

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Informal briefing event with District Inspectors

Thursday 24/01/14 at 6.00pm in Room 115

PRESENT:

Members - Mervyn Storey
Danny Kinahan
Stephen Moutray
Robin Newton
Sean Rogers
Pat Sheehan

Staff - Peter McCallion
Karen Jardine
Sharon McGurk
Sharon Young

NOTE OF ISSUES RAISED

Suggested questions below were issued for guidance:

1. How effective is ETI's / District Inspectors' current approach in respect of school inspection / improvement – does ETI / do District Inspectors satisfactorily assess the value added in those schools which have lower levels of examination attainment?

Participants passionately argued that the District Inspector (DI) role – which is unique to Northern Ireland – is a key strength of our school inspection and improvement process. It was suggested that DIs are best-placed to appreciate and understand the context in which schools operate and learners develop.

Participants set out the wide range of activities that DIs are involved with including particularly inspectorial work but also thematic and other reports on shared education and special education etc. DIs also referred to the support that they provide to the Education and Library Boards and Area Learning Communities etc.

As DIs have contact with many schools it was argued that they are well-placed to disseminate best practice to struggling schools; help schools through improving iterations of the school evaluation process; and provide principals with necessary perspective. As DIs often work as inspectors in different phases they are also able to mentor schools on pupil transitions and are able to maintain a longitudinal picture of pupil progress. It was

contended that DIs are an invaluable knowledge repository and maintain a unique “corporate memory” of educational policy.

It was argued that DIs, acting as the “critical friend” and supporting school’s own self-evaluation processes, have had a measurable positive effect on school practices and pupil outcomes. DIs indicated that 80% of follow-up inspections saw schools improving by at least 1 grade.

Some participants indicated that principals often feel that they can confide in DIs in respect of matters relating to school leadership which can not readily be discussed with their staff or governors. That said, it was strongly argued that the pastoral nature of the relationship between DIs and schools does not in any way prevent DIs from making difficult judgements or delivering unwelcome advice to schools in respect of their effectiveness.

Participants disputed many of the claims made in oral and written evidence to the Committee in respect of an opaque or unrepresentative or biased inspection regime – DIs highlighted the professional framework (set out in Together Towards Improvement and The Reflective Teacher) against which schools are inspected. Participants also referenced a wide-range of evidence sources used by DIs including: the first hand review of pastoral care procedure and practices; the use of classroom observation; interactions with children, parents ,governors, teachers and school leaders; as well as schools’ pupil tracking processes in addition to end of Key Stage and other examination outcomes.

Participants pointed out that the inspectors who were much criticised in evidence to the Committee were the same DIs who were much praised in other evidence – often by the same witnesses. Some participants conceded however that despite agreed procedures and the undeniable positive impact of inspection, some schools may have a limited understanding and an adverse outlook in respect of the inspection process.

Participants argued that the DI role had altered in recent years. It was suggested that a pressure on resources and a greater focus on undertaking a fixed number of formal inspections per year had served to limit DIs’ ability to provide pastoral support to schools. Some participants indicated that DIs were now limited to 2 to 3 days per term for pastoral visits and that this was wholly inadequate. Some participants sharply contrasted the more evaluative nature of pastoral DI visits with the more rigid inspection focus associated with formal inspection visits.

Participants highlighted new inspection practices which effectively excluded the local DI from the inspection team – previously it had been the practice for the DI to be in a supporting role to the lead inspector. It was argued that the latter practice ensured that the context in which the school operated was taken into consideration. It was further argued that the current practice prevented this.

Participants felt that school inspection had become a high stakes endeavour linked to Area Planning outcomes. Some participants said that this context coupled with the requirement to increase the number of inspections and the changes to the DI role might account for much of the recent adverse feedback from schools.

In respect of the assessment of the value-added by schools, participants suggested that evidence provided by schools in this respect was patchy at best. It was suggested that further training and support for schools was required if a fair and consistent picture of the value-added was to be developed.

Some participants highlighted their dissatisfaction with the current use of inspection descriptors e.g. “inadequate”; “unsatisfactory” or other terms such as “failing schools” arguing that such terms obscure the real message from an inspection. Some participants suggested that these should be replaced with less pejorative terminology.

Many participants also agreed that the format and language in inspection reports should be clearer and written with the end user in mind – i.e. the school or parents. Some participants suggested that format changes could make reports shorter, more understandable and easier and quicker to write.

Participants generally indicated that the Curriculum Advisory Support Services (CASS) have been significantly rundown and as a consequence the school improvement process has been undermined.

Some participants sharply contrasted ETI’s previous philosophy and approach to inspection and improvement with that of Ofsted – the latter was characterised as purely audit-based and often limited to merely following-up on the findings of previous inspections; the former was characterised as pastoral and inspection for improvement.

2. What are the key issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties? What are the gaps (if any) both in terms of the ETI review process; the role of District Inspectors and the support services provided by the Department or the Education and Library Boards?

Some participants identified the following issues as impacting on schools experiencing difficulties: the quality of educational provision; the quality of leadership and management; and the quality of teaching and learning.

Some participants argued that poor relationship management within schools can have a hugely detrimental impact on many important aspects of a school's effectiveness. Participants suggested that DIs can often identify poor relationship management from the schools' self-evaluation material. It was suggested that management skills are a key requirement for school leaders which are not necessarily met by the current training and development opportunities for teachers and principals.

As above, it was felt that the rundown of CASS was detrimental to all schools and particularly those experiencing difficulties. Participants believed that CASS was a good support system for all schools and was essential for those in the Formal Intervention Process (FIP). Some participants felt that DIs were in certain regards being used in place of CASS. Some participants felt that inspection and CASS should remain entirely separate. Others argued that there was some merit in the Education Scotland arrangements whereby CASS and inspection are more aligned.

Many participants highlighted the absence of specialist inspectors in subjects like PE, history or science. It was argued that the loss of specialist inspection expertise was to the detriment of the teaching of these subjects in schools.

3. What alternative approaches and/or models of good practice in other jurisdictions in terms of school inspection, might ETI / District Inspectors adopt in the assessment of value added and school improvement?

Participants highlighted ETI's extensive and valuable work with inspectors in other jurisdictions – indicating the importance of such work to improving policy and practice.

Some participants identified positive aspects of other inspection regimes e.g. Education Scotland's practice of working more closely with external partners, some of which include academics, teacher training providers, Arms Lengths Bodies etc.

Some participants suggested that ETI's inspection regime focused too strongly on English and Maths and the assessment of added-value should include more subjects such as STEM, History, PE.

Participants generally felt that the Northern Ireland inspection and improvement regime compared well with other jurisdictions.

4. What priorities and actions are needed (if any) to improve ETI's / District Inspectors' approach to the school improvement process? Are alternative measures of pupil achievement or enhanced powers, improved governance and transparency measures for ETI needed to enhance school inspection / improvement?

Participants generally believed that the DI role was a valuable and unique asset of school inspection and improvement in Northern Ireland. It was felt that the pastoral aspects of the role should be protected and strengthened – an adequate level of “District Time” should be set aside for DIs so as to allow them to concentrate on developing their knowledge and providing support to local schools.

Participants generally argued that inspection should focus on improvement in schools rather than simply attainment.

Participants strongly felt that an audit-focused approach linked to rigid inspection timetables for all schools regardless of risk – as in Ofsted - was not the way forward for the school inspection process in Northern Ireland.

Participants argued that a key objective for the future is the strengthening of the self-evaluation process in schools. This is currently inconsistently undertaken by schools. A higher level of confidence in this process could, it was argued, free-up DIs to concentrate on pastoral support for all schools and the provision of specialist focused support for struggling schools.

A number of participants argued that in order to re-affirm the integrity of the inspection process, ETI must be independent from the Department. These participants also suggested that the newly independent inspectorate be aligned with the school support services currently provided by CASS. The new governance arrangements should be devised in such a way as to reflect the culture and needs of the Northern Ireland school system and should not simply reflect practices in other jurisdictions. Other participants indicated that governance changes and the realignment of ETI with CASS had not been widely considered or supported by DIs.