

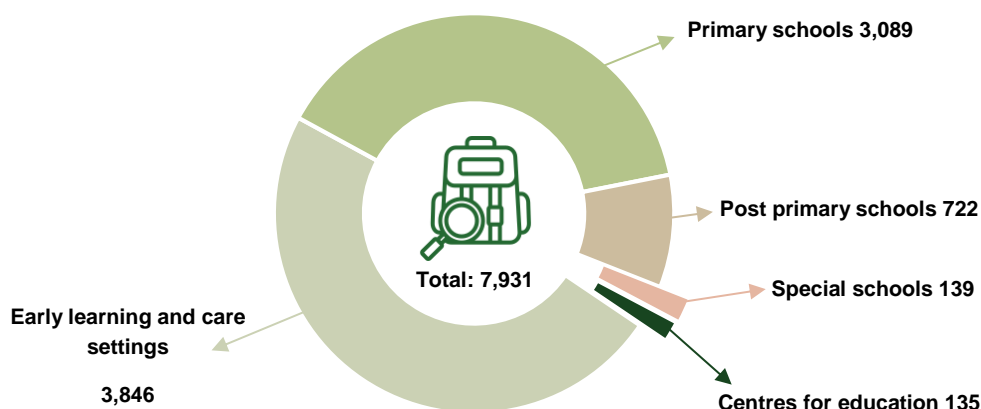
8 Monitoring and managing the performance of school inspections

8.1 All State-funded primary and post primary schools in Ireland are subject to inspection by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education (the Department). Section 13 of the Education Act 1998 (the Act) provides for the establishment of an Inspectorate whose main functions are to

- provide an assurance of quality and public accountability in the education system
- carry out inspections in schools and centres for education
- conduct national evaluations
- promote best practice and school improvement by advising teachers, principals and boards of management in schools
- publish inspection reports on individual schools and centres for education
- report on curriculum provision, teaching, learning and assessment generally in the education system
- promote the Irish language
- provide advice to policy makers in the Department and to the wider educational system
- evaluate and report on educational provision for children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage and those with special educational needs
- promote and support school self-evaluation.

8.2 As illustrated in Figure 8.1, at the end of 2023, a total of 7,931 schools, early learning and care settings and centres for education fell within the remit of the Inspectorate. Primary and post primary schools account for around 48% of the settings for inspection.

Figure 8.1 Number of schools, early learning and care settings and centres for education subject to inspection at 31 December 2023



Source: The Inspectorate, Department of Education

- 8.3** Total gross expenditure for the Department in 2023 was around €10.18 billion. The Department's administration expenditure was just over €139 million, of which €15.1 million relates to the Inspectorate. Over 90% of the expenditure on the Inspectorate is in respect of salaries, wages and allowances.
- 8.4** The Act requires the Minister for Education (the Minister) to appoint a Chief Inspector, and provides for the Minister to determine the number of inspector posts. The Act defines the Chief Inspector and the inspectors collectively as the Inspectorate.
- 8.5** At the end of 2023, the Department employed a total of 138 (whole time equivalent) inspectors including senior management. Around 48% of the staff are assigned to primary and post primary school inspections. The Inspectorate is divided into nine business units — five regional inspection units and four policy units.

Focus of this examination

- 8.6** This report examines how the Department monitors and measures the impact of school inspections. For the purpose of this examination, only primary (including special schools) and post primary school inspections have been considered. The scope of the report does not extend to inspections of early learning and care settings and other education centres.
- 8.7** The examination team liaised with staff of the Inspectorate and reviewed documents including management system reports, procedural documents, annual reports, internal communications, management presentations, Inspectorate policy, strategy documents, published inspection guides, and Department circulars.

School inspection selection process

- 8.8** In accordance with Section 13(3) of the Act, the Inspectorate determines its annual inspection programme. The process of identifying schools for inspection is completed twice a year by the Inspectorate — in June and December. The decision on the type of inspection and the selection of a primary or post primary school is based on factors such as
- the last time a school had an inspection visit such as a whole school evaluation or other type of inspection
 - whether the school has been identified for a follow-through inspection
 - Inspectorate resources available and school days available
 - risk-based information about the schools available from the Inspectorate's Inspection Management Information System (IMIS), and from the local knowledge of inspectors in the regional units
 - inspection support for wider departmental curriculum and system reforms
 - inspections that incorporate policy evaluation and development
 - achieving a balance across the various types of inspection including whole school evaluations, subject inspections, curriculum evaluations, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) evaluations, and inspections in the areas of special educational needs, and inclusion.

Types of school inspection

8.9 Inspections are carried out in accordance with the Act and with the *Code of Practice for the Department of Education Inspectorate* (2022). As illustrated in Figure 8.2, various inspection types are used by the Inspectorate such as

- one-day **incidental inspections** that are typically unannounced,
- more intensive **whole school type evaluations**, and
- inspections that **follow through** on how schools have implemented recommendations made in previous inspections.

Figure 8.2 Types of primary and post primary school inspection^{a,b}

Inspection type	Detail	Notice given	Onsite visit day/s	Outcome
Incidental inspection	Evaluate aspects of the work of a school under the normal conditions of a regular school day.	No	1	Written note of advice or verbal feedback
Curriculum evaluation/subject inspection	Focuses on evaluating specific subjects on the primary and post primary school curriculum.	Yes Five working days in advance	1-2	Publication of final report
Whole school evaluation and Whole school evaluation — management leadership and learning (WSE-MLL)	Evaluate key aspects of quality of the work of the school — pupils learning, teaching, support for pupils wellbeing, leadership and management and school self-evaluation.	Yes Ten working days in advance	3-5	Publication of final report
Evaluation of action planning for improvement in DEIS^c schools	Evaluate how schools devise, implement and monitor action plans for improvement of DEIS themes.	Yes Ten working days in advance	3	Publication of final report
Evaluation of inclusive practices and provision for children with special and additional educational needs	Evaluates the provision for students with additional and special educational needs in mainstream classes and support settings.	Yes Ten working days in advance	2	Publication of final report
Child protection and safeguarding inspection	Examines a school's compliance with key aspects of child protection procedures for primary and post primary schools.	Yes 24 – 48 hours in advance	2	Publication of initial and final reports
Follow-through inspection	Assess the extent to which a school has implemented recommendations from earlier inspections.	Yes Two working days in advance	1	Publication of final report

Source: *A Guide to Inspection in Post Primary Schools; A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools and Special Schools*, Department of Education (January 2024). Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Notes: a Excludes policy-focused inspections which include inspections required through memoranda of understanding with other Government departments (for example Coláistí Gaeilge) and other inspections requested by other divisions within the Department or at the request of the Minister.

b A type of inspection called 'supporting the safe provision of schooling' was introduced in response to Covid-19. This inspection type is no longer being performed and none were conducted in 2023 or 2024.

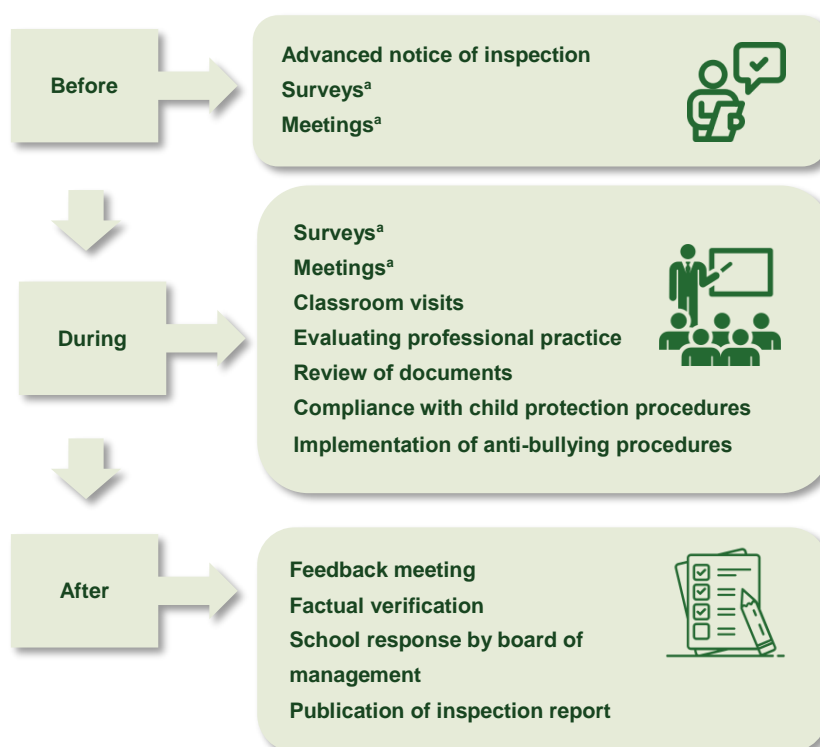
c Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools.

Inspection process

8.10 School inspections are carried out within the school calendar year. As illustrated in Figure 8.3, a school inspection typically comprises three phases.

- Except for incidental inspections, the first phase usually involves advance notice of the inspection taking place.
- This is followed by an onsite visit to the school to observe the teaching and learning in classrooms, administer pupil surveys, review documents such as the school register, various policy documents and curriculum plans and to also conduct various meetings with, for example, the board of management, members of the teaching staff and groups of parents.
- At the end of a school inspection, feedback meetings are held with the school followed by the completion of an inspection report (with the exception of incidental inspections) which outlines the main findings and recommendations of the evaluation.

Figure 8.3 Typical inspection process



Source: *A Guide to Inspection in Post Primary Schools; A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools and Special Schools*, Department of Education (January 2024)

Note: a Surveys and meetings are not conducted in incidental inspections, curriculum evaluations and subject inspections.

Measuring inspection performance

- 8.11** Performance measures are necessary to enable the Department, and its stakeholders, to evaluate whether the Inspectorate is achieving its objectives and priorities. A good performance measurement system would
- enable alignment of performance measures with the Inspectorate's overall aims and objectives
 - enable the reporting of outcomes of the Inspectorate's activities against targets
 - provide a comprehensive picture of performance across the Inspectorate's activities.
- 8.12** The Department provides just one output measure for inspections in its annual Revised Estimate i.e. the total number of inspections of early learning and care settings, primary and post primary schools and others. A target is not provided for this measure.
- 8.13** The Department stated that the output measure in the Revised Estimates does not convey the breadth and depth of the inspection and advisory activities undertaken throughout the system each year. It has stated that its annual statement of priorities includes numbers of school inspections and published inspection reports.¹ The examination noted that the numbers presented in this statement are not described as targets but as approximate numbers of inspections delivered on an annual basis, along with approximate numbers of inspection reports published annually.
- 8.14** The Department also stated that the Department's annual report provides a detailed numeric breakdown of the types of inspection and advisory activities undertaken by the Inspectorate. The latest annual report published on the Department's website is for the year 2022.² It reports on activities undertaken, but does not report outturns against pre-set targets.

Management information

- 8.15** Since September 2016, the Inspectorate uses an ICT system called the Inspection Management Information System (IMIS) to record information on its school inspection activity.³ Every primary and post primary school is allocated a 'roll' number (assigned by the Department) which serves as an identification number within the IMIS. Each inspection carried out is given a unique inspection identification number.
- 8.16** The information recorded on the IMIS for a school includes its history of inspection (both completed and ongoing inspections), inspection outcomes and recommendations.

Inspection activity 2016 – 2023

- 8.17** Data was obtained by the examination team on the number of inspections completed and recorded on the IMIS between September 2016 and December 2023 for primary and post primary schools. According to the IMIS, the total number of inspections completed was 24,099.
- 8.18** The examination found that over 50 descriptions had been entered in the 'inspection type' field in IMIS. Some of the descriptions were easily identifiable as an inspection type but for many others, the inspection type was not clear.

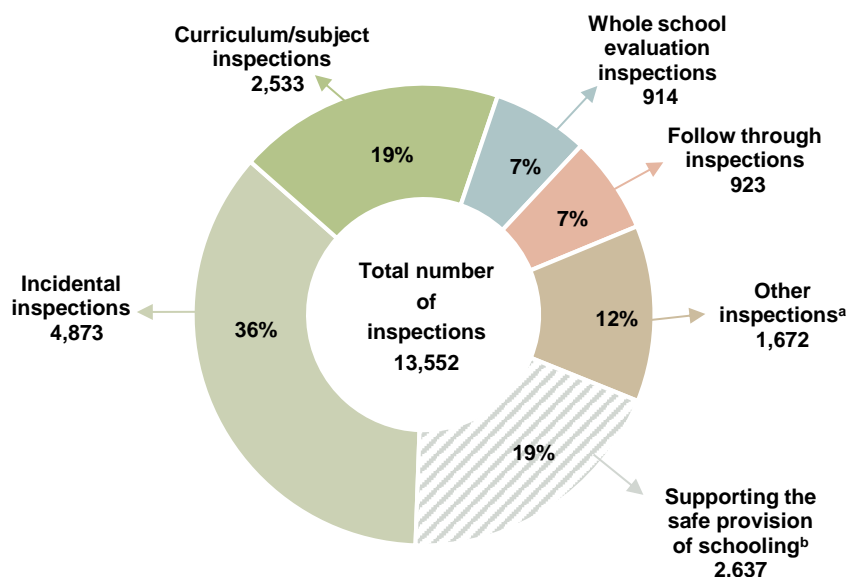
¹ The Department of Education Forbairt Annual Statement of Priorities 2023 can be found [here](#).

² The Department of Education Annual Report 2022 (published in 2023) can be found [here](#).

³ The IMIS is a live system incorporating planned inspections, those in progress and completed.

- 8.19** The examination also found that some of the descriptions recorded in the 'inspection type' field in the IMIS related to other functions of the Inspectorate, including functions such as advising schools in school self-evaluation. During Covid-19, the Inspectorate's function was expanded to an advisory role around the provision for safe schooling and other Covid-19 related activities. In addition, the Inspectorate provided an advisory function to schools including the continuity of learning and resumption of schooling post Covid-19.
- 8.20** The examination team identified a total of 9,826 advisory engagements were recorded in the IMIS for the period September 2016 to December 2023. The examination found that this advisory activity is included in the total number of inspections reported in the Revised Estimates. In addition, there were a further 721 activities in IMIS with the description 'section 29 appeal'.¹
- 8.21** When the non-inspection activities of the Inspectorate are excluded, the total number of primary and post primary school inspections completed between September 2016 and December 2023 is 13,552 — representing around 56% of all of the activity recorded in IMIS. The distribution of these inspections by type is set out in in Figure 8.4.
- 8.22** The level of primary and post primary inspection activity by year between September 2016 – December 2023 is shown in Figure 8.5 (over). The impact of Covid-19 on inspection activity can be seen in 2020 followed by an increase in activity thereafter. By 2023, inspection activity had exceeded pre Covid-19 output, due, in part, to the further expansion of the Inspectorate's function to include child protection and safeguarding inspections.

Figure 8.4 Primary (including special schools) and post primary school inspections, September 2016 – December 2023

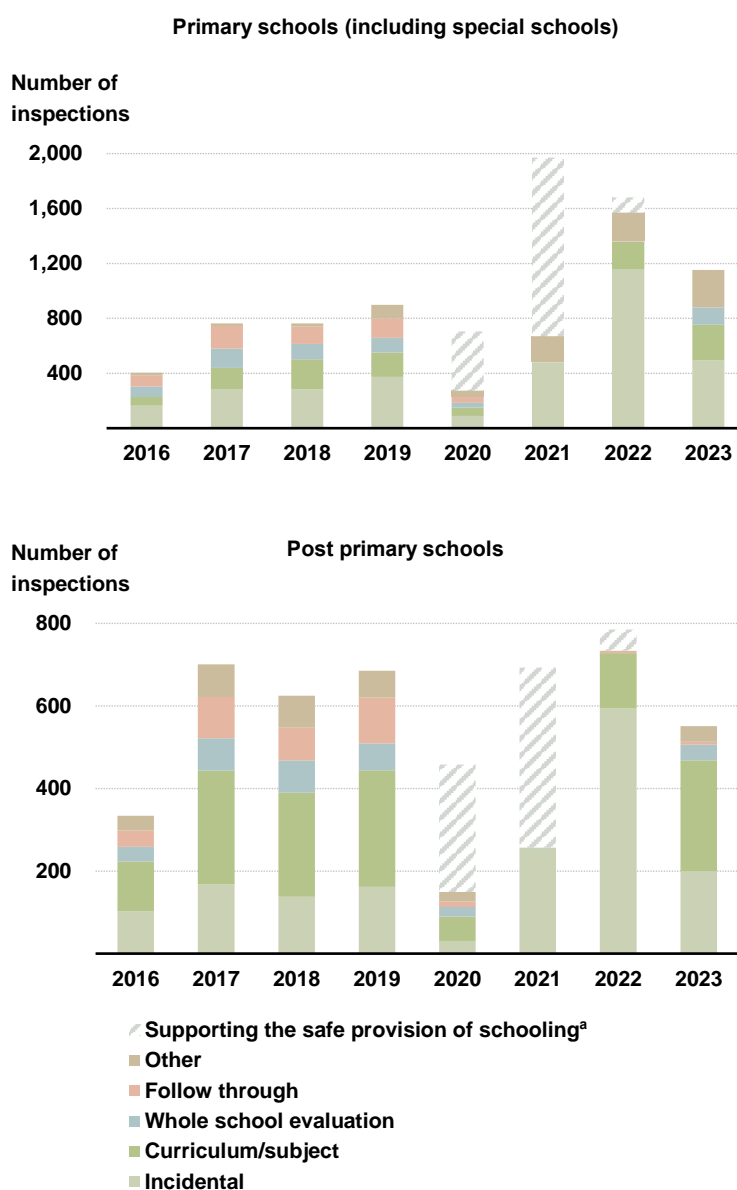


Source: Inspection Management Information System, Department of Education

- Notes:
- a Other includes 362 Child Protection and safeguarding inspections; 158 Inclusive practices for special needs children; 107 Evaluation of planning in DEIS schools; 79 Literacy and numeracy inspections DEIS schools; 90 Programme evaluations; 99 recognition as a Gaeltacht school inspections; 336 summer school inspections; 197 International test inspections; 244 miscellaneous inspection types (11 different categories).
 - b A type of inspection called supporting the safe provision of schooling was introduced in response to Covid-19. This inspection type is no longer being performed and none were conducted in 2023 or 2024.

¹ [Section 29 of the Education Act 1998](#) concerns exclusion of students from schools for disciplinary or other reasons.

Figure 8.5 Inspection activity by inspection and school type, September 2016 – December 2023



Source: Inspection management information system, Department of Education

Note: a A type of inspection called 'supporting the safe provision of schooling' was introduced in response to Covid-19. This inspection type is no longer being performed and none were conducted in 2023 and 2024.

Whole school evaluations

- 8.23** Whole school evaluation inspections are more intensive than other inspection types. These accounted for 7% of the number of school inspections carried out by the Inspectorate between September 2016 and December 2023.
- 8.24** To assess the average level of whole school evaluations carried out, data for the period 2016 was excluded due to it not being a complete year and for the period 2020 to 2022 (inclusive) due to how Covid-19 impacted the Inspectorate's activity. This included a formal strategy to focus on incidental inspections as part of reengagement with schools in 2022.
- 8.25** The examination found that, on average, around 120 primary schools are subject to a whole school evaluation inspection annually, from a total of 3,089 existing schools — around a 4% coverage rate. At post primary level, on average, around 65 schools are subject to a whole school evaluation inspection annually, out of 722 schools — a 9% coverage rate. This represents a potential whole school evaluation inspection cycle of every 25 years for primary schools, and 11 years for post primary schools.
- 8.26** The Department stated that whole school evaluation is one of a range of evaluation models used by the Inspectorate to evaluate the quality of education provision in schools. The use of a range of inspection models provides a quality assurance system that also deploys inspection resources in a proportionate and efficient way.

Incidental inspections

- 8.27** Incidental inspections — duration one day — accounted for 36% of all inspections carried out between September 2016 and December 2023 (4,873 of 13,552). This was largely driven by the formal strategy to focus on incidental inspections post Covid-19.¹ The result was an increase from 520 incidental inspections at primary and post primary levels in 2019 to 1,572 in 2022. Incidental inspection activity has returned, broadly, to pre Covid-19 levels in 2023.

Inspection outcomes

- 8.28** With the exception of an incidental inspection, once all other inspections are completed, an inspection report is finalised that includes the inspector's findings and recommendations. This is issued to the relevant school for factual verification and school response before being finalised and published on the Department's website.²
- 8.29** The Inspectorate does not provide schools with an overall rating at the end of the inspection. Schools are rated in accordance with a 'quality continuum', as outlined in Figure 8.6, across specific categories examined during the inspection such as the teaching and learning in classrooms and curriculum planning processes.

¹ Revisions to inspection arrangements were set out in Department of Education [Circular 32/2021](#) and [Circular 33/2021](#).

² [SI 49/2006](#) Education Act 1998 (Publication of Inspection Reports on Schools and Centres for Education) Regulations 2006.

Figure 8.6 The quality continuum for school inspections

Level	Description
Excellent	Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of learners. This provision provides an example for other schools and settings of exceptionally high standards of provision.
Very good	Provision that is very good, is very effective in meeting the needs of learners and is of a very high standard. There is potential to build on existing strengths to achieve an excellent standard.
Good	Provision that is good, is effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to build on existing strengths in order to address the aspects to be developed and achieve a very good standard.
Requires improvement to achieve a good standard	Provision that requires improvement to achieve a good standard, is not sufficiently effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is good or better.
Requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard	Provision that requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard, is not meeting the needs of learners. There is immediate need for significant action to address the areas of concern.

Source: *A Guide to Inspection in Primary, Post Primary and Special Schools*, Inspectorate, Department of Education (January 2024)

8.30 Since the requirement to publish inspection reports was introduced in 2006, the Inspectorate has published 20,882 inspection reports in total. This figure reduces to 17,005 when early years' inspections of 3,877 are excluded. The remaining published school inspection reports averaged 1,000 reports for each year, in the period to the end of 2023. Given there was a total of 3,950 primary and post primary schools (including special schools) at the end of 2023, this broadly represents an inspection coverage of around 25% of schools per year. On this basis, on average every school will be subject to an inspection resulting in a published inspection report about once every four years.

8.31 The examination found 41 primary schools and ten post primary schools that have had no published inspection report since 2006, indicating they have either only been subject to incidental inspection or another inspection model that does not have a written report published.

- Of the 41 primary schools not reported on, 24 were opened in the last five years with a further six opening in the last ten years. The Department stated that the remaining 11 schools have all had some form of an inspection or advisory visit.
- Of the ten post primary schools not reported on, seven were opened in the last four years. The Department stated that with the exception of two of these schools which opened in the last year, the remaining eight have had some form of inspection and/or advisory visit.

Inspection reviews

8.32 In accordance with the Act, a school, teacher or board of management affected by an inspection may request a Section 13(9) review of the inspection.¹ In the period from 2018 to 2023, a total of four formal reviews have been completed.

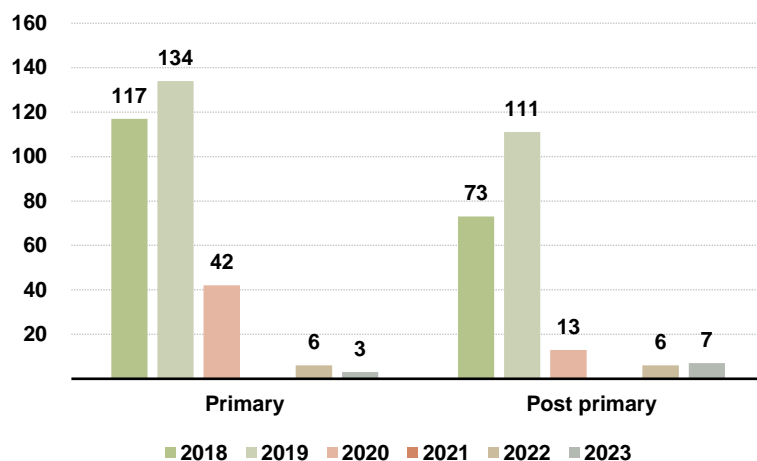
¹ Procedure for the review of inspections carried out by the Department of Education Inspectorate under Section 13(9) of the Education Act 1998 can be found [here](#).

- 8.33** The Department stated that the vast bulk of concerns or complaints about inspections are successfully resolved through engagement with an informal review process.

Follow-through inspections

- 8.34** The responsibility for implementation of Inspectorate recommendations to schools lies with the board of management, school principals and teachers.
- 8.35** Follow-through inspections may be undertaken by the Inspectorate to evaluate the progress in addressing some or all of the recommendations made on an earlier inspection. They are typically carried out within a three-year period. Schools with elements of performance that received less than a satisfactory rating are prioritised for follow-through inspections. However, it is not mandatory to conduct follow-through inspections.
- 8.36** When entering inspection results on the IMIS following an inspection, inspectors are required to indicate if a further inspection is required. The Inspectorate uses this information to select schools which should be subject to further inspection. The appropriate inspection activity for follow-through may be any of the range of inspection types and advisory activities.
- 8.37** The number of follow-through inspections reduced in 2020 and virtually ceased in 2021. Follow-through inspection numbers have not returned to anything like pre Covid-19 levels, as shown in Figure 8.7 below. The Department stated that this is because the overall inspection programme was adjusted in 2020, 2021 and 2022 in light of the impact of Covid-19 to prioritise child protection inspections, incidental inspections and urgent follow-through inspections. The Department further stated that other types of inspections were completed in schools that had been flagged for further inspection in those years such as incidental inspections.

Figure 8.7 Follow-through inspections 2018 – 2023



Source: Inspection Management Information System, Department of Education

Conclusions and recommendations

- 8.38** The Department provides just one output measure in relation to its inspection of primary and post primary schools in the annual revised estimate — the total number of inspections completed in each financial year. This is reported historically, and is not differentiated by type of inspection or education level. No target is set for the measure, against which delivery could be assessed.

Recommendation 8.1

The Department's Inspectorate should review and refine the performance measures currently being used to ensure that they more accurately reflect its full range of functions. This will assist both the Inspectorate in improving the decision making and planning process, and stakeholders in better assessing the annual output and effectiveness of the Inspectorate.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

To achieve this, more detailed tabulation of outputs of the Inspectorate will be provided in the Revised Estimate each year from Q4 2024. In addition, more detailed reporting on the breadth of Inspectorate activity across its main functions will be included in the Department's annual report and in the Department's annual statement of priorities (Forbairt).

The Inspectorate will publish its own annual report (in addition to contributing to the Department's wider annual report). The first Inspectorate annual report will be published in Q4 2024.

Timeline for implementation

Quarter 4 2024.

- 8.39** The Inspectorate's management information system (IMIS) shows the total number of inspections completed in the period September 2016 – December 2023 as 24,099 inspections. The examination found that this total number includes activities that related to other functions of the Inspectorate such as its advisory functions. When this advisory activity is excluded, it appears that a school will be subject to some type of an inspection on average at least every two years. However, there is no Departmental benchmark or target to assess this activity level against.

Recommendation 8.2

The Department's Inspectorate should set out a formal inspection policy that covers both the inspection and advisory functions of the Inspectorate, as part of the Department's corporate planning process. Inspection targets should then be set in line with that policy.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

Timeline for implementation

Quarter 2 2025.

- 8.40** The examination found issues with the quality of the data held within IMIS which makes analysing school inspection activity difficult. Over 50 descriptions had been entered into the 'inspection type' field in IMIS. While some of these were easily identifiable as an inspection type, for many other activities recorded it was not as clear.
- 8.41** Some of the descriptions recorded in the 'inspection type' field also related to the other functions of the Inspectorate including advising schools in areas such as school self-evaluation, provision for safe schooling, continuity of learning and resumption of schooling post Covid-19. Advisory activity and school placement appeals represents 44% of the total number recorded as inspections since 2016.

Recommendation 8.3

The Department's Inspectorate should review the range of inspection and other activities it undertakes and redevelop its IMIS to improve its data analytical capabilities. This should include putting controls in place within IMIS to ensure that inspection activity and other activity are clearly categorised.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

The Inspectorate will develop and introduce revised approaches to inspections on a phased basis between October 2024 and September 2027. The Inspectorate will work with the Department's ICT division to examine how IMIS can be enhanced and supported to provide better information.

Timeline for implementation

October 2024 to September 2027.

- 8.42** Inspection reports are completed and published following most inspections. These reports include the inspector's findings and recommendations, which are issued to the relevant school for factual verification and school response before being finalised and published. A review process is also in place if required. The Department stated that the vast bulk of concerns or complaints about inspections are resolved informally with just four proceeding to formal review in the period 2018 – 2023.

Follow-through inspections

- 8.43** Responsibility for implementation of Inspectorate recommendations rests with the board of management, school principals and teachers. Upon completion of an inspection, the inspector may indicate that a follow-through inspection is required. Schools with elements of performance that received less than a satisfactory rating are prioritised for follow-through inspections. However, follow-through inspections ceased during Covid-19, and have only resumed at minimal levels.

Recommendation 8.4

The Department's Inspectorate should strengthen its approach to follow-through inspections, including formalising its procedures, to provide assurance that inspection recommendations are appropriately addressed by the schools.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

The Department and the Inspectorate accept the need to build further on current approaches to follow-through inspection and engagement with schools and to formalise current procedures to strengthen school self-evaluation (SSE) and action planning for improvement.

A systematic process of follow-through inspections is already in place. Inspections labelled as 'follow-through inspections' are not the only methodology used to support full implementation of inspection recommendations. The Inspectorate conducts school self-evaluation visits and other types of advisory visits to schools. These are designed to build the capacity of school personnel to fulfil their role as leaders of school improvement, including their role in leading the implementation of inspection recommendations. This practice is in keeping with international best practice and provides an effective follow-through function in supporting/empowering schools to take ownership of quality improvement.

Timeline for implementation

Quarter 4 2025.

