

Inspectorate Profile

Inspectorate, Department of Education, Ireland

June 2024

1. Overview of the Inspectorate

Age of the Inspectorate

The Inspectorate in Ireland is one of the oldest Inspectorates of education. It was founded in 1831 when a comprehensive publicly funded system of primary education was established. Subsequently, inspectorates of vocational/technical education and second-level education were established in the early twentieth century. Those three branches of the Inspectorate - primary, post-primary and vocational - were united in the 1990s. In 2015, the Inspectorate recruited its first early years' inspectors.

Since 2016, the Inspectorate has carried out inspections of early years settings as part of an inter-departmental arrangement between the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Department of Education and the Inspectorate.

Structure of the Inspectorate

The Inspectorate is a division of the Department of Education. It is centrally organised with the Office of the Chief Inspector based in the Department's main office in Dublin. There are also multiple offices geographically spread around the country.

The Senior Management Group of the Inspectorate comprises the Chief Inspector, two Deputy Chief Inspectors and nine Assistant Chief Inspectors.

The Inspectorate is currently divided into nine business units, each managed by an Assistant Chief Inspector.

- Five of these business units are regionally based and are responsible for the planning and delivery of the programme of inspections and school self-evaluation and other advisory visits in early learning and care settings, primary and post-primary schools and centres for education.
- Two business units have specific policy support responsibilities and work closely with other divisions of the Department on policy development and implementation in relation to areas such as inclusion, curriculum and assessment, and teacher education.
- One business unit is responsible for supporting the implementation of the inspection programme and the improvement of inspection processes through the development of inspection models, research and analysis of inspection data.
- One business unit is responsible for the management of the Inspectorate's business operations and communications.

Another three Assistant Chief Inspectors are currently assigned to lead units of the Department that are working on policy areas such as Special Education, Senior Cycle (Upper secondary) reform and Irish in English-medium schools.

Size

The number of serving inspectors currently stands at 144. This includes 12 members of the Senior Management Team, 20 early years inspectors, 56 primary inspectors and 56 post-primary inspectors. Almost all inspectors are assigned to inspection and advisory services in the five regional business units. Some inspectors are assigned, for between 20% and 90% of their time, to provide research and technical support to the inspection programme, to policy development work, and to working with other divisions of the Department. The work of the Inspectorate is supported by an administrative staff of 13 personnel.

Remits

The Inspectorate evaluates educational provision in State-funded early learning and care settings, primary schools, post-primary schools, centres for education and special care units. It also carries out inspections of educational provision in other settings such as agricultural colleges and Irish language summer colleges on behalf of other state departments or agencies. In addition, two inspectors are assigned on a part-time basis to the Inspectorate of the European Schools. The Inspectorate monitors the implementation of national child protection requirements and anti-bullying procedures in all its inspections.

Unit of inspection

The Inspectorate primarily evaluates the quality of provision in individual schools and other education settings. The focus of the inspection depends on the model of inspection used. For example, the focus may be on whole-school provision, provision for particular subjects and curricular programmes, or on the implementation of Department of Education initiatives such as the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative. Further information on its inspection models is available in the Inspectorate's published guides to [early years education inspections](#), [primary inspections](#), [post-primary inspections](#) and [inspections in special care units](#).

The Inspectorate does not report on groups of schools. Neither does it normally inspect and report on individual teachers and practitioners although observation of teaching and learning is a central element of all inspections. As part of [Procedures for the Suspension and Dismissal of Teachers under Section 24 of the Education Act 1998 \(2018\)](#), a board of management in a school may request the Chief Inspector to arrange for a review of the work of an individual teacher.

Purpose of the Inspectorate

In accordance with Section 13 of Education Act 1998 (revised 2018), the Inspectorate has a statutory role to:

- evaluate and report on the quality of educational provision in schools, early learning and care settings and centres for education
- support and advise schools, early learning and care settings and centres for education on the quality of educational provision
- build capacity through embedding school self-evaluation across the system
- advise the Minister on any matter relating to education policy and provision
- conduct research into education and provide evidence-based advice in informing Department of Education policy across a range of areas.

The Inspectorate's [Code of Practice](#) outlines the four key principles that underpin its work as an Inspectorate:

- A focus on learners
- Development and improvement
- Respectful engagement
- Responsibility and accountability

The Inspectorate has both accountability and improvement functions. The accountability dimension of its work involves quality assuring and reporting back to others about quality, standards, educational opportunities and experiences, and issues of educational equity. This accountability function is achieved through measures such as the publication of individual inspection reports and reporting back to schools, education settings and parents about the outcomes of inspections.

The Inspectorate strives to bring about improvement in the quality of education provision for children and young people through the advice and support it gives to teachers, schools and other education settings, and policy makers. It also strives to promote improvement through the sharing of good practice through its communications and reports and through promoting and supporting school self-evaluation.

What is your strapline/motto?

"Excellence in learning for all" is the vision that the Inspectorate wants to achieve through its work.

Relationship with government

The Inspectorate is a division of the Department of Education and the Chief Inspector is a member of the Management Board of the Department. The Chief Inspector is accountable to the Dáil (Irish parliament) under the Education Act 1998 and reports formally on quality and standards in schools. This parliamentary responsibility underpins the separate and independent role of the Chief Inspector within an integrated Department of Education.

Under the Education Act 1998, the Inspectorate selects the schools and education settings that are to be inspected.

The Minister may, from time to time, request that a particular evaluation be carried out, for example a specific thematic evaluation, to assist them with policy decisions. Thematic reports, including the Chief Inspector's Report, require approval by the Minister before they are published.

Accountability

As outlined above, the Inspectorate is accountable to the Dáil (the Irish parliament) and the Minister of Education for the delivery of its functions. The Inspectorate reports to the Minister for Education and the Secretary General of the Department of Education.

The accountability functions of the Inspectorate are set out in the Education Act 1998. The Inspectorate has a statutory duty to evaluate and report on the quality of educational provision in publicly funded schools, early learning and care settings and centres for education, and to publish inspection reports. The Inspectorate also has responsibility for the

implementation of regulations made by the Minister of Education and to advise the Minister on any matter relating to educational policy and provision.

The goals for the Inspectorate's work are set out in the [Department of Education Statement of Strategy 2023-2025](#) and in [Forbairt](#), the Department of Education's Annual Statement of Priorities. An update on the implementation of the Inspectorate's actions in [Forbairt](#) is included in the progress report that is published by the Department of Education at the end of each quarter.

Impact of inspections:

Existing inspection impact processes include:

- publication of inspection reports
- publication of composite inspection data in the Chief Inspector's Report, the Annual Report of the Department of Education, and in thematic reports which inform policy
- commitment in the [Code of Practice for the Inspectorate](#) to respectful engagement with others in the course of its work, thereby promoting professional dialogue and action by schools and education settings on inspection advice
- post-inspection surveys of teachers, principals, and chairs of boards of management and parents' associations to gather their views about school inspection
- follow-through inspections and implementation of follow up processes under the oversight of the Inspectorate's School Improvement Monitoring Group and the Department of Education's School Improvement Group (See below).

Quality assurance of inspections

The Inspectorate uses a range of mechanisms to ensure that its work is conducted to the highest professional standards and that its judgements are valid and reliable. These include internal quality assurance mechanisms and the use of external evidence.

Internal quality assurance mechanisms include:

- publication of the standards and procedures that the Inspectorate is committed to in its work
- the recruitment of inspectors from among highly qualified, experienced teachers, using a multi-stage recruitment and interview process
- the development of comprehensive training, induction and mentoring programmes to develop and maintain evaluation expertise among serving inspectors
- investment in the long-term professional development of inspectors, including the funding of post-graduate study and research by inspectors relating to the work of the Inspectorate
- development of inspection activities and models through collaboration with school and setting stakeholders, and drawing on research, practice in other Inspectorates, and the outcomes of trials in schools and settings
- supporting inspectors in their work through comprehensive internal guidance and data collection systems
- comprehensive editing and quality assurance of inspection reports prior to publication.

Mechanisms used by the Inspectorate to capture external perspectives on its work include:

- inclusion of responses that the Inspectorate invites from inspected schools in its published inspection reports
- surveys of teachers, principals, chairpersons of boards of management and parent associations following the completion of whole-school inspections in schools
- [procedures in place to facilitate formal reviews of inspections](#) in response to requests from teachers and early years educators, as well as owner-managers and boards of management who are dissatisfied with an inspection
- the use of external experts to review aspects of the Inspectorate's work.

In accordance with the Inspectorate's internal Quality Assurance Action Plan, the focus in the next three years will be on promoting a culture where inspectors:

- continually reflect on their own inspections
- view themselves as an integral part of an effective team
- support and challenge their colleagues through respectful professional engagements around the quality of inspections.

Additional internal strategies for assuring that inspections are of good quality will include:

- team review
- peer review
- review of inspection files.

Additional external strategies for assuring that inspections are of good quality will include:

- greater and improved opportunities for stakeholder feedback on inspections, particularly that of students and parents
- engagement of other Inspectorates and agencies in reviewing, in a developmental way, inspection processes and reports.

2. Evaluation process

Self-evaluation

In Ireland, school self-evaluation is designed as a process of collaborative, internal school review that is focused on school improvement.

The document, [School Self-evaluation: Next Steps 2022-2026](#) which includes Department of Education Circular 0056/2022 sets out what is required of schools in relation to school self-evaluation during the period September 2022 - June 2026.

Schools are required to prepare a concise three-year plan that enables them to address context-specific school priorities related to teaching, learning, equity and inclusion as well as national priorities, such as those relating to wellbeing and curriculum.

Schools are also required to prepare an annual report and improvement plan that is shared with all members of school board of management and staff. Schools are also required to share the main points of the report and improvement plan with parents and pupils/students.

During inspections, inspectors

- take account of the outcomes of school self-evaluation when making judgements and recommendations
- evaluate and report on the effectiveness of schools' engagement with the school self-evaluation process, including how school self-evaluation is reflected in teachers' practice and in pupils/students' learning in the classroom.

Going forward, the Inspectorate intends to strengthen the complementarity of internal evaluation by schools and external evaluation.

Focus of inspection

Most inspections focus on the quality of teaching, learning and student achievement. Some inspections, for example child protection and safeguarding inspections, have more of a compliance focus. Depending on the inspection model, inspections may also evaluate the quality of support for students, the quality of action planning for improvement and the quality of leadership and management.

All primary and post-primary inspections include a review of compliance of schools and education settings with aspects of child protection regulations and anti-bullying procedures. Inspections may also include a review of compliance with regulations relating to other areas such as enrolment and the deployment of resources. The Inspectorate does not examine the finances of a school but may comment as necessary on whether the school has the necessary processes in place to manage finances.

During inspections, inspectors rely on evidence from a range of different sources. The majority of inspectors' time during inspection is spent observing teaching and learning in the classroom. Inspectors also interact with students as a normal part of inspection activity.

Depending on the model of inspection, sources of evidence also include meetings and interviews with school stakeholders, review of school policy and planning documents, and surveys completed by teachers, parents or students.

In all inspections, inspectors are required to take context factors such as school size, location, socio-economic circumstance of the students and community into consideration.

Inspection framework

Inspections in primary and post-primary schools are informed by [Looking at Our School 2022 - A Quality Framework](#). Looking at our School sets out clear, definable standards in two dimensions: teaching and learning and leadership and management. This framework also informs school self-evaluation. The standards are not intended as prescriptive formulae for standardisation or as a checklist of mandatory requirements. They are written in a way that respects the professional autonomy of the inspector, the teacher and school leader to make a judgement on quality.

There is a separate Quality Framework for Early Years Inspections which is included in the published [Guide to Early Years Education Inspections](#). This framework incorporates the key elements of best practice in early education under four broad areas:

- The quality of the context to support children's learning and development
- The quality of the processes to support children's learning and development

- The quality of children’s learning experiences and achievements
- The quality of management and leadership for learning.

Key outcomes and signposts for best practice are identified for each of the four broad areas.

Inspection time and resources

The inspection type determines the length of time the inspection takes, the activities undertaken in the course of the inspection and the number of inspectors involved. Typically, the core inspection activity in schools takes between one and five days. For example, unannounced inspections and follow-through inspections take place over one day, curriculum or subject inspections take one to two days and whole-school evaluations take up to five days.

One inspector normally carries out unannounced inspections, curriculum evaluations, subject inspections and follow-through inspections, while whole-school evaluations can involve between one and three inspectors, depending on the size of the school. In some very large post-primary schools, additional inspectors may be assigned to the inspection to ensure that a sufficient sample of learning settings is observed.

All entrants to the Inspectorate are required to have a first- or second-class honours primary degree, a recognised teaching qualification and at least five years’ teaching or early years education experience. At primary level, entrants are required to have competence in the Irish language. At post-primary level, entrants are required to have a first- or second-class honours degree in the relevant subject on the post-primary curriculum.

Many of those recruited to the Inspectorate are extended professionals who have invested a lot of time into their professional development and post-graduate studies. Entrants include principals, and individuals who have worked in education support agencies, third level institutions and in industry. They may also have experience and expertise in aspects of education that were identified as desirable at the point of recruitment, for example, leadership, special educational needs and information and communication technology.

Frequency of inspections

In planning its annual inspection programme, the Inspectorate adopts a proportionate risk-based approach to inspection planning which is based on a range of criteria in relation to schools. These criteria include the inspection history of individual schools, the medium of instruction in the school, the findings of previous inspections such as unannounced inspections, and other relevant information received by the Department and the Inspectorate about the school. This includes data such as performance in state certificate examinations, student attendance and student retention data.

Having a range of inspection models enables the Inspectorate to make inspection more responsive to need. Information from shorter inspections is an important factor in planning on a risk basis where more intensive inspections such as whole-school evaluations may need to be deployed. It has also helped to ensure that inspections occur more frequently in schools.

An inspection visit is conducted in primary and special schools at least once in four years, on average. Typically, an inspection visit is conducted in post-primary schools at least once in two years.

While the programme of inspection includes schools identified through the Inspectorate's risk analysis procedures as likely to benefit from external evaluation, schools at all levels of quality performance are included. This also allows the Inspectorate to recognise, affirm and disseminate very good and exemplary practice across the educational system through the publication of inspection reports.

Non-inspection activities

Within the provisions of the Education Act 1998, the Inspectorate has responsibilities other than inspection. The Inspectorate's key responsibility in this regard involves the provision of advice to the Minister of Education and policy makers within the Department of Education on matters relating to educational policy and provision, including the curriculum taught in recognised schools, assessment and teaching methods, teacher education, the Irish language and special education. Much of this advice to policy makers and the Minister is based on the outcomes of inspection and research conducted by the Inspectorate, and it may involve the provision of thematic reports.

The Inspectorate also performs important administrative functions on behalf of the Department, including participation on committees hearing appeals against the decision of a school to permanently exclude, suspend or refuse to enrol a student in accordance with Section 29 of the Education Act 1998.

The Inspectorate represents the Department of Education on national bodies including the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the National Council for Special Education and the Teaching Council. The Inspectorate also represents the Department of Education on international bodies such as the Board of Governors of the European Schools and various OECD committees.

3. Consequences of inspection

Reporting

In accordance with the published [Guidelines for the Publication of School Inspection Reports \(2015\)](#), the Inspectorate publishes [school inspection reports](#) for all types of inspection types, apart from unannounced inspections, on the website of the Department of Education. The publication of school inspection reports makes the findings and recommendations of inspections available to all members of the school community and to the wider public.

Making reports publicly available achieves a number of purposes, including encouraging school self-review and development and ensuring a wider dissemination of good practice in and among schools and education settings. It is also intended that published inspection reports will provide authoritative and balanced information on the effectiveness of schools and education settings, and provide valuable information to parents, prospective parents, and learners.

Grading

The Inspectorate does not assign overall ratings to individual schools or education settings.

Published inspection reports contain clear evaluative statements about the quality of provision in the main dimensions of the school or education setting's work such as teaching

and learning, leadership and management, and support for students. These evaluative statements are informed by the language of the Quality Continuum used by the Inspectorate to report inspection judgements.

The five levels of the Quality Continuum are: *Excellent; Very good; Good; Requires improvement to achieve a good standard; Requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard*. (A table of the Quality Continuum is included in the published guides to [early years education inspections](#), [primary inspections](#), [post-primary inspections](#) and [inspections in special care units](#)).

Each level in the Quality Continuum is accompanied by:

- a **descriptor** that describes the quality of provision for the level and identifies the action needed for a school or education setting to move to the next level
- **descriptive terms** with a wider range of language that inspectors can use when providing feedback and writing reports.

Each published inspection report includes a table of the Quality Continuum. Using the levels of the continuum, inspectors record their judgements of the key areas of provision on the Inspectorate's central Inspection Management Information System (IMIS).

The Inspectorate does not employ reward or sanctioning mechanisms arising from an inspection. Follow-up monitoring processes are employed where serious deficiencies have been identified in the work of an individual school or education setting (See below).

Sharing inspection findings

The findings of inspection are shared through the publication of the [Chief Inspector's reports](#). These reports provide an analysis of, and reflection on, the quality of education provision in schools and other education settings in Ireland during given periods.

The findings of inspection are also shared through the publication of [thematic reports](#) on aspects of educational provision including literacy and numeracy, provision for children with special educational needs, and provision for children and young people living in areas of disadvantage. These thematic reports play an important role in informing educational policy and national strategies.

What happens following an inspection?

While responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the recommendations and improvements in an inspection report rests mainly with the management of schools and education settings, there are a number of follow up actions in place that help to ensure that schools and education settings act on the recommendations of inspections and to increase the impact of inspection for improvement.

- Published inspection reports include a written response, if provided, from the school or education setting outlining what it will do to address the recommendations for improvement in the report.
- As part of its annual inspection programme, the Inspectorate carries out follow-through inspections in a sample of schools, including schools where significant

difficulties were identified, to establish the progress that has been made in implementing the recommendations of the previous inspection.

- In a small number of schools that are experiencing significant difficulty, further supports are provided to ensure that they bring about the required improvements in aspects of their provision. This support is provided through two processes:
 - ***School Improvement Monitoring*** which is led by the Inspectorate, and initiated for schools where significant weaknesses relating mainly to teaching and learning were noted during an inspection and are likely to be addressed through bespoke engagements with the Inspectorate. Typical engagements include support and advisory visits, the conduct of specific types of inspection, and support in relation to action planning for improvement.
 - the ***School Improvement Group*** which is led by the Department's School Governance Section and includes representatives of the Inspectorate and officials from other Department sections. This group provides a co-ordinated approach to supporting schools where significant weaknesses in provision are identified, particularly in relation to school leadership and management. This process involves direct engagement with the representatives of school boards of management, trustees or patrons of schools as appropriate.

As part of the above processes, individual schools are asked to provide action plans and progress reports relating to the implementation of recommendations in inspection reports. Schools experiencing difficulty may also avail of support from the professional support service for teachers.