaboration with Planning Authority:

The Planning Authority collaborates closely with the DQSE, particularly for applications related to Class 2C planning related to childcare facilities.

Plan Evaluation:

The DQSE conducts a meticulous evaluation of the plans submitted, ensuring they align with the relevant regulations.

Our team replies to the Planning Authority within their specified timeframes.

Outcome – ‘No Objection’ or ‘Objection’:

If the plans are in compliance with the necessary regulations, applicant will receive a ‘No Objection’ response.

However, if the plans do not meet the required criteria, we will provide an ‘Objection’ response, accompanied by detailed reasons based on DQSE’s criteria.

Minor Adjustments and Compliance:

In cases where minor changes are needed to ensure full compliance with the National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0-3 years) (2021) and the Registration Criteria for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0-3 years) (2021), the RCS is here to assist.

The DQSE offers the option of an online meeting or email communication with the applicant and/or the responsible architect (Perit) for guidance through the necessary amendments.

Re-consultation:

If the Planning Authority requires further consultation or modifications, the DQSE will work closely with the applicant to address their concerns and maintain compliance with DQSE standards.

Important Note:

It is crucial to understand that obtaining a permit from the Planning Authority alone does not grant permission to operate as a Childcare Centre. Adherence to DQSE standards is essential for full authorization.

This comprehensive pre-licensing phase ensures that all Childcare Centres are set up to provide a safe and compliant environment for young children.

The pre-licensing phase consists of several stages, as shown in the figure below.

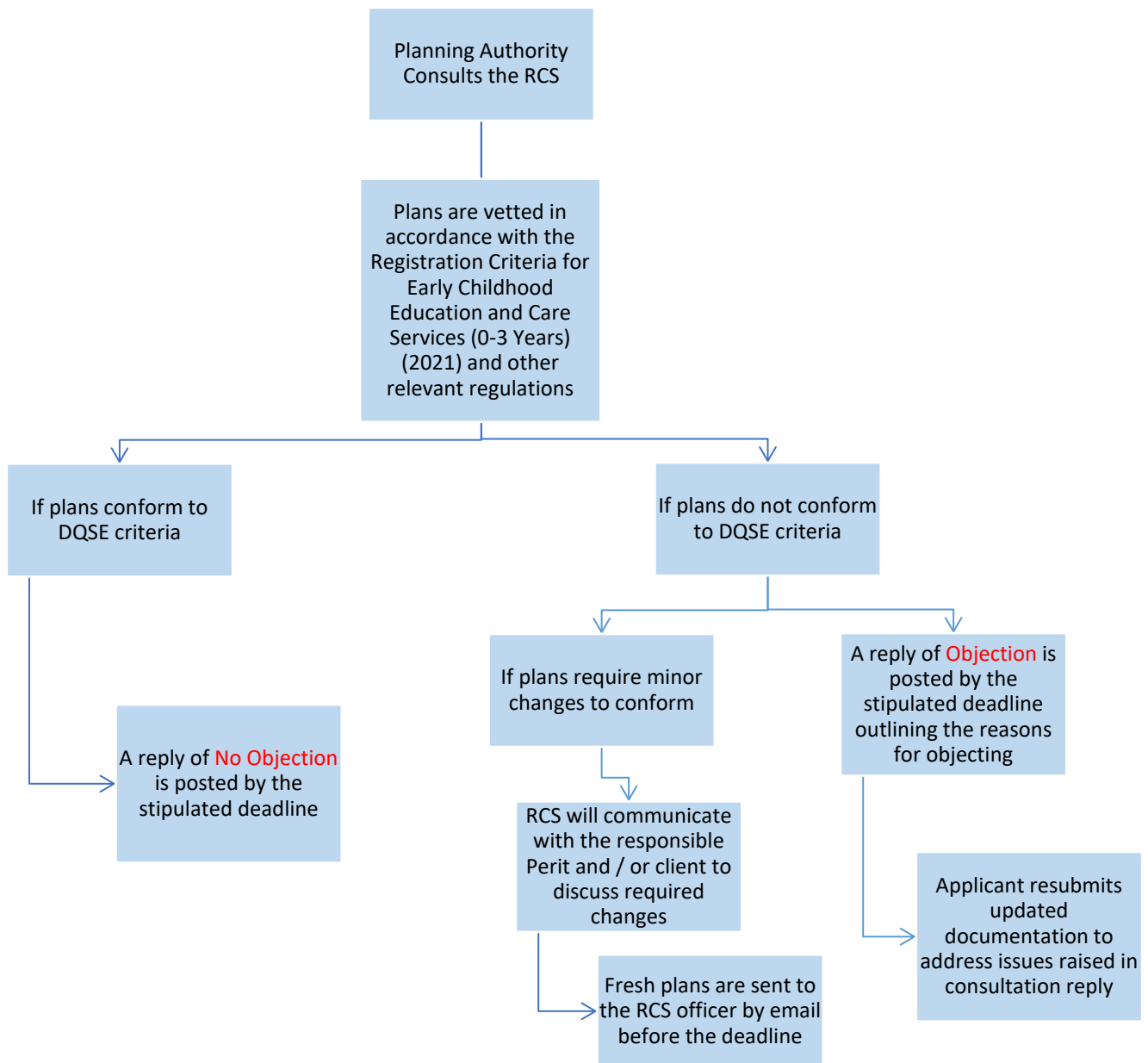


Figure 1. The pre-licensing phase.

7.2. LICENSING PHASE

The licence for a Childcare Centre is issued in line with Education Act (CAP 605), the National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (2021), the Registration Criteria for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (2021) and the [Interpretation of the Registration Criteria Document](#). The licensing phase consists of several stages, explained in Figure 2.

The licensing phase is important in establishing a childcare centre. The following steps outline the process involved.

Submission of Licence Application:

The applicant initiates the licensing process by submitting a childcare licence application form through the [DQSE online portal](#), accompanied by all the necessary supporting documentation.

Document Verification:

DQSE officers responsible for issuing childcare licences meticulously review the submitted documents in accordance with the requirements specified in the application form.

If an application lacks documentation or contains inaccuracies, it will not be considered complete. In such cases, the DQSE officer promptly informs the applicant to submit the missing documents. Additional documents are assessed within a maximum of 5 working days.

Acknowledgement Receipt:

Once all the required documents are successfully reviewed and accepted, the DQSE officer issues an acknowledgement receipt to the applicant.

Site Visit and Compliance Assessment:

Within 3 months from the date of the acknowledgement receipt, and if a licence is granted, the DQSE officers proceed with a site visit. During this visit, they assess the premises' compliance with the pre-operational requirements outlined in the [National Standards for Early Education and Care Services \(0-3 years\)](#), the [Registration Criteria for Early Childhood Education and Care Services](#), and the Planning Authority approved plan.

Additionally, during the site visit, the DQSE officer calculates and decides the centre's maximum child capacity.

Issue of Licence:

Once the application is approved and endorsed by the DQSE Director, a Childcare Centre licence is duly issued by the DQSE.

This comprehensive licensing phase ensures that the Childcare Centre meets all regulatory requirements, guaranteeing a safe and compliant environment for children.

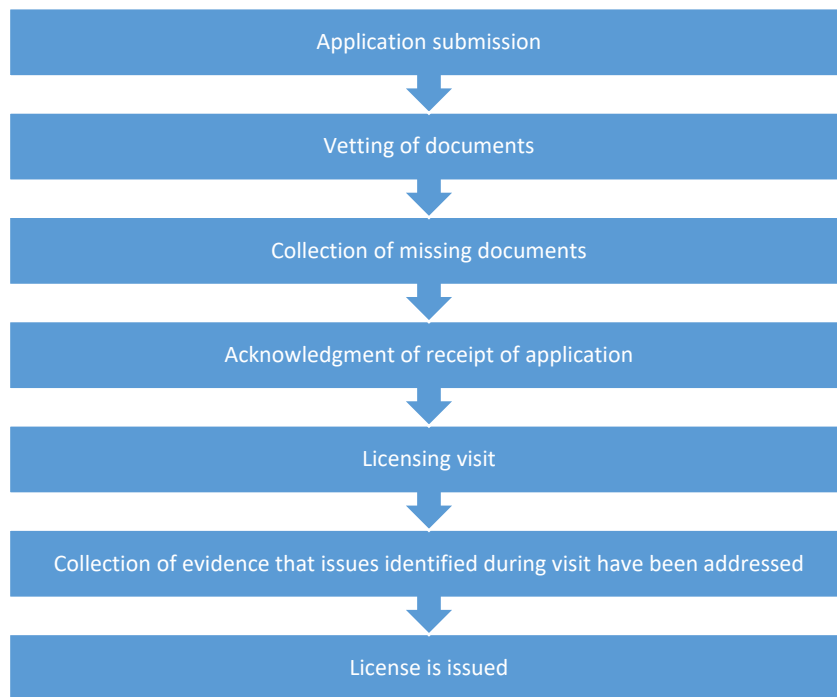


Figure 2: The

licensing phase.

7.3. REVISION OF CHILDCARE CENTRE LICENCE

The process for revising a Childcare Centre's licence is outlined below.

Online Submission of Revision Application:

To request a revision of the licence, an online application form must be submitted within three (3) months from the date of any changes made, as specified in Education Act Cap.605.

Specification of Changes:

Any changes made by the Childcare Centre should be clearly stated on the revision application form.

Upon submission of the licence revision application form, the DQSE will request specific supporting documentation relevant to the type of change being made by Childcare Centre.

Possible Licence Revision Visit:

In certain cases, as deemed appropriate, the DQSE may conduct a licensing revision visit to ensure compliance with the regulations and standards.

Service providers, service users, stakeholders and the general public may lodge a complaint regarding the service provided by a centre. A complainant should ideally initiate the complaint with the LRP and/or centre manager in order to seek redress.

Unresolved complaints may be directed to the DQSE by calling 25981400 or sending an email to customercare.dqse@gov.mt complete with supporting documentation that is of relevance to the complaint. All complaints will be dealt with in a confidential manner.

Action is taken, as necessary. An unannounced visit can be carried out by a review team to ensure that the complaint is addressed. A report is compiled by the investigating team and passed on to the DQSE management. The DQSE acknowledges all complaints, and investigates accordingly

All complaints received by the DQSE, the outcome of the investigation and any action taken, are logged in the Complaints Register kept by the DQSE.

Disclaimer

The DQSE retains the right to make necessary technical adjustments or updates to the Handbook on External Review of a Childcare Centre from time to time. The most up-to-date version of the Handbook will be available on the DQSE website.