



26 January 2021

Circular: 0001/2021

To: Boards of Management, Principal Teachers and Teachers in Primary Schools
and Special Schools

To: Chief Executives of Education and Training Boards

ARRANGEMENTS FOR INSPECTORATE ENGAGEMENT WITH PRIMARY AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS JANUARY – JUNE 2021

SUMMARY

This circular provides information about the Inspectorate's advisory, research and evaluation engagements with schools in the current school year.

It outlines work that we will be carrying out between January and June 2021.

It complements Department Circular [0040/2020](#) which issued to primary schools in June 2020.

You will find a Powerpoint presentation about this Circular at the following link:

<https://assets.gov.ie/120500/acaf96f8-1bbe-4723-8cb5-aeb83da1f2ef.pdf>

Introduction

The Inspectorate is very conscious of the very significant challenges faced by school principals, teachers and other school staff, boards of management, pupils, parents and school communities during the 2020/21 school year because of the Covid-19 pandemic. School leaders and school staff have made outstanding efforts to reopen and sustain in-school provision in Term 1 of the school year and, at present, are doing so to provide online learning for pupils.

Conscious of the challenges and context faced by schools, the Inspectorate adjusted the normal arrangements for inspection and advisory work for the 2020/21 school year. These adjustments were set out in Department circular [0040/2020](#), where we described arrangements for school self-evaluation and school inspection for the school year 2020/2021.

The primary purpose of this Circular letter is to provide you with additional information on the Inspectorate's advisory, research and evaluation engagements with schools between January and June 2021.



1. Inspectorate engagement with schools: September to December 2020

Advisory Support Work in Term 1

The main focus of the Inspectorate's work in the first term of the 2020/2021 school year was on its advisory work in schools. Our work was designed to support school leaders, teachers and other school staff to provide for the learning and progression of all children and young people – with a strong focus on the needs of vulnerable learners. We carried out this work through telephone calls, video conferencing and through in-school visits in a total of 4661 engagements with primary and special schools.

Analysis of the themes emerging from the Inspectorate's advisory work with schools showed that pupils were happy to be back in school and to reconnect with their friends and their teachers and that, despite the challenges of a pandemic context for the leaders and managers of schools, there was huge commitment among teachers, principals and the whole school community to ensuring pupils could successfully settle back to school and progress in their learning. Principals also raised with us concerns that they had about a range of issues, such as the availability of substitute teachers and the implementation of Covid-19 prevention measures in schools.

Research and evaluation in Term 1

The Inspectorate's research and evaluation work from September-December 2020 included surveys of principals, teachers, parents and pupils in a sample of primary, post-primary and special schools. We also worked with focus groups of pupils/students in a small sample of primary and post-primary schools. The information from the surveys and the pupil/student focus groups complemented data provided by principals during the advisory sessions.

By capturing the perspectives of the range of stakeholders, we gained valuable insights into the successes and challenges facing schools and pupils during the first term of the school year. In particular, we understood better the particular needs of each group of respondents in relation to wellbeing, teaching and learning and arrangements in relation to Covid-19.

The learning from this research and evaluation work helped to inform the guidance which was issued to schools by the Department following consultation with representatives of teachers, school leaders, school management bodies, national parents' organisations and, at second level, students' representatives. The research also provided an opportunity to disseminate good practice.

Inspection Activity in Term 1

Inspection activity during the September-December 2020 period included the following:



- We completed a number of inspections that had commenced in February/March 2020 but which had to be halted when schools closed on 12 March. Reports arising from these inspections have been issued in almost all cases, and we are grateful to the schools concerned for their cooperation in finalising the inspections and the reporting processes.
- During Autumn 2020, in collaboration with the Health and Safety Authority, the education partners and a sample of schools, we developed arrangements for visits to Support Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS visits). These visits were designed to support schools and to monitor the implementation of safe working practices as schools reopened and operated in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 416 such visits took place in primary and special schools during September-December 2020. The overall findings from these visits were very positive, showing how schools were working to ensure that they were safe places in which to work and learn.
- During the September-December 2020 period we also completed a number of priority inspections. These included urgent Follow-Through inspections, a number of Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections, and a small number of other inspections.

2. HSE School Support Service

During the final months of 2020 evidence emerged from contact with schools which showed the need for additional support for schools and school leaders when Covid-19 cases arose. The Inspectorate collaborated with our colleagues in the Health Service Executive's School Support Teams to assist them as they provided specific and targeted support to schools.

Since early November 2020, a number of inspectors have been assigned for a portion of their time to the HSE School Support Service. This support will be increased as schools reopen and the Inspectorate will continue to provide assistance to the HSE Support Teams as required and agreed.

3. Inspectorate advisory, research and evaluation work January- June 2021

Enabling all pupils, particularly the most vulnerable, to remain connected with their schools and to continue to progress in their learning, continues to be a Department priority as this school year progresses. This priority applies to all contexts in which schools provide for pupils' learning in the current school year – whether face-to-face, in a remote environment, or in a blended learning context. Inspectors are very conscious of the critical role played by principals, teachers, special needs assistants and other school staff, boards of



management, parents and the whole school community in supporting this priority.

The Inspectorate's programme of work in the January-February 2021 period reflects our commitment to supporting schools and ensuring the best possible outcomes for all learners. The programme of work will include the following:

Advisory Support Work in Term 2 and Term 3

- **Dedicated phone advisory service in regard to curriculum implementation in the remote learning context:** From Tuesday, 19 January 2021, the Inspectorate is providing a dedicated phone advisory helpline service to schools from 09.00-17.30, Monday-Friday. This is to enable school principals and teachers to contact the Inspectorate with queries about teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum implementation, especially in a remote teaching context. The helpline is available by choosing the Curriculum Implementation option (option 2) on the Department of Education COVID Helpline 057-9324461.
- **Dedicated email address for queries regarding curriculum implementation in the remote learning context:** School principals and teachers will also be able to contact the Inspectorate with queries about teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum implementation, especially in a remote teaching context, via email to inspectorateadvisory@education.gov.ie
- **Continuing advisory service:** Primary schools and special schools may also contact their assigned inspector for advice about teaching and learning. Inspectors will also continue to contact schools directly offering advice and collecting information about the experiences of schools.

Research and Evaluation in Term 2 and Term 3

In order to ensure the provision of the best possible opportunities for learners the Inspectorate will continue to collect information about how well the system is adapting to the challenges that it faces. This information will inform the guidance produced by the Department and the advice offered to school leaders and teachers. During the remaining part of the school year, the Inspectorate will undertake

- **Surveys of principals:** As we did in Term 1, we will be approaching a sample of principals inviting them to complete confidential online questionnaires. We are very grateful to principals for the collaboration with us in this work.



- **Pupil and parent focus groups and surveys:** This work enables us to collect detailed information about the views of pupils and parents in relation to the experiences of online learning and/or in-school learning. We are very grateful to the schools that facilitate this focus group and survey work.
- **Developing ways to evaluate online learning:** We are also developing approaches to enable inspectors and schools to evaluate the quality of education provision in a remote learning environment more comprehensively. We want to develop this approach jointly with teachers and school leaders, so we will be inviting a small sample of schools to collaborate with us in this developmental work in January/February 2021. As in all such developmental work, schools can choose or decline to join the project, and any reports arising from the evaluations will not be published. If your school is interested in joining this work, our research section would be delighted to hear from you at ESRU@education.gov.ie.

Inspection Activity in Term 2 and Term 3

- SSPS visits to school (the visits that Support Safe Provision of Schooling) will resume when schools reopen and we will report to the Health and Safety Authority about these on a weekly basis. Details about how these inspection visits are conducted and reported upon are available in the guide to SSPS visits, [Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling](#), which was approved by the Minister for Education following consultation with the education partners in Term 1. The findings from these SSPS visits to date have been very positive, showing that schools are working very hard to adhere to safe working practices.
- We will conduct a small number of Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections in schools and some other urgent inspections
- Inspectors will also follow up with schools where specific issues have been raised in relation to the consistency of provision for remote teaching and learning, including, for example, queries regarding regularity of online provision and feedback for pupils, provision for pupils who receive support from Special Education Teachers, etc.
- The specific activities included in the Inspectorate's work will be kept under review and will evolve in line with public health advice and the prevailing health circumstances.

4. School self-evaluation in the 2020/2021 school year

As Circular 0040/202 indicated, there are no new SSE requirements for schools in the school year 2020/21. The December 2020 issue 15 of the [SSE e-Bulletin](#)



provided some practical suggestions about how the SSE process might help schools as they respond flexibly to challenges as they arise in the current school year.

The next cycle of SSE 2021-2024 is due to commence in September 2021. Prior to that, the Department and its Inspectorate will engage in consultation with all stakeholders, including principals, school leaders and teachers. This will provide a very valuable opportunity to consider what is working well, what the next focus of SSE should be, and what additional actions should be taken to support the use of SSE.

5. Further information and useful documentation

Further information and useful advice can be found as follows:

- A Powerpoint presentation to complement this Circular can be found at <https://assets.gov.ie/120500/acaf96f8-1bbe-4723-8cb5-aeb83da1f2ef.pdf>
- A suite of guidance materials, agreed with the education partners, to support schools to mediate the curriculum safely for all pupils/students in the context of partial or full school closures is available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/#additional-guidelines-and-procedures>
- In addition, the *Updated Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs* is available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/965639-continuity-of-schooling/>
- The *Updated Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting pupils at risk of educational disadvantage* is available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/965639-continuity-of-schooling/>
- *Arrangements for schools to have in place appropriate contingency measures to ensure that schools are prepared to continue to support teaching and learning in the event of a partial or full closure of schools arising from Public Health advice* - Circular [0074/2020](#)
- A Guide to SSPS inspection visits, *Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling: Inspection visits designed to advise and support schools on creating a safe learning and working environment for all* (January, 2021) is available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/664a8-supporting-the-safe-provision-of-schooling-2021/>

Harold Hislop
Chief Inspector
oci@education.gov.ie