

Supplementary guidance:

lesson observations and
learning walks

Autumn 2017

The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales. Estyn is responsible for inspecting:

- ▲ nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
- ▲ primary schools
- ▲ secondary schools
- ▲ all-age schools
- ▲ special schools
- ▲ pupil referral units
- ▲ all-age schools
- ▲ independent schools
- ▲ further education
- ▲ independent specialist colleges
- ▲ adult community learning
- ▲ local authority education services for children and young people
- ▲ teacher education and training
- ▲ Welsh for adults
- ▲ work-based learning
- ▲ learning in the justice sector

Estyn also:

- ▲ provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others
- ▲ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence

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What is the purpose?

To provide guidance to inspectors for evaluating lesson observations and learning walks

For whom is it intended?

Inspectors of maintained and independent schools, non-maintained settings and post 16/FE

From when should the guidance be used?

September 2017

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Supplementary guidance

The key Estyn documents that guide inspection activity are the inspection guidance handbooks for each sector. However, we also produce supplementary guidance to help inspectors to consider specific aspects of education and training further.

The supplementary guidance documents set out some key principles, considerations and resources for inspectors. They relate to all sectors that Estyn inspects, unless they state that they are for a specific sector. They expand on certain aspects of education/training (e.g. the inspection of literacy) or on ways of conducting inspections (e.g. the use of learning walks) or specific inspection arrangements (e.g. guidance on inspecting church schools).

The supplementary guidance documents do not aim to be comprehensive. Inspectors are not required to work through them exhaustively when covering any specific aspect on an inspection. However, inspectors may find them useful when responding to specific emerging questions that arise during inspections or when they wish to reflect or investigate further.

The supplementary guidance documents may help providers gain an understanding of Estyn's inspection arrangements. They may also be helpful to providers in evaluating specific aspects of their own provision.

Our inspection work is based on the following principles:

- Inspectors will approach inspection with a positive mindset to ensure it is the best possible professional learning experience for the staff in each provider
- Inspectors will take a learner-focused approach to inspection
- Inspectors will always focus strongly on the quality of teaching and learning
- Inspectors will seek out well-considered innovative practice
- Inspectors will tailor the inspection activities according to the circumstances in each provider as far as possible
- Inspectors will be agile and responsive to emerging findings and will use the increased range of inspection tools and approaches available
- Inspectors will consider everything in the inspection framework, but will only report on the key strengths and weaknesses within each provider

Lesson observation: General principles

The aim of all inspection activity is for the team to gather sufficient evidence from lesson observations, learning walks and other activities to judge the validity and accuracy of the provider's own evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses in relation to outcomes and the quality of its provision and leadership.

During inspections, the reporting inspector (RI) will organise a number of lesson observations and learning walks. Members of the inspection team should not undertake lesson observations or learning walks on their own initiative, but should always refer back to the RI for discussion and to secure their agreement.

There is no requirement on the inspection team to observe all teachers or all subject or learning areas. The RI and inspection team should not normally share the timetable of lesson observations and learning walks with the nominee unless there is a specific, persuasive reason to do so, for example to facilitate access to a designated area of the site or to ensure the health and safety of inspectors.

Estyn has no fixed template for the type or structure of lesson required. Teachers should structure the lesson in the way that they consider is most appropriate for the learners in the class and the learning objectives they wish the learners to achieve. The inspector should judge teaching in relation to the success of the learning and the progress made by learners, not on the methods used or the type or style of delivery by the teacher, and in the context of learning over time.

Inspectors do not allocate a grade or single evaluation to each lesson observed. They do not generate a profile of individual lesson grades when coming to make their evaluation of teaching and the standards achieved by learners. Instead, the inspection team discusses the prevalence and significance of the various strengths and weaknesses in standards and teaching across the provider. The inspection team gathers a wide range of evidence on the quality of teaching and the progress made by learners, for example through scrutiny of teachers' planning and talking to learners about their work. Lesson observation forms only one part of that evidence.

Inspectors will consider any planning that teachers use for the lesson observed, but they do not require teachers to do any bespoke lesson planning specifically for the inspection. Inspectors wish to see the planning that teachers normally use to guide the teaching and learning. There is no desire to increase the bureaucratic burden on teachers or support staff as a result of inspection activity.

Due to the increased use of learning walks during inspections, inspection teams will have the opportunity to see a larger number of learners, classes, activities and teachers than in the previous inspection cycle. This also means that the number of formal lesson observations is likely to reduce compared with the inspection arrangements in place from 2010 to 2017.

If inspectors are unable to gather sufficient evidence during lesson observations or through learning walks about learners' standards, their learning experiences and the quality of teaching, inspectors should speak with the nominee and request an additional sample of learners' work, further discussion with learners and teachers' planning for further scrutiny.

Lesson observations

Lesson observations focus primarily on the work of a single class, session or lesson. Typically, they will involve an inspector observing learners in a classroom, laboratory or workshop setting. On occasions, the lesson observation may involve observation of learners outside the classroom, for example in outdoor areas, in a sports hall or performance space or in corridors.

Inspectors undertake lesson observations for at least 30 minutes. In most cases, they will observe learning for longer than this. The usual time for a lesson observation is between 45-60 minutes, but it could be longer depending on the nature of the lesson and the evidence required by the inspector. On occasions, an inspector may spend 30 minutes with a class at the beginning of a session and return later to see other parts of the lesson.

At the end of each lesson observation, the inspector will offer the teacher the opportunity for a brief professional dialogue on the lesson/activity observed. Where this is not possible, the inspector and the teacher should agree a mutually convenient time and location where the professional dialogue can take place. The inspector should always offer the opportunity for professional dialogue, but it is up to the teacher involved whether they wish to accept the invitation or not.

Professional dialogue with teachers should focus primarily on the work of the learners and the progress they make. Any comments on the quality of teaching should relate to the strengths and weaknesses in the learning that took place and the contribution of the teaching to it.

Learning walks

Inspectors will carry out learning walks during inspections. Learning walks focus on a specific aspect of the work of learners across a number of classes, for example standards in literacy or ICT or the quality of support for learners with additional learning needs. One inspector may undertake a learning walk across a range of lessons or a number of inspectors may visit individual classes, workshops or areas of a provider for a short period with a common focus or theme in mind.

During most inspections, the learning walk activities will usually take place between the start and middle of the time that the inspection team are in the provider, though they can happen at any time during the inspection period. The outcomes of learning walks and other inspection activities will inform the focus of inspection activity on any following day(s). Reporting inspectors will need to be flexible in their timetabling of further observations and other activities in order to respond appropriately to the emerging findings from the evidence obtained from learning walks.

There is no designated time allocation for a learning walk observation as the inspection focus may vary from learning walk to learning walk and from inspection to inspection. The RI should discuss the practicalities of learning walk activity with the inspection team and provide suitable guidance at the start of the inspection.

At the start of inspections, RIs will arrange for members of the inspection team to undertake learning walks at specific times and the RI will identify the specific focus for the learning walks. The RI will usually ensure that there is no overlap in the work of inspectors, ie two inspectors observing the same activity in the same class. However, in open-plan learning environments, there may be occasions when inspectors may undertake observations and learning walks in similar areas, for example in a large, open-plan foundation phase area in a school, across a large workshop or performance space or in an outdoor area, such as a playground or playing field.

Due to the focused nature of the learning walk activity, and the spread of activity across a number of lessons/classes within a relatively short period, inspectors will not be in a position to offer professional dialogue to individual teachers after learning walks. Inspectors on learning walks may focus on the work that learners undertake rather than the quality of the teaching. During learning walks, inspectors may also not see very much whole-class teaching at all. However, the range of lessons and activities observed through learning walks often means that a larger proportion of staff experience the inspection process than was the case in the previous inspection arrangements.

Recording findings from lesson observations and learning walks

Inspectors should note emerging findings electronically in the relevant area of their electronic judgement forms (JFs) as they undertake inspection activity.

In most cases, inspectors should note their findings in the 'Observation notes' section of the JFs, which focuses on standards and teaching. These can then form the basis for team discussion on the overall strengths and weaknesses in standards and teaching within the provider. Inspectors should record their findings on any other aspects of the provision, for example the breadth, range and appropriateness of the curriculum or the quality of the learning environment, in the relevant section of their JF.