
HANDBOOK FOR THRESHOLD ASSESSMENT

CONTENTS

- 1. INTRODUCTION**
- 2. THE CONTEXT**
- 3. AIMS AND PURPOSES**
- 4. AN OUTLINE OF THE PROCESS**
- 5. ELIGIBILITY**
- 6. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**
 - Teachers
 - Principals
 - Governors
- 7. THE STANDARDS**
- 8. THE APPLICATION PROCESS**
 - Principles
 - Making an Application
 - Selecting evidence
- 9. ASSESSING APPLICATIONS**
 - The Role of the Principal
- 10. AFTERWARDS**
 - Feedback
 - Appeals

1. INTRODUCTION

This handbook is for teachers in Northern Ireland who are eligible to apply for threshold assessment under the Threshold (Northern Ireland) arrangements. It has its genesis in the agreement between the Teachers' Side and Management Side which created a mechanism to facilitate the movement of teachers on to point one of the upper pay scale.

Threshold Northern Ireland sets teachers eligible for threshold assessment a new challenge, but it also offers them a new opportunity.

It requires those who decide to apply to review what they have done as teachers in the past two or three years against the four agreed threshold standards, and to select evidence from their practice to demonstrate that they have been working broadly at these standards during this time. PRSD review statements and the wider knowledge and understanding the principal has of the teacher's work also plays an important part in the decision-making process.

2. THE CONTEXT

Thirty years – a teaching generation – ago, the world was a different place. Change was minimal and great educational value was placed on the stability of tradition. Parents expected schools to be like those they attended, and the outcomes of formal education were not expected to alter greatly with the passage of time.

The world of the 21st century is very different. We recognise now that, if young people are to be well prepared for their futures, schools, and the practice within them, have got to change.

But change in schools can only be achieved through teachers and, if they are to change what they do too, they need career-long professional support, something that is not occasional, but which arises directly from their critical reflection about what they do in the context of their own schools.

Threshold Northern Ireland gives teachers an opportunity to reflect on their practice, and use it to provide evidence to demonstrate that they are effectively meeting the needs of their pupils and to gain a tangible reward for their efforts as a result.

It is consistent with established good practice in performance review and professional development and will be a key element in the wider programme of changes designed to raise the status and professionalism of teaching here.

3. AIMS AND PURPOSES

Threshold assessment in Northern Ireland should:

- contribute to the overall process of improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools;
- support the further development of teachers as reflective professionals and thereby contribute to the growth of self-evaluating schools;
- build on the sound practice already established in the early professional development of teachers.

Threshold assessment in Northern Ireland will:

- give recognition to the high calibre of Northern Ireland teachers and allow those with relevant experience to gain due reward for their professionalism in the classroom;
- be based on four standards which reflect the significant characteristics of effective teachers
 - core values, understanding of the curriculum and professional knowledge
 - teaching and assessment of learning
 - contribution to raising standards through pupil achievement
 - effective professional development
- focus on the individual teacher rather than the school;
- promote equality of opportunity throughout the profession

4. AN OUTLINE OF THE PROCESS

The process of Threshold Assessment can be viewed as consisting of two phases: **APPLICATION** and **ASSESSMENT**.

Threshold Northern Ireland is designed to help eligible teachers to review their classroom practice against agreed standards, to select evidence from that practice which demonstrates that they meet the four agreed threshold standards and to submit an **APPLICATION** on the appropriate form.

The evidence which eligible teachers present on their threshold application will be **ASSESSED** by the principals of their schools who will be able to take into account, when making their judgements, PRSD review statements, the wider knowledge they have of each teacher and their understanding of the contexts in which they work.

5. ELIGIBILITY

The first stage of the process involves identifying the teachers in each school who are eligible to apply for threshold assessment. Teachers are strongly advised not to proceed to the application stage before eligibility has been established.

- applications may be made by all teachers (including those acting as Principals and Vice-Principals at the time of application), apart from principals and vice-principals, who were on point M6 for experience and qualifications before or at the appropriate date ;
- salary points awarded for additional responsibilities should not be included, but those who were on point M6 for qualifications and experience before or at the appropriate date who also hold such additional responsibility points are eligible to apply for threshold assessment;
- full-time, part-time teachers and temporary teachers are eligible to apply;
- queries about eligibility should be referred, in the first instance to the principal, ultimately it will be a matter for the employing authority;
- for teachers in non-standard settings e.g. peripatetic teachers employed by the EA, eligibility will be determined by the employing authority.

6. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

For threshold to work effectively teachers and principals need to have a clear understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities and to work closely together. A summary of the main roles and responsibilities follows.

TEACHERS

No teacher is required to apply for threshold assessment.

Eligible teachers who decide to apply for threshold assessment will need to:

- select the evidence from their professional practice during the past 2 to 3 years which they believe demonstrates that they have worked at the four agreed threshold standards;
- complete the application form and submit it to the principal of their schools.

N.B. These responsibilities apply equally to teachers employed on a temporary basis.

PRINCIPALS

Principals have both the legal and the professional responsibility for evaluating the standards of teaching and learning in the schools they lead and for ensuring that there are proper standards of professional performance.

Principals have access to existing school monitoring systems and to their wider knowledge of the teacher, in coming to a judgement as to whether the evidence submitted is accurate and indicative of overall performance.

Principals have direct knowledge of the context in which teachers teach; they are therefore best placed to make the judgements on threshold applications submitted by teachers in their school.

In order to be able to carry out this responsibility effectively, they will need to:

- provide in-school briefings for all eligible teachers;
- distribute application forms to all eligible teachers;
- give teachers sufficient time to complete their application forms;
- receive completed applications by an agreed date;
- assess the completed applications against the four agreed threshold standards, as 'met' or 'not yet met';
- inform all applicants of the outcome of their application;
- provide feedback to all applicants.

GOVERNORS

Governors have **no formal role** in threshold assessment but they should be aware that it is happening and have an interest in its implications for the teachers in their schools.

Following assessment, the Chairperson of Governors will receive a report on the threshold assessment process in the school from the principal. Governors, through their role in the school salary committee, will also be involved with any appeals against the principal's assessment by unsuccessful applicants.

7. THE STANDARDS

An Introduction

There are four standards that teachers eligible to apply for threshold assessment have to show themselves able to meet if they are to be successful.

Teachers eligible to apply for threshold assessment must show themselves able to meet all four of the standards.

The four threshold standards in Northern Ireland are:

- core values, understanding of the curriculum and professional knowledge;
- teaching and assessment of learning;
- contribution to raising standards through pupil achievement;
- effective professional development.

Each standard deals with a different aspect of the work of a teacher, but, taken together, they reflect recognised professional principles and practice, and there is throughout a strong emphasis on teaching in the classroom.

Much will depend on the context within which a teacher works, the age range of the pupils, the resources available, the range of subjects and courses offered, the extent to which the teacher is classroom based, and perhaps most importantly, the educational backgrounds and needs of the pupils in the teacher's care. All of these factors should be taken into account and reflected in the application form.

When making an application for threshold assessment, eligible teachers will be expected to provide *evidence that they have worked at these four standards during the previous two to three years* of their careers. PRSD review statements should be used as an important source of evidence of effective performance.

THE FIRST STANDARD

CORE VALUES, UNDERSTANDING OF THE CURRICULUM AND PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

What does this standard deal with and how can it best be interpreted to take account of different school contexts?

To meet this standard, eligible teachers will have to provide evidence from what they have done *in the previous two to three years* to show that they:

- are effective professionals
- have up-to-date knowledge of their subject(s) or specialism(s)
- take account of wider curriculum developments that are relevant to their work as teachers

What will teachers need to do to demonstrate that they meet this standard?

(a) to demonstrate that they are effective professionals, teachers at the threshold level must be able to show through their teaching that they:

- care for children;
- seek the development of the whole child;
- are committed to the rights of the child and the promotion of equal opportunities;
- are able to adapt to changing circumstances and new ideas;
- have vision, energy and perseverance.

(b) to demonstrate that they have *up-to-date knowledge of the teaching of their subject(s) or specialism(s)*, teachers at the threshold level must be able to show *through their teaching* that they:

- have relevant, up-to-date knowledge and understanding of their subject(s) or specialism(s) within the framework of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and/or the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education;
- know their subject(s) or specialism(s) in sufficient depth to be able to teach them effectively;
- understand the range of factors (social, emotional, cultural, psychological) that affect pupils' learning and take them into account in their planning and preparation.

(c) to demonstrate that they *take account of wider curriculum developments that are relevant to their work*, teachers at the threshold level must be able to show *through their teaching* that they:

- have a working knowledge of the major strategies and initiatives introduced in Northern Ireland (such as, for example, the Northern Ireland Education Technology Strategy);
- include a cross-curricular dimension to the work they do with pupils.

THE SECOND STANDARD

TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

What does this standard deal with and how can it best be interpreted to take account of different school contexts?

To meet this standard, eligible teachers will have to provide evidence from what they have done in the previous two to three years that they

- consistently and effectively plan to meet pupils' individual learning needs
- use a range of appropriate learning and teaching strategies
- effectively monitor and evaluate pupils' learning

What will teachers need to do to demonstrate that they meet this standard?

(a) to demonstrate that they *consistently and effectively plan to meet pupils' individual learning needs*, teachers at the threshold level must be able to show *through their teaching* that:

- their planning takes account of the need for them to set realistic, but challenging, goals for their pupils;
- these goals are communicated to and shared with their pupils.

(b) to demonstrate that they *use a range of appropriate learning and teaching strategies*, teachers at the threshold level must be able to show *through their teaching* that they:

- use learning activities which take account of a variety of learning styles and include learning outside the classroom by making appropriate use of, for example, homework, project work, field trips;
- take account of pupils' previous learning;
- make effective use of a range of resources to support learning;
- use ICT effectively and appropriately to help them achieve their learning objectives for their pupils, due account being taken of the facilities and training opportunities available;
- provide positive, appropriate and targeted support for pupils with specific learning needs;
- maintain high levels of behaviour and discipline in their classrooms;
- provide a positive and purposeful learning environment for pupils by, for example, rewarding pupils appropriately, celebrating their progress and achievement and displaying examples of their work.

(c) to demonstrate that they *monitor and evaluate their pupils' learning effectively*, teachers at the threshold level must be able to show *through their teaching* that they:

- implement their school's policies on assessment, recording and reporting;
- take appropriate account of both Northern Ireland and individual school targets for achievement;
- set their pupils realistic, but challenging, targets for improvement;
- report appropriately to pupils, parents, other teachers and the principals of their schools on their pupils' progress, identifying any action required;
- establish learning partnerships with, for example, pupils, parents, teaching colleagues or other members of the community.

THE THIRD STANDARD

CONTRIBUTION TO RAISING STANDARDS THROUGH PUPIL ACHIEVEMENT

What does this standard deal with and how can it best be interpreted to take account of different school contexts?

To meet this standard, eligible teachers will have to provide *evidence from what they have done in the past two to three years* to show that, as a result of their work, their *pupils have continued to achieve in a manner consistent with the targets set by their schools in the light of relevant information.*

Pupils' achievements can be related to their personal, social and academic achievement, but *must be demonstrated by evidence.*

What will teachers need to do to demonstrate that they meet this standard?

It will be for *each school principal to make a professional judgement as to whether the progress made by a teacher's pupils is at least within the range expected* in light of the school's local and regional context.

School principals will make their judgements on the basis of evidence submitted by teachers.

In order to demonstrate to their principals that they meet this standard, eligible teachers will need to present evidence which:

- shows that there has been *appropriate development, relative to their prior attainment and expected achievement*, for the great majority of the pupils for whom they are responsible;
- is *representative of the broad range of the teacher's work* and takes account of any particular circumstances which affect that work;
- demonstrates that *care and attention are given to all the teacher's pupils*;
- indicates that *the level of progress made by the teacher's pupils compares favourably with what might reasonably have been expected for such pupils*, taking the school's context and setting into account.

THE FOURTH STANDARD

EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What does this standard deal with and how can it best be interpreted to take account of different school contexts?

To meet this standard, eligible teachers' will have to provide evidence from what they have done *in the previous two to three years* that they:

- take responsibility for their own professional development;
- use the outcomes of their professional development to improve their teaching and their pupils' learning;
- make an active contribution to the policies and aspirations of the school.

What will teachers need to do to demonstrate that they meet this standard?

(a) to demonstrate that they *take responsibility for their professional development*, teachers at the threshold level must be able to show that they:

- engage in on-going professional self-review;
- understand and are aware of the importance of critical reflection in evaluating and, where possible, improving their professional practice.

(b) to demonstrate that they use the outcomes of their professional development to improve their teaching and their pupils' learning, teachers at the threshold level must be able to show that they:

- have identified areas in which they need to develop in order to meet their school's as well as their own personal development needs;
- have taken appropriate action to enhance their professional knowledge, expertise and skills;
- have shared the outcomes of their professional development with others in their working teams.

(c) to demonstrate that *they make an active contribution to the policies and aspirations of their schools*, eligible teachers must be able to show that they:

- have participated in the formulation and implementation of the school's development plan and other whole school policies and can function as members of professional teams;
- promote the ethos of the school.

8. THE APPLICATION PROCESS

PRINCIPLES

For the application process to work smoothly and effectively, it is essential that certain basic rules and principles are not only understood by all those involved but also adhered to at every stage. If these principles are followed at each stage, the climate of trust that is so important to the success of the threshold process as a whole is much more likely to be developed and the process itself is much more likely to be worthwhile and productive.

These basic principles deal with five key issues:

- equality of opportunity
- confidentiality
- professionalism
- openness and transparency
- sensitivity.

Equality of opportunity

Threshold assessment in Northern Ireland is *open to all eligible teachers, whatever their circumstances*.

Those involved in the assessment process must not act unfairly to any individual or unlawfully discriminate against any applicant on the grounds of his or her age, gender, marital status, nationality, race, disability or sexual orientation.

Eligible part-time or temporary teachers must not be treated any less favourably than eligible full-time permanent teachers.

Threshold assessment is open to eligible *teachers working in a variety of non-school settings*, such as, for example, peripatetic teachers or teachers based in referral units.

Teachers absent from school, for example, on maternity leave or sick leave are also entitled to apply and their applications must be treated in the same way as those of teachers remaining in that school.

Confidentiality

Each eligible teacher's application should be treated in confidence.

Application forms will be seen only by the assessing principal and by any member of the school management team whom the principal thinks it appropriate to involve in the assessment process.

Professionalism

Teachers applying for threshold assessment are expected to behave professionally when completing their applications: they are expected not only to make a declaration that they are eligible for assessment but also to submit evidence in their application forms that is accurate and open to verification.

Principals are responsible for making the assessments on the basis of the evidence summarised on the application forms, PRSD review statements and their wider knowledge of each applicant, the contribution he or she has made to the achievements of the school and the particular context in which the teacher is working:

In drawing on and making use of this wider knowledge and determining whether the evidence submitted by each applicant is both accurate and indicative of his or her overall performance, principals must maintain the highest professional standards.

Openness and transparency

It is important that threshold assessment is an integral part of the continuing professional development of teachers.

One of its fundamental aims is to contribute to the overall process of improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools, but it also aims to 'give recognition to the high calibre of teachers and allow those with relevant experience to gain due reward for their professionalism in the classroom.'

If threshold assessment is to achieve these wider aims, it is essential that all those involved in it, and school principals in particular, are open and straightforward about their actions at all stages.

This means that:

- all teachers in the same school should be treated in the same way and given the same opportunities to apply for threshold assessment;
- every application should be assessed in the same fair and consistent manner;

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- the briefings that teachers are given about threshold assessment in their schools should be clear, straightforward and helpful;
 - any centrally-held school information on which teachers applying for threshold assessment might wish to draw should be made easily available to them;
 - teachers should be given opportunities to consult their principals or other senior colleagues about their application forms;
 - completed application forms should be assessed as quickly as possible;
 - confidentiality must be fully respected;
 - the opportunities that principals have to draw on and use their wider knowledge of applicants and their contributions to the achievements of the school should not be used unfairly;
 - eligible teachers who decide to apply for threshold assessment should know how the principals of their schools intend to use this wider knowledge and information and be confident that they will use only such additional information as can be verified.

Sensitivity

Teachers may find some aspects of the assessment process difficult to come to terms with and principals will need to take time to form a clear and confident understanding of their responsibilities.

It is therefore very important that all those who have key roles in the threshold assessment process in Northern Ireland are sensitive to the concerns, apprehensions and uncertainties of others.

Teachers should bear in mind that principals have very important responsibilities, especially for assessing applications against the threshold standards in a fair and consistent manner and satisfying the external assessors asked to verify the process that has been used.

Principals should bear in mind that many teachers will need time and assistance to help them make their own way through the process and understand exactly what it means for them.

If all those involved understand, sympathise with and are sensitive to the needs, apprehensions and uncertainties of the others, the fundamental aims of Threshold Northern Ireland are very much more likely to be achieved.

MAKING AN APPLICATION

Eligible teachers who decide to apply for threshold assessment are advised to:

- keep their applications *factual and concise*;
- *read all the information provided about the four agreed threshold standards carefully* before starting to think about the evidence they might include in their application forms;
- *make sure that they know what each of the four standards deals with* and requires of them;
- *select from the evidence available that which illustrates what they have typically done* or are doing as teachers;
- read and *pay careful attention to the additional guidance* provided along with this handbook;
- keep in mind that the *examples given in the completed application forms must be open to verification*: there is no requirement for teachers to make or keep portfolios of evidence, but they must be sure that any source of information referred to in their application forms can be verified, if necessary.

SELECTING THE EVIDENCE

It is the teacher who is responsible for applying for threshold assessment. This means that it is the eligible teacher who is responsible for completing the application form.

The eligible teacher who decides to apply for threshold assessment needs to:

- provide a *summary of evidence* to show that he or she meets each of the four threshold standards in Northern Ireland (citing PRSD review statements where appropriate);
- use this evidence to *demonstrate that he or she has worked at the standards required over the previous two to three years*;
- present the summary of the relevant evidence selected in the form of *concrete examples of his or her day-to-day practice*;
- be able to *demonstrate that all four of the standards have been met*.

9. ASSESSING APPLICATIONS

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

It is the responsibility of the principals of the schools at which eligible teachers work to:

- *make an assessment of each application form* submitted and *form a judgement* as to whether the four agreed threshold standards have been met or not;
- *make notes about any additional information used* to inform the assessment that has been made ie PRSD review statements;
- *note areas for each teacher's future professional development*, whether or not the application has been assessed as successful;
- write comments on the final page on:
 - the accuracy and relevance of the applicant's evidence;
 - any additional evidence which has been obtained.

In carrying out these responsibilities, principals are expected to exercise their professional judgement and to *keep very much in mind the basic rules and principles* that apply to all those involved in the threshold process in Northern Ireland.

10. AFTERWARDS

FEEDBACK

Because Threshold Northern Ireland is set in the context of professional development generally, eligible teachers who apply for threshold assessment should receive feedback on the outcome of their application from the principals of the school in which they work, based on development issues arising from the application forms.

Successful Applicants

Eligible teachers whose applications for threshold assessments are successful will be *notified by the principal of the outcome of their application within 20 working days of the date of their assessment*.

They will be placed on point 1 of the upper pay scale from 1st September in the calendar year in which they make their application.

Successful applicants will also receive *professional feedback from the principal of their school*. This feedback will be based on the evidence presented in their application forms, the comments made by the principals about the assessments they made of the evidence submitted against the four threshold standards and any other relevant information. Its purpose will be to inform the teachers' further professional development.

Unsuccessful applicants

Eligible teachers whose applications for threshold assessment have not been successful will be *notified of the outcome in writing by the principal within 20 working days*.

Unsuccessful applicants will be *entitled to make a further application* for threshold assessment in the following year, provided they continue to meet the eligibility criteria.

They will also be entitled to have *professional development feedback from the principals of their schools*. This feedback will reflect the assessments made of the evidence submitted on the threshold application forms, the notes made by the principals about areas for further development and any other relevant information.

The *purpose of this development feedback is to help teachers whose applications have been unsuccessful to understand what more they need to do to meet the four agreed threshold standards* (or those of them that they have not been able to meet) and how they can gather the evidence that will demonstrate that they have done so.

APPEALS

Eligible teachers whose threshold applications are 'not yet met' will be able to appeal the decision through the appeals mechanism within the school's / service's pay policy.