



## **Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling**

**Submission to the  
Department of Education**

**November 2020**



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## 1 Introduction

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IPPN is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the Department of Education, management bodies, unions, education agencies, the National Parents' Council, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,000 Principals and Deputy Principals.

We remain at your disposal should the Department like to discuss any aspect of this submission with IPPN.



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## 2 Consultation Process

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In the first instance, IPPN thanks the Department for the opportunity to make a submission in relation to *Supporting the Safe Provision/Resumption of Schooling*.

Given the tight timescales involved in providing feedback on the guidelines, the template and the pilot inspections, IPPN was not in a position to consult widely with members, which we would typically endeavour to do to support the points made in any submission.

It is worth noting that this consultation process is the seventh such consultation since mid-August 2020. Each submission has its own merits and is important in its own right; each one also takes a considerable amount of effort, if it is to be of value to IPPN, to our members and to the stakeholder that sought the feedback. It is not sustainable to continue to react to high numbers of requests from stakeholders, as to do so in the timescales put forward in most cases compromises our ability to progress core services to our members, and our own strategic aims. In most cases, the information required to substantiate the key points in a submission is not readily available. If we are to be very honest, with a few notable exceptions, the whole approach to consultation taken in recent years by a number of stakeholders comes across as 'lip service' to the idea of genuine consultation with stakeholders.

To address this, IPPN has sought a cohesive approach to such consultations with education stakeholders - the Department and all the education agencies - and respectfully requests that future consultations be brought to the Primary Education Forum in the first instance. This would ensure that there was consideration given to adequate notification, timing, sequencing and prioritisation of all consultation processes *across the sector* so as to facilitate organisations such as IPPN in engaging with practitioners in schools to gather and present feedback in a planned, coherent manner.

This would also ensure that the feedback and recommendations put forward are comprehensive, reflective of the situation across all types of school, as well as balanced and fair, as it would be less likely to be skewed towards those with a particularly entrenched or negative view of a particular proposal.



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## 3 Context

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Since March 12<sup>th</sup> 2020, when schools were forced to close their doors and school leaders had to lead learning using new and innovative ways of supporting their pupils through various online platforms, school leaders have not had a break. Before Covid-19, the burgeoning workload of principals meant that they were lucky if they managed any sort of break in the middle of the summer holidays. This past summer, the vast majority of principals had no break at all, with many working 50/60-hour weeks, or more, to make sure their schools were ready to resume, with all measures in place to ensure the safety of all children and staff.

When the SSRS/SSPS inspections were initially announced in mid-September, school leaders reacted strongly and negatively about a perceived lack of support from the Inspectorate. This was at a time when many school leaders were experiencing a huge emotional strain. Having worked tirelessly over the summer to reopen their schools, many were struggling to cope with the additional workload relating to keeping them safe and open, and with the widespread uncertainty and anxiety among pupils, staff, parents and the wider school communities, in relation to the potential risks of reopening.

Responding to this announcement, which was seen as the ‘straw that broke’ school leaders’ scant reserves of morale, on 16<sup>th</sup> September IPPN, as the professional body of school leaders, issued a strongly-worded statement expressing significant concerns about the move to have the primary inspectorate organise inspections of schools on behalf of the HSA. It was felt that this compromised the advisory and support role the inspectorate at a time when there were many ways in which the body of inspectors could have supported the heroic efforts of school leaders in more empathetic and effective ways.

Since then, the situation has been resolved, largely owing to the positive engagement the inspectors have had with schools during SSPS pilot inspections.



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## 4 Review Conclusions

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IPPN welcomes the SSPS guidelines and the learning from the pilot inspections to date, as this will give certainty and clarity to schools about the SSPS inspections when they are rolled out.

### 4.1 Observations

We have a number of observations about the guidelines and the pilot inspections, as follows:

1. The information is helpful, clearly laid out and provides the basis for schools' understanding of what to expect when they are notified on an inspection. All school leaders should be quickly able to go through the checks and satisfy themselves that all is in order. At this stage every school should be easily able to verify the checks.
2. There are a total of ten COVID-19-related checks and three Child Protection checks. As with the COVID-19 checks, the Child Protection Level 1 checks should be already in place in schools and should therefore pose no extra burden on school leaders.
3. The guidelines acknowledge the work done by teachers and school leaders and state clearly that the Inspectorate are carrying out these checks in a supportive manner. From what we can gather from the limited consultation we were able to achieve over the past few weeks, that has been the experience of school leaders in the pilot phase to date. This approach is absolutely crucial to the success and acceptance of such inspections in the future.
4. The advance notice provided to schools involved in the pilot inspections is appreciated.
5. It should take school leaders a very short time to prepare for an SSPS inspection – a quick check with the Lead Worker Representative should suffice. Reports to date confirm this and that the attitude of the Inspectors has been supportive and helpful.
6. We thank and congratulate the inspectors on the positive, supportive approach taken in the pilot inspections to date and encourage its adoption as a model for future inspections.



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## 4.2 Recommendations

We also have a small number of recommendations to refine the process further:

1. It would be very helpful for a **minimum notice period** to be agreed. Teaching principals in particular would need at least a week's notice to organise themselves to facilitate these inspections. Many have arrangements for substitute cover for their leadership and management (release) days and ideally the inspections could be planned to coincide with days for which substitute cover has been/can be arranged. Administrative principals also would need several days' notice; we suggest a minimum of three days.
2. Ensure that **the importance of positive, supportive and reassuring engagement** at this time of extreme pressure on school leaders is highlighted and reaffirmed with the inspectors tasked with carrying out the SSRS inspections.
3. **Consistency of language** across the Memorandum of Understanding, the guidelines and the templates – there are mentions of both 'Supporting the Safe *Resumption* of Schooling' and 'Supporting the Safe *Provision* of Schooling' in the documentation.