

Department *of* Education

QUALITY ASSURANCE INSPECTIONS
IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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The Education and Training
Inspectorate

Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education
Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Introduction

A key purpose of inspection is to promote improvement and to help to raise standards. All inspections also have common features, for example, they evaluate the ethos, the quality of pastoral care, teaching and learning, and standards of achievement, and the effectiveness of the management arrangements. In the interests of improvement of its service to the public, to the schools and their teachers, to the pupils and their parents, and to Department of Education, the Inspectorate uses a range of inspection types. The purpose of this leaflet is to outline the nature and scope of a particular form of inspection - the quality assurance inspection.

What is a quality assurance inspection (QAI)?

A QAI is an external evaluation, by the Inspectorate, of the internal, self-evaluative work of a school in relation to a significant aspect of its provision.

At the school's invitation, and with the agreement of the Chief Inspector, the Inspectorate will evaluate and report on:

- the thoroughness and effectiveness of the processes which the school has used in its self-evaluation;
 - the validity of the evidence which it has assembled and of the findings which have emerged;
- and
- the appropriateness of the priorities for action, and of any action that has been taken.

The QAI is as rigorous a form of inspection as any other; while a culture of openness and self-evaluation, and a commitment to improvement, will help schools to get the most from any inspection, such an ethos is particularly helpful within the distinctive context of a QAI.

Most schools identify a team to take the lead responsibility for the self-evaluative exercise: all staff should know about the initiative. In addition, all should be encouraged to feel part of the process.

The completion of the internal self-evaluation (or 'internal audit', as it is often termed), and the external quality assurance process, including the evaluation of the outcomes, are not stand-alone events; rather, they should support continuing development and consolidate the spirit and practice of self-improvement within the school. So, before it requests a QAI, the school should ensure that **as far as possible, any such request is within a context of an agreed commitment to, and existing practice of, continuous improvement.**

Towards a Quality Assurance Inspection

Choice of Theme

The theme or focus of the self-evaluative activity (or internal audit) depends largely on a school's priorities and what it believes would best enable improvement in relation to ethos, teaching, learning, and standards of achievement. Some schools have chosen to evaluate the quality of the experiences of a specific year group, for instance, or the quality of provision for pupils who have special needs; in certain schools, departments have chosen to evaluate, for themselves, the quality of their work at subject level. Other schools have found it helpful to choose a narrowly focused area for their first formal self-evaluative activity and to build on the experience gained, and the findings, to improve their methods of evaluation and/or to broaden the scope of their internal evaluation work on departmental or whole-school matters.

Starting Well

Experience has shown that certain approaches facilitate effective self-evaluation when schools are intending to request a QAI; these are outlined below:-

- i. the purpose and aims of the internal self-evaluative exercise (or internal audit) are clear and understood by all involved, including the principal, the senior management team, the Board of Governors, classroom teachers, parents, the pupils, and others who might be involved;
- ii. the focus of the self-evaluation, and the evidence to be considered, are clearly identified, and related to priorities in the school's development plan;
- iii. a team of staff to lead the self-evaluative work is identified, and their roles and remit explained to, and understood by, all; depending on the focus of the self-evaluation, such a team could, for example, consist of the teachers in a department, led by the head of department or by another senior member of staff; or it could be a group of teachers who volunteer to take the work forward on a whole-school issue, such as pastoral care, or literacy at key stage 3, under the leadership of a senior teacher;
- iv. agreeing and working towards realistic and appropriate targets and using agreed performance indicators/success criteria are integral parts of the process of the self-evaluation work;
- v. the procedures for evaluation are rigorous, comprehensive and fit for purpose; they are clear to all involved;
- vi. the procedures used involve minimum disruption to the day-to-day work of the school, are valid and cost-effective in time and effort;

- vii. the sources of evidence take account of school and departmental documentation, the views of the pupils, teachers, parents, the Board of Governors and include the observation of practice wherever learning is taking place;
- viii. the findings are based on quantitative and qualitative evidence which can be externally verified.

Next Steps

- i. the outcomes and recommendations of the specific self-evaluation exercise (internal audit) are recorded and shared with all involved;
- ii. the findings are used to guide further developments both in the area of focus and in other aspects of the school's planning for improvement through continuing self-evaluation;
- iii. the procedures used are developed and improved as necessary, and become part of a continuing programme of self-evaluation and improvement which covers whole-school as well as departmental issues;
- iv. the process of self-evaluation work is accepted and developed as a useful contribution to the process of effecting improvement in any area of a school's provision.

Involving the Inspectorate

If a school wishes to have an external quality assurance of its work, the governors should request the Chief Inspector for an inspection, giving in outline, the reason for their request. If the Chief Inspector agrees, a member of the Inspectorate will call with the school at the earliest opportunity and discuss the nature of the inspection with the principal.

The School's Report of its Work

In preparation for a QAI, the school should prepare a written report which will be made available to the Inspectorate (around a fortnight before the inspection) and includes:-

- i. a statement of the focus of its self-evaluative exercise ('internal audit') and the reasons for that choice;
- ii. the composition of the team which had lead responsibility for the exercise;
- iii. the methods used, eg, questionnaires which can be attached as appendices to the report;
- iv. the main findings, including quantitative information and evaluative comments;
- v. any action planned to support improvement in the aspect of provision which the school has evaluated, and in the quality in teaching and learning, and standards of achievement.

The written report may include an indication of other current or intended self-evaluation activity in the school.

The Inspection

The inspection will involve a team of inspectors visiting the school for around three days; they will consider the school's report, talk with staff who have had lead roles in the self-evaluation exercise, observe teaching and learning, and talk to pupils. The QAI, as with all inspections, will involve an evaluation of the quality of the school's pastoral care. The inspection will result in a publicly available report of findings which will give the Inspectorate's evaluation of the effectiveness of the school's internal evaluative processes, and the accuracy of its findings; it will also state how confident the parents and the public can be in the school's self-evaluative approaches and its commitment to improvement. As with other forms of inspection, and if appropriate, there will be a follow-up to the inspection some twelve months after the inspection report is published.

Some schools which have had a QAI have developed further their methodology in the light of their inspection, and have embarked on other self-evaluative activities; there is no requirement, or need, to have an external quality assurance inspection of every such activity; it is more important to accept and promote self-evaluation as a valuable and essential way of working and to continue to have the confidence to engage in the process with a clear focus on the interests of benefiting the learners and raising standards of achievement.

Outcomes

The success of the Quality Assurance process will be demonstrated if:

- the school's confidence in its self-initiated improvement is strengthened and the Inspectorate's external evaluation is accepted as a contributor to improvement;
- the teachers accept systematic self-evaluation as a valuable and essential way of working and promote it within and beyond their own schools;
- it results in continuing development and tangible improvement in the pupils' standards of achievement and/or the quality of the school's provision;
- the parents have their confidence confirmed in the school's commitment and ability to improve.