



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling

Inspection visits designed to advise and support
on creating a safe learning and working
environment for all

Inspectorate
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Contents

1) Introduction	3
1.1) School staff and communities have made extraordinary efforts to ensure schools remain open successfully in the COVID-19 context	3
1.2) The Inspectorate is supporting the safe operation of schools	3
2) Aims of the SSPS visits	4
3) The initial approach – working together	5
4) Procedures and key features	6
5) Framework of checks	7
6) Overview of activities during the SSPS	9
7) Child protection monitoring	10
8) Follow up by the Department’s School Governance Section	10

1) Introduction

1.1) School staff and communities have made extraordinary efforts to ensure schools remain open successfully in the COVID-19 context

The safe and sustainable operation of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic is a national priority. Ensuring that schools are safe learning and working environments for all is vital. The Department of Education has issued detailed guidance to all schools to support this. The guidance is based on the advice provided by health authorities, including the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) and is subject to ongoing review. It has been customised for schools in consultation with the education partners. It provides key messages to minimise the risk of COVID-19 for staff, pupils/students, families and the wider community while recognising the importance of sustaining the operation of schools for the health and wellbeing of pupils/students and of society as a whole.

1.2) The Inspectorate is supporting the safe operation of schools

The Inspectorate is committed to supporting and advising schools as they provide for teaching and learning. Circular 40/2020 (Primary) and 41/2020 (Post-Primary) issued to schools in June 2020 set out how the Inspectorate would engage with schools to support teaching, learning and the safe operation of schools in the 2020/21 school year.

The Inspectorate is playing a role in supporting schools in implementing the guidelines issued by the Department and also in providing assurance to the public that schools are a safe working and learning environment for all. The Inspectorate is doing this in a number of ways:

- Through conducting a programme of advisory sessions with schools designed to support the implementation of the Department's advice to schools
- Through carrying out a programme of inspection visits to schools¹ to provide advice and support in the implementation of the Department's guidelines relating to creating a safe learning and working environment for all in line with our commitments under Circular 40/2020 (Primary) and 41/2020 (Post-Primary).
- Through conducting focus groups, surveys and advisory groups with primary and post-primary children and young people. These engagements have provided unique insights into learners' experience of school since September 2020.

The insights gleaned from advisory sessions, inspection visits and surveys of children and young adults are contributing in a real way to the ongoing development and refinement of Department policy and guidelines for schools.

¹ Throughout this guide, the term 'school' is used to refer to schools, centres for education and other learning settings. The term 'principal' includes centre coordinators.

This guide sets out how the Inspectorate undertakes the second of these tasks. It describes how the Inspectorate developed, in cooperation with schools, a way in which the Inspectorate can recognise the efforts that schools are making to provide safe working and learning environments, advise school leaders of best practice, and monitor and report on the challenges and successes for schools in providing a safe learning and working environment while dealing with COVID-19.

2) Aims of the SSPS visits

The aims of the SSPS visits are to:

- Support school leaders and boards of management as they implement the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Primary Schools, Special Schools and Post-Primary Schools²
- Help the Department to understand the challenges of implementation, given the varied context of Irish schools
- Provide an assurance that the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Primary Schools, Special Schools and Post-Primary Schools is being implemented by school authorities
- Report to School Governance Section of the Department on the extent to which the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Primary Schools, Special Schools and Post-Primary Schools is implemented in the sample of schools inspected
- Fulfil the Inspectorate's commitments under Circular 40/2020 and 41/2020 and the Memorandum of Understanding between the Health and Safety Authority and the Department of Education.

² Initially published as the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable Reopening of Primary Schools, Special Schools and Post-Primary Schools.

3) The initial approach – working together

When developmental work began on this model in September 2020 the Inspectorate recognised that all schools were learning and adjusting as they recommenced teaching and learning in schools in ways that were safe for pupils / students, their families and the teachers and other staff who work in the school.

The Inspectorate also recognised that it had to develop suitable and effective ways to:

- Recognise and affirm best practice in implementing the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of schools issued by the Department to schools
- Identify instances where guidance is not being adequately implemented and provide advice to support the board of management, the principal, the lead worker representative(s) and the staff of schools about how this might be addressed
- Identify where guidance is proving difficult to implement, so that this information may be provided to both the Department and to stakeholders in a timely manner
- Provide assurance to health authorities, to the Department, the education partners, the wider school community and the general public that the Department's guidance to schools is being implemented by schools.

As an initial step, a framework of checks was used by inspectors to monitor how schools were implementing their COVID-19 response plans. Those checks were based on the Department's COVID -19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools.

In consultation with the education partners, two separate trials of the inspection visits were conducted in a total of 73 primary schools, post-primary schools and centres for education in September and October. During these trials, inspectors used the framework of checks and discussed them and their findings with the principal of each school. Feedback was provided to the principal and to the lead worker representative(s) at the end of the visit. A copy of the completed record of findings in respect of each check was also provided to the principal to support his/her work in implementing the Department's guidance in the school.

The trial visits facilitated the adjustment of the framework of checks in the following ways:

- Clarifying some of the indicators
- Removing duplications in others
- Including indicators that focus on measures put in place outside of classrooms but within the school environment.

The Inspectorate also engaged with Schools Governance Section of the Department on the findings of the trial visits and provided feedback on the extent to which the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Primary Schools Special Schools

and Post-Primary Schools is being implemented in the sample of schools visited and on any emerging challenges.

Aggregated data from the visits was also provided to the Health and Safety Authority and feedback from that authority and changes in health advice were also kept under review. The overall findings from the visits were generally positive. Most schools showed a high level of compliance and the instances of non-compliance were subsequently rectified by the school. During the trial phase the Inspectorate further engaged with stakeholder organisations to inform them of the findings from the trial, to listen to their observations and suggestions, and to discuss the next steps in the trial.

This Guide has been developed following that engagement with the education stakeholders and sets out how *Supporting the Safe Provision of Schools* (SSPS) inspection visits are conducted.

4) Procedures and key features

Normally, the inspector contacts the school principal the day before the visit is to take place. In some instances, a visit may be unannounced.

Typically an SSPS visit takes 1.5 - 2 hours.

In scheduling a programme of visits inspectors vary the times of visits to ensure that they are present in different schools at various times during the school day.

During the SSPS visits the inspector enquires into ten specific areas of the Department's COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Primary Schools, Special Schools and Post-Primary Schools. Each of these areas has a number of indicators that enables the inspector to determine if the school is fully implementing that aspect of the Response Plan. The aspects and indicators are outlined below.

The inspector discusses the findings with the school principal and Lead Worker Representative(s) at the end of the visit.

A report from the inspection visit is published in accordance with the *Guidelines for the Publication of Inspection Reports* (September 2015).

5) Framework of checks

The Framework of checks for the inspection visits is based on the Department's COVID-19 Response Plan for the Safe and Sustainable Reopening of Schools. That response plan is, in turn, aligned with advice and regulations set out by the Health and Safety Authority for all workplaces.

The checks are grouped into four main areas:

1. Planning
2. Appointment of a Lead Worker Representative (LWR)
3. Provision of staff training
4. Implementation of control measures

Each main area has a number of checks; these are the specific actions that a school should take in relation to each area. The areas and checks are shown on the table below.

PLANNING	
1	The school has a COVID-19 policy ³ in place
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The policy contains, at a minimum, the commitments set out in Appendix 1 of the COVID -19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools
b.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is evidence that the policy was shared with staff, pupils/students and parents
c.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school principal and Lead Worker Representative (LWR) confirm that they are familiar with the revised COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Post-Primary / Primary and Special Schools
2	The school has updated its health and safety risk assessment to identify the hazards and outlining the relevant control measures associated with COVID-19
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school's risk assessment includes COVID-19 as a risk and identifies associated control measures
APPOINTMENT OF A LEAD WORKER REPRESENTATIVE	
3	The school has appointed a Lead Worker Representative
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The name of LWR(s) is available⁴
b.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The members of school staff that were spoken to during the visit were aware of the identity of the LWR
c.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A discussion with LWR(s) shows that he/she is aware of the role and responsibilities of a LWR(s) as outlined in Appendix 8 of the COVID -19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools
d.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The LWR(s) confirms that he/she has completed training for LWRs
e.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The LWR confirmed that (s)he receives protected time, in line with DE guidelines, to enable them to carry out their duties in that role

³ This may be referred to as the school's COVID-19 Response Plan

⁴ In post-primary schools with more than 40 staff, a second Lead Worker Representative should be appointed. In schools with two LWRs inspectors should meet with **both LWRs** where possible. In primary schools with less than 30 staff, a Deputy lead Worker Representative will be appointed in addition to the LWR.

In schools with 30 or more staff and in all Special Schools, an Assistant Lead Worker Representative will be appointed in addition to the LWR

PROVISION FOR STAFF TRAINING	
4	The school has ensured that staff have reviewed the training materials provided by the Department of Education
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The members of school staff that were spoken to during the visit confirm that they have completed relevant training
5	All staff have completed a Return to Work (RTW) form
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The principal confirmed that all staff have completed a RTW form
b.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The members of school staff that were spoken to during the visit confirmed that they completed a RTW form
CONTROL MEASURES	
6	The school has procedures in place for dealing with a suspected case of COVID-19 in line with the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school principal and the LWR are aware of the procedures for dealing with a suspected case
b.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An isolation area is ready
c.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact telephone numbers for parents are available
d.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school has a supply of PPE available
7	The school has displayed posters and other signage to prevent introduction and spread of COVID-19
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is visual evidence of posters and signage throughout the school
8	The school has made changes to the school and classroom layout to support physical distancing and to facilitate ongoing cleaning of the school in line with section 5.4 of the Department guidelines
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is visual evidence of reconfigured classrooms that take account of the minimum physical distancing requirements
b.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A sanitising station is available at the main entry and exit points to the school
c.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sanitising stations are available at regular intervals throughout the school
d.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers, other staff and students wear face coverings in line with current DE guidance/requirements
e.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visitors to the school are requested to wear face coverings
f.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school has measures in place to decrease interaction and increase physical distancing outside of classrooms
g.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrangements are in place to facilitate physical distancing in the staff room
h.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are measures in place for good ventilation that take account of current DE guidance/requirements
9	The school has made necessary arrangements to limit access to the school to necessary visitors and maintain records of contacts to the school
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A contact Log is maintained for visitors
10	The school principal confirmed that enhanced cleaning arrangements that reflect the Department's guidance are in place

6) Overview of activities during the SSPS

BEFORE THE SSPS VISIT	Inspectorate Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide schools with a short courtesy phone call indicating when the inspector is planning to visit the school⁵. • Outline the documents required for the visit and establish if they can be viewed electronically • E-mail the school contact form to the school • Outline the engagements to be held during the visit • Enquire as to the school's protocols for receiving visitors to the school • Assure the principal that he/she has complied fully with all Department guidelines for visiting schools • E-mail the self-declaration details to principal
	School Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete school contact form and return to inspector • Ensure that all necessary documents are available for the visit • Make the necessary practical arrangements for the engagements
DURING THE SSPS VISIT	Inspectorate Activity	Review: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 Policy Statement • COVID-19 risk assessment • School's contact log⁶
		Engage with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Lead worker representative(s) • Selection of staff members⁷
		Observe: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical distancing arrangements in selection of classrooms, social areas etc. • COVID-19 signage • Sanitising units • Isolation area • PPE equipment • Staff room • A selection of areas outside of classrooms
		Child Protection Checks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct level one child protection checks
		Complete inspector's contact tracing log

⁵ Normally, this call should take place on the day prior to a visit. The Inspectorate reserves the right to conduct unannounced SSPSs.

⁶ This is checked through the inspector completing the contact log on or prior to arrival at the school

⁷ The inspector selects the staff members with whom (s)he will engage and the classrooms and other areas that (s)he will visit

		Feedback: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide feedback to principal and lead worker representative(s) at the end of the visit
AFTER THE VISIT	Inspectorate Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue of draft report for factual verification and for school response • Publication of the final report on the Department website
	School Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up on any aspects highlighted during the feedback • Response at factual verification and school response stage, if relevant

7) Child protection monitoring

During a SSPS visit the inspector conducts level one child protection monitoring as follows:

1. The name of the DLP and the child safeguarding statement are prominently displayed near the main door of the school / in the reception area
2. The school's child safeguarding statement has been ratified by the board and includes an annual review and a risk assessment
3. All teachers visited reported that they have read the school's child safeguarding statement and that they are aware of their responsibilities as a mandated person

8) Follow up by the Department's School Governance Section

The Department of Education's School Governance Section is responsible for following up and supporting individual schools. The Inspectorate will share the reports from individual schools where aspects of the guidelines are not being fully implemented with School Governance Section.

If required, School Governance may request the Inspectorate to conduct a follow-up visit to such schools.

Where the inspector becomes aware of resourcing issues regarding sanitising, PPE, enhanced cleaning, supervision and substitution, these will be communicated to School Governance without delay.

Where the inspector becomes aware of planning and building issues these will also be communicated to the Planning and Building Unit via School Governance without delay.