Initial teacher education (ITE)

Link inspector role: principles and protocols

Autumn 2025

Contents

Background..... 2
What is the purpose of the ITE link inspector role?..... 3
How does the link inspector role support improvement?..... 3
How often will a link inspector engage with a partnership?..... 3
What types of activity might be involved?..... 4
How will link inspector activity align with our broader inspection framework?..... 5
How can partnerships make the most of link inspector engagement?..... 5

Principles and protocols

Background

In some sectors we inspect, such as further education, adult and community learning, and local government education services, we have ‘link inspectors’. These are designated HMI who engage more regularly and informally with a provider or partnership. This type of engagement typically takes place outside the formal inspection process, through visits or online meetings.

Initial teacher education is a small but important sector that plays a crucial role in developing our workforce. In our recent consultation about the development of new inspection arrangements from 2025, we suggested working more frequently with ITE partnerships, assigning a link inspector to each one.

What this engagement looks like may vary depending on the partnership’s needs, but is likely to focus on how the partnership is making progress to address recommendations from its last inspection. It may also explore themes from our broader cross-sector work to support the partnership in strengthening its provision. Delaying the introduction of core inspections until September 2027 is intended to give partnerships time and space to focus on key areas for improvement.

We consulted with partnerships about the development of the link inspector role during summer 2025.

This document will be available bilingually for partnerships from November 2025.

What is the purpose of the ITE link inspector role?

The purpose of the link inspector (LI) role is to:

- support ITE partnerships to reflect on their strengths and identify, or refine, areas for improvement through regular, supportive, low-stakes professional dialogue.
- build relationships with partnerships, grounded in an understanding of their specific higher education contexts.
- offer a national perspective on inspection developments, share sector-wide effective practice, and support professional learning within the sector.

How does the link inspector role support improvement?

In sectors where the link inspector role is already well established, providers value the opportunity to talk outside of formal inspections.

The role aims to:

- provide a safe space for developmental, low-stakes conversations with an inspector, and
- encourage collaborative activities that help to build capacity for continuous improvement within the sector.

More frequent engagement with ITE partnerships can help us to:

- identify topics that may be useful for wider discussion and shared professional learning at our stakeholder events
- highlight areas that would benefit from a deeper thematic focus, and
- inform updates to our inspection guidance.

By building a relationship with a link inspector, partnership leaders know there is someone in Estyn they can call, if they have any questions or if they wish to share information.

How often will a link inspector engage with a partnership?

The engagement model will be reviewed prior to recommencing our inspection cycle in September 2027, but will include an initial scoping phase to understand the partnership's context and operational structure. This initial/introductory meeting could include the following discussion points:

- The partnership's current context and operational structure
- The partnership's improvement priorities and self-evaluation within the context of wider university priorities and quality assurance systems
- The partnership's views about how professional, statutory and regulatory bodies influence its current work
- Where relevant, the support that will be provided as part of 'Estyn Enhanced Engagement' activity.

Subsequent termly or biannual engagements (for example a one-day visit, in addition to half-day online meetings) will be discussed and jointly agreed with each partnership. We will aim, as far as possible, to ensure continuity in the LI assigned to a partnership to nurture deep understanding and productive relationships. As part of our own workforce planning, a second HMI may also visit with the link inspector to support this continuity.

What types of activity might be involved?

Our engagement with partnerships will be flexible, responsive to the needs of the partnership and agreed in discussion with partnership leaders. Partnership leaders and the link inspector will decide on the agenda together and agree any practical arrangements.

There will always be a focus on recommendations from a partnership's core inspection and progress towards addressing these but there is plenty of scope for the partnership to suggest which ones might be the most useful to them at a moment in time.

Activities relating to inspection recommendations are likely to include professional dialogue with leaders and other key staff, who lead or are responsible for particular work streams. We may, depending on the focus of the visit:

- review documents together
- take part in joint learning walks
- undertake joint visits to schools
- join mentor training events or partnership leadership meetings, and
- engage in other shared self-evaluation activities.

Where appropriate, the link inspector might contribute to partnership stakeholder sessions on themes linked with a partnership's improvement priorities, for example about programme design or mentoring.

The range of engagement options will be discussed with each partnership to ensure that support is tailored to each partnership's circumstances. We may also provide support for sector-specific areas for improvement identified in His Majesty's Chief Inspector's Annual Report.

How will link inspector activity align with our broader inspection framework?

Link inspector activity is part of the ongoing appraisal of ITE provision across Wales. It will capture the main messages about the ongoing self-evaluation of each partnership, changes to provision, and any important changes to governance and staffing in a partnership.

Link inspectors will provide useful information to the ITE lead officers about strengths and areas for development within each partnership. Lead officers will continue to inform the Education Worforce Council (EWC) about any relevant developments within the sector, through a summary verbal report in meetings of the Teacher Education Accreditation Board.

Particularly important, is the role link inspectors will play in providing context and relevant information to an inspection team during a partnership's core inspection. A link inspector will not lead an inspection of the partnership they support but will normally be a member of the inspection team. This approach has worked well in other sectors we inspect.

How can partnerships make the most of link inspector engagement?

From our experience of link inspector visits in other sectors, we encourage partnerships to approach this engagement as a developmental opportunity. Discussions are most beneficial when partnerships share successes and challenges openly to build trust and understanding. Partnerships may wish to use link inspectors as sounding boards for new initiatives, planned changes or longer-term strategic developments. Where possible, partnerships may wish to engage in sector-wide professional learning and knowledge-sharing activities fostered through the link inspector network.