



Review of Estyn and Care Inspectorate Wales' Joint Inspection Arrangements

Executive Summary

**Inspecting care and education in regulated non-school settings eligible
for funding for part-time education**

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Review of Estyn and CIW's joint inspection arrangements for inspecting care and education in regulated non-school settings eligible for funding for part-time education

Estyn and CIW conduct joint inspections of regulated non-school settings that provide care and education for children focussing on three and four-year-olds taking up their education places in non-maintained settings. The review gathered information from various stakeholders to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the joint inspections. Currently, there is a slight increase in the number of non-maintained settings providing early education.

The process of information gathering for the Review was undertaken from January 2024 - March 2024 and evidence obtained from the actions in the Review was used for comparison and evaluation, and to form subsequent recommendations (summarised on pages 5 and 6). General information was gathered as part of the Review through questionnaires and focus groups for Parents/Carers, Local Authorities and Umbrella Organisations, Registered Person and Practitioners and from inspectors from Estyn and CIW. Responses were received in English and Welsh.

Effectiveness of the Framework

Responses from the inspectors indicate a range of views on the effectiveness of the current joint inspection framework. Considering the curriculum changes that have occurred since the joint inspection framework was introduced in 2019, the responses indicate it would be helpful to explore how the framework could be further developed or renewed to better reflect CfW in the future.

There continues to be distinct elements and specific criteria within the framework which each organisation (Estyn and CIW) is responsible for, so inspections are undertaken by inspectors from each organisation as there are significant regulatory and legislative implications on each inspectorate. The perception of setting leaders, Umborgs and LAs is that the current framework should fully merge the responsibilities of the two organisations and as such each inspector should be able to comment upon all aspects of the framework. In practice, innovating towards a seamless approach such as this, where common themes are jointly evaluated regardless of which organisation the inspectors are from, is yet to be planned for or fully achieved, but is a key recommendation of the Review.

Notice Period of a Joint Inspection

Ten days' notice is currently given to settings prior to the joint inspection, most professional stakeholders (70%+) felt this was an appropriate timescale with only a few indications in comments that 'no notice inspections' were preferable. Taking all comments and responses into account, on balance, 10 days' notice of inspection is deemed to be a fair amount of time.

Documentation that forms part of the Preparation for the Joint Inspection Process (including using the VIR)

Prior to the joint inspection, the setting leader uploads documentation to the Virtual Inspection Room (VIR). This is deemed to be the right type and quantity of documentation from the perspective of the Local Authority and Umborgs (>80%), and from the Registered Person and setting leaders (>90%).

There was a more mixed view regarding the length of time needed to collect and review the evidence prior to a joint inspection from the perspective of Estyn and CIW. Inspectors would welcome more

time to ensure sufficient evidence was gathered when in the setting. An additional half day could be added in order that inspectors could gather all evidence that was needed, particularly in larger settings where full day care was offered.

From discussions within the focus groups, setting leaders would welcome an opportunity to upload more information to the VIR in advance of the inspection or have a dedicated time to sharing documentation during the inspection. This would ensure no evidence is missed and allow for a setting to signpost inspectors to good practice.

Collaboration and Documentation

The **role of the inspection coordinators** is valued by members of both Estyn and CIW. Comments indicated that they are pivotal in ensuring that the process before and after the time in settings stays on track.

The **pre-inspection collaboration** between inspectors is valued by members of Estyn and CIW to varying degrees. An internal evaluation and review of this process may be helpful to unpick the nuances so that improvements can be made.

The **pre-inspection plan** used by the inspectors for joint inspections may benefit from a review and an update, as 40% of respondees found it to be very useful or completely useful, and 60% indicated that they did not find it particularly useful (moderately useful, slightly useful, not useful at all).

By contrast the **joint inspection toolkit** was deemed to be very useful or completely useful by most members who responded from both Estyn and CIW. This document could be used as a basis/template for the further development of other guidance available.

The **documentation which outlines the level of follow up guidance** used by the inspectors when deciding on the required next steps for settings following a joint inspection is regarded positively by approximately 60% of respondees, and a third indicated they found it to be moderately useful.

The **quality assurance checklist**, used when compiling an inspection report, is deemed to be more valuable by inspectors from Estyn than those from CIW. A review of this document to represent the needs of both organisations would be beneficial along with clear communication as to its purpose and effectiveness as a part of the quality assurance process.

The benefit and value placed on **the quality assurance processes** presents a mixed picture across the responses from the two inspection bodies, with inspectors from Estyn expressing more positive views than those from CIW.

The **factual accuracy guidance** that is used by inspectors when responding to queries from settings again presents a mixed picture; during the focus groups discussions there were deliberations as to whether more queries from settings are directed to Estyn than they are to CIW. One explanation is that the inspection co-ordinators are employed by Estyn who are often the point of contact for queries that arise post inspection. This may be an area for further exploration by the inspection bodies.

It is recommended that in line with Curriculum for Wales (CfW), Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) and new assessment arrangements, all guidance documentation should be reviewed to ensure consistency within the inspection process and that the language within them aligns with policy documents.

Length of Joint Inspections

The current joint inspection arrangements involve inspectors visiting settings for two consecutive mornings, which has generally been seen as sufficient time to gather evidence and make fair judgements. However, there are concerns that this timeframe may not be adequate for some settings with multiple aspects to cover. Suggestions have been made to adjust the duration of inspections based on the size or type of the setting, or to add additional inspectors for larger settings. There is also a need to consider flexibility in the timing of an inspection to capture all aspects of provision, such as afternoon activities or wraparound care. Additionally, it may be beneficial to consider a different structure for the inspection days, such as visiting in the morning on one day and in the afternoon on the next. Overall, there is a recognition that more time may be needed for inspectors to thoroughly cover all aspects of regulation and ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the setting.

Balance of Evidence and Composition of Inspection Teams

The balance of evidence collected, observations made during inspections, and the composition of inspection teams are important factors in reaching conclusions for inspectors. While the current inspection team structure is generally well-received, practitioners have reported inconsistencies in some inspection teams' understanding of the new curriculum. Ensuring that inspectors are experienced and fully attuned to CfW and the Additional Learning Needs Act is crucial, and further/on-going training will continue to be needed in this area.

The burden of multiple policy initiatives introduced by the Welsh Government can be overwhelming for settings, and there is a need for greater alignment and clarity in requirements as there is duplication of evidence within settings to meet the expectations of the various initiatives.

Inspectors emphasise the importance of focussing on specific elements during inspections, making it bespoke to the setting's current development, which may lead to different evidence being requested in the settings. Improved communication and case studies may help address perceived inconsistencies and improve understanding between inspectors and settings as to why this occurs.

Communication During an Inspection

Effective communication during an inspection is crucial to ensuring a fair process that considers the needs and wellbeing of all parties involved. The majority of professional participants feel that there are appropriate opportunities for communication with inspectors, but some practitioners have noted disparities in their experiences. Clear communication and open dialogue between inspectors and settings are essential, with strong leadership playing a key role in facilitating this. It is important for inspectors and setting leaders to receive ongoing support and training to ensure wellbeing is always prioritised in the inspection process.

Feedback Meeting

Consistent views amongst stakeholders were reported regarding feedback meetings. These take place at the end of inspections and are seen as valuable by settings, but there are considerations to keep in mind. The location should be suitable and comfortable for the setting and having two practitioners present can help with remembering details being reported. Confidentiality must be respected, and no setting leader should be solely responsible for delivering less favourable news from the report. The feedback meeting should only involve professionals connected to the setting, with a specified number of attendees to ensure consistency. Inspectors from Estyn and CIW should both be present. Parents

should only be informed of the inspection outcome once the report is published, and they should not participate in the feedback meeting.

Reporting Timescales

A report is produced within 45 working days following a joint inspection, with differing perspectives on the ideal reporting period. Non-compliance issues are addressed more quickly, with Priority Action Notices that outline required changes/developments being issued in the immediate term. While some may find the 45-day period too long it is generally considered fair, and it is accepted that in cases of non-compliance where specific issues from inspections need addressing, these are always expedited.

Inspection Themes

The current joint inspection framework for non-maintained settings incorporates six themes related to children's outcomes, practitioner effectiveness, and leadership quality. There is a difference in opinion between setting leaders/practitioners and Umborgs/LAs regarding the effectiveness of these themes, with the latter group identifying overlap and duplication. Suggestions for alternative approaches include aligning themes with the ECPLC document and using the five Developmental Pathways and/or Three Enablers for inspection. Better alignment with ECPLC is seen as essential for improving links between curriculum, practice, provision, leadership, and inspection. Inspectors also prioritise themes differently, but there is generally alignment with other stakeholder suggestions. Parents prioritise the safety of children and the quality of play and learning in inspections, which are key aspects of CfW and the ECPLC and would be incorporated into future approaches.

Summative Judgements

The use of summative judgements in inspection reports is a divisive issue, with inspectors and professional stakeholders largely in favour of removing them and parents and settings being in favour of retaining them. Concerns were raised about the misrepresentation of issues, the impact on competitiveness among settings, and the potential negative effects on morale. Language used in judgements was also questioned, with many feeling that removing them would lead to more honest and productive discussions. Comparisons to inspection practices in schools indicated that removing summative judgements resulted in a more open, honest and thorough inspection process. Removing summative judgements would also ensure the non-maintained sector broadly aligns with schools. It was also noted that summative judgements may not accurately reflect current practice in a setting, leading to potential advantages or disadvantages. Ultimately, the recommendation is to fully remove summative judgements from inspection reports and the rationale for this conclusion is found in the full version of the Review.

The Report

Stakeholders agree on the importance of capturing key findings in final inspection reports but have differing opinions on what the report should include. There is a collective respect for the thought and analysis that goes into creating the narrative of the report, which is often used by professionals for subsequent action planning within settings. There is significant interest in developing a one-page summary to complement the full narrative report and replace the reporting of summative judgments; this approach would provide a quick-glance document for business purposes for settings, and for sharing key information with parents and carers in an easy-read and accessible format.

Conclusion

The hard work and commitment of the broader early childhood education and care sector in Wales is valued and appreciated by inspection bodies. Likewise, the positive contribution of the non-maintained sector is acknowledged by CIW and Estyn. Settings appreciate the importance of inspections and the professionalism of inspectors. Joint inspections have provided valuable insights into the sector and have led to increased understanding and respect between inspectors and settings. Despite challenges such as retention and rising costs, many settings offer high-quality opportunities for young children.

A key recommendation for the future is a proposed blended model of inspection, with early years specialists undertaking inspections based on a core set of shared criteria. The future direction of inspections should be aligned with the aspirations of the ECPLC and CfW, focussing on evidence-based practice and meeting the needs of young children. Strategic planning at policy level in Wales will be necessary to ensure inspections reflect Wales' long-term aims for early childhood, care and education.

Overview of Recommendations

Timescales

Review timescales before, during and after inspections.

Virtual Inspection Room

Consider how improvements might be made to the VIR for ease of access and usability.

Collaboration and Documentation

Review documentation that forms part of the joint inspection process for its usefulness and purpose to the two inspection bodies to ensure that it meets the needs of the inspection teams. (Pre-inspection Plan, Joint Inspection Toolkit, Follow-up Guidance, Quality Assurance Checklist, Quality Assurance Process, and Factual Accuracy Guidance).

Revise the language of all guidance documentation to reflect the terminology of CfW and ECPLC.

Length of Joint Inspections

Consider adjusting the length of the joint inspection based on the size of the setting; larger settings may need more time.

Consider the time needed to observe all practices throughout the day.

Balance of Evidence

Maintain the balance of evidence gathered through the inspection process and provide opportunities for further discussions about it between the setting leader and the inspection team.

Composition and Consistency of Inspection Teams

A significant and key recommendation from the review for the longer term is to develop an early years inspection framework aligned with the aspirations of ECPLC so that the team is working from a unified, common framework, instead of the current blended one.

With the cooperation of Welsh Government policy officials, streamline the demands on the early years' workforce with regards to inspection evidence, as reporting requirements from different parts of early years' policy create unnecessary replication for the setting leaders and practitioners.

Provide regular mandatory training for inspectors on the ALN Act, CfW and ECPLC to ensure that the pedagogy, process and language used in documentation and observations is fully understood, recognised, and reported upon when inspections are undertaken.

Communication During an Inspection

Secure a better flow of information during an inspection by establishing "information touchpoints" as part of the process between the inspectors and the settings.

Feedback Meeting

Review and reflect on arrangements for the feedback meeting to ensure that all parties are well informed; provide training and support as needed.

Section 5 - Recommendations; Inspection Themes

Review the themes for joint inspections to align with Welsh policy direction using Early Childhood Play Learning and Care (2023) (ECPLC) as the foundation for inspection.

Section 6 - Recommendations; Summative Judgements

Remove summative judgements in full and replace with a one page summary to accompany the full report.

Section 7 - Recommendations; The Report

Review the format of the report in line with specific recommendations in the body of the Review.