



IPPN Submission to the Department of Education Inspectorate

Review of Code of Practice, Guidelines and Procedures

April 2022

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1 INTRODUCTION

On 11th March, following a briefing by the Inspectorate, IPPN was invited to submit feedback by 13th April on the following:

- The Code of Practice for the Department of Education Inspectorate
- Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools
- The Procedures for Review of Inspections carried out by the Department of Education Inspectorate under Section 13(9) of the Education Act 1998

We sought and were granted additional time to provide feedback, to facilitate IPPN in seeking input from members to this important review via our E-scéal member e-bulletin. Due to the timing, close to the Easter break, and also due to burnout among school leaders, we received very little input from members. IPPN's observations in this submission are therefore limited to those of the leadership team and a small number of primary school leaders who reviewed the documents in detail and submitted their observations.

This submission may therefore not be fully reflective of the benefits or the issues and challenges arising from the proposed amendments to the Code, Guide and Procedures that may become evident when they are implemented. A further review may be warranted when schools are more familiar with the new approach, to ensure that the framework and guidelines are fit for purpose.

It is notable that so few school leaders chose to provide input, particularly as the Code, Guide and Procedures will affect every primary school in the country and that engagement with the Inspectorate is relevant to every school leader. IPPN has found that leaders' professional collegiality in feeding in to consultation processes, which was so evident over the years, has been compromised over the past few years. Whereas it would have been quite normal for dozens of members to feed back in relation to planned submissions 4-5 years ago, this has dwindled to fewer than a handful over the last few years. Furthermore, the number of requests for submissions from across the education sector has increased significantly over the past few years, so school leaders are understandably pulling back to focus on their own and their schools' priorities. This point has been raised by IPPN at the Primary Education Forum on a number of occasions, and directly with a number of senior officials in the

Department and education agencies. We hope that this feedback will be considered when planning for future consultation processes. Perhaps a new approach needs to be designed, so as to ensure that practitioners – both teachers and school leaders – are afforded the time and space to consider important changes to policy and practice, and can feed back through representative bodies in a timescale that respects their workload.

2 KEY CONSIDERATIONS

2.1 CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION INSPECTORATE

2.1.1 What is working well

The following are the benefits of the Code:

- Overall, the Code is clear, concise and unambiguous
- The inclusion of the explanation of terminology used in the document is very positive, as is the clarification of the purpose of the Inspectorate and its functions
- It is crucial that the Inspectorate has included a statement about the importance of fairness and the right to response.

2.1.2 What needs to be further developed

The following are the aspects of the Code that need to be addressed before being rolled out to all schools:

- The 'advice' aspect of the role of the Inspectorate, as highlighted in the section on 'Purpose' is not supported elsewhere in the Code. Clarification of purpose, function etc. seems to focus entirely on evaluation and analysis, which is a missed opportunity. See 'IPPN Recommendations'.
- While fairness is included as a principle of respectful engagement, consistency in the application of best practice - how the guidelines and procedures are implemented on the ground by individual inspectors and inspection teams in schools - is a key issue as reported by members. Clarification is needed regarding which process schools should use to highlight these issues – Is it the 'procedure for review', the 'customer comments and complaints system' or the process of 'resolving a concern informally with the assistant chief inspector', all of which are referenced in the documentation?. Relevant professional development/ assessment of the Inspectorate team where such inconsistencies are highlighted may also be required.
- *Terminology used in this document p3*
 - *'Educational practitioner means an early year's educator; a teacher in a recognised school or centre for education; a teacher or tutor or instructor in any publicly funded*

education or training setting in which the Inspectorate conducts evaluation and/or advisory work'

In IPPN's view, 'Educational practitioners' should not include teachers. Teachers in schools have a qualification in Education (and are registered as such with the Teaching Council). This should be clearly identified in the Code. Early years educators/ third level tutors may not have this professional status thus the roles need to be distinguished - The phrase 'teachers and educational practitioners' could be used instead.

- *'Management body means an owner/manager of a publicly funded early learning and care setting'*

The owner is often also a practitioner. The implications of this need to be considered.

- *'We identify provision and practice that is of poor quality and we follow up as necessary, including drawing the attention of those responsible for the management of the education setting to the need to improve and referring education settings of concern to relevant bodies' p7*

It would be helpful to distinguish between provision and practice. Practice is aligned to the LAOS Framework. Benchmarks can be identified by schools as a guide so that an assessment of poor quality would be clearer. Poor quality of provision could be determined by external factors (funding, waiting lists etc.) and be outside of the professional realm for teachers. This needs to be acknowledged.

- *'We are committed to fair procedures in how we deal with others in the course of our work' p8*

It seems incongruent that an evaluation of practice which is designed to promote improvement and support schools can lead to a report which impacts on individuals and could lead to a question of fair procedures. Appraisals should be solution-focused and pathways identified for progression. If there are such serious examples of extremely poor quality, the model should have provision for a formal, monitored and directed assistance.

2.2 GUIDE TO INSPECTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

2.2.1 What is working well

The following are the benefits of the Code:

- The inclusion of special schools and other special educational settings
- Links to latest circular provided within the document.

2.2.2 What needs to be further developed

The following are the challenges/deficiencies of the Guide that would need to be addressed before being rolled out to all schools:

- *‘Considering this, inspectors will, within the guidelines and the principles set out in the Code of Practice for the Inspectorate (2022), have reasonable flexibility to exercise professional judgement on the range of activities that will be carried out during inspections’ p6*
The professional judgement of an inspector is respected but there is always a difficulty if the framework is not clearly established e.g., some inspectors are very focused on paperwork etc. There needs to be a clear rubric for assessment for national standardisation and fairness.
- *‘School Contact Form’ and ‘School Information Form’ p7-8*
This information should be downloaded and accessed from the Primary Online Database
- *‘teachers’ collective and collaborative practice’ p9*
It is difficult to evaluate the nature and quality of collaborative practice. Not all collaboration is equal. Team teaching is not a requirement in schools and consistency does not mean collaborative practice is occurring. As an aspect of school development, it may provide evidence of distributed leadership but if it is assessed as a key area of teacher practice, it could lead to tokenism
- *‘school leadership team’ p13*
Clarification required - does this mean the In-school management (ISM) team, or all teacher leaders? Recommendations would need to be addressed by the Board of Management, the ISM team, and all staff

2.3 PROCEDURES FOR REVIEW OF INSPECTIONS CARRIED OUT BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION INSPECTORATE UNDER SECTION 13(9) OF THE EDUCATION ACT 1998

2.3.1 What is working well

The following are the benefits of the Procedures:

- Clarification of the rationale for a procedure for review.
- Inclusion of ‘without undue delay’ provisions, provided sufficient time is provided to schools, taking into account school closures and the particular challenges faced by teaching principals.
- Clarification of ‘working days’ rather than simply ‘days’.

2.3.2 What needs to be further developed

The following are the challenges/deficiencies of the Procedures that would need to be addressed before being rolled out to all schools:

- Some aspects of the Procedures read as a training manual for the review panel and could be omitted, retaining only those aspects required to clarify the role of the review panel
- *On what grounds can a review be sought?* p8
The judgements/ findings are not included for review, but these are the most likely queries to arise from schools. It would be helpful to include at least the categories explored.
- *'The constitution of the panel will ensure that the relevant expertise is available in relation to inspection, education, and administrative procedures'* p20
There should be a representative on the panel with experience in the relevant sector/setting (a principal, teacher and/or practitioner)
- *'Requests for an extension of time'* p26
Time limits should respect school closures and engagement with schools should not be planned too close to the start or end of school terms.

3 IPPN RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the detailed feedback provided above, IPPN has the following recommendations. Some of these recommendations have been provided as feedback in relation to other review processes to the Inspectorate over the past few years.

1. There seems to be significant overlap between the Code, the Procedures and the Guide. The rationale for three separate documents is unclear. This review may be an opportunity to combine them into one over-arching document, to make it easier for schools to engage with the process, and to know that everything is in one place.
2. The purpose of the Inspectorate, as set out in the revised draft Code, highlights the role of the Inspectorate to *'improve the quality of teaching and learning through providing high quality evaluation, analysis and advice'*. The evaluation and analysis aspects are well advanced and well regarded. However, the advice role needs to be further developed. IPPN believes this would enhance the engagement between schools and the DE and would appreciate an opportunity to explore this further. An exploration of how this is done in other jurisdictions, such as in Australia, would be beneficial.
3. Further training of school inspectors to foster and deepen a collaborative, co-professional evaluation approach to their engagement with schools. There has been improvement in recent years but feedback from school leaders indicates that it has not been consistently applied, nor is it widespread.
4. Is there potential to change the nomenclature of 'inspection' to embed the new focus on the Inspectorate's three-pronged role - 'evaluation, analysis and advice'?
5. Supporting schools to achieve best practice requires the Inspectorate, as a whole, to progress beyond a reporting focus that seems – to schools being evaluated - to be on 'box-ticking' and 'catching people out'. For example, the Inspectorate could review its approach to inspection reports (all forms of inspection) and take into account schools' genuine efforts to ensure they fully comply with the requirements, and give a certain amount of time to address any remaining issues.

IPPN would be happy to engage with the Inspectorate further in relation to our feedback and recommendations, in particular to ensure that the framework can be implemented in all schools, and focused on achieving the key outcome – a quality education for every pupil.