



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Veronica Bintley
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
Bangor
BT19 7PR
veronica.bintley@deni.gov.uk

10 December 2014

Our Ref: PMcC/1863

Dear Veronica

Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process – Committee reply to the Departmental response

At its meeting on Wednesday 12 November 2014, the Committee received a briefing from Departmental officials on the Department's response to the Committee's report on its inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process

I wrote to you on 14 November 2014 indicating that the Committee would give further consideration to the Department's response and would reply formally in respect of this and in respect of proposed changes to the Formal Intervention Process in due course.

At its meeting on Tuesday 9 December 2014, the Committee agreed to write to the Department to thank officials for the briefings and written information provided in the course of the inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process.

Committee for Education

Room 375, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3XX

Tel: (028) 9052 1201 Fax: (028) 9052 21974

E-mail: peter.mccallion@niassembly.gov.uk

The Committee also agreed to make the following comments in respect of the Department's response to the inquiry report.

In respect of Recommendation #1 and the need for adequate resourcing for school improvement, the Committee agreed to reiterate its concerns that if improvements to CASS are not made and if further changes to the Formal Intervention Process are introduced this might at best enhance the perception of unfairness in school inspection and at worst actually disadvantage schools in certain sectors.

In respect of Recommendation #2 and greater alignment between inspection and improvement services, the Committee did not accept the Department's argument that any change of this kind was precluded by the requirement for legislation. The Committee welcomed ETI's provision of additional involvement in school improvement – through its support for literacy and numeracy in a number of schools - but felt that in order to address the perception of imbalance between inspection and support as identified in the OECD Report, ETI should do more to make this aspect of its work evident.

The Committee did not accept the assertion that ETI's inspection methodology was well understood in schools. Officials' recent statements in this regard were at odds with evidence to the inquiry and appeared to contradict previous statements by officials. The Committee agreed to seek an update on the progress of the use of "paired observations" and changes to moderation practices and recorded its disappointment that officials appeared to distance themselves from earlier concessions in respect of the need for ETI to better explain itself to schools.

In respect of the ETI Complaints Procedure, the Committee felt that, although the procedure is reportedly in line with the Assembly Ombudsman's guidelines, the absence of a single complaint ever being fully upheld and the absence of a mechanism to allow an inspection judgement to be altered was simply not acceptable and that therefore change is required. The Committee agreed to seek an unequivocal assurance that the planned review of the ETI Complaints Procedure will positively address this issue.

The Committee expressed some surprise that officials had, on 12 November 2014, clarified evidence in respect of the Customer Services Excellence

Committee for Education

Room 375, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3XX

Tel: (028) 9052 1201 Fax: (028) 9052 21974

E-mail: peter.mccallion@niassembly.gov.uk

Assessment and had appeared to fail to do so previously. The Committee also recorded its disappointment that officials would not give a simple and unequivocal commitment to review and improve ETI's processes in respect of the use of post-inspection school questionnaires.

With regard to the use of questionnaires as part of the inspection process, the Committee noted the explanation provided on anonymity and sought clarity on the typical levels of responses among different groups: e.g. parents; teachers and pupils to ETI inspection questionnaires.

In respect of Recommendations #7 and #8, the Committee welcomed the clarification provided by ETI that the existing single inspection report is to be replaced with an internal "running report" and an external inspection report which would not be based on 1 word descriptors. The Committee agreed to seek a timeline for the development of the "running report" and the removal of 1 word descriptors. The Committee also agreed to ask ETI to make clear its intentions to schools in this regard sooner rather than later.

In respect of Recommendation #9, the Committee noted the absence of clarity in the written and oral responses from officials. The Committee reiterated its view of the importance both of "District Time" and a role for District Inspectors in inspection teams.

With regards to Recommendation #10, the Committee agreed to seek clarity on the numbers of inspections and the numbers of inspectors of IME settings and the composition of inspection teams – specifically the minimum number of inspectors with the required level of fluency in the Irish language on each team.

The Committee welcomed the Department's response in respect of the baselining of attainment in schools and the Department's apparent recognition of the importance of school context. The Committee agreed to seek an update on the development of the school dashboard.

The Committee welcomed the Department's response recognising the importance of self-evaluation by schools.

Committee for Education

Room 375, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3XX

Tel: (028) 9052 1201 Fax: (028) 9052 21974

E-mail: peter.mccallion@niassembly.gov.uk

In respect of Recommendation #14, the Committee expressed its disappointment that although the Department undertakes an annual school census and is to undertake a biennial feedback process with pupils, it is apparently unwilling to make a similar effort to engage with parents. The Committee observed that the Department's lack of enthusiasm for a parental consultation platform is not in keeping with the Department's policy of encouraging involvement by parents in their children's education.

The Committee noted DE's position in respect of statutory independence for ETI. The Committee was surprised by the lack of clarity from DE in respect of the OECD recommendation that ETI, as a unitary inspectorate with access to a data-rich education system, should undertake longitudinal studies of the effectiveness of the education system. The Committee therefore agreed to seek an explanation as to why the Department is not to require ETI to undertake longitudinal studies.

If you require clarification in respect of the above, please do not hesitate to contact me.

A response by 16 January 2015 would be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely

Signed Peter McCallion

Peter McCallion
Clerk
Committee for Education

Committee for Education

Room 375, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3XX

Tel: (028) 9052 1201 Fax: (028) 9052 21974

E-mail: peter.mccallion@niassembly.gov.uk