

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION –
INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION
AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE
AND THE SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT PROCESS**

**COMMENTS FROM
NORTHERN IRELAND
PUBLIC SERVICE ALLIANCE**

September 2013

BACKGROUND TO NIPSA'S INVOLVEMENT WITH ETI

1. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) represents over 45,000 union members across the civil and public services and the voluntary sector. We represent members within the twelve Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments including the Department of Education (DE) which has responsibility for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). NIPSA has been closely involved in negotiating and progressing many issues affecting our members in ETI under the leadership of both the current Chief Inspector (CI) and that of her predecessors. As such, we have a clear vested interest in ensuring the Committee of Education (CoE), in undertaking this inquiry, takes cognisance not only of the views of a wider range of stakeholders but also considers not only the effect that any proposed changes would have on our members who will be directly affected by the outcome/s of this review but also their invaluable direct experience of how the education sector best functions within NI.
2. We would add that we welcome the CoE's decision to instigate an inquiry into the School Improvement process and the role of the ETI as we believe this inquiry will afford the Committee the opportunity to witness for themselves the dedication and professionalism and high levels of public service manifested by our members.

TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE INQUIRY

3. NIPSA would specifically comment on the terms of reference for the Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate as follows -
The effectiveness of ETI's current approach in respect of school inspection /improvement – considering particularly how ETI assesses the value added in those schools which have lower levels of examination attainment
4. It is NIPSA's belief that Inspectors consistently display collegiality, team work and support in executing their duties, many of which are challenging and complex. They also consistently work well over and above the hours they are contracted to, without remuneration, in order to ensure that the evaluations they produce are robust and accurate through using the widest possible evidence base. Evaluations are always agreed through team consensus achieved after a process of rigorous and extended debate and always take context into account. As such, most inspection reports contain an opening section outlining salient features of the school's context.
5. In every inspection, the context of the school is foremost in inspectors' minds and in all cases the interests of the learner are paramount. Inspectors do not shy away from making difficult decisions, where those decisions are merited. This can involve relaying difficult messages, while treating all teachers with the utmost professional courtesy and sensitivity. However, no matter how diplomatically these messages are relayed, at times inspectors do not receive the same professional courtesy in return.

6. Inspectors possess a wide range of educational experience, professional expertise and knowledge and are highly reflective individuals. Because they work from home and, thus, spend much of their time working alone, they value the opportunity to work together during staff development days, the most effective of which involve specialist inspectors leading sessions which focus on up-skilling on aspects of evaluating effectively across all phases. They also welcome the use of Area of Study panels, which allow inspectors to share and learn together, thereby keeping them abreast of contemporary research, while updating their skills, as well as staying well informed of contextual issues at local and regional levels.
7. The recent introduction of a new inspection model for post-primary schools and changes to the primary inspection model which our members are, in good faith, attempting to implement, has been at no small cost to their work life balance. In order to complete inspections within the new 5 day timeframe required by these changes our members are having to work well beyond their prescribed hours on a regular basis. Our members are very dedicated and already work very long hours, not least as they have to drive long distances to and from myriad locations in the course of their work. It is not uncommon for inspectors to work in excess of 70 hours per week in order to achieve the required turnaround. It is our understanding that the new models have the potential to add to an already heavy workload and, thus, may ultimately have a detrimental effect on the quality of inspections over time. The recent focus on driving up the numbers of shorter inspections (2 and 3 day completions, as opposed to 5 or 6 day completions), presumably to meet targets, are not be in the best interests of our members and may prove unpopular with schools. ETI inspection work was always underpinned with rigour: the desire to raise the number of inspections through doing more with fewer resources (the Chief Inspector cites a 20% reduction) and reduced time for inspectors to evaluate the provision has the clear potential to cause divisions between ETI and the schools, if mistakes are made due to the pressures of completion.
8. Inspectors on the ground are flexible and willing workers, willing to make reasonable adjustments, but all ultimately have a desire to work alongside schools with good professional relations in the interests of the learners.

Identify the key issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties and any gaps both in terms of the ETI review process and the support services provided by the Department or the ELBs;

9. The majority of inspectors carry out a District Inspector role in addition to their scheduled inspection work. The districts are divided by geographical area and phase of education. The District Inspector visits his/her organisations in order to accrue knowledge on the particular context and quality of education in each setting.
10. Inspectors highly value their role of the District Inspector. It is a role that is equally highly valued by many Principals and allows ETI to work alongside schools in the interests of promoting improvement for the learners, while

maintaining good professional relationships. This role allows the District Inspector to share good practice, get to understand the context of the school first hand and promote good working relationships outside the formal inspection process. Furthermore Branch members undertake pastoral visits to schools in order to offer support to individuals or groups at times of difficulty.

11. This District knowledge is further disseminated through regular ETI meetings which are arranged along ELB areas. This is a cross-phase group and provides a vital opportunity to share and understand the contexts, developments and challenges across a particular ELB area. The Inspectors value opportunities to disseminate good practice, which is underpinned by their good working relationships with a range of other organisations, such as CASS, Health and Social Care Trusts and Early Years Organisation. Much of this dissemination work comes from the inspectors working voluntarily beyond their core duties with very positive feedback from the system.
12. District Inspectors are often called upon to provide briefings on organisations in their district for Ministerial visits and other VIP visits. They are also called upon to provide ETI recommendations on development proposals for schools within their districts.
13. We would, therefore, see the role of the District Inspector as pivotal.

Identify and analyse alternative approaches and models of good practice in other jurisdictions in terms of school inspection, the assessment of value added and improvement

14. The education system, coupled with the culture, in Northern Ireland is unique and, much as we favour the abolition of selection post primary and would welcome the introduction of good practice from other jurisdictions if this would improve the current system, this needs to be carefully thought through as it may be difficult to import systems which may work elsewhere but which may not be a good fit for how the education system operates within Northern Ireland. Given the poor press that appears about OFSTED, NIPSA would urge caution about importing methods and ways of working with schools which may not be suitable for Northern Ireland's system. NIPSA would oppose strongly the importation of anything that would serve to put further pressure on schools and inspectors on the ground, who already work in challenging circumstances to promote improvement for the learners. NIPSA seeks to endorse greater engagement between schools and inspectors in a climate that is NOT fuelled by fear, but rather by mutual respect. However, any change that would impact on the way in which our members currently work would ultimately need to be negotiated with trade union side in the first instance.

Consider what priorities and actions need to be taken to improve ETI's approach to the school improvement process including the need for enhanced powers; alternative measures of achievement; improved governance; and transparency

15. We believe that Inspectors, who are the professionals at the coalface in regard to school inspections, need to be the final arbiters when it comes to assessing and determining the outcome of an inspection, not least as it is ultimately their responsibility to justify and stand over their evaluations and explain their reasoning to the staff within the schools they have inspected.
16. The complaints procedure within the ETI was reviewed last year. Our members welcome the fact that they are able to be challenged as this encourages more openness **but they do have reservations about challenges that become time-consuming and protracted as, not only do they cause great stress to all concerned but they can be extremely time-consuming and very costly and detract from the core business of the ETI.**
17. There is a need for increased resources to ensure ETI meets the DE targets and to move away from the recent desire to drive up the quantity of inspections. If there is a need to ensure all schools are inspected in a seven year time-frame, then this needs to be adequately resourced. A recent development has been the increased use of Associate Assessors on inspection teams. Although our members value the current working skills and experience that these education professionals bring to inspection teams, there is a concern that they are now being used more in order to facilitate more inspections to taking place, by spreading ETI inspectors out more thinly. We are concerned that this use of unpaid labour devalues the professionalism of our members and is an attempt to bring ETI in-line with OFSTED.
18. Our members are very supportive of the work being undertaken to research, agree and identify a wider range of achievement that takes account of examination outcomes, as well as wider achievement. **ETI consider a wide range of evidence when evaluating the standards and achievement in schools. Colleagues do not rely on key stage results as a measure of achievement alone as this could be done by anyone in DE. Inspectors consider the school's internal data, scrutinise the children's work in class and in their books and undertake discussions with children in class - particularly those in year 4 and 7.**
19. However, Inspectors who conduct the inspection need greater assurances about the finality of their decisions and the fact that evaluations may not be over-turned from anywhere outside of the original inspection team.
20. Our strong view is that status quo should remain. Being part of DE and the wider NICS allows the ETI to be more accountable for their actions and fosters greater levels of transparency and public accountability.
21. There is a strong desire within the members in ETI to make reporting as clear and transparent as possible. To this end, schools are becoming more involved in the inspection process with the principal kept up-to-date on the emerging findings throughout the inspection and focus groups being utilised in order to assist in making reports clearer.

