



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Education and Training
Inspectorate and School Improvement
Process: NIPSA Briefing

6 November 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Tony McMullan	NIPSA
Ms Janette McNulty	NIPSA

The Chairperson: We welcome to the Committee Tony McMullan, assistant secretary of NIPSA; and Janette McNulty, departmental secretary. Thank you for taking the time to come here and for your written submission.

Mr Tony McMullan (NIPSA): Thank you very much, Chairperson, for inviting us to provide written evidence to the Committee, which you have received, and for asking us to come along today to give oral evidence. We will start with a presentation, and then we will be more than happy to answer any questions. I will start off, then Janette will address some issues, and then I will conclude.

First, I would like to advise the Committee that I am the lead official in NIPSA with responsibility for the Department of Education (DE) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Janette works as a civil servant, but is our departmental secretary. Unfortunately, we do not have any inspectors with us because all of them are on inspections at the moment. We could not get an inspector, even though we wanted to have one with us in case there were technical or professional questions. Unfortunately, every one of them has allocated inspections to do. We have talked to our representatives in the inspectorate, and, hopefully, we will be able to answer any points that you wish to raise with us, as well as giving an overview of what the inspectorate is about.

By now, you will have had the opportunity to read our written submission, but I would like to refresh your memory on some of the salient points. The inspectors possess a wide range of educational experience, professional expertise and knowledge, and all are highly reflective individuals. In every

inspection, the individual context of the school and what happens there is foremost in inspectors' minds, and, in all cases, the interests of the children — the interests of the learner — are paramount. The inspectors do not shy away from making difficult decisions when they believe they are merited.

The recent introduction of a new inspection model for post-primary schools and changes to the primary sector inspection model, which our members are attempting to implement in good faith, have come at no small cost to the work/life balance of the inspectors. The inspection work is always underpinned with rigour. However, there has been a desire to increase the number of inspections, leading to more inspections with fewer resources. Indeed, the chief inspector has cited that she has been asked to deal with a 20% reduction in the budget allocated to ETI by the Department. The reduced time for inspectors to evaluate provision has, in our view, a clear potential to cause divisions between ETI and schools. Our members have serious concerns about any future erosion of time allocations for the completion of inspections. The recent trend to complete inspections within shorter time frames is causing our members great concern. We believe that there must be adequate time to ensure that the evaluations remain high quality and fit for purpose.

The education system, coupled with the culture in Northern Ireland, is, in many respects, unique. Although, as a trade union, we favour the abolition of post-primary selection, we would welcome the introduction of good practice from other jurisdictions if it would improve the current system. However, that needs to be looked at very carefully because it may be difficult to import systems from other jurisdictions. Those systems may work elsewhere but may not be a good fit for how the education system operates in Northern Ireland.

Our members would welcome a similar time allocation to their Scottish counterparts, who get approximately 40 days a year for professional development. That would allow ETI staff time for partnership working with others so that the work that they do can contribute to system-wide improvement. It may also improve confidence among schools because inspectors will be continually refreshing their skills, knowledge and understanding. We also believe that the inspectors, who are the professionals at the coalface in respect of school inspections, need to be the final arbiters when it comes to assessing and determining the outcome of an inspection, not least because it is, ultimately, their responsibility to justify and stand over their evaluations and to explain their reasoning to staff in the schools that they have inspected.

There is a need for increased resources to ensure that ETI can fully and effectively meet business plan targets, and continue to provide high quality, professional evaluations in the interests of the learner. There is also a need to move away from the recent desire to drive up the quantity of inspections. If there is a need to ensure that all schools are inspected within a seven-year time frame, we believe that needs to be adequately resourced. In addition, inspectors need greater assurance about the finality of their decisions and that evaluations may not be overturned from anywhere outside of the original inspection team.

Our strong view on where ETI should be situated is that the status quo should remain, namely that ETI should be part of the Department of Education. We believe that being part of the Department and the wider Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) allows ETI to be more accountable for their actions and fosters greater levels of transparency and public accountability. There is a very strong desire among our members in ETI to make reporting as clear and transparent as possible.

Our members refute suggestions made in some of the oral evidence that the Committee has heard from other stakeholders that, following industrial action last year by teachers, schools are terrified of visits and that the relationships with the schools remain difficult. The direct experience of our members in ETI is that their relationships with schools are still very good. However, they note that they have sometimes been subjected to extremely inappropriate behaviour, which invariably goes unreported, not least as our members do not have the time to factor in meetings with their management because of the tight, unrelenting schedules for inspections and the fact that there is currently no mechanism for an inspector to make a complaint against a school or an individual therein.

Members of the inspectorate would welcome the introduction of a code of conduct for inspection, which would be for the inspectors, the schools and their governors to adopt and adhere to. Fundamentally, our members see themselves as advocates for learners, speaking up for the children whose schools they inspect. They believe that their job is to report honestly, without fear or favour. The sad fact of the matter is that, sometimes, provision is not good enough, and some children can be failed.

The Committee previously cited a departmental official, Chris Stewart, who made it clear that the inspectorate was part of the Department of Education. When our members join the ETI, they relinquish their teaching status, adopting instead the terms and conditions of civil servants. That does not mean, however, that there is not a degree of autonomy in the way in which the inspectorate conducts its business. The inspectorate is influenced by DE policy, but our members point out that no one in the Department tells them how to inspect, and, as such, they value retaining the autonomy that they have within the Department. It also means that, from our point of view as trade unionists, our members are protected by NICS terms and conditions, represented by us and have a right to be consulted if changes to those terms and conditions are proposed.

Inspectors argue that they represent very good value for money. We have noticed in some submissions by other organisations, including some of the teacher unions, that they said ETI is allocated a very large budget. We do not accept that. Some 0.3% of the Department of Education's overall budget goes to ETI.

NIPSA members and the inspectors are extremely dedicated and hardworking, consistently working above job requirements and often working well over their prescribed hours, without amassing flexi-leave or attracting overtime. In fact, they regularly work very long hours and drive very long distances. In addition, they frequently have to work at home after hours to ensure that they meet deadlines for inspections, with 70 hours a week being quite normal for those who undertake the role of a reporting inspector. Our members are extremely child focused and they want only the best for children. They report unanimously to us that they believe that they are very privileged to do this work. They observe and affirm the very best practice.

At this stage, Chairperson, I will pass over to my colleague Janette McNulty.

Ms Janette McNulty (NIPSA): Since forwarding our submission to you, we have taken the time to listen to some of the oral evidence that was presented to the Education Committee by some of the other stakeholders. Having heard that evidence, we believe that it may help the Committee if we refer specifically to a number of issues that were raised so that we can provide you, on behalf of our members, with their perspective.

There is particular concern among our members around some of assertions made by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) in its submission to the Committee, including its statement that:

"Many of those employed by the ETI have little or no experience of teaching, leading or managing schools."

Our members suggest that that may be a typo, which should instead read "any recent experience". In any case, they vigorously refute that, not least because to become a primary sector inspector, for example, they are required to have at least 10 years of teaching experience, demonstrate evidence of effective use of self-evaluation in bringing about improvement in children's learning, and have successfully completed an accredited postgraduate study related to primary education. In other specialisms, the job spec may vary slightly, but it will be just as robust. In addition, our members point out that the majority of inspection teams include at least one associate assessor. They are drawn from a pool of around 200 current teaching staff who work alongside the inspectorate for the duration of an inspection. The associate assessors have always been very positive about the training they receive to undertake that role, and the robust and well-considered way in which inspections are conducted. However, as there is currently no mechanism for them to come together as a collective body, unless they have responded to the inquiry on an individual basis, it may be that you have not yet heard their perspective. That may be a factor that you will wish to consider.

I turn to the way in which inspections are conducted. Although one of the complaints was around written reports being shorter, those are only one indicator of findings that the inspectors use. Inspectors also spend a lot of time during the report-back providing principals, governors and representatives from the relevant employing authority with detailed oral feedback on their findings and answering questions that they may have. As teaching unions are not present at those report-backs, any assertions they made about what takes place are based on second-hand feedback. The inspectors' findings are, ultimately, aimed at providing information for the school that improves provision in the interests of children, because the inspectors are advocates for learners. The inspectors work extremely hard to bring all the key people with them, but it can prove difficult when they need to deliver a message that the school may not want to hear.

The NAHT also asserted that the cost of retaining the inspectorate is considerable, without providing an indication of that cost. Our members argue that they constitute extremely good value for money. As Tony pointed out, The ETI comprises only 0.3% of the Department of Education's overall budget. They consistently work well over their prescribed hours, without the facility to accrue flexi-leave or attract overtime, drive very long distances on a regular basis, and then have to continue to work at home in the evening to ensure that they meet deadlines. Although they are civil servants, they cannot avail themselves of the same working patterns as other civil servants. In addition, they are currently being subjected to a drive to increase the number of inspections. That, coupled with the reduction in resources, is having a significant impact on their health and well-being.

We are aware of earlier discussions around the pros and cons of other inspection models, within and outside the UK. Our members are not necessarily wedded to any of those. Rather, their view is that they would welcome a system that advocates inspection that leads to improvement for learners. As such, they would be content to incorporate the best elements of a range of other models to best suit our regional needs. They see that, rather than discussions around increased powers for the inspectorate, as key, because their focus is on how to improve learning for children and young people. They welcome working alongside schools in the best tradition of working together towards improvement.

Having listened to the evidence presented by some of the other teaching unions, we welcome their comments on working towards partnership arrangements. We are reassured that, although they cited some criticisms, they advised that those were not aimed at inspectors. We particularly welcome the comments on the role of the district inspector, which they view as crucial. Our members in the inspectorate very much endorse that. In fact, you will recall that, in her evidence to the Committee, the previous week, the chief inspector stated that:

"From our perspective, the district inspector will provide support to principals. I know of examples where the principal asked the district inspector whether he could talk about a particular issue, and the district inspector was very happy to do that. That is one vehicle for providing support for principals."

We were, therefore, concerned that the teaching unions reported that, at a recent meeting that they had with the chief inspector, she stated that, the minute the district inspector walks in the door of a school, they are in inspection mode. Because they felt that that was the case, it changed the relationship completely. We wish to make it very clear that our members are very clear that that is not how they see the role. Our members see district inspectors' visits to schools as inspections leading to improvement in which the tone is very different — akin to that of a critical friend, providing objective opinions, support and challenge where appropriate. In addition, district inspector visits do not generate written reports. As such, the findings are not deemed high stakes, because they are shared only with the principal and are not put in the public domain.

Many of our members would have concerns if district inspection visits resulted in written reports being put in the public domain, given the fact that, historically, the role of the district inspector has always been viewed as a positive and constructive working relationship. Our members add that the knowledge that the district inspectors have of their district's schools is vital in the inspection of a school. As such, it is important that, where possible, the district inspector fulfils the role of a reporting inspector on inspections in his or her district's schools. They would voice their concern that, should situations arise in which the district inspector no longer even serves as a member of the inspection team, they are ultimately the ones who, should a school need support, have to deal with the after-effects.

Mr T McMullan: I would like to finish our oral evidence with some final points. Having read the reports of some of the oral submissions that other interested bodies have given, we note that the teachers' unions referred to a number of concerns. One was about self-evaluations. They suggested that schools were becoming terrified of showing any flaws. As I mentioned earlier, our members in ETI would refute suggestions of schools being terrified. However, they also want to record their take on the issue of self-evaluations, which were previously required from schools prior to an inspection taking place and were seen by our members in ETI as a positive tool. Our members point out that, when a school recorded concerns via its self-evaluation form, that indicated to them that the school was aware of the issues, which was preferable to unearthing those issues during an inspection. That, conversely, would imply that problems had not been spotted. The school development plan is now the means for this evaluation, as it should be based on a robust self-evaluation process, encouraging schools to take charge of that important improvement process.

Inspectors have some concerns about the newly introduced evaluation of governors. We have read the evidence to the Committee. We understand and appreciate that governors fulfil their duties in a voluntary capacity. However, given the fact that it is a statutory duty, as determined by the Education Minister, inspectors are keen to do what they can to support the upskilling of governors in self-evaluation processes.

Our members point out that the self-evaluation pro forma and quality indicators used in the inspection process are freely available at all times on the ETI website. Those involved can use those as part of their ongoing self-evaluation process. District inspectors draw attention to those and, during visits to schools, encourage their use. Inspectors fully support promoting better governance in schools, thereby promoting upskilling that allows governors to take charge of their statutory duties in a more comprehensive manner so that they know in more detail the work of the school and are enabled to support and challenge appropriately. There was also some concern expressed in earlier evidence about the amount of data needed from schools in advance of an inspection. Our members in the ETI are not oblivious to those concerns, and the amount of information required from, for example, secondary school information disks (SSIDs), which provide data in the secondary sector, has recently been reduced. Inspectors do, however, use qualitative data to ensure that they make as accurate an assessment of school performance as possible. They are required to test the validity of evidence because the assessments are, and fundamentally have to be, evidence based. However, that does not mean that they do not also take into account the context in which they put the reports together.

It was also noted that the last chief inspector's report was full of negative language. That was reported to the Committee during a previous evidence session. The teachers' unions have pointed out that that is not healthy for the education system. Our members in the ETI are very aware that careless use of language can upset and damage relationships. Our members are open to suggestion and to change and, if there is a better way of doing things or a better way of expressing the language used around inspections, they are more than happy to consider that. They appreciate that words such as "satisfactory" can cause sensitivities, because they can sometimes be taken personally, although they would add that their assessments are essentially about the performance rather than about the teacher.

Our members are aware of the concerns being expressed around the shorter timescale of two weeks' rather than four weeks' notice being given to schools regarding an inspection visit. The shorter timescale came about as a result of feedback through the NISRA questionnaires that are completed by schools after inspections. In fact, a common assertion made by schools to inspectors at the end of an inspection is that they wished that the inspectors would just arrive in schools without notice to see how the schools would operate normally. That is completely contrary to what the teaching unions advised but is generally the case in schools that are "very good" or better and that feel they have nothing to hide.

There was also a suggestion that parents were not consulted as part of the inspection process. Our members point out that that is not the case. Parents are given the opportunity to complete questionnaires and can also request a meeting with the reporting inspector during an inspection. The teaching unions have also voiced concerns that, where they did not necessarily agree with the result of an inspection report, there was no vehicle for challenge, except on a factual basis, and that any complaints made about individual inspectors resulted in them being moved to a different district rather than them being dealt with.

Regarding complaints against inspectors, our members are not aware of any occasion where complaints have been made that have led to an inspector being moved out of their district. There will be times when inspectors are moved between districts, but that happens for other reasons, such as promotion etc. There is currently no mechanism for an inspector to take a complaint against a school or an individual, as I said, and inspectors and our members in the ETI welcome the introduction of a code of conduct for inspection, which would be for the inspectors, the schools and the governors to adopt and adhere to.

In the main, our members in the ETI feel that they have a good, mutually respectful, high-quality working relationship with schools that they inspect. They are very aware that young people are reliant on them to ensure that they do their level best in all situations to make the most accurate evaluation call in the interests of pupils and learners. In that way, our members believe that they are intrinsically representing and giving a voice to those children whose schools they inspect. More often than not, they affirm the very good and outstanding work of the many excellent teachers we have in Northern Ireland.

That completes our submission, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Tony and Janette. It is an interesting place for the Committee to be. We are now the subject of considerable interest on this particular inquiry. In fact, I was just saying to Committee members earlier that we probably received more submissions on this issue than we have on any other inquiry that we have recently had. It is good to see the inspectorate being aware that it is now being inspected as a result of this inquiry.

What I find interesting in your submission and presentation is the degree of concern — "division" may be too strong a word — or difference of opinion between your members and those of other unions that represent teachers, who are, ultimately, subject to the inspection regime. That leads to a concern around the whole issue, which I notice from your submission that you are keen to protect. Paragraph 20 of your submission states:

"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."

If that is the case, based on what we have found in the submissions that we have received to date — apart from yours today, which basically says, "Things are not as bad as everybody else says" — we need to determine who has an accurate picture of what is going on in the inspection regime.

That leads me to ask a question. Paragraph 19 of your submission states:

"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."

Who else would interfere in the work of the inspection process? If you believe that the status quo should remain and that everything is healthy in the relationship between the ETI and the Department, who is the original inspection team and who, in your estimation, would overturn or interfere in that process?

Mr T McMullan: The inspection team depends on the size of the school. Normally, very small schools would have two inspectors. In very large schools, a team can comprise up to six inspectors who do the work and report back. That is what we see as the inspection team.

You asked about who can interfere. It has always been the case that inspectors do the report and submit it to their line management. Over the years, there has been support from line managers if a challenge needs to be made, but the overwhelming majority of the inspections have been accepted. We are concerned that there is the facility for inspections to be overturned at a higher level. Also, of course, teachers and schools have the right to challenge a report on a factual basis, as we pointed out in our submission. Nobody has any difficulty with that because the reports must be factually based and evidence based. However, we would be concerned whether anybody, either internal or external, would seek to change a report once it is completed.

The Chairperson: Yes, Tony, but there is a complete contradiction between paragraphs 19 and 20 of your submission. On one hand, you say that "that status quo should remain", so that there are:

"greater levels of transparency and public accountability."

Yet, I cannot get a clear indication from you about which individuals or organisations would possibly interfere and overturn original decisions taken by your inspectors. You mentioned a facility to overturn a report at a higher level. Is that higher level in the ETI? Or, as some of us suspect, is it a conversation that carries on between the ETI and the Department? We have examples of reports that are subject to ongoing discussions between the Minister, the Department and the inspectorate around a particular school that was inspected. That is in the public domain; in fact, we have had correspondence from the Minister about it. It seems as though there have also been discussions with the relevant boards about that particular school. We want to have transparency and openness, and schools certainly want to have transparency. They want to know whether anyone else, who may have an ulterior motive, is meddling in the pot.

You talked about the number of inspectors, Tony. There is a school in my constituency that had eight inspectors come through the door. I am at a loss to understand why eight inspectors were required. That is a practical issue for the ETI. Could the Department interfere? In written terms, what is the

facility to overturn? As a union representative, do you know from your members that a process is written down? Is there a process or facility somewhere that allows the Department to interfere? What are the mechanics of all that?

Ms McNulty: As we mentioned, we cannot give you exact figures for how many inspectors go into a school at any one time. It depends on the school and whatever. As we said, most inspections will include an associate assessor from another school. The robust discussions about inspections happen at the time of the inspection with those inspectors who are directly involved. In a sense, we are saying that that status quo should remain. They are the experts and the people who have seen at first hand what the issues are. They should make the assessments.

The Chairperson: I just want to ask one other question, and a lot of other members want to come in. Do you believe that the Department's target of a 20% cut to the resources of the ETI is achievable? Is that cut driving a more widespread use of associate inspectors in place of inspectors? Is that whole process undermining inspection standards?

Mr T McMullan: As we indicated in our earlier comments, we do not believe that the reduction of 20% is achievable without having a direct impact on inspections. We believe that inspectors need proper time to do inspections. All the inspectors are working flat out, and we indicated that many inspectors who are doing inspection reports are working over 70 hours a week. That is completely unsustainable. The inspectors do that because they are passionate about the work, but people will eventually burn out.

A 20% reduction in the budget will lead to a significant reduction in inspections. It is just unsustainable. We made the case to the Department that the ETI needs to be properly resourced to do its job, and we are not saying anything different here. If the Department and the Minister want the ETI to do that job, they have to provide it with the resources.

Mr Kinahan: Tony and Janette, thank you very much. Your presentation started quite well but, as you got towards the end of it, I got quite angry. At the beginning, you talked about collaboration, the two-way passage of information and people working together. When the representatives from the ETI were here the other day, I very much got the feeling that they were not really listening or taking things on board. They see themselves as slightly above everything that is going on. When you got to the points at the end of your presentation about careless language, not having your own complaints procedure and wanting a code of conduct, I had this vision of you wanting to set up your own body that would suffer from the same faults. You are not listening or taking the concerns on board. When you go to the schools and talk to the principals and vice-principals, you learn that they have very real concerns. You acknowledged those at the beginning but, at the end, you went back into your bunker almost as though you had blinkers on.

To get to a question: will you try to be more collaborative so that you really are more comfortable sharing procedure so that you are part of them and working with them? By the end of your presentation, I got the feeling that you are a different organisation that is protecting your members who are in the ETI. We need you in there. We need you to be involved, helping and moving them all forward. You painted a very different picture at the end of your presentation than you did at the beginning. That is one question.

The second point is something that Sean came up with when we asked the representatives of the ETI about teacher training during the 40 days. Teachers are being judged on something that they cannot control because they are not getting the time. So many processes and reviews and so much work is being thrown at them that they do not have time to do their training. The representatives from the ETI did not seem to take the point on board that the ETI is judging teachers on something that they cannot control. The ETI needs to consider that it is throwing so much at teachers that they do not have the time to train themselves. It cannot fail them for not hitting their number of days of training. It must help them and help the system to change.

Mr T McMullan: Thanks very much, Mr Kinahan, for that question. We understand and appreciate that there are concerns. We read the transcripts of the oral evidence that has been given to the Committee by teachers' unions, the boards, other organisations and individuals that have come before the Committee. We understand that.

What we are trying to say is that our members do not want to be in a bunker. They want to be professional and passionate — they believe that they are passionate — about the work that they do.

Fundamentally, they believe that inspecting schools is about trying to identify all the good practices and sharing them with others. Where there are particular weaknesses in schools, it is about identifying poor practices so that they can be dealt with. I note from one of the submissions that the Committee received that 81% of schools that have been revisited after an inspection have seen an improvement. That shows that inspections work.

Our members are very keen and are very passionate about what they do. They want to do that to the best of their ability. We asked for protocols in areas where we believe that they would be justified. We do not necessarily want to create additional red tape; no one wants more red tape. We accept that there is a level of bureaucracy. Sometimes, bureaucracy gets a bad name as if all bureaucracy is wrong, but there is a certain level of bureaucracy in every organisation that is necessary to sustain it. When we suggested some things that should be put in place, we thought that they would be helpful and beneficial to the system. We were not in any way trying to be negative.

Fundamentally, because our members are so passionate about what they do, they want to work very closely and collaboratively with schools, principals and teachers. They do not want to do something that would have a negative impact. Having said that, on the occasions when they find practices or things that are wrong, they believe that they have to say that they are wrong. They have to be open and honest. If they were not, they would be failing in their duty, not just to the ETI but, more importantly, to the children.

Mr Kinahan: You also said that you did not really recognise the fear factor. You did not quite say "fear"; I think that you were even stronger than that.

Ms McNulty: The teachers' unions said that there was a fear factor. That was very emotive language. We said that our members feel that they have very good relationships with the schools that they deal with. I am not saying that it is always the case, but it is the nature of these things that people who have issues are more proactive in sending submissions in to an inquiry. Schools or other organisations that have had a good experience may not necessarily write in because there is no need to do that.

The Chairperson: On that general point Janette, you made certain statements in your submission about selection and other things that are not the subject of this inquiry. As the representatives of your members, how confident are you that your members believe a lot of those things and would concur with what is in your submission?

Previously, we received submissions from the unions on a variety of things. I have met numbers of teachers and staff who are members of those unions who have told me that the union does not speak for them on those issues. What discussions have you had with your members in preparation for making this submission so that you have got to the point that you can say that your members feel or believe something?

Ms McNulty: We have had very full discussions with our members. We would not be here saying the things that we are without their agreement, because we want to take them with us. If we were to say something outwith anything that they wanted to say or that they were taking forward, we would obviously not be put in a good position with them.

Mr T McMullan: Just on that point, I think that it would also be the case that, because teachers' unions represent thousands of members but the ETI has fewer than 60 members, we have been able to let all our members see our proposed submission having consulted them on it.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks for the presentation. I will pick up on a topic that the Chair started with, which was to flag up the various differences in opinion between your members and members of the teachers' unions. What engagement is there between you around the whole process of inspection? Is there room for engagement and the sharing of good practices in building up trust, which is an issue that we have certainly been made aware of so far?

Ms McNulty: From what we told you, our members are keen to engage, and we welcomed the fact that the teachers' unions alluded to that in their oral submission. There certainly would be no barriers to that.

Mr Hazzard: But it does not happen, does it?

Ms McNulty: I am not sure that it is relevant, in the sense that I do not know that the teachers' unions would necessarily be for it. The teachers' unions represent different people for different reasons, so I am not sure how often it would be relevant to meet to discuss things.

Mr Hazzard: It was just even on the subject of the time that elapses in writing the report. As was said, if that is shortened, it will create stress, worry and everything else. Equally, I suppose that the other side of that coin is that teachers can be caused stress and worry if it is prolonged. Perhaps that is one particular area where you could come together to decide what would be an agreed length of time or what the benefits would be of shortening it.

Ms McNulty: But, at the end of the day, our members have to do what they are told. If they are told that the report is now a five-day report, they do that. They are human beings as well, and, much as we appreciate that teachers would be anxious to hear the results of a report, they also have to bear in mind that the inspectors now have to do this in a very condensed period. As Tony said, that is not only becoming much tighter for them to do, but you also have to factor in that they also have to drive. Some of our inspectors would drive two hours to a school in the morning, two hours back and take work home to finish a report by a Friday.

Mr Hazzard: That is fair enough. You spoke of the need maybe for a code of conduct to be in place. Would you agree with a complaints procedure alongside that for inspectors? You talked of some scenarios and situations in which that might have been beneficial.

Mr T McMullan: Sorry, could you repeat that?

Mr Hazzard: You spoke of perhaps needing a code of conduct that would help the situation. What is your opinion on having a complaints procedure as well? That way, inspectors could —

Ms McNulty: Sorry, just to clarify, do you mean a complaints procedure against the inspector or —

Mr Hazzard: No, for the inspectors. You spoke of some scenarios where they could have benefited from the opportunity to make a complaint or —

Ms McNulty: The point that we were making was that they could, technically, make a complaint. However, their schedules make that very difficult because it would put things on hold and they would have to take time out to make a complaint. In other words, even in the past, when they maybe thought that they could have complained — they mentioned things to us — it was not possible because they had so many other things to do.

Mr Hazzard: I suppose that what I am getting at is that you must feel that being able to complain if behaviour has not been what it should have is an important facility. Surely, like there is for schools, there should be a complaints procedure or arbitration if a report has not been what they think it should have been.

Mr T McMullan: We understand that schools are able to use the appeal mechanism if anything in a report is not factual.

Mr Hazzard: Is that for facts and facts only, though?

Ms McNulty: Well, again, as we mentioned, all inspections are evidence based. So, if they have been done properly, they should be accurate.

The Chairperson: Is Chris not referring to the point that you mentioned, Tony, about extremely inappropriate behaviour, which I assume was on behalf of teachers in schools where your colleagues were carrying out an inspection? If that is the case, is it not your duty to report it to your senior line management and to make the principal aware that particular incidents took place? You said that, technically, you can record it, but there is an issue because of work pressure. If some extremely inappropriate behaviour took place, is it not an issue that needs to be separate, in a sense, from what may be the factual detail about how that school responds to GCSE results or its management structure and all those things that relate to the school? Surely members are not left isolated if things are happening to them that you believe to be extremely inappropriate.

Mr T McMullan: You are absolutely correct, Chair. We advise our members that, where they are the recipients of behaviour that is unacceptable, they should report it. We think that that should happen, and we encourage our members to do that.

Mr Hazzard: I want to ask about the level of support, advice and training that is available for inspectors and your assessment of it. What do you think it should be?

Mr T McMullan: As we indicated, our colleagues are all aware of what happens in other jurisdictions, and that is why we made the point that not everything that happens in other jurisdictions should automatically be applied here. However, where we see good practice in other areas, we think that it should happen here. For example, our members identified that, in Scotland, most of the schools inspected get about 40 days a year allocated for professional development. Our members get only a couple of days for that, if they are lucky, because of the small numbers that there are, the number of inspections that they do, the geography and the pressure to produce reports more and more quickly. That leads to there being very little time for professional development. Our members are professional people working in this field, and we would like to see them having the same opportunities at least as their colleagues in Scotland.

Ms McNulty: It is particularly imperative in the case of our inspectors. When they join the inspectorate, they have no choice but to work from home. That is the stipulation. So, in a sense, they are all working in isolation and it is very seldom that they all get together as a group. That is why it is difficult, for all sorts of reasons, for some of the things that we mentioned here. For the majority of time, they are on their own and, compounded by that, they are rushing to finish inspections. So, in the case of our members, it is imperative that they get together more often.

Mr Rogers: You are welcome. Thanks for your input. I want to pick up on one or two points that were raised earlier. Chris asked whether you, as representatives, would sit down with the teachers' unions. Your response was that you did not feel that that was relevant. Why is that?

Ms McNulty: Sorry, I did not think what was relevant? Meeting teachers' unions?

Mr Rogers: Yes.

Ms McNulty: It depends on the issue. It would not necessarily be the case that the teachers' unions and ours would meet. If there was a relevance to it, we would, and we would welcome doing so. However, in the context of what Chris was saying, I am not sure that it would have been a relevant issue in that instance.

Mr Rogers: Surely there is a difference of opinion over the role of the inspectorate between how you perceive it and how the teachers' unions perceive it. Do you not think that there would be value in sitting down together?

Ms McNulty: In fairness, the crucial point is about how the teachers see the inspectors, and how the working relationships within the schools operate.

Mr Rogers: Yes, but the teachers are represented by their union. No?

Ms McNulty: Yes.

Mr T McMullan: I am not sure, Mr Rogers, that we see that there is a difference between what the inspectors believe their role to be and how the teachers see it. There is clearly a difference of opinion on how inspections are being done. However, with respect to the overall role of the inspectorate, as I understand it, the teachers' unions accept it. Nobody argues for the abolition of the inspectorate. The inspectorate has an important role to play in developing skills and providing best practice etc. As I understand it from reading the submissions of the teachers' unions, they seem to have concerns about how the practice happens in reality; whereas, we speak on behalf of members who we represent. Obviously, because we are not inspectors and we are not in schools on a daily basis, we do not see what happens there. Certainly all the evidence that we get from our members is that they are doing the job professionally, competently and with the best interests of the children at heart.

Mr Rogers: I do not question that at all. Having spent my life in the profession, I know that people work 70-plus hours a week, but I still think that there would be value in sitting down together, even if it is only to get a perspective on where people are coming from. I found your answer to be strange.

Mr T McMullan: It is something that we can consider. The teachers' unions and NIPSA work together through the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NICICTU). NICICTU also has an education committee that we are represented on, so some things, on a broad level, are discussed about the education funding issues, but I am not aware of requests being made by us or by the teaching unions to talk about the ETI's role. It may be something that can be looked at. Thank you for raising it.

Mr Rogers: That leads me back to my original question, which may be a different take on the 20% reduction. Is a 20% reduction really an aspirational one, with the assumption that self-evaluation will be better embedded in our schools? Do you believe that the role of the ETI in school performance should move to becoming a role in which it quality-assures the findings of a school's self-evaluation?

Ms McNulty: We will need to take that question back to our members to ask them. We will certainly do that.

Mr Rogers: I am just wondering whether the 20% is in there somewhere, too.

Ms McNulty: I am not sure why you are linking the 20% specifically to self-evaluations. The 20% reduction, as far as we understand, would be to do with resourcing across the inspectorate. In other words, for example, if an inspector retires, he or she may not be replaced. I am not saying that that would be the case, but it is that kind of thing. Our concern, and why we have highlighted it, is that an awful lot of school inspections are happening. They are not decreasing — in fact, they are increasing — and the period for inspections has shortened, as we discussed. Therefore, there is a lot more pressure on the inspectors who are there. That is our concern.

Mr Rogers: I think that if schools' self-evaluation were better embedded, there would be less need for the team of eight inspectors.

Ms McNulty: Our understanding on self-evaluation, and, as I said, we will take that back for further response if required, is that it is legally required under the school development plan. That is something that the schools have to do in any case for legal reasons, but if an inspector goes in to a school, that is something that he or she looks at as part and parcel of the inspection.

Mr Rogers: As a side point, the Chair also mentioned the team of eight. It might be helpful if we could get some clarification from the Department as to why in one case it is a team of eight or a team of five, or whatever.

You both mentioned advocates for learners in your presentation, and I think that that is extremely important. However, I get the feeling that the pressure that is on the inspection team means that you are finding a lot of difficulty in delivering. The other thing that I would like to mention is the reduction in quality staff development that was available, the reduction in the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS), and so on. Has that contributed to the pressures as well?

Ms McNulty: That is something that our members could comment on more fully than we could, because that is to do with school inspections per se. However, our understanding is that CASS would have been there initially to deal with schools before something went wrong, and now, because the resourcing is so much less, it is really there when something goes wrong. I suppose in a sense it is more proactive than reactive.

Mr Rogers: Would your members like to have greater alignment between the ETI and the school-supported staff development that exists, for example, in Scotland?

Ms McNulty: That is something that we would have to speak to the members about. I would not want to speak on their behalf when we have not checked that with them.

Mr T McMullan: That issue has not arisen in any discussions that we have had with our members. If we were giving a comment, it would be a purely personal view, and we are here to articulate that of NIPSA. When we were preparing ourselves to come here, we looked at all our submissions again and

prepared on that basis. The question that you ask is a good one, but it never featured in any of our discussions, so we would not be competent to answer it directly. I apologise.

Mr Craig: Tony and Janette, it is good to see you here. I want to go back to something that the Chair was discussing with you. Paragraph 19 of your submission states:

"Inspectors who conduct the inspection need greater assurances about the finality of their decisions".

I will hold my hands up: I have been in the position of having the inspectors in and being at the other end. What do you mean by that statement? I always assumed that the report of the inspectors who came through the door and did the report was final.

Ms McNulty: That is how it is, and that is how they want it to remain.

Mr Craig: What other assurances do they need?

Mr T McMullan: We want to make it absolutely clear that this would be the final report and that there would be no possible change to the report, internally or externally. "Internally" obviously means in the Department and "externally" means outside the Department.

Mr Craig: We are always told that that does not happen, so why would they have that doubt or fear in their mind?

The Chairperson: Is that based on evidence? I am sorry to cut across Jonathan on this.

Mr Craig: No, you are all right.

The Chairperson: There must be evidence that leads you to believe that some people have been meddling and interfering. Who are they? Are they politicians? Is it other schools?

Ms McNulty: If I could say —

The Chairperson: What experience led you to write paragraph 19 of your submission?

Ms McNulty: Basically, whenever an inspection is done, as we said, there is very robust evidence and discussion around that before the inspectors leave the school. Anything that they decide on once they are in the school is how the inspection goes and what the actual end result will be. On occasion — we are not talking about elsewhere outside the inspectorate, and we make that clear — those decisions may be challenged and looked at. What we are saying is that that should not be the case and that it should remain as is.

Mr Craig: Challenged and looked at by whom?

Ms McNulty: In the inspectorate.

Mr Craig: Under what criteria? My experience is that you get a challenging report put in front of you as governors of the school, and, yes, in that room you do challenge some of the things in the report — some rightly. We have to be honest and say that some things in the report you just have to swallow even though they are not nice. At the end of the day, however, what comes out of that discussion between the governors and the inspectorate is final. It was as far as we were aware. I am not aware of anybody, outside the inspectorate team or anyone else, having any influence over that. Are you telling me that the case has been different in some cases?

Ms McNulty: What I am saying is that is what happens the majority of times that an inspection is done. There can possibly be a challenge, however. That does not necessarily change it, but there may be a challenge in the inspectorate when the report comes back, and that should not happen.

Mr Craig: From whom does that challenge come and on what grounds?

Mr T McMullan: What we are saying, and I am sorry if we are making heavy weather of this, is that because the Committee was doing an investigation into the inspectorate, we thought it important that we reflect on the broad questions that you are looking at but also point out that our members, in discussions that we had with them, thought that this was an important issue. They feel that that should be made clear so that there can be no doubt in anybody's mind — politicians', people in the inspectorate's or teachers' — that once the inspection report is done, there will be finality on it, and it will have been done by the inspectors. We are not saying necessarily that there has been evidence of interference. We are saying that there should not be interference.

Mr Craig: There should not be interference.

Mr T McMullan: That is what we are saying.

Mr Craig: That tends to tell me that there is interference. I have a good reason for raising this, Tony, because my bitter experience tells me that there is interference. I always assumed that, once it was done, a report was final and closed and that the issues raised were those that the school had to deal with. However, on an ongoing basis, I see moving goalposts around what the school is meant to do. Who is moving the goalposts? Who is doing the interfering?

Mr T McMullan: As I said, we are not saying that there has been interference; rather, we are saying that there should not be and that that should be clear. Everyone involved in the inspection report, in the ETI, and inside and outside the Department should be aware of the system, what our members aspire to and what they want. That is what we are saying.

Mr Craig: I find it concerning that someone outside the inspection team would have any influence over it. In fairness to the people on the inspection team, they are the ones at what I will call the pointy end. They are in there looking at the detail of everything. There should not be anyone else doing anything outside that.

Mr T McMullan: We concur absolutely.

Mr Craig: You said that the inspectors do not have a right of complaint. That also concerns me. I was not aware of that, and I would have automatically assumed that they could complain to their management team, and so on, if someone overstepped the mark around any issue. If an inspector oversteps the mark in some way, will you outline what the complaint procedures are around that?

Mr T McMullan: We did not say that our members do not have the right to complain. We are saying that, owing to the length of time involved in the process, the reality is that many of them do not complain, because they have so many inspections and so much else to do. I answered the Chairperson directly that we would encourage our members to make a complaint if they have one. If complaints are made against anybody, they need to be investigated. We do not have a difficulty per se with teachers making complaints against our members. We believe that our members are doing the job professionally and competently. However, if there are complaints made, they need to be investigated. We will stand over that. We do not have a difficulty per se. We are not saying that our members should have the right to complain but that nobody can complain against them. If investigations are conducted thoroughly and properly, our members will stand over whatever the outcome is.

In the same way, as we said when concluding our submission, we made it very clear that the overwhelming evidence is that the quality of education is very good. Exceptional teaching is being done in Northern Ireland. That has to be commended. The inspection process has a very real part to play in developing good practice. However, where there is bad practice, it needs to be challenged. Our members want to do that to the best of their ability.

Mr Craig: I do not disagree with you, Tony.

There is a massive disincentive for anyone to complain against an inspector. I have witnessed that. I think that you understand that that is the case: you are in there, you are being critical about what is going on anyway, and the fear from people is that, if they complain, they will make the situation worse. It would be interesting to see what level of complaints there ever has been against inspectors. I would not imagine that it is that high.

Mr T McMullan: I am not aware of the statistics, so I cannot help in that regard.

Mr Lunn: Thanks for your presentation. I am sorry to go back to the question of the finality of the report, because the issue has been beaten to death. You said that there is a full discussion between the school and the inspectorate before the report is issued. That is fair enough. I imagine that it might even take the form of a draft report. If the principal of a school does not agree with something in a report and is incensed by it, is it not reasonable for him or her to write to the chief inspector and for the chief inspector then to have a discussion with the inspection team that produced the report, and that might lead to a change in the report's wording? Do you see that as interference?

Ms McNulty: Again, what we would say is that anyone who has not been in direct contact with or inspected the school would not know the context in which something was written or why it was written. What we are really saying is that our inspectors are the professionals at the coalface, and they are ones doing the inspections first hand. Therefore, someone who is told about something third hand, or whatever, and has not actually seen everything in context would not necessarily be able to make a judgement about it.

Mr Lunn: That is OK. That is why I phrased my question to reflect "following discussion with the chief inspector and the team, there might be a change". That would be different from somebody higher up in the inspectorate chain instructing a team to change a report, which I do not imagine would happen.

Ms McNulty: In the scenario that you suggest — we are not saying that this — has happened, if the chief inspector were to suggest a change, we personally do not feel that that would be appropriate, because the chief inspector would not have been on the inspection and therefore would not have seen what happened in context. The value judgements of the inspectors, who are the professionals, have to be trusted.

Mr Lunn: If, following that discussion, the inspectors who were at the school reflected on what they said and decided to temper their remarks or change an assessment in some way, would that not be reasonable? Do you think that that is interference?

Ms McNulty: The point that we made earlier is that this is not about one inspector. It is about a team of inspectors that includes associate assessors. They sit down and have very robust discussions for a very long time. It is not something that is done lightly whatsoever. We therefore feel that it would be wrong to challenge that at that stage.

Mr Lunn: I am glad that you mentioned the fact that they sit down and have a full discussion. The whole structure and mechanics of the system seem a bit strange to me. It is a condition that inspectors must work from home. I do not know why that should be the case. For a start, it must hinder the interchange of practice and ideas among inspectors. You mentioned that there is almost a complete lack of opportunity for professional development. It does not sound like a job that I would want to do, working 70-odd hours a week from home and then perhaps being sent off to the wilds of a different part of the country for four or five days to work with other people who have also come in from different areas. At least they finally get together to produce a report. I was beginning to think that you were going to tell me that it is all done by e-mail. What is the rationale for them having to work from home?

Ms McNulty: I do not know the exact rationale, but there are 60 inspectors, and if they were all working in the Department of Education itself, we would need another 60 offices. Therefore, a few years back, a decision was taken that inspectors who come on board work from home.

Mr Lunn: Do they operate geographically in any way? If a number of them live in Fermanagh, for example, is it reasonable to send them anywhere?

Ms McNulty: That is something that we have discussed before. Obviously, when you join the inspectorate, you could be living in any part of Northern Ireland. Some of our inspectors have young families or caring responsibilities, so it is not as easy as just going from one place to another to be nearer to whatever district is yours. There are times when inspectors literally pass each other on the road, so that perhaps needs to be thought through.

Mr Lunn: Sounds like school buses.

Mr T McMullan: I will add to the earlier question, which is, in a sense, linked to this. I am not sure why the inspectors all work from home, but it has always been like that ever since we came in. Therefore, it predates us. It may be because they are going out to schools all over Northern Ireland, whereas, the headquarters function can be in any central location. The vast majority of staff who work in the headquarters in Rathgael House do not have to travel around. The schools inspectorate, however, is travelling in all six counties in Northern Ireland, largely daily, so it would not be as cost-effective if they were all stuck in Bangor and had to travel to Enniskillen, Newry, Armagh or Coleraine.

Mr Lunn: I was not suggesting that they all be stuck in the one place, but there must be a suitable point somewhere in between 60 people all working from home and 60 people all working from one point, if you know what I am getting at. That leads me on to another issue, because it sounds like something that ESA could perhaps sort out when it comes into being. *[Laughter.]* You knew that I would get there, Chair. Do you have a view on the sections of ESA that relate to the inspectorate? Some people think that it will increase its powers to a draconic level, and the rest of us think that it does not make a whole lot of difference at all. What is the view of your members on whether ESA, in its present draft form, will give the inspectorate much extra power? Are they comfortable with it?

Mr T McMullan: As we understand it, there is to be some limited additional power, but it would still be less than the power of other bodies in other jurisdictions, such as Ofsted, and so on. Our members are content with the power that it has, and if it gets some limited additional powers, I do not think that there will be a problem with that. The inspectorate will not go into ESA; it will remain part of the Department.

Mr Lunn: Yes, but its powers will be incorporated into the —

Mr T McMullan: Yes, I accept that. The bottom line is that our members want to be left largely alone to get on with doing what they do best but within the confines of structures and the confines of being answerable and accountable. Our members have no difficulty with that, but they primarily want to get on with doing what is best in the interests of children.

Mr Lunn: You are leading me on to something else, which is the 20% reduction that is being talked about. You would think that, given the present structure of our education estate and system, that would be quite hard to achieve. However, if ESA came into being and got to grips with area planning and sorted out the school estate, 20% might not be so impossible to achieve on, dare I say it, the basis that there might be fewer schools.

Mr T McMullan: The issue of how many schools there should be is not within our area of responsibility.

The Chairperson: Tony, that is not totally accurate, because your submission raises a very serious issue. It states:

"They are also called upon to provide ETI recommendations on development proposals for schools within their districts."

Therefore, the inspectorate is asked. Following this meeting, I will ask the Department for the information about particular schools and the recommendations that were given by the inspectorate on development proposals, because, until I saw your report, my understanding was that the ETI had no role. Paragraph 12 states:

"District Inspectors are often called upon to provide briefings on organisations in their district for Ministerial visits and other VIP visits."

I would like to see the ones that they provide when I go to visit a school, but anyway. It continues:

"They are also called upon to provide ETI recommendations on development proposals for schools within their districts."

That is to do with area planning. A development proposal is about a significant change, and if you are advocates for learning, how do those two things tie up?

Ms McNulty: I am not sure that that was our understanding of what they meant. We will clarify that for you.

The Chairperson: We would like to know.

Mr Lunn: Thank you for taking over my line of questioning, Chairman.

The Chairperson: You and I think the same things, Trevor.

Mr Lunn: It is an interesting line in the submission. It does not seem that surprising to me that if there is a development proposal, let us say, to close a school, at least the latest inspection reports would be referred to as part of that process. Following on from that, it might not be that impossible that the inspectorate could be called on to make a comment or a submission. It had not occurred to me before, but it does not seem unreasonable.

I just want to say something about this fear factor. I do not like that term: it is emotive, and I do not think that it is a proper description of what happens when an organisation, in whatever business, is going to be the subject of an inspection. In my previous life, I was inspected many times by the Financial Services Authority (FSA). Those occasions cost about four nights' lack of sleep and a good week of preparation. The FSA would comment on that and say that that was part of the process. It puts you on edge, because you have to look at your procedures and your recording, and so on, and tidy up your act in preparation for the inspection. The FSA thought that that was a good thing, and it knew that everyone did it.

To me, that is part of the process here, too. I would find it very strange if schools were not made to feel slightly on edge by the prospect of an inspectorate report. However, there does not need to be a fear factor, leading to the type of confrontation that we have heard about.

I do not really have a question for you, but I think that you said that you only really hear from the disgruntled people in these scenarios. You do not hear from the ones who found the report useful or beneficial or who had no complaint.

Ms McNulty: Our inspectors have said to us that they do affirm good schools and acknowledge good teaching. That is something that they would want us to say. That is exactly the point: schools that have had a bad experience, for whatever reason, will possibly be those who will be more vocal about the report.

Mr Lunn: The inspectorate could perhaps be a bit more generous in praising good practice.

Ms McNulty: We would attest that it is.

Mr Lunn: OK. We hear from other organisations that are involved, and it is chalk and cheese. Sometimes you would not think that you were talking about the same subject. It would be useful to get the balance right, and I am sure that the inspectors would agree with that.

Mrs Dobson: Trevor has asked most of the questions that I was going to ask. I am somewhat baffled by your take on the relationship with teachers. Janette, you described the inspectorate as being like a critical friend. From chatting to teachers, my impression is that with friends like that, they do not need many enemies.

Speaking with my agriculture hat on, I have to say that it reminds me so much of farmers' opinions of departmental officials. The farmers would say that officials used to come out to help you but that now they come out to get you. The impression that I get from speaking to teachers is that you are out to get them and that you are certainly not a critical friend. You have a lot of work to do to build that relationship with the teachers.

Trevor touched on the fact that inspectors work from home, and you talked about a feeling of isolation. They need to do more: speak with other inspectors and develop relationships in order to deal with the impression that head teachers have of them.

Chris Hazzard mentioned that the Scottish inspectorate has 40 development days a year. You get a couple of days, possibly. Would NIPSA support the adoption of the Scottish inspection system?

Mr T McMullan: You raised a number of points. First, I accept that, having talked to teachers, you have a different opinion about the idea of a critical friend. Our members fundamentally believe that they are a critical friend, in the sense that they want to be supportive of teachers and that they want to identify good and bad practice. If they were not doing their job professionally and competently and did not point out where there were weak practices, they would be failing in their job, not just on behalf of the Department and the Executive but, more importantly, on behalf of the children. Our members believe that that is fundamentally their job. However, they do not want to get into a war situation in which there would always be friction between them and teachers. They want to work together. In many senses — at least, this is reported to us — teachers do accept where there are weaknesses in areas. There could be a whole variety of factors: socio-economic factors; the location of a school; or the size of a school. In many cases, teachers accept that their school is failing in some respects and accept the report. In other areas, as in life, not everyone likes being challenged.

Mrs Dobson: You appreciate that a heavy-handed approach would not lead to a good working relationship with teachers.

Mr T McMullan: Absolutely, I accept that. Our members would not want a situation in which teachers believed that they were coming in with a heavy hand. They believe that they go into schools to do a professional job. Clearly, from what you have said, that does not appear to be happening in all cases. That is certainly not the impression that we are getting from our members. You say that they need to build relationships —

Mrs Dobson: You say that they work from home and in isolation. Are they so out of touch or isolated that they are not picking that up?

Mr T McMullan: I do not believe that. Although they work in isolation, a minimum of two inspectors go to each school, and, as identified earlier, there could be up to eight on certain occasions. So they talk to one other, but they do not work in office accommodation where they see people every single day. That is why we have suggested that more time is needed for professional development.

We do not say that the Scottish system in its entirety should be brought to Northern Ireland. We believe that we should look at best practice elsewhere. If there are good elements of best practice, and there is certainly one in professional development, they should be brought to Northern Ireland. However, we do not suggest automatically replacing ETI with the Scottish system.

Mrs Dobson: There is certainly a lot of work to be done to gain the confidence of the teachers and to be seen as assisting rather than policing them.

Ms McNulty: Again, that is not the experience of our members. It may well be that some teachers feel like that, but, in general, our members say that they have a very good relationship with schools.

Mrs Dobson: Perhaps they need to talk more to the teachers.

The Chairperson: May I conclude by clarifying something? It follows on from Tony's point about good practice. I just wonder whether there is a fear factor in NIPSA. We have talked about the fear factor in schools, but is there one in NIPSA, too? Paragraph 14 refers to good practice fit for the education system that operates in Northern Ireland. It goes on to mention specifically the poor press about Ofsted and states:

"NIPSA would urge caution about importing methods and ways of working with schools".

Who would be responsible for importing such methods and ways of working with schools that would not be suitable for the Northern Ireland system? There is a direct link back to Ofsted. Is there a fear that the current chief inspector, who is a former employee of Ofsted, might be responsible for importing methods and ways of working that might not be suitable for Northern Ireland?

Mr T McMullan: As well as our own experience, we talk to colleagues in unions that represent members in Ofsted, and, indeed, in other areas. Although we are a uniquely Northern Ireland-based trade union, we have close relationships with colleagues in other unions in other jurisdictions. We are aware, not least through those relationships but also because, as citizens, we read the press and watch the television, of the very difficult relationship between Ofsted, teacher unions and other organisations in Britain. We do not believe that the Ofsted model is a good one. We are not

highlighting this particularly to the chief inspector; we are saying to anyone, be it the chief inspector, the Minister or anyone from the Department as a whole that we do not believe that Ofsted would be the best model for Northern Ireland. We want to continue with what we have but, where we can, advance it and make it better.

The Chairperson: Surely that enhances the argument that ETI should be a separate entity, not part or parcel of the Department but completely outside it, and that the chief inspector should not sit on the senior management team. As clearly indicated, somebody is meddling and interfering, which affects development proposals. Surely we would be in a better position if we had an independent inspectorate that had a clear remit to be an advocate for learners and had the child at its centre. Such an inspectorate could comment on all the policy and other issues but would not be inextricably linked to the Department in the way that it is perceived currently: solely to ensure that the most recent circular, policy or whatever comes from the Department is implemented. As Chris Stewart made very clear, the inspectorate is the Department. In many other regimes in Northern Ireland, that has not been acceptable. It is not acceptable for the police to investigate themselves; we need an ombudsman. It is not acceptable for health professionals; we need an independent arbiter. Yet, in education, we have a cosy relationship that taints the transparency and openness of the system. This is not an attack on individual inspectors, because I value their professionalism and the work that they do; it is about the process in which they are involved.

Mr T McMullan: We look at the experience of other places. Ofsted is not part of the Department for Education in Britain, yet there are still enormous difficulties, criticism and friction. So being independent of the Department will not, in itself, resolve any problems. Even if the ETI was independent of the Department, it could still get as its chief executive a person from Ofsted. The independence issue is, in our view, not the critical factor. We believe that the ETI is best served by being within the Department but with a degree of autonomy, which it has. That is to the best advantage of our members but, more importantly, the people whom we serve: the children.

The Chairperson: Tony and Janette, thank you very much for your submission and your time. We look forward to continuing the dialogue and discussion with you.