

MALTA

Key contextual data

Compiled by

**Inge Schreyer, Pamela Oberhuemer,
and Valerie Sollars**

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Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the terms used in this report for the main forms of ECEC provision are **childcare centre (0–2)** and **kindergarten centre** (kindergarten, pre-primary class, a two-year programme starting as early as 2 years 9 months)¹. Any additional forms are described where appropriate.

Historical milestones in ECEC in Malta

1827 - 1964	British colonial rule on the Maltese islands, initially showing little proactive interest in advancing a state-funded education system. Between the mid-19 th and early 20 th centuries, many schools are established by the Roman Catholic Church and its Religious Orders and will have a lasting impact on the education system, including pre-primary schooling.
1837	The British Home and Colonial Infant School Society recommends establishing infant schools, but this is a slow process. Over the ten decades to follow, up to 1944, some 375 applications (petitions) are submitted, mostly by women hoping to earn a living by providing a safe environment for neglected and destitute working-class children. Even illiterate applicants are granted a license if they are considered to have the necessary moral attitudes and practical skills.
1845	First fee-paying school opened by nuns for 4 and 5 year-old girls; poor children are not required to pay.
1869	Strategic military importance of Malta heightened by the opening of the Suez Canal – followed by an increasing formalisation of the education system
1870	Maltese becomes the language of instruction during the first two years of school, otherwise English replaces Italian as the formal language of the education system.
1899	First curricular guidelines for elementary schools, including infant and preparatory classes, are issued.
1904-1907	The first crèches are opened by Religious Orders, with few regulatory requirements beyond basic issues of hygiene.
1914	Provision for ‘infant schools’ predominantly through private entities due to inadequate public school accommodation
1923	‘Infant’ schools are an integral part of ‘elementary’ schools. The infant syllabus included English, arithmetic, writing, religious instruction and drill.
1924, 1927, 1946	Compulsory school attendance Act for pupils of elementary schools, which included two years in infant stages and six elementary ‘standards’. School-leaving age was initially 12 years, later raised to 14 years. ‘Elementary’ schools became known as ‘Primary’ schools.
1936	In the annual education report for 1935/1936, the then Education Director refers to the ‘Montessori’ school and argues that ‘for the present, we must limit ourselves to following Montessori principles in the education of children up to the age of 6½ and afterwards proceed to more formal teaching...’.
1975	Introduction of the first state-funded kindergarten provision for 4 and 5 year-olds, i.e. at a late time in history compared with other European countries

¹ **Editors’ note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. The SEEPRO-3 editors have chosen the following age-inclusive format for countries where primary schooling starts at age 6: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds. In the case of Malta, the relevant formats are **0–2** and **3–4** years, since children start primary school in the year when they turn 5. Locally, 0–3 and 3–5 are the age group parameters generally referred to.



1987	Kindergartens come under the auspices of the Ministry for Education, having been the responsibility of the Department of Social Services within the Ministry for Labour and Social Services until this time.
1988	Kindergarten provision extended to include 3 year-olds.
1996	The University of Malta playschool is one of the first settings at the workplace, welcoming 2 to 4 year-olds, thus addressing the needs of employees and university students. The state general hospital and a secondary hospital also offer some form of childcare services for their employees.
1997–1999	A feasibility study on the introduction of public child day care centres is conducted following a request by the Parliamentary Secretary for Women’s Rights. A post-implementation audit was conducted in 1999 to identify shortcomings which had led to the lack of uptake. Apart from poor market research, entrusting children to strangers rather than resorting to family support and having guilt feelings about using childcare contributed to the very low attendance.
2001	A <i>Child Care Task Force</i> was set up on the initiative of the Co-operatives Board. Since settings were totally unregulated, some 15 existing private day care centres/nurseries were identified through adverts on the media and phone directories (yellow pages).
2006	Publication of the first <i>National Policy for Early Childhood Education</i> and publication of <i>National Standards for Child Daycare Facilities</i>
2009	Introduction of an optional Bachelor-level qualification for core practitioners working in kindergarten centres/pre-primary classes in schools which entitled holders to a teachers’ warrant
2012	Publication of the <i>National Curriculum Framework for All</i> – the first document to acknowledge the early years as a distinct cycle of education (<i>Early Years Cycle</i>) for 0 to 7 year-olds
2013	Publication of <i>ECEC in Malta: The way forward</i> . This document summarises the development of ECEC in Malta and makes recommendations towards promoting high quality provision across early years services in light of the Government’s 2013 electoral manifesto proposal to extend services through free child-care services.
2014	Free childcare services introduced for parents in employment or pursuing studies utilising registered childcare centres (<i>Free Childcare for All</i> scheme).
2016	Publication of the <i>Professions in Education Act</i> (July 2016) – one of the proposals for the amendments to the Education Act identifies an MQF Level 4 qualification in early childhood education as the minimum required level in order to obtain a license to practise the profession of Kindergarten Educator. This undermines earlier initiatives to introduce an MQF Level 6 qualification in the field. Childcare centres come under the auspices of the Ministry of Education.
2017	The Government – MUT agreement organises kindergarten educators into three tiers: KG III for staff with an EQF 6 Bachelor degree; KG II and KG I for staff with EQF 5 qualifications for 60 ECTS or 30 ECTS respectively. Duties of staff are identical irrespective of qualification.
2018	The promotion of the emergent curriculum in the early years is launched with kindergarten educators (2018/2019) through 10 hours of training but without a clear plan for on-going support or monitoring.
2019	Amendments to the Education Act (1988)
2021	Publication of the second <i>National Policy for Early Childhood Education</i> and publication of <i>National Standards for Child Daycare Facilities</i> . The 'standards' are organised around structural and process factors. It also established the minimum level of qualifications for staff in childcare retaining a low-level qualification for both childcare educators and managers.
2021	Publication of the <i>Early Childhood Education and Care - National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo</i> . This framework is presented as a precursor to the eventual designing of a strategic action plan.

2023	<p>The number of childcare settings over the past decade rises considerably. In May 2023, there were 180 settings (licensed or registered). By comparison, in 2016 there were about 93 settings.</p> <p>Participation of children aged 3 and older in ECEC sees one of the greatest decreases in the EU to 89.1% in 2020 from 96.9% in 2015.</p>
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Sources: MGG 1936; MEU 1997, 1999; National Archives Malta (various sources) 1899, 1923; MEYE 2006; MFSS/MEYE 2006; Sollars 2013, 2018a; Childcare Task Force 2021; European Commission 2023

ECEC system type and auspices²

Following the Council of the European Union’s Recommendation on ECEC in May 2019, a National ECEC Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo was published in 2021 (DQSE 2021a). The stated aims are to address the need for a multi-sectoral approach embedded within an integrated ECEC system.

Currently, the system of early childhood education and care can be described as only partially integrated. Overall responsibility lies with one top-level authority, the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR), and regulatory mechanisms apply to all ECEC settings for children up to statutory school age (5 years). However, the settings themselves are not unitary, but separated between mostly privately-owned childcare centres for under 3 year-olds and mostly state-maintained kindergarten centres/pre-primary classes for 3 and 4 year-olds. Both kinds of setting were initially located in the social welfare sector: whereas childcare centres came under Social Welfare authorities until 2016, state kindergarten centres were the responsibility of the Ministry for Labour and Social Services when first introduced in 1975. However, the kindergarten centres came under the auspices of the Ministry for Education in 1987.

Although the first stage of the education system is described in the National Curriculum Framework (2012) as the *Early Years Cycle (0–7)*, it comprises not only childcare and kindergarten settings, but also the first two years of primary schooling (MEDE 2012). There is no unifying ECEC curricular framework across settings, but two binding sets of guidelines. Also, staffing qualifications within the three stages of the *Early Years Cycle* differ in that a lower level of qualification (ISCED 4) is required for work within the non-compulsory sector (0 to 4 year-olds) compared to the university qualification (ISCED 6) necessary to work with 5 to 7 year-olds (Sollars 2018a). Thus, early childhood education and care is not as yet a fully unitary ECEC system.

Within the MEYR, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) is responsible for the regulation of non-compulsory ECEC settings, including (since July 2016) childcare provision. The 12 childcare centres which are state-funded and managed by the *Foundation for Educational Services (FES)* are located adjacent to the state primary school of the town or village, with an entirely separate administration. However, most childcare centres are privately owned and managed (Sollars 2018a).

General objectives and legislative framework

The general objectives of the *Free Childcare for All scheme (FCS)* introduced by the Maltese government in April 2014 for parents in employment or education are to provide equitable early childhood education and care irrespective of the family’s financial means and social background and to increase women’s participation in the labour market.

² The Eurydice country report on ECEC in Malta provided orientation for legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are indicated within the text and in the *references*.

The two currently binding regulatory frameworks are subsidiary legislation of the 1988 Education Act (most recently amended in 2019). These are the

- *National Minimum Curriculum (Pre-Primary Level) 1989*, which sets out the main curricular objectives for pre-primary classes for 3 and 4 year-olds (see chapter on *Curricular Frameworks* for details of the more recent National Curriculum Framework 2012).
- *Registration of Childcare Facilities as Educational Establishments 2008*, which provides framework regulations for setting up provision for children under 3 years of age (MFED 2021c).

The objectives of the recently issued *National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0–3 years)* (MFED 2021a) are to: reflect recent developments in the ECEC (0–3) field within a Maltese context; be in line with ongoing ECEC research and practice for under 3 year-olds; develop and strengthen a more socially just and active labour market in Malta by sustaining availability and accessibility to quality ECEC services; and ensure that the standards, focused on ECEC services for 1 to 3 year-olds, are consistent with the overall framework for the Early Years Cycle (0–7 years) within the National Curriculum Framework (MEDE 2012). They replace the 2006 National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities.

General objectives of the recent *Early Childhood Education and Care National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo*, issued in 2021, are to “maximise young children’s development which will profoundly impact on children’s future learning, health and earning potential which can perpetuate intergenerational benefits” (DQSE 2021a). The framework is also seen as contributing towards the 2016 G20 Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Five policy goals and dimensions are addressed: access to ECEC; the workforce; curricular issues; monitoring and evaluation; governance and funding (MFED 2021b).

ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

There is no universal legal entitlement or guarantee to a place in ECEC provision in Malta. Attendance is voluntary. Through the Free Childcare Scheme (FCS) introduced in 2014, a targeted legal entitlement from the age of 3 months is available for parents/guardians in employment or education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 184). From the age of 2 years 9 months, kindergarten enrolment is free of charge, irrespective of whether the parent is economically active or not, and enrolment rates are high (see *Participation rates in regulated provision*).

Compulsory schooling begins early compared with most other European countries. The official school starting age in Malta is 5. Since children are enrolled during the year they reach their fifth birthday, and the scholastic year starts in late September, some children may be as young as 4 years 9 months when they enter the first class of primary school (ISCED 1).

Main types of provision

Childcare centres (sometimes known as Childcare and Family Support Centres) are available for children from three months up to 3 years of age and are owned, managed and organised by mostly private entities. By the end of January 2024, there were 191 centres registered with the DQSE: 11 were licensed and 180 were registered. Of these, 12 (6.3%) were state-funded, managed through the Foundation for Educational Services (FES) and registered with DQSE; two (1.4%) were organised by the local council for the town/village; three (2.1%) were managed by

the church and a five (2.6%) were run on a private/public partnership basis, where the Government supports a private entity by hiring the premises; two (1.4%) were set up by corporate entities which give priority to the children of employees of the entity before admitting children from the wider context and three (2.1%) were located in higher education institutions

The state-maintained centres are open between 07:30 and 16:00 although in six of the 12 settings, longer hours are available (06.00am–18.00) (FES 2023). Private centres have varying opening/closing times, ranging from as early as 06:00 to as late as 20:30 hours.

Kindergarten centres (kindergartens; pre-primary classes) are available for children from 2 years 9 months up to school entry age. Most are located either in state-maintained schools (64 in 2022/2023), or affiliated to grant-aided Catholic Church schools (23), or run by independent schools (9). These kindergarten centres thus come under the organisational regime of the school. The primary school head is formally head of the pre-primary classes. Children are grouped in same-age classes called ‘Kindergarten I’ (3 year-olds) and ‘Kindergarten II’ (4 year-olds). There are also 10 kindergarten settings which operate independently and are not affiliated to schools but have extended their services from childcare settings (Government of Malta 2023, own calculations).

Pre-primary classes are typically open from Mondays to Fridays from 08:30 to 14:30 (i.e. opening hours do not necessarily match parents’ employment hours) and closed during school holidays. Where larger independent schools offer the full range of educational provision – nursery, kindergarten, primary and secondary - the hours for nursery and kindergarten are rather short (8:30 to about 12:30/13:00). However, the parents have the option of making use of extended hours against additional payment. Schools belonging to five religious orders welcome boys and girls at pre-primary/primary level but others are single-sex. All state-run provision and most of the private/independent schools are co-educational.

Provider structures

Childcare centres

Most under 3 year-olds in **childcare centres** attend privately-run provision. Of a total of 180 settings by the end of May 2023, only 12 were state-funded (FES 2023). Providers offering childcare services include corporate entities, the Church, local councils, and individuals investing in their private business. The small number of Government childcare centres are managed by the Foundation for Educational Services (FES) and are registered with the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE). They follow the 2021 National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0–3). An individualised service is offered, most particularly to children at risk of social exclusion (MFED 2020). In April 2014, the FCS was introduced and settings registered with the Ministry for Education are entitled to participate thus becoming eligible to receive subsidies (see chapter on *Financing and costs*).

Kindergarten centres/pre-primary classes

Kindergarten centres are run by three different providers and may be state-maintained, church-affiliated or private/independent. The largest provider is the state sector, followed by the independent and church school sectors. In 2023–2024, a total of 9,523 children aged 3–4 years were enrolled in kindergarten provision (Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department 2024). *Table 1* shows the distribution according to provider type.

Table 1

Malta: Number of children enrolled in kindergartens by setting provider, 2023–2024

	State maintained	Church-affiliated	Private/Independent	Total number of children in kindergarten
Kindergarten 1 (3–4 year-olds)	4,108	299	797	5,204
Kindergarten 2 (4–5 year-olds)	2,897	721	701	4,319
Total*	7,005	1,020	1,498	9,523
Relative share by provider type, in %	73.6	10.7	15.7	

Source: personal email communication from the Research Unit at the Office of The Director General, Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department, 23 February 2024

*Depending on the date of data collection there might be slight variations in other statistics regarding the age or the year group of the children

In the school year 2022/2023, there were a total of 106 kindergarten centres. Of these, 64 were state-run (11 located in Gozo), 23 were run by Church schools and 19 by Independent/private schools (Government of Malta 2023).

Participation rates in regulated provision

Childcare centres

By the end of June 2022, a total of 6,518 children were benefitting from the FCS at any point in time between January and June 2022: 1,913 children joined a childcare setting in 2022, whereas the remaining 4,605 children were in childcare in previous year/s and were still registered in the system in 2022³. By the end of October 2023, 8,627 children had benefitted from the FCS at any point in time during this year. There had been 3,529 new entrants in 2023⁴. Table 2 illustrates the uptake of childcare services from the time it was introduced up to 2019.

Table 2

Malta: Number of children benefitting from Free Childcare Scheme, 1st April 2014 till 31st December 2019

Year	Period	Number of children benefitting from scheme for first time	Total number of children benefitting from the scheme
2014	1 Apr - 31 Dec	3,856	3,856
2015	1 Jan - 31 Dec	2,843	5,852
2016	1 Jan - 31 Dec	2,767	5,335
2017	1 Jan – 31 Dec	3,025	5,939
2018	1 Jan – 31 Dec	3,343	6,737
2019	1 Jan – 31 Dec	3,579	7,341

Source: DQSE 2019/20, 12

The FCS helped to significantly increase the proportion of children below the age of 3 in formal childcare between 2005 (5%) and 2022 (43.1%) (see Table 3).

³ Data were provided by JobsPlus via email communication on July 11th 2022.

⁴ CEO from JobsPlus at the meeting of the Family Affairs Committee, Parliament of Malta, Session no. 14 held on December 5th 2023.

Kindergarten centres/pre-primary classes

The proportion of children over 3 years of age also increased from 2005–2022, although not to the same extent as with the under-threes (from 58% to 91%, see *Table 3*).

Table 3

Malta: Enrolment rates by duration of attendance in centre-based settings and age, 2010-2022

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to under 3 years, in %	3 years up to minimum compulsory school age, in %
2005	1 to 29 hours	4	32
	Over 30 hours	1	26
	No enrolment in ECEC	95	43
2010	1 to 29 hours	6	26
	Over 30 hours	3	46
	No enrolment in ECEC	91	28
2015	1 to 29 hours	10.7	34.6
	Over 30 hours	7.2	53.8
	No enrolment in ECEC	82.1	11.6
2022	1 to 29 hours	19.5	26.6
	Over 30 hours	23.6	64.4
	No enrolment in ECEC	56.9	9.0

Source: Eurostat 2023e

In 2021, the overall share of children attending pre-primary education amounted to 72.5% in state-run settings, 17.2% in private/independent and 10.3% in church settings (NSO 2023, 49). Eurostat statistics of age-disaggregated data (*Table 4*) indicate that in 2021, the vast majority of the 4 and 3 year-olds were enrolled in a centre-based setting.

Table 4

Malta: Number of children in centre-based ECEC settings and enrolment ratios according to age, 2021

Age	Number	Share in %
Under 2 years	No data available	No data available
2 year-olds	795	16.6
3 year-olds	4,030	83.6
4 year-olds	4,445	88.5
5 year-olds	46	0.9

Sources: Eurostat 2023b, f

There has been a decrease in participation rates in early childhood education: In 2020, the proportion of children over 3 years was 89.1% compared to 96.9% in 2015 (European Commission 2023b, 57). This could possibly be related to the COVID pandemic and/or the drop in the fertility rate which currently is the lowest in Europe (Eurostat 2023d).

Financing and costs for parents

In 2021, 5.5% of total general government expenditure was on education, 1.4% on pre-primary and primary education (Eurostat 2023k). No specific information is available for the childcare sector.

Since April 2014, parents who are in education or employment and whose children attend any of the childcare settings registered with the Ministry for Education do not pay fees. The providers of childcare settings registered in the FCS receive €4.80 per hour per child for children under the age of 12 months and €4.55 for children between the ages of 13 to 36 months (JobsPlus 2022).

Private childcare centres for children under age 3 and where parents are not eligible for the FCS set their own fees. Variations in fees reflect the diverse services, including whether the childcare setting is operating independently or whether the 'nursery' is part of a school. The former are open all the year round and may offer two, three or five-day a week packages and rates but services within independent private schools tend to follow the school timetable in some respects, such as school holidays. Fees in the private settings vary. Information provided by various settings suggests that every three months, parents pay anything from €650 to over €900 (various email communication, May 29th 2023; Sept 21st 2023).

Fees in state-subsidised childcare centres are means-tested and may be as low as €2 a day for low income earners where the service is used once a week and range overall from €8 to €150 per month (personal email communication, May 28th 2023).

Attendance in state-maintained kindergarten provision is free of charge. Places in grant-aided church-run kindergarten centres are also free of charge, although parents are encouraged to give donations to help with institutional expenditure. Independent schools charge tuition fees for which parents receive a tax rebate. Parents whose children attend church-run and independent schools with pre-primary classes pay registration and administration fees and must also purchase books and other requisites. Provision of textbooks is free of charge for children in state schools and there are no registration fees.

Staff to child ratios and group size in centre-based settings

Childcare centres

The *National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0–3) 2021* recommend the following ratios of qualified staff to children:

- 1:3 for infants under 12 months of age,
- 1:5 for children aged 13 to 24 months, and
- 1:6 for children aged 25 to 36 months.

In the case of mixed-age groups, the recommended ratio is 1:6, although only one child under 18 months may be in such a group.

Kindergarten centres/pre-primary education

Irrespective of the service provider, all pre-primary settings are required to provide a standard ratio of

- one staff member for a maximum of 14 3 year-olds and
- one staff member for a maximum of 19 4 year-olds

The respective maximum group size (14 for Kindergarten I and 19 for Kindergarten II) may not be exceeded (MEDE and MUT 2017; Archdiocese of Malta and MUT 2018).

At present, staff to child ratios in kindergarten settings are as follows:

- Kindergarten 1 classes have a maximum of 14 pupils per class (this being reduced to 12 if the group includes a pupil with a statement of needs);
- Kindergarten 2 classes have a maximum of 19 pupils per class, reduced to 16 if the group includes a child with special education needs.
- In the event of shared classes (two classes in one room), children shall not exceed 22 pupils for Kindergarten I, and 30 for Kindergarten II (Eurydice 2023).

Curricular frameworks

ECEC in Malta (childcare and early education) is not guided by a co-ordinated curriculum document. The National Curriculum Framework, although explicitly for the age-range 0 to 7 years, makes no provision for educational activities with under 3 year-olds. However, the more recent *Educators’ Guide for Pedagogy and Assessment: Using a Learning Outcomes Approach* (DQSE 2015) promotes learning for under 3 year-olds by “being active, exploring and investigating, playing, using language and interacting with others”.

Activities in the **childcare centres** are loosely guided by the *National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0–3) 2021* and two sets of *National Occupational Standards* for the Childcare Worker and the Childcare Manager respectively. Both documents refer to areas of child development, and helping children to develop their potential through inclusion and participation in a range of stimulating activities reflecting non-stereotypical roles and the diversity of race, culture and religion (MFHEA 2022a, b). The daily programme provides a variety of play activities to stimulate learning.

The **kindergarten centres** are included in the *Early Years Cycle* of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for schools (MEDE 2012). The policy document is binding. For the early years, five broad learning outcomes are defined: a strong sense of identity; a positive self-image; social competence; communicative competence; positive attitudes towards learning in order to become engaged and confident learners. However, no discrete learning areas are proposed. Both the *Educators’ Guide for Pedagogy and Assessment* (2015) and the NCF promote a vision of an ECEC curriculum grounded in children’s rights and view children as competent, able and having unlimited potential. Staff are expected to adapt their teaching approaches to meet children’s individual needs (Eurydice 2023).

Digital education

Digital education was set as a policy priority early on in Malta, to sustain a strong digital economy. Several national policies and programmes have been put in place to develop digital competences from an early age (European Commission 2020). The new National Standards 2021 refer to a ‘digital learning environment’ in childcare centres which includes services and tools that enable learning, support administration and improve communication, thus enhancing the quality of childcare programmes. The National Curriculum Framework (2012) for schools refers in general to ‘digital literacy skills’ as key competences that enable pupils to move up the ladder of society’s economic and social opportunities, but these are not specifically mentioned for the Early Years Cycle.

Monitoring – evaluation

There is no national agency or specific entity focusing on the monitoring and evaluation of early childhood education.

Child-related assessment

There are no formal assessment requirements for childcare centres. The staff observe and record notes on individual children's progress during their daily activities, as indicated in the *Educators' Guide for Pedagogy and Assessment: Using a Learning Outcomes Approach* (2015).

The National Curriculum Framework states that children will not be formally assessed in the Early Years Cycle. However, their development and progress are to be recorded and reported to parents at least twice a year. Formative assessment is advocated for this Cycle and the learning programmes developed are to lead to the stated learning outcomes (see section on *Curricular frameworks*) (National Curriculum Framework, MEDE 2012).

Centre-level assessment

There are no requirements for centre-level assessment for the **childcare centres**. For the **kindergartens/pre-primary classes**, internal quality assurance is the responsibility of each school. In most cases, an internal evaluation of the kindergarten centre is carried out annually and leads to a new development plan (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 128).

External evaluation

External evaluation of ECEC settings, irrespective of the provider, is the responsibility of the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education in the Ministry for Education.

Childcare centres are externally reviewed annually by a team which includes a compliance officer from the Regulatory and Compliance Section (RCS) and an EO from the Education Review Section (ERS). Both departments are located within the QAD (*Quality Assurance Department*). During the visit, the review team conducts meetings with the legally responsible person (LRP) and/or the centre manager, reviews centre documentation, conducts observations, informally discusses the outcomes of observations and provides final feedback. The outcomes of the visit are included in a report which is sent to the LRP. The outcome of the process will determine the registration status for the subsequent calendar year.

A letter circular from the DQSE (QAD 01/2022, April 2022) informed childcare settings that gradual changes to the audits will be taking effect as a result of the new *National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0–3 Years)* (MFED 2021a), *The Registration criteria* (MFED 2021c) and the *Early Childhood Education and Care National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo* (MFED 2021d). Ahead of the external audit, settings are required to compile a wide range of health and safety documents.

Monitoring and inspection of **kindergarten centres** for 3 and 4 year-olds varies across providers. Church-affiliated and independent schools with kindergarten centres organise and manage their own monitoring. Early Years Education Officers from the Department of Curriculum Management (DCM) visit Church and/or Independent kindergarten settings upon invitation by the Secretariat for Catholic Education or the invitation from the senior management team of the independent school respectively.

The state kindergarten centres are monitored by Early Years Education Officers within the Department of Curriculum Management at the Ministry for Education. Kindergarten Educators are supported on a regular basis starting from a year before they need to be confirmed in the Public Service. The frequency and intensity of these observation visits before and after confirmation

depends on the level of support required, as determined by the Education Officers. In addition to monitoring visits, kindergarten centres are inspected by Education Officers (QAD) as part of broader school audits.

Apart from support and confirmation visits, Early Years Education Officers also conduct routine visits. These can be organised and structured according to:

- Requests made by the Head of School through the College Principal and Director- DCM
- Requests made by the Council for the Teaching Profession, and
- Evaluation of current performance of staff who have been newly recruited or transferred to a different kindergarten setting.

Although the Early Years Education Officers are considered to be fully qualified to be appointed Education Officers, they are not necessarily in possession of academic qualifications specifically in early childhood education but may have accumulated years of service or experience in a range of settings or appointments, even in the primary and secondary school sectors.

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

Malta ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2013 (EASNIE 2020). National policy emphasises the importance of an inclusive approach from an early age. For the **childcare sector**, Standard 10 of the National Standards for Child Day-Care Facilities is dedicated to equal opportunities and children with special needs. Early intervention services managed by the Directorate for Educational Services are also provided to children at risk of or diagnosed with learning difficulties or disabilities. Assessment is carried out by a multi-disciplinary team at the Child Development Assessment Unit and then referred to the early intervention service. The service is given to these children in their own home setting, in the childcare centre and, eventually, in kindergarten.

Children diagnosed as having special educational needs (256 children in public **kindergartens**) in 2020/21 (EASNIE 2023) are usually admitted to mainstream kindergarten centres, a decision which is taken by the parents. The staff are required to refer children needing extra support to the relevant professionals. Such referrals are processed by the Statementing Moderating Panel. Furthermore, the Child Development Assessment Unit (CDAU) works in close collaboration with the Inclusive Education Network to provide early intervention for children born with a disability or one detected in the early months. In state-run pre-primary classes, a Learning Support Educator is allocated to give either one-to-one or small group support, depending on the specific educational need. The Directorate for Educational Services sponsors professional development for supply staff to work with special needs children as support staff. Church-run and independent pre-primary classes receive state support for staff. In terms of Learning Support Educators (LSEs), in 2022/2023, 459 were employed in state-maintained (236 in KG 1 and 223 in KG 2), 66 in church-affiliated and 103 in private-independent kindergarten centres, responsible for one child or having shared duties if supporting more than one child with special educational needs (email communication through Director of NSSS, May 31st 2023).

LSEs may be employed without any formal training. They are required to follow a 70-hour course and subsequently another 140-hour course whilst already in employment. Several follow a two-year part-time Diploma in Facilitating Inclusive Education at University. More recently, a 210-hour course leading to a Level 5 Higher Certificate in Inclusive Education has been introduced and offered by the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). LSEs are not trained to work with a specific age-group or a particular disability. They may be assigned duties to any child, irrespective of the child's age or whether s/he is in kindergarten, primary or secondary

education. LSEs' responsibilities can range from one learner with full time one-to-one support to three learners on shared support depending on the assistance required according to the recommendations of the Statementing Moderating Panel (SMP) (Sollars 2018a).

Children with a migration background

Foreign-born children attending pre-primary settings (under 5 year-olds) in Church and Independent schools in 2021-2022,⁵ as reported by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability, accounted overall for 0.7% (N=338) and 20.1% (N=330) of the pre-primary population respectively; in state settings for 18.2% (N=1,226). The top five countries of origin in state kindergarten settings in 2021-2022 included children from Italy (177), Syria (147), Serbia (100), UK (79) and Bulgaria (65). Within Independent schools, foreign-born children came from Italy (55), England (41), France (24), Germany (19), Sweden (17) and Spain (16). Within Church schools, the number of foreign-born children was very low, with 4 coming from Pakistan and 1 each from Belgium, Italy, Sudan, and Ukraine.

Children with a migration background are defined as those where both parents are born and raised outside Malta.

In 2021–2022, 776 foreign-born children in state kindergartens came from countries outside the EU27, i.e. 11.5% of all children (6,731) in state kindergartens. In the same scholastic year, 151 foreign-born children in non-state kindergartens came from countries outside the EU27, i.e. 5.6% of all children (2,713) in non-state kindergartens.

According to Eurostat, in 2022, 20.6% of the overall population held a non-Maltese citizenship, more than half of them (58.1%) came from countries outside the EU27. In terms of children under age 5, 24.3% did not have a Maltese background, with almost two thirds (64.1%) of them coming from outside the EU27 (Eurostat 2023c).

Traditionally, Maltese was the predominant language in state settings, with English being the predominant language in private and in church school settings. With the influx of foreign children in schools, a shift in favour of English across all school sectors is becoming evident. The Ministry of Education's *Language Policy for the Early Years* (2016) promotes a heterogeneous model of bilingual education to encourage children's language development, in which professionals switch between the two languages according to the children's needs, based on their own experience and knowledge (Mifsud and Vella 2020, 4f, 9).

Parental leave arrangements⁶

Maternity leave is obligatory during the six weeks immediately following the birth of the child. A further eight weeks can be taken either before or after birth. 14 weeks are covered 100% by the employer (no upper limit), followed by a flat-rate payment for a further four weeks during which mothers receive €175.84 per week in alignment with the statutory minimum wage.

Fathers working as public sector employees are entitled to ten, fully paid days of **Paternity leave** which have to be taken during the 15 days immediately following the child's birth. In the private sector, the days have to be taken immediately after birth.

Parental leave in the public sector is granted for 12 months per family if the parent has been working for at least a full year and is unpaid. If both parents work in the public sector they have

⁵ Data for Church and Independent schools obtained from the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability (email communication, 23 March 2023).

⁶ The brief overview in this chapter is based mainly on the country note for Malta by Frances Camilleri-Cassar in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see References).

to divide this time between them, but cannot both be on leave at the same time. Leave may be taken in one continuous period or in blocks of four, six or nine months. Four months can be split in blocks of one month, up to the child's 10th birthday. Parental leave in the private sector is four months per parent. For eight weeks, parents are paid 50% of previous earnings for children under 4 years and 25% of previous earnings for children 4–8 years. The leave can be taken in blocks of one month, up to the child's 8. birthday. The requirement of at least one year of continuous employment applies here as well.

The most recent data are from 2019: In the public sector, 814* mothers took up the 14 weeks paid Maternity leave entitlement, but only 624* took the remaining low-paid four weeks of leave. In 2019, only 145* fathers in the public sector took Paternity leave. In 2018, regarding the uptake of the unpaid Parental leave, the mother's share was 97%. There are no available data for the private sector (* own calculations).

Current challenges for the ECEC system in Malta

Country expert assessment by Valerie Sollars

One of the key challenges facing ECEC concerns the absence of an entity or directorate with an explicit focus on and responsibility for early years policy development, promotion, guidance and implementation. The absence of such an entity (a) is an indicator of the minimal importance attributed to early childhood education; (b) perpetuates a situation where the sector is sometimes directed by inappropriate policies which fail to acknowledge the specific needs of early years or to show an understanding about the development of very young children; (c) contributes to a situation where early childhood education and care has no voice; and (d) implies no holistic vision about the sector or a strategy to ensure quality provision of services. Indeed, there is no large scale national research which has yet monitored actual practices either in childcare or in kindergarten and their short, medium or long-term effects or implications on children and their families.

A second challenge faced by ECEC stems from the historical development of the sector. Over the years, responsibility for the kindergarten section swung back and forth between different Ministries before finally becoming part of the Ministry for Education. Similarly, the responsibility for childcare settings was, until June 2016, within the Ministry for Social Policy. Although the Ministry for Education is now responsible for all settings, there is as yet no holistic vision for early childhood education and care. Many of the personnel who are expected to monitor and support the early years sector have themselves minimal academic training or work experiences specifically in ECEC and the much-needed support and guidance especially required because of the low-level of qualifications of the practitioners themselves, cannot be appropriately provided.

A third challenge arises from the generally low-level qualifications expected of staff working in childcare and to a slightly lesser extent, in kindergarten. An EQF Level 6 qualification leading to an undergraduate degree has been introduced for Kindergarten Educators, but this is not compulsory and the majority of KGEs have lower qualifications. The latest standards document (DQSE 2021b) establish a 60 ECTS Level 4 qualification for Childcare Educators and a 60 ECTS Level 5 qualification for managers. Whilst initiatives and services have increased rapidly, thus addressing availability and accessibility, there was never any vision or strategy which should have accompanied the spread of services and nurtured a highly-educated workforce.

Demographic data

Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.

Total population

In 2022, the population in Malta totalled 520,971. The population has been rising steadily over the past 20 years (2000: 388,759; 2010: 414,027; 2020: 514,564) (Eurostat 2023a).

Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average of the total fertility rate in the EU27 (from 2020) was 1.53. The highest total fertility rate in the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries was in France (1.84); Malta had the lowest rate (1.13) in the SEEPRO-3 countries (Eurostat 2023d)⁷.

Children under age 6

Table 5

Malta: Children under 6 years of age, 2022

Age	Number of children
Under age 1	4,400
1 year-olds	4,588
2 year-olds	4,514
3 year-olds	4,847
4 year-olds	4,849
5 year-olds	5,025
Total 0 to under 6 year-olds	28,223

Source: Eurostat 2023a, own calculations, differences due to rounding

In 2022, children under age 6 comprised 5.4% of the total population in Malta, 2.6% of the total population were children under 3 years of age. Those shares were approximately on a level with the EU-average (cf. Table 6).

Table 6

Malta: Children under 6 years of age – share in total population from 2000 to 2022, in %*

Year	Comparison Malta /EU	Under 3 year-olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Malta	3.5	3.7	7.2
	Ø EU15 ⁸	3.2	3.2	6.4
	Malta	2.9	3.2	6.1

⁷ Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>). Data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) are from World Bank Data (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).

⁸ For the 2000 data, the then EU15 countries (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK) were taken into account, the 2005 data (EU25) additionally include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK and the basis of the 2015 data are the EU28 countries with additionally BG, RO and HR. The EU27 data (from 2020) include the EU28 countries without UK.

Year	Comparison Malta /EU	Under 3 year-olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2005	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	Malta	2.9	2.9	5.8
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Malta	2.6	2.8	5.4
	Ø EU27(2020)	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, *own calculations, deviations due to rounding

Single households with children under age 6

In 2022, 71.8% of all households with children under the age of six were couple households. Only 2% of all households are single households – almost all were single mothers (1.8%).

Table 7

Malta: Households with children under age 6, 2022

Household type	Total households	Total households, in %*
All households	56,400	
Couple households	40,500	71.8
Other household type	14,800	26.2
Single households, total	1,100	2.0
Single households, women	100	1.8
Single households, men	100**	0.2

Source: Eurostat 2023l, * own calculations, **data computed

Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In Malta, in 2022, the overall employment rate for men (15-64 years) was 86.2% and for women 72.9% (Eurostat 2023j).

In 2022, 72.1% of women and 94.9% of men (18-64 years) with children under 6 were employed. Among the EU27-countries (2020), the shares of employed fathers were the second highest rate in the EU (EU-average 87.2%); those of mothers were above the EU-average (63.6%) as well (Eurostat 2023g, own calculations).

Table 8a

Malta: Employment rates of parents with children under 6 compared with other EU countries, 2010, 2022

	2010	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Malta	40.6	88.2
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries ⁹	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 31.7	Latvia: 72.7
	2022	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Malta	72.1	94.9
Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries ¹⁰	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries	Czech Republic: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023g

⁹ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

¹⁰ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in *Table 8b*.

Table 8b

Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)
+Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9
+++United Kingdom (2021/2023)				
with dependent children	75.6	92.1	++72.3	++79.2
with children under 2 years	72.4	93.1	++72.1 (2023)	++79.4 (2023)
with children 3–4 years	70.7	95.0		

*Eurostat 2023g, 2023j

**[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

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Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion¹¹

In 2022, 17.9% of children under 6 years of age were at risk of poverty or social inclusion. This positions Malta slightly better than the EU average (23.3%) for this age-group. The relative share of all persons in the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 20.1% compared to 21.6% of the EU average. 2.8% of the children under 6 years suffered from severe material deprivation in 2020, compared to 1% of the total population (EU average 6.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Eurostat 2023h, i).

¹¹ 'At risk of poverty or social exclusion' refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or (severely) materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation)

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