

Witness Name: Faustina Graham

Statement No.:1

Exhibits: FG/01 – FG/114

Dated: 04 July 2025

## UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF FAUSTINA GRAHAM

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I, Faustina Graham, Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate will say as follows: -

#### Introduction

1. I make this statement in response to a request from the Inquiry dated 4 April 2025 made under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 asking for a witness statement in connection with Module 8 of the Inquiry.
2. This statement is to the best of my knowledge and belief accurate and complete at the time of signing. The Department of Education (DE) continues to work on its involvement in the Inquiry, and should any additional, relevant material be discovered, I will of course ensure that this material is provided to the Inquiry and I would be happy to make a supplementary statement if required. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is cited in the DE Statement for Module 8 [Ref–M08-DENI-001] as included and actively involved in the contingency arrangements under the Continuity of Learning arrangements.
3. I was appointed Chief Inspector (CI) in September 2020 and took up post in November 2020. My predecessor, Noelle Buick, retired from her post as CI at the end of March 2020; the intention to retire was publicly announced on 22 January 2020 [FG/01 - INQ000641909]. I am a former ETI Assistant Chief Inspector (ACI) but was seconded as a Director in DE from April 2014 until taking up post as CI.

Since Ms Buick retired and prior to my appointment as CI, the ETI Inspectorate Management Group (IMG), comprising two of the three ACIs covered the duties of the CI post (the third ACI was absent on sick leave from November 2019 to mid-May 2020). In preparing this statement I have access to the required documentation and inspector colleagues, in order to ensure compliance with this request. At June 2025, of the three ACIs in post at the start of the pandemic, one has retired, another has moved to another Northern Ireland Civil Service post and the third is undertaking a different inspection role in ETI.

## **Part A - Roles and responsibilities of the Education and Training Inspectorate**

4. ETI is formally a part of DE, although inspection activity goes beyond the statutory education sector. We also provide inspection services for the Department for the Economy (DfE) and other commissioning Departments. ETI co-operates and undertakes joint working with the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI) and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), operating under the terms of Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with those organisations. We are based in and are funded by DE, although we work across all phases of publicly funded education and training in Northern Ireland. Our principal duty is to assist DE, DfE and other commissioning departments in their discharge of responsibility for education, youth provision and training in Northern Ireland. ETI inspects purposeful activity within prisons, evaluating the quality of prisoner work roles, education, training and skills. We also undertake Tier 4 educational oversight and annual monitoring review inspections (for provision up to and including, level 3) on behalf of the Home Office.
  
5. Article 102 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 requires that every school, institution of further education, grant-aided institution or establishment and institution or establishment which is maintained or managed by the Education Authority (EA), shall be open at all times to inspection. ETI exercises its functions in line with Article 102, which sets out the duties of inspectors to monitor, inspect and report on the standard of education being provided in organisations and advise the commissioning Departments as

appropriate [FG/02 - INQ000641910]. We have engaged in a significant transformation programme over the last three years to revise and develop the processes for how those statutory duties are carried out, with a key aim of ensuring that the work of ETI has a positive and sustainable impact on school/organisation improvement.

6. ETI comprises both professional inspection staff, mostly qualified teachers, and an administrative planning and support team. As CI, I am the most senior member of ETI and report to Permanent Secretary of DE. I am also a member of the DE Board and Top Management Group (TMG).
7. ETI is a unitary inspectorate which provides an independent inspection service. ETI does not have a statutory regulatory role. ETI is not an Arm's Length Body; it carries out inspections as appointed by DE under Article 102(3) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. Our vision is 'to be the voice for equity and excellence for all learners', and our mission is 'empowering improvement'.
8. Inspection serves three main purposes: ensuring public accountability; encouraging improvement at organisation and system level by raising standards; and collecting first-hand evidence that can be used to inform education and training policy. ETI plays a central role in school/organisation improvement and the raising of standards across the education and training systems in Northern Ireland by monitoring, inspecting and reporting on the standard of education and training provided in: early years; primary, post-primary and special schools; education other than at school (EOTAS); further education (FE); work-based learning (WBL); youth; and initial teacher education.
9. The table below provides the number of settings/organisations in each phase inspected by ETI at June 2025.

Phase	Number of Settings/Organisations
Early years	38 Sure Starts 322 voluntary and community pre-schools 256 Nursery classes in Primary Schools

	44 Reception classes
Nursery Schools	93
Primary Schools	781
Post-primary schools	190
Special Education	40
FE	7
WBL	25
Youth	1400 (focus for inspection is larger local youth clubs, headquarter organisations, outdoor education centres and regional services)
EOTAS	38
Independent	14
Other - including prison work, initial teacher education and Home Office	4 prisons 4 initial teacher education providers 1 private language school (Tier 4 Educational Oversight)

10. ETI undertakes individual organisation inspections as well as cross-cutting thematic evaluations and broader inspection work which contribute to policy, planning and improvement work. Each thematic evaluation has Terms of Reference agreed with DE or DfE. ETI also publishes case studies and outcomes of consultations; ETI does not have a research function.
11. There are currently 3.5 full-time equivalent ACIs and one Director who, under my direction, participate in the formulation and implementation of ETI's policies, strategies, and the business and corporate plans. Each ACI / Director leads a specific area of work within ETI. There are seven Managing Inspectors (MIs), each of whom manages a team of specialist inspectors, often with specific roles. A role that inspectors undertake is that of District Inspector (DI), with responsibility for a group of schools or organisations within specified geographical areas for their phase. The Inquiry may wish to note that the DI role is unique to Northern Ireland and is not part of the delivery model of other UK inspectorates. District visits complement and supplement the centrally determined inspections;

providing a valuable opportunity for the DI and school/organisation to engage professionally, outside the context of the formal inspection programme. The organisation chart for ETI is included as **[FG/03 - INQ000641911]**.

12. The DE response to Module 8 of the Inquiry indicates that on 18 March 2020, in response to the developing Covid-19 pandemic, the then CI Noelle Buick informed all schools and settings that ETI was taking the unprecedented action of pausing all inspections with immediate effect and until further notice. The rationale for this action was to enable schools and settings to focus on the health and well-being of staff, pupils and students and to plan for imminent closures **[FG/04 - INQ000641912]**. While individual organisation inspections were paused, ETI remained focused on the safety and well-being of children and young people and the continuity of their education. There was no change in the legislative framework for ETI for any phase of education.
13. During the initial stage of the pandemic, all ETI inspectors and staff were redeployed to support the education system. DIs worked collaboratively with relevant managing authorities and support bodies, namely, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC) and the Education Authority (EA) to support individual schools as a designated Covid-19 Cross-Organisation Link Officer (COLO) providing support for Covid-19 related issues and communicating DE guidance at key points. Other aspects of support, referenced throughout this statement, included: publishing evaluations of children and young people's experiences of learning remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic; providing practical advice and guidance on learning and teaching to support continuity of learning; and providing policy advice and support to DE in relation to the creation, implementation and evaluation of alternative approaches to learning and assessment, including alternative assessment for public examinations. Examples include: **[FG/05 - INQ000641915]**, **[FG/06 - INQ000641921]**, **[FG/07 - INQ000641922]**, **[FG/08 - INQ000641923]**, **[FG/09 - INQ000641925]**, **[FG/10 - INQ000532059]**.
14. Initially, the then CI was a member of the DE Incident Management Team (IMT) which was best placed to address the major elements of the DE response. ETI

was represented by ACIs as required and following the then CI's retirement in March 2020.

15. In June 2020, ETI published an update **[FG/11 - INQ000641944]** indicating that when schools and providers re-opened to all children and young people, inspections would continue to be paused for a period of time (subject to review). ETI indicated that it would continue to review and monitor the situation in line with input from the then Education Minister, DE, other commissioning departments and agencies, the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Executive. ETI emphasised that it would continue to work with schools, providers and the wider education and training system to provide advice and support.
16. On taking up my post in November 2020, I reviewed the role of COLO and decided to gradually expand the role over the January to Easter term of 2021, to include also the more normal monitoring and advisory role carried out by Inspectors as DIs for schools and settings.
17. It is important to set out the context within which ETI has been operating over the past number of years, including the period leading up to, and after, the Covid-19 pandemic. For prolonged periods of time over the last decade, industrial action by the teaching unions, which included non-cooperation with inspection, limited robust evaluation in schools, and more widely at system level. However, ETI continued to deliver in challenging and uncertain times, with resilience, flexibility, and a continuous focus on equity and excellence for all learners. The context for change is important - the then Education Minister, now Lord Weir, made public (reflecting ongoing internal discussion with the then CI) his decision that inspection needed to change. In March 2020, the Belfast Telegraph reported that 'Education Minister, Peter Weir has called for "radical change" in the way that school inspections are carried out'. The article went on to explain that 'Mr Weir said the culture of inspections has to change, with more trust placed in the professionalism of teachers as "experts in their field" **[FG/12 - INQ000641945]**.
18. The Minister went on to outline that he wanted a radical change in the direction of travel of inspections, "I detailed this in a previous policy paper 'Reducing the

Burden' and how I would like to see inspections reformed." Mr Weir said the culture of inspections had to change, based around three key principles.

- "We need to see a higher trust in the professionalism of teachers and to allow teachers to deliver, and, accompanying with that, a light touch regime when it comes to what monitoring needs to happen."
- "Secondly, we need to reach a point where there is no additional data to be produced, by schools, ahead of any inspection. We should trust teachers as experts in their fields and not just data providers. The best schools are schools which start from the point of self-evaluating."
- "Thirdly, there must be a change in the approach and in relationships. "We need to shift away from the current model to an educational improvement service based around collaboration, based around supporting schools, based around mutual respect and generating two-way discussions."

19. I began my tenure as CI therefore, working to the mandate of the then Education Minister in taking forward a review of the extant model of inspection. In doing so, I have sought to deliver on the key aspects of change required and move to an equally, if not more, accountable inspection model, but fundamentally less formulaic and bureaucratic.
20. ETI's DIs had and continued to play a critical role in ensuring ongoing engagement and professional dialogue with individual schools/organisations across all phases of education and training. The formal inspection of individual organisations remained paused throughout the specified period of the pandemic. However, ETI adapted to new flexible ways of learning and working. ETI publications during the period of the pandemic identified effective practice and challenges, using the outcomes to stimulate discussion between inspectors and practitioners, as the changes were happening. A wide range of policy advice was provided, often at short notice, again drawing on the effective working relationships which were developing between DIs and school leaders.
21. During 2021/2022, I ensured a range of DI activity continued across all phases of education and training, including the identification and sharing of good and effective practice via reports published on the ETI website. In the primary and

post-primary sectors, there was a focus on monitoring and evaluating the DE-funded Engage Programme. The aim was to limit any long-term adverse impact of Covid-19 by supporting pupils' learning and engagement on their return to school/setting, through provision of high-quality, one-to-one, small group or team teaching support in every school/setting in Northern Ireland.

22. A further update, provided on the ETI website in April 2021 **[FG/13 - INQ000641946]**, advised that while formal inspections across all education and training phases remained paused (subject to review), ETI continued to reserve the right to conduct a formal inspection where there were serious concerns about provision. For example, while inspections continued to be paused, ETI published a report in relation to safeguarding arrangements in an organisation **[FG/14 - INQ000641947]**. We also advised of our intention to conduct a range of short formal monitoring visits to a number of schools and organisations across all education and training phases which were in the follow-up inspection process. I ensured that the visits would focus on the individual organisation's view of improvements effected prior to the pandemic and any impact of Covid-19 on the curriculum, including practical work, learning experiences and the quality of learning and teaching.
23. As part of the DI role, information was gathered on the adaptations school principals (including those of special schools) made in relation to the changing needs of their pupils as a result of:
  - the impact of Covid-19 related events and changed routines at home and at school; and
  - the increase in the number of pupils presenting with complex learning, physical and emotional health and well-being needs.
24. During the specified period, ETI senior management briefed the Education Ministers, Peter Weir (January 2020 - June 2021) and Michelle McIlveen (June 2021- October 2022), and the DE senior management team on the need for a continued pause in inspection and on key findings from inspection activity as illustrated for example in **[FG/14 - INQ000641947]**. ETI also provided an update to the Committee for Education on remote learning.

25. The senior inspection team attended virtual meetings of the Heads of Inspectorates in England, Scotland, Wales and Republic of Ireland throughout the specified period, at which the latest developments, issues and challenges were discussed, and practice and emerging findings were shared.
26. ETI was commissioned by DE, as part of the Continuity of Learning Programme, to provide guidance on effective ways in which the curriculum could be tailored (planned for, implemented and assessed) across the range of areas of learning for a phased return for children to full-time education.
27. DE asked for a series of pieces of work, which would reflect the changing circumstances in which schools were working, to provide up-to-date advice and guidance on an ongoing basis. **The Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches** phase-specific publications [FG/15 - INQ000641927], [FG/16 - INQ000641928], [FG/17 - INQ000641929], [FG/18 - INQ000641931] represents the first phase of that work. Across June 2020, ETI met reference groups of curricular coordinators, Heads of Departments and leaders on a cross-sectional basis from across Northern Ireland to seek their views on the challenges of remote learning and teaching, and what approaches they might take in moving towards a return to face-to-face teaching complemented by blended learning where necessary.
28. ETI conducted a range of commissioned thematic evaluations to monitor and report on key contemporary areas, including those relevant to the pandemic and post-pandemic contexts as well as gathering information on themes through district visits. These are detailed further in the statement. In addition, ETI held dissemination events for Physical Education in Primary Schools, Specialist Provisions in Mainstream, Preventative Curriculum and the Engage II programme [FG/19 -INQ000641957], [FG/20 - INQ000648272], [FG/21 - INQ000648263] and [FG/22 - INQ000641979].
29. The ETI's approach to support schools and providers while inspection was paused, and the move through recovery towards a resumption of inspection,

aimed to be highly responsive to the conditions being experienced by schools and was based on three guiding principles:

- promoting improvement in the best interests of children and young people as the unifying purpose of improvement and inspection, putting them at the centre, especially their health, mental well-being and resilience;
- understanding that recovery and renewal are a shared context for schools, providers and inspectors; and
- taking account of the context of the school and providers, including socio-economic factors, funding, community and pastoral needs, and multi-agency support services accessed.

30. The best interests of children and young people remained at the heart of all ETI inspection activity throughout the specified period.

#### **Part B - Planning prior to the pandemic**

31. DE had specific responsibility for oversight of preparedness, response and recovery arrangements for the education sector. As ETI is part of DE, it is included within the departmental arrangements. ETI had no designated role in the emergency planning arrangements other than providing professional advice. ETI does not have a specific role in planning for potential school closures, how children and young people's learning would be protected or how the welfare or safety of children would be protected.
32. DE's Major Emergency Response Plan (MERP) [FG/23 - INQ000617094] provides a framework for the central management and co-ordination of a high-level response, by DE, to a range of possible emergencies. The MERP relates primarily to DE and its staff; it was created in 2008 and, along with business continuity plans, was invoked at the onset of Covid-19, including the implementation of a Departmental Operating Centre (DOC). The role of the DOC is explained in the DE response to the Inquiry.

33. ETI was not consulted directly by the Northern Ireland Executive. ETI had no role in the decision to close schools. The CI is not the decision maker for specific emergency responses. ETI's role is to provide professional advice.
34. There were no changes made to the legislative framework within which ETI operated during this time and there was no consultation with any external bodies about the role of ETI during this period.
35. As set out in the DE response to the Inquiry, the maintenance of children's services is primarily the responsibility of the EA.

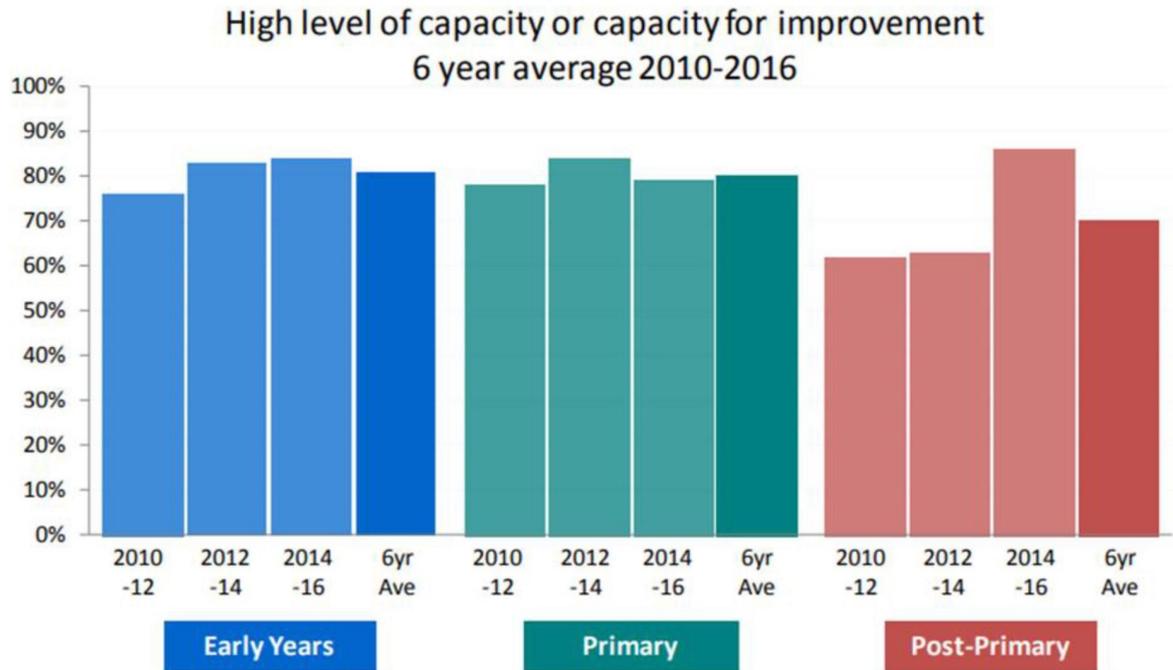
## **Part C - The Inspectorate's data about and assessment of the impact of the pandemic on children and young people's education**

### **Learning and education prior to the pandemic**

36. During the period 2015-2020, ETI reported on the quality of education provision in individual organisation inspections using four overall effectiveness conclusions (the OEC) as set out below.
  - OEC1: The organisation has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
  - OEC2: The organisation demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
  - OEC3: The organisation needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the area(s) for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.
  - OEC4: The organisation needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all the learners (for schools: it requires external support to do so). The ETI will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.

37. In the five-year period up to 2020, ETI continued to inspect across a number of phases of education and training. Prior to the pandemic, ETI published reports for individual organisation inspections and thematic evaluations. **The Chief Inspector's Report** is a biennial report which encompasses the findings from inspections, a wide range of thematic evaluations and district work across a range of sectors.
38. In the five-year period preceding the pandemic, ETI published two biennial Chief Inspector's Reports for the reporting periods 2014-16 **[FG/24 - INQ000641948]** and 2016-2018 **[FG/25 - INQ000641949]**, which encompassed findings from inspections, surveys and district work. They detailed what was going well but also highlighted the key challenges facing Northern Ireland's education and training system during the time span covered. The last Chief Inspector's report was in 2018. Due to sustained Action Short of Strike (ASoS) by teachers, the evidence base was incomplete and therefore the data unreliable for use at system level to compile a 2020 CI report.
39. **The Chief Inspector's Report 2014-2016 [FG/24 - INQ000641948]** included also a synopsis of the quality of education and training in Northern Ireland over the previous six years to indicate a longer term trend, noting sustained improvements in early years provision in particular. My predecessor noted that since 2010, the average percentage of early years settings with a "high level of capacity" or "capacity" to identify and bring about improvement was 81%. Over the six years, the average percentage of the primary schools inspected with a high level of capacity or capacity to identify and bring about improvement was 80%. In the post-primary phase, while the schools inspected in this 2014-16 cohort showed a more positive picture than in previous reports, across all six years, this sector still had more room for improvement than the other two sectors, with just over 70% of the schools inspected having a "high level of capacity" or "capacity" to identify and bring about improvement.
40. The inspection trends over the six years from 2010-2016 and longer, in the settings and schools inspected, indicated that 20% of children across early years

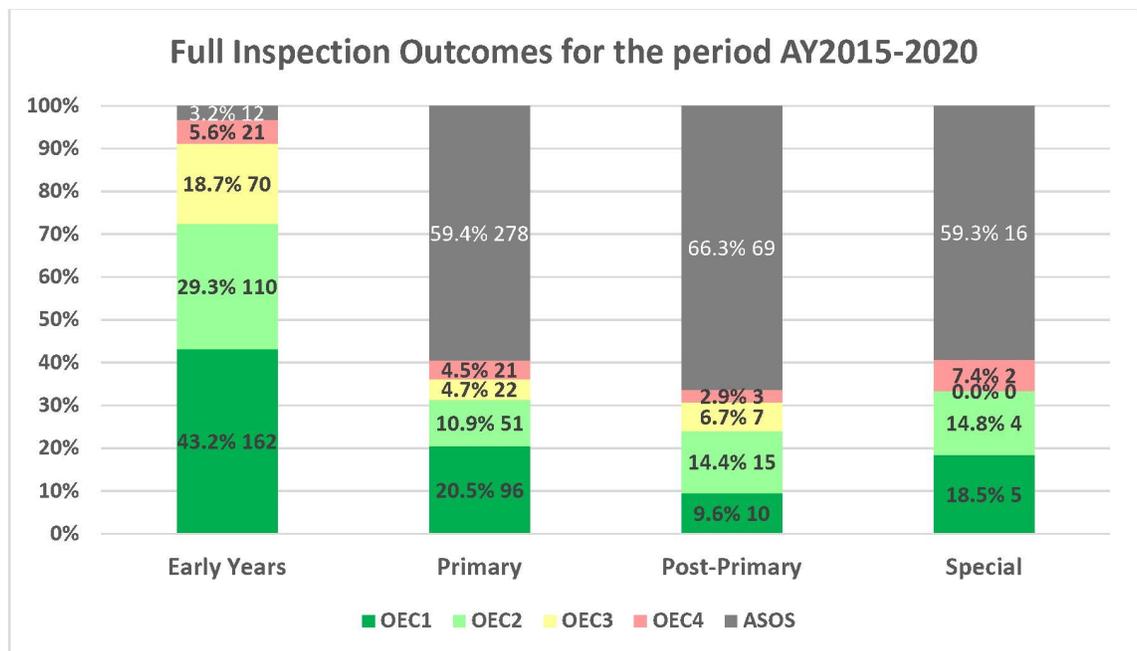
and primary and 30% in post-primary were accessing education that was not good enough, indicated by an inspection outcome of OEC3 or OEC4.



(\*Source: The Chief Inspector's Report for 2014-2016 Commentary Page 4)

41. From January 2017 to the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the Inspectorate's assessment of the overall quality of education in Northern Ireland was impacted significantly by a prolonged period of industrial action involving ASoS. In January 2017 four of the five teaching unions, which make up the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC), declared industrial action primarily in relation to a pay dispute, with one of the actions being non-co-operation with ETI inspections.
42. Where an inspection was impacted by ASoS, the conclusion from 2017 to 2020 stated that ETI was "unable to assure parents/carers, the wider school community and stakeholders of the quality of education being provided for the pupils' and was 'unable to evaluate fully the outworking of the arrangements for safeguarding in the school'".

43. As a consequence, **The Chief Inspector’s Report 2016-2018, [FG/25 - INQ000641949]** (p. 8): “stated: ‘It is not, however, appropriate, in this Chief Inspector’s Report (2016-2018), to compare detailed inspection evidence of improvement in each of these three phases with the findings from the periods covered by previous Chief Inspector’s reports because (since January 2017) of fewer lesson observations, different inspection models and the new ISEF”. The term ISEF refers to the new framework for inspection at that time; the Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework, which was introduced in January 2017 [FG/26 - INQ000641932], [FG/27 - INQ000641933], [FG/28 - INQ000641934], [FG/29 - INQ000641935], [FG/30 - INQ000641936], [FG/31 - INQ000641937], [FG/32 - INQ000641938], [FG/33 - INQ000641939], [FG/34 - INQ000641940], [FG/35 - INQ000641941], [FG/36 - INQ000641942], [FG/37 - INQ000641943].
44. During the period 2015-2020, ETI used four overall effectiveness conclusions (the OEC). The graph below shows the percentage of inspections with an individual organisation inspection outcome at each of the four OEC levels for each phase.



\*In addition, there were follow-up inspections, sustaining improvement inspections, and monitoring inspections which were impacted to varying degrees by ASoS.

45. From the 2015-16 to the 2016-17 academic year, just over 80% of early years settings with a full inspection were evaluated as OEC1 or 2. From 2017 there was a declining trend to two-thirds of settings inspected being evaluated as OEC1 or 2 by 2019-20 (82.9%; 81.4%; 74.2%; 65.6%; 66.0%). The statutory nursery settings were following action short of strike from January 2017 which meant that only inspections of voluntary and private pre-school providers resulted in an overall effectiveness conclusion being reported during this period.
46. From 2016-17 to 2019-20, it is not possible to draw conclusions about any trends in the quality of provision in the primary, post-primary and special sectors due to the significant impact of industrial action on individual organisation inspection.
47. **The Chief Inspector's Report for 2014-2016 [FG/24 - INQ000641948]** refers to key challenges for education and training in Northern Ireland identified in **The Chief Inspector's Report for 2012-2014 [FG/38 - INQ000641950]**. These included improving outcomes for learners; building on high quality provision; ensuring high quality leadership and management; reducing the variability of access to good provision; urging parents, carers and other stakeholders to get more involved; ensuring a broad and balanced curriculum; raising the ambition and aspiration of learners; developing capacity and high quality professional development for staff; and developing further the work of Shared Education partnerships.
48. In the 2014-16 report, the then CI acknowledged that while some progress had been made, key challenges remained for education and training in Northern Ireland. The report identified the need to:
- improve achievements and standards for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and for boys and Looked After Children in particular;
  - become more effective in early identification and supportive intervention for individuals with learning challenges;
  - collaborate to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, which is better adapted to the needs of learners and takes account of the current economic restraints;

- provide preventative education which strengthens the resilience of young people without diminishing their initiative and independence;
- continue to build the capacity of teachers and leaders at all levels to act as leaders of learning and be more effective in evaluating and continually improving provision and practice; and
- ensure more effective support and more rapid resolution of issues for schools and providers in challenging circumstances.

49. The analysis from a more limited evidence base for **The Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018 [FG/25 - INQ000641949]** indicated that the system continued to work very well for thousands of learners. It stated that, even in schools which provide well for most learners, there was undue variation in the quality of provision and outcomes for particular groups of learners, such as those with special educational needs (SEN), those with free school meals entitlement (FSME), newcomer pupils, looked after children, and boys. This report noted some persistent contemporary issues. These included the need to:

- develop the role and effectiveness of senior leaders and middle leaders in improving the quality of learning and teaching;
- improve outcomes for specific groups of learners and reduce inconsistencies in the quality of learning and teaching within and between institutions, especially matching it more closely to the learners' needs;
- ensure the safeguarding of children and young people was paramount;
- engage more closely with parents/carers as the 'first educators';
- extend curricular and teaching links which ease transitions; and
- improve the breadth and coherence of the provision for creative and expressive subjects.

50. The following captures, insofar as it is possible, the areas identified in Question 9, bearing in mind ETI's inability to make evaluations at system level based on robust first-hand evidence.

## **Attainment**

51. Northern Ireland has been without any national measures of school or system performance at primary school or at Key Stage (KS) 3 since 2013, due to

widespread non-participation as part of union action in the arrangements for statutory end of Key Stage assessment. In 2013, around one-fifth of pupils had not achieved the expected levels of literacy and numeracy at the end of primary school; this system-level data is no longer available. At primary level, Northern Ireland participates in two large-scale international assessments. Year 6 pupils take part in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study known as PIRLS and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study known as TIMSS. The **Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018 [FG/25 - INQ000641949]** highlighted that the **TIMSS study (2015) [FG/39 - INQ000641951]** showed that our 9-10 year-old children out-performed 42 of 50 countries in mathematics and were above the international average in science. The most recent **TIMSS Study (2019) [FG/40 - INQ000641952]** shows consistently strong performance of the children in mathematics and science during the period. In the **Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018 [FG/25 - INQ000641949]**, the **PIRLS Study (2016) [FG/41 - INQ000641954]** showed our 9-10 year-old children outperformed 41 of 49 countries and were significantly outperformed by only two.

52. Trends in attainment in public examinations, including General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), Advanced (A) Level and equivalent qualifications, show that the educational standards achieved by school leavers have improved significantly and steadily year-on-year during the period 2015 to 2019 (pre pandemic), with greater numbers and percentages of pupils achieving important qualifications and key benchmarks.
53. In 2018/19, 72.8% of Year 12 pupils attained the benchmark of at least 5 GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A\* to C, including GCSE English and mathematics; this was a rise from 67.7% in 2015/16. As in many systems internationally, there remains a strong correlation in Northern Ireland between socio-economic disadvantage and educational outcomes. For Year 12 pupils with free school meals entitlement, 54.1% attained the benchmark of at least 5 GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A\* to C including English and mathematics in 2018/19; this was a rise from 44.8% in 2015/16. In 2023/24, 52.5% of Year 12 pupils entitled to free school meals achieved this key benchmark. The gap in

attainment between pupils with free school meals entitlement and those who do not have free school meals entitlement closed over the period, but slowly.

54. Attainment at A level also improved over the period, particularly in non-grammar schools. In 2018/19, 58.8% of pupils in non-grammar schools attained three or more A levels (or equivalent) at Grades A\* to C, compared to 51.5% in 2015/16. In 2018/19, 79.7% of pupils in grammar schools attained this benchmark, compared to 76.3% in 2015/16.
55. During the pandemic, alternative awarding arrangements were in place, with GCSE, A Level and vocational qualifications awarded by the main awarding body in Northern Ireland, the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) based on Centre Determined Grades provided by post-primary schools, FE Colleges and other providers. Following the pandemic, there was a managed and staggered return to pre-pandemic standards by CCEA.

#### **Attendance**

56. ETI does not have a direct operational role in monitoring or gathering school attendance data.
57. **The Chief Inspector's Report 2016-18** stated that the rate of absence remained unacceptably high and continued to increase as pupils moved from primary to post-primary schools, remaining at a Northern Ireland average of 93.3% in post-primary schools. Of the 6.7% of absences in post-primary, almost one-third were unauthorised; and, while it was noted that it was difficult to make direct comparisons with other jurisdictions, at that time this was the highest level of unauthorised absence in the United Kingdom.
58. Additionally, it was noted that too many pupils were missing school as a result of suspension or expulsion. In 2016-2017, a total of 4,048 pupils of compulsory school age (4-16) were suspended and, alarmingly, 286 of these were primary school children. The number of boys being issued with suspension was approximately three times that of girls.

59. During 2015-16, ETI carried out a good practice survey into how schools improve attendance. **The Attendance in Schools - ETI Good Practice Report [FG/42 - INQ000641955]**, confirmed there is no 'quick fix' for poor attendance; a holistic approach is necessary. Leadership, vision, ethos, culture, pastoral care, a relevant and adaptive curriculum, careful consideration of the needs, interests and ability of all of the learners, teaching which engenders engaged learning for all learners, prompt responses to upward trends in absence data, close engagement with parents, external agencies and others; all of these pieces make up a 'better attendance' jigsaw.

### **Elective home education**

60. I would highlight for the Inquiry that it is a matter for the EA to engage with home educators in line with its published guidelines. ETI does not have a role in inspecting home education as the remit of the ETI applies to education and training provided in schools or educational establishments.

### **Children and young people's behaviour, social development and engagement with learning**

61. In the five years preceding the specified period and previously, ETI reported on children's behaviour and engagement with learning in its inspection reports of individual organisations but did not collate this data at system level. Some notable comments from the Chief Inspector reports are worth the Inquiry's consideration. For example, in special schools, the 2016-2018 CI Report commented that: there was effective, creative, tailored provision for pupils with complex educational, social, emotional and behavioural needs; however in almost all of the schools, it indicated there was also insufficient capacity to meet the needs of the pupils with extremely challenging behaviour; and the schools reported that support from Health Trusts and the EA was insufficient and was often inadequate.
62. The report highlighted also that across education and training: a significant number of learners were presenting with even more complex and mental health

needs; and with reported inconsistencies in timely access to health and social services to respond to the growing demand.

63. ETI reported on children and young people's social and emotional development in individual and thematic reports. **The Chief Inspector's Report 2014-2016** identified the need to build children and young people's resilience and to co-operate with agencies and service providers in order to improve the well-being of children and young people.

64. **The Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018** identified the following:

- In nearly all pre-school settings in the period 2016-18, children's personal, social and emotional development is promoted effectively.
- While developing literacy and numeracy remains important, the holistic development of the child is central to the approach in most primary schools.
- Most EOTAS centres developed and implemented effective diagnostic systems to assess the pupils' social and emotional areas of need and set appropriate individual targets, with associated strategies. There is a clear focus on supporting the emotional well-being of the pupils.

### **Provision for children with special educational needs**

65. It is difficult to identify trends based on ETI inspections due to the impact of ASoS on the associated evidence base. Therefore, I would draw the Inquiry's attention to a report published by The Northern Ireland Audit Office in June 2017 on **Special Educational Needs** which focused on SEN provision in mainstream schools [FG/43 - INQ000641956]. The report highlighted the number of pupils with SEN and the associated rising costs. It indicated that while the educational achievements of pupils with SEN were improving, there has been no strategic evaluation of the support provided to ensure the best possible outcomes. Inconsistencies in the identification of children with SEN and unacceptable delays in the statementing process were also highlighted.

66. Ten recommendations were made and the report concluded that neither DE nor the EA could demonstrate value for money in terms of economy, efficiency or effectiveness in the provision of support to pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. Arising from recommendations 8 and 9 of the report, DE commissioned ETI to carry out an evaluation of the impact of SEN provision in mainstream schools and support for pupil outcomes, with a particular focus on effective early intervention strategies.
67. A full evaluation of the quality of the provision for SEN was inhibited by ASoS. ETI's **Report of a survey of Special Educational Needs in mainstream schools** (February 2019) [FG/44 - INQ000641958] concluded that: the available data from school admissions showed a continuing rise in the numbers of pupils with SEN; the evidence from schools is that the needs of pupils in mainstream schools are more complex, with an increasing number of children beginning school with under-developed communication, social and self-help skills; and that schools who have proven reputations for effective support for pupils with SEN, experience increased enrolments arising from pupil transfers from other schools.
68. I would also draw the Inquiry's attention to **Too Little Too Late: A Rights Based Review of Special Educational Needs Provision in Mainstream Schools**, published by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), in March 2020. The report [FG/45 - INQ000641959] presents the findings of a Rights Based Review of Special Educational Needs provision in mainstream schools in Northern Ireland. The Review found a system under extreme pressure, finding it difficult to respond to the scale of need and the complexity of issues that pupils are presenting. This is partly because the past 15 years has seen a significant rise in the number of children with SEN in Northern Ireland. The review also found alarming gaps in the collation of vital, disaggregated, basic operational data regarding SEN provision in mainstream schools. This includes the number of pupils who have not been prioritised for an assessment by education psychology but require access to specialist Stage 3 services; the number of pupils referred to the EA Educational Psychology Service; the waiting lists for Stage 3 services across EA regions; compliance with procedures put in place for transfer of information between EA and the Health

Trusts; and the number of vacant Educational Psychologist posts in the Educational Psychology Service. Challenges in the system have further been exacerbated by extensive delays in the implementation of the new policy and legislative framework for SEN in Northern Ireland. A total of 40 recommendations were made within the report.

### **Safeguarding in schools**

69. In the five years preceding the specified period and previously, ETI reported on safeguarding in its inspection reports and thematic evaluations. **The Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2018, [FG/25 - INQ000641949]** found that in most organisations inspected, the arrangements for safeguarding pupils reflected or reflected broadly the guidance issued by DE. In the minority of settings where there were shortcomings: training on child protection was not up to date; risk assessments were lacking; safeguarding policies and practices were not being revised routinely; and, in a very few cases, there were health or safety hazards.
70. In summary, prior to the pandemic, the key issues in relation to equitable outcomes for all children and young people were educational disadvantage, standards in literacy and numeracy, and provision for children with special educational needs.

### **The Inspectorate's work as an inspectorate in the education sector (excluding early years)**

71. ETI along with many others, had to rethink priorities quickly in response to the pandemic. ETI provided policy advice and support to DE in relation to the creation, implementation and evaluation of alternative approaches to learning and assessment. ETI supported policy development through the provision of timely, evidence-based, professional advice to promote improvement for learners.
72. ETI provided regular updates to stakeholders, including NICCY, throughout the period on its work with schools, providers and the wider education system, having

taken the decision to pause inspections to ease pressures on education and training providers. Communication was key and these updates were provided via ETI's website and its social media platforms, for example **[FG/11 - INQ000641944]** and **[FG/13 - INQ000641946]**.

73. Inspectors worked with other stakeholders, including CCEA, CCMS, CSSC, CnaG, C2K and EA, to support DE in providing guidance and support for schools as they moved to remote learning. This guidance was placed on the EA's "Supporting Learning at Home" site. Case studies were also filmed and were available to support schools through the C2K media library powered by Planet eStream **[FG/46 - INQ000641960]**.
74. Throughout the specified period, ETI welcomed invitations from principals and leaders of organisations who wished to highlight emerging learning in their setting, which they thought would benefit the education system more widely. This included an opportunity for schools and other education and training providers to discuss their approaches to remote learning with a DI and for inspectors to listen to the system's views and concerns on matters affecting schools and organisations and any possible future scenario planning. ETI's intention was to capture individual organisations' experiences of delivering, monitoring and reviewing provision with a view to evaluating the impact of the pandemic at system level, and identifying priorities for future development. Inspectors were keen to learn with and alongside practitioners and leaders for the future benefit of all learners. In doing so, it was ETI's intention to capture and disseminate the best practice that was emerging, despite the challenging circumstances and to identify practical priorities for the future of education and training policy and practice in Northern Ireland.
75. ETI was commissioned by DE as part of its 'Continuity of Learning Programme' to provide guidance on effective ways in which the curriculum could be tailored (planned for, implemented and assessed) across the range of areas of learning and subject areas for a phased return for children to full-time education. In undertaking the work, ETI met reference groups of curricular co-ordinators, heads of department and leaders on a cross-sectional basis from across Northern Ireland. **The Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and**

**approaches** phase-specific publications (June 2020) represented the first phase of that work [FG/15 - INQ000641927], [FG/16 - INQ000641928], [FG/17 - INQ000641929], [FG/18 - INQ000641931].

76. In an update of 21 January 2021, ETI informed the system that while inspections continued to be paused, priorities for ETI's engagement with education and training providers would be to evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum delivery focusing particularly on: the design, delivery and quality of remote learning; the impact on quality of learning and teaching; and the mental health and well-being support for learners, schools/providers and leaders. ETI signalled it would publish individual phase-specific reports covering: inspection findings (September 2018 to December 2020) [FG/47 - INQ000641961], [FG/48, - INQ000641962], [FG/49 - INQ000641963], [FG/50 - INQ000641964], [FG/51 - INQ000641965], [FG/52 - INQ000641966], [FG/53 - INQ000641967]; and lessons learned during the Covid-19 response and recovery phase-specific thematic reports on remote learning (May 2021) [FG/54 - INQ000641968], [FG/55 - INQ000641969], [FG/56 - INQ000641970], [FG/57 - INQ000641971], [FG/58 - INQ000641972].
77. ETI issued a questionnaire during the week of 25 January 2021 to gather insights into the sectors' experiences and reflections on the nature and extent of remote learning provision. The ETI consultation on the delivery of remote learning was completed by most pre-school settings, schools and EOTAS centres and resulted in publications of the quantitative analysis of the responses for pre-school, primary, post-primary, special and EOTAS centres (February 2021) [FG/59 - INQ000641916], [FG/60 - INQ000641917], [FG/61 - INQ000641918], [FG/62 - INQ000641919], [FG/63 - INQ000641920].
78. ETI issued questionnaires for all pupils in school, from years 6 to 14, from 1 June 2021 to 11 June 2021, inviting them to tell everyone interested in education more about what it was like to be a young person undertaking learning during the second Covid-19 lockdown of January to March 2021, when most pupils were learning remotely from home. ETI committed to ensuring that the information provided would not identify an individual school or respondent. Prior to issuing the questionnaires, ETI piloted the questionnaires beforehand with the support of school leaders, teachers and the unions. A total of 28,790 year 6 to year 14 pupils

completed the online questionnaires. Of these responses: 14,256 were year 6 and year 7 pupils from 45% of all primary schools; and 14,534 were pupils from 77% of post-primary schools. The majority (71%), of the post-primary responses were from KS3 pupils, largely because of the time of the school year that the survey took place.

79. In terms of remote learning, ETI identified **[FG/54 - INQ000641968], [FG/55 - INQ000641969], [FG/56 - INQ000641970], [FG/57 - INQ000641971], [FG/58 - INQ000641972]** some key measures for being better prepared for potential future lockdowns, and to realise many of the clear benefits that can accrue from effective remote learning, including:
- monitoring on a regular basis the amount of work expected from pupils while working remotely, particularly in the post-primary schools where several subject teachers may be making demands of them at the same time;
  - strategies to increase the level of pupils' connectivity with school, through, for example, participation in regular assemblies, class 'get-togethers' and more opportunities to work with their peers in small groups;
  - to develop the digital skills of pupils and staff, to ensure they are well equipped to use to best effect the functionality of the available digital platforms;
  - encouraging pupils to access remote learning through devices with sufficient functionality to engage and participate fully in all aspects of the learning process; and
  - reviewing the impact of the learning and teaching strategies deployed during lockdown, with a view to discerning those that work best for developing and consolidating the pupils' wider skills.
80. The **Phase-specific reports September 2018 and December 2020** (March 2021) **[FG/47 - INQ000641961], [FG/48 - INQ000641962], [FG/49 - INQ000641963], [FG/50 - INQ000641964], [FG/51 - INQ000641965], [FG/52 - INQ000641966], [FG/53 - INQ000641967]** represented evidence from inspections and evaluations carried out by ETI between September 2018 and December 2020, as well as analysis of ETI engagement with a significant number

of education and training settings across Northern Ireland during the period when inspection was paused in March 2020 due to the pandemic. The reports also included a range of key considerations going forward across the appropriate phases. The reports captured and articulated at system level what practitioners were learning as they were discovering new ways of working. They were intended to stimulate debate about effective learning and teaching and the future of education in Northern Ireland.

81. In the update of 13 April 2021, ETI informed the system also that we intended to conduct a range of short formal monitoring visits to a number of schools and organisations across all education and training phases which were currently in the follow-up inspection process. The visits were intended to support organisations to reflect on the strengths of their current provision with a view to being well prepared for a follow-up inspection when that could take place.
82. On 6 September 2021, ETI provided an update to the system, via its website and social media platforms, on its work for the academic year 2021-2022 and set out its five-step approach to work for the autumn term. The system was informed that ETI would:
  - consult with and listen to stakeholders, as ETI worked to review its corporate purpose and begin the planning of revised inspection protocols and procedures;
  - continue to carry out monitoring visits to support organisations in the follow-up process; and
  - support the education system by embarking on an ambitious programme of capacity and capability building, drawing on ETI's and practitioners' expertise to disseminate the learning accrued over the previous eighteen months.
83. ETI's 'Empowering Improvement – Stepping Forward Together' programme opened in October 2021. Through this programme, ETI embarked on an ambitious programme of capability building in the education system to help organisations to self-evaluate and improve provision for learners in the areas of:

senior and middle leadership; remote and digital learning; and classroom learning and teaching.

84. In October 2021, ETI began publishing its Learning Insights, at approximately fortnightly intervals, as part of the **Stepping Up and Stepping Forward series of ten Learning Insights** (February 2022) [FG/10 - INQ000532059] which draws on learning from the education and training system's response to the pandemic. These insights focused on how well Northern Ireland's education system responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and other challenges. It is informed by inspectors' direct and first-hand observation and collation of evidence from: their visits to schools and colleges as part of district engagement; and thematic evaluations, questionnaires, focus groups and interactions with practitioners across all education sectors. The series of ten learning insights was launched to coincide with National Children's Mental Health Week in February 2022.
85. Inspection of individual organisations in the statutory sector did not start again until 2022, ETI did not undertake 'blended inspections'.

#### **ETI publications linked directly to Covid-19**

86. During the period, ETI undertook and published the following linked directly to Covid-19 (not including early years which are detailed separately):
- a) **A collation of resources and information to support pupils with Special Educational Needs in the context of Remote Learning, as well as Remote Learning Advice for early years and primary** (20 March 2020) [FG/64 - INQ000641974], [FG/65 - INQ000641975], [FG/66 - INQ000641976].
  - b) **The Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches** phase-specific publications (June 2020) [FG/15 - INQ000641927], [FG/16 - INQ000641928], [FG/17 - INQ000641929], [FG/18 - INQ000641931] presented the views of settings and schools in June 2020 on the challenges of remote learning and teaching, and what approaches they might take in moving towards the return to school with as

many children and young people as possible, complemented by blended learning where necessary.

- c) **Safeguarding Remote and blended learning: challenges and approaches** (June 2020) [FG/67 - INQ000641930]; this paper identified the key safeguarding challenges faced by schools and educational/training organisations during the period of educational closures due to Covid-19 and how these have been approached across all phases of education and training.
  
- d) **The Effectiveness of Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) Camps Programme** (November 2020) - ETI was commissioned by DE, in collaboration with the Executive Office, to evaluate the effectiveness of the Together: Building a United Community Camps Programme (2019/20). The camps are cross-community and encourage participation from young people aged 11 to 19 years from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The evaluation reports on the main findings from ETI visits to a representative sample of urban, rural, schools, community, sports and faith-based camps visited during the period June to December 2019 and evaluates the effectiveness of the programme against its outcomes. The report also examines the leadership and management of the programme, data provided by the EA and makes comment on the safeguarding procedures [FG/68 - INQ000641914].
  
- e) **Phase-specific reports September 2018 and December 2020** (March 2021) [FG/47 - INQ000641961], [FG/48, - INQ000641962], [FG/49 - INQ000641963], [FG/50 - INQ000641964], [FG/51 - INQ000641965], [FG/52 - INQ000641966], [FG/53 - INQ000641967]. The reports represented evidence from inspections and evaluations carried out by ETI in this time period.
  
- f) **Thematic reports on Remote Learning (May 2021)** documented pre-schools', schools' and EOTAS centres' experiences of monitoring and evaluating the delivery and quality of remote learning, building on the

quantitative analysis and containing analysis of the qualitative findings from the consultation (February 2021), along with further qualitative evidence gathered during focused discussions by DIs with settings throughout January and February 2021 [FG/54 - INQ000641968], [FG/55 - INQ000641969], [FG/56 - INQ000641970], [FG/57 - INQ000641971], [FG/58 - INQ000641972]. The reports documented approaches and strategies, including those used for: mental health and well-being; remote learning; provision of feedback to pupils when learning remotely; and when pupils do not register or log on. The thematic reports include also feedback on the barriers to pupil engagement with remote learning and case studies.

- g) **Thematic Report on Primary Schools' Delivery, Monitoring and Evaluation of Effective Remote Learning** (May 2021) [FG/57 - INQ000641971]. A total of 616 primary schools completed the ETI questionnaire (77% of all of Northern Ireland's primary schools). This report references the quantitative and qualitative evidence obtained from the ETI questionnaire and includes further information, gathered during focused discussions undertaken by DIs between Monday 25 January and Friday 12 February 2021 with 103 teaching and non-teaching school leaders.
- h) **Thematic Report on Post-Primary Schools' Delivery, Monitoring and Evaluation of Effective Remote Learning** (May 2021) [FG/55 - INQ000641969]. A total of 159 schools (82% of all of Northern Ireland's 193 post-primary schools) completed the ETI questionnaire on the delivery of remote learning during the week of 25 January 2021. This report is informed by an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative evidence obtained from the questionnaire, and the further qualitative evidence gathered during focused discussions by DIs with just over one-fifth of schools (21%, or 40 of 193) between 25 January and 12 February 2021. Examples of approaches by schools appear throughout the report. Case studies from a further five schools detail their self-evaluation of delivering, monitoring and evaluating effective remote learning from March 2020 to February 2021.

- i) **Thematic Report on Special Schools' Delivery, Monitoring and Evaluation of Effective Remote Learning** (May 2021) [FG/58 - INQ000641972]. Sixty percent of special school principals responded to the questionnaire and the quantitative and qualitative data obtained is analysed within this report. The ETI also facilitated online or telephone discussions with the leadership of six special schools to identify case studies on effective practice in remote learning. An online meeting was arranged with a group of parents in one case study school, and with a board of governors in another to obtain their experiences and perspectives. DI discussions with school leaders between September 2020 and February 2021 also informed this report.
- j) **Consultation with Year 6 to 14 pupils about their learning experiences during the second Covid-19 lockdown, from January to March 2021** (November 2021) [FG/06 - INQ000641921]. **Pupil-friendly pamphlets of system-level views of what it was like to be a young person undertaking learning during the second Covid-19 lockdown, January to March 2021** (informed by the 28,790 responses of year 6 to year 14 pupils) were published in English and Irish, along with a summary of the quantitative data and a commentary report [FG/69 - INQ000648264], [FG/70 - INQ000648265], [FG/71 - INQ000648266], [FG/72 - INQ000648267], [FG/73 - INQ000648268], [FG/74 - INQ000648269], [FG/75 - INQ000648270], [FG/76 - INQ000648271].
- k) **Multi-disciplinary Approaches to Meeting the Needs of Pupils in Special Schools** (26 November 2021) - The report evaluated how a number of special schools with varying access to, and models of, multi-disciplinary support, met effectively the often complex needs of their pupils, reflecting on the positive impact on pupils' holistic development and learning. The majority of the representative sample of schools featured in this report have access to multi-disciplinary support. In addition, there are case studies of schools which have significantly less access to therapy, and schools which have had support from the Middletown Centre for Autism and music therapy services. The schools and external organisations invited to participate were identified

by ETI DIs based on knowledge gained through district engagement [FG/77 - INQ000641926].

- l) **An evaluation of the curriculum, with a particular focus on life skills and play in special schools** (26 November 2021) - The report draws on engagement with school leaders and teachers during February and March 2021, regarding their views on how they have managed the curriculum in their schools, with a particular focus on play and life skills during the Covid-19 pandemic. The evidence draws on DI knowledge of the experiences across all special schools during the pandemic. Six special schools were involved in more detailed, focused discussions; most of these schools had or were in the process of reviewing or revising their curriculum either prior to or during the Covid-19 pandemic. The experience of the pandemic reaffirmed for leaders and school staff the critical need for a flexible, pupil-centred curriculum [FG/78 - INQ000641913].
  
- m) **An evaluation of the Department of Education's Engage Programme in primary and post-primary schools during 2020-2021** (December 2021) focused on how schools provided effective intervention programmes for those pupils whose learning had been impacted adversely by the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools were selected based on the amount of funding they received, DI information and a sector and geographical spread [FG/79 - INQ000641978].
  
- n) **The 'Stepping Up and Stepping Forward' series** (February 2022) commenced publication with Learning Insight 1 in October 2021 and continued until publication of Learning Insight 10 in December 2021, with the series of 10 Learning Insights then published collectively. **Stepping Up and Stepping Forward: 10 Learning Insights on how well Northern Ireland's education system is responding to Covid-19 and other challenges'** [FG/10 - INQ000532059].
  
- o) **Independent evaluation of the Gaeltacht e-Hub Pilot Project** (March 2021) - this evaluation report of the Gaeltacht e-Hub Pilot Project was

commissioned by the Department of Education (Government of Ireland) from the Education and Training Inspectorate (Northern Ireland) to provide an external, independent view of the pilot project. The Gaeltacht e-Hub was an innovative three-year pilot project of the Department of Education (Government of Ireland) aimed at facilitating students in Gaeltacht post-primary schools to study Higher-Level Physics online through the medium of Irish for the Leaving Certificate. The original timings and organisation of evaluation of the e-Hub pilot had to be reviewed to take account of the constraints and limitations imposed by the Covid-19 virus pandemic [FG/80 - INQ000641924].

- p) **A Thematic Evaluation of Physical Education in Primary Schools** (October 2022) - DE commissioned ETI to undertake a thematic evaluation of physical education (PE) provision in primary schools. During March 2022, ETI engaged with 84 primary schools to observe practice and discuss their experiences of delivering the statutory PE curriculum. The report recognised how primary school PE had been impacted significantly by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic resulted in a significantly restricted PE programme across the schools due to: the initial DE 2021/2022 curriculum planning recommendation advising schools not to teach PE indoors with more than fifteen children at any one time; the re-purposing of some multi-purpose halls; a limitation on facilities and equipment; reduced or no access to external facilities, such as swimming pools or community halls; increased cleaning responsibilities; a dependency on outside spaces; and restricted or no access to extra-curricular activities [FG/19 - INQ000641957].
- q) **An Evaluation of the Department of Education's Engage II Programme in schools, pre-school settings and EOTAS Centres during 2021-2022, (May 2023)** [FG/22 - INQ000641979]. DE commissioned the ETI to evaluate the effectiveness of the Engage Programme during the 2021-2022 academic year and in particular its impact on children and young people's learning. Schools were selected based on the amount of funding they received DI information and a sector and geographical spread.

## Attendance during and post-pandemic

87. ETI's role is to identify and share effective strategies for schools to improve school attendance, rather than to directly monitor or gather attendance data. ETI's focus during the specified period was on understanding the broader impact of the pandemic through engagement with schools and educational settings.
88. On returning to school, a number of children struggled to settle back in. In the **Primary Insights Report September 2021 to September 2024**, ETI noted a legacy of Covid-19 is low attendance. For example, a number of children could not attend full days due to increased anxiety or attachment issues. The **ETI evaluation of DE's Engage II Programme (2021-22)** found that post-primary schools continued to battle ongoing pupil and staff absences due to the pandemic, which often required redeploying staff to cover sickness. This is mirrored in the **ETI Post-Primary Insights Report September 2021 to September 2024**, where the proportion of post-primary pupils missing ten percent or more of schooling had more than doubled compared to pre-pandemic (2017/18) levels **[FG/81 - INQ000641977] and [FG/22 - INQ000641979]**.
89. ETI identified a number of factors which affected school attendance during the specified period.
- Pupil mental health and well-being emerged as leading causes of absenteeism. The ETI found a marked increase in anxiety-driven absences. In primary schools, staff reported more children avoiding school for emotional or attachment reasons (**Primary Insights Report September 2021 to September 2024**).
  - In post-primary schools, inspectors noted higher disengagement, lower attendance and increases in emotionally-based/anxiety-based school avoidance. Complex health and SEN issues also contribute: poor mental health and medical needs were frequently cited as reasons for absence (**Post-Primary Insights Report September 2021 to September 2024**). In

many cases, these attendance difficulties coincide with broader social/emotional issues.

90. In summary, the issues related to attendance identified in the 2016-18 Chief Inspector's Report, not only remain but have been exacerbated as a result of Covid. Schools implemented a range of measures to mitigate concerns about attendance throughout the pandemic. Key measures included:

- Pastoral and well-being support - schools introduced or expanded nurture groups, well-being hubs, and counselling services to respond to increased anxiety, emotional difficulties, and school avoidance, particularly in the primary and post-primary phases.
- Parental engagement and communication - schools placed greater emphasis on strengthening home-school relationships, aiming to provide collaborative support for pupils with chronic absence or emotionally-based school refusal.
- Monitoring attendance and early identification - attendance was closely monitored to identify early at-risk pupils and to tailor interventions.
- Participation in the Engage and Engage II programmes - these programmes funded additional staffing to provide targeted small-group teaching, literacy and numeracy interventions, and social-emotional support. ETI's evaluation noted that many schools used these programmes to re-engage pupils who had poor attendance, through mentoring and supporting them with enhanced personal care.
- Collaboration with external agencies - where possible, schools worked with Education Welfare Officers, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and Behaviour Support Teams to support pupils with complex needs. Some schools also engaged with pilot attendance improvement projects.

91. ETI assessed that the Covid-19 pandemic did have a sustained, longer-term impact on school attendance in Northern Ireland. ETI highlighted systemic constraints such as long delays or gaps in professional support, which make it harder to tackle absences early. For example, industrial action and staffing

shortages in the Education Welfare Service (EWS) impacted negatively on follow-up attendance referrals (**Primary Insights Report, September 2021 to September 2024**). Many schools reported a high volume of referrals for external support (Educational Welfare Officers, Educational Psychologists, HSC CAMHS) but insufficient resources to meet them. In post-primary EOTAS centres, the ETI noted that pupils' needs are often diagnosed too late, making it difficult to prevent disengagement. Likewise, inconsistent application of suspension/expulsion policies has left some pupils out of school for whole days or longer (**Post-primary Insights Report, September 2021 to September 2024**). ETI noted also that pupils taking family holidays in term-time contribute to lower attendance in some schools.

92. ETI highlighted a marked and sustained decline in attendance across all school phases compared to pre-pandemic levels. For example, in post-primary schools, the percentage of pupils missing 10% or more of school more than doubled between 2018/19 and 2022/23. ETI attributed this ongoing trend to increased pupil anxiety, emotionally-based school avoidance, disengagement from school routines, and difficulties re-establishing consistent attendance following periods of disruption. The legacy of Covid and industrial action necessitates more action to empower school improvement, not just a return to the status quo.
93. Inspectors report **[FG/81 - INQ000641977]** that primary schools are working proactively to address low attendance which is a legacy of Covid-19, however the number of children who are not able to attend school for the full school day and who are regularly absent from school due to anxiety and attachment issues has increased. The percentage of post-primary pupils with ten percent or more absence as of June 2024 is more than double the figure in 2017/18 and 2018/19. Schools report an increasing complexity of reasons for low attendance including medical grounds, poor mental health, emotionally based school avoidance and family holidays taken during term time. We have therefore highlighted pupil absence as a significant concern.

## **Children and young people's behaviour, social development and engagement with learning**

94. ETI recognised the resilience and responsiveness of schools in implementing targeted measures, particularly those integrating academic and emotional support, for example, through Engage and nurture provision. Despite the schools' best efforts, the impact of these measures was limited by delays in accessing external services, staffing shortages, and high post-Covid absence levels. ETI stressed that school-based actions, while vital, must be supported by co-ordinated system-wide strategies, including mental health provision and consistent policy.
95. As Chief Inspector, rather than publishing a biennial Chief Inspector's Report in the context of Covid, I published the **Stepping Up Stepping Forward Insights** drawing on learning from the education and training system's response to the pandemic. As set out above, the Stepping Up Stepping Forward insights were based on first-hand observations and evidence from survey work, questionnaires, focus group discussions, visits to organisations, and interactions with leaders and practitioners across all education and training sectors, since March 2020 [FG/10 - INQ000532059]. My aim was to collate and disseminate the individual learning insights from inspection activity, to acknowledge the exemplary work of education and training leaders/practitioners and suggest how we draw on their successes and work collaboratively to address the ongoing challenges.
96. A summary of the findings is outlined below.
- While the Covid-19 pandemic brought additional challenges, many of our children, young people and adult learners demonstrated high levels of resilience and perseverance; nevertheless, the pandemic and the associated lockdowns created additional anxieties for other learners.
  - Organisations reported to inspectors that some young people experienced challenges including issues within the home, disengagement and high levels of stress. Increased online learning during the pandemic highlighted the need for organisations to ensure that digital learning platforms, ICT systems and codes of practice kept learners safe.
  - One of the major challenges for learners during lockdown was a sense of isolation. There were instances where young people lost touch with their

friends and/or school community or felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the changes in their environment and circumstances.

- Both primary and post-primary pupils indicated they missed the opportunities for socialisation, interaction with their friends and the regular face-to-face pastoral events such as assemblies.
- Organisations welcomed the additional funding provided to help educational settings support the mental health and emotional well-being of children and young people including, for example, DE's Engage Programme [FG/82 - INQ000641980], designed to help young people re-engage in their learning and the DE Well-being Fund [FG/83 - INQ000641981] which provided £5 million to schools and EOTAS centres to support pupils.
- While extra funding enabled schools to provide additional counselling, schools reported that it did not meet sufficiently the needs of all the pupils being referred or self-referring.

97. **ETI Phase Insights Reports from September 2021 to September 2024 [FG/81 - INQ000641977]** cover part of the period for this module of the Inquiry. In those Insight Reports, ETI refers to the adverse impact of Covid on the social and emotional development of many children. Schools report that particularly in the foundation stage, an increased number of children, presenting with delays in their speech and language development, had difficulties regulating their emotions, and required significant adult support.

### **Remote Learning**

98. ETI published a series of phase thematic reports [FG/54 - INQ000641968], [FG/55 - INQ000641969], [FG/56 - INQ000641970], [FG/57 - INQ000641971], [FG/58 - INQ000641972] on remote learning, which capture self-evaluation of new and emerging effective practice in remote learning as well as identifying challenges and highlighting emerging effective practice and promoting future opportunities for digital delivery.
99. The ETI thematic reports on **Remote Learning** are based on an ETI questionnaire on the delivery of remote learning during January 2021, along with further qualitative evidence gathered during focused discussions by DIs with

settings throughout January and February 2021. Case studies are included in each.

100. A key challenge was the competing demands of having several children at home, at different stages of learning; and parents too working from home, limiting significantly the time available for children to access technology.
101. In primary schools **[FG/57 - INQ000641971]** there was consensus among school leaders and teachers that remote learning cannot replicate face-to-face teaching and there are specific areas of the curriculum which are challenging to deliver remotely, such as children's play, language, phonics, reading and numeracy in the foundation stage, problem solving, the arts, PE, thinking skills and personal capabilities. An online environment is not always conducive to identifying concerns about individual children, such as heightened anxiety and an insufficient level of support. Schools identified this as an area which would require careful monitoring when the children returned to face-to-face teaching.
102. ETI found that for Irish-medium (IM) pupils, the interactive language strategies used in the immersion classroom were difficult to replicate online, as it is acknowledged that the best immersion experience for pupils is at school. Live teaching and staff voice recordings in the Irish language were key to the provision.
103. ETI highlighted **[FG/55 - INQ000641969]** that in-school daily provision and support for vulnerable and key worker children continued and individual post-primary schools reported increased levels of anxiety amongst pupils as the isolation, with few opportunities to forge friendships and social interaction with others, led to some pupils struggling with remote learning. ETI identified examples where pupils requiring social support and assistance to manage their workload were encouraged to attend school. In other examples, classroom assistants used online platforms to work remotely with individual pupils while the dedicated autism classroom was open and functioning for those pupils whose anxiety levels were too high to remain at home.

104. As special schools remained open during this period for face-to-face teaching, all principals reported **[FG/58 - INQ000641972]** that the increasing numbers of pupils remaining at home to shield or self-isolate required staff to provide remote learning in addition to classroom teaching. Most school staff found it challenging to deliver remote learning together with face-to-face teaching, particularly with high numbers of pupils in some classes, rising staff absenteeism and operational challenges. Principals made temporary amendments to the school's provision, for example, reducing the hours of pupil attendance, to enable staff to plan, prepare and give feedback on pupils' work and also to facilitate weekly contact with parents. All special school leaders emphasised the importance of maintaining regular and timely communication with parents to support their well-being and the well-being needs of their child. While resources and activities were shared with parents, staff were attuned to the individual context and needs of families, which had the potential to impact on work completion.
105. ETI found that all schools recognised the need to give time for human connection, (re-)assurance and belonging. Learning from the first lockdown, there was much more regular contact with pupils learning at home, including in live sessions.
106. ETI highlighted a range of considerations going forward across each phase, examples include:
- Allowing for a more flexible definition of 'vulnerable' children based on individual school context and need, in particular for those pupils at risk of disengagement, falling behind in their learning and unable to progress appropriately.
  - Establishing a shared understanding of engagement and participation in remote learning, to secure consistent experiences and adequate progression for all pupils.
  - To work towards equality of access to digital technology for pupils and schools.
  - Monitoring the work-life balance for staff who are required to deliver education in complex and fluid circumstances.
  - Improving the quality of the digital infrastructure across Northern Ireland and providing equitable access to suitable digital devices for all children and staff.

- A planned, coherent and accredited teacher professional learning programme to build competence and confidence in digital pedagogy.

## **Safeguarding**

107. DE, EA and CCMS were responsible for ensuring that appropriate arrangements were in place for onsite safeguarding and remote learning. ETI reported on safeguarding as part of each phase report and remote learning thematic reports. Examples of protocols were included in phase reports **[FG/15 - INQ000641927]**, **[FG/16 - INQ000641928]**, **[FG/17 - INQ000641929]**, **[FG/18 - INQ000641931]**.
108. Our **Safeguarding - Remote and blended learning: challenges and approaches** publication (June 2020) **[FG/67 - INQ000641930]** identifies the key safeguarding challenges faced by schools and educational/training organisations during the period of educational closures due to Covid-19 and how these were approached across all phases of education and training. The publication includes a range of examples from each phase detailing how specific organisations responded and the approaches they put in place. ETI engaged with leaders, principals and training providers throughout the period of closure and the publication was informed by this information.
109. The **Consultation with Year 6 to 14 pupils about their learning experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown, from January to March 2021** (3 November 2021) **[FG/06 - INQ000641921]**, found schools gave a high priority to safeguarding and well-being. Almost 98% of pupils reported that they had been taught about staying safe online. Increased remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for schools to develop and regularly review digital learning platforms, ICT systems, and updated, relevant codes of practice to enhance pupil safety.

## **Food security**

110. ETI did not monitor or report on how schools addressed any concerns about children's access to food and meeting children's basic needs during the specified period. However, in the primary phase report 2018-2020 **[FG/51 - INQ000641965]**, it was reported that in some contexts, where schools knew

families were struggling financially or with other aspects of their well-being, pastoral support often included the provision of food boxes and/or guidance on how to connect with other relevant support services in the wider community. ETI also reported, in **Stepping Up and Stepping and Forward [FG/10 - INQ000532059]** that schools and organisations responded creatively to support the most disadvantaged individuals, their families and the wider communities they serve. For example, across education and training, many organisations went the extra mile to meet the needs of learners and their families by visiting homes, offering support and delivering food parcels.

### **Non-pharmaceutical Interventions**

111. ETI did not evaluate the use of non-pharmaceutical interventions. During the period where ETI inspectors were acting as COLOs, they would have provided professional advice on queries relating to public health measures in schools, which were on an ad hoc basis via the COLO arrangements.

### **Grades and examinations**

112. Inspectors were involved in the provision of advice to DE, from the very early stages of the pandemic, around the cancellation of examinations and the use of teacher/centre-assessed grades **[FG/84 - INQ000641982]**. This included visiting schools, and talking to focus groups of pupils to take their views on the best ways of implementing this response from their perspective.
113. Inspectors contributed to the establishment and implementation of a school leaders' reference group, to discuss possible technical solutions to teacher/centre-assessed grades. Inspectors also provided advice around the technical options/solutions being explored by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), including the potential risks.
114. Inspectors also provided advice to DfE regarding the assessment and awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications, and the essential skills qualifications, including participation on 'Task and Finish' groups set up by DfE to devise the optimum response.

115. ETI was not commissioned to undertake any formal evaluation of the impact on pupils of the teacher/centre-assessed grades and standardisation. In May 2020, the then Minister announced that teacher/centre-assessed grades would not be used by inspectors in the inspection accountability process.
116. DIs continued to engage closely with schools across the period of the pandemic, including talking to GCSE, AS level and A level pupils; the findings from these engagements are outlined below.
- Pupil mental health and well-being was clearly adversely impacted.
  - The pandemic was a period of significant anxiety and uncertainty for pupils who were taking key external examinations such as GCSE, AS and A level examinations, and also level 2 and level 3 vocational qualifications; young people wanted certainty that they would be awarded their qualifications, and that the qualifications would be portable in terms of progression; and assurances that the methodology for awarding qualifications would be fair and transparent.
  - Pupils were largely supportive of the process of teacher-assessed grades in the absence of examinations; they also appreciated the close alignment of approaches across the various UK jurisdictions, meaning that progress to higher education across jurisdictions was not impeded.
  - The statistical standardisation process, or algorithm, deployed by CCEA in the summer of 2020, caused considerable anxiety to pupils and parents; it also impacted on the credibility of the process, and the decision by the Minister to revert to teacher-assessed grades was also appreciated by them.
  - Evidence shows some variability across schools in the extent of grade inflation as the result of the use of teacher-assessed grades; this was inevitable given that all teacher-based assessments were accepted as the final grade awarded in August 2020, and the level of moderation by the awarding body (CCEA) of teacher-awarded grades in 2021 was minimal, for example, the grades from one department in the case of a post-primary school.
  - There was disappointment that AS grades awarded in August 2020 would not contribute to the A level award in 2021.

- Many pupils talked about the extent of over-assessment or 'testing overload' as teachers used an increased number of assessments in the run-up to the collation of teacher-assessed grades, particularly in 2021, in order to underpin awarding of grades and deal with parental queries or appeals around those awarded grades.
- The pandemic impacted individual pupils differently; pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds had less access to resources such as the internet and modern mobile devices and therefore a more limited capacity to access remote learning. The levels of parental support varied widely and pupils with additional needs often struggled to access remote learning effectively.

117. In **Stepping Up Stepping Forward Learning Insight 9 – [FG/10 - INQ000532059]**, ETI reported that in a year when public examinations were cancelled, many learners were engaged in numerous internal assessments. Teachers, in both primary and post-primary schools, reported that correcting and providing feedback for online testing was excessively time consuming. On returning to face-to-face lessons, the loss of teaching time during the lockdowns was compounded by a focus on assessment rather than learning in some organisations. On return to school in the spring of 2021, teachers and learners reported that extensive assessments and tests were set, in order to ascertain gaps in learning.

118. ETI highlighted the additional pressure caused by the cancellation of formal examinations in the summers of 2020 and 2021, not least the new demands for assessment data, in order to confirm centre-determined grades. Teachers reported to inspectors that this testing and its associated administration was challenging for staff and pupils. Teachers and leaders faced the extremely challenging task of having to put in place alternative awarding arrangements to provide centre-determined grades.

### **Enduring Impact**

119. ETI's assessment of the impact of Covid-19 on the education and training system has been set out in a number of reports, most notably the **Stepping Up Stepping**

**Forward Insights [FG/10 - INQ000532059].** Some key findings are outlined below:

- The additional disruptions brought by Covid-19 impacted profoundly on the most disadvantaged learners.
- The pandemic exacerbated poverty levels, bringing about furlough and unemployment, and impacting adversely on people's emotional health and well-being.
- In education and training, those impacted most by the Covid-19 disruptions included: asylum-seekers; those not in employment, education, or training; prisoners serving time in jails; and children affected adversely by economic poverty and homelessness.
- Covid-19 brought about particular challenges for the children and young people who attend special schools.

120. It is my professional assessment, based on a range of inspection evidence that since the pandemic, societal attitudes (including those of parent/carer) to the principle of children and young people engaging full-time in education have changed. Non-attendance, particularly in post-primary schools and by pupils experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, is proving to be a stubborn issue to address. It is not, however, solely as an impact of the pandemic. Schools report a complexity of reasons for low attendance, including poor mental health, emotionally-based school avoidance and family holidays taken during term time.

121. What is clear is that poor attendance and lower achievement go hand in hand; children and young people with low levels of attendance also miss out on other important aspects of education, such as the development and application of wider skills, participation in after-school activities and opportunities to enhance confidence and self-esteem.

122. Recent inspection evidence shows that schools with creative and supportive approaches to enhancing and improving learners' emotional health and well-being are maintaining high levels of attendance and engagement.

123. The most recent **Compendium of Phase Insights Report [FG/81 - INQ000641977]** provides information on the challenges and opportunities for the education and training system, some of which are a result of Covid, while others pre-date Covid. Primary, Post Primary, Youth and Further Education phase insights reports refer to the impact of post-pandemic challenges and the legacy of Covid and these were also referred to the Corporate Statement for DE.
124. Literacy and Numeracy, SEN, and Educational Disadvantage have been issues pre-, during and post-Covid. Concerns in relation to attendance and pupils' emotional health and well-being have been exacerbated during and post-Covid. However as ETI has resumed inspection, the emerging evidence also gives cause for some optimism as individual schools find ways of overcoming their challenges. While examples are not consistent, the effective work is beginning to have some impact through dissemination events and self-generated school clusters working collaboratively to solve persistent problems.
125. I would also draw the Inquiry's attention to research, for example from NICCY and academia which also sets out the lasting impact on children. The NICCY Report '**A New And Better Normal**' for example, draws on the published ETI findings **[FG/85 - INQ000498623]** and a Queen's University study, funded by NICCY, which collated data on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and related responses **[FG/86 - INQ000641984]**. The PlayBoard NI and University of Ulster '**Our Voices Matter**' summary report **[FG/87 - INQ000641985]** captured the thoughts and feelings of children and young people, confirming that the restrictions placed on society have had a negative impact on their play, education and well-being.

#### **Part D - the Inspectorate's data about and assessment of the impact of the pandemic on children in pre-school settings**

126. The role of ETI in pre-school settings up to March 2020 was to monitor, inspect and report on the standard of education being provided to pre-school children in statutory nurseries and non-statutory voluntary and private pre-school settings and the standards of professional practice among teachers and staff in those

establishments. ETI also evaluates the quality of provision in Sure Start settings. Sure Start is a targeted programme supporting children under the age of four and their families in the most disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland. Sure Start projects deliver a wide variety of services designed to enhance children's learning skills, health and well-being, and social and emotional development. ETI is not a regulator of services or provision.

127. DE's Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) is a universal service offering funded pre-school education places in a range of settings in statutory (nursery schools and nursery units in primary schools) and non-statutory (voluntary and private) pre-school settings. The Department of Health has devised minimum standards which stipulate the minimum level of service to be provided in order to be registered with a Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) and meet health and social care inspection standards. Voluntary and private pre-school providers who wish to offer DE-funded pre-school places must be registered with a HSCT. They are also subject to inspection by HSCT inspectors and the ETI. Statutory nursery schools and nursery units in primary schools are inspected by the ETI, however they are not regulated by the HSCTs for pre-school provision. **The Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12 [FG/88 - INQ000641986]** have been developed to provide assurance of a consistent level of quality in these services, and also to ensure a consistent regional approach to registration and inspection. HSC Trusts are responsible for registering and inspecting these services against the requirements laid down in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 **[FG/89 - INQ000641987]**.
128. During the period from March 2020 to June 2022, ETI undertook a range of inspection activity to understand how pre-schools were responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our focus during the period was primarily on remote learning provision, the impact on children's development and well-being, and the adaptations made by pre-school settings and Sure Start services in response to the pandemic.
129. Specific to early years, ETI completed a **Pre-school Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches report [FG/16 - INQ000641928]**; a Sure Start thematic review **[FG/90 - INQ000641988]**;

monitoring visits to pre-school settings; and ongoing policy advice on the restart of pre-school provision.

130. The **Pre-school Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches report** was published in June 2020 [FG/16 - INQ000641928]. The objective of this report was to gather insights from reference groups comprising a representative sample from a range of funded pre-school settings (nursery schools, nursery units, private pre-school settings, voluntary pre-school settings, and Irish-medium pre-school settings) on the challenges they faced with remote learning and teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim was also to understand the approaches these settings intended to take for the phased return of children to full-time education in September 2020. DIs for early years organisations engaged with these reference groups to discuss any issues that arose. The resulting report summarised the potential challenges identified by pre-school leaders and the various approaches they were considering to tailor the curriculum, (planning, implementation, and assessment) across all learning areas for the children's return.
131. We published '**Safeguarding - Remote and blended learning challenges and approaches**' [FG/67 - INQ000641930] in June 2020, applicable to all sectors, which provided a summary of the challenges and potential approaches to safeguarding. The approaches and exemplars were based on engagement between ETI DIs and organisations across education and training; however, an evaluation of their impact and effectiveness was not possible at that time.
132. ETI highlighted the importance of organisations considering not only the mental health and well-being of their children/young people, but also the mental health and well-being of parents/carers and their teaching and ancillary workforce. The maintenance of strong community links and relationships to plan additional and multi-agency support for children/young people, their families and the staff was key to the implementation of successful practice. The report shared practice in place in organisations that responded both pastorally and creatively.
133. ETI highlighted that when organisations re-opened to children, young people and learners, it was important that the re-opening was managed well by making sure

that: contact was positive; teaching promoted the development of emotional health and well-being; and opportunities were provided for children, young people and learners to seek help when they need it. At that point, we emphasised a number of important safeguarding principles, namely:

- The best interests of children, young people and learners must always come first.
- If anyone in the organisation has a safeguarding concern about any child, young person or learner they should continue to act immediately.
- Children, young people and learners should continue to be protected when they are online.

134. The **Pre-school Examples of Approaches to Learning and Teaching During the Covid-19 Recovery Phase September 2020 – December 2020**, published in January 2021 [FG/91 - INQ000641989] was based on information gained from a combination of district visits, virtual visits via phone calls and online staff meetings made to nursery schools, nursery units and voluntary and private pre-school settings across Northern Ireland in the period from 1 September 2020 to 29 November 2020. It also included information gained through ETI consultation with three focus groups of leaders representing all types of pre-schools. During the restart and recovery phase, the visits and meetings sought to assess both strengths and challenges and capture lessons learned. The purpose of the report was to offer actionable insights and inform future practices in early childhood education by reflecting on effective strategies and areas needing improvement.

135. In March 2021, ETI published a **pre-school phase report** with evidence from inspections and evaluations carried out between September 2018 and December 2020 [FG/50 - INQ000641964]. The purpose of the report was to provide an analysis of ETI's engagement with pre-school settings and to highlight key findings from the sector. ETI continued to gather evidence and gain insights through a combination of district visits and virtual interactions, including phone calls with nursery schools, nursery units, and voluntary and private pre-school settings across Northern Ireland and input from the three focus groups of leaders representing all types of pre-school settings.

136. In May 2021, ETI published a pre-school phase-specific thematic report on remote learning which built on the findings from the abovementioned reports, and initial reports on curricular challenges and approaches associated with remote learning during the first lockdown (June 2020) **[FG/56 - INQ000641970]**.
137. From April 2021 to June 2022, monitoring visits to pre-school settings in the follow-up inspection process focused on the actions of the pre-school to address the areas for improvement identified in the original inspection. The visits focused on the setting's current priorities and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the curriculum, including practical experiences, and the quality of learning and teaching. The visits supported the settings to reflect on their current provision and self-evaluation leading to improvement.
138. ETI also completed a department-commissioned thematic evaluation on the **Consistency of parental engagement within the Sure Start developmental programme for 2- to 3-year-olds [FG/90 - INQ000641988]**. The report, published in September 2021, focused on how Sure Start projects planned, delivered, and monitored services for children and families during the Covid-19 pandemic, in the period from March 2020 to March 2021. The evaluation was informed by responses from all 38 Sure Start projects across Northern Ireland, with more in-depth engagement from a representative sample of 10 projects. The aim was to identify key strengths, challenges, and innovative practices adopted during the period of restricted service delivery. The resulting report summarised the collective learning, highlighting effective approaches, and provided insights to inform future service planning and resilience.
139. ETI published a thematic paper on outdoor curriculum delivery in pre-school and foundation stage in November 2021, to provide insights into how pre-school staff adapted and developed the use of the outdoor learning environment to support curriculum delivery and learner well-being **[FG/92 - INQ000641990]**.
140. The evidence from the aforementioned reports highlighted the following key impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on pre-school education.

- Children’s progress was negatively impacted in circumstances where there was insufficient access to digital devices and/or a lack of parental confidence or time (in the case of working parents) to home educate.
- Limited Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and wide variation in the confidence, capacity and skill set of staff posed significant challenges, in particular for the non-statutory pre-school sector. Leaders and staff recognised the need for continued support and training to build staff resilience.
- Supporting children already identified with additional needs proved particularly difficult, with a number of Sure Start projects reporting delays in referrals to external health services and clinics.
- On returning to school, while most children were reported as making progress with the planned and sensitive support of staff, others required more specialist professional assessments and assistance to make the necessary progress.
- Pandemic restrictions, including the closure of playgrounds and public parks, limitations on social mixing, and increased screen time through remote learning, reduced children’s opportunities for energetic outdoor play which is essential for developing children’s physical skills. Recognising these deficits upon children’s return to school, pre-school staff prioritised regular outdoor activities and energetic play to foster the development of both fine- and gross-motor skills, and spatial awareness. This highlights the sector’s awareness of the need to address potential developmental delays arising from the period of restricted activity.
- During the pandemic, parents informed pre-school staff that their children missed both their friends and the staff members. To foster connection and security, many pre-school settings developed online videos. Practitioners reported up to 100% uptake for online story sessions, which helped promote well-being and maintain connections beyond the family bubble.
- The settings reported that most children settled well on their return and exceeded the expectations of staff, who commented positively on the children’s resilience in adapting. However, as noted in the **Early Years Insight Report September 2021 to September 2024**, a small number of settings noted an increase in children presenting with anxiety and

emotionally-based school avoidance, with the EA Educational Psychology Service providing support for these children to re-engage with their learning.

- The increase in the number of pre-school children presenting with a range of SEN and developmental delays is commonly reported across settings, particularly for children with speech and language needs. The extent to which these delays are directly related to their experiences during lockdown, or due to a general increase in the number presenting with a developmental delay, is unclear at this stage.
- On children's return to pre-school, following periods of lockdown, ETI inspection reports noted an increase in the number of children requiring additional adult support for independent self-care skills, such as managing their own snack and dinner routine and toileting.
- While most children settled well on their return to settings and demonstrated resilience, some settings noted a small but increasing number of children who needed support with emotional self-regulation.

141. ETI's focus (as stated in other sections in the commentary) during the pandemic was primarily on remote learning provision, the impact on children's development and well-being, and the adaptations made by pre-school settings and Sure Start services in response to the pandemic.

142. ETI operates as an integral part of DE; in relation to early years advice, this was provided as needed to the DE policy team.

### **Part E - the Inspectorate's data about and assessment of the impact of the pandemic on children receiving education other than at school**

143. Pupils attending EOTAS centres have complex social, emotional and behavioural difficulties which have been assessed as being more likely to impact on their learning. ETI monitors, evaluates and reports on the quality of education provision in EOTAS settings, to inform its contribution to policy, planning and improvement work and in line with statutory requirements. ETI does not regulate EOTAS settings.

144. Up to March 2020, EOTAS settings were inspected through district inspection work, full inspections, follow-up inspections and themed evaluations. This inspection work was reported through the Chief Inspector's Reports, Phase Insights Reports and published inspection reports for individual organisations.
145. ETI completed a review for DE between September 2019 and May 2020, into the implementation of EOTAS provision as set out in DE Circular 2014/24 **[FG/93 - INQ000641991]**. ETI's ongoing follow-up inspections have played a central role in improving the quality of provision for marginalised learners and the outcomes they attain.
146. The review informed also the **EOTAS phase report September 2018 to December 2020 [FG/47 - INQ000641961]**. The report states that in almost one-quarter of the EOTAS centres inspected, during the period from September 2018 to March 2020, pupil attendance improved over the time of their placement compared with their attendance when at school. The primary sector and KS3 partnerships between the schools, the centres and the outreach support service were reported as supporting those pupils effectively to maintain their place in their referring school.
147. ETI highlighted that in centres providing a well-planned therapeutic curriculum, pupils acquired skills to regulate their own behaviours and manage their emotions more effectively. In the more effective practice, observed in a small number of centres, teaching and non-teaching staff contributed effectively to high quality and therapeutic learning experiences which benefitted the pupils.
148. In this report, the challenges faced by EOTAS centres included:
- limited access to educational psychology expertise and advice, which delays the assessment of pupils with complex needs;
  - insufficient governance arrangements;
  - variation in the quality of provision resulting in outcomes for pupils, well below their ability;

- shortcomings in partnerships with mainstream schools including very limited reintegration of KS4 pupils back to their referring school;
- limitations in key data about attendance, assessment and accreditation; and
- poor quality accommodation which does not reflect the same standards for access, security and health and safety required of school buildings.

149. The phase report for 2018-20 states that at the time of inspection, arrangements for safeguarding in most EOTAS centres reflected or reflected broadly, guidance from DE. In three centres, where safeguarding provision had been evaluated as unsatisfactory, all issues reported were subsequently addressed.

150. During the first period of lockdown, EOTAS centre leaders reported inconsistent communication, in particular for KS4 pupils, from their mainstream school. Not all pupils attending EOTAS provision were enabled to access the online learning provision from their referring school. From late April 2020 onwards, staff responded to the pupils' frustration with remote learning by facilitating learning in-centre, in one-to-one settings or small groups.

151. The EOTAS phase report (September 2018 and December 2020), highlighted in the period March to June 2020, in the more effective practice that was reported, EOTAS centres compiled induction packs, created virtual centre tours for the next school year to support new pupils and their parents/carers, and provided online introductions to staff. ETI reported that in going forward, the use of virtual meetings with pupils' referring schools should help enable better partnership between centres and schools.

152. The phase report highlighted that between September 2018 and December 2020, the EOTAS centres overall were, generally, continuing to cope well and addressed challenges positively. The centres:

- Completed risk assessments and developed systems to keep pupils and staff safe. However, 'bubble' arrangements were limiting opportunities for pupils to develop their social interaction skills.

- Reported that there was beneficial professional learning for staff, including in trauma-informed practice, emotional health and well-being and blended learning.
- Reported non-attendance for a small number of pupils with complex needs, including severe anxiety, and for those whose parent/carer was shielding.
- Demonstrated energy and commitment to meet the needs of vulnerable pupils. In the most effective practice, staff fostered a positive sense of togetherness with their pupils, building on trust and mutual respect, and provided a range of effective therapeutic interventions.
- Valued the benefits of partnership with the Youth Service through the expertise and additional support of youth workers and the programmes delivered, when accessible. Some centres, however, had no access to youth work support.
- Experienced inconsistent support from services, with a shortfall in educational psychology support across centres and the counselling, careers guidance and education welfare support was often by phone call or online, which was less effective in engaging pupils.
- Reported the inconsistencies in access for pupils of the online provision from their referring schools.
- Experienced varying degrees of staff confidence and competence in using digital technology to deliver lessons remotely, re-engage pupils in their learning and develop pupils' digital and online learning skills.
- Reported that communication with parents/carers improved during lockdown as staff provided advice and support to help parents/carers manage their child's emotional and behavioural needs.
- Reported that when work was focused on supporting pupils' needs for emotional, social and physical well-being, they engaged with pupils through, for example, phone calls, home and doorstep visits.

153. In the report, EOTAS DIs identified a number of key considerations, going forward, including how to:

- Develop ways in which the pupils' views can help to shape, refine and improve the EOTAS provision.

- Continue to build the EOTAS partnership with mainstream schools, especially at KS4 where there remained significant variation in the quality of engagement by referring schools.
- Develop the capacity and opportunity for pupils to access and benefit from online provision both from their referring schools and their EOTAS centres.
- Improve access to quality professional learning for EOTAS staff, including the sharing of effective practices across centres, referring schools and with parents/carers using digital technology as appropriate.

154. On 6 January 2021, the Education Minister announced that EOTAS centres would remain open to provide face-to-face learning. The Inquiry may wish to note the detailed findings of '**A Thematic Report on Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) Centres' Delivery, Monitoring and Evaluation of Remote Learning** published 14 May 2021 [FG/54 - INQ000641968]. The report captured centre leaders' self-evaluation of new and emerging effective practice in remote learning as well as identifying challenges. It aimed also to promote future opportunities for digital delivery. The findings arose from a questionnaire completed by 84% of EOTAS centres and DIs also facilitated online or phone discussions with 14 centre leaders focused on the delivery, monitoring and evaluation of remote learning, safeguarding, well-being and staff professional learning.

155. The feedback we collated highlighted that pupil engagement with remote learning was variable. Centre leaders all reported that face-to-face learning and teaching was the most effective way to provide the intensive support and nurturing relationships required by pupils attending EOTAS provision. In the more effective practice, staff prepared pupils in anticipation of another lockdown by ensuring: pupils' passwords were correct for the centre and shared with parents/carers; they had appropriate access to devices and resources; and they knew how to navigate online platforms. Challenges identified included:

- the curtailment of the breadth of the curriculum experience, particularly with practical and vocational aspects and the full experiential benefits of therapeutic interventions;

- when pupils disengaged, their re-engagement was slow and complex;
- pupils were reluctant to engage first time with counselling services online;
- meeting the demands of KS4 courses online with pupils who require intensive support; and
- the geographical variation in connectivity.

156. In more recent inspection findings, ETI reported that the role of EOTAS staff in outreach support for schools has been enhanced, helping to build the capacity of schools to meet the complex and diverse social, behavioural and emotional well-being needs of pupils. Some progress has been made to improve the quality of the accommodation and resources in EOTAS centres, including access to digital technology for the pupils and staff.

**Part F - the Inspectorate's data about and assessment of the impact of the pandemic on children receiving further education and work based learning**

157. In Northern Ireland, DfE is responsible for the policy, strategic development and financing of the statutory further education sector and contracting non-statutory training providers to deliver work-based learning programmes (and previously, European Social Fund (ESF) projects). DfE is also responsible for higher education provision within the further education colleges.

158. ETI is not responsible for the regulation of further education colleges or work-based learning organisations.

159. All formal inspection activity was paused on 18 March 2020. Unlike the schools, inspections in further education, work-based learning and ESF projects were unaffected by industrial action. DIs continued work with the colleges and provider organisations, which included scrutiny of their recovery-focused Quality Improvement Planning processes as outlined in **[FG/94 - INQ000641992]**.

160. DIs worked with the further education colleges, work-based learning providers and ESF project promoters to provide advice and support, whilst the organisations were navigating uncertainty and challenges, adhering to emergency public health legislation and guidance while continuing to provide

learning, teaching and training for learners. In the first few weeks after closure of all organisations, inspectors helped answer multiple queries on a daily basis. During this time specialist inspectors also provided policy advice to DfE in respect of alternative awarding and assessment arrangements for vocational qualifications.

161. DI information showed that the further education sector adapted quickly to the pandemic with a move to online teaching; it developed and enhanced existing digital platforms to provide learners with a flexible delivery model, taking into consideration the capacity and capability of the learner and the needs of the specific vocational qualification. Adoption of online teaching approaches was more varied in the work-based learning and ESF sectors, due mainly to the lack of existing digital platforms and associated capabilities to deliver training specific to the content of work-based learning programmes or the aims of ESF projects.
162. Inspectors adapted inspection and evaluation methodology to adhere to the Covid-19 public health restrictions. In November 2020, ETI carried out a baseline review of the delivery and impact of remote learning provided by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) **[FG/95 - INQ000641993]**. The inspection team evaluated the quality and impact of the learning experiences provided through remote and blended learning, and the provision for the care and well-being of learners. Almost all of the evaluation work took place remotely. The report was published in March 2021; it was intended to share examples of effective practice in providing online or blended learning approaches, mainly for the further education and work-based learning sectors. We reported that, since March 2020, senior and middle leaders and staff worked quickly to plan, establish and deliver programmes remotely; in addition, they provided awarding bodies with calculated grades and assessment outcomes using the available formative assessment information.
163. During 2021/22, inspectors carried out monitoring visits to a range of training organisations (2) and ESF project promoters (32). The visits were designed to support organisations, particularly for those with previously identified areas for improvement, in reflecting on their current provision with a view to being well prepared for when inspections would resume. Subsequent to a visit, a letter was

issued to each organisation and copied to DfE, highlighting the positive actions the organisation had taken to adapt the curriculum and learning due to the impact of Covid-19, along with further actions needed going forward **[FG/96 - INQ000641994]**.

164. In the period September 2021 to June 2022, ETI inspected 28 ESF projects across 22 project promoters, resulting in published inspection reports. We evaluated key work undertaken by the six colleges of further education to progress the development and implementation of the 'Curriculum Hubs', designed to support a consistent approach in curriculum delivery across priority occupational areas. The evaluation, as set out in **[FG/97 - INQ000641995]**, provided the further education sector with an opportunity to review its curriculum delivery in line with the evolving operating environment to ensure alignment with Northern Ireland's economic skills needs. ETI completed six baseline inspection visits to newly contracted work-based learning providers in 2022. The visits provided the new organisations with a baseline evaluation of the quality of their provision and key areas for improvement for going forward; a summary letter of the visit was issued to the organisation and to DfE. Follow-up inspections were completed in 2022 for five work-based learning providers, with publication of the associated report. These inspections evaluated the organisation's progress in addressing the key areas for improvement identified at the time of their original inspection.

165. **An Evaluation of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) Business Development Groups (BDG) (March 2022) [FG/98 - INQ000641996]** found that the Covid-19 pandemic seriously impacted the benchmarking activity of participants due to restrictions which meant that the BDG scheme's support assistants could not collect the required data. The emergence of the pandemic in March 2020 caused the normal operation of the BDGs to be disrupted. CAFRE introduced remote learning in the BDG scheme at an early stage, which was challenging due to participants living in rural areas, with some having either poor or no access to the internet. In addition, some of the participants faced further barriers due to their lack of ICT skills. CAFRE adopted a videoconferencing system that provided the option for those without an internet connection or ICT equipment to join the meeting using their phone, to

provide as much accessibility as possible for the participants. During this time, the facilitators provided effective learning opportunities including one-to-one support and group delivery, using a range of strategies including online meetings, videos, webinars, telephone calls and face-to-face meetings, where possible, to best meet the needs of each participant and their circumstances. The measures put in place were effective with most of the participants remaining engaged in the scheme. The online provision for BDG participants was part of the wider baseline review of the delivery and impact of remote learning in CAFRE carried out in November 2020 by ETI.

166. The findings from inspection and evaluation evidence and DI information showed that there was a multiplicity of impacts on the provision for children, young people and adult learners in further education and training, in the short-, medium- and long-term.
167. From mid-March 2020, almost all education and training organisations were closed to learners and they re-focused their work and resources from a model of largely face to face on-site provision, to one of moving significant aspects of their provision online. They rapidly established a model of alternative remote learning, teaching and engagement support, with varying levels of engagement by learners.
168. The evidence shows that colleges, work-based learning and ESF providers found themselves at various states of readiness, and at very different starting points, for this significantly changed education and training landscape. Organisations that had previously invested in establishing an operational digital learning platform, which staff and learners were familiar with and competent in using, coped better with the transition to the emergency remote teaching model that was required in the early days of the first lockdown. Learners in these organisations had a swifter, less problematic transition to online learning.
169. The further education colleges were best placed to adapt quickly to the remote delivery of significant aspects of their curriculum. All had well-established and fit-for-purpose digital learning platforms and tried-and-tested blended learning

curriculum delivery models, particularly for curriculum areas at Level 3 and above.

170. Provider organisations who did not have an operational digital learning platform, adapted the resources used for face-to-face learning and teaching and made them available online, using a range of digital applications. Due to the pace of change, and the then lower level of staff digital skills, the impact of this approach, in terms of learner engagement and participation, varied greatly. In the majority of providers that were new to this method of delivering learning and teaching, there was insufficient time for planning how the resources and digital applications would be used to support learning; by necessity it was approached in the absence of digital pedagogical processes or training. Where the organisations did not have an appropriate online platform, resources were either emailed to the learners or provided in hard-copy format.
171. The impact of virtually no practical skills training was most acute for those professional and technical areas where the training and attainment of occupational skills is required to hold a licence to practise to recognised industry standards. Online learning was unable to compensate fully for the cessation of face-to-face practical skills training and development opportunities.
172. While the colleges had the required infrastructure and a substantive staff capacity to deliver remote learning to good effect, despite their best endeavours, their efforts were hampered by: the digital strain and demotivation reported by many learners, resulting from inadequate ongoing access to appropriate devices and sufficient, reliable bandwidth; the number of staff who were ill-prepared in terms of the required digital skill set and access to infrastructure at home for the rapid transition to remote learning; the closure of childcare facilities which impeded staff availability and flexibility; the additional challenge of following the guidance and associated demands of a very wide range of awarding organisations with regard to the provision of calculated assessment grades/outcomes and the planning required for adapted assessments.
173. Across the work-based learning providers and ESF project promoters, the logistics of providing staff with the necessary infrastructure to enable them to

work and teach from home proved extremely challenging; however, progress was rapid, staff were flexible and supportive of one another and a majority were up and running quite quickly.

174. Very few ESF and work-based learning providers had sufficient technical infrastructure, including a relevant digital learning platform, around which to build a coherent delivery platform or easily accessible repository of resources; in addition, not enough staff had the required digital skill set in order to plan and deliver effective online lessons. The issues associated with digital poverty, such as relevant device and bandwidth availability, and the capacity of their learners, particularly trainees on the Training for Success programme and many of the participants on ESF projects, to engage effectively in a remote learning environment, became evident in these phases of provision; fewer learners were completing and achieving their vocational qualifications.
175. The initial response by the ESF project promoters was to provide individualised one-to-one support to their participants by telephone, doorstep visits and by means of social media platforms. A majority of the ESF project promoters and work-based learning providers, however, improved quickly and further developed their online presence, offering a range of online resources for trainees and participants; specifically and appropriately, these were targeted in the first instance at supporting their health and well-being. Many of the ESF project promoters went further by providing practical support for participants, including help with essential food, heating and access to mobile devices.
176. The pandemic highlighted shortages in digital skills among both staff and learners. The lockdowns during the pandemic led to an acceleration of online learning. Providers were forced to rapidly adopt digital platforms to provide some continuity to delivery of programmes. Since the pandemic, this has resulted in a shift to blended and online learning models. Providers have upgraded their IT infrastructure to support remote learning and there is an ongoing need for investment in digital infrastructure.
177. Since blended learning has become a permanent feature of delivery, providers must ensure digital platforms are effective, and that both staff and learners are

equipped with the necessary digital skills. Continuing professional development in digital teaching and blended pedagogy has become a priority and a long-term need.

178. Remote learning exposed inequalities and disparities in digital access (devices, internet) and digital literacy, particularly impacting disadvantaged learners and those on lower-level qualifications. Providers are now acutely aware of these disparities and are more proactive in ensuring learners have appropriate access to all aspects of their programme. Providers can often supply or lend digital devices to learners and at times give financial support towards accessing Wi-Fi, enabling learners to progress successfully in their work.
179. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing disparities, particularly affecting younger, lower-paid, and lower-skilled individuals. Learners with additional needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds experienced the most significant challenges with engagement and progress. This has resulted in a renewed focus on social inclusion (e.g. the Step Up Project). Sustained funding and associated support in further education and work-based learning is needed to address growing demand, especially from vulnerable groups.
180. The pandemic resulted in disruption to work-based learning with many work placements being delayed or cancelled, reducing opportunities for learners to develop required occupational skills. Over the first few months of the crisis, the evidence shows that just under one-half of apprentices remained in employment, with the majority of them being furloughed. The Apprenticeship Incentive Scheme introduced by DfE led to a recovery in this provision. The most recent DfE statistical data **[FG/99 - INQ000641997]** shows that the total number of starts on ApprenticeshipsNI had increased by 71% between 2019/20 and 2023/24 and by 49% between 2022/23 and 2023/24. In contrast, as set out in **[FG/100 - INQ000641998]**, the number of enrolments and students has not recovered or been sustained to pre-pandemic levels across the further education colleges. This lack of full recovery, coupled with a longer-term decline in further education enrolments is concerning for future workforce skill levels. It highlights the critical need for a continued focus and investment in skills training to ensure employers

and the economy have the technically skilled workers required at Level 3 and above.

181. In line with the ETI and DfE MoU and SLA, there was regular communication between ETI and DfE officials in respect of planned monitoring visits and enhanced scrutiny of revised, Covid-19 recovery-focused Quality Improvement Plans. Monitoring reports from visits to individual organisations were routinely shared with DfE officials, along with feedback on the effectiveness of all the colleges and providers' capacity to plan for improvement, particularly in respect of adapting the curriculum and learning due to the impact of Covid-19.
182. In addition, during the Covid-19 pandemic period, there was representation by ETI on a range of DfE groups including the Further Education Policy and Safe Resumption Advisory Oversight Group, the Essential Skills Advisory Group, and the Vocational Qualifications Task and Finish Group. ETI provided professional advice at these meetings.
183. ETI provided specific advice to DfE, requested by senior policy officials responsible for FE and work-based learning provision, in relation to alternative awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications and essential skills, to provide DfE officials with a professional educational view.
184. During the pandemic, learners faced heightened mental health challenges, leading to reduced motivation and engagement. This has resulted in a legacy of poor mental health and well-being due to isolation, anxiety, and disrupted learning paths for learners. Supporting resilience and well-being remains a priority for the further education and training sectors which have been proactive in investing in appropriate services to support learners.
185. Staff recruitment and retention challenges in the further education and training sector have been exacerbated since the pandemic, particularly in occupational areas such as construction and engineering as well as essential skills. This has placed an additional burden on the system to deliver the broad range of programmes offered.

186. In **The Further Education and Training Insights Report September 2021 – September 2024 [FG/81 - INQ000641977]**, inspectors found that following the period(s) of remote learning necessitated by the pandemic, tutors are increasingly more competent in the effective use of digital technology to support learning and teaching and provide blended delivery models where appropriate.

**Part G – the Inspectorate’s data about and assessment of the impact of the pandemic on children and young people in Secure Establishments**

187. In Northern Ireland, secure establishments primarily refer to prisons and to secure accommodation centres for children and young people. ETI’s remit extends to the inspection of the education, skills and work activities provision and the safeguarding arrangements for children and young people in secure establishments in Northern Ireland in respect of the provision provided by the EA. ETI’s remit extends to the inspection of the education, skills and work activities provision in prisons of the further education and training provision by the Belfast Metropolitan College under contract to the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS); in prisons, the inspection of safeguarding is led by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI). ETI provides inspection services in relation to the education, skills and work activities provision for the CJI, in line with an agreed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and an associated Service Level Agreement (SLA).
188. In line with the agreed MoU/SLA, ETI inspectors join inspection teams with CJI, HM Inspectorate of Prisons, and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA). ETI evaluates the quality of education, skills and work activities provided for the children and young people in the secure setting. In line with the MoU/SLA, ETI provides oral feedback to stakeholders at the end of inspection visits. CJI presents all final agreed inspection reports to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The reports include the findings of the joint inspection team and the recommendations for improvement.
189. Prior to the specified period, ETI undertook **An Inspection (Involving Action Short of Strike) of Lakewood Special School, Bangor, County Down (April**

2017) [FG/101 - INQ000641999]. Lakewood Special School is part of Lakewood Regional Secure Care Centre which is a purpose-built regional secure care facility located in Bangor. The school provides education for up to 16 pupils aged from 11 to 18 years who are resident in the secure children's home as a result of a secure accommodation order. As a result of industrial action, ETI was unable to assure parents/carers, the wider school community and stakeholders of the quality of education being provided for the pupils. The senior leadership co-operated with the inspection in relation to safeguarding responsibilities. Due to ASoS, ETI was unable to evaluate fully the outworking of the arrangements for safeguarding in the school.

190. Prior to the specified period, **An announced inspection of Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (June 2018)** was completed by CJI in partnership with the RQIA and ETI [FG/102 - INQ000642000]. Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (the JJC) is the only custodial facility for children in Northern Ireland. The Education Authority (EA) now manage delivery of education within the JJC as part of its Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) provision (since the process to transfer responsibility for education provision from the Youth Justice Agency to the EA was completed in September 2017). As a result of industrial action by the teachers, ETI was unable to evaluate fully the: quality of the EOTAS education provision and the overall outcomes for the pupils; quality of the care, welfare and support of the pupils; and the Centre's leadership and management and capacity to effect and sustain improvement in its provision and outcomes. Where it was possible to evaluate aspects of the Centre's education and training provision, they were reported.

ETI reported the findings outlined below:

- In the eight weeks prior to the inspection, there were 75 pupils accessing the EOTAS education provision, a majority of whom had full attendance. Almost half of the pupils had special educational needs requiring additional support with aspects of their learning. Almost 60% were Looked After Children.

- The Centre's data indicated that the pupils made progress across an appropriate range of qualifications in numeracy and literacy, and a majority achieved accreditation in Information and Communication Technology.
- A small number of pupils attending the Centre could not read.
- The curriculum was narrow and did not comply with EOTAS Guidance 2014/24 [FG/93 - INQ000641991].
- Individual education plans were not fully developed and had been appropriately identified by senior managers as an area for improvement.
- The Head of Education needed to attend principal child protection training; all child protection and safeguarding policies needed to be updated; and a Relationships and Sexuality Education policy needed to be developed.
- The room used for vocational construction studies was not fit for purpose and the facility should not be used until the provision is appropriately resourced and developed.
- The facilities for technology and design were unsuitable and required significant improvement.
- The art room was unsuitable for that purpose or for use as a technology and design workshop.

191. Prior to the specified period, **An Unannounced Inspection of Hydebank Wood Secure College (October – November 2019)** was jointly carried out by HM Inspectorate of Prisons with CJI and in partnership with RQIA and ETI [FG/103 - INQ000642001]. In relation to education, skills and work activities, ETI inspectors found that the: achievements of prisoners engaged in education, skills and work were good; quality of education, skills and work provision, including the quality of teaching, training, learning and assessment was good; personal development and behaviour was good; and leadership and management of education, skills and work impacted positively on the educational experiences provided for the young people.

192. During the specified period, **an Inspection (Involving Action Short of Strike) of Lakewood Special School, Bangor, County Down (January 2020)** was undertaken by ETI [FG/104 - INQ000642002]. As a result of the industrial action, ETI was unable to assure parents/carers, the wider school community and

stakeholders of the quality of education being provided for the pupils. Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection, the arrangements for safeguarding pupils reflected broadly the guidance from DE.

193. During the specified period, **An announced inspection of Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (January 2022)** was completed by CJI in partnership with the RQIA and ETI [FG/105 - INQ000531993]. A youth-friendly version of the report was also published (September 2022) [FG/106 - INQ000642004]. This inspection formed part of CJI's regular programme of inspection of places of detention, in accordance with its remit as part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism. The inspection required additional planning and safety measures for on-site evidence gathering in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. On this occasion, while formal inspections across all education and training phases continued to be paused, ETI conducted a formal monitoring visit to the Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) provision within the Centre. The monitoring visit focused on the EOTAS centre's view of improvements effected prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and any impact of Covid-19 on the curriculum, including practical work, learning experiences, and the quality of learning and teaching. The visit was intended to support the EOTAS centre at Woodlands to reflect on the strengths of their current provision with a view to being well prepared for a follow-up inspection when that could take place.

194. Based on the evidence available at the time of the monitoring visit to the EOTAS Centre at Woodlands, ETI reported that ways to improve included:

- Prioritising the collation of data from referring schools/EOTAS centres, including an escalation system to ensure a response.
- Ensuring pupils develop more systematically their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills in their vocational education through rigorous monitoring and evaluation by People 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Evaluating the impact of teachers' feedback to pupils and the evaluation of the learning to inform planning for pupils to attain the best possible outcomes.
- Developing the curriculum for ICT and Learning for Life and Work, including an emphasis on healthy eating.

- Demonstrating the sustained impact of teacher professional learning on the pupils' ability to self-regulate their behaviour and take responsibility for their emotional health and well-being.
- Formalising the exceptional teaching arrangements for pupils with medical and other needs who are unable to attend the EOTAS Centre.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the transition process on pupils' longer term outcomes.
- Establishing independent governance, including for safeguarding arrangements.

ETI also reported that the pupils did not have access to facilities for technology and design.

195. During the specified period, **A Review into the Operation of Care and Supervision Units in the Northern Ireland Prison Service (February 2022)** was undertaken by CJI in partnership with the RQIA and ETI. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons in England and Wales undertook a critical review of the draft report **[FG/107 - INQ000642005]**. The Review required the ETI inspection team to carry out fieldwork in each prison during the Covid-19 pandemic and entailed additional planning, risk management and health and safety logistics. At that time, NIPS estate had three Care and Supervision Units (CSUs) that served four adult prisons (Maghaberry Prison; Magilligan Prison; and Hydebank Wood Secure College, which also accommodates female remand and sentenced prisoners in Ash House Women's Prison). The CSU at Hydebank Wood had changed to a shared facility in October 2020 that accommodated both women and young men held at Hydebank. Hydebank Wood Secure College accommodates young men between 18-24 years of age. The CSU at Hydebank held up to 20 prisoners (16 male and four female).
196. In relation to the CSU which had opened during 2019 at Hydebank, the evidence at the time of the Review is outlined below.
- It was a bright, vibrant and a calming place. There was good use of colour and acoustics.

- There was a multi-purpose room equipped with seating, television, game console, exercise bike, small library and servery facility. This room was bright, airy and had the potential to support purposeful activity, including learning and skills.
- There was a de-escalation (sensory) room fitted with acoustic panels to reduce noise intrusion that was painted with calming colours. It contained moveable furniture to provide a sense of individual control.
- An excellent library service was provided with scheduled visits by the librarian.

197. ETI does not have an assessment of whether the pandemic has had a greater impact, or not, on children and young people who live in secure settings. Recent inspection evidence from **An Unannounced Inspection of Hydebank Wood Secure College (May-June 2024)** shows, however, that the education, skills and work activities provision for the young men fosters an ethos of active participation, **[FG/108 - INQ000642006]**. Almost all of the prisoners participated in education, skills or work or attended the gym. Inspection evidence shows that, over the period from 2021 to 2023, there had been a notable increase in the number of accredited qualifications achieved, a majority of which were short qualifications relevant to industry. More work was needed to support and track the young men's progress in achieving essential skills qualifications. Better evaluation of the impact of the SEN provision was also identified as an area for further development.

#### **Part H - the Inspectorate's general assessment of the impact of the pandemic on children and young people, and lessons learned**

198. DE commissioned ETI (under the auspices of DE's Continuity of Learning Programme) to carry out a range of work to contribute to assessing the pandemic's impact on children and young people. Specifically, Between 1 June and 11 June 2021, ETI invited all pupils in school, from years 6 to 14, to tell us more about what it was like undertaking learning during the second lockdown. Through this consultation we gathered first-hand evidence from 28,790 pupils as set out in **[FG/06 - INQ000641921]**. Additionally we sought other first-hand

evidence through focus group discussions with children, young people, and education professionals.

199. Our DIs engaged with and visited schools, further education colleges, and early years, youth and training organisations in line with the prevailing Covid restrictions. Inspectors engaged in professional dialogue with leaders and practitioners seeking their views on emerging issues and providing advice and support at the earliest opportunity as the landscape shifted and changed.
200. Observations during inspectors' engagements were focused particularly on children and young people's emotional health and well-being, their experiences of and the efficacy of remote learning, the impact of Covid-19 on learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, the effectiveness of curriculum delivery during the disruption and the safeguarding and pastoral care provision during remote learning periods.
201. ETI identified significant emotional stress among children and young people caused by the pandemic and its impact on their education and well-being, with vulnerable learners particularly adversely affected. Disadvantaged pupils faced widened inequalities, especially due to digital poverty. While some learners gained independence and enhanced digital skills, gaps in learning and engagement persisted. Learners voiced the need for mental health support and valued interactive teaching. At post-primary level, the shift to teacher-assessed grades led to internal testing pressures. Strong collaboration emerged across sectors, though professional development needs remained. Progress was made in remote learning, but a regional strategy was lacking. ETI encouraged curriculum flexibility to address disrupted enrichment provision and evolving learner needs.
202. The range of exhibits included in this statement illustrate a number of learning points which have informed the way forward for DE and DfE. ETI reports across the specified period and subsequently, have included the need to ensure we protect children in education during future pandemics, through: a robust digital learning strategy; targeted support for vulnerable learners; embedded emotional well-being initiatives; flexible curriculum adaptation, including outdoor play and

learning; meaningful ways of encouraging and responding to the voice of learners; strengthened cross-sectoral collaboration; ongoing support, including through inspection, on securing robust child protection and safeguarding arrangements as circumstances develop and change; and investment in teacher professional learning.

203. Sustained investment in mental health support is essential, including preventative education alongside immediate support where necessary. Schools and other education and training organisations need high-quality and easily accessible counselling services to meet the immediate and longer-term emotional needs of children and young people. Teachers, lecturers, youth leaders and support staff should receive ongoing training in supporting pupils' emotional well-being; in particular, supporting young people to develop resilience and be discerning as to when different forms of support are required and/or when they can draw on their personal, family or peer network supports, to deal with initial stress or anxiety before it becomes overwhelming.
204. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, because they are likely to be at greater risk of falling behind, should be supported by a range of measures including wraparound multi-agency support for families, focused interventions for literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy, and targeted funding. Project-based and outdoor learning should also be expanded.
205. Access to digital devices, broadband, and learning platforms should be universal, with strengthened digital pedagogy skills for teachers, through professional development. More use should be made of blended approaches to learning in schools and other organisations, so that children and young people are familiar with learning in this type of environment. Regarding assessment of and for learning, a balanced and holistic approach to assessment that prioritises learning and avoids overwhelming pupils with excessive testing is required. The professional judgment of teachers should be valued alongside standardised assessments. Continued investment in Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is critical. While I appreciate that all of the above is easier said than done, it should not deter us as educators in our ambition to plan in parallel for the immediate

support that is required, coupled with the preventative education that makes it less necessary.

206. All of the above points are expanded on in ETI's publication **Stepping Up and Stepping Forward** (February 2022) [FG/10 - INQ000532059] which became the baseline position for the important issues facing education in Northern Ireland at that time. Across the autumn of 2021, elements of the final publication were released at two-weekly intervals in the form of Ten Learning Insights aimed at stimulating debate and discussion across the system, about the current context and how we might be able to move forward collectively.
207. The contextual information referred to in Section A of this statement makes clear that as an education system, there has been an absence of quantitative data relating to standards and performance for a considerable period of time. DE has recently launched TransformED (May 2025) which outlines a comprehensive strategy for the transformation of teaching and learning in Northern Ireland. The strategy focuses on the core areas of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling educational disadvantage. The strategy has been informed by ongoing ETI professional advice on these issues. The strategy document [FG/109 - INQ000642007] outlines also the history of industrial action in Northern Ireland and the impact it has had on the progress of our education system when evaluated in light of general outcomes and international comparisons on standards. The new strategy, having been informed by both research and inspection information, sets a confident starting point for addressing and/or mitigating the enduring impacts the pandemic has had on children's learning and education.
208. Our **Stepping Up Stepping Forward** publications, for example, commend the self-generated work of teachers in organising into collectives to support each other and identify the need for government to support this type of innovation financially, while not restricting the innovation that occurred. The new strategy includes a programme directed at doing just that, where self-generated professional development opportunities can be taken forward by schools.

209. Similarly, to better protect education during future pandemics, the strategy includes an emphasis on creating a strong digital learning strategy, targeting support for vulnerable learners more precisely, embedding emotional well-being initiatives, flexible curriculum adaptation, meaningful learner voice mechanisms, strengthened cross-sectoral collaboration, and sustained investment in teacher professional learning.
210. I would also draw the Inquiry's attention to the proposals the Northern Ireland Minister of Education is taking forward to strengthen the legislation relating to inspection, **[FG/110 - INQ000642008]** thereby bringing it in line with all other UK jurisdictions and making it an offence to obstruct inspections. This will remove the inspection process from the industrial relations space.
211. ETI, as an organisation, has tried to draw on the lessons learned in planning the current inspection strategy and also planning for the future so that we are better prepared for future pandemics or any other unforeseen global or national event. A return to stability of the general education system will allow us to get a comprehensive understanding of where exactly our education system sits currently.
212. Our transformed inspection process has taken account of all of the lessons learned, particularly in relation to working more collaboratively with all organisations we inspect. We are also providing professional development opportunities across all sectors to ensure we have a common understanding of how inspection can support the education system through an agreed process rather than be seen as an event to get through at a point in time. Our DI role proved invaluable in rebuilding trust across the education system and allowed us also to move at pace in getting focus groups of principals and teachers to work with our policy colleagues at short notice and often at the end of difficult school days, to contribute to the fast-moving pace of events as the pandemic developed.
213. We are working towards embedding flexible inspection models, enhancing our own digital capabilities, prioritising well-being in evaluations, strengthening the input of learner voice, investing in enhanced collaboration and leadership support, and refining rapid communication and risk-based inspection

approaches. Our ambition through the transformed inspection process, is to get as close to 'real time' reporting as we can, ensuring that key messages are made clear immediately to stakeholders, while working on refining a more considered report. All inspections and visits currently include an immediate verbal feedback session at the end of the work to allow an organisation to begin work immediately on the salient issues. Approaches to thematic work have been adapted to provide interim feedback milestones to the commissioning departments, again reporting issues which we know can be acted upon without waiting for the final report.

**Further information about the impact of the pandemic on children and young people relevant to the Provisional Scope for Module 8.**

214. Many authors and researchers talk about the future using terms like volatility, uncertainty, and instability. In seeking to protect children in the future, it is essential that we continue to consider lessons learned from our experience during Covid, continually shaping and reshaping the educational landscape, making it fit for purpose for the children and young people of today as they become the citizens and societal leaders of tomorrow. The educational landscape that shifted, pivoted and modified normal practice during Covid, did so when faced with the choice of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the experience or being fearless and taking risks to adapt to the world as it changed in front of our eyes. Traditionally, education systems do not move at pace and even turning around provision in a single school which is struggling has been likened to turning an oil tanker, with no quick fixes being readily available.

215. The education workforce in Northern Ireland pivoted to remote learning over the course of one weekend. While all of the educational elements outlined in this statement had varying degrees of success, the core competencies already present in the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum showed the potential for true resilience to come to the fore, both in surviving day-to-day but also in coping and succeeding, despite barriers that no-one had ever experienced before. The flexibility in our curriculum enabled teachers to accommodate changes to their curriculum delivery without having to grapple with different curriculum objectives or intent [FG/111 - INQ000642009], [FG/112 - INQ000642010], [FG/113 -

**INQ000642011], [FG/114 - INQ000642012].** It is crucial as we move forward that we recognise, as outlined in this statement, that while stubborn educational challenges remain, and more will follow, it is only by being flexible, adaptable and compassionate, that we will build strong communities of learning for the future. Our revised curriculum will need to enable us to build the cognitive, social and emotional capabilities and values of our learners to both stay ahead of technological change and adapt and solve the unknown and unforeseen problems that we now know we will face. In a relatively small education system, strong leadership was welcomed, collaborative working proved essential and people and organisations which showed generosity of spirit in supporting their peers, realised it enhanced rather than took away from their own successes.

216. In ETI, we tried to draw on the approaches we had the privilege to both see and evaluate and use them to transform not only our own organisation and our thinking, but also to transform the inspection process as we look and move towards the future. For example, being forced to both evaluate and deliver professional development remotely, allowed us to build expertise in online delivery and truly extend our reach across the education system, delivering our successful Empowering Improvement programme phases 1 and 2 to many organisations across Northern Ireland and at the end of a school day. Equally, by providing advice, support and challenge to schools throughout the pandemic, we were able to rebuild the trust of the education system that had been lost over the preceding six years. We also co-designed, with the education system, a flexible, adaptive and more context-specific and empathic approach to the concept and process of inspection.

217. Prior to and post-pandemic, the Northern Ireland education system is one which has for a long time been 'at odds with itself', including with regard to inspection. It is crucial that in a small society and education system we continue to work collaboratively to 'get it right' for children and young people and that educators, employers, government and researchers work towards that shared goal, complementing and contributing to each other's work rather than competing. Schools are the places where education policies either connect or collide and DE's new strategy provides a framework to shape other enabling policies and

interventions, providing coherence and alignment and ensuring that cumulatively, more and more young people succeed, whatever the circumstances. Similarly, DfE has just commissioned ETI to undertake work on SEN provision for young people in post-statutory education to assist in highlighting gaps where young people, particularly those on vocational pathways, can experience a more coherent transition between school and other education provision and, also, onwards to higher-level education or the world of work. I remain optimistic that we in ETI, as a unitary inspectorate, spanning so many sectors and with our unstinting focus on being the voice for equity and excellence for all learners, can be a catalyst in building consensus across the entire education and training system, empowering improvement for all learners. We will continue to play a key role in contributing to overall system improvement and advising on enabling policies and interventions in education.

218. We recognise that a strong, confident, reflective, and improving education and training system is critical to the lives and life chances of our children and young people as well as to the future of Northern Ireland in almost every conceivable way. A central focus on ongoing school and organisation improvement has guided the development of inspection work.

219. Over the last four years, in line with our commitment in **Stepping Up Stepping Forward** publication, we have completely changed the inspection process, with a renewed focus on the centrality of the learner; an increased emphasis on professional dialogue during inspections; and a stronger emphasis on the identification, reporting and sharing of highly effective practice. We have moved forward confidently and optimistically in support of all learners.

### **Statement of Truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

**Personal Data**

Dated: 04 July 2025