



Analysis of responses to the Education and Training Inspectorate's consultation on the development of inspection



The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

August 2023

Contents

Introduction	2
Methodology.....	2
Summary of key feedback points	4
Draft purpose of inspection	6
Draft guiding principles.....	8
The use of overall effectiveness conclusions	10
The use of performance levels	14
Recording and reporting findings	17
Key aspects of education and training to be prioritised by inspection process.....	19
Aspects of education and training that require less emphasis.....	21
Reducing the burden of inspection, de-mystifying the inspection process and minimising stress.....	23
Progress to date (August 2023)	25
Conclusion	27
Appendix 1: Draft purpose of inspection and guiding principles	28
Appendix 2: Overall effectiveness conclusions and performance levels used by the Education and Training Inspectorate.....	29
Appendix 3: ETI Quality Improvement Strategy (Draft)	30
Appendix 4: Five core questions and nine contributory areas (draft)	31
.....	32

Introduction

During the 2021/22 academic year, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) commenced work on its Empowering Improvement: Stepping Forward Together strategy. As part of the strategy, ETI committed to:

- a programme of professional learning/capacity building targeted at middle leaders in schools, early years settings and Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) centres, focused on whole-organisation self-evaluation, and the self-evaluation of learning and teaching; and
- wide-scale consultation and engagement with schools, other education and training providers, and our wide range of stakeholders, about the development of an inspection strategy.

Between February and May 2022, just under 1300 participants, mostly at middle leadership level, from 673 schools and organisations, engaged in the Empowering Improvement professional learning project. The feedback from those who engaged in the project was overwhelmingly positive and there is a significant demand for similar work.

The consultation on the development of inspection is ongoing; this report summarises the feedback we have received to date and will be updated with any relevant comments from the small number of focus groups which remain to be completed.

Methodology

Over the period April to July 2022, we invited all school/organisation leaders to share with us their views of, and ideas for, the development of inspection through an online survey.

In addition, 39 focus groups were held (**Table 1**), involving: school/organisation leaders; teachers; learners; parents; and a range of stakeholders, including, employing authorities and key officials from the main commissioning Departments. Consultation also involved engagement with the teaching unions, which is ongoing.

We received 403 responses to the online survey; just over one-quarter of all schools/organisations responded (**Table 2**).

Table 1: Focus Groups (to date)

Focus Group	Number
Reference Groups (Primary and post-primary)	3
Post-primary principals	4
Primary principals	3
Early years principals/leaders	4
Special/EOTAS leaders	2
Commissioning Departments	2
Further education quality managers	1
Work-based learning leaders/managers	1
Teachers	3
European Social Fund (ESF) (The inspection of ESF projects ceased at the end of March 2023)	2
Employing authorities	2
Pupils	2
Parents	3
Youth organisation representatives	3
Other stakeholders	4

Table 2: Response rate to online survey.

Setting/School/Provider	No of schools/centres/ providers that responded to questionnaire	Total number of schools/centres/ providers 2021/22*	Proportion of schools/centres/ providers responding
Voluntary and Private Pre-school Education Centres	106	356	29.8%
Nursery schools	34	94	36.2%
Primary	162	784	20.7%
Post-primary	47	192	24.4%
Special	10	39	25.6%
EOTAS	14	16	87.5%
Further education colleges	5	7	71.4%
Work-based learning Providers	11	26	42.3%
European Social Fund Projects	14	67	20.9%
Totals	403	1581	25.5%

NB: Total number of schools/centres/providers 2021/22* - based on '[School enrolments - Northern Ireland summary data](#)', published by the Department of Education, 01 March 2022.

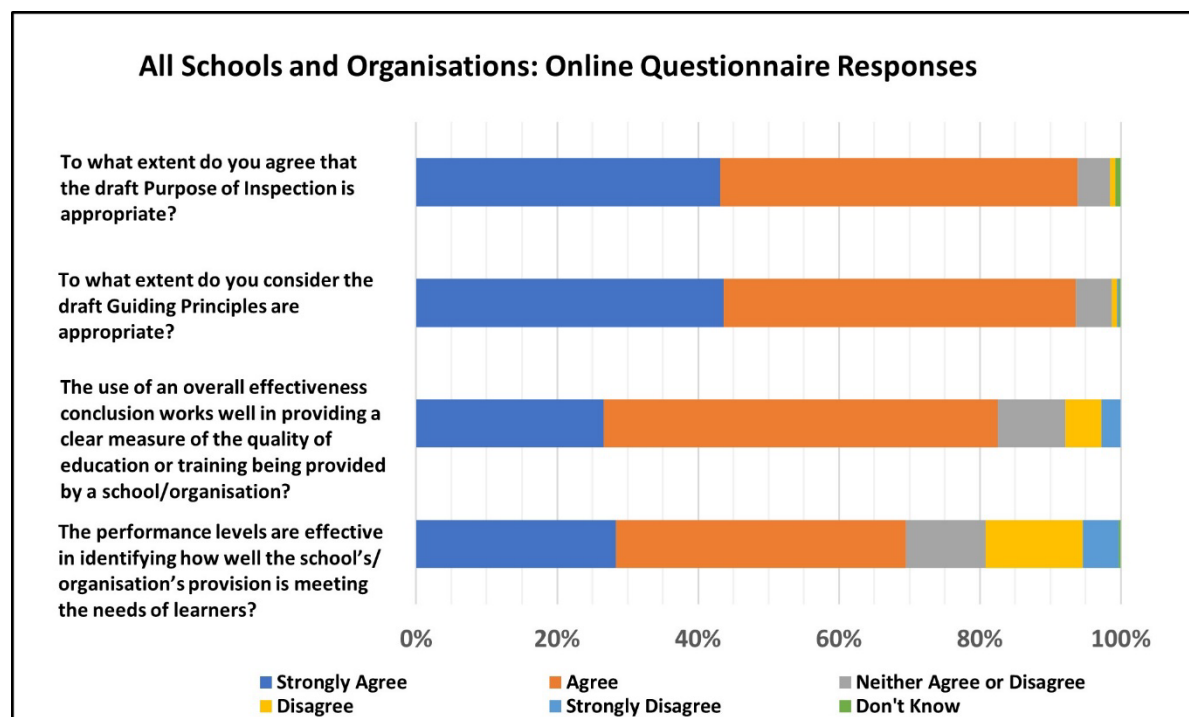
The analysis that follows is based on the questions we asked in the online consultation document and during focus group discussions, which focused on:

- the draft purpose of inspection;
- the draft guiding principles of inspection;
- the use of the overall effectiveness conclusions;
- the use of performance levels;
- aspects of education and training that should be prioritised in the inspection process;
- aspects of education and training that require less emphasis in the inspection process; and
- how to de-mystify the inspection process and reduce the burden of inspection.

Summary of key feedback points

- There is a high level of consensus, across all phases, about the purpose of inspection in supporting improvement; 94% of the online respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the draft purpose of inspection is appropriate (**Figure 1**).
- Similarly, there is the same high level of cross-phase agreement that the draft guiding principles are appropriate.
- There is a strong acknowledgement of the need for some form of overall effectiveness conclusion; 83% of the online respondents strongly agreed or agreed that an overall effectiveness conclusion works well, with a further 10% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.
- It is clear, however, from the many written comments, and the feedback from the various focus groups, that the wording of the overall effectiveness conclusions needs to be reviewed and modified to ensure that their meaning is clear, particularly for parents and learners.

Figure 1: Summary of online responses.



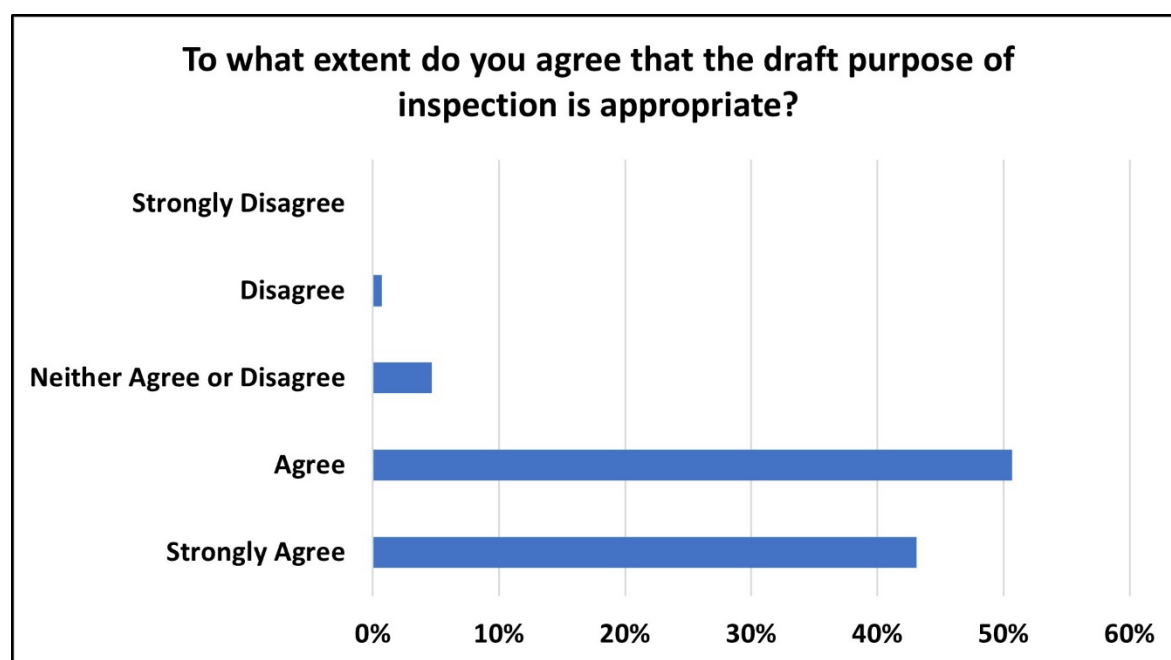
- The views of the respondents regarding the use of the current performance levels varies significantly, including across the phases. Almost all the online respondents across further education, work-based learning and ESF strongly agreed or agreed that they worked well; in contrast, just under one-half of the respondents in primary thought they worked well.
- Overall, more than two-thirds (69%) of the online respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the current performance levels are effective in meeting the needs of learners; almost one-fifth (19%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were effective while 11% neither agreed nor disagreed.
- A common request across the written responses and the focus groups is that ETI take meaningful cognisance of the individual school or organisation context and reflect this during inspection.
- The main recurring themes, across the phases, for reducing the burden of inspection, and minimising stress are: more collaborative working with ETI, such as the Empowering Improvement work; more regular engagement with inspectors, in particular with the District Inspector; better clarity around ETI expectations and documentation requirements; greater account taken of school/organisation context; and reduced volume of paperwork.

- Across the phases, the respondents wanted to see less emphasis on: the provision of paperwork and policies for accountability/compliance purposes; and data and outcomes. They wanted inspections to place more emphasis on: the quality of teaching, training and learning; value added and progress in learning; the welfare and support of learners, including the promotion of healthy lifestyles; school/organisation context; and capacity for self-evaluation and self-improvement.

Draft purpose of inspection

The draft purpose of inspection (Appendix 1) as presented in the online consultation was very well received by the respondents. Ninety-four percent (94%) of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the draft purpose is appropriate (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Draft purpose of inspection.

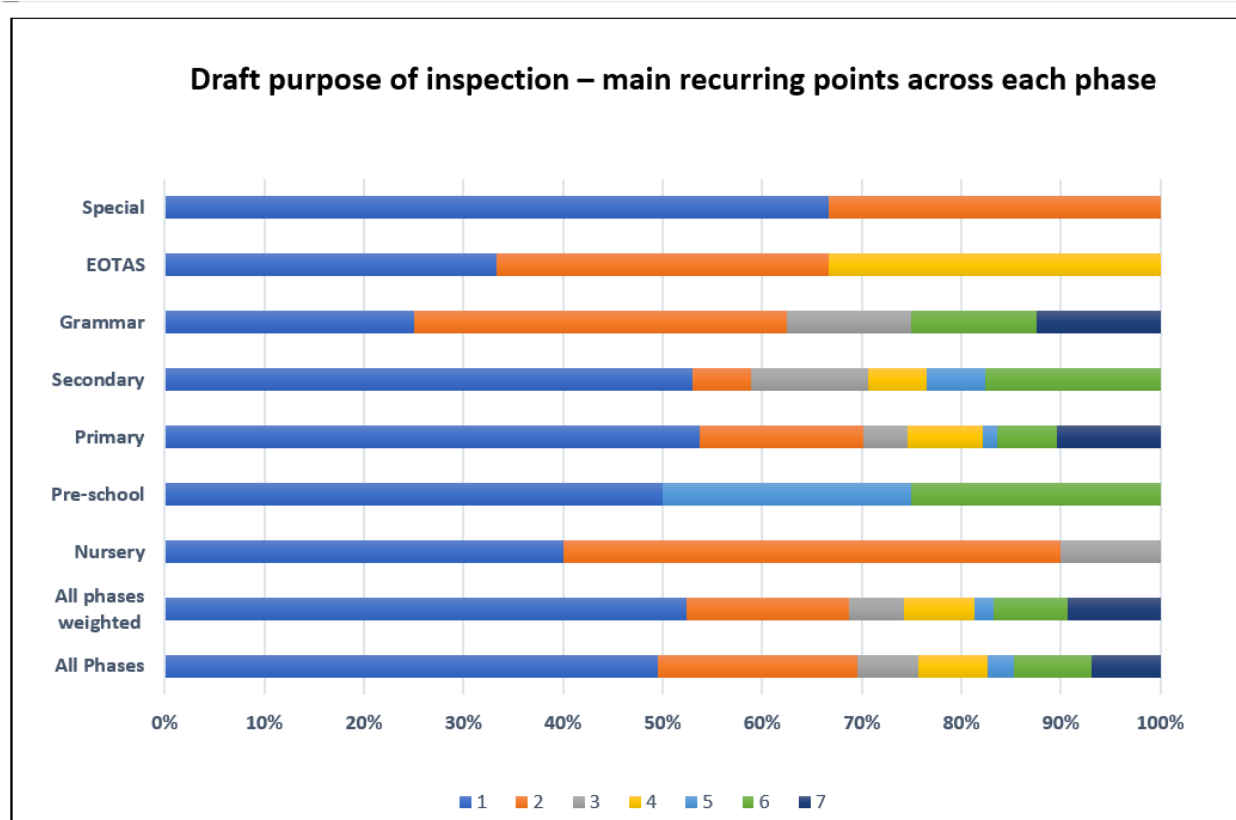


Over 100 written responses were provided in the online consultation around the draft purpose of inspection. There was a high level of consensus with the purpose of inspection as outlined, in particular the focus on supporting improvement and enhancing the experiences of the learners. The respondents also agreed with the centrality of self-evaluation, the dissemination of effective practice and a focus on building capacity. In the written comments they again emphasised that taking cognisance of individual school and organisation context is essential during inspection.

A recurrent theme, throughout the consultation process, is the need for regular contact and partnership working with the school/organisation District Inspector (DI). Several comments mentioned the need for value added to be considered and evaluated as part of the inspection process. A few comments referred to the importance of fair and consistent reporting on the inspection and for consideration to be given by ETI to the differing audiences for reports.

The participants in the youth sector focus groups welcomed the emphasis on building capacity and self-evaluation; they also outlined the importance of the inspection process recognising the diversity of the provision across the youth service, including the role of regional organisations and the wide variety of youth providers.

Figure 3: Comments on draft purpose of inspection.



Key to Figure 3

1. Positive response regarding the emphasis on ETI's role in supporting improvement.
2. Agree with the importance of self-evaluation.
3. Like the aspect of building capacity within schools through dissemination of effective practice.
4. Meaningful cognisance should be taken of individual school/organisation context.
5. Value added should be considered/evaluated holistically.
6. Regular, ongoing partnership with District Inspector is paramount.
7. Collaboration required at many levels, including Education Authority (EA) or similar support.

The participants in the wide range of focus groups were also very supportive of the purpose of inspection. They told us that they liked: the tone in which it is written; the fact it is underpinned by the need for collaboration; and the emphasis placed on the importance of the relationship between the school/organisation and the District Inspector.

A few of the focus group participants suggested a more longitudinal approach to inspection with a central role for the District Inspector, making use of technology as appropriate, as opposed to a snapshot across a short time frame.

It is clear that parents take a keen interest in the work and performance of the school their child attends. They clearly expressed their expectations of schools, including that their children are safe and happy; they learn within their ability, but with high expectations; and that there is a warm ethos, good rapport, positive relationships and community involvement. They also expect that: schools are well resourced, especially for children in need of support; teachers are valued, supported and developed; and that their children are accepted for who they are.

Next Steps/Follow-on Actions

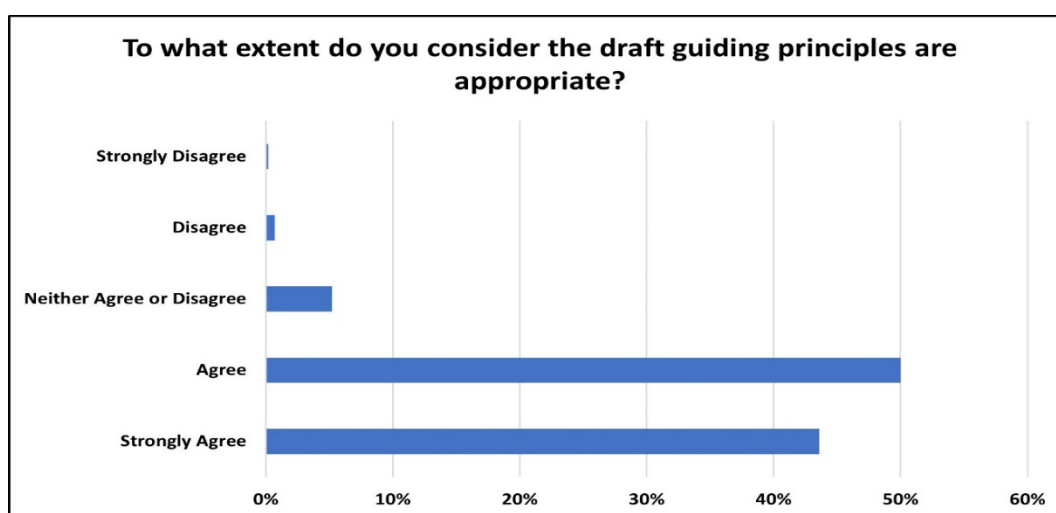
ETI will:

- adopt the draft purpose of inspection into all documentation/guidance, including the development of the prototype models, around the inspection process; and
- consider the most effective way of meaningfully integrating school/organisation context and uniqueness into the inspection process, as part of the development of the prototype inspection models and any subsequent inspections.

Draft guiding principles

The draft guiding principles (Appendix 1) were also very well received by the respondents to the online survey. Just under 94% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the principles are appropriate (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Draft guiding principles.



Almost 50 written comments were received on the draft guiding principles. The comments were particularly supportive of the context of the school/organisation being considered, the centrality of the learner and the focus on quality and impact of learning and teaching, and the importance of self-evaluation.

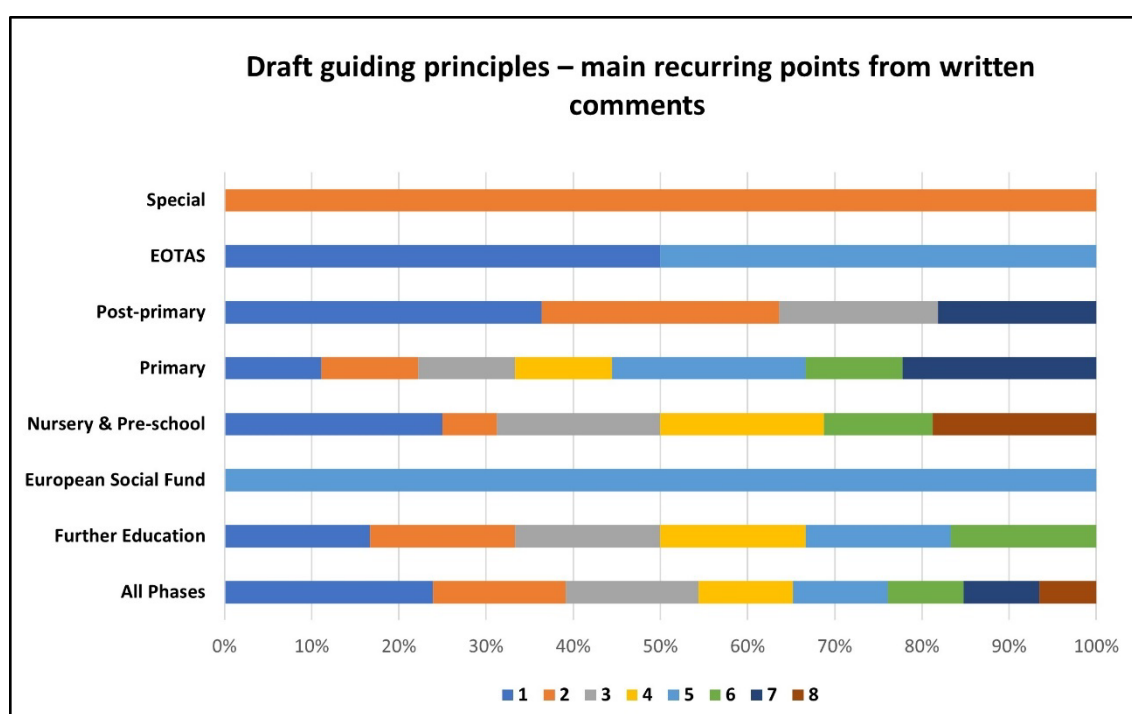
Concerns were raised in relation to guiding principle 7, ‘Inspections are proportionate to risk.’ In the focus groups, many of the participants told us that they didn’t really understand what this guiding principle meant, and that there was the potential for the wider public to misinterpret its meaning, namely that schools/organisations selected for inspection are ‘at risk’. The main aspect of risk this refers to is a significant lapse in time since the last inspection activity.

Other matters raised included:

- the perceived lack of consistency and reliability in judgements made by inspectors;
- the need for inspection to be a positive experience;
- the need for inspectors to fully understand the context of the school/organisation or service being inspected, particularly in specialist provision such as EOTAS;
- the intensity of the one-day inspection model in early years; and
- the focus on learner attainment in public examinations, particularly in post-primary schools.

A summary of the main recurring written comments is outlined in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5: Comments on draft guiding principles.



Key to Figure 5

1. Meaningful cognisance needs to be taken of the context of the school/organisation and its learners.
2. What does 'Proportionate to risk' mean?
3. Inspectors' judgements need to be reliable and consistent; inspectors need to listen.
4. DI and school/organisation relationships need to be strong, based on trust, and supportive.
5. Agree with the guiding principles.
6. Inspection process needs to be a positive experience for staff to support them on their improvement journey and to reduce stress.
7. Focus on and affirm effective practice as well as the areas for improvement. Sharing of good practice by the Inspectorate would be worthwhile.
8. One-day inspection does not give a true evaluation of the provision in a large pre-school setting.

Next Steps/Follow-on Actions

ETI will:

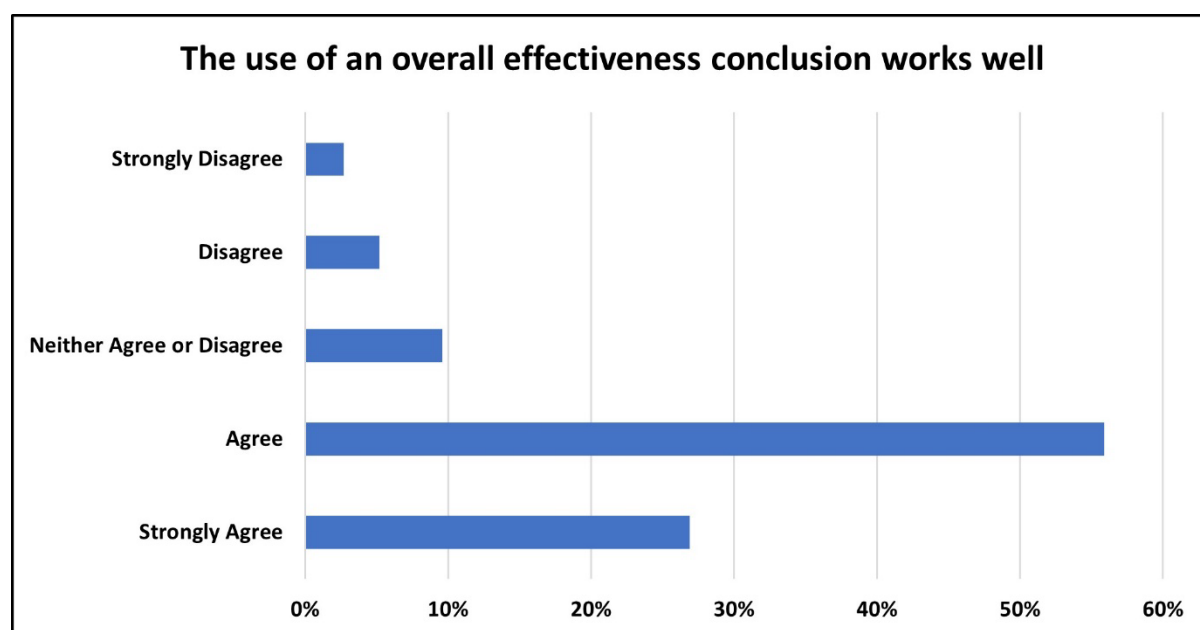
- review the wording of a few of the guiding principles, in particular, the proportionate-to-risk principle;
- adopt the revised guiding principles into all documentation/guidance, including the development of the prototype models, around the inspection process; and
- consider the most effective way of meaningfully integrating school/organisation context and uniqueness into the inspection process.

The use of overall effectiveness conclusions

Overall effectiveness conclusions have been used in ETI published reports since January 2017; these are outlined in Appendix 2.

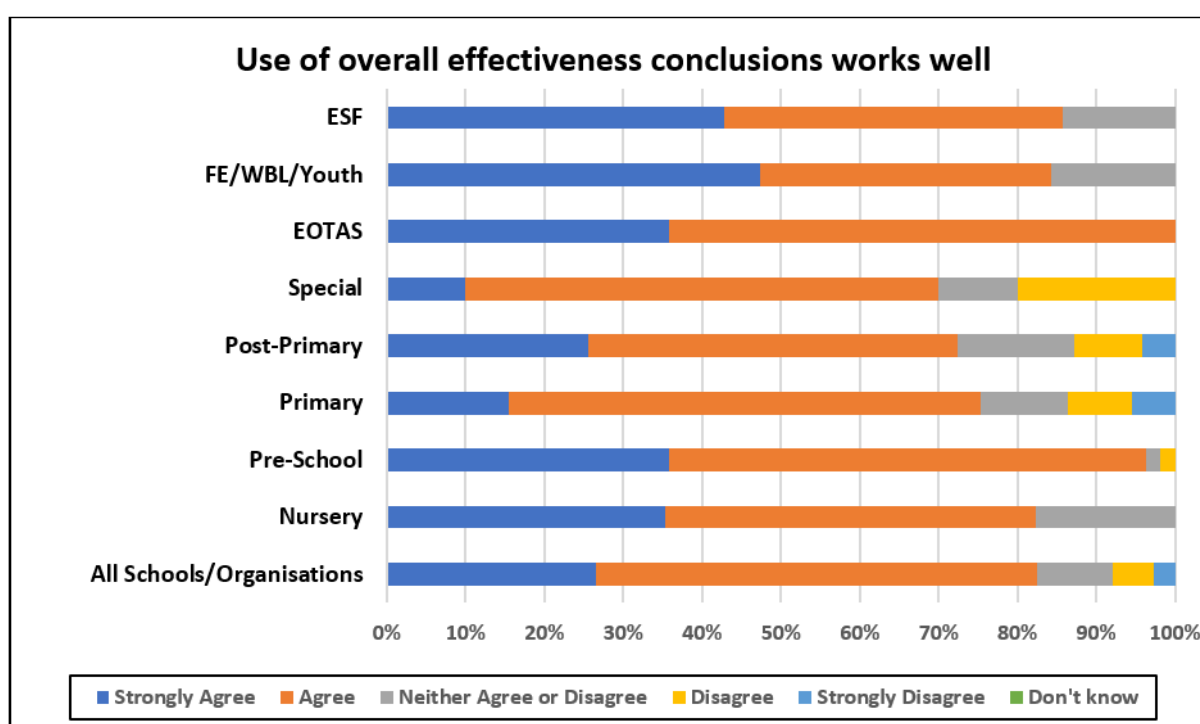
The feedback from the online survey, and from focus group discussions, clearly shows that almost all stakeholders acknowledge the need for some form of overall effectiveness conclusion or statement. The data from the online survey (**Figure 6**) shows that 83% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that overall conclusions work well in providing a clear measure of the quality of education or training being provided by a school/organisation, with a further 10% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Figure 6: Overall effectiveness conclusions.



Variation in the views of respondents is evident when the returns are broken down by phase (**Figure 7**). The use of an overall effectiveness conclusion is more popular in further education, work-based learning, European Social Fund (ESF), EOTAS and pre-school, whereas in the school phases, they are viewed as less effective. Nonetheless, over 70% of schools agreed or strongly agree that overall effectiveness conclusions work well.

Figure 7: Overall effectiveness conclusions.



Seventy-seven (77) written comments were received on the overall effectiveness conclusions. While there is consensus on the value of having an overall conclusion or statement, it is clear that the wording/language used in the current conclusions is a concern, particularly in the primary, post-primary and special school phases; just under one-third (29%) of the written responses raised an issue with the language used in the current conclusions, reporting that it can be confusing for parents/carers, learners and other stakeholders, and demotivating for staff (**Figure 8**).

Other matters raised included:

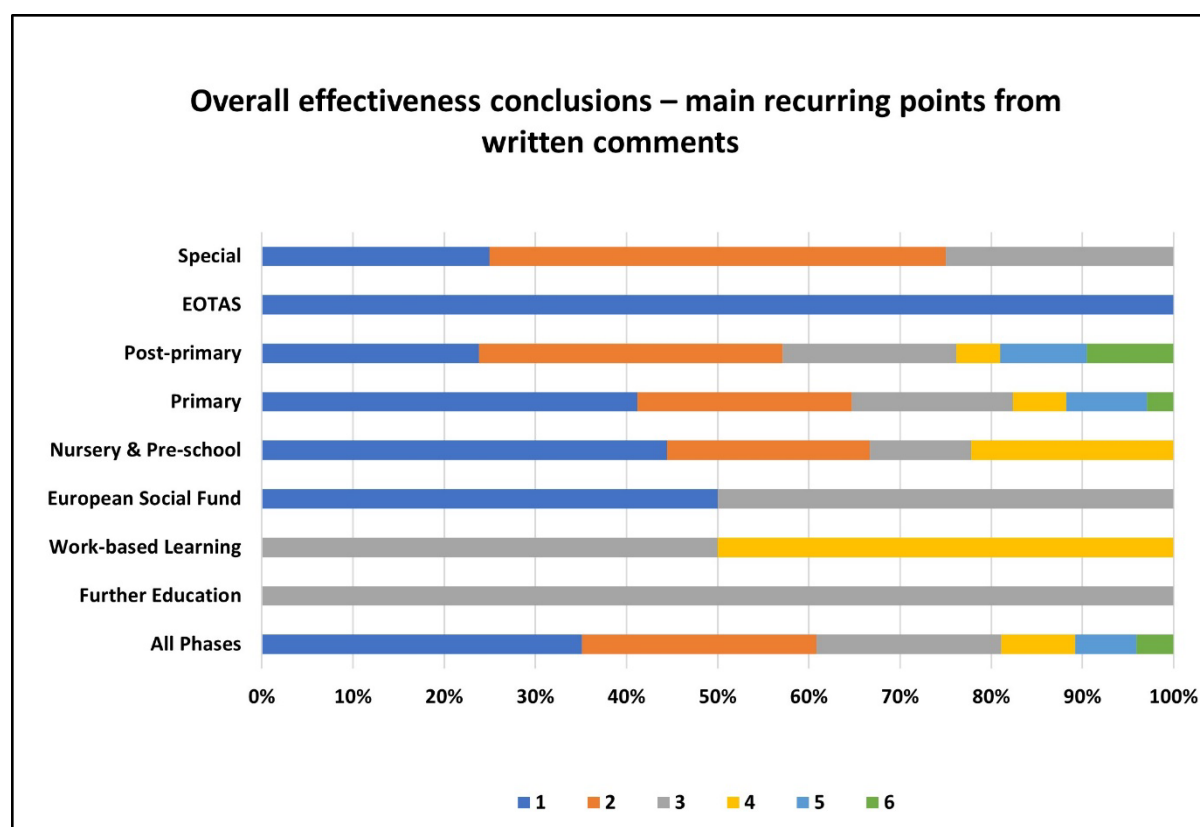
- the lack of alignment between the four overall effectiveness conclusions and the six performance levels (used for outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management);
- the over-emphasis on the conclusion with too much being summarised into one statement that fits all schools/organisations;
- the sense that the weighting of inspection outcomes has shifted towards focusing more on the priorities of stakeholders such as Departments and government, as opposed to the needs of the schools/organisations and their communities; and
- the employing authorities support the retention of a concluding statement, written in clearly understandable language and which highlights the strengths and helps identify the extent of improvement support that the school/organisation requires post-inspection.

The employing authorities also talked about the importance of the post-inspection process, in particular the need for clarity around roles and responsibilities in the support process that may be necessary after some inspections.

Parents were also supportive of the continued use of concluding statements; their desire is for reports to include the holistic experience of the learners. The parents made the point that overuse of the term 'improvement' suggests a deficit in the provision and they expressed a preference for the use of more empowering language such as 'development' and 'growth'.

A summary of the main recurring written comments is outlined in **Figure 8**.

Figure 8: Comments on overall effectiveness conclusions.



Key to Figure 8

1. An overall conclusion is necessary.
2. The current language of the conclusions is confusing.
3. Content of the concluding statement should be clearer.
4. The number of overall concluding statements needs to be considered and they should be better aligned with the performance level statements.
5. The context of the school is important and needs to be embedded in the inspection process.
6. The conclusion shouldn't be the main focus of the inspection report.

Next Steps/Follow-on Actions

ETI will:

- revisit the wording of concluding statements, with a focus on clarity of language and meaning;
- align performance levels, if retained, more clearly to the concluding statements;
- take feedback from stakeholders on revised concluding statements, including during the prototyping stage of inspection modelling across the phases; and

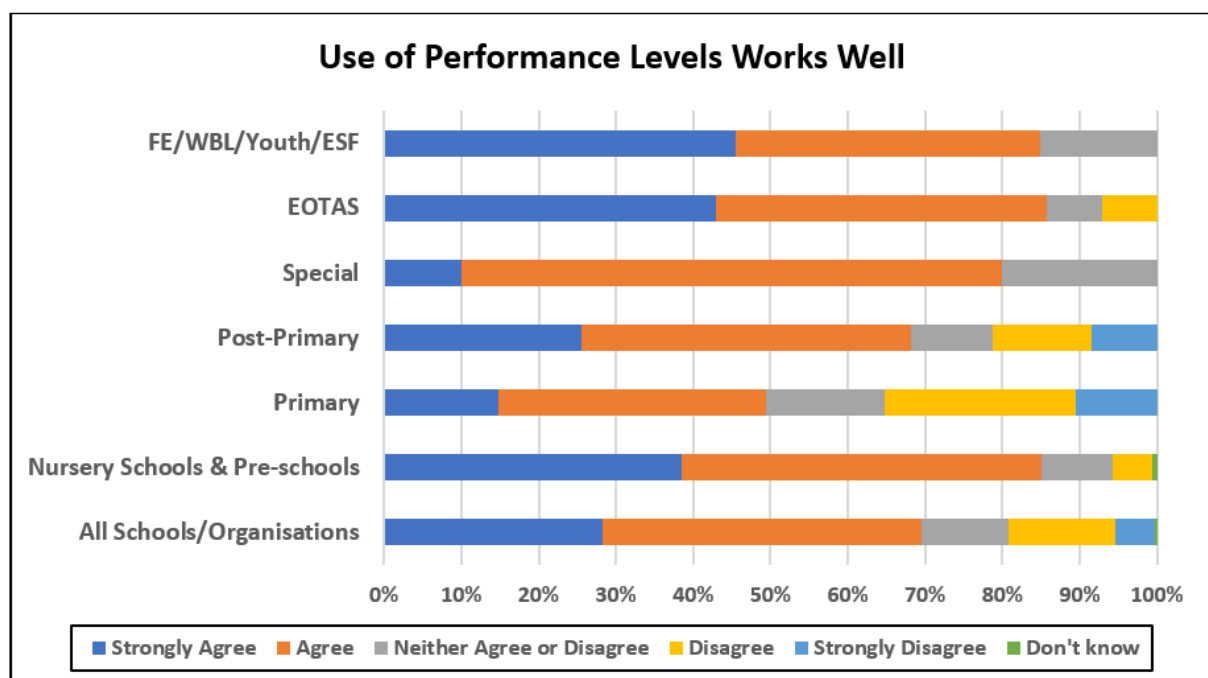
- liaise closely, after an inspection, with employing authorities and Departmental officials to ensure they are aware of the extent of support that a school/organisation may need.

The use of performance levels

Currently, ETI uses six performance levels to evaluate outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management, which are published in reports; these are outlined in Appendix 2.

The feedback on the use of performance levels varied considerably, including across the different phases. The data from the online survey (**Figure 9**) shows that, overall, 69% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that performance levels are effective in identifying how well the school/organisation is meeting the needs of learners, with a further 11% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Figure 9: Use of performance levels.



The continued use of performance levels in their current form was considered as more acceptable in the further education, work-based learning and ESF phases of our work. Fewer than 50%, however, of the primary schools who responded thought they worked well, with just over one-third (35%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they worked well. Just over one-fifth (21%) of the post-primary schools also disagreed or strongly disagreed that they worked well.

One hundred and fifty-five (155) written comments were received around the use of performance levels. In a significant number (53) of the written comments, the respondents indicated that they were not in favour of the continuation of performance levels, mainly due to: their potential negative impact on staff morale and wellbeing; increased focus on the performance level itself, as opposed to a dialogue about improvement; anxiety around the potential identification of individual staff or leaders in small school/organisation settings; and their contribution to the intensity and high-stakes culture (potential reputational damage) which can be associated with inspection.

Other matters raised included:

- the language used, including concerns over the use of the 'Outstanding' performance level;
- the lack of clarity or exemplification as to what distinguishes one performance level from the others;
- the over-emphasis on data/examination results in ETI's evaluation of outcomes for learners, as opposed to the use of qualitative information on the school/organisation's successes and the impact of their ethos; and
- whether there is a need for six performance levels and should they be published.

Alternative suggestions provided through the consultation included reporting performance levels orally to the school/organisation but not publishing them.

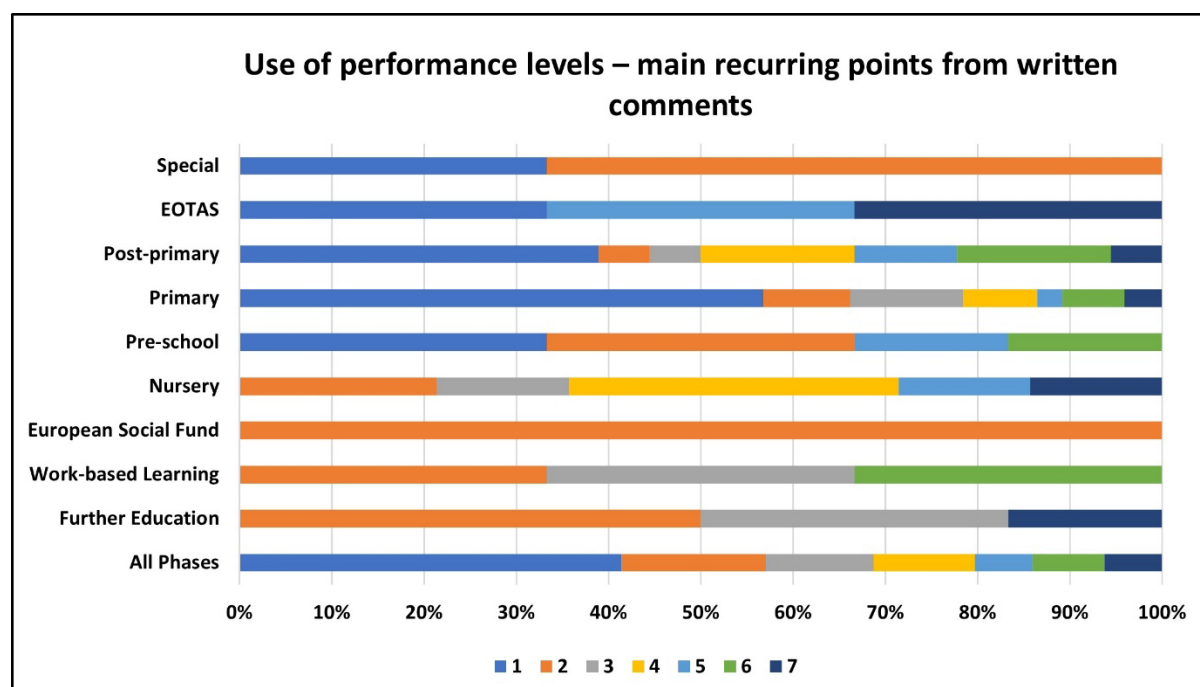
The use of performance levels was the subject of considerable comment and debate across many of the focus groups. Many participants stated that schools and organisations needed to understand better how performance levels are reached and against what criteria. They suggested that the performance levels should be reduced in number to align better with the concluding statements and that the language of the performance levels should be reflected in the concluding statements. It was suggested that the three previous classifications for improvement (important, significant and urgent) were unhelpful and that the word outstanding is replaced by excellent.

Some participants in the employing authority focus groups reported the need for outcomes such as performance levels to be retained in order to provide more depth and professional insight into how effectively the needs of children and young people are being met in a school/organisation.

Across the focus groups, many school/organisation leaders and the majority of teachers raised concerns in relation to the use of performance levels and how aspects of a school's/organisation's provision can be left with a 'label' for an extended period of time. The parental focus groups raised no issues with the use of performance levels in reports but emphasised the point that the performance levels should be elaborated on within the text.

A summary of the main recurring written comments in the online survey is outlined in **Figure 10**.

Figure 10: Comments on the use of performance levels.



Key to Figure 10

1. Performance levels should not be used due to the impact on staff morale, or at least not published.
2. The performance levels should be used and are clear.
3. Don't like the use of the 'Outstanding' performance level, use of the word 'Excellent' would be better.
4. Is there a need to have three performance levels below good?
5. The performance levels need to take account of context and baseline position.
6. There needs to be a more detailed explanation of the criteria for each of the performance levels.
7. Reduce the number of performance levels, to three or four of them.

Next Steps/Follow-on Actions

ETI will:

- debate and review the continued use of performance levels;
- review the language associated with the term performance levels;
- explore what, if any, aspects of education and training should be awarded performance levels, and if these should be published; and
- revisit and review the wording, number and exemplification indicators of performance levels, if retained.

Recording and reporting findings

ETI reports are used by many of our stakeholders, at times for different purposes, including by schools/organisations, parents/carers, learners, employing authorities, Departments/Government and the wider public.

We received 158 written comments about how we record and report findings, and how this could be done differently. The most common themes were for the reports to use constructive language, be user-friendly and to be more 'individualised', taking better account of the context and uniqueness of the school/organisation, its ethos and the value it adds.

The responses from the primary and post-primary schools are supportive of changed language in the overall effectiveness conclusion used and for the removal of performance levels from published reports. The further education colleges, work-based learning providers and ESF projects are content with the current approach to reporting and don't see the need for significant change.

Other matters raised included the need for:

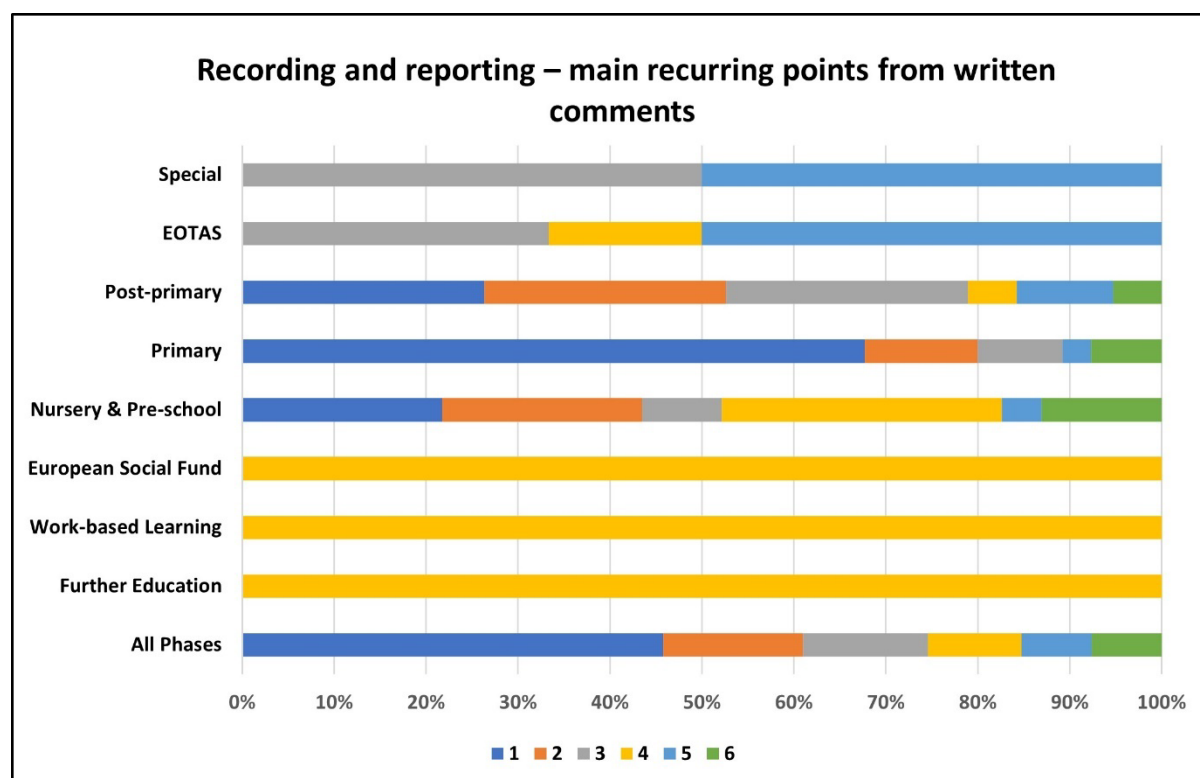
- reports to be more supportive, highlighting better the particular strengths of the school/organisation;
- reports to provide clear feedback on strengths and areas for improvement, schools/organisations need to know clearly what they are doing well and exactly what they need to do better; and
- performance levels to be shared with the school/organisation and the relevant Department, but not published.

Many of the focus group participants expressed concerns around accessibility of the reports for learners and their parents/carers and stated that the written reports were often overly generic and did not reflect sufficiently the richness and uniqueness of the oral report back. They also said that the identification, exemplification, and more effective communication of effective practice would be beneficial to schools/organisations. Youth organisations would like to see more 'youth-friendly language' in the written reports.

Parents/carers, in particular those who live in areas with a choice of schools, value inspection reports. They appreciate that, for a range of reasons, all schools have different challenges and successes and suggest that inspection reports are essential to keep parents informed of school effectiveness. They want primarily to be assured that: learners are happy and safe; individual needs are known, understood and provided for; links with the community are strong; teachers are valued, supported and developed; and overall the school is thriving.

Learners who met with ETI stated that they had very little knowledge of the inspection process and were unfamiliar with reports.

Figure 11: Comments on recording and reporting.



Key to Figure 11

1. Change the overall effectiveness conclusions and remove performance levels from the published report.
2. Reports need to be more supportive and constructive, more user-friendly and with thought given to different versions for different audiences, tone should be one of support, partnership and improvement.
3. Report takes more cognisance of the context of the school/organisation and value added rather than outcomes of public examinations.
4. The current process is working well, there is no need to change it.
5. Needs to be greater consistency between the oral report back and the written report.
6. Don't report through publication on website – report to the Department and work to support schools/organisations who are under-performing or give organisations time to improve before publication.

Next Steps/Follow-on Actions

ETI will:

- undertake a comprehensive review of the structure, content and language of published reports, as part of the development of inspection process;
- ensure in reporting that the strengths and any areas for consideration/action are reported clearly to the school/organisation;
- trial different versions of reports as part of the prototype process; and
- consider the removal of performance levels from published reports.

Key aspects of education and training to be prioritised by inspection process

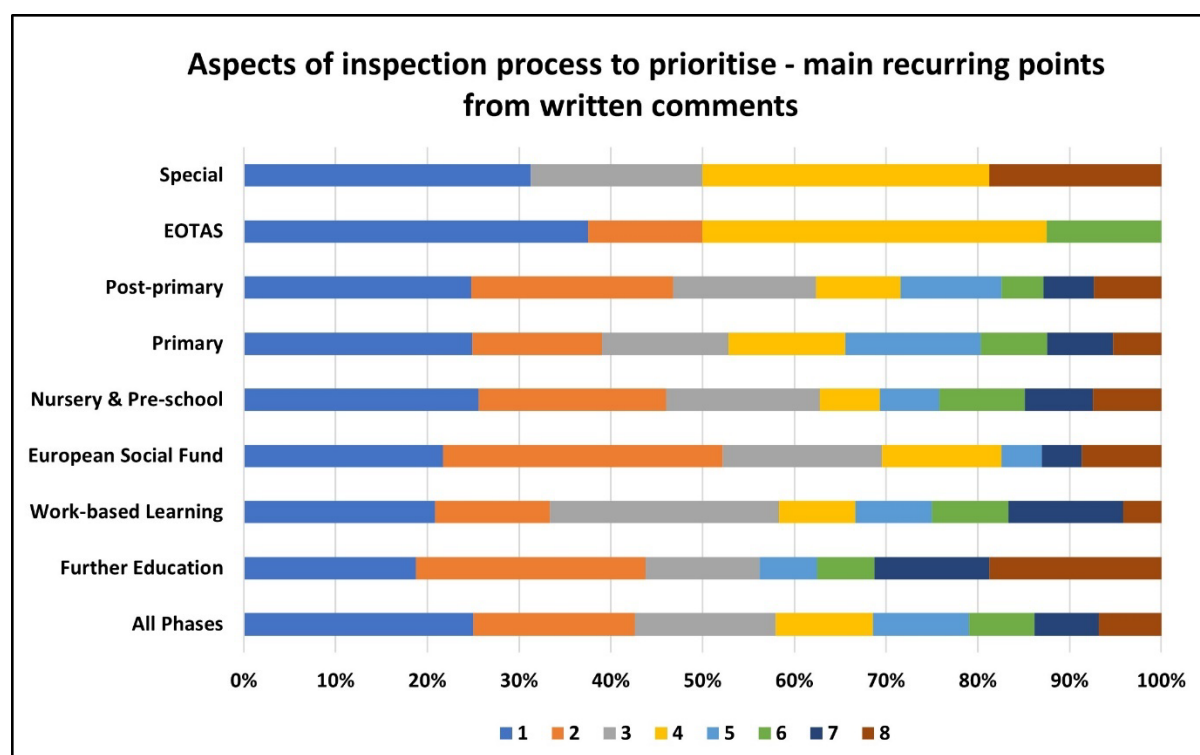
We received 363 written comments around the key aspects of education and training that should be prioritised by the inspection process going forward. Almost one-half (49%) of the respondents indicated that the highest priority for inspection should be the quality of learning, teaching and training. Over one-third (35%) of the responses placed the outcomes attained by learners and the progress they make as a high priority. Almost one-third (30%) of the schools/organisations emphasised the need for a high priority to be placed on evaluating the care, welfare and support of learners, including the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

Other priorities raised included:

- the capacity of the school/organisation for self-evaluation, including using its self-evaluation and context as the starting point for inspection work;
- the impact of the curriculum offer, including collaboration to broaden the offer available to learners;
- a focus on building equity, including tackling underachievement and educational disadvantage;
- the extent of professional learning for staff;
- the need for the education system, including inspection, to understand better some of the specific challenges facing the Irish-Medium Education sector and the private and voluntary pre-school phase, in particular the recruitment and retention of staff and the investment in staff time to generate appropriate resources;

- inspection should reflect and celebrate effective practice, recognising the quality and impact of teaching and learning on the experiences for learners; it should also reflect significant progress in improving from a low base;
- extent and impact of learner participation in the life and work of the school/organisation;
- an ETI priority focus on school/organisation vision and context aligns well with the introduction of the new Integrated Education Act; and
- the holistic development of learners.

Figure 12: Comments on areas of inspection to prioritise.



Key to Figure 12

1. Focus on the quality of learning, teaching and training for all learners.
2. Look at the outcomes attained by learners and the progress in learning they make, including for those with additional learning needs.
3. Evaluate the care, welfare, guidance and support for learners, including healthy lifestyle awareness (most often referred to as pastoral care).
4. Use the school/organisation self-evaluation and context as the starting points for the inspection work.
5. Build capacity for self-evaluation.
6. Evaluate the extent of professional learning for staff and overall school/organisation learning.
7. Affirm and share excellent practice and build confidence.
8. Evaluate the quality and impact of the curriculum offer, including collaboration.

It was clear in the focus group discussions that the vision and associated ethos of the school/organisation should be considered as high priorities in the revised inspection process.

Next Steps/Follow-on Actions

ETI will:

- give further consideration to each of the key priorities as part of the development of high-level/core questions and contributory areas for inspections of the future, work which is already well underway;
- develop indicators to assist schools in the self-evaluation of the key contributory areas for inspection of the future;
- continue to invite schools/organisations to self-nominate for trialling and prototyping the high-level/core questions and contributory areas for inspection of the future; and
- ensure the priority areas are included in discussions and development work around inspection models going forward.

Aspects of education and training that require less emphasis

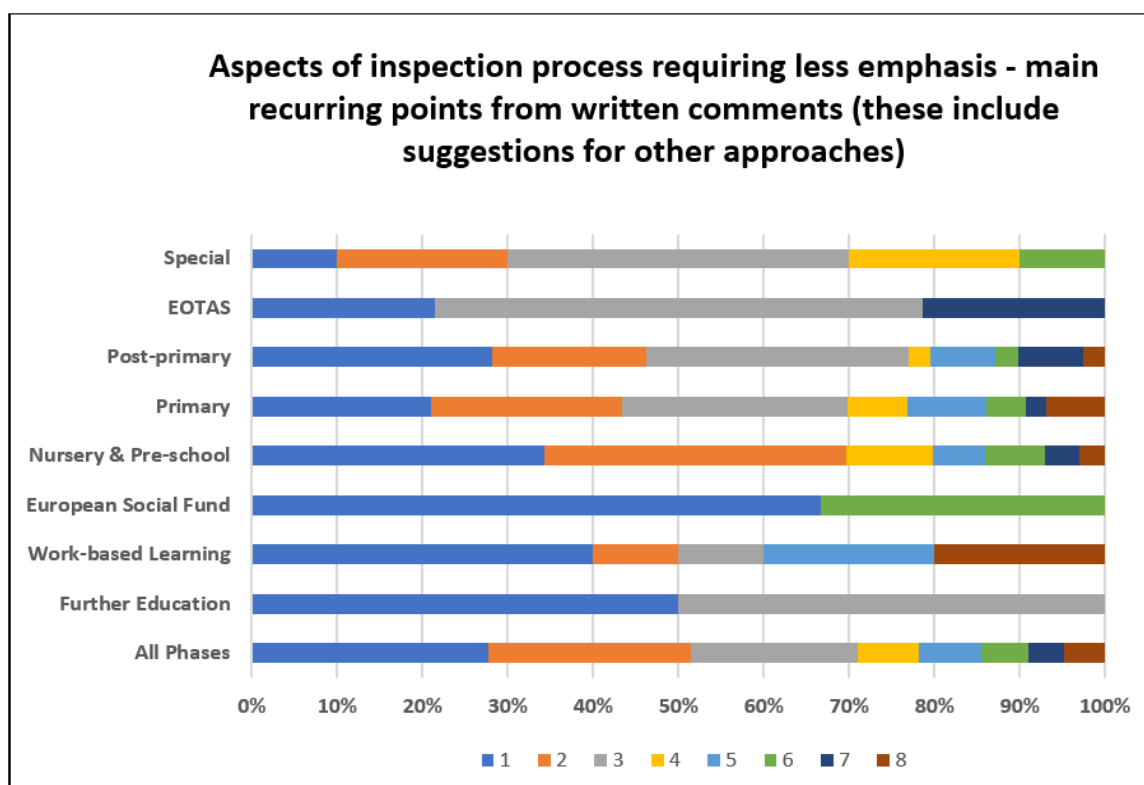
Once again, we received a large and very helpful quantity and quality of written responses to this section of the consultation, with 391 written responses.

Schools/organisations are telling us very clearly that they want a reduced emphasis on paperwork during inspection and on the need to provide evidence for accountability purposes, for example, policy documents. Early years made up almost one-half (47%) of the respondents who reported that the high volumes of paperwork required for inspection were of particular concern. A significant number (17%) of the schools/organisations who responded also want less focus by inspectors on the data around the outcomes attained by learners, an issue raised most specifically by post-primary schools (26%), special schools (40%) and EOTAS centres (62%).

Other matters raised included:

- in EOTAS, a greater emphasis on evaluating the effectiveness of the support for the social, behavioural and emotional wellbeing needs of the learners, rather than on data related to outcomes;
- in special schools, the respondents felt that soft skills development was of more importance than looking at data and other measured outcomes; and
- a minority of post-primary schools want evaluation of curriculum to be based upon community context, learner experience, parental attitude and stakeholder contentment (learners, parents and staff).

Figure 13: Comments on the areas of inspection requiring less emphasis.



Key to Figure 13

1. Too much focus on recording/paperwork to provide evidence for ETI accountability, and policy documents.
2. Less focus on data and outcomes attained by learners.
3. Evaluate the quality of the curriculum offer, including collaboration.
4. Extent of professional learning for staff is important.
5. Set high expectations, including for standards achieved.
6. Evaluate the impact of the curriculum offer.
7. Evaluate the extent and impact of learner participation in the life and work of the school/organisation.

Next Steps/Follow-on Actions

ETI will:

- work to minimise the documentation required for inspection;
- strive to improve communication between ETI and schools/organisations, and other key stakeholders such as the employing authorities, setting out clearly in guidance and webinars the documents that are, and are not, essential to be provided for inspection; and
- develop and refine inspection contributory areas that are centred on the holistic development of the learner, and also include the extent of professional learning for staff and learner participation and engagement.

Reducing the burden of inspection, de-mystifying the inspection process and minimising stress

We received 384 written comments around how we might reduce the burden of inspection and de-mystify the inspection process, and what might be done to minimise the stress associated with inspection, in order to bring out the best in people.

One-half (50%) of all of the written responses talked about the need for partnership, collaborative working which is focused on improvement, between ETI and schools/organisations. Many of the written comments were supportive of the ETI's Empowering Improvement work with middle leaders and would like to be involved in more initiatives such as this, further developing self-evaluation practices.

The schools/organisations place much value on the role of the District Inspector; around one-third (29%) of the schools/organisations who responded stated that they want more regular engagement with their District Inspector, to build positive relationships and trust which underpin professional dialogue, share good practice from elsewhere and get feedback on improvement work.

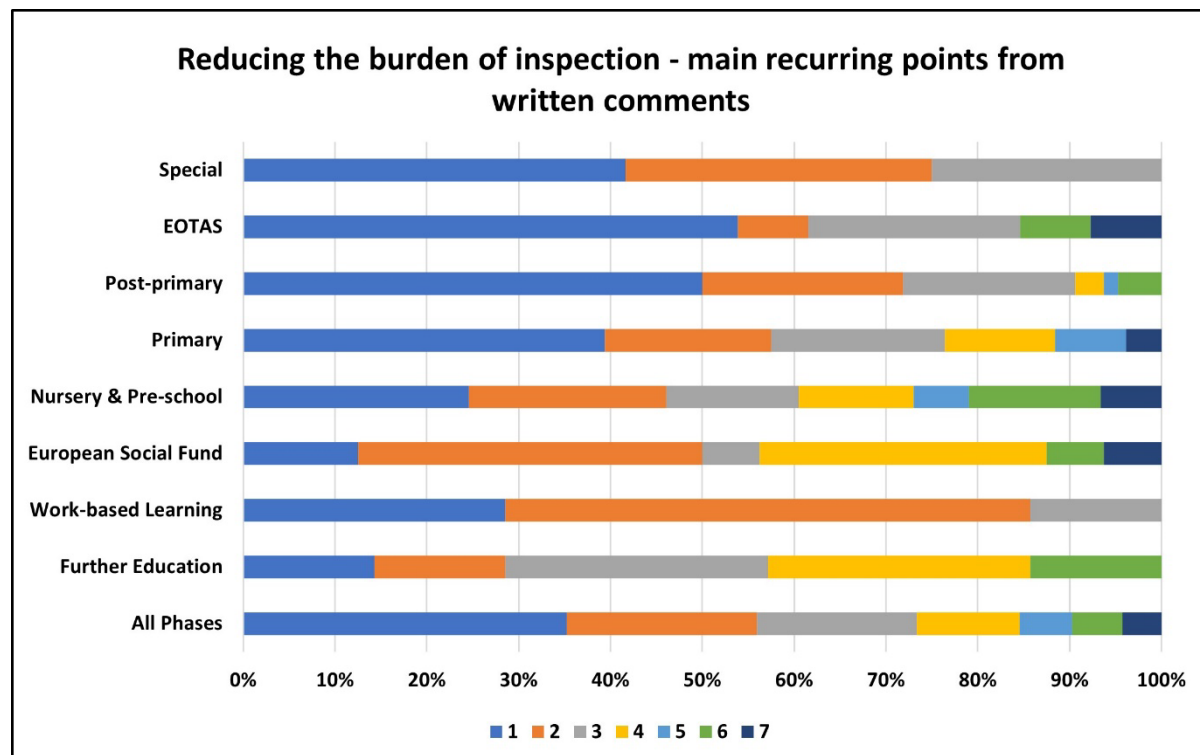
Many of the schools/organisations expressed a desire for the inspection process to be undertaken in an increasingly supportive manner, with more opportunities for dialogue with staff to increase familiarisation with the process and reduce 'fear' of inspection. Participants in several of the focus groups felt that the time lapse between inspections is too long, leading to increased anxiety and strained relationships when an inspection notification comes. Early Years representative organisations, in particular, referred to the ETI's work with clusters of pre-schools and suggested that increased engagement through clusters would continue to empower improvement while also providing clarity around the inspection process.

Other matters raised in the written comments and focus group discussions included:

- better clarity around expectations and a reduction in documentation/paperwork;
- greater account taken of school/organisation context;
- better communication with staff at all levels in the school/organisation and more time given over to pre-inspection work for this;
- more affirmation of what is going well in schools/organisations;
- better involvement of young people/learners in the inspection process;

- improved clarity to governors about their role in the inspection process; and
- the possibility of more frequent, focused, lighter-touch engagement with inspectors to build capacity, including access to specialist inspectors.

Figure 14: Comments on reducing the burden of inspection.



Key to Figure 14

1. Working together in partnership and more collaboratively, focusing on improvement, how to develop practice and self-evaluation; build upon, for example, the Empowering Improvement programme.
2. More regular engagement with the District Inspector; positive, professional relationships, professional dialogue and quality feedback.
3. Clarity about expectations and documentation requirements; clearly-defined areas that are to be inspected and the importance of a pre-inspection visit.
4. More frequent, focused, less intense and light touch engagement with inspectors.
5. Greater account taken of the school's/organisation's context, for example, available physical, human and financial resources.
6. Reduce the burden of paperwork for an inspection.
7. Human nature means inspection will always bring some degree of stress.

Next Steps/Follow-on Actions

ETI will:

- use all available strategies to minimise the documentation required for inspection, including the ongoing digitisation of many aspects of the inspection;
- ensure revised inspection models with time built in for inspectors to take meaningful account of the context of schools/organisations;
- resource permitting, build on the Empowering Improvement project work undertaken with school/organisation middle leaders;
- ensure all inspection guidance is fit for purpose, easily accessible, contains clear exemplification of expectations and is communicated innovatively and effectively to all schools/organisations, including teachers/tutors;
- communicate inspection guidance and documentation requirements clearly and consistently to employing authorities and other external stakeholders; and
- continue to review and further develop the role of the District Inspector.

Progress to date (August 2023)

The extent and depth of the feedback from the wide-scale consultation has provided an opportunity for ETI to think differently about what a purposeful inspection process looks like and to start many aspects of it afresh. The development work around inspections of the future continues at pace, and many of the next steps/follow on actions identified throughout this report have already been implemented and reviewed in the prototype inspections completed to date.

In November 2021, over 700 schools/organisations expressed a desire to work with ETI in the development of inspections of the future; of these, 252 schools/organisations subsequently self-nominated for a co-design visit by inspectors to trial new approaches and materials and take feedback. To date, 138 of these schools/organisations have been visited as part of the co-design aspect of this development of inspection work, which has included for some voluntary participation in prototype inspections.

ETI are particularly grateful to schools/organisations for their willingness to work with us, enabling new approaches to be trialled and feedback to be analysed with a view to informing future ways of working. Successful prototype inspections have been undertaken in early years, youth, special schools and work-based learning.

Due to the ongoing action short of strike by the teaching unions, it has not been possible to undertake prototype inspections in any primary or post-primary schools. Nevertheless, senior leaders in a number of primary and post-primary schools have helpfully worked with inspectors to facilitate co-design visits to explore a range of different potential approaches to inspection.

Throughout all of the consultation activity and during all co-design and prototype visits, inspectors worked closely with senior and middle leaders in schools/organisations to consider new and more effective ways of meaningfully integrating school/organisation context and uniqueness into the inspection process. Consequently, this approach is informing the development of innovative, revised inspection models going forward. Some of the key changes include:

- a renewed focus on the centrality of the learner to the inspection process, using **five questions** for consideration as the core of all inspections, which includes an enhanced focus on the ethos and culture of the school/organisation, its vision and values, and how it creates a community of learning;
- the identification and use of **nine contributory areas** to provide the evidence for the five core questions; four of the contributory areas, namely: curriculum for all; planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning; health, wellbeing and keeping safe; and equity, equality and inclusion will be included as a focus on all inspections;
- the development of indicators of effective and less effective practice across the nine contributory areas which will help to empower schools/organisations undertaking their own reflection and self-evaluation work;
- the inclusion of a pre-inspection joint planning session with the school/organisation to: allow the context to be explored; engage with and reassure staff; and to plan and organise the inspection activity;
- an increased emphasis on professional dialogue with key staff and extended engagement with learners during inspections;
- a reduced requirement/expectation around provision of documentation, including an increasing use of digital solutions where possible;
- a revised reporting format structured around the five core questions and taking explicit account of the context and uniqueness of the school/organisation;
- stronger emphasis on the identification, reporting and sharing of highly effective practice;

- the removal of published performance level gradings across the inspection and reporting process; and
- the use of bespoke conclusions, indicating the extent, if any, of follow-up inspection work.

The current drafts of the five core questions and nine contributory areas are depicted visually in Appendix 4.

Conclusion

The consultation process provided a timely opportunity for ETI to engage constructively with our many stakeholders. It has assisted us in drafting the revised Quality Improvement Strategy (Appendix 3), of which the inspection of individual schools/organisations is a key strand. The purpose of the Quality Improvement Strategy is to empower schools/organisations to be the best they can be for their learners.

We are very grateful for the high levels of engagement by schools/organisations and for the time and feedback which they have willingly provided. The detailed analysis of this comprehensive feedback activity has provided much food for thought, and indeed, while we are unable to act on every view or opinion, clear themes are emerging from the feedback which have been trialled and further developed and which we will continue to act upon.

In terms of our next steps around the development of inspection, we will continue collaboration and consultation through self-nominated school/organisation visits, focus groups and the further prototyping and piloting of inspection models. The development work around inspections of the future continues at pace, and much has already been achieved.

Appendix 1: Draft purpose of inspection and guiding principles

Draft purpose of inspection

The purpose of all inspection activity is to build capacity within the organisations inspected to provide high quality education and outcomes for learners. This will be achieved by: promoting processes of self-evaluation which will endure beyond the period of the inspection; evaluating and reporting objectively and fairly on the quality of provision in the best interests of the learners; helping to inform and establish improved ways of working through professional dialogue; and identifying, affirming, reporting, and disseminating examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn.

Draft guiding principles

1. Learners are at the heart of everything we do.
2. Inspections/evaluations are impartial, reliable and based on first-hand evidence.
3. Inspections/evaluations are transparent and involve schools/organisations as fully as possible.
4. An important focus is the quality and impact of learning and teaching.
5. Evaluations (inspection findings) are reported constructively, balanced fairly and focused on promoting improvement in the interests of the learners.
6. Effective practice is recognised, affirmed and shared.
7. Inspections are proportionate to risk.
8. The context of each school/organisation is taken into account to inform the inspection activity, which will be adapted accordingly.
9. Engagement in inspection/evaluations will empower organisations in their improvement journey and build capacity.
10. As a reflective organisation we will continue to encourage and act upon feedback on how the inspection process can be improved.

Appendix 2: Overall effectiveness conclusions and performance levels used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

From January 2017, ETI have used one of the following overall effectiveness conclusions when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the school/organisation:

- | |
|---|
| (i) The school/organisation has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the organisation sustains improvement. |
| (ii) The school/organisation demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the organisation sustains improvement. |
| (iii) The school/organisation needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the area(s) for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection. |
| (iv) The school/organisation needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection. |

The aggregation of the overall effectiveness conclusions, over a period of time, enables ETI to report on the overall performance of the education and training systems, and if they are improving.

Also from January 2017, ETI have used the following six performance levels when reporting on outcomes for learners, quality of provision and on leadership and management:

Outstanding
Very good
Good
Important area(s) for improvement
Requires significant improvement
Requires urgent improvement

Appendix 3: ETI Quality Improvement Strategy (Draft)

The ETI Quality Improvement Strategy represents the broad framework for inspection and other related work going forward. The four interrelated strands are outlined below:



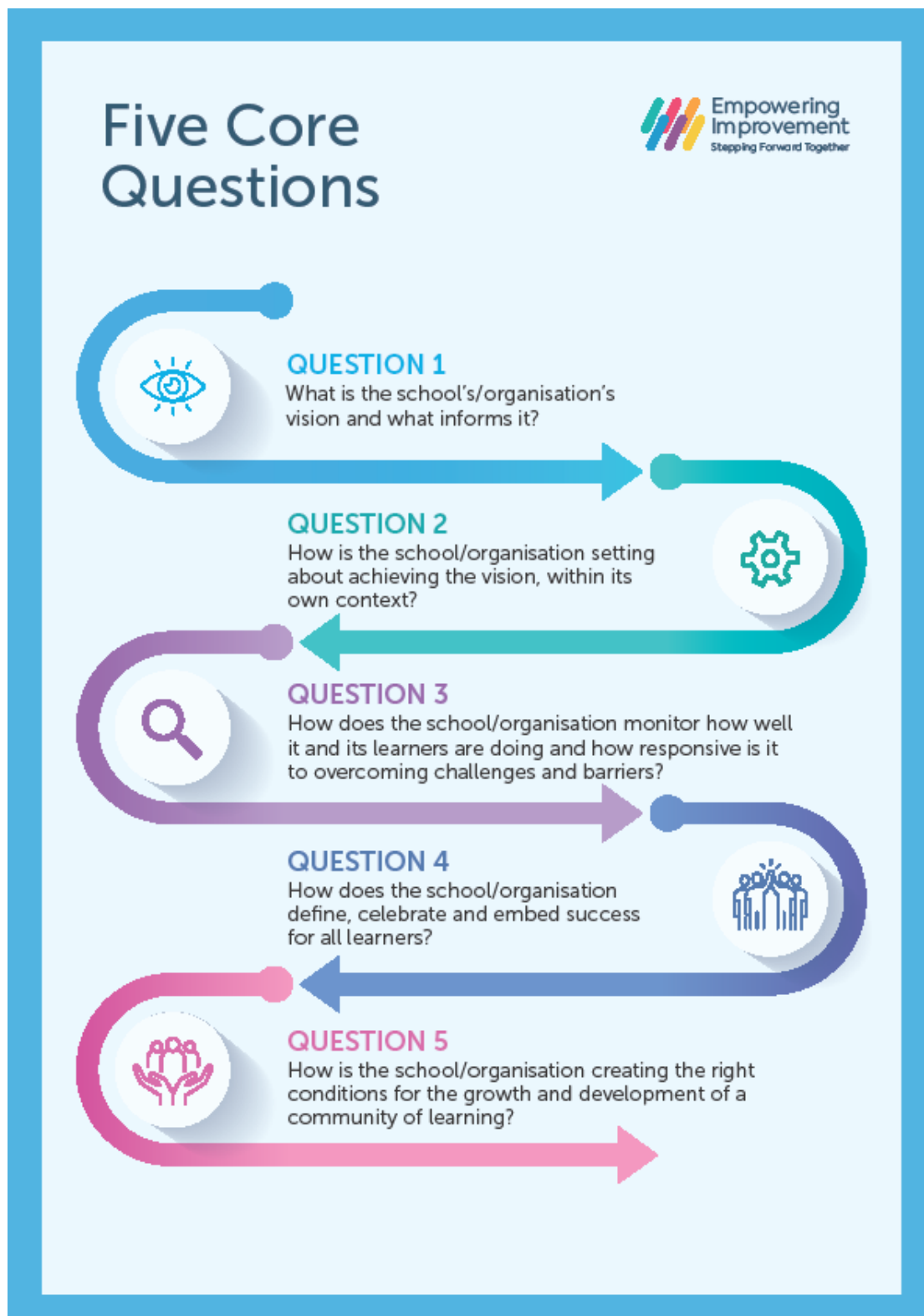
Quadrant 1: The inspection of schools/organisations.

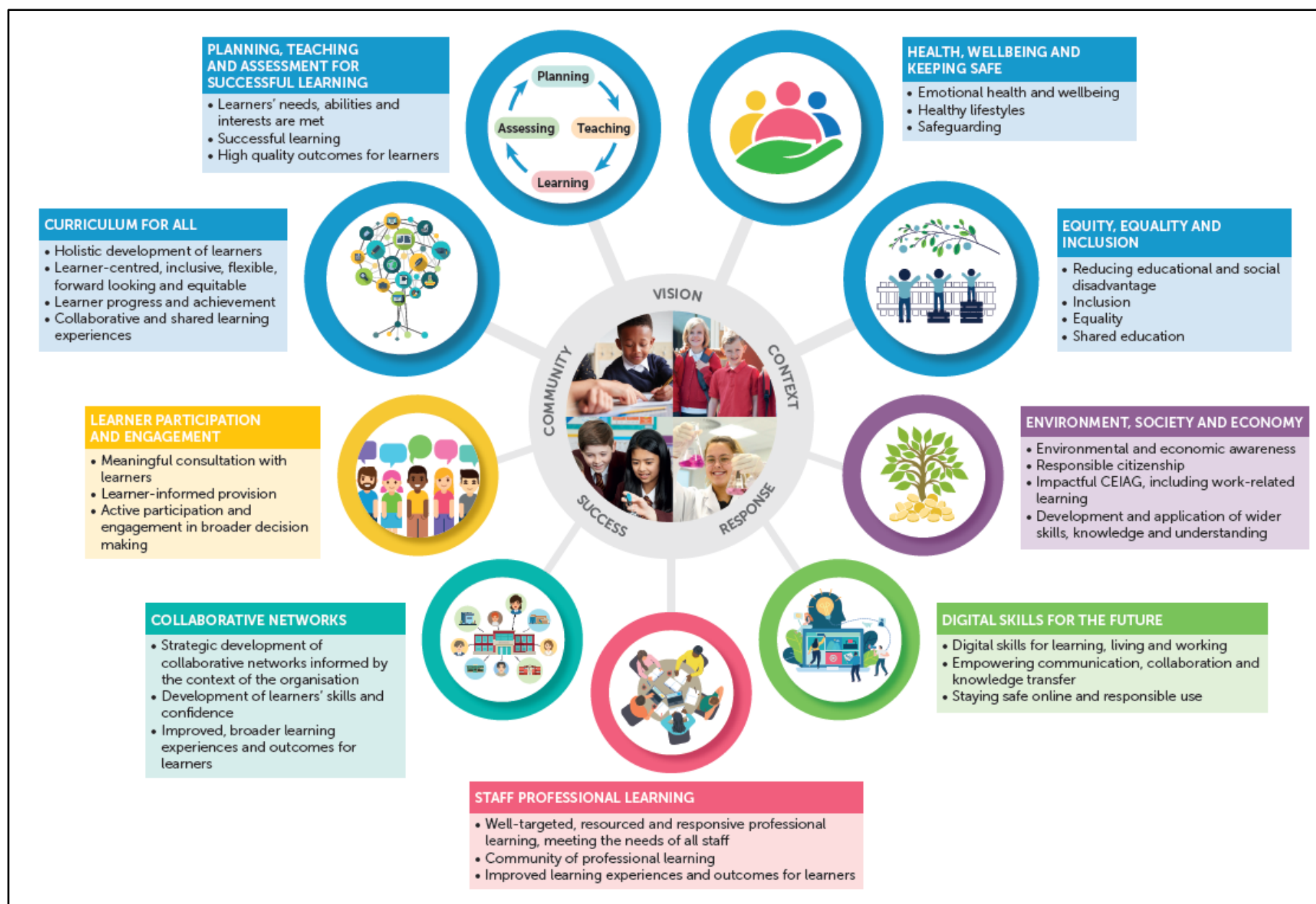
Quadrant 2: Thematic evaluations; these can be based upon: which policy colleagues in commissioning Departments need information; matters that schools/organisations have brought to our attention; patterns or trends that we see emerging through individual school/organisation inspections and District Inspector work which we think require a more detailed exploration at system level. Recent examples of thematic evaluations include the preventative curriculum in schools and EOTAS centres and the provision for physical education in primary schools.

Quadrant 3: The broader exploratory inspection and evaluation work includes the work we undertake in collaboration with other inspectorates, often involving education and services provided by organisations other than schools and colleges, for example, the learning and skills provision in NI prisons.

Quadrant 4: There is a broad remit to our professional learning for impact work. This includes sharing of effective practice, capacity-building through initiatives such as our Associate Assessor programme and more recently the Empowering Improvement programme.

Appendix 4: Five core questions and nine contributory areas (draft)





© CROWN COPYRIGHT 2023

This report may be reproduced in whole or in part, except for commercial purposes or in connection with a prospectus or advertisement, provided that the source and date thereof are stated.

Copies of this report are available on the [ETI website](#)

Follow us on  [@ETI_news](#)  [@ETInews](#) 



The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Providing inspection services for:

Department of Education
Department for the Economy
and other commissioning Departments

