



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

A Guide to Inspections in Special Care Units and Children Detention Schools

Inspectorate
Revised July 2023

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education works to improve the quality of learning for children and young people in Irish schools, centres for education and other settings. Our work in schools and centres for education is designed to evaluate key aspects of the work of the school and centres for education and to promote school improvement. Inspections of schools at special care units (SCUs) and children detention centres (CDCs) are carried out in accordance with section 7(2)(b) and section 13(3)(a)(i) of the Education Act 1998.

This guide replaces the previous version of the guide (2013) which has been reviewed in the light of experience and in consultation with the education partners. It sets out the practices and procedures involved in the inspection of schools at SCUs and CDCs which are effective from September 2016. Inspections of schools at SCUs and CDCs are carried out in accordance with the *Code of Practice for the Department of Education Inspectorate (2022)* available [here](#). During these evaluations a school's board 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).

1.2 Rationale

This guide describes a specific model of inspection that is carried out in the schools attached to SCUs and CDCs. Given the particular vulnerability and high level needs of the children who attend these schools, the fact that all are in the residential care of the state, and the responsibility on the state to ensure that every reasonable effort is made to address their needs appropriately and effectively, the Inspectorate has committed to a programme of annual inspections of these schools in order to quality assure the education provided for the children, and to provide advice and support to the teachers, principals and the managements of the schools.

This model of inspection is designed to address the particular circumstances pertaining in these schools. Other inspection models such as incidental inspections, whole-school evaluations, subject inspections and thematic evaluations may also be used from time to time to complement this model. Separate guides are available for each of these inspection models.

The areas of enquiry for the inspection of schools at SCU and CDCs take into account the particular circumstances of the school, including the varied personal, social, and educational experiences of the students prior to placement in the SCU or CDC, which may impact on their participation, achievement and progression in school.

The model for inspections of schools attached to SCUs and CDCs is designed to fit the particular circumstances pertaining to the provision of education within these schools. The main purposes and features of these school inspections are;

- to monitor the quality and effectiveness of learning and teaching in the schools
- to affirm good practice in learning, teaching and support for students
- to support the development of self-reflective professional practice by school management and teachers, and
- to provide advice to teachers and school managements about the quality of the education provided in the school.

2. How are inspections of schools at SCUs and CDCs carried out?

2.1 Before the inspection visit

2.1.1 NOTICE

No advance notice of these inspections is provided to a school at a SCU or CDC. The unannounced nature of these inspections facilitates the evaluation of key aspects of the work of the school under the normal conditions of a regular school day. The inspection is generally conducted by a team of two or more inspectors. Inspection activities take place typically over two or three days. Additional time may be dedicated where the school is located in more than one setting. The in-school evaluation days need not be consecutive.

2.2 During the inspection visit

On arrival at the school, the inspectors introduce themselves to the principal and/or deputy principal (or other teacher in charge) and they explain the nature and purpose of the visit. The inspectors use this opportunity to become familiar with the school context, and to explain the format of the inspection. Arrangements are discussed with the principal for the administration of teacher questionnaires and for the organisation of meetings and visits to classrooms.

Typically, evaluation of learning and teaching is carried out on the first day of the inspection. The inspection team sets out a schedule for the first day of the inspection including the classes to be visited and liaises with the principal over the course of the day in relation to the arrangements for the other elements of the inspection. The inspectors discuss with the principal any timetabling or calendar issues which may influence the lessons and other learning activities that are to be inspected.

Normally inspectors do not make changes to the initial inspection plan, but if the need for alterations to the plan emerges later, the inspectors indicate this to the principal during the course of the inspection.

2.2.1 SURVEYS

Surveys are administered to teachers in order to get their views on the operation of the school.

The completed surveys provide an insight into the performance and operation of the school and are a key source of evidence as part of the evaluation. Information gained from the analysis of surveys may be referred to in the inspection report but detailed statistical information is not included. A summary of the aggregated data from these surveys is provided to the school. Completed individual surveys are confidential to the Inspectorate. The surveys identify the school from which they come but individual teachers are not identifiable.

2.2.2 MEETINGS

The inspectors convene a number of meetings during the visit:

Interview with the principal

During the course of the inspection, one or more meetings with the principal, or, in the absence of the principal, with the deputy principal, are conducted. The purposes of these meetings are:

- to discuss matters related to the management and operation of the school, the strengths and challenges facing the school, the quality of links with the residential centre and agencies supporting the students, and planning for school development and improvement
- to provide an opportunity for the principal to discuss matters relating to learning and teaching with the inspector
- to provide feedback on the implementation of recommendations made in previous inspections.

Focus group meeting

Focus group meetings with students are conducted. These meetings provide the evaluation team with an insight into the students' experience of education and their perspective on day-to-day life in the school. The meetings are conducted by two inspectors, generally without the presence of school staff. The organisation of the meetings take the welfare of students, staff and inspectors into account.

Meetings with the management of the school and residential centre

On the first day of the inspection, the inspectors discuss with the principal the arrangements for meetings with the manager / chairperson of the board of management, and the director of the residential centre. These meetings take place, if possible, on the second day of the inspection. If it is not possible to hold these meetings on the second day, the inspectors endeavour to schedule the meetings at suitable times on the first day

or during the next four or five days. The purpose of these meetings is to discuss matters such as the management and general operation of the school, the quality of provision that is made for the students, the strengths and challenges for the school, the quality of links between the school, the residential centre and agencies supporting the students, and the agenda for school development and improvement.

2.2.3 CLASSROOM VISITS

Inspectors visit classrooms and other learning settings to observe learning and teaching, and to interact with students and to review their work. Learning and teaching in any learning setting in the school may be observed over the course of the evaluation. This may include the work of temporary staff and support teachers that may be based in other schools but working in the school at the time of the inspection visit. Visits to classrooms and other learning settings typically last the length of one or two lessons. In some instances a lesson may be of a double period duration and inspectors take this into account when planning the lesson observation schedule.

Information is sought about the support strategies in place in the school to meet the needs of students in relating to the development of their literacy and numeracy skills.

2.2.4 DOCUMENTS

At the initial meeting with the principal, he or she is asked to provide the school timetable and any other relevant information regarding the arrangements for classes. The first day of the inspection is generally focused on visits to classrooms to observe learning and teaching. Documents relating to programmes for classes, subjects, and for individual students, which should be readily available, are also examined.

At the initial meeting with the principal, and as required during the course of the evaluation, the inspection team indicates the documents that should be made available for review. These documents include:

- All class / teacher timetables
- The school register and roll books, (or electronic version)
- The minutes of board of management meetings
- The minutes of staff meetings
- School improvement plans
- The code of behaviour and the school's incident book
- The school's child safeguarding statement
- The school's anti-bullying policy
- Drugs / substance misuse policy

- Internet acceptable use policy
- The admission / enrolment policies
- The school's attendance policy (including strategies for monitoring attendance)
- The school's policy and procedures for transfer and progression of students
- The school's assessment policy and procedures for initial and ongoing assessment of students
- Records of educational assessment, individual education plans, and accounts of student engagement and progress
- Copies of written reports on students who have transferred from the school
- The sections of the school plan related to school curriculum
- Literacy policy
- Numeracy policy
- Health and safety policy and procedures
- Code of practice for dealing with adult bullying and sexual harassment
- Staff development / CPD policy
- Data protection policy

During the course of the inspection, the inspectors may also request to see sections of the school plan related to school curriculum, organisation, assessment, and student progression.

2.2.5 FEEDBACK

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

The inspectors also meet with the principal to provide advice and recommendations in respect of any priority whole-school issues identified during the inspection that require action by the school, and to give brief feedback on the draft inspection findings, focusing on the positive aspects of the work observed and, where appropriate, on aspects that require improvement. The inspectors also answer any queries the principal may have about the school information form and make arrangements for the return of the form to the inspector.

2.2.6 SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION

School self-evaluation (SSE) is an important process influencing the quality of the education provided for young people in schools. Since its formal introduction to the Irish school system in 2012, schools have engaged with the process in varying ways to advance aspects of teaching, learning and wellbeing.

In Ireland, SSE is designed as a process of collaborative, internal school review that is focused on school improvement. It is envisaged as a process which is based on sound, reliable information from a range of sources and perspectives – including information about the experiences of children and young people. It is also meant to be an inclusive, participatory process involving school management, all staff, and young people. As such, it is a rights-respecting process – acknowledging the role of these stakeholders and actively facilitating their participation in the process. The Department has published [School Self-Evaluation Next Steps September 2022- June 2026, including Circular 0056/2022](#); this document advises how schools can develop and use SSE in the years ahead in a way that ensures that school and system goals for equity, inclusion, teaching, learning, and wellbeing can be achieved.

The Quality Framework

To support schools in ensuring that they have robust self-evaluation processes in place, the Department has also published a quality framework for post-primary schools, [Looking at Our School](#) (2022) and a complementary quality framework for Centres for Education and Community Training Centres, [Looking at Our Centre](#) (2023). These frameworks provide a set of criteria or descriptors of quality which can be used by schools to inform their judgements about the quality of their provision.

The quality frameworks provide, in essence, a set of standards against which schools can consider how well they are performing. In inspections in schools at Special Care Units and Children Detention Centres, inspectors will use the the standards and statements of practice most appropriate to the needs of the young people in the schools to inform their judgements.

2.2.7 EVALUATING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

While inspections of schools at SCUs and CDSs clearly involve an evaluation of the professional practice of teachers, and the quality of learning that is observed in the classroom, the inspection process is not a professional competence inspection. Procedures are in place under section 24 of the Education Act 1998 to facilitate schools in dealing with issues relating to professional competence and the inspection arrangements that are part of the Section 24 procedures are entirely separate from the

inspection of the SCU or CDC. 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 principal and the teacher as part of the feedback provided. Where concerns relate to management and/or leadership in the school they are shared with the principal and the chairperson of the board of management as part of the feedback provided.

2.2.8 COMPLIANCE WITH CHILD PROTECTION PROCEDURES

As part of the Department's oversight of the implementation of the [Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post Primary Schools 2017](#), inspectors conduct level two child protection monitoring during inspections of schools at SCUs and CDC. The checks conducted are as follows:

1. The name of the DLP and the Child Safeguarding Statement are prominently displayed near the main entrance to the school.
2. The Child Safeguarding Statement has been ratified by the board of management and includes an annual review and a risk assessment.
3. All teachers visited reported that they have read the Child Safeguarding Statement and that they are aware of their responsibilities as mandated persons.
4. The Child Safeguarding Statement meets the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017.
5. The records of the last three board of management meetings record a child protection oversight report that meet the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools 2017.
6. The board of management has ensured that arrangements are in place to provide information to all school personnel on the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools, 2017.
7. School planning documentation indicates that the school is making full provision for the relevant aspects of the curriculum (SPHE, Stay Safe, RSE).
8. Child protection records are maintained in a secure location.

3. Following the inspection visit

3.1 The inspection report

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

3.2 Publication of the report

The finalised report and the school's response is published on the website of the Department of Education (www.education.ie). The detailed arrangements for the publication of inspection reports are described in a separate document, [Publication of School Inspection Reports – Guidelines \(2020\)](#).

3.3. Acting on the recommendations of the inspection

The board of management, as part of its agenda for school improvement, should discuss the findings and recommendations of the evaluation report and should, along with the school principal, plan for and oversee the implementation of the actions needed to address any recommendations which the inspector made in the feedback meetings. The findings of the inspection should also be used by the school, along with other types of evidence gathered by it, to inform its school self-evaluation processes and its planning for improvement and development.

While responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the recommendations and improvements in an inspection report rests mainly with the board and principal (or the Chief Executive of the ETB in the case of an ETB school), the patron or trustees of the school also have a responsibility to ensure that effective follow-up action is taken. In some cases, schools may wish to access the assistance available from the school support services and other sources of advice when planning and implementing improvements.

The Inspectorate and other divisions of the Department of Education will monitor the implementation of recommendations in selected schools and in the system generally. The degree to which progress has been made on the implementation of recommendations in

an inspection report may be evaluated in the course of the annual inspection of the school by the Inspectorate.

3.4 Review of inspections

A teacher or a board of management affected by an inspection may seek a review of the inspection using the procedures outlined in [Procedures for Review of Inspections on Schools and Teachers under Section 13\(9\) of the Education Act \(1998\) \(2015\)](#).

4. Evaluation framework

The main focus of the evaluation is on determining

- the extent to which the school is identifying and meeting the needs of the young people attending the school
- the quality of the leadership and management of the school

In considering the extent to which the school is meeting the needs of the young people, inspectors will examine the processes the setting has in place to identify young people's needs, including their learning, personal, social, and emotional needs. They will also consider the extent to which the teaching approaches and learning experiences are appropriate for their needs.

The inspectors also take account of the classroom atmosphere and how students are managed and organised during learning activities. Inspector evaluates the level to which students' knowledge, skills and attitudes are progressed, and the extent to which they are engaged appropriately in their learning. Assessment practices and the progress made by students are also examined. The inspector may also interact with students and review samples of their work.

The inspectors consider the general level of support and guidance available to the students. They consider the quality of the links between the schools attached to the SCU or CDS and those schools to which students transfer. The provision that the school is making for the development of students' life skills and the care structures in the school are also considered.

In considering the quality of leadership and management, the inspectors examine the composition, role and operation of the board of management, its engagement in the development of policies and procedures to guide the operation of the school, the quality of the links it has established with the residential centre and agencies supporting the students and the physical resources and facilities available in the school to support learning and teaching.

The quality of in-school management is assessed. The inspectors look at communication structures in the school and the level of cooperation and collaboration among the school community. The relationship between the school and the residential setting is also examined.

The quality of planning at whole-school and classroom levels, the strengths and challenges for the school, and the agenda for school development and improvement are addressed.

The school's procedures for monitoring student attendance, transitions, retention and progression are examined.

In line with the development of school self-evaluation, the inspectors will, over time, assess the effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation processes, and how well they are being used to improve engagement and outcomes for students, teaching, leadership and management.

Based on the development of the school in recent years and on how plans for improvement have been identified and implemented, the inspections will also consider the school's capacity to implement the recommendations arising from the inspection within an appropriate timeframe.

4.1 The quality continuum

In analysing and reporting on their findings in respect of all three areas of enquiry, inspectors use a quality continuum with the following five levels:

- Very good
- Good
- Satisfactory
- Fair
- Weak

Examples of the language used in reports to describe the quality of practice in a school with regard to the quality continuum are provided at *Table 1* below.

Table 1: The quality continuum

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
Very Good	Very good applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is outstanding and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary
Good	Good applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a <i>very good</i> standard.	Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
Satisfactory	Satisfactory applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
Fair	Fair applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Weak	Weak applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;

5. Publication and revision of this guide

This Guide has been prepared following consultation with the education partners as required under Section 13(8) of the Education Act, 1998.

The Inspectorate is committed to improving the ways in which it carries out its evaluation and advisory work in schools and the provisions of this guide will be reviewed periodically.

The Inspectorate retains the right to make necessary technical adjustments or updates to the Guide from time to time. The most up-to-date version of the Guide will be available at www.gov.ie.