

Evaluation, Accountability and Improvement in Scottish Education

The work of HM Inspectors within Education Scotland



Transforming lives through learning

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Scottish Ministers have overall responsibility for the development and oversight of the education system. The provision of publicly-funded pre-school and school education is the responsibility of 32 local authorities. Ministers announced on October 2010 that a new education improvement agency called *Education Scotland* would be established on 1 July 2011 through the amalgamation of a number of agencies including *HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE)* and *Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS)* – which handled curriculum development and teacher support.

The new agency is led by Chief Executive Officer Bill Maxwell (formerly HM Senior Chief Inspector within HMIE). Strategic priorities for the inspection and evaluation functions of the new agency include:

- giving assurance and bringing about improvement in standards and quality through inspection and review
- building capacity for improvement
- giving professional, evidence-based advice
- securing internal improvement

Education Scotland's powers to inspect educational establishments and services for children are set out in legislation. Current inspection programmes include inspection of early years centres; publicly-funded and independent primary, secondary and special schools; further education colleges; education provision in prisons; community learning and development services; voluntary organisations; educational psychology services and initial teacher education.

Staff are civil servants. Inspection teams often include, in addition to inspectors who are permanent members of Education Scotland staff, associate assessors who are practitioners in schools, colleges or other sectors, and 'lay' members of the public, with no specific knowledge of education.

In the OECD report on the *Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland (2007)*, HMIE is described as *an inspectorate that aims at cultural change and strategic action rather than compliance*.

Inspection, accountability and improvement

Inspection reports on schools were published for the first time in 1983 as part of the UK Government's drive at that time for increased professional accountability and information on public services throughout the United Kingdom. Following that date, HM Inspectors responded to requests that they clarify and share the criteria which they used to evaluate schools. This sharing of criteria led to discussion at national level amongst all educational professionals about what represented high-quality school education. As this shared understanding developed, schools increasingly began to use the same criteria for their own self-evaluation as those used by inspectors for external inspection. These developments led to the publication in 1996 of the first edition of *How good is our school?*

Self-evaluation: How good is our school?

The centrepiece to Scotland's shared approach to school evaluation is the set of quality indicators contained in *How good is our school?* The third and current edition¹ was published in 2007. These indicators embody good practice and establish a common language of quality which is used by schools, education authorities and inspectors. Each quality indicator provides a description of 'very good' and 'weak' performance, impact, provision or practice. These descriptions play an important role in stimulating self-evaluative reflection and discussion in schools, and also in ensuring consistency in evaluations made during reviews by education authority personnel and during inspections. A range of other similar evaluation guides provide the focus for self-evaluation and external inspection and review for non-school sectors and services.

The 'Scottish approach' to improvement in schools

What has become known as the 'Scottish approach' to school improvement has been developing since 1983. Its premise is that schools must take responsibility for the quality of the education which they provide and must demonstrate that they are taking action to secure continuous improvement.

Where self-evaluation works best, staff at all levels, children and young people, parents and partners in the school community are involved in evaluating the quality of the school's work openly and rigorously, using the indicators in *How good is our school?* The indicators cover the full range of a school's work and help to identify strengths which can be celebrated and shared, and priorities for improvement which can be built into an improvement plan.

In this process, schools are supported and challenged by their education authorities and are subject to rigorous external inspection by Education Scotland, currently once every six years or so. The use by all three partners of the same, shared criteria to identify strengths and areas for improvement is an important feature of the 'Scottish approach'.

Education is the sector of Scotland's public services in which self-evaluation is furthest advanced. The methodology and practice of the former HMIE component of Education Scotland has been widely emulated in other Scottish sectors, including through the HMIE-led joint inspections of child protection.

Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act (2000)

Progress with the 'Scottish approach' led to the national commitment to educational improvement in schools being enshrined in legislation following the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. The 2000 Act states that *An education authority shall endeavour to secure improvement in the quality of school education which is provided in the schools managed by them.* The Act also requires schools to produce an annual self-evaluation report and improvement plan and to share this with their local education authority. Schools share these reports and plans with parents.

¹ http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/Images/hgiosite3_tcm4-712732.pdf

Role of education authorities

The most effective authorities provide a suitable blend of support, evaluation and challenge to schools and develop effective partnership with headteachers and their senior management teams. In the best practice, headteachers, who are senior officers of the authority, establish positive relationships with local authority officers and work with them on improvements to the curriculum, learning and teaching and quality assurance. Local authorities are themselves subject to inspection of their education functions by Education Scotland (see later).

Rigour of school self-evaluation and education authority support and challenge

It is still not uncommon for inspections to identify aspects for improvement in schools which had not been identified either through school self-evaluation or education authority engagement with their schools. Such cases illustrate the importance of external inspection to complement self-evaluation and support improvement.

Inspection

External inspection is designed to serve three main purposes.

- Inspections provide assurance and public accountability, informing parents, schools and colleges, other providers of education and Scottish Ministers about standards and quality in education.
- They are designed to promote the adoption of high quality professional practice by identifying key strengths, indicating where improvement is needed and offering suggestions on ways of drawing on best practice which inspectors have seen elsewhere.
- The evidence deriving from inspections and reviews plays an important part in informing the development and review of educational policy and practice, providing policy makers with analysis based on a rich base of independent, first-hand evidence of what is happening in schools and other sectors of education across the country.

In the words of the OECD report: *'By creating an interactive situation of ongoing dialogue, inspection promotes a culture of self-reflection and evaluation.'*

Influences and recent developments in inspection in Scotland

A number of factors have led to recent and ongoing changes to inspection processes in Scotland. These include the maturation of self-evaluation in schools and in the support and challenge functions of local authorities; a national drive to reduce the perceived burden of inspection upon those being inspected; an increasing emphasis on the need for partnership between education and other services for children to achieve better outcomes for all children, particularly the most vulnerable children (*Getting it Right for Every Child*); the introduction of a new curriculum for ages three to 18 in Scotland (Curriculum for Excellence) and the need to ensure most effective and efficient use of HM Inspectors' expertise and resources.

In addition, a Concordat was agreed between the Scottish Government and local authorities in November 2007. This agreement provides greater freedom to local authorities to identify their spending priorities and establishes a National Performance Framework as the basis for monitoring of performance. Two of the indicators in this framework relate to the results of inspections (the proportion of schools and pre-school centres which have positive inspection reports).

Education Scotland is currently reviewing the framework for school inspection to take account of these and other contextual factors. Possibilities for further evolution will need to take account of possible risks and benefits and the ways in which local authorities are likely to engage with their schools in relation to self-evaluation and improvement in future.

Current approaches to school inspection

In response to these factors, new models of inspection were introduced in August 2008. The models are designed to be more proportionate and to give greater emphasis to capacity building. Proportionality is achieved by building on the school's self-evaluation and concentrating on the aspects which have the most important impact on children and young people. Inspection seeks to build capacity by creating scope for inspectors to engage in professional discussion with teachers during an inspection.

As part of the process, inspectors assess the school's self-evaluation. School staff are actively involved in the inspection processes, with senior school staff undertaking joint activities with HM Inspectors including classroom observations and attending inspection team meetings.

In most cases inspections identify a number of strengths as well as key recommendations for improvement. Experience has shown that schools and education authorities take these recommendations from HM Inspectors very seriously and take action to bring about improvement.

In the roughly ten per cent of cases where an inspection shows that a school is not providing a high enough quality of education, inspectors provide more extended engagement through a process of *continuing engagement*.

Continuing Engagement

The continuing engagement process involves ongoing joint working between Education Scotland, the local authority and the school in order to secure improvements. In most cases HM Inspectors visit after one year to assess progress and to support staff. They may return after a further year to carry out inspection activities and report to parents and others about progress. By this point, a very high proportion (85% of those who have had a continuing engagement programme) have reached a satisfactory or better standard.

Monitoring of continuing engagement activity indicates that it is making a significant difference and is contributing to change and improvement at school and authority levels. In most schools, pre-school centres and authorities there is evidence of an

overall increase in capacity and capability for improvement. If inspectors feel that, following an inspection and continuing engagement activities by Education Scotland, an education authority has had sufficient opportunity to secure improvement in a school and has not done so then they can refer the matter to Scottish Ministers. These powers have not so far been used.

Inspection and evaluation of local authority effectiveness

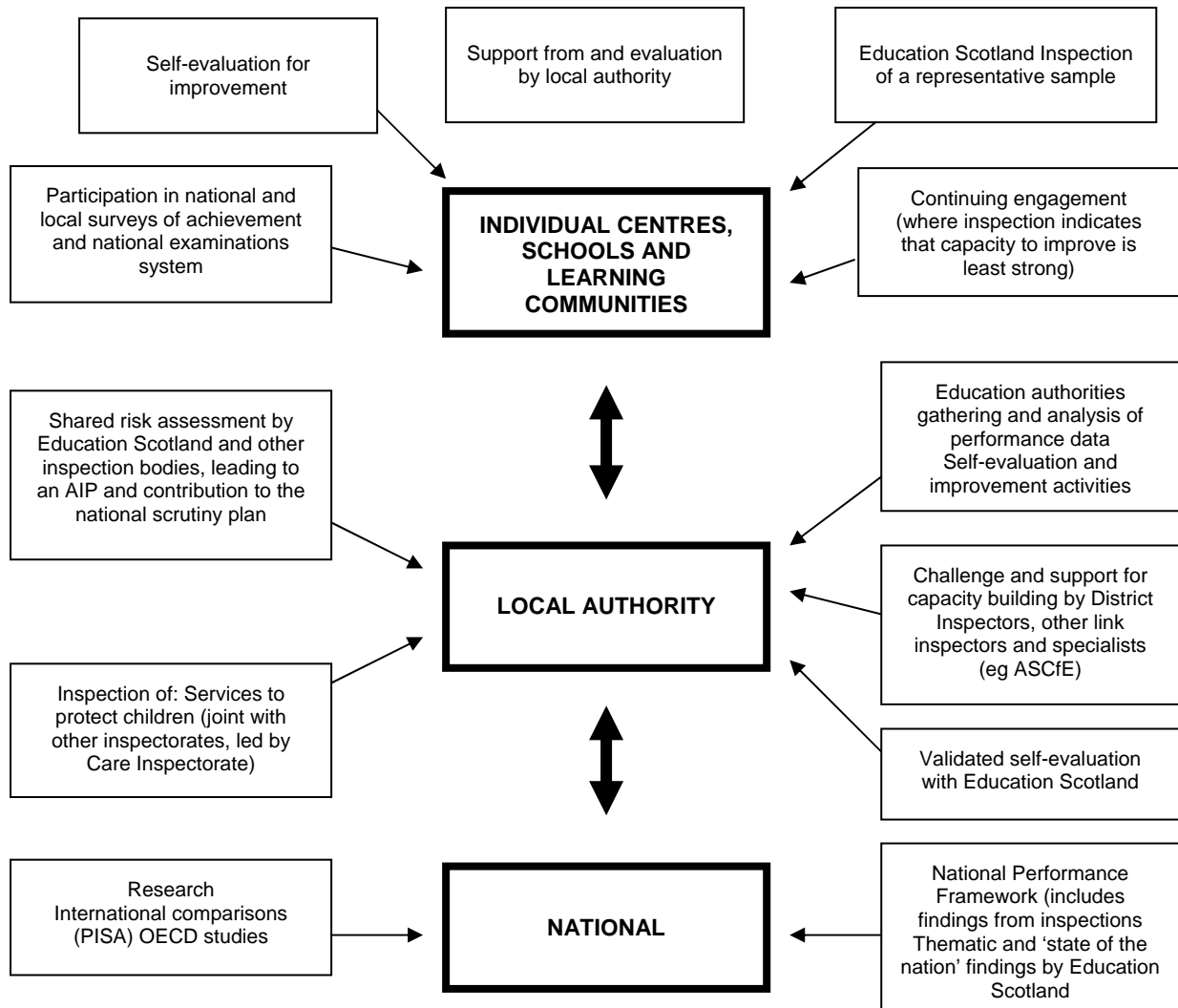
HMIE previously carried out inspections of the education functions of all councils (INEA), but have now stopped the routine INEA cycle. This is part of Education Scotland's contributions to the national drive to reduce scrutiny of council operations and make inspection more proportionate to risk.

HM Inspectors contribute evidence to the new arrangements for devising the national plans for scrutiny of council operations. The process is led by Audit Scotland, and involves round-table Shared Risk Assessments by representatives of the inspectorates for each type of service (social work, education, health, case, policing, housing, etc). This process leads to a scrutiny plan for each council based upon the assessment of risk. In the case of education, the findings of Education Scotland inspections provide robust evidence of performance to assess risk.

In addition, HM Inspectors have recently developed validated self-evaluation for local authorities. Validated self-evaluation is entirely voluntary. It is used where HM Inspectors and the council agree that the authority's self-evaluation has developed sufficiently. It therefore builds upon close ongoing, rigorous engagement between HM Inspectors and authorities. It is proportionate, targeted to those areas which will yield the greatest benefit for learners. HM Inspectors work alongside council staff, applying their expertise in evaluation and their knowledge of the best of educational practice across Scotland. Inspectors challenge and extend the authority's own evaluation, affirm (or otherwise) the findings, and so build capacity in self-evaluation so that outcomes for learners will improve. Education Scotland inspections of the council's schools and learning communities provide important evidence for the validated self-evaluation of the service. Validated self-evaluation provides robust evidence to contribute to Shared Risk Assessment. There is a high demand from local authorities for HM Inspectors from Education Scotland to work with them in this way.

The current models of school inspection complement and inform the new arrangements for local authority inspection and scrutiny and validated self-evaluation at local authority level. HM Inspectors have separately developed a more proportionate model of college review through its contracted arrangements with the Scottish Funding Council. The new arrangements are broadly aligned with those for other sectors.

EVALUATION AND INSPECTION ACTIVITIES (these are interconnected in many ways)



Impact of inspection

HM Inspectors gather evidence, both directly from those who have been inspected and through independent research, to assess the impact of inspection and inform developments. In a recent review of schools which had recently been inspected there was evidence of improvement in a high proportion of the schools.

Education Scotland contributions to policy advice

Education Scotland’s contributions to national policy and decision-making are founded on the extensive evidence base from inspections and engagement across the system. HM Inspectors:

- collate the findings of its inspections to provide professional advice to support evidence-based policy making and decisions by Government and national and local bodies;
- provide evidence on the implementation of national policy and to performance monitoring and the extent to which improvements are being achieved; and

- provide evidence on the extent to which improvements are being achieved within individual Authority Outcome Agreements established under the Concordat.

Promoting the adoption of effective practice and building capacity for improvement

Education Scotland plays an important role in disseminating and promoting good practice. The professional engagement between inspectors and teachers in inspections and validated self-evaluation provides the most frequent and direct opportunity for disseminating and promoting good practice.

The *Education Scotland*² and *Journey to Excellence*³ websites contains multimedia illustrations of examples of effective practice, and can be used by teachers as part of their professional development. HM Inspectors publish a range of reports on specific educational themes each year. These include examples of good practice, recommendations and areas for improvement. Reports are often supported by conferences which demonstrate examples of the most effective practice. HM Inspectors frequently make contributions at other national and local events.

Inspectors have been reviewing how to achieve greatest impact from the knowledge of effective practice which is gained through inspections, reviews and other tasks, and have adjusted the balance of these activities accordingly.

In addition, Education Scotland's use in inspections of associate assessors directly builds capacity and promotes the dissemination of practice around the education system and broader services for children. Their experience and observations can promote improvement in their own organisations and education authorities, and in those being inspected. Recently, HM Inspectors suspended part of the inspection programme for some six months in order to provide direct support for the implementation of the new curriculum in Scotland, Curriculum for Excellence.

Some issues and areas for future development within the new organisation

- Achieving the best balance of support/evaluation roles
- Making best use of evidence of performance to inform support/evaluation activities
- Addressing the challenges of future reductions in funding for public services on the quality of education and on the support and challenge offered by inspectorates and local authorities
- Developing a more coherent framework for inspection, through a review of the current school inspection models and taking account of stakeholder views.

² Education Scotland – www.educationscotland.gov.uk

³ Journey to Excellence - www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk

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