



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Development of Inspection:  
Education and Training Inspectorate

26 June 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

### Development of Inspection: Education and Training Inspectorate

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)  
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Baker  
Mr David Brooks  
Ms Cheryl Brownlee  
Mr Robbie Butler  
Ms Cara Hunter  
Ms Kate Nicholl

**Witnesses:**

Ms Nicola Byrne	Education and Training Inspectorate
Mrs Cathy Galway	Education and Training Inspectorate
Ms Faustina Graham	Education and Training Inspectorate
Ms Elaine McAllister	Education and Training Inspectorate
Ms Sinead McKenna	Education and Training Inspectorate

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** You are all very welcome; it is good to have you here. I will run through the names that I have of those attending, but, if any of you want to make further introductions when it comes to your presentation, please feel free to do so. From the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), we have Faustina Graham, chief inspector; Nicola Byrne, assistant chief inspector; Sinead McKenna, acting assistant chief inspector; Cathy Galway, director of policy, planning, organisational development and youth — that is not a short job title; and Elaine McAllister, managing inspector.

We know that you are at the point of launching a significant change to how inspection will be delivered in Northern Ireland, so the Committee is keen to hear from you. I am sure that there will be a lot of questions across a range of issues. I will hand over for initial remarks or an opening presentation. That can take up to 10 minutes, and then we will move to questions and answers. When we have a large panel, as we had in the previous session, I am always mindful that it can be difficult to get through things in a timely fashion if everybody answers every question, so I ask that one or two panel members focus on the answer to each question. We tend to take five minutes per enquiry from each member. That is to make sure that everybody has the opportunity to engage. I will do my best to stick to that. Over to you.

**Ms Faustina Graham (Education and Training Inspectorate):** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to brief you on the role, function and purpose of inspection in education; provide further detail on the development of our new inspection framework; and cover our thematic reports, as you requested, on physical education in the primary sector, the

preventative curriculum and, more specifically, the relationships and sexuality education (RSE) aspects of that report. I hope that the written briefing was helpful in providing a backdrop to all of that work. I will touch briefly on each of those elements.

The functions of the Education and Training Inspectorate are set out in article 102 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. We operate very much in line with our statutory duties. The briefing paper outlines the wide range of areas that we inspect, which include and go beyond the statutory education sector. We are a unitary inspectorate that provides an independent and evidence-based inspection and policy advice service, particularly to the Department of Education, of which we are a part, and the Department for the Economy. We also accept commissioned work from other Departments, such as DAERA in relation to the inspection of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). We also have agreements in place with Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) on joint working and inspection; cooperation with those inspectorates; and information sharing. We do that through memoranda of understanding and service level agreements with all of those organisations.

Inspection serves three main purposes: ensure public accountability; encourage improvement at organisation and system level by raising standards; and collect first-hand evidence that can be used to inform education policy. In high-autonomy education systems, of which this is recognised to be one, a strong inspectorate is how government get assurance that all is well within the system; know to intervene, if necessary; and know where policy is working effectively, or, in light of experience, where it needs to be modified. When I became chief inspector in September 2020, I did so with a clear remit to review inspection and reset professional working relationships, and to do those things to ensure that optimum benefit would be gained from marrying self-evaluation by organisations with the external evaluation that comes through inspection.

Putting our learners at the centre, as we always do, we developed our vision, which is to be the voice for equity and excellence for all learners. We made public commitments in our 'Stepping Up and Stepping Forward' publication to empower improvement by facilitating professional dialogue across education sectors, and identifying, reporting on and disseminating innovative practice from which others could learn. Those commitments very much remain.

In setting out to transform the inspection process, we initially consulted with all stakeholders on what they saw to be the function and purpose of inspection. Reassuringly, there was agreement that all of us who are responsible for delivering public services and spending public money must be accountable. The issue for organisations in receipt of inspection services was that they wanted assurances from us that the accountability process would be fair, objective and transparent, and rightly so.

Turning to purpose, we set about defining and agreeing a purpose that would lead to organisations feeling confident — in other words, being empowered — in their ability to handle the process of inspection in a robust and professional but, ultimately, beneficial way for them, by seeing it as complementary to the ongoing process of improvement in their own organisation and as a catalyst for further improvement, rather than as an event to be managed, endured or overcome or, indeed, as just another piece of the bureaucratic burden. The consensus that we reached with all of our stakeholders is that the purpose of all inspection activity is, therefore, to contribute to building capacity in the organisations that are being inspected and to enable them to provide high-quality education and outcomes for all of their learners. Having established those parameters, many schools and our Northern Ireland Teachers' Council colleagues, despite the fact that we had action short of strike, have engaged enthusiastically in co-design work around the development of the new inspection models. We could not have done that work without their participation, and we remain very grateful for that cooperation.

The development, trialling and implementation of the new inspection model has, to date, been very well received, and a number of pilot inspection reports have already been published. I also recently published an update on the Education and Training Inspectorate website, which goes into detail on the new approach and provides indicators of effective practice. Inspectors have also been delivering workshops on empowering improvement. In the current term, we have delivered those to around 300 leaders, and we will continue to engage with the education and training sectors on the new model in order to ensure that schools, organisations, settings and, indeed, our youth clubs, understand the new approach and can engage with it positively and constructively.

The key change to inspection is that we are using five questions for consideration as the core of all inspections, whatever the sector. Those questions focus on what the school or organisation wants to

achieve for its learners; in other words, its vision. They also focus on the challenges that it faces in doing that; how it monitors how well it is doing that; how it celebrates and embeds success; and how, ultimately, it creates a community of learning. We have included those questions as well as the nine contributory areas in the written update that we provided.

Despite action short of strike over a sustained period, individual organisation has continued across the phases of early years, work-based learning, further education, youth and education in our prison system. We are the only jurisdiction that has always retained a district inspector network. That network is where individual inspectors are allocated to each of our organisations and retain an ongoing link. That has continued across all phases and is one of the most valued aspects of our work.

We continue to involve practising senior leaders in the inspection process through our associate assessor programme. For example, associate assessors with specialisms in physical education (PE) provided a number of the visits that contributed to the PE thematic survey that you have under consideration. I do not plan to go into any detail on those thematic evaluations in these opening remarks, other than to highlight that in the physical education report, while there is evidence of good practice, there is still more that needs to be done to ensure that children are benefiting from their statutory entitlement to physical education, not just in terms of hours of activity but in the quality of education that is on offer.

Likewise, we have highlighted the actions that are needed to ensure that children receive a high-quality curriculum offer for relationships and sexuality education, particularly one that reflects the contemporary issues that children and young people face and equips them with the knowledge and skills to take informed decisions as they become young adults.

Those thematic evaluations, which are strongly evidence-based, allow us to advocate for the changes that teachers, and pupils and their parents, want to see in those areas. Equally, rather than make a series of recommendations and leave it at that, we have tried to make some practical suggestions for next steps in order to move practice forward in both of those areas.

We all know that these are challenging times in education. We hope that, by working collaboratively with a range of stakeholders and organisations, the service that we provide will support our colleagues who work directly with learners daily to, in turn, enable more and more young people to succeed. As the strapline for our inspection framework says, we want to

*"lower the stakes but raise the impact".*

We are happy to take any questions.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you very much for your written briefing and the presentation. It gave us a bit of a summary. I will start by commenting on my engagement with school leaders about the process, which suggests that it has been really positive. School leaders and educators are very quick to tell you when things are not working in the system, and rightly so. They will raise that flag, and we absolutely expect them to do that. The feedback I have heard is that it has been a positive process and that school leaders have found the engagement to be helpful. There definitely seems to be a willingness to work with the new process. I wanted to put that on the record. We do not often recognise when things go well or when engagement and consultation is effective, so it is important that we record that.

**Ms Graham:** That is lovely to hear. Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Leading on from that, are you able to give us a little bit more of an assessment of the response from the schools that were involved in the pilot? What was their feedback on the process and on how it was for them?

**Ms Graham:** Over the past term, with the cessation of action short of strike, we have been able to conduct a number of pilots. The pilot participants went through a self-nomination process, through which schools volunteered to take part in the pilot. During the previous period, which was, hopefully, when you received some of that feedback, a lot of our schools engaged in elements of what was going to be the new inspection process. We really want to record our appreciation for the schools that volunteered to work with us in the final term of the year, which is the most difficult term for them. We very much appreciated that.

We conducted six pilot inspections in the school sector: two in the post-primary sector and the remainder in the primary sector. We also completed around 25 follow-up inspections in schools, which really came about under the previous inspection process, but we tried to marry some of the old approaches with new approaches in order to, again, allow schools to get a sense of what we were doing and to receive feedback on those.

I will hand over to Elaine for a moment to talk about some specifics of the inspection. She has participated in inspections as our managing inspector for the primary sector and as the person who leads on that work. Elaine, do you want to give a little bit of detail on that?

**Ms Elaine McAllister (Education and Training Inspectorate):** Certainly. We have had an awful lot of very positive feedback. We have heard that people are feeling empowered, that they having professional dialogue — and it really is a dialogue — for the first time in a long time and that they feel that there is respect on both sides. It was very much the case that, when we went out, the teachers were very on edge. They were highly stressed about the idea of someone coming out into the classrooms, because it has been such a prolonged period of time since anyone, even someone from their school, had come in to observe them. They felt that it was quite a high-stakes process.

As part of our inspection process, we now have a joint planning day on which we go into the school before the inspection to work with the principal and look at the evidence that school will present to us. We talk about it and plan out how the inspection will be. We find out from them what their key priorities are and how they will demonstrate the work that is going on in the school and, most importantly, their impact and how it benefits the children. We have had great feedback about how beneficial that day is. A key part of the planning day involves meeting the staff, along with the principal, to talk to them about what the engagement in the classrooms will be like and how we will talk to them afterwards. We encourage them to be reflective practitioners and to tell us where the learning in the lesson went well, where they will take the learning next, what may not have gone well, and which learners did or did not get it. If we can walk out of the room knowing that the teacher knows where to go next with their teaching and what they are doing with their class, we are happy, because we have all been teachers and we know that not every lesson goes perfectly. It is, however, about knowing what did not go well and what your next step is to fix that. The planning day has been warmly received. In every school we have been in, including where we had follow-up inspections, principals have written to us to give us very positive feedback about that.

**Ms Graham:** The inspection process continues to be robust. It was heartening to hear that, even when things did not go as well as people may have hoped, they were very receptive and able to take on board the type of things that the inspectors fed back to them. We want to ensure that there is that balance and that improvements can be effected subsequently. So far, so good, but, clearly, we still have more work to do.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thank you for that. I want to pick up on action short of strike, which has been referenced in a number of your comments, and some of the nervousness that there might be in the system with having someone back in the classroom observing what you are doing or scrutinising things in a bit more detail. Have you got any sense of the key challenges that you see in managing that? We may have quite a lot of teachers in the workforce now who have never been through an inspection process and have never been observed by their principal or anyone from senior leadership in the school. Do you have any thoughts on how that can be best managed to strike that balance between a robust process that the public can have confidence in, with that accountability that you referenced and with the evidence base that is required for taking policy forward, and ensuring that schools do not feel that it is a threatening process but a process in which they can put their best foot forward and showcase what their school can do?

**Ms Graham:** That is why we have invested so much time in engaging with the system. During COVID, we conducted a programme called Empowering Improvement, in which we worked with around 1,200 middle leaders, and we found exactly what you were describing. It was an online course that was run over a substantial period of time, and many of the middle leaders had come into the situation of being middle leaders during COVID and had found that extremely difficult. On the basis of that and on the basis that we continued to work with those people through clustering with our district inspectors subsequently, we then designed what I described in my opening remarks as Empowering Improvement, and we called it Empowering Improvement 2. We have spent around four weeks, which we are going to extend to six weeks in the upcoming period of time, with the 300 leaders who we have worked with over this term alone after school online for an hour and a half, working right through the

process so that leaders will feel that they truly understand the process and that, in talking to their own staff, they can ensure that that is conveyed.

Equally, one of the things that schools will probably still tell you is that we did not go away in any shape or form over that period of time, but I say that in a constructive way around the role of our district inspector, and I would like to think that you have heard positive feedback about that very long tradition of having a district inspector. Our district inspectors have still been in schools, talking to principals and really trying to ascertain where those sensitivities exist.

One of the key things about the current approach is the request from all organisations that we really look closely at the unique context of each organisation. As Elaine said, on the pre-inspection planning day, the inspector who will be leading the inspection will spend the day in the school and will talk to everyone on the staff. There is something about that — when people see your face and see that you are a normal person in that particular situation — where you start to lower the levels of anxiety.

As Elaine said, we have also all been teachers. We know what it feels like to have someone else in your class, and, at the moment, we are trying to shift the observation piece away from a focus on any kind of performance — if you want to call it that — of teaching but really focus, as Elaine said, on what the children have learned and how learning was facilitated. That becomes a dialogue and a professional discussion that we feel will help the school to move forward subsequently. I hope that that answers your question.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is helpful. I have one final question, and it is specifically in relation to the engagement in the inspection process with the children and young people in the classroom. You referenced the fact that we have a system with a high level of autonomy, and this comes up time and time again in the Committee. We might put forward any number of proposals or ideas, but, ultimately, schools have a huge degree of independence as to whether they implement and how they implement departmental policy. Pupils and young people refer back to us that, in the areas that matter to them, including RSE, which you highlighted, the broader learning for life and work, which we have looked at, and careers advice, the sense is that there is very patchy provision. Some schools are delivering it in a way that really meets young people where they are at, and they come away very positively from that, and others say that, throughout their school career, they did not even know that they had had that bit of the curriculum, because it had been dealt with in such a light-touch way. How does the inspection process engage with young people to really try to drill down into those bits of the curriculum? I am not talking here about delivering qualifications and exam results but those bits that prepare young people for life so that they are meeting them where they are at and meeting their needs.

**Ms Graham:** It is fair to say that we have always done that, but I will ask Nicola to come in on some of the specifics around how we are engaging with young people in the revised process. We think that it is really important that we extend that beyond what we have done previously. I hope that you saw from the RSE report that we tried to use innovative ways of engaging with young people. We had 14,500 young people respond to that report, and one of the ways in which we tried to do something different was by putting those user-friendly responses back to them. Nicola was talking about an event that she was at last night, at which schools and young people were using what we said was good practice and seeing that in a very positive way subsequently. Nevertheless, we have still thought about how we engage even more with young people.

At times, it is patchy, sometimes because of the various complex issues that you described. I always find it reassuring that, even among the young people whom you engage with, there is something about our education system that empowers them to feel that they can have their say. They are very articulate when they come to talk to you, and they are not frightened to speak up. That, in itself, is an indication of a successful aspect of our education system when, although young people may be protesting about something, they do so in such an informed and mature way. I will let Nicola fill you in on some of the actual inspection details. I just wanted to put it in that context.

**Ms Nicola Byrne (Education and Training Inspectorate):** We needed to hear their voice and how they could engage with inspection. When we were looking at the new model of inspection, one of the first things that we did was have focus groups with the children and young people to hear how they wanted to engage with us, and we also talked to senior leaders about how they engaged and got the voice of their learners in their organisations. That helped us when it came to developing strategies for us to harness their voice through inspection.

In our inspections in primary and post-primary schools, we have questionnaires that go out prior to inspection, and we get significant numbers of responses to those questionnaires. That gives us a lens to look through before we even go into the school building. It is important for us to look at those views and the views of the parents to get a feel for where things are at in an organisation. However, when we are in schools, a key element — probably the most enjoyable element of our work — is talking with the children and young people and hearing their views on what is helping them to learn and how much they enjoy their school life. An element of the new model is that they bring work with them to talk us through elements of provision that they have thoroughly enjoyed. We utilise that to reach our evaluations, so their voice plays a key role for us in hearing what is going well and what is not.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I will finish with this. You mentioned the work of the inspectorate and following up on how it really informs policy. I know that the preventative curriculum piece that you did was a specifically commissioned piece of work, but if there is a theme developing in your inspections — for example, we have talked a lot about mental health and well-being and how schools implement that emotional health and well-being framework — does that get fed back through the system? I asked the Department for a short answer on that. There may be a sense that the strategy is not quite matching up delivery on the ground.

**Ms Graham:** Yes, there is that commitment from the Department to follow up. If you look at the report on PE, you will see that a commitment was made that we would follow up on the PE survey in a two-year period, but that was with the agreement of the Department, because the Department then set up the task and finish group on PE, and we will look at that work in due course. It is very much that iterative process. As we move back into inspection, at each point in time, we continually feed back to our policy colleagues while always retaining our independence in the evaluations that we make.

**Ms Byrne:** When we see a theme emerging — we have maybe identified effective practice in an area that needs to be disseminated more widely — so we will identify, affirm and then report. It can be in case-study format or anything like that, so that we are ensuring that the iterative pieces of our findings are coming to a product that allows that to be disseminated more widely.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** That is crucial to your new approach.

**Ms McAllister:** Also, in our biannual report, which takes system-wide issues from the chief inspector, as well as our annual reports to the Department, we take issues that we find across inspections, and we highlight them.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** It is important to say positive stuff as well and that good practice gets disseminated. That is really important. Your written briefing was really clear that this is about celebrating the good stuff as much as it is about highlighting any issues. Thank you for your responses on that. I will hand over to the Deputy Chair.

**Mr Sheehan:** In your briefing paper, you mention that you meet the inspectorate in the South to see how you can learn from one another and how working jointly can produce the best results. That joint work was identified as an example of best practice by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). It also flagged up that educational outcomes in the South significantly surpass outcomes in the North. In your work with the inspectorate in the South, have you gained any insight as to why that disparity exists?

**Ms Graham:** That is not a conversation that we have had in relation to that specific report. That is something that we can look at in due course, but we discuss all the educational issues. We would need to look at that in detail with our colleagues as opposed to thinking about it in isolation in any way. With any report, there are complexities around how data is chosen and selected in order to look at something. In respect of different outcomes, we will also look at any of the Shared Island projects probably in conjunction with each other. That allows an easier sharing of practice.

We also do inspector exchanges. Some of our colleagues will go and join inspections in the South, and other colleagues will come up and work with us. That has been more difficult for us because of action short of strike, but, hopefully, we will get back into that whole area of work again. They have complexities in their education system too, and we share a lot of the same issues.

**Mr Sheehan:** Have those who go South from your inspectorate reported back anything of note that you think should be implemented in the education system here?

**Ms Graham:** Obviously, people will have various experiences. I will caveat anything that I am going to say with the fact that I may have a lot of views on experiences that I have had, but the only thing that I can report to you is what we have an evidence base for, and that is my job as chief inspector.

Anecdotally, one thing that they say that they find interesting and different, but not necessarily better, is the year before leaving cert, where there is the option to take an additional year. That is worth exploring, but we do not know enough about that at this time to make direct comparisons between that and what happens here.

All young people, as we know, have different levels of maturity, and, sometimes, the opportunity for some type of gap year may begin to answer some of the issues that the Chair was referring to around the complexities of education. However, that is not something that we will comment on in detail without doing a specific piece of work. I am talking very much about some of the comments that my colleagues make as opposed to anything that I would say very firmly.

**Mr Sheehan:** Fair enough. Moving on, in the 2021 report entitled 'Multidisciplinary Approaches to Meeting the Needs of People in Special Schools', you stated that:

*"Collaborative practice between education staff and multi-disciplinary specialists is a significant and highly positive feature of a number of special schools."*

At the minute, a large number of specialist provisions are being set up in mainstream schools. We are also hearing that there is a shortage of the type of allied health professionals that are needed for that wrap-around support. First, are you concerned that children with special needs, particularly those in specialist provision in mainstream schools (SPiMS), will not get the support that they need? Are you, as an inspectorate, going to put a particular focus on those SPiMS?

**Ms Graham:** Had there not been action short of strike, we would not have found ourselves in exactly the crisis that we find ourselves in now. Had we been in schools, continuing our work, I think that some of the issues would never have reached the point at which everyone, never mind me, is concerned. Our day-to-day work, going into individual organisations, ensures that we are looking very specifically at those things. It is unfortunate that we have found ourselves in a situation in which, as you said, children who, traditionally, would be in special schools may not find themselves there.

I will have over to Nicola, because she has looked at the issue in more detail. The shortage of those links between allied health professionals and professionals is, of course, going to be an area of concern, but we have to find a way to work through that. As soon as we can get back to our normal way of working, we will be able to report reasonably quickly on the efficacy of those approaches. However, we cannot do that if we do not get access to the organisations and individual settings. We would really welcome your support in ensuring that we can do that. It is hugely important that those very vulnerable children are supported in the way in which they should be. Nicola, will you provide some of the detail?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** If you do not mind, Deputy Chair, I will come in there. You talked about our support to get access to those settings. What is blocking the access to those settings at the moment?

**Ms Graham:** Action short of strike. For us, that was the blockage. What I was saying was that, because schools were not cooperating with inspection, an individual inspection would flag up the type of things that Pat is talking about.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** We hope that we are out of that phase.

**Ms Graham:** Yes. Our intention is to start our implementation in September.

We have been in around 500 classrooms from Easter until now. That is the speed at which we can start implementing a piece of work such as this. We have been denied the opportunity to do that. When we are in schools, even in a mainstream classroom, we will always look at children who have statements, or at the whole range of the ability in a classroom. Clearly, however, SPiMS has grown very rapidly over a very short period. We have not had the opportunity to look at SPiMS in the way in which we normally would. I hope that we can do that reasonably quickly. Nicola, you have some background.



**Ms Byrne:** Yes. It is always concerning when children do not get access to either high-quality education or the health service that they require. I think that everybody should be concerned when that is not happening. We have looked at reports, such as the Ipsos independent review of special educational needs (SEN) report, others from the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee report that looked at SEN. We know that there is a piece of work to be done to help children who have special educational needs. When we looked at what we could do in an action-short-of-strike context, we focused on three elements. We looked at teacher professional learning (TPL) to support pupils with special educational needs. We also looked at specialist provisions, or, as they were previously referred to, learning support centres, and the statementing process. Those are the three pieces of work that we have taken forward last year and this year.

We published 'An evaluation of teacher professional learning in meeting the special educational needs of learners' — that is a long title — in December 2023. That showed that our teachers need more support. Back in 2017, we recommended that teachers required career-long access to training to support pupils with special educational needs. The focus cannot be on initial teacher education. Initial teacher education has to deal with the fundamentals of good teaching. Special educational needs training tends to build on that. Our recommendation in 2017 was about looking at what happens in initial teacher education, focusing on our newly qualified teachers, and then continuous professional development (CPD) to support pupils who have special educational needs so that teachers in the classroom can meet the educational needs of the children in front of them.

Our report from December 2023 shows that there are gaps in that access and inequity in access across special schools and our mainstream schools to the types of training that teachers need. Our report puts forward practical suggestions on how that work could be taken forward to help teachers to feel empowered. The change we seek has to come from us. With that, I am thinking —

**Mr Sheehan:** Nicola, has there been any discussion with the Department or the Education Authority (EA) about implementing those recommendations?

**Ms Byrne:** Yes, there are frequent conversations, Pat. It is crucial that that work is taken forward at pace. One of the key issues was that teachers did not know what training was available or how to access that — in fact, they did not have access to it. One of our recommendations — it may seem very basic — was to have a centralised repository of all the training that is available so that people can access it. That work is already in train. A repository is now being launched by the EA so that teachers can access the training. We need to look at what exactly the offer is and the quality of it. We will keep an eye on how that work progresses.

**Mr Sheehan:** Finally, on a scale of one to 10, how satisfied are you with the progress that is being made on that?

**Ms Byrne:** We have to take things in steps. Children need things now.

**Ms Graham:** We have stopped using numbers. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Sheehan:** It sounds as though it is a low number. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Graham:** In fairness, the end-to-end review in the Department encompasses that. The progress is less obvious, in a way, but those changes are happening, as Nicola said. Piece by piece, they are happening in the context of the Department's Learning Leaders strategy, which is the broader professional development strategy. They are not happening by accident.

You have two reports in front of you. Nicola talked about special educational needs. All the reports highlight the lack of professional development and our best resource's lack of access to professional development over a considerable time. Some of that has been down to action short of strike. It is crucial for us all to work collaboratively in looking at professional learning for our colleagues. We can spend millions of pounds on all sorts of initiatives and spend lots of time tracking them and finding out whether they have been successful, but, in fact, our best resource is our human resource: our teachers and the rest of the workforce. Each report highlights the fact that consistency of access to professional learning in our system is not where it needs to be. I really want to emphasise that. Special educational needs is one area. The two other areas that are under consideration today emphasise that clearly. Our teachers tell us that, and they trust us to report that back to you.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I gave a bit of extra time to that, because we will, we hope, hear from the Department in detail on the whole transformation agenda and SEN after recess. We should not lose sight of how critical it is to empower teachers to deliver for children with special educational needs. That is critical, but there are resource challenges. Schools do not have the money to pay for training — they simply do not have it. Given teacher workload and those pressures, they also do not have the time. There are challenges in how you operationally roll that out to ensure that teachers access it.

A clear recommendation in the independent review was about the fact that professional development for teachers is a vital element of our education system. We would not tolerate it if a consultant in the health service just stopped upskilling, but there is a sense that the training for those who educate our children has been on hold for a long time, and that does not seem appropriate.

**Mr Brooks:** I want to make sure that I picked you up right. You understand the need for ongoing professional development, which Nick talked about. In the health service, there is revalidation and so on, and that is very important. Are you saying, however, that we should not look at instituting that and making it mandatory at the initial teacher training stage?

**Ms Byrne:** No. It is currently an optional, useful module for teachers. I know that they want to make it compulsory for all teachers to have experience in special schools. All those moves are the right moves in the right direction. I am not saying that we should not do that.

**Mr Brooks:** It is a belt-and-braces approach rather than saying —.

**Ms Byrne:** Yes. It is difficult to meet the needs of children with special educational needs, given the complexity of those needs. It takes an understanding of pedagogy and that it requires that bit more: a master's or a PhD in elements of special educational needs. There is a lot to it, and you need to have a really clear understanding of what high-quality literacy teaching looks like. I think particularly of children with neurodiversity. We know that you can cover the fundamentals of teaching in a four-year course. If we want it to be an eight-year course, that brings with it all those other issues. Our report in December says: have that initial teacher education to allow teachers to come out with the competencies, but recognise that this is career-long. The needs of children today are not the needs of children tomorrow.

**Mr Brooks:** Yes, I understand. It was more that, having talked to special schools locally, I know that some find that, when they try to access staff, it is very difficult because the teachers who are available either have not had the experience or feel intimidated by the idea of becoming involved in a special school as they do not have that grounding. Therefore, putting it in as a mandatory part of their initial training would give all teachers at least some understanding of teaching in that environment. Yes, of course, if they are going to make a career of that, a further degree of specialism will be needed, but it feels to me, from the discussions that we have had so far — I am no expert clearly — that it would be beneficial for all teachers to have that foundation level grounding.

**Ms Byrne:** Absolutely, yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Thanks for that. I might not have time to bring you back in again, David.

**Mr Brooks:** That is fine.

**Mr Butler:** I have a couple of questions, but, first, I will jump on David's point, if you do not mind. It is really important that we flesh this one out. Previously, we had the discussion around autism and making autism training a mandatory component. I will give my own experience. When I came out of training, either as a prison officer or a firefighter, I did not have the experience that you get on the job. I imagine that teachers are the same. Picking up on your point, Nicola, I am so bold as to say that more important than initial training is experiential learning and ongoing continuous professional development. If that is the case, I am concerned with the direction being taken with regard to these SPiMS. Units are being provided as a bolt-on to mainstream schools. If we just do the mandatory training aspect at the start, we might be leaving some of our teachers vulnerable. They have ticked the box that says that they have been trained, but is that in the best interests of the children? If that is the

case — if I am even half right — has the ETI developed any methodology or roadmap for how CPD could be done for teachers, if that is the direction that the Department and the EA are going to take for these kids?

**Ms Byrne:** A diagnosis of autism does not tell you what strategies you need to deploy to meet the needs of an individual child. You need to know that child. You need to know where their strengths lie to be able to build on them. The engagement of the parents is crucial, so that you can see what works for the child and what does not. The training helps in providing strategies, and Middletown Centre for Autism has a fabulous model for how it rolls out training. That is a very impactful way for teachers to engage and build confidence in their ability, rather than looking for an external source to come in to provide support. It is really important for teachers to be confident and able to say, "I know you as a child. I can work with your parents to put things in place to help you to progress. What is next for you as a child?" rather than, "You are a child with autism and, therefore, I will do this". It is about having those conversations. That is a skill set that requires experiential learning alongside the theoretical side of it all.

**Ms Sinead McKenna (Education and Training Inspectorate):** In the TPL for the SEN report, we said that clusters were being formed naturally in area learning communities, where practitioners were coming together to share their experiences. That is part of the experiential learning. Where practitioners come together, they share the challenges within and without their own school community. That is also where practice builds up and they become reflective practitioners. We see evidence of that on inspection. We see it across the piece when people transition into work-based learning. For instance, there is the Skills for Life and Work programme. From the reports that we recently published on our website, you can see that a lot of learners are presenting with those needs. You can see the challenge for tutors and vocational tutors who have to ask, "How do we address the need?". It is all about having a professional dialogue and conversation to make sure that there is practice in place that we can disseminate and share. We play a really important role in identifying that practice, seeing where it is and affirming what is going well in the system and who is doing well. However, we absolutely acknowledge that there are challenges for teachers and tutors in dealing with that in the here and now.

**Mr Butler:** Thank you. I would like to stretch that out, but I will not, because I want to ask specifically about the ETI, if that is OK. I have a couple of questions. First — I hope that I did not miss this in a reply to the Chair — the review of the thematic report on PE is due: has it started or is it complete and, if so, will you tell us about it? Secondly, is the ETI resourced to qualitatively and quantitatively carry out inspections? At that point, what teeth does the ETI have to hold anyone accountable? What does that look like?

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** We have to ask you to keep the answers fairly brief. Robbie has given you a lot, so that may not be doable. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Graham:** I hope that I can remember them. I may have to ask you to repeat them.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** Robbie has come in right at the end of his time with a whole new set of questions. I have to ask you to give a brief answer.

**Ms Graham:** We intend to start looking at the follow-up to the PE survey in the upcoming academic year. We need to allow our practitioners time to review that process.

On our resourcing, we have a range of specialist inspectors. As we said, we are a unitary inspectorate. We all come from a range of backgrounds and have a range of specialisms. Once we are in the organisation, we work in at least two areas so that we broaden our understanding. We see ourselves as professional evaluators of education as opposed to people who, necessarily, formerly worked in that area. We usually have at least two PE specialists for post-primary, and a number of our primary specialists will have had a PE background. We try to keep a range of expertise across our organisation. Our resource is depleted, so we are struggling in PE. In post-primary PE, we have only one inspector rather than two. She can do the work of two *[Laughter]* because of her expertise, but we will go out to recruitment for another inspector in that area. We are content that we manage to cover all the specialisms that we need to cover, but our resourcing has been depleted, so we will need to build back to full capacity as an organisation. That will take a bit of time.

On having teeth, the important thing is that we have a long tradition of working with all organisations. I feel privileged to do the work that I do, but I think that people respect the evaluations that we make,

particularly, as I said, in RSE: for people to tell us how uncertain they felt about delivering aspects of RSE rather than pretend or put their best foot forward shows the trust and respect that they put in us to carry something forward. Teachers need to feel that they have been treated well and that the evaluation is objective, transparent and fair. There is something vocational as well as professional in every teacher that means that they want to do their best for the children. There is no other reason for them to be there. Therefore, some of that is inbuilt in the teaching profession. Nevertheless, in the previous inspection process, as I said, we had follow-up inspections. Once an inspection has taken place, we continue to monitor to ensure that the improvements that need to be made will be effected in due course. In our revised inspection framework, we have made a decision that every organisation, even wonderful organisations, will have some type of follow-on activity, because that will allow us to disseminate the most effective practice and what we call "next practice", whereby we can take forward really cutting-edge practice in our system.

As I said, our organisations know that we did not go away during the action short of strike. I hope that we have effective professional relationships through which that will happen. As always, however, we will formally report. We will bring the report on PE to the Department, to which we presented the first report. There was a commitment from the permanent secretary at the time, in the absence of the Assembly, that all our reports would be responded to by our policy colleagues, and that we would formally report on those in due course. There is that cyclical process that is focused on quality improvement. As I said, in some of the other jurisdictions, there is an inspection and it finishes, but, for us, there is ongoing work with organisations, and our district inspector will always remain with the organisation. I hope that that indicates how the teeth that we have work constructively and positively with the system and that improvements are effected over time.

**Ms Hunter:** I thank the panel for being here today. I have two questions, which I will ask back to back. The first is about high-quality education and inspection. I am intrigued to hear your perspective on the role of phones in school and whether they distract young people. Secondly, I would love to hear your perspectives on the rules and regulations on bullying and reporting bullying. We have had some back and forth with the Department on that. I imagine that inspection plays a role in it as well. I would love to hear your perspectives on those two issues.

**Ms Graham:** Thank you. Our view of the world of technology in general is that it is a tool that is there to be used by us as human beings. One of the things that we would say about education, and particularly education for the future, is that we have to educate our young people to keep ahead of all the technological changes so that they can be in control of that situation. As you say, the issue of phones is highly sensitive and controversial because there are so many extremes. We will continue to look that at over time. You have, of course, the issue of distraction and issues related to RSE that we have reported on, particularly bullying — including bullying that takes place online and, therefore, outside the control of the school. Equally, however, if we do not educate young people to use the technology and be in control of it, rather than the other way round, and to know how to navigate that technology effectively, we are denying them an opportunity for a fully rounded education. It is an issue around which we have to build some sort of consensus.

I would not give you a hard and fast answer at this point, Cara, because I know that it is a really current issue and we have to look at all its aspects. We produced a digital technology piece earlier this year. Since COVID, the teaching profession, in particular, has really upskilled in that area. The important thing is that we help young people to think about how they scrutinise everything relating to the technology that they use. I think that our schools will find ways around it, if we work collaboratively together. We need to find ways to support schools when it becomes a discipline issue. That is one of the issues that schools are worried about when it comes to the use of mobiles in school. There is also the impact of the technology, where teachers feel that young people are a slave to their phone, as opposed to the idea of exploring how to navigate the whole world of technology successfully. I hope that that is an honest answer as to where I think we are at this point.

What was your question on bullying?

**Ms Hunter:** You touched on an aspect of it there. We have heard from the Department about the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act and how there is no onus on a board of governors to report back [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] Is it possible for us to have a more robust take on bullying in Northern Ireland? The Committee noted that the lack of monitoring and data means that we do not know whether it is homophobic or misogynistic, for example; we do not know the nature of the bullying.

Thank you very much for your points on mobile phones. It is interesting that, in County Wicklow, schools made a shared agreement to get phones out of the way. However, I think that you are right: there are opportunities there. We heard from the independent review panel about the potential of AI and for job creation. Yes: a wee point on bullying would be great; thank you.

**Ms Graham:** We go into an organisation and look at everything, including its culture and ethos. We do not necessarily separate out the whole concept of bullying and say, "We will look at this", because we want to see what culture is being created in the school. We ask about the vision of the school. When you are in an organisation for three to four days, you begin to absorb a sense of how behaviour is managed in that setting. What you have described about the data is important, but data is only a starting point, Cara. Data informs our inspection process, but, ultimately, it is about looking beyond the data to see what the actual issues are in an individual organisation pertaining to the experiences of young people in that context at that time. We have talked about special educational needs. Every single organisation that we go into is unique, so we try to tailor what we do to support those schools to look at what we would describe as positive behaviour management in those kinds of situations.

There are all the various forms of bullying that you have referred to. Telling people not to do it will not work. It is about trying to ensure that there is a culture where young people actually know how to engage with each other and — going back to the relationships part of RSE — how they build positive and supportive relationships with their peers and everyone else whom they encounter in life.

**Ms Byrne:** When we are on inspection, we look at addressing bullying or anti-bullying policies, the promoting positive behaviour policy, behaviour for learning policies — all types of policies. I am just thinking about the past two months that we have been on inspection and the 500-odd lessons that we have been in. You get a feeling of where things are at with regard to a culture of disclosure, people saying how they are feeling and the emotional literacy in the organisation. That is crucial. Sometimes, the numbers can tell you, "There is a culture of disclosure. That is seen as important", rather than, "This is a school with issues around bullying". It is about culture. We see the outworking of those policies. We talk to governors about the information that they get. We look at the data on attendance, suspension and expulsion. We look at the practice that is there, such as restorative practice, and all the different strategies that schools can use to try to ensure that children know that they are valued, that they are welcome and that the staff there want to be able to help them. That is the culture that we want to see in our schools. It is about getting underneath the data, seeing the outworking of the policies that are in place and ensuring that schools are reviewing the issue so that they are very child-centred, because we know that children are going through difficult times, whether due to an increase in social, behavioural or emotional well-being needs or whatever. We know that children need teachers to be advocates for them.

**Ms Hunter:** That is helpful. Thank you.

**Ms Nicholl:** Thank you. That was so interesting. Nicola, it is lovely to see you again.

I have a couple of questions. Nicola and I were at an event last night where Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock launched a 'Female Voices' document on the curriculum to tackle sexism and misogyny. I am interested in your thoughts on that and your take on it as an inspector.

I was going to ask about a preventative curriculum, but, actually, while we have been having this conversation, I have been thinking a lot about newcomer children. What are your views on how schools are dealing with newcomer children? Our demographics are changing. We talk a lot about SEN, but I am very worried about newcomer children, especially asylum seeker children who move around different schools. How do schools deal with that? How do you assess that?

I have forgotten my third question, so I will leave you with those for now.

**Ms Byrne:** First, last night was fabulous. It was great to see Our Lady and St Patrick's College empowering children to move the issue forward. The young people who we saw last night are an absolute credit to the school. I told the principal that I was not there in an evaluative role last night — I would not be invited to anything if I kept going and evaluating the work. However, what I will say, more generally, is that that is the type of work we need, where a teacher facilitates young people to take control of their learning, because they are well placed to say what the younger cohort of pupils wants, what is relevant to those pupils and what they need for life. It was an excellent example of that work. When I look at our preventative curriculum report and what needs to happen next, I see that one of the first things is about empowering young people, and that was so evident last night. It is a fabulous

initiative. It was fabulous to see the head of PE empower those children. We want to disseminate that kind of work. We see such fabulous practice in our schools, and it is important to disseminate it more widely.

**Ms Nicholl:** I think that there is a role for the Committee there as well. I suggest that we get the young people to come in and present their work, because that would encourage other schools to do more.

**Ms Byrne:** On your second question, I am conscious that we have just published a report for a pilot inspection of a school that has 75% newcomer children. Our plan is to disseminate highly effective practice to support children who are newcomers. There is some excellent work going on, and there are some schools that are struggling. It will be important for us to affirm the good practice that is there and provide support, through our district inspector roles, to disseminate the better practice. We need to affirm what is effective practice and how it can be shared.

**Ms Nicholl:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I will finish with a quick question on what is a big topic. The question of why the inspection of religious education (RE) does not sit with the ETI comes up a lot. Do you have a view on whether RE should be brought under the auspices of the ETI? You may not be able to express a view on that. I put my cards on the table: I am concerned that one part of our curriculum is not scrutinised on accountability, policy development, the sharing of good practice and everything that you outlined at the start. Do you have a view on taking that forward?

**Ms Graham:** My understanding is that it is in legislation that we do not have any control over RE, and, as I said, we do what it is our statutory duty to do. Schools can request to have RE inspected by us. That tends to happen in the post-primary sector, where there are examinations. Schools will sometimes request us to inspect their RE provision because there is a community of learning in a school, and there are times when teachers feel that they have been left out of the process, particularly if things have turned out well for the school. The option for an inspection is there, and we are content with that because it allows moral and family values to be considered separately. It is down to the chair of the board of governors to make a request, and, by and large, we will say yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr Mathison):** I am conscious that it is an area of the curriculum where there is a lot of reliance on third-party provision. For accountability, we need to understand who is coming into schools, how decisions are taken and who scrutinises them. However, I understand that your role is set out in legislation.

I really appreciate your time. We are, hopefully, at a really good juncture in our education system, where your functions can continue, as they should have done. We hope that, with the new framework in place, the positive reception from schools will continue. Thank you for your time.