Estyn's guidance toolkit for assuring the quality of inspections through QAR and QAI

updated September 2024

This document is also available in Welsh.

Information sheet

Version control

Document version	Author	Date of issue	Changes made
1.0	Barry Norris	January 2013	
1.1	Barry Norris	April 2013	Minor drafting
2.0	Barry Norris	September 2017	Revisions for new inspection arrangements from September 2017
3.0	Fiona Arnison	September 2018	Minor amendments to IEF grid titles; removing protocol QAR guidance for RIs and QAR inspectors into separate document
3.1	Fiona Arnison	March 2019	IEF guidance moved into separate document, to allow easier access for PIs, AIs and RIs
3.2	Fiona Arnison	September 2021	Updated to reflect the removal of summative judgements and subgrades from inspection, and the inclusion of inspection mindset
4.0	Fiona Arnison Liz Barry	September 2024	Revisions for new inspection arrangements from September 2024

Equality Impact Assessment

A business rationale assessment has been carried out and this policy contributes to Estyn's strategic objectives and delivery principles.

In accordance with Estyn's Equality Impact Assessment, an initial screening impact assessment has been carried out and this policy is not deemed to adversely impact on the grounds of the nine protected characteristics as laid out by the Equality Act 2010.

Quality Assurance forms and guidance

The QAI and QAR forms are submitted electronically through a web-based system using Estyn's Virtual Inspection Room extranet.

The overall A-D grades relate to Contractor-led inspections. (The Yes/No (Y/N) indicator relates to HMI-led inspections.)

The grade definitions are as follows:

A – meets requirements in all or nearly all respects;
B – meets requirements, but a few minor shortcomings;
C – meets requirements, but with a few significant shortcomings;
D – does not meet requirements as a result of major shortcomings or very serious failings.

Quality assurance of inspections form (QAI)

Aspect	Criteria	Comment (where appropriate)
Preparation and management	The RI prepares, briefs and manages the team effectively	
	The RI organises a suitable range of inspection activitythat takes into account the specific context of the provider The RI's demeanour clearly conveys the inspection mind-set The RI ensures inspectors engage in professional dialogue with practitioners throughout the inspection	
Securing robust inspection findings	The RI facilitates team discussion well	
	The RI challenges the team's findings appropriately	
	The RI weighs evidence and applies follow-up protocols appropriately	
Team input forms (TIFs) and QA	The RI uses the VIR and TIF systems appropriately The RI undertakes suitable quality assurance of the team's work	
	The RI engages fully in the QAI process	
Nominee and team involvement	The RI involves and supports team members well	
	The RI engages well with the nominee and senior leaders The RI ensures the nominee is involved in team meetings	
Overall QAI grade	**Meets requirements A/B/C/D Y/N**	
	Areas to consider for future inspections	

Guidance on awarding QAI grades

Estyn requires all Reporting Inspectors, whether CAI or HMI, to undertake inspections of good quality.

For HMI-led inspections, assistant directors carry out a sample of quality assurance visits to inspections. For CAI-led inspections, HMI undertake a sample of quality assurance visits to inspections. The quality assurance process ensures public confidence in the inspection, including confidence in the conduct and mind-set of the inspection team, the accuracy and validity of any top-level Inspection Area evaluations and the overall quality of Estyn inspections and reports. They are also a valuable source of feedback to help us continually improve our inspection approaches and to tailor our guidance and training.

As a result of the visit, HMI will allocate an overall quality assurance grade to CAI-led inspections (QAI). The grade reflects the overall balance of strengths and shortcomings in the inspection. In addition, HMI may want to identify and comment on particular strengths and any shortcomings in aspects of the reporting inspector's practice.

The following table sets out further general guidance that HMI and CAI may find helpful.

Preparation and management

Meets requirements	Minor shortcoming	Significant shortcoming	Major shortcoming
Preparation undertaken according to timescales	A small amount of slippage in time management of preparation but no impact on delivery	Preparation is a little tardy, e.g. not all documents and communications are within the timeframes identified in the toolkits. This creates some awkwardness for team, provider and Estyn and might lead to undue anxiety.	RI's time management means that preparation communications are not within the timeframes expected. This creates significant awkwardness for team, provider and Estyn, and means that the RI has not ensured that all reasonable steps have been taken to prevent undue anxiety.
Allocation of responsibilities makes best use of team	Responsibilities are fine, but loadings are a little uneven	Responsibilities are too uneven or do not take team members' experience into account well enough	Responsibilities are too uneven (or not matched well enough to a team member's experience) and create coverage and workload issues
Timetable for learning walks/observations by team members is in place and RI adapts it flexibly in relation to the context of the provider and emerging findings	Timetable is appropriate, but it is a little rigid and lacks a degree of flexibility	Timetable for first full day is too sketchy and team members are a little confused about what to do	No timetable of learning walks/observations/visits in place for first full day of inspection and team members are unsure of what to do
All relevant meetings identified	Nearly all relevant meetings identified	A few relevant meetings identified	No relevant meetings identified
Everyone on the team follows the expectations of inspectors and acts in a suitably professional way. The RI's demeanour conveys the inspection mind-set well. The RI supports team members to convey a similar mind-set. The RI ensures there is purposeful, professional dialogue with practitioners throughout the inspection.	One or two minor actions/comments by the team/RI might lead to criticism, but not to the extent of undermining confidence in the team or their findings. Generally the team conveys the inspection mind-set appropriately and engages suitably in professional dialogue with practitioners.	Actions/comments by member(s) of the team begin to undermine confidence in the team's professionalism (i.e. not fulfilling 'expectations of inspectors')	Actions/comments by the team are very likely to lead to criticism and to undermine confidence in the team's professionalism and/or the inspection findings. Demeanour is not in keeping with the mind-set.

Generally, a well-run, well-organised inspection where everything happens as it should.	Generally, the inspection runs well, but there are a few tweaks that could tighten up its organisation and management.	Generally, an inspection where there are organisational weaknesses or behaviours, that begin to affect the conduct of the inspection.	Generally, an inspection where there are significant organisational weaknesses and/or behaviours that undermine the conduct of the inspection.

Securing robust inspection findings

Meets requirements	Minor shortcoming	Significant shortcoming	Major shortcoming
Inspection findings are secure due to appropriate challenge by RI and team	Inspection findings are generally secure but do not always receive appropriate challenge from RI and/or team	Inspection findings are taken too much on trust and the lack of challenge begins to undermine confidence in the inspection findings	One or more of the main evaluations are clearly too generous or too harsh and do not receive sufficient challenge from RI and/or team
Inspection findings match the balance of strengths and areas for improvement	The balance of strengths and areas for improvement is not quite right in a few cases	The balance of strengths and areas for improvement is skewed inappropriately in too many cases	The balance of strengths and areas for improvement is clearly incorrect and undermines the inspection outcome and the validity of the summary
Team clearly identifies practice worth sharing, where appropriate	The reasons for identifying practice worth sharing are not always completely clear	The reasons for practice worth sharing are not clear enough in all cases	The decision to ask the provider to prepare a case study (spotlight) of interesting or innovative practice appears erratic and unsubstantiated by evidence
All evaluative statements match inspection framework criteria and go into the appropriate report sections	There is minor misplacement of evaluative content in the verbal feedback to the provider and/the final report	There is more significant misplacement of evaluative content in the verbal feedback to the provider and/the final report	There are significant omissions and/or deviations from framework guidance
RI considers appropriate level of follow-up using guidance suitably	RI considers appropriate level of follow-up, but the process and discussion is not fully developed according to the guidance	RI considers the guidance fully, but misapplies it and arrives at an inappropriate outcome or the RI does not follow the agreed protocol for discussing follow-up	RI considers inappropriate level of follow-up and does not follow guidance correctly. The discussion is either too brief, or too inaccessible, for the nominee to understand the inspection outcome
Generally, an inspection where you feel the RI's work makes sure that inspection findings are 'spot on'	**Generally, an inspection where you feel the findings are appropriate, but the RI does not always secure or test the evidence base robustly enough**	**Generally, an inspection where the RI does not challenge enough and the credibility of the evaluations is somewhat undermined**	**Generally, an inspection where the credibility of the evaluations and the RI's work are questionable and where the findings are unlikely to stand up to rigorous public scrutiny**

Team Input Forms (TIFs)

Meets requirements	Minor shortcoming	Significant shortcoming	Major shortcoming
TIFs are present in the VIR in the correct format and collated regularly.	TIFs are in the correct format but with a minor shortcoming, e.g. one has a file name where the name has changed from the original.	TIs are in the correct format, but with a few minor shortcomings. Collated TIFs are not shared during the course of the inspection, so team members are not aware of other inspectors' work.	TIFs are not in the VIR or they are in the wrong format. More than one file name has been changed or tags have been lost. The RI does not collate the TIFs during the inspection to have an overview of the emerging findings.
RI ensures that TIFs have appropriate supporting evidence to support all main evaluations.	One or two supporting evidence sections are just a little thin, but they still support the main evaluation.	Supporting evidence content relies too heavily on cutting and pasting from the school/provider'sdocuments. The evidence is not set out clearly enough to enable a database search.	Too much supporting evidence is missing or is so thin as to undermine confidence in the main evaluation.
RI ensures that TIFs contain appropriate content.	TIFs contain appropriate information, but have minor shortcomings, e.g. they contain the names of individuals.	TIFs contain mostly appropriate content, but there are comments which are too informal or display some degree of bias.	TIFs contain too much inappropriate content or no content, or they rely far too heavily on cutting and pasting from provider documents with little/no verification.
Generally, the RI makes sure the team meets all the TIF requirements; no further work required.	**Generally, the TIF processes are suitable, but the TIF content has one or two shortcomings; a little tidying required.**	**Generally, the TIF processes are mostly okay, but the content shows a pattern of shortcomings which reflects a certain lack of care and attention to detail but without undermining the validity or reliability of the TIFs overall.**	**Generally, the TIF processes are weak or of poor quality and these have the potential to create issues for Estyn in relation to further remedial work or gaps in the inspection database.**

Nominee and team involvement			
Meets requirements	*Minor shortcoming*	*Significant shortcoming*	*Major shortcoming*
The RI ensures that the nominee is involved well in the inspection and attend all team meetings. They ensure that the nominee understands the messages and clarify these where necessary, but manage any defensiveness on the part of the nominee well.	The nominee is suitably involved but misses an important discussion at one point (e.g. teaching is discussed outside the team meeting). The RI allows the nominee to interject defensively or inappropriately.	The nominee is fully aware of the inspection process but does not hear all important discussions on the findings or main evaluations, for example relating to the quality of teaching. The RI does not provide opportunities to check the nominee's understanding of the discussion.	The nominee is not involved enough and the inspection findings come as too much of a surprise.
The RI ensures that the nominee has read the nominee handbook checked the appropriate box in the initial contact form.	The RI has asked the nominee if they have completed the online training, but the record in the VIR is not complete	The RI misses opportunities to clarify the role of the nominee and does not support them to fulfil their role actively enough.	The RI does not ask whether the nominee has read the nominee handbook checked the appropriate box. The nominee does not receive good enough support and clarification from the RI.
The RI ensures that the PI is involved very well in the inspection and receives very good support.	The management of the PI is generally good but there are a few occasions when the PI could have been included more fully.	In general, the RI supports the PI well but the PI arrives at their findings too much in isolation from the rest of the team.	The management of the PI's involvement is generally poor and the PI works in isolation too much.
The RI ensures that all team members have suitable opportunities to contribute to the team discussions about key areas such as teaching and learning. They manage the discussion effectively and efficiently and ensure that the nominee understands the team's emerging thinking.	Generally, the RI manages the team discussions well, although they may miss occasional opportunities to encourage contributions from quieter inspectors through supplementary questioning, or to prevent one team member from dominating the discussion unnecessarily.	The RI does not manage the team discussion efficiently enough, particularly concerning teaching and learning in the round. They miss too many opportunities to ensure that all team members contribute their findings meaningfully.	The team discussion is not of a good enough quality, e.g. the team meeting may be either overly long or too superficial, or the RI may dominate the meeting too much. As a result, the nominee is unclear about the team's findings and the reasons behind the main evaluation or the inspection outcome.

Overall QAI grade			
Consider an A grade	**Consider a B grade**	**Consider a C grade**	**Consider a D grade**
Generally, an inspection that runs very well, with secure evaluations, appropriate use of the TIF system and good involvement by everyone concerned.	Generally, an inspection where there are some minor lapses here and there, but nothing that undermines the overall running of the inspection or the security of the evaluations.	Generally, an inspection where there are rather too many minor shortcomings and these begin to raise questions about the quality of the inspection overall.	Generally, a weak inspection that is likely to attract criticism or complaint and undermine confidence in the inspection outcomes.

Quality assurance of reports (QAR)

Aspect	Criteria	Comment where appropriate
Reporting Input Form (RIF) and VIR	The RI uses the VIR/RIF systems well and collates findings regularly	
	The RI ensures completion of all sections of the RIF	
The written report	The summary is cohesive and reflects the main findings well. It makes clear links between leadership, the provision and outcomes for pupils, and identifies 'cause and effect' appropriately	
	The recommendations are appropriate and emanate from the evaluations and summary	
	The level of follow-up is appropriate and follows agreed protocols	
	Evidence, including the use of questionnaires, supports evaluations across the three Inspection Areas	
	Findings across the report are internally consistent	
Presentation	Writing conforms to Estyn's requirements	
	The RI engages purposefully in the QAR process	
Overall QAR	**Grade A/B/C/D or Y/N**	
	Areas to consider for future inspections	

Guidance on whether a reporting input form meets requirements (QAR judgement)

For CAI-led and HMI-led inspections, HMI allocate an overall quality assurance grade to reports (QAR). The grade (A-D or Y/N) reflects the balance of strengths and areas for improvement in the inspection report and the evidence submitted to support the report's findings, i.e. in the Reporting Input Form (RIF). HMI should highlight strengths and areas for improvement in the RIF (using Track Changes) during the edit, moderation and validation phase, for further consideration by the Reporting Inspector.

Estyn requires Reporting Inspectors to produce RIFs and reports of good quality. Any shortcomings in quality for a HMI-led inspection will be discussed with the HMI and where appropriate picked up through our performance management arrangements. Where the reporting input form for a CAI-led inspection contains serious shortcomings, it will fail to meet Estyn's requirements and is likely to be awarded a D or N grade overall. A serious shortcoming is a significant weakness in the evidence within the RIF or the inspection report that affects the accuracy of the overall evaluation, and/or the level of follow-up, or detracts significantly from the overall quality of the report.

A serious shortcoming undermines confidence in:

- the accuracy and validity of any top-level Inspection Area evaluations or level of follow-up, and/or
- the overall quality of Estyn inspections and reports.

HMI will complete the relevant QAR form before the draft report is sent to the school/provider for a factual check. The edit, moderation and validation phase and completion of the QAR form occurs prior to publication on Estyn's website.

The following table sets out further general guidance to support the allocation of an overall QAR grade for CAI-led inspections. HMI and CAI RIs may find it helpful.

Reporting Input Forms (RIFs) / The written report

Meets requirements	Minor shortcoming	Significant shortcoming	Major shortcoming
Evaluations are very secure and are very well supported by appropriate evidence	Evaluations are secure in nearly all respects but are occasionally borderline in relation to the evidence provided	Evaluations are just about secure but the evidence base is thin in too many sections so that it is not always possible to see the internal consistency between thesummary, outcome (follow-up), evaluations and evidence	Evaluations are not secure because the RI has not weighed the evidence appropriately or there is a lack of evidence to support many of the statements, or it is clear that the summary and level of follow-up are not consistent in relation to the evidence within the RIF
The evidence and summarymatch the balance of strengths and areas for improvement very well, and are consistent across the RIF	The balance of strengths and areas for improvement is mostly reflected correctly in the evaluations and commentaries within the RIFThere may be an occasional discrepancy between the summary and the overarching messages in the report's main evaluation(s)	The balance of strengths and areas for improvement is broadly right for most evaluations but it is inappropriate in a few. The summary does not match the evaluations well enough for a few of the aspects	The balance of strengths and areas for improvement is clearly incorrect. There is considerable inconsistency across the RIF.
The evaluations match criteria in the inspection framework and any deviations are explained fully	The evaluations match criteria in nearly all cases and deviations are noted	Most evaluations match criteria, although any deviations are not always fully explained	The evaluations do not follow the inspection criteria. They are not explained clearly enough in the report or through the supporting evidence provided
Level of follow-up is appropriate and explained fully within the 'reasons for follow-up' section of the RIF	The level of follow-up is appropriate but is not fully explained in the RIF	Level of follow-up is probably appropriate but there is no explanation from the RI to relate findings to the follow-up level – remedial work required from RI	Level of follow-up is clearly inappropriate and does not follow guidance protocols
Recommendations are well chosen and highly relevant. They emanate clearly from the	Recommendations are generally appropriate and suitable. They emanate from the evaluation text	There are too many or too few recommendations. Generally, the recommendations stem	The recommendations do not emanate clearly from the evaluation text and may be inappropriate in

evaluation text and are reflected in the summary. The number of recommendations is appropriate		from the evaluation text but may not link tightly to the summary or may not be the most relevant.	number or content. Recommendations do not appear relevant.
All statements match 'What we inspect' criteria and relevant report sections	There are minor omissions	The report follows the 'What we inspect' criteria but there is selective use of evidence on occasions	There are significant omissions within various sections of the framework and these undermine the validity and reliability of the inspection outcomes
Generally, a report where you feel the evaluations and summary are 'spot on'	**Generally, a report where you feel the evaluations are sound, but with occasional uncertainty or inconsistency**	**Generally, a report where the evaluations and summary are broadly okay, but where gaps and inconsistencies begin to create uncertainty about the robustness of the inspection findings**	**Generally, a report where the evaluations and summary are very weak and would be unlikely to stand up to rigorous public scrutiny**

Presentation			
Meets requirements	*Minor shortcoming*	*Significant shortcoming*	*Major shortcoming*
Style is clear and plain with very few passives and no jargon terms	Occasional use of passives and sentences that are overly complex	The messages are clear, but there is too much use of jargon or repetition across the report	Style is too dense or sentences and syntax are confusing in too many places
Very few/no lapses in relation to grammar, spelling or punctuation	Occasional, very minor errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation	There is a trend of grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors in one or more sections	Significant errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation throughout text
The report has one voice/style that permeates all its sections. The summary summarises the school well and links cause and effect cohesively.	The report has one voice in the main but one or two aspects read differently from the rest. The summary is appropriate but may need a little rewriting to improve the flow	The report gets its messages over reasonably well, but there is a mixture of voices within the report. The summaryis 'clunky' e.g. it feels like cut and pasted sentences	The report is a mish-mash of voices and styles with little or no coherence overall
Emphasis is on evaluation over description and 'cause and effect' is clear	A bit too much description in places, which is not always helpful to the reader (e.g. not linked to a recommendation or evaluation of impact)	Too much unfocused description within too many sections. The link between thesummary, evaluation text and the associated recommendations may be tenuous on occasions.	Far too much description with little/no evaluation. Recommendations do not emanate clearly from the text.
Follows the Writing Guide in all respects; very little attention required at the edit stage	A few deviations from the Writing Guide (e.g. erroneous capitalisation); a little attention required at the edit stage	Regular deviations from the the Writing Guide in one or two respects throughout the report which require significant attention at the edit stage	Very many and persistent deviations from the Writing Guide which require a great deal of attention at the edit stage
All sections complete, formatted correctly and in the right place	An occasional small formatting error, for example with setting out bullets	More persistent errors	A section of the report is missing or in the wrong place or formatting is clearly wrong
Generally, a report that requires little or no editing – a report that could, overall,go out as it is	**Generally, a report where there are just occasional lapses, and which need tidying up before you would feel happy about its publication**	**Generally, a report which requires more intensive editing before publication, or takes the QA editor far longer than the time allocated to review the report. The lapses are too persistent**	**Generally, a poor report, with little evidence of robust, careful editing, that is likely to undermine confidence in inspection outcomes when/if published. Requires considerable work during the QA process**