In Northern Ireland, the approach to quality assurance in early childhood and school education is that internal and external evaluation should complement and support each other. The main aims of quality assurance are to effect improvement through:

- highlighting and sharing best practice;
- identifying poor provision and providing support to improve;
- building capacity in the system.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) [1] has been moving towards a proportionate, risk-based approach to inspection, drawing on performance indicators and ongoing monitoring to determine the frequency of inspection. The risk-based approach was introduced in 2010. New inspection models, detailed in the Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF) [2], were introduced in January 2017 and continue to be based on risk assessment. The ISEF was developed to provide a more holistic overview of the key aspects of education and training at all stages, from early years education and care through to further education [3] and work-based learning.

In 2003, the ETI developed the guidance Together Towards Improvement [4], which promotes the process of self-evaluation in schools. The Department of Education (DE)'s [5] (2009) policy document Every School a Good School [6] emphasised that school improvement was primarily the responsibility of schools, which are best placed to identify areas for improvement and to implement changes that bring about better outcomes for pupils.

**Early childhood education and care**

**Responsible bodies**

The early years teams [7] (specialist teams of social workers) in the five regional Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts [8] are responsible for registration, inspection, monitoring and support for all childminding, daycare and pre-school facilities in their local areas. These include providers of the 'Sure Start' [9] developmental programme (a targeted programme which includes help for two- to three-year-olds to prepare for pre-school [10]).

Those nursery schools [11] and voluntary / private settings which provide funded provision for the final pre-school year (three- to four-year-olds), are also inspected annually by the early years teams, but in addition, are subject to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) [1] see the subheading ‘Primary and secondary education’ below.

**Approaches and methods for quality assurance**

Approaches and methods for quality assurance of nursery schools and voluntary / private settings receiving government funding to provide for the final pre-school year are the same as for schools.
They are described under the subheading ‘Primary and secondary education’ below.

For other settings, including private day nurseries, voluntary playgroups, childminders and providers of the ‘Sure Start’ developmental programme, which includes help for two- to three-year-olds prepare for pre-school, requirements are laid down in The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. The Minimum Standards for Childminding and Daycare for Children under Age 12 clarify the requirements made in the 1995 legislation.

There are 16 minimum standards that registered providers must adhere to, grouped under four headings:

- quality of care (including safeguarding and child protection),
- quality of staffing, management and leadership,
- quality of the physical environment,
- quality of monitoring and evaluation.

A fifth section outlines the required policies and procedures registered providers must hold.

The standards were first published in 2012, and were updated by the Department of Health in October 2018.

Early years teams, which are specialist teams of social workers in the five regional Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts, are responsible for registering and inspecting services against the requirements of the standards. Group daycare settings, such as day nurseries, playgroups and out-of-school care, and childminders are inspected annually. Before childminders are registered, the social worker will check that their homes are safe for young children.

**Primary and secondary education**

As well as primary and secondary schools, this section covers nursery schools and voluntary / private settings receiving government funding to provide for the final pre-school year (three- to four-year-olds).

**Responsible bodies**

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), a division of the Department of Education, carries out inspections of educational quality and standards in primary schools, post-primary schools, nursery schools and in private and voluntary early years settings which receive public funding to provide the Pre-school Education Programme for children in their final pre-school year.

All grant aided schools have a board of governors, which has a strategic role in the management of the school. This includes monitoring and evaluating performance and promoting self-evaluation to sustain school improvement, with a view to providing the best possible education for pupils.

**Approaches and methods for quality assurance**

There is a dual system of external inspection and institutional self-evaluation, which aims to promote high standards of education and of professional practice. The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF), effective since January 2017, applies to both external inspection and internal self-evaluation. Data on pupil performance informs both.
**External inspection**

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is responsible for the external inspection of schools. External inspection provides an evaluation of the school as an organisation across the broad spectrum of its activities. The emphasis is on education provision and outcomes, and on the leadership and management of the whole organisation and how this contributes to improvement. Further information about the focus and purpose of inspections is available on the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) website [22].

**Models of inspection**

The ETI has been moving towards a proportionate, risk-based approach to inspection, drawing on performance indicators and ongoing monitoring to determine the frequency of inspection. New inspection models, detailed in the Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF) [2], were introduced in January 2017. The Framework was developed to provide a holistic overview of the key aspects of education and training at all stages, from early years education and care through to further education [3] and work-based learning.

Depending on the specific model of inspection used (the models are described below), and the size and context of the school, an inspection may involve:

- a Reporting Inspector (RI), who manages the inspection team undertaking a particular inspection;
- an Associate Assessor (AA) - a senior professional with expertise and experience in a particular area, such as a school principal or vice-principal, who is released by their school to join an inspection team;
- a District Inspector (DI), who has responsibility for a group of schools within a geographical area. The DI is normally a member of the team of any scheduled inspection for a school within his or her geographical area, although he or she is not normally the Reporting Inspector. Outside of the scheduled inspection programme, the DI also provides challenge and support to enable schools to bring about improvement and, where possible, will be the Reporting Inspector for ‘sustaining improvement inspections’ (described below).

The ETI website provides further information on the roles and responsibilities [23] of these inspectors/assessors.

For nursery schools and other pre-school centres providing for the final pre-school year (three- to four-year-olds), different types of inspection model are used to take account of their different stages of development.

All new, or recently re-opened, pre-school centres receive a visit from the local District Inspector (DI). During this visit, the centre’s work is evaluated and the DI spends time with the staff, providing feedback on the current quality of provision, strengths, and key areas for improvement in order to provide a baseline for further inspection.

Scheduled inspections in pre-school centres take place in a cycle over a number of years. Most pre-school inspections are completed in one day and are carried out by at least one inspector from the ETI and one other team member, either another inspector or an Associate Assessor. For more detailed information about pre-school inspections, see Pre-School - Inspection Guidance [24] (ETI, 2018).

Since January 2017, there have been three main models of inspection for primary and post-primary schools:
a full inspection
a sustaining improvement inspection (SII)
a monitoring inspection (Min).

The approach to inspection is aimed at being proportionate to risk, with more frequent, shorter inspection activities taking place where appropriate. The ETI aims to visit schools formally (outside of the full inspection or follow-up process) approximately every three years, either through a sustaining improvement inspection (SII) or a monitoring improvement inspection (Min).

A **full inspection** takes place over two/three or four days (primary schools) or four days (post-primary schools) and the notification period is two weeks. The period between inspections varies. The size and composition of the inspection team also vary according to the size and context of the school, but the team always includes a reporting inspector (RI). For post-primary inspections, the team includes subject specialists.

A **sustaining improvement inspection (SII)** is for schools previously evaluated as having ‘the capacity to identify and bring about improvement’ (see the subheading ‘Framework for inspection’ below). Typically, such schools will receive a SII three years after their last inspection. The notification period is 48 hours. The inspection is conducted by the District Inspector (DI) as Reporting Inspector (RI), wherever possible, and an Associate Assessor (AA). The inspection may last up to two days. At the beginning of the SII, the RI, in discussion with the principal, identifies (a) line(s) of inquiry linked to the priorities identified in the school development plan (see ‘Self-evaluation’ below).

A **monitoring inspection (MIn)** is for schools not having a full inspection, follow-up inspection (see ‘Inspection outcomes’ below) or SII. It is used to determine the type and timescale of the next inspection activity. The aim is to evaluate the extent to which the leadership and management of the school uses self-evaluation effectively to inform the school development planning process to bring about improvement.

For more detailed information about the different models of inspection, see [Primary Inspection Guidance](#25) (ETI, 2018) and [Post-Primary Inspection Guidance](#26) (ETI, 2018).

Framework for inspection

The **Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF)** [2], in effect since January 2017, is common to all phases of education inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

The framework covers three key areas:

- outcomes for learners
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Each area contains three aspects and is judged against the following scale:

- **outstanding**
- **very good**
- **good**
- **important areas for improvement**
- **requires significant improvement**
- **requires urgent improvement**.

Inspections also evaluate:
• aspects of governance (for schools and nursery schools, not for other pre-school providers),
• care and welfare,
• arrangements for safeguarding learners.

Judgements are combined to provide a judgement on overall effectiveness, expressed on the following scale:

a) the organisation has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all learners;

b) the organisation demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all learners;

c) the organisation needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all learners;

d) the organisation needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all learners.

The framework is supplemented by phase-specific guidance.

a. The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF): Effective Practice and Self-Evaluation Questions for Pre-School [27]
b. The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF): Effective Practice and Self-Evaluation Questions for Primary [28]

Inspection outcomes

At the end of the inspection, the Reporting Inspector reports back verbally to pre-schools and schools, giving them the provisional findings of the inspection team. This report-back highlights the strengths of the school or pre-school and, where appropriate, identifies areas for improvement. Schools / pre-schools then receive a pre-publication copy of the written inspection report. The final inspection report is published and made available on the ETI website [30].

If areas for improvement have been identified, the school or pre-school is expected to produce an action plan, setting out how these will be addressed. The following measures apply in addition.

a) If there are important areas for improvement, follow-up will include an interim follow-up inspection and a follow-up inspection within 12-18 months.

b) If there are significant areas for improvement which need to be urgently addressed, the school or pre-school will be placed in ‘formal intervention’ and monitored by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Follow-up will include an interim follow-up inspection and a follow-up inspection within 18-24 months. External support is also provided, either through the Education Authority (EA) [31] or the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) [32], depending on the legal category of school.

c) If unsatisfactory arrangements for safeguarding/child protection are identified, the ETI will return within six working weeks to monitor progress in addressing the issues.

Full details of actions taken following an inspection are available in the January 2019 guidance: What
Happens After an Inspection? [33].

Self-evaluation

The Every School a Good School [6] policy (2009) emphasises that school improvement is primarily the responsibility of the school, which is best placed to identify areas for improvement and to implement changes to bring about better outcomes for pupils. Self-evaluation which leads to sustained self-improvement underpins the policy.

Self-evaluation forms a central part of the school development planning process with the resulting actions and targets captured in a school development plan (SDP). Under Section 13 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 [34], boards of governors [35] are required periodically to produce a SDP. The SDP is a strategic plan for improvement, bringing together the school's priorities, the main measures it will take to raise standards, the resources dedicated to these, and the key outcomes and targets it intends to achieve. The Education (School Development Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 [36] set out the detailed requirements for SDPs. Guidance [37] on school development planning is available from the Department of Education.

The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF) [2], used by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) as the basis for inspection, is also recommended for use by schools as part of their self-evaluation procedures. The framework is supported by phase-specific characteristics of effective practice and self-evaluation questions; see the subheading ‘Framework for inspection’ for further information.

Article last reviewed March 2019.

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