

Guidance for Inspectors

How we inspect

Independent Specialist Colleges
September 2022

**This document is also
available in Welsh.**



Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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Introduction

Purpose of the guidance handbook 'How we inspect'

This handbook sets out our approach to inspecting independent specialist colleges in 2022. It explains **how** we inspect. The guidance is essential reading for reporting inspectors and all other members of the inspection team. It may also be useful for colleges to support their understanding of the inspection mind-set and methodologies.

The guidance should be read alongside ['What we inspect' guidance in independent specialist colleges](#), which outlines the inspection framework. Colleges can use this guidance to see how inspections work and to help them in strengthening their own self-assessment and improvement processes.

Where the inspection identifies practice worth sharing, inspectors will invite the college to write a case study that we will publish on our website. Where the inspection identifies important concerns in relation to standards, quality of education and training or leadership and management, we will arrange follow-up activity to support improvement. Guidance on the different types of follow-up activity is available on our website.

There is further information about inspections on our website www.estyn.gov.wales

Legal basis for the inspection of independent specialist colleges

In the post-16 sector, the Learning and Skills Act (2000) requires the Chief Inspector to report on:

- the quality of the education and training provided
- the standards achieved by those receiving education and training
- the quality of leadership and management, including whether the financial resources made available to those providing education and training are managed efficiently and used to provide value for money

Policy background

While not governed directly by the following policies and conventions, the guidance handbook takes account of the following:

- the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015
<http://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/people/future-generations-act/?lang=en>
- the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the Welsh Government in 2004 as the basis for policy-making for children and young people <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>
- the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018
<https://gov.wales/additional-learning-needs-and-education-tribunal-wales-act>

Taking account of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Each inspection will start with a discussion with leaders about the impact of the pandemic on their learning community. This will be an opportunity for the college to share with the inspection team the initial and ongoing challenges brought about by the pandemic.

Throughout the inspection, we will take account of the college's context, and the impact of the pandemic on all aspects of its work.

As in the past, when considering well-being and attitudes to learning, inspectors will not report on the college's attendance rates compared with other colleges. However, we will consider the effectiveness of the college's approaches to ensure that learners attend and engage with their learning on a regular basis, as part of their evaluation of the college's provision for care, support and guidance. We will take account of how well the college has evaluated and responded to any changes in learners' social and emotional needs, behaviour and well-being as a result of the pandemic, college and learning centre closures, and distance learning.

We will consider the quality of teaching sessions and learning experiences that learners receive over time and whether these enable learners to make the progress they should. Part of this work may have been completed at home, or through distance learning activities.

Inspectors will give the college's leaders the opportunity to brief the team about the impact of the pandemic on the college's progress in developing new initiatives and strengthening the provision. Inspectors will consider this information as part of the context of the college, and the emerging inspection evidence base.

Inspection arrangements

Introduction

This section is set out in a way that reflects the sequence of work before, during and after a core inspection.

The reporting inspector (RI) is responsible for the conduct and management of the inspection and for the inspection report. While this guidance focuses mainly on the role of the reporting inspector, all team members must comply with the same inspection requirements.

Principles of inspection

Inspectors will:

- ensure that inspection is of high quality and responsive to the needs of all learners
- ensure that judgements are secure, reliable, valid and based on first-hand evidence

- involve colleges fully in the inspection process, including the opportunity for the college to select a nominee
- use the college's improvement priorities as the starting point for the inspection and to identify key issues for investigation in order to make judgements on the validity of its findings
- include peer inspectors in the inspection process
- keep to a minimum any requirements for documentation and preparation by the college
- gain the perspective of learners, staff and other stakeholders
- apply the principle of equality for Welsh and English to all our inspection work, providing bilingual services whenever they are appropriate
- be constructive in identifying and supporting colleges with important aspects or weaknesses that require improvement

Inspection mind-set

Estyn's approach to inspection is:

Fair and impartial – this means that we work to be independent, objective and balanced. We are robust and consistent in our work. We weigh the evidence and its significance to provide an honest, credible and accurate view of the college's strengths and areas for improvement.

Supportive – we work to guide colleges to implement improvements that benefit learners. We encourage innovation and recognise good intentions. We are friendly but always professional in our approach. We support educational reform. We work hard to develop meaningful relationships with colleges and local and regional organisations.

Reflective – we are open-minded. We listen to a wide range of stakeholders and reflect on their responses. We are thoughtful, measured and careful. We plan opportunities to think carefully about the inspection findings and to discuss them with others in the team.

Transparent – we are well informed and communicate clearly, directly and succinctly. We use efficient and effective inspection methodologies to respond to the college's unique situation. We plan inspection activity and report on strengths and areas for improvement in ways that reflect the particular circumstances of each individual college. As a result, our actions promote trust and respect.

Code of conduct for inspectors

Our code of conduct explains how we embody the inspection mind-set through their actions. Inspectors should uphold the highest possible standards in their work. All inspectors have to meet the standards of Estyn's code of conduct.

When conducting the inspection, inspectors will:

- be courteous and professional
- carry out their work with integrity and due sensitivity
- evaluate the work of the college objectively
- report honestly, fairly and impartially
- communicate clearly and openly

- act in the best interests of learners
- respect the confidentiality of all information received during the course of their work

It is important that we evaluate the effectiveness of provision and leadership on their impact and not on the basis of any preferences for particular methods. The key to the evaluations is whether the methods and organisation are fit for the purpose in supporting all learners to achieve high standards and strong levels of well-being.

Inspectors should inform Estyn of any perceived or actual conflicts of interest as soon as they receive notification that they are part of the college's inspection team.

Expectations of colleges

In order that inspection and regulation are constructive and beneficial, it is important that inspectors and colleges establish and maintain a professional working environment based on mutual courtesy, respect and professional behaviour. We expect inspectors to uphold Estyn's Code of Conduct but we also expect colleges to:

- be courteous and professional
- provide evidence that enables inspectors to conduct the inspection in an open, honest and objective way
- use Estyn's electronic systems for managing inspections as required
- provide evidence that will enable inspectors to report honestly, fairly and reliably about the college
- maintain a purposeful dialogue with the reporting inspector and other inspectors
- recognise that inspectors need to observe practice and talk to staff, learners and other stakeholders without the presence of a manager or senior leader
- draw any concerns about the inspection to the attention of the reporting inspector in a timely and suitable manner through the nominee or senior manager
- work with inspectors to minimise disruption and stress throughout the inspection
- ensure the health and safety of inspectors while on their premises
- maintain the confidentiality of meetings and inspection findings until the final publication of the report

At the point of the inspection notification, colleges should review the composition of the inspection team. It is the responsibility of the colleges to highlight any perceived or actual conflicts of interest prior to the start of their inspection.

Safeguarding, including health, safety and well-being issues

Inspectors will carry out inspections in accordance with the inspectorate's guidance on inspecting safeguarding. If they observe anything that they think constitutes in their opinion, a real risk to the safety of staff, visitors or learners, inspectors should alert managers at the college. In all cases, inspectors should make a separate electronic note of the risk and that they informed managers of it. Inspectors should report on obvious risks relating to health, safety and well-being under inspection area 4 (care, support and guidance). Where these risks are a serious concern, inspectors should include a short comment in the report and a recommendation in the report. Estyn will send a well-being letter to the college asking them to outline how they will address the shortcoming.

Responding to a safeguarding allegation

If an inspector becomes aware of a safeguarding allegation//suspicion in respect of a child, young person or vulnerable adult, they should follow the procedures as set out in the current version of ‘Estyn’s policy and procedures for safeguarding’, which is available on Estyn’s website.

Approach to inspection

The starting point for inspection is the college’s assessment of its own performance and priorities, supported by relevant evidence. Inspectors will not inspect all aspects of work in depth during a core inspection. They will sample evidence to test the college’s own assessment of its work.

The progress learners make from their starting-points and the standards they achieve are the key measures of the quality of the education and training they have received and of the effectiveness of the leadership and management of the college. Inspection will focus on the needs of learners, their attitudes to learning and the impact that the provision makes on supporting their progress and the standards they achieve. The inspection period and number of inspectors may vary according to the size of the college.

We will carry out inspections in line with our Welsh Language Policy, available from our website www.estyn.gov.wales.

The Virtual Inspection Room

The inspectorate will use an electronic system, called the ‘Virtual Inspection Room’ (VIR), for managing many aspects of the inspection. It is a web-based system that allows colleges to upload information before the inspection and to download guidance from the inspectorate about the inspection process. The VIR is also the place where colleges can access the emerging questions from the reporting inspector at the start of the inspection and the post-inspection questionnaires.

We ensure the security of information uploaded by subjecting the VIR to penetration testing. This testing evaluates system security. We identify and implement any actions to prevent unauthorised access. All users of Estyn’s VIR system have a username and password which are recorded and maintained securely within an active directory. The system also has features to ensure password protection including threat detection and conditional access.

The inspection team

Inspection teams will be led by a reporting inspector (HMI), with other team members drawn from among HMI, peer inspectors (from other colleges) or additional inspectors (AIs). Additional inspectors may be on secondment or contracted to Estyn.

The reporting inspector manages the inspection team and is the first point of reference for everyone involved in the inspection.

We will invite colleges to select a senior member of staff, called the nominee, to work

with the inspection team. In practice, nearly all colleges accept the invitation, but it is not a requirement. The nominee should have sufficient seniority to act as a link between the college and the inspection team but need not be the leader of the college. Colleges can access the guidance for nominees on preparing for the inspection from links within the initial contact form (ICF), completed by the Inspection Co-ordinator (IC) and available via the VIR.

Contacting the college before the inspection

The college will receive 15 working days' notice of the inspection.

Following this, the inspectorate will contact the college by telephone to set up the arrangements for the inspection. Inspection co-ordinators (IC) in Estyn will undertake the initial contact with colleges. During this discussion, the inspection co-ordinator will:

- explain the purpose of the inspection and discuss an outline programme for the inspection
- discuss the specific information required before the inspection, including the completion by the college of a self-evaluation form on its provision for safeguarding, and make the arrangements for receiving it in electronic form through the Virtual Inspection Room
- ask if there are any issues or risks the team should be aware of and ask for a general health and safety briefing for the team at the start of the inspection
- establish whether the college wishes to have a nominee and, if it does, agree the role of the nominee and explain the process for completing the nominee guidance
- arrange a meeting at the start of the inspection with the nominee to provide a health and safety briefing for the team
- arrange a meeting at the start of the inspection for the college to set out its priorities for improvement and its current stage of development
- provide links and guidance for the completion of online pre-inspection questionnaires for learners, staff, and governors (where appropriate)¹
- agree arrangements for setting up a meeting with governors (where appropriate)
- arrange the availability of supporting evidence, including samples of learners' work
- ensure that there are agreed procedures for addressing any concerns or complaints that might arise during the course of the inspection
- organise any domestic arrangements, such as a base for the inspectors, parking and internet access
- set up the arrangements for feeding back the inspection findings
- agree the arrangements for completing the post-inspection questionnaire
- inform the college through the initial contact form of the key inspection arrangements

¹ We have used the term 'governors' throughout this guidance, but we acknowledge that colleges may refer to different terms for the governance and supervision of the college

The inspection co-ordinator will request the following information from the college through the virtual inspection room as soon as possible after the formal notification of the inspection:

- key background information on the college
- the college's most recent quality development plans and self-assessment reports
- the number of learners, the nature of their ALN and details of their placing authorities
- details of the college's timetables for the period of the inspection
- arrange a date (as agreed with the RI) for the initial conversation with the nominee

If the inspection is to take place early in the academic year, Estyn may ask for samples of learners' work from the previous year.

When we notify colleges of the inspection, they will receive information on how to conduct a confidential online survey of learners. Estyn will also provide a pre-inspection online questionnaire for governors (where appropriate), and all teaching and support staff directly employed by the college. The outcomes of the surveys will form part of the pre-inspection evidence and help inspectors to form emerging questions to investigate.

The team will also consider the most recent survey of learners' perceptions conducted by the college.

During the inspection, inspectors may meet with learners, and teaching and learning support staff as part of their gathering of evidence.

Planning the inspection and preparing the team

Taking into account the college's identified improvement priorities and self-assessment reports, and any information already held by Estyn, the reporting inspector will plan the inspection and allocate responsibilities to members of the inspection team.

Inspections involve observations of teaching, including learning walks and scrutiny of learners' work.

During the inspection

Initial team meeting

In the initial meeting of the inspection team, there should be a health and safety briefing from a member of the college staff. The college should provide a brief position statement on its strategic priorities and its current stage of development. After that, the team should discuss with senior leaders the improvement priorities identified by the college and the progress that it is making in its improvement work. The reporting inspector will confirm these arrangements with the college during the pre-inspection phone call.

Inspectors will sample, test and validate the college's own priorities and its evaluations of its strengths and areas for improvement and any other strengths and areas for improvement which the reporting inspector identifies. The discussions will

also consider the evidence that inspectors need to review. This will include learning walks, session observations, sampling learners' written work, and interviews with learners, staff, employers (where appropriate) and other stakeholders.

Gathering and reviewing inspection evidence

The team will plan the inspection so that they can cover the reporting requirements within the five inspection areas. The team will ensure that they have enough time to review the key evidence they need to make their evaluations. The main forms of evidence are:

- documentary evidence, including information on learners' performance and progress
- observation of teaching, training, assessment and other activities
- samples of learners' work
- survey responses from learners, staff, and governors (where appropriate)
- discussions with learners, leaders, managers, governors (where appropriate) and other key stakeholders

The team will use direct observation of learners' work wherever possible to gather evidence to support their judgements. Inspectors may select an additional sample of learners' work if required to further their investigation of a specific aspect.

Inspectors will undertake a range of activities to gather evidence for their evaluation of learners' progress and the quality of the college's provision. This may include session observations, learning walks, where inspectors move relatively quickly through a number of teaching or training sessions looking at a specific aspect of the provision, conversations with selected learners about their work, and discussions with individual teachers, about learners' progress in their sessions and how they plan work to meet their needs.

The voice of learners is a key source of evidence for inspectors. Discussions with learners will provide an opportunity to explore learners' knowledge and understanding of their work and skills. It will also help inspectors to gauge how well they feel the college supports learners and contributes to their well-being.

Colleges should make information available to the inspection team about the standards achieved by learners, particularly the results of any initial and diagnostic assessments and other assessments of additional learning needs (ALN). This will help inspectors to judge learners' progress, to come to a view about the standards learners achieve compared to their starting-points and the way teachers, use the information.

The team will need to consider stakeholders' views about the college and test out the validity of those views during the inspection.

Where the nominee is not the principal, it is important that the reporting inspector holds a brief daily meeting with the principal and nominee to clarify inspection issues and the broad, emerging findings of the inspection team.

Recording inspection evidence

Inspectors will use various forms to note and to collate their findings and evaluations.

Wherever possible, inspectors will complete their forms electronically as part of Estyn's electronic system for collecting, collating and recording inspection findings.

Team meetings

The main purpose of team meetings is to arrive at an accurate, reliable, valid and corporate view of standards and the quality of provision and leadership. Meetings will provide opportunities for inspectors to:

- test the evaluations in the college's quality development planning and self-assessment processes
- discuss emerging issues
- review visits to learners
- resolve pre-inspection issues and emerging questions
- identify any gaps in the evidence base
- consider main inspection findings and any recommendations

Professional dialogue

At the end of a session observation, inspectors should have a brief professional dialogue with the member of staff involved in the activity. It may be necessary, in some cases, to conduct this discussion later during the inspection.

The main focus of the discussion should be on the learners, the progress they make during the session and the standards they achieve during the activity. The inspector should stress that these are emerging, interim findings on one aspect of the evidence base and that these may be amended, on reflection, after scrutiny of learners' work or talking to learners, or as the result of moderation within the team. Inspectors should try to focus on any strengths or areas for development in relation to the specific activity seen.

Due to the sharply focused nature and relatively short duration of learning walks, and the spread of the activity across a number of activities within a relatively short period of time, inspectors will not be in a position to offer professional dialogue to individual teachers, trainers or assessors after learning walk activity.

Formal feedback

At the end of the on-site part of the inspection, the team will provide verbal feedback to college leaders. The college should invite representatives from the governing body (or other supervisory board) to this meeting. The feedback should focus on the main evaluations for each of the five inspection areas and the reasons for these.

The feedback meeting provides the opportunity for leaders to hear and to reflect on the evaluations. The feedback should focus on the strengths and areas for improvement and the factors that contribute to them. The reporting inspector should explain to the college that factual matters may be corrected and evaluations may be clarified, although they are not negotiable.

During the inspection, the team will also consider if there is any effective practice in the college that is worthy of consideration and emulation by other colleges. Where this is the case, the reporting inspector will ask the college to prepare a case study (or studies) for dissemination on Estyn's website.

All the evaluations reported during an inspection are provisional and subject to moderation and validation by HMCI. They are confidential to the college's staff and governors. They should not be communicated beyond this group, including via social media, until we publish the report on our website.

Complaints about the conduct of the inspection

If there are any issues about the conduct of the inspection overall or the conduct of individual inspectors, then the college, through the nominee, should raise these directly, and as soon as possible, with the reporting inspector. The college should not wait until after the inspection, but should raise any issues during the on-site inspection. Issues often arise due to misunderstandings and these can usually be resolved quickly and satisfactorily in college close to the time when they occurred.

There is guidance for colleges on Estyn's complaints handling procedures on Estyn's website.

After the inspection

The inspection report

The reporting inspector is responsible for producing a final inspection report that is clear to a lay audience and helpful to the college.

When writing reports, inspectors should take account of Estyn's writing guidance which is available on our website www.estyn.gov.wales.

We will publish reports bilingually, where colleges have made this request, in line with Estyn's Welsh Language Policy.

We base the structure of the inspection report on a Common Inspection Framework and the report will take the following form:

About the college

Summary

Recommendations

What happens next

Main findings

- 1 Learning
- 2 Well-being and attitudes to learning
- 3 Teaching and learning experiences
- 4 Care, support and guidance
- 5 Leadership and management

The evidence base of the inspection

We will produce the report within statutory or agreed sector timescales.

The factual accuracy check

Estyn will give the college a late draft of the report to help check the factual accuracy of the content. The college will normally have five working days in which to consider the draft report and to identify any factual errors.

The focus of the factual accuracy check is on resolving any factual inaccuracies in the inspection report. It does not focus on the findings or the evaluations. There is further guidance for colleges on the nature and scope of the factual accuracy check on Estyn's website.

The college should raise any complaints about the conduct of the inspection during the on-site inspection. However, if the college continues to have unresolved complaints about the conduct of the inspection after the end of the on-site inspection, then it should refer to our complaints handling procedures on our website. The focus of the procedures is on the conduct of the inspection and not the findings or the evaluations arrived at by the inspection team.

Assuring the quality of inspections

The inspectorate is committed to:

- effective selection, training, briefing, support and deployment of inspectors, including peer inspectors and additional inspectors
- effective training, briefing and support to allow the nominee to play an active role
- regular dialogue with the nominee and principal during inspection
- criteria and recording systems that comply with the common inspection framework and guidance
- careful review and analysis of evidence
- unambiguous oral feedback of the team's findings for each inspection area
- clear, accurate and well-presented reports

As part of our quality assurance procedures, we invite colleges to complete a post-inspection questionnaire (PIQ). The questionnaire will be available to colleges in the VIR. Colleges should complete the first part of the PIQ immediately after the on-site inspection and submit it electronically to Estyn through the VIR system. Colleges can complete the second part of the PIQ after the publication of the inspection report, again through the VIR system.

Colleges should raise any concerns about the conduct of an inspector during the inspection as soon as possible with the reporting inspector.

The reporting inspector will carry out the quality assurance of the inspection in the first instance. Estyn will quality assure a sample of inspections on site and will assure the quality of all inspection reports before their publication on our website. Our arrangements for ensuring the quality of inspections and the arrangements for dealing with complaints are available on our website www.estyn.gov.wales.