Estyn's guidance toolkit for assuring the quality of inspections (QAI)

Updated September 2026

This document is also available in Welsh

Information sheet

Information box

For further advice contact: communications@estyn.gov.wales

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Version control

Document version	Date of issue	Changes made
1.0	January 2013	
1.1	April 2013	Minor drafting
2.0	September 2017	Revisions for new inspection arrangements from September 2017
3.0	September 2018	Minor amendments to IEF grid titles; removing protocol QAR guidance for RIs and QAR inspectors into separate document
3.1	March 2019	IEF guidance moved into separate document, to allow easier access for PIs, AIs and RIs
3.2	September 2021	Updated to reflect the removal of summative judgements and subgrades from inspection, and the inclusion of inspection mindset
4.0	September 2024	Revisions for new inspection arrangements from September 2024
5.0	September 2025	Updated to reflect changes to QAR form and grade descriptor. Separation of QAI from QAR toolkit
6.0	September 2026	Updated to reflect current inspection practice, staff structure and guidance

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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.

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Quality Assurance of Inspection forms and guidance

Estyn requires all Reporting Inspectors (RIs), whether contracted, HMI or secondees, to undertake inspections of good quality.

For HMI and secondee-led inspections, assistant directors carry out a sample of quality assurance visits to inspections (QAI). For inspections led by contracted inspectors - i.e. Registered Inspectors (RgI) or Registered Nursery Inspectors (RgNI), HMI undertake a sample of QAI under the direction of the lead officers for quality assurance, senior HMI and assistant directors/strategic directors. 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 evaluations and the overall quality of inspections.

As a result of a visit, HMI or senior HMI will allocate an overall quality assurance grade to inspections led by contracted inspectors. The grade will reflect the overall balance of strengths and shortcomings in the inspection. In addition, HMI will identify and comment on particular strengths and any shortcomings in aspects of the reporting inspector's practice.

This work enables Estyn to collect information about the overall quality of its inspection work. We analyse the outcomes and use the information to promote inspection work of high quality, to follow up instances where there are concerns about inspection quality and to inform our professional learning and development work for inspectors.

For contracted inspectors, we may use the outcomes when considering tenders and the award of inspection contracts.

Quality assurance forms and guidance

The QAI will focus on six main themes:

- Preparation and planning
- Leadership and team management
- Securing robust inspection findings
- Evidence management
- Nominee and stakeholder engagement
- Inspection mindset and expectations of inspectors

For each theme, the QAI lead will consider the associated criteria (below), but need comment only on the main strengths and any shortcomings in each of the six themes.

For RgI/RgNI, we will provide one overall grade, considering the descriptors. If inspectors identify that any one theme has major shortcomings or serious failings, they should consider carefully whether an overall Grade D is appropriate. Where HMI award an overall C or D, they must be clear about the shortcomings that contribute to the grade.

In all cases, the person undertaking the QAI will identify areas for improvement for future inspections.
The grade definitions are as follows:

A meets requirements in all or nearly all respects;
B – meets requirements, but a few minor aspects to improve;
C – meets requirements, but needs notable support to do so – a few significant areas to improve;
D – does not meet requirements as a result of major shortcomings or serious failings.

Major shortcomings in relation to inspections

Where the work of inspectors has major shortcomings, or there are serious failings, it is likely that the inspection will fail to meet Estyn's requirements and/or may generate a substantiated complaint about the conduct of the inspection. A significant or major shortcoming is:

- any weakness that may affect the team's judgement
- any aspect of the RI's work or that of the team that may detract significantly from the overall quality of the inspection, or
- any aspect that may reflect poorly on the inspection process as a whole.

A significant or major shortcoming undermines confidence in:

- the accuracy and validity of any Inspection Area and/or
- the quality of Estyn inspections and reports.

The overall A-D grades relate to inspections led by RgI or RgNI (A Yes/No indicator relates to HMI-led inspection.).

You can find further information about Estyn's arrangements to assure the quality of inspections, including the steps we may take to improve inspectors' practice if it falls short of expectations, on our website.

Quality assurance of inspections (QAI)

Themes	Criteria
Preparation and planning	The Reporting Inspector • makes timely and purposeful initial contact with relevant stakeholders to gather key contextual information and ensure the provider is clear about inspection arrangements • prepares, briefs and manages the team effectively • organises a suitable range of inspection activity that allows the team to gather appropriate evidence to come to secure judgements • takes into account the specific context of the provider • adapts planning in response to emerging findings • ensures inspection activity is proportionate and suitably focused
Leadership and team Management	The Reporting Inspector • manages time and workload effectively across the team • communicates expectations clearly, provides suitable direction and maintains the team's focus • creates a professional, open and reflective team culture • facilitates team discussion well • challenges the team's findings appropriately • manages differing viewpoints constructively
Securing robust inspection findings	The Reporting Inspector • demonstrates sound and consistent professional judgement • supports the team to triangulate evidence effectively • distinguishes between strong, sufficient, and weak evidence • ensures judgements are firmly evidence-led • challenges assumptions and avoids premature conclusions

	• ensures all findings are justified clearly • weighs evidence and applies follow-up protocols appropriately
Evidence management	The Reporting Inspector • uses the VIR and TIF systems appropriately • undertakes suitable quality assurance of the team's work • ensures accurate and timely recording of evidence • identifies gaps in evidence and addresses them effectively
Nominee and partner engagement	The Reporting Inspector • builds and maintains professional and respectful relationships with the nominee and other partners • ensures the nominee/provider is involved fully in team meetings • communicates clearly and transparently throughout • ensures the nominee/partners understand inspection processes and findings • manages challenge and disagreement professionally and sensitively (where they arise)
Inspection mindset and expectations of inspectors	The Reporting Inspector • clearly conveys the inspection mind-set through their demeanour • avoids bias, remains objective and demonstrates fairness and professionalism • maintains appropriate independence • engages fully in the QAI process, reflecting critically on their own performance and engaging with feedback constructively
Overall QAI grade	**A, B, C, D** **Meets requirements Y/N**
	Areas to consider for future inspections

QAI Grade Descriptor Matrix

The following matrix is meant as a guide. It is in place to support those completing QAI to reflect on the significance of strensghts and shortcomings. Those undertaking QAI may wish to use the language/terminology contained within this continuum to help reflect the balance of strengths and areas for development.

QAI grades in the table below relate only to the work of Contracted Inspectors.

Evaluation theme	A - Highly effective	B – Effective	C – Inconsistent	D – Serious concerns
	Meets requirements in all or nearly all aspects	**Meets requirements with a few minor aspects to improve**	**Meets requirements but needs notable support to do so – a few significant areas to improve**	**Does not meet requirements as a result of major shortcomings or serious failings**
Preparation and planning	Preparation is timely, well-structured and informed by context. Activity is proportionate, focused and adapts effectively to emerging evidence. The team is well-briefed and inspection activity enables secure evidence gathering.	Preparation and planning is generally secure but may lack a little flexibility. Context is considered but minor inefficiencies or missed opportunities to adapt to the provider's context or emerging findings. No significant impact on the inspection.	Preparation lacks sufficient focus, adaptability or coherence. Planning does not reflect context or emerging findings well enough, leading to inefficiencies or gaps in evidence gathering. These weaknesses reduce the effectiveness of inspection.	Preparation is weak or poorly managed. Planning is unfocused, disproportionate or inappropriate. The Reporting Inspector fails to adapt meaningfully to emerging findings or adaptations are poorly judged. Shortcomings compromise the inspection's reliability.
Leadership and team management	The RI provides clear direction and maintains team focus. The RI communicates clearly and expectations are	The RI communicates expectations mostly clearly and provides suitable direction. Leadership is	Leadership is just about acceptable. The team does not always receive clear direction. Discussions may	Leadership is ineffective. The RI does not provide clear direction or maintain team focus, resulting in confusion

	well understood. Team discussions are facilitated skilfully. An open and reflective culture is evident. Differing viewpoints are managed constructively. Workload is balanced, enabling the team to work efficiently.	generally effective, though there may be minor inconsistencies in managing workload or team meetings. Team culture is positive and discussions remain productive. Opportunities for deeper challenge are sometimes missed.	lack structure or sufficient challenge. Team culture is functional but not consistently open or reflective. Differing viewpoints are not always handled well. Time and/or workload management show weaknesses leading to reduced effectiveness.	or fragmented working. Team discussions are poorly facilitated, with insufficient challenge or unhelpful dynamics. The culture is not reflective enough, and differing viewpoints are mishandled. Time and workload are managed poorly, significantly hindering the team.
Securing robust inspection findings	Judgements are secure, evidence-led and justified. The RI ensures effective triangulation, challenges assumptions and supports the team to reach consistent, objective conclusions. Follow-up protocols are followed well.	Judgements are mostly secure, though some explanations may lack precision. Triangulation is generally effective but occasionally misses opportunities to probe evidence further. The RI challenges assumptions but not always consistently. Distinctions between evidence strengths may be less clear. Follow-up protocols are applied appropriately. Minor inconsistencies do not undermine overall validity.	A few judgements lack sufficient rigour or are not based strongly enough in evidence. Weaknesses in triangulation, challenge or objectivity lead to some insecure or insufficiently justified findings. Distinctions between strong, sufficient and weak evidence are unclear. There are a few inaccuracies in the way follow-up protocols are followed which could weaken confidence in the inspection.	Judgements are unreliable or poorly evidenced. Lack of rigour, bias or failure to challenge assumptions significantly undermines the validity of findings. Findings are not justified clearly. Follow-up protocols are not followed or applied incorrectly or inappropriately. Shortcomings undermine the validity of the inspection.

Evidence management	Evidence is recorded accurately and consistently. Systems (VIR/TIF) are used effectively. The RI ensures strong quality assurance. They identify and address gaps in evidence thoroughly. The evidence base is secure, coherent and reliable.	Evidence management is generally secure, though minor inconsistencies in recording, system use or QA are evident. Most gaps in evidence are addressed. These do not significantly undermine the overall reliability of the evidence base.	Weaknesses in recording, QA or system use lead to gaps or inconsistencies in the evidence base. A few issues remain unresolved or are identified too late to be addressed effectively. This reduces the strength and coherence of the evidence base.	Evidence management is ineffective. Poor recording, weak QA or failure to address gaps results in an insecure or unreliable evidence base. These shortcomings undermine the validity of the inspection and compromise the team's judgements.
Nominee and partner engagement	Relationships are professional, respectful and constructive. Communication is clear and transparent. Partners are engaged and understand the process and findings. The nominee is involved fully in team meetings. Challenge is managed sensitively.	Engagement is generally effective, though there may be minor lapses in clarity or inclusivity. The nominee is involved appropriately. Communication is mostly clear. Challenge is handled professionally. Minor inconsistencies do not affect relationships or confidence.	Engagement is inconsistent. Communication sometimes lacks clarity or transparency which may lead to uncertainty. The nominee is not involved fully, leading to misunderstandings or tension. Handling of challenge or differing viewpoints is uneven, sometimes creating tension or reducing partnerr confidence.	Engagement is ineffective or unprofessional. Relationships with the nominee or partners break down or lack respect. Communication is unclear leaving stakeholders confused. The nominee is excluded from key discussions. Challenge or disagreement is handled poorly, causing conflict, mistrust or damage to the credibility of the inspection.
Inspection mindset and expectations of providers	The RI models professionalism, integrity and fairness consistently. Independence is maintained,	Professional conduct is secure overall, though there may be minor lapses in tone or adhering to the inspection	There are a few weaknesses in professionalism, objectivity or independence. The RI does not consistently demonstrate	Conduct falls below expected standards. The RI does not demonstrate the inspection mindset well enough. They

	and the inspection mind-set is conveyed clearly. The RI reflects critically and engages constructively with QA processes. Their conduct maintains confidence in the inspection.	mind-set. These do not undermine overall confidence. The RI engages with QA processes appropriately. Any shortcomings do not undermine confidence in the inspection.	the inspection mindset. The RI does not engage strongly with all aspects of QA. Shortcomings may begin to undermine trust in the inspection.	lack professionalism or independence. Their attitude or demeanour may undermine confidence in the inspection. The RI does not engage well enough with QA processes. Shortcomings damage the credibility of the inspection.

Carrying out a QAI visit

In most cases, QAI will take place over one the equivalent of one day.

For QAI of Registered Inspectors (RgI) the 'normal' allocation of time is:

- Tuesday am – travel
- Tuesday pm – work in school / attend team meeting
- Wednesday am – work in school
- Wednesday pm – travel

However, in some cases it may be more appropriate to change this model. For example, it may be appropriate to spend all day Tuesday or all day Wednesday with the inspection team. Where this is the case, you will need to confirm this with the sector assistant director (AD) and/or lead officers for Quality Assurance (QA). We will need provide the timing of the visit to the Inspection Co-ordinator (IC) before they notify the school of a QAI visit.

For QAI of HMI, the assistant director/senior HMI will decide on the most appropriate time to visit, but this should not normally be more than one full day.

For QAI of Registered Nursery Inspectors (RgNI) the QAI will normally take place over one half-day, to be decided by the assistant director and/or lead officers for the sector.

What should we do when we visit a provider?

On arrival, explain to the headteacher/provider that the purpose of the visit is:

- to quality assure the work of the inspection team
- to ensure compliance with processes, such as those set out in the inspection documents 'What we inspect' and 'How we inspect'
- to ensure consistency in practice from inspection to inspection across Wales

It may be appropriate to ask to be taken on a brief tour.

It will also be beneficial to arrange a time to meet the headteacher/principal/person in charge at a later time for a fuller discussion to find out how well the inspection is progressing.

Our purpose as QAI is not

- to inspect the school or to take the focus away from the team
- to distract leaders from their day-to-day role or the inspection

During the visit we should:

- clarify the inspection team's thinking, and challenge when appropriate to do so; and
- help the team balance good features and shortcomings if needed

During the visit we will:

- scrutinise a sample of available Team Input Forms (TIFs)
- examine other elements of the evidence base, instructions to the team, agendas for meetings, analysis of questionnaires etc.
- make sure that the nominee protocol is adhered to and discuss with the nominee their contribution to, and involvement in, the process
- make sure that the protocol for the work of other inspectors, such as a peer inspectors are adhered to. Discuss with them their contribution to and experience of the inspection
- hold discussions with the lead inspector
- attend any interviews conducted by the lead inspector
- attend team meetings
- where appropriate, challenge and support inspectors to reconsider evidence to balance strengths and shortcomings
- if needed, direct inspectors to consider guidance, for instance on deciding a school is in need of follow-up activity
- check the lead inspector's management and quality assuring of the work of the inspection team

Discussion with the RI should normally include the following:

- organisation of the inspection
- the work of team members
- understanding of 'What we inspect' and 'How we inspect'
- quality assurance of the inspection
- possible inspection outcomes and level of follow-up

Discussion with the headteacher/principal/person in charge should include the following:

- pre-inspection meeting
- inspection arrangements (including support for the nominee if/where appropriate)
- mind-set and professional conduct of the lead inspector and team

At the end of the visit we will:

- provide brief oral feedback to the lead (but no grade)
- thank the headteacher/principal/person in charge

- complete appropriate QAI forms

Completing the QAI feedback

- go to the VIR for the school/provider
- enter the 'inspection portal' area
- click of the 'quality' tab
- complete the form using the criteria (above) as a guide. Please write in the second person, for instance 'You managed team meetings effectively…'
- when the report is complete, make sure you have the 'final' and not the 'draft' selected at the end of the report and press 'submit'. This saves the form to the database as a final version.
- if you have any queries, please ask the lead officers for quality assurance or the relevant AD.