

## Stepping Up and Stepping Forward

### Learning Insight 6

Leaders responded admirably to Covid-19 by providing continuity of learning; they still face many challenges and require further support to continue to manage these effectively



#### What do we know?

Northern Ireland is fortunate to have so many excellent leaders at all levels in education and training. Their relentless dedication to, and work for, their learners has contributed significantly to the many improvements in education and training over many years. Leadership involves inspiring and guiding others, having credibility and providing vision, particularly at times when it is difficult to see what lies ahead. Management involves problem solving, providing order and organising resources to meet all needs, particularly unprecedented ones.

Northern Ireland's education and training system is privileged to have such talented and committed people at the forefront of the response to Covid-19. It is important to acknowledge that these leaders have addressed successfully an ever-growing range of increasingly complex issues over a considerable period of time. The significant range of challenges affecting education and training that existed before Covid-19 remain. These include: addressing educational underachievement, supporting effectively learners who have additional needs, promoting the emotional health and wellbeing of learners and staff, and managing limited resources and tight budgets. Self-evaluation as a process, validated externally by inspection activity, is crucial in bringing about positive change and improving the lives and life-chances of learners. Society expects assurances that schools are well-managed, learners are cared for and that they achieve well.

#### What have we learned?

During Covid-19, Northern Ireland's school and college leaders met innovatively the challenges that arose. Given the extraordinary nature of the disruptions caused by the pandemic and the need to follow Public Health Agency (PHA) advice, leaders put in place remote learning arrangements and worked at pace to upskill their staff to ensure that there was continuity of learning. Leaders, at all levels, and their staff are still addressing many significant and complex issues; we need to continue to value, listen, support, encourage and work alongside them.



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Covid-19 has intensified the problems and workloads that already existed. On top of the core business of organisational improvement, school and college leaders continue to deal with a range of additional Covid-related pressures on a daily basis. These include: the health and welfare of their staff, upskilling their workforce quickly and meeting the pastoral and academic needs of learners and, in many cases, their families as well.

They had to respond to guidance and direction, while as the pandemic progressed, work out how they could make their organisations safe to re-open. Monitoring the welfare and progression of learners was challenging, however many leaders were better prepared for the second lockdown in early 2021 due to the effectiveness of capacity building within their organisations. Many leaders were involved in the alternative awarding arrangements for public examinations. There were unfamiliar and new demands placed on organisations to ensure pupil assessment was rigorous and controlled to a high level; these high-stake processes were stressful for leaders, staff and learners alike.

ETI inspectors listened to hundreds of testimonies from principals from all over Northern Ireland through district engagement visits, survey work and through telephone and online meetings; what came across consistently was that our school and college leaders, while being human and vulnerable like everyone else, responded with commendable levels of courage, determination and resilience. Many felt overwhelmed by the additional administrative demands, which included contact tracing, interpreting and administering PHA guidance, facilitating alternative assessment arrangements and maintaining staffing levels when so many learners and staff were getting sick or had to self-isolate.

Many principals reported that these challenges brought extra pressures to what already is an extremely demanding role. Furthermore, for schools involved in area-based planning processes, additional anxieties were placed upon their leaders due to the ongoing uncertainties.

### What will help us move forward constructively?

Going forward, challenges remain for leaders, including many unresolved pre-pandemic issues and newer Covid-related ones. It is important that collectively, we recognise the work of our leaders at all levels, acknowledge the severity of some of the challenges that may lie ahead and identify actions to alleviate any pressure points. In addition, it is important that the health and wellbeing of our leaders is prioritised and that inspection activity does not contribute to any undue stress. To this end, ETI is committed to working collaboratively with leaders in order to communicate expectations with clarity so that any anxieties around inspection are reduced and the process is transparent and constructive for all.



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ETI recognises the pressures leaders face in managing their schools on a day-to-day basis. For example, many school leaders report that considerable time is spent on administration work such as finding substitute teachers, accessing the support of some external agencies and the bureaucracy necessitated by Covid-19. We should work to ensure that administration does not distract leaders from their essential work of improving the curriculum and learning. There is an important balance between ensuring there is sufficient accountability and assurance for the system, without diverting leaders and teachers too far from their core business.

ETI's core business is to provide impartial external evaluation through support and appropriate challenge. School and organisational leaders are accountable to their communities for the quality of the provision. Where leaders work alongside their district inspectors, the process of self-evaluation, validated through inspection activity, can be a productive and collaborative one which ultimately benefits the learners and provides the assurances a community needs.

ETI can support our leaders through focused district inspection activity which supports schools by offering external evaluation, advice and validation of the school's improvement journey. Furthermore, ETI will help schools build middle leadership capacity and improve learning and teaching through its [Empowering Improvement: Stepping Forward Together](#) initiative and will consult widely in developing a new inspection strategy.

### Empowering Improvement – Stepping Forward Together

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ETI is committed to wide-scale, meaningful consultation and engagement with all stakeholders in order to support schools and organisations as they move forward during this challenging time.

ETI aims to work alongside schools and organisations with a particular focus on sustainable capacity-building of leaders and teachers in the key area of self-evaluation, in order to improve the educational provision and attainment of all pupils/learners.

