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Your Ref: PMcC/1863

15 January 2015

Dear Peter

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE AND THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESS – COMMITTEE REPLY TO THE DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSE

Thank you for your letter of 10 December 2014 regarding the Department of Education's (DE's) response to the Committee's Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process.

In its evidence relating to recommendation 1, the ETI stated that it was important that adequate resources should be provided to support the school improvement process. DE is aware that colleagues in the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) within the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) prioritise support to those schools that have been identified as being in the Formal Intervention Process (FIP) or which have been identified as being at risk of underachievement. The proposed changes to the FIP will ensure that the focus remains on providing support to those schools where there is greatest need, as identified through inspection.

In addition to the support provided by their managing authorities, schools placed in FIP receive support from ETI through the work of the District Inspector and through the interim and follow-up inspection process. To date, the impact of this has been very positive with 80% of schools improving the quality of their provision by at least one performance level in their follow-up inspection.

Your letter makes reference to ‘the perception of unfairness in the school inspection’. The ETI in its evidence to the Committee sought to demonstrate an inspection process that is robust, transparent and fair. This was confirmed by the OECD as part of its wider study into the evaluation and assessment framework in Northern Ireland published in December 2013. The ETI will continue to counter negative perceptions within the wider education sector.

In respect of the Committee’s comments regarding recommendation 2 and the legislative position, what is being proposed would require legislative change. Article 102 of the 1986 Order makes inspection a statutory function of the Department of Education and its inspectors. If this function is to reside elsewhere, as it does in Scotland, a legislative change would be required. The need for a legislative change does not preclude structural change, but the Department currently has no plans to make a change that would require it.

The ETI welcomes the Committee’s endorsement of the work that it undertakes to support school improvement. In addition to the work of the district inspector and the impact of the inspection process itself, the ETI has been instrumental in the dissemination of good practice through conferences and workshops. For example, the ETI issued a report on the best practice in the teaching of English and mathematics in areas of social disadvantage and organised dissemination events for this report which included workshop activities for the delegates. This was very well received as it demonstrated that, with the right approach to learning and teaching, and the appropriate expectation of what pupils can achieve, standards can be improved. The fact that the case studies were identified by ETI and the conference organised by ETI raised the profile of the issue.

Inspectors are also providing support to 19 post-primary schools in literacy and/or numeracy which will help to ensure that information and good practice is effectively shared between practitioners. Inspectors have also produced a series of programmes for ESAGS.tv in which they discuss a range of topics with school leaders and practitioners. Recent examples include the Leading to Success series, Talking about Improvement and The Role of the Head of [English/Mathematics] in Effecting Improvement. The ETI has also worked with a number of schools, either individually or in clusters, in promoting improvement through the development of effective self-evaluation processes.

In the last term of this academic year ETI gave presentations to a large number of conferences or meetings attended by groups of teachers and/or school leaders. Approximately 750 middle and senior managers have attended such meetings and have been able to benefit from the support of the knowledge and experience of ETI. Inspectors often ‘go the extra mile’ to provide the support the schools request.

The ETI accepts that it could do more to make this aspect of its work more evident however and is actively seeking to do this, in particular through the development of its website. It must be clear, however, that the role of ETI is to promote improvement at the point of inspection. Inspectors are more than willing to provide the support schools request, resources permitting, at individual school level over and above that

which is provided post-inspection as part of the follow-on process but the extent to which this is achievable is determined by the resource at their disposal.

With regard to recommendation 3, inspectors have been keen to demonstrate the efforts that have and continue to be made to ensure there is transparency about the inspection process and methodology. The NISRA post-inspection evaluation provides evidence that inspectors do explain the inspection process clearly to organisations at the point of inspection.

While ETI already goes to considerable lengths to communicate its inspection methodology, the process is and will continue to be kept under review to ensure improvements are identified and implemented. Involving the organisational representative at every stage of the inspection process, including the final moderation meeting, is increasing transparency and helping schools understand better the inspection process.

The ETI is also developing a new 'inspection overview' document that will complement existing support material available on the ETI website. In addition, ETI is exploring the possibility of summarising key characteristics of highly effective (very good) and less effective (satisfactory) provision within the new 'inspection overview'. The provisional timeline for launching the 'inspection overview' is September 2015.

The ETI takes every opportunity to respond to invitations to speak on the inspection process at conferences organised by professional organisations. For example, in September and October 2014 ETI gave 15 presentations at principals' conferences part of which was specifically focused on the inspection process and in particular the use of data during evaluation. The important element of any of these conferences is the opportunity to engage with the stakeholders through dialogue.

The Committee agreed to seek an update on the progress of the use of "paired observations" and changes to moderation practices.

The ETI has already piloted a process of conducting 'paired observations' with school principals during inspection. In the pilot period, 35 joint lesson observations have taken place during district visits and 12 during formal inspection visits. While the practice has been generally welcomed, some principals express reservations about conducting joint lesson observations during formal inspections. In response to this feedback, ETI has been keen to stress to principals that this is a further way of adding transparency to the inspection process, building capacity in the system and articulating a common understanding of what good learning and teaching looks like.

As part of the 'Role of the Representative', currently being piloted on inspection, principals (or their representative) are invited, whether or not they have taken part in joint lesson observations, to attend an inspection team meeting to discuss the effectiveness of teaching and learning observed.

In relation to the Committee's concerns regarding the ETI Complaints Procedure (recommendation 4), the ETI believe that the fact it receives very few complaints and that very few complaints progress to stage 2 or beyond demonstrates that the complainant is satisfied with the investigation, outcome and ETI's response.

The ETI would like to reiterate and assure the Committee that there is a mechanism to allow an inspection judgement to be altered. Should an investigation find that the evidence does not support robustly an inspection judgement then it will be amended as necessary. As is the case in all jurisdictions, any change to a professional judgement made by an inspector can only be made by the Chief Inspector.

As mentioned in the Department's written response, the ETI will be conducting a further review of the complaints procedure for publication in September 2015. This review will involve stakeholders as appropriate, and will give full consideration to the issues raised by the Committee.

In respect of recommendation 5, DE agrees that post-inspection surveys and customer service assessments should be an independent assessment of the inspection service.

With regard to comments on the Customer Service Excellence Assessment, the ETI believes that it was consistent in stressing the value, independence and objectivity of the award and is pleased to note that there is now clarity about this Cabinet Office award process.

The post-inspection surveys are carried out on ETI's behalf by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) which is the principal source of official statistics in Northern Ireland. As such the Department is content that construction and administration of the evaluation tool used to evaluate the inspection process is robust.

ETI is committed to continuous improvement and will continue to use post-inspection questionnaires to inform and direct improvement activity. As outlined in its response to the Committee's recommendation, ETI will request that NISRA engage with appropriate education stakeholders to consider their proposals for questionnaire content of post inspection surveys.

With regard to recommendation 6 and the use of questionnaires as part of the inspection process the Committee asked for clarity on the typical level of responses to questionnaires used during inspection.

During the academic term April 2014 – June 2014, the response rates to the parental questionnaires varied from 4% to 84%. Primary phase response rates ranged from 4% to 84%; post-primary response rates ranged from 5% to 70%. The average response rate in primary was approximately 25% and in post-primary it was just below 20%.

During the same period the response rates to the teacher questionnaires ranged from 20% to 100%. Primary response rates ranged from 60% to 100% while post-primary response rates ranged from 20% to 100%.

Pupils in primary and post-primary schools do not complete questionnaires – their responses are given during discussions with inspectors as part of the safeguarding/child protection evaluation processes.

In respect of recommendation 7, and the request for a timeline, the development of the “running report” is underway and will be piloted in this academic year with a view to introduction as soon as possible thereafter.

In respect of recommendations 8, the Committee requested a timeline for the removal of one word descriptors. The ETI has had discussions with NITC and stakeholder groups on the use of descriptors for overall effectiveness. Based on the outcomes of these initial discussions, the ETI is aiming to progress a focused consultation within the next few weeks.

The consultation will propose the use of six single-word performance levels for the specific areas under evaluation, i.e. Achievement and Standards, Quality of Provision, and Leadership and Management. It will however, propose that the six single-word performance level descriptors currently used for Overall Effectiveness will be replaced with a conclusion paragraph which signals the follow-on activity required at one of four levels. Subject to the outcome of this focused consultation, the ETI is aiming to implement any necessary change with effect from September 2015.

As specified in the written and oral responses to recommendation 9, the ETI welcomes the many positive comments received on the work of the District Inspector. The ETI provided a detailed written response to questions from the Committee on the role and time allocated to the District Inspector, in February 2014.

The ETI would like to assure the Committee of its continual commitment to the development of the role of the District Inspector and, as previously outlined, will allocate as much resource to this role as possible.

As stated in a previous submission in relation to recommendation 10 and the inspection of Irish Medium Education (IME) settings, ETI continually reviews its inspection practice and seeks to deploy the most suitable teams for inspection work, within the constraints of current resourcing.

ETI inspectors who are proficient in Irish are deployed on all Irish-medium school inspections as well as being involved in other inspection work. Of the 42 inspectors who conduct most of their work in the school sectors, six are trained to specifically inspect Irish-medium schools. This equates to 14% of the operational schools workforce of ETI.

In the academic year 2013-14 one post-primary, two primary inspections and two pre-school settings included the inspection of IME; in addition there were four follow-up inspection and one interim follow-up inspection carried out in IME settings in the early year’s sector. All of these inspections were conducted by an IME specialist.

In respect of recommendation 11, the Committee requested an update on the development of a dashboard of measures. To date work on the dashboard has primarily encompassed desk research, literature reviews and internal discussion on the range of indicators that might be included in a dashboard of measures. Officials

have also engaged in without-prejudice discussion at a number of conferences, workshops and in a small number of schools.

This month key stakeholders will be contacted and invited to be part of a panel that will work with officials to consider what should be included in the dashboard of measures, how the information can best be presented and the timescales for implementation at school and or system level.

In relation to the Committee's comments on the response to recommendation 14, DE accepts that it would be beneficial to have a more structured means through which to involve and consult with parents at a system level. As highlighted in the original response, DE will give consideration to how this could best be achieved and resourced to ensure that a wide range of parental views and opinions can be captured about a range of education policy matters. The creation of the new Education Authority provides an opportunity to put such arrangements in place.

Finally, in response to the Committee's comments in relation to the statutory independence of the ETI, DE would reiterate its position that operationally the ETI carries out its inspection functions in a manner that is fully independent from the Department and reports 'without fear or favour'.

In addition to inspecting school effectiveness, the ETI provides impartial advice on wider education policy and undertakes research and evaluation of aspects of education policy at the request of the Department. As outlined in the briefing on the 12 November, ETI has undertaken longitudinal studies in the past and is currently undertaking a longitudinal study on the impact of nurture unit provision.

Yours sincerely

Michele

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