

## INSPECTION PROFILE

**Country name: Ireland**

### 1. Basic information

**Structure of inspectorate:** *Are you organised centrally or by region/state? Does inspection regulation or standards vary across regions or states?*

The Irish Inspectorate is a division of the Department of Education and Skills. It is centrally organised with the Office of the Chief Inspector based in the Department's main office in Dublin. The Senior Management Group of the Inspectorate comprises the Chief Inspector, two Deputy Chief Inspectors and ten Assistant Chief Inspectors.

The Inspectorate is currently divided into ten business units, each managed by an Assistant Chief Inspector. Five of these business units are regionally based and are responsible for the planning and the delivery of the programme of inspections and school self-evaluation and other advisory visits in primary and post-primary schools and centres for education. A separate business unit is responsible for the inspection of early childhood care and education settings across the country.

Two business units have specific policy support responsibilities and work closely with other divisions of the Department on policy development and implementation in relation to areas such as teacher education, inclusion, special education, curriculum and assessment, and Irish in the school system. One business unit is responsible for supporting inspection processes through the development of inspection models, research and analysis. The Department's Gaeltacht Education Unit that supports educational provision in Irish speaking areas is managed by the Office of the Chief Inspector and is led by an Assistant Chief Inspector.

**Age of inspectorate:** *How long have you been established for? What was your predecessor organisation (i.e. who did inspection before you?)*

Our Inspectorate is one of the oldest Inspectorates of education. It was founded in 1831 when a comprehensive publicly-funded system of primary education was established. Subsequently, inspectorates of vocational/technical education and second level education were established in the early twentieth century. Those three branches of our Inspectorate - primary, post-primary and vocational - were united in the 1990s. In 2015, our Inspectorate recruited its first early years inspectors. Since 2016, we have carried out inspections of early years settings as part of an inter-departmental arrangement between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Skills and our Inspectorate.

**Size:** *How many inspectors do you have? How many central/policy staff do you have?*

The number of serving inspectors currently stands at 142. This includes 13 members of the Senior Management Team, 16 Early Years inspectors, 55 primary inspectors and 58 post-primary inspectors. Up to 80 primary and post-primary inspectors are assigned to inspection and advisory services in the five regional business units. The remaining Inspectorate staff are assigned to provide research and technical support to the inspection programme, to policy development work, and to working with other divisions of the Department. The 16 Early Years inspectors evaluate educational provision in early years settings that are on contract to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to deliver two years of free pre-school education.

11 administrative staff currently support the work of the Inspectorate. The administrative staff members are based in four main offices around the country (Dublin, Cork, Sligo and Limerick).

**Remits:** *What form of education do you inspect? e.g. early years, schools, universities? Anything that is non-education?*

Our Inspectorate is responsible for the evaluation of educational provision in primary schools, post-primary schools, centres for education and special care units and for the provision of advice to the education system, the Minister and policy makers. We also have responsibility for evaluating the quality of educational provision in state-funded early years settings and we carry out inspections of educational provision in other settings such as agricultural colleges and Irish language summer colleges on behalf of other state departments or agencies. In addition, two inspectors are assigned on a part-time basis to the Inspectorate of the European Schools. As part of the implementation of new national Child Protection requirements, we are committed to including child protection checks in all our inspection models and, from January 2019, to the delivery of a stand-alone inspection model - Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections - focused on child protection and safeguarding procedures in schools.

**Unit of inspection:** *Do you inspect schools or groups of schools (or both?) Do you inspect teachers, or subject departments? Do you inspect local authorities?*

Our inspections involve the use of a range of inspection models and the unit of inspection is in accordance with the model of inspection used. For example, Whole School Evaluations and Early Years Inspections focus on overall educational provision in individual primary and post-primary schools and early years settings respectively. At primary level, curriculum evaluations focus on the teaching and learning of individual subjects in a school while at post-primary level, subject inspections focus on the work of a subject department in a school. Other inspection models focus on the delivery of bespoke curricular programmes and Department initiatives in individual schools, including the Transition Year Programme between lower and upper secondary and the Department's Delivering Equality of Opportunity to Schools (DEIS) initiative. Further information on our inspection models is available in our published guides to [early years education inspections](#), [primary inspections](#), [post-primary inspections](#) and inspection in [special care units](#).

We do not report on groups of schools. Nor do we normally inspect and report on individual teachers and practitioners although observation of teaching/pedagogy and learning is a key element of the evidence gathering process in all inspections.

We also evaluate the professional competence of newly qualified teachers at primary level at the request of the Teaching Council. The Inspectorate's involvement in this work is being phased out and will cease from 2019/2020 in accordance with the implementation of new procedures for the induction of newly qualified teachers which will be managed by the Teaching Council.

Also, under Revised Procedures for the Suspension and Dismissal of Teachers under Section 24 of the Education Act 1998 (2018), there is a provision whereby a board of management must request the Chief Inspector to arrange for a review of the work of an individual teacher.

### **What is your strapline?**

"Excellence in learning for all" is the vision that we want to achieve through our work. Fundamentally, through our evaluations and advisory work, we strive to improve the learning experiences and learning outcomes of all children and young people.

**Relationship with government:** *Do you operate as part of the Education Ministry, or are you independent? Briefly explain the legal relationship you have with the Ministry (e.g. any reporting duties)? Are you allowed to report on government policy? Are you allowed to publish reports without government approval?*

Our Inspectorate is a division of the Department of Education and Skills and the Chief Inspector is a member of the Management Board of the Department. The functions of the Inspectorate are outlined in section 13 of the Education Act 1998 (revised 2018). We are independent in that we have the right under legislation to select the schools, early years settings and centres for education that are to be inspected. However, we must carry out our functions in accordance with procedures for inspection that are determined by the Minister following consultation with the stakeholders in education. The Minister may, from time to time, request that a particular evaluation be carried out, for example a specific thematic evaluation, so as to assist him/her with policy decisions. All guides to inspection and thematic reports, including the Chief Inspector's Report, require approval by the Minister before they are published. The Chief Inspector has a statutory duty to publish inspection reports.

As a division of the Department of Education and Skills, we receive an agreed proportion of the overall budget allocated to the Department. Our overall staffing levels are also decided within the parameters laid down from time to time by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

**Accountability:** *What are you accountable for delivering? Where is this set out? (e.g. in legislation or in a policy document?) How are you held to account as an organisation (e.g. must you report annually)?*

The Education Act 1998 placed our Inspectorate on a statutory basis. Not only do we have an evaluative role but also a strong advisory role at a micro and macro level.

In terms of evaluation, we evaluate the organisation and operation of schools and centres for education. We evaluate the quality of education provided, including the quality of teaching and learning. We assess the implementation of regulations made by the Minister.

In terms of support and advice, we support and advise schools, teachers, early years education providers and parents on matters relating to the provision of education. We also advise the Minister on any matter relating to educational policy and provision.

In terms of reporting, our Inspectorate reports to the Minister on educational policy and practice. We report to school boards, patrons, parents of students and teachers on the quality of educational provision in individual schools. We also publish reports of our inspections.

We are accountable to the Minister for the delivery of our functions. The particular goals and emphases from year to year in our statutory role as inspectors are further articulated in the Minister's three-year action plan which sets out particular actions for the education system, including those that our Inspectorate is committed to deliver.

## 2. Evaluation process

**Self-evaluation:** *Do you have a form of self-evaluation (i.e. do you expect institutions to report on themselves?) If so, briefly explain how this relates to external evaluation.*

School self-evaluation (SSE) has been a requirement in all our primary and post-primary schools since 2012. School self-evaluation is designed to work alongside and to complement the external inspections of schools in terms of improving students' learning and the work of schools generally.

Schools are required to prepare SSE reports and school improvement plans, and to provide summaries of these to the school community each year. These annual reports and plans focus on the aspect of teaching and learning selected by the school as a priority area for improvement. However, the true value of SSE is in the promotion of collaborative reflection by the school community about teaching and learning and how to improve it.

Currently, the SSE focus of our Inspectorate is on embedding the process of SSE in the practice of schools through advisory visits and by providing some evaluative commentary on SSE processes in a number of our inspection types. In our inspections, inspectors take account of the schools' work on SSE by reviewing the extent of a school's engagement in school self-evaluation and its impact on teaching and learning.

**What do you examine during inspection?** *Do you look at finances? Do you look at legal compliance? Do you observe and/or grade lessons?*

All our inspections focus on the quality of teaching, learning and student achievement. Depending on the focus of the evaluation, they may also evaluate the quality of support for students, the quality of action planning for improvement and the quality of leadership and management.

All of our primary and post-primary inspections include a review of compliance of settings with child protection regulations. Inspections may also include, when necessary, a review of compliance with regulations relating to other areas such as enrolment and the deployment of resources. We do not examine the finances of a school but may comment as necessary on whether the school has the necessary processes in place to manage finances.

During our inspections, we rely on evidence from a range of different sources. Of central importance to us is the first hand observation of pedagogy and learning in classrooms, pre-schools and other education settings. We ensure that the majority of inspectors' time during inspection is spent observing teaching/pedagogy and learning in the classroom. Our inspectors also interact with students as a normal part of inspection activity in classrooms, pre-school settings and other learning contexts.

Depending on the model of inspection, our sources of evidence also include meetings and interviews with school stakeholders such as school/pre-school managers, teachers, parents and students, review of school documents, and questionnaires completed by teachers, parents or students. These many sources of evidence allow us to triangulate our evidence and help to ensure that our judgements are fair and balanced.

In all of our inspections, we recognise that schools/pre-schools work within a very specific context and we take context factors such as school size, location, socio-economic circumstance of the students and community into consideration.

**Do you have an inspection framework? Is this a quality or compliance model? Do you evaluate the quality of education or teaching, or report against a series of non-qualitative standards? How does this work?**

Our inspections in primary and post-primary schools are informed by *Looking at Our School 2016 - A Quality Framework* for the education system, schools and inspection that our Inspectorate developed following consideration of national and international research and consultation with educational stakeholders. *Looking at Our School* sets out a set of clear, definable standards in two dimensions: teaching and learning and leadership and management. The standards in the Quality Framework inform the judgements that we make of the strengths in provision and areas for development. *Looking at our School* is also used for purposes other than inspection, including to inform school self-evaluation. The framework for primary schools is available on the Department's website [here](#). The version for post-primary schools is available [here](#).

The standards in *Looking at our School* are not intended as prescriptive formulae for standardisation. The standards are written in a way that respects the professional autonomy of the inspector, the teacher and school leader to make a judgement on quality, rather than providing a checklist of mandatory requirements.

Our inspections in early years settings are informed by a separate quality framework which incorporates the key elements of best practice in early education and categorises provision under four broad areas:

- The quality of the context to support children's learning and development
- The quality of the processes to support children's learning and development
- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements
- The quality of management and leadership for learning.

Key outcomes and signposts for best practice are identified for each of the four broad areas. The Quality Framework for Early Years Inspection is available in the guide to early years education inspection [here](#).

Our inspections are also informed by our Code of Practice and by our guides to inspection which set out how inspection is to be undertaken. Separate guidelines are provided for inspections in early years settings, primary schools, and post-primary schools, and also in schools attached to High Support Units, Special Care Units, and Children Detention Centres. These guidelines are published on the website of the Department of Education and Skills and are available [here](#). Our Code of Practice is available [here](#).

In accordance with Section 13(9) of the Education Act 1998, we have published procedures that outline how teachers, practitioners and boards of management affected by an inspection can seek a review of the inspection. The published procedures are available [here](#).

**Inspection time and resource.** *How long are your inspections? Do they last several days, or shorter? How many people go on inspection? What sort of qualifications/experience do they have? i.e. are they former head teachers, lawyers or accountants?*

The inspection type determines the length of time the inspection takes, the activities undertaken in the course of the evaluation and the number of inspectors involved. Typically, the core inspection activity in schools takes place between one and five days. For example, unannounced inspections and follow-through inspections take place over one day, curriculum or subject inspections take one to two

days and whole-school evaluations take up to five days. One inspector normally carries out unannounced inspections, curriculum evaluations, subject inspections and follow through inspections, while whole school evaluations can involve between one to three inspectors depending on the size of the school.

All entrants to our Inspectorate are required to have a first or second class honours primary degree, a recognised teaching qualification and at least five years' teaching experience. At post-primary level, entrants are required to have a first or second class honours degree in the relevant subject on the post-primary curriculum for which the inspector position is required. Inspectors may also have experience and expertise in aspects of education that were identified as desirable at the point of recruitment, for example, special educational needs, early childhood education and information and communication technology.

**Frequency of inspections:** *Do you have set inspection cycles? How long are these? Are they risk-based or not? If risk-based, what information do you use for assessing risk?*

We have moved from cyclical evaluation in schools to 'smart regulation' of schools. We use a risk-based approach to support planning for inspection that includes the review of available information on the schools, including inspection data, and the selection of the inspection model that is most responsive to the inspection requirements for that school.

We have developed a range of inspection models that have enabled us to make inspection more responsive to need. Having a range of inspection models means that inspections occur more frequently in schools; schools in which there is a greater risk to the learning of students are identified more quickly and a proportion of more intensive inspections can be focussed where the need for improvement is likely to be the greatest. Information from shorter inspections is an important factor in planning on a risk basis where more intensive inspections may need to be deployed.

At primary and post-primary level, the inspection planning process involves risk assessment based on data from unannounced inspections and stand-alone curriculum evaluations or subject inspections that are conducted each year as well as other data including school size, the medium of instruction in the school and length of time since the previous published report. Other data available to the Department of Education and Skills such as performance in state certificate examinations, student attendance and student retention data are also considered as part of the risk assessment process.

While the programme of inspection includes schools identified through our risk analysis procedures as likely to benefit from external evaluation, schools at all levels of quality performance are also included. This also allows us to recognise, affirm and disseminate very good and exemplary practice across the educational system through the publication of our inspection reports.

**Main business:** *Do you do anything that is not inspection? E.g. pre-registration or providers, or other forms of regulation? Are you involved in complaints examination? Do you take part in competition of headmasters?*

The Education Act 1998 formalised the responsibilities of our Inspectorate and its enactment, together with the establishment of agencies such as the National Psychological Support Service in 1999 and the State Examinations Commission in 2003, led to the removal of responsibilities such as the psychological assessment of pupils and implementation of the state examinations from us.

Within the provisions of the Education Act 1998, however, we continue to have responsibilities other than inspection. Our key responsibility in this regard involves the provision of advice to policy makers within the Department of Education and Skills and the Minister on matters relating to educational

policy and provision, including the curriculum taught in recognised schools, assessment and teaching methods, teacher education, the Irish language and special education. Much of this advice to policy makers and the Minister is based on the outcomes of inspection and research conducted by our Inspectorate, and may involve the provision of thematic reports. Examples include our work on developing a Gaeltacht Education Policy (2016) and a paper on Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish Educational System (December 2015).

We also perform important administrative functions on behalf of the Department including participation on committees hearing appeals against the decision of a school to permanently exclude, suspend or refuse to enrol a student in accordance with Section 29 of the Education Act 1998. We represent the Department on national bodies including the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Teaching Council and on international bodies such as The Board of Governors of the European Schools and various OECD committees.

### **3. Consequences of inspection**

**Reporting:** *Do you publish your reports on institutions? If so, who reads them and how are they used? (e.g. to help parents make school choices?)*

We publish school inspection reports relating to all inspection types, apart from unannounced inspections, on the website of the Department of Education and Skills. The publication of school inspection reports makes the findings and recommendations of inspections available to all members of the school community and to the wider public. The reports are one important source of information about the work of schools. Making them publicly available achieves a number of purposes, including encouraging school self-review and development and ensuring a wider dissemination of good practice in and among schools and early years settings. It is also intended that our published reports provide authoritative and balanced information on the effectiveness of schools, and provide valuable information to parents, prospective parents, and learners.

We have taken steps to make our reports more accessible to all stakeholders by using language that is easier to understand and by including clear evaluative statements about the quality of provision in each section of the report.

Our guidelines for the publication of reports (2015) are available [here](#).

**Grade:** *Do you grade institutions? If so, how many do you have? Are there any rewards for getting the top grade? Or any punishment for getting the lowest?*

We do not assign ratings to individual schools or settings but our published reports contain clear evaluative statements about the quality of provision in the main dimensions of the school's work such as teaching and learning, leadership and management, and support for students. Each report includes a table of the Quality Continuum that shows the language that we use in reporting our judgements.

Our Quality Continuum for inspection in schools includes levels ranging from very good to weak, and includes a continuum of language that allows inspectors to record nuanced judgements about the school's practice in the main dimensions of the school's work. The continuum reflects the fact that school quality is constantly developing and that most schools are at different stages on the school improvement journey for different aspects of their provision.

**Knowledge sharing:** *How do you use the findings of inspection? Do you use thematic reporting, and publish your findings?*

The findings of inspections informs our risk based approach to inspection and the type of follow-up actions deemed necessary in the case of individual schools.

Our Chief Inspector's report draws on the analysis of inspection data to comment on quality in schools and identify areas in need of improvement at system level. Inspection data also inform the provision of thematic reports on aspects of educational provision including literacy, numeracy, the Irish language and provision for learners living in areas of disadvantage. The most recent Chief Inspector's report 2013-2016 is available [here](#).

Inspection data such as that informing the Chief Inspector's report and thematic reports also play an important role in informing educational policy and national strategies, for example, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Action Plan and the Digital Learning Framework for Schools.

**What happens following an inspection?** *Do schools shut down? Are the weak ones partnered with other schools; the strong ones allowed to flourish? 5*

We have a number of follow up actions in place that help to ensure that schools act on the recommendations of inspections and to increase the impact of inspection for improvement.

Our published reports include a written response from the school outlining what it will do to address the recommendations for improvement in the report.

At school level, it is expected that the board of management of each school, as part of its agenda for school improvement, should use the report to inform its self-evaluation processes and its planning for improvement and development.

At system level, the Inspectorate and other divisions of the Department of Education and Skills monitor the implementation of recommendations in selected schools and in the system generally. For example, the Inspectorate carries out follow-through inspections in a sample of schools, including schools where significant difficulties were identified, to establish the progress that has been made in implementing the recommendations of the previous inspection.

Where necessary, individual schools are asked, as part of the follow through process, to provide action plans and progress reports relating to the implementation of report recommendations. Schools experiencing difficulty can also avail of support from the Professional Development Support Service for Teachers.

**What is the stated purpose of your Inspectorate?** *Do you have a theory of action about how improvement is achieved through inspection?*

Our Inspectorate is committed to a particular purpose and a distinctive approach to inspection.

Our primary focus as an Inspectorate is on learners. We focus on learners' learning experiences and on the educational outcomes and standards they achieve when we evaluate and report on the work of teachers and schools. We also keep the observation of teaching and learning in classrooms central in inspection activity while mindful of the need to also take teachers'/practitioners' collective professional practice into account in the judgements that we make about educational provision.

We also believe that inspection has to serve an improvement as well as an accountability function. We encourage school improvement in our inspections through affirming and disseminating best practice, promoting and supporting school self-evaluation, and working in a collaborative and co-professional way with teachers, school leaders and others in school communities. Nonetheless, we do hold schools accountable and provide an assurance of the quality of teaching and learning in schools through reporting objectively and fairly, having taken the context of the school into account.

Further information on the principles underpinning our inspections is available in our published code of practice (2015) [here](#).