



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Guide to Evaluations of Settings funded by the Department of Education other than Recognised Schools

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education (DE) works to improve the quality of learning for children and young people in Irish schools, early learning and care settings, centres for education, community training settings and other settings. All evaluations are carried out in accordance with section 7(2)(b) and section 13(3)(a)(i) of the *Education Act 1998*.

Settings other than recognised schools are settings that provide education to children and young people and are in receipt of funding from the Department of Education. These settings include Life Settings and Line Projects. Each year a number of settings may be included in the Inspectorate's annual programme of inspection.

1.2 Purpose of this guide

This guide was developed following consultation with the education partners and sets out the approach to evaluations in settings funded by the Department of Education other than recognised schools.

All evaluations are carried out in accordance with the *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate* (2022) available at [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie). During the evaluation, the management of the setting and its staff are obliged to accord the inspectors "every reasonable facility and co-operation" in the performance of their duties (Section 13(7), Education Act 1998).

1.3 The aim of external evaluation

External evaluations are designed to promote improvement in settings. They provide an external perspective on the work of the setting. Inspectors and inspection reports provide judgements on the quality of provision in a setting, affirm the aspects of practice that are working well and help to inform and complement the setting's own self-evaluation and quality assurance or self-reflection processes. Recommendations in inspection reports provide important direction for the setting as it seeks to bring about ongoing improvement.

The purpose of the external evaluation is to:

- provide assurance of the quality of provision in the setting in the context of use of public funds
- affirm good practice and to promote improvement, with a focus on teaching and learning, and governance, leadership and management

- ensure that all aspects of provision meet the individual and ongoing developmental needs of the young people
- promote self-evaluation and improvement in the setting.

External evaluations support co-professional engagement between learning practitioners¹ and the inspector. During these evaluations, the majority of the inspector's time is typically given to direct observation of training, teaching and learning in learning settings, with a view to assessing the quality of provision and supporting improvement. The inspector's feedback to the learning practitioner and to the setting should enhance professional reflection and self-evaluation, and ultimately improve outcomes.

During evaluations, inspectors also provide opportunities for professional dialogue with the setting co-ordinator² on matters of particular relevance to the work of the setting.

1.4 Key principles that inform inspections

The Inspectorate is focused on ensuring that children and young people in settings receive the best possible education in light of their potential and their learning needs.

Inspectors are committed to carrying out inspections in ways that provide real opportunities to affirm good practice and to provide practical advice to individual learning practitioners, to setting co-ordinators and to management authorities with the ultimate aim of improving learning experiences and outcomes for children and young people.

The work of the Inspectorate is underpinned by four key principles:

1. A focus on the young people in the education setting
2. Development and improvement
3. Respectful engagement
4. Responsibility and accountability

These key principles, described in detail in the [Code of Practice for the Department of Education Inspectorate \(2022\)](#) provide the standards that inform, guide and govern the Inspectorate's work.

¹ The term learning practitioner is an agreed term used in this guide to refer to any adult involved in teaching and / or training activities within a setting

² The term co-ordinator is used in this guide to refer to the person with responsibility for the day-to-day management of the setting

1.5 The evaluation framework

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education has published a number of quality frameworks: *Looking at Our School 2023: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*, and *Looking at Our Centre 2023: A Quality Framework for Centres of Education and Community Training Centres*. These frameworks are designed to ensure that internal and external evaluation processes are complementary and, to that end, are used by inspectors to inform their work as they monitor and report on the quality of provision for children and young people. The evaluation framework for evaluations of settings funded by the Department of Education other than recognised schools will draw on the most appropriate quality framework for the setting. In all cases, the evaluation will focus on teaching and learning, leadership and management and relationships between the setting and the wider community. In designing the lines of enquiry for each evaluation, inspectors will be particularly conscious to establish the extent to which the setting is meeting the needs of the young people who attend it, the extent to which the setting is well managed and the quality of the links established by the setting with the wider community and with other education settings.

Teaching and learning	Leadership and management	Community relationships, including links with other education settings
The learning experiences of young people in the setting The outcomes attained by young people in the setting Learning practitioners' individual practice Learning practitioners' collective practice	Governance Leading teaching and learning Organisation and leadership Leading setting development	Relationship between the setting and schools and further education settings to support continuity in educational experiences Relationship between the setting and Department support services and community-based statutory and voluntary services to support coherence in provision for young people Relationship between the setting and local businesses and workplaces to support the experience and progression of young people

2. Evaluation Activities

2.1 Overview of evaluation activities

Before the evaluation	Notification	Typically, five days' notification of the evaluation by phone call followed by email. The Inspectorate reserves the right to conduct unannounced inspections in these settings
	Inspectorate activity	<p>Liaising between Inspectorate and setting co-ordinator to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish a broad outline of evaluation activities • outline the engagements to be held during the visit • provide suggested wording for and links to online surveys for the setting to issue to parents/guardians, staff and young people, if relevant • seek timetable information to support planning for the in-setting week <p>Email the setting information form to the setting co-ordinator.</p>
	Setting activity	Setting co-ordinator completes setting information form and returns it with required documentation and timetables to reporting inspector
During the evaluation visit	Inspectorate activity	Checking compliance with the requirements of <i>Children First 2015</i>
		<p>Meeting with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting management • staff • young people • parents/guardians
		Observation of teaching and learning
		Interaction with young people and review of their work
		<p>Review of documents and assessment data; for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting improvement plans • Plans for teaching and learning • Individual support plans • Policies and procedures as outlined in section 2.3.2
After the evaluation	Inspectorate activity	Post-evaluation meetings with setting management
		Collated survey data, if available, shared with the setting
		Draft report issued to the co-ordinator, chairperson of the management authority and CEO of the ETB where relevant, for factual verification and for setting response
	Setting activity	Draft report reviewed for factual verification
		Setting may submit a response to the report
	Inspectorate activity	Publication of the report on gov.ie

2.2 Before the evaluation

2.2.1 Notice

Settings are typically given five days' notice of an evaluation. The notification is made by phone call, followed by email. The notification is copied by email to the chief executive of the relevant ETB and the chair of the management authority, where relevant.

Following the official notification, the reporting inspector contacts the setting co-ordinator to outline the format of the evaluation, to arrange meetings, and to clarify any specific issues.

The Inspectorate reserves the right to conduct these inspections without prior notification.

2.2.2 Documents

The setting information form

The setting co-ordinator is requested to complete a setting information form in electronic format. When notification is provided, the completed form should be returned to the reporting inspector by email as soon as possible following its receipt.

2.2.3 Surveys

Surveys may be used to gather the perspectives of parents/guardians³, young people and staff on aspects of the work of the centres. If used during an evaluation, the various surveys will be conducted online. The following procedures apply when surveys are used:

- The inspector sends links for each of the surveys to the setting co-ordinator.
- The inspector provides sample wording that the co-ordinator could use when communicating about the surveys to various parties.
- Centre co-ordinators send the survey links via text message to all parents/guardians, young people and staff of the centre.

The survey results provide an insight into the performance and operation of the centre. Information gained from the analysis of survey results may be referred to in the inspection report, but detailed statistical information is not included. A summary of the aggregated data is provided to the centre; no individual is identifiable from the survey results.

³ Surveys are only administered to parents/guardians of young people under the age of eighteen

2.3 During the evaluation

This section describes the range of activities undertaken during the evaluation. In conducting the evaluation, inspectors take account of the context and circumstances of the setting. In light of this, inspectors will, within the guidelines and the principles set out in the [Code of Practice for the Department of Education Inspectorate \(2022\)](#), have reasonable flexibility to exercise professional judgement on the range of activities that will be carried out during the evaluation. The evaluation typically takes place over three days and is conducted by two inspectors.

2.3.1 Meetings and interviews

During the evaluation, meetings and interviews are held to gather information and evidence to inform the evaluation.

Meetings typically take place with:

- Senior management of the setting
- Setting co-ordinator
- Learning practitioners
- Group of parents
- Group of young people

Additional meetings may be convened by the inspectors, if deemed necessary.

These meetings provide the inspectors with an insight into the experience of day-to-day life in the centre from a range of perspectives. The Inspectorate takes a rights-based and strengths-based approach in meeting with young people during inspection. A rights-respecting approach acknowledges young people's fundamental right to be part of every decision that affects them as a matter of principle. It takes their views seriously, bearing in mind their age and maturity, and recognises the unique and invaluable contribution that they can make to the inspection process. To help young people understand what an inspection is and how meetings transact, the Inspectorate has put together some resources for young people, parents and educators. They are available [here](#).

2.3.2 Visits to learning settings

Inspectors evaluate learning and teaching in a number of lessons. The daily schedule of lesson observations is provided to the setting co-ordinator at the beginning of each day. The focus of these observations is not limited to specific subject areas and lessons are selected from across the curriculum offered in the setting.

Lesson observations focus primarily on evaluating the quality of learning and teaching, with a particular focus on the extent to which learning and teaching approaches and activities are

meeting the needs of young people. As lessons vary in duration, nature and style, inspection methods also vary in order to obtain evidence upon which to base judgments about learning and teaching. The inspector engages with young people about their learning during visits to learning settings.

Oral feedback is provided to individual learning practitioners at the end of lessons or at another time during the in-setting evaluation. The feedback relates to the overall quality of learning and teaching in the lesson. Observed good practice is acknowledged and affirmed and recommendations for improvement are made, where appropriate.

2.3.3 Documents

While the evaluation focuses principally on the work of the setting as it transacts daily, inspectors examine a small number of documents during the evaluation. The documents reviewed vary depending on the setting, but typical include:

- Literacy and Numeracy policy
- Records of attainment
- Information on transfer and progression
- Learning practitioner individual planning documents (termly/yearly)

An inspector may also request additional documents or records which are relevant to the evaluation.

2.3.4 Evaluating professional practice

While evaluations of settings involve an evaluation of the professional practice of learning practitioners and the quality of learning facilitated, the inspection process is not a professional competence inspection. However, where an inspector has serious concerns about the quality of learning and teaching in an individual lesson observed, those concerns will be shared with the co-ordinator and the learning practitioner as part of the feedback provided.

Where concerns relate to management and/or leadership in the setting, they are shared with the co-ordinator as part of the feedback provided.

2.3.5 Compliance with Children First 2015

All settings funded by the Department are required to complete a Child Protection Self-Assurance form and submit it to Social Inclusion Unit of the Department of Education. Prior to the inspection, inspectors will seek a copy of this form from SIU.

During the evaluation, the inspectors may seek confirmatory evidence in relation to particular aspects of the Self-Assurance Form:

2.3.6 Unsolicited Communication

Unsolicited communications are pieces of information that have been brought to the attention of the Inspectorate but have not been sought, requested or invited. They may be in written or verbal form, signed or anonymous. The Inspectorate considers and responds to all unsolicited communications received before and/or during inspections in line with its statutory and other procedural obligations if such communications are relevant to the particular evaluation framework or model of evaluation.

In responding to unsolicited communications, the Inspectorate is committed to maintaining its objectivity and impartiality and treating those who provide unsolicited communication and those who are the subject of the unsolicited communication fairly. It is also committed to taking account of all sources of evidence and not giving undue weight to any particular source of information. If the unsolicited communication is of relevance to the evaluation, the Inspectorate will share the substance of the communication with the subject of the communication during the evaluation and allow them a reasonable opportunity to provide a response.

A record will be kept of all information provided. While the Inspectorate will respect confidences when receiving information, it cannot, in every circumstance, guarantee the absolute confidentiality of the information provided, or the anonymity of the individual person or persons providing the information. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed because a right of response may necessitate the provision of relevant information to a third party, including the identity of the person providing the information.

2.3.7 Records management

Records relating to inspections are processed in accordance with the Department of Education records management procedures and its [Data Protection Policy](#).

2.4 Following the evaluation

2.4.1 Feedback meetings

The inspectors review the evidence collected and draft the key findings and recommendations arising from the evaluation. The inspectors return to the setting⁴ to present and discuss the draft findings and recommendations with key setting personnel to include:

⁴ Typically within a week of the completion of the visit to the setting evaluation

- The setting co-ordinator
- The management authorities
- Setting staff

These meetings provide an opportunity for discussion of the outcomes of the inspection and are an important part of the evaluation process. They allow for communication of the draft findings of the evaluation and provide opportunities for clarification.

2.4.2 The inspection report

A draft inspection report is finalised following the completion of the feedback meetings. The report presents the key findings and recommendations arising from the evaluation. It is processed through the normal quality assurance procedures of the Inspectorate and is issued to the setting for factual verification and later for setting response as prescribed in [Guidelines for the Publication of School Inspection Reports \(2015\)](#).

2.4.3 Publication of the inspection report

The finalised report and the setting's response are published on the website of the Department of Education (www.gov.ie).

2.4.4 Acting on the inspection report

The management authorities of the setting, as part of their agenda for improvement, should discuss the findings and recommendations in the evaluation report and should plan for and oversee the implementation of the actions needed to address the report's recommendations. The setting should use the report, along with other types of evidence gathered by the setting, to inform its self-evaluation processes and its planning for improvement and development.

Responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the recommendations and improvements in a report rests mainly with the management authorities of the setting.

The Inspectorate and other divisions of the Department of Education may monitor the implementation of recommendations in selected settings and in the system generally. The degree to which progress has been made on the implementation of recommendations in the report may be evaluated at a later date by the Inspectorate.

3. The Quality Continuum

In analysing and reporting on their findings, inspectors use a quality continuum. Examples of the language used in reports to describe the quality of practice in a setting with regard to the quality continuum are provided in *Table 1* below.

Level	Description	Examples of descriptive terms
Excellent	Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of learners. This provision provides an example for other schools and settings of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Excellent; exemplary; outstanding; exceptionally high standard; with very significant strengths
Very good	Provision that is very good is very effective in meeting the needs of learners and is of a very high standard. There is potential to build on existing strengths to achieve an excellent standard.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful
Good	Provision that is good is effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to build on existing strengths in order to address the aspects to be developed and achieve a very good standard.	Good; of good quality; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; strengths outweigh the shortcomings; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist
Requires improvement to achieve a good standard	Provision that requires improvement to achieve a good standard is not sufficiently effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is good or better.	Fair; less than effective; less than sufficient; evident weaknesses that are impacting on learning; experiencing difficulty; shortcomings outweigh strengths; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Requires significant improvement to achieve a	Provision that requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard is not meeting the needs of learners. There is immediate need for	Weak; poor; ineffective; insufficient; unacceptable; experiencing significant difficulties; serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated; requiring significant

good standard	significant action to address the areas of concern.	change, development and improvement to be effective
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Table 1: The quality continuum

4. Review of inspections

A learning practitioner or a board affected by an inspection may seek a review of the inspection using the procedures outlined in *Procedure for the Review of Inspections carried out by the Department of Education Inspectorate under Section 13(9) of the Education Act 1998 (2022)* which is available on the Department's website [here](#)