1. Introduction

Scoil Mhuire NS is a mixed, rural school under the patronage of the Catholic Bishop of Cork and Ross. Currently, there are one hundred and eighty one pupils enrolled in the school and attendance levels are high. School authorities predict falling enrolment trends in the short to medium term due to local demographic shifts. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

2. Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Further Development

The following are the main strengths of the work of the school:

- The board of management give generously of their time and provide support and advice to the school community.
- The school is a modern, well maintained and well resourced facility.
- The school has a diligent principal and an experienced staff and it enjoys good levels of support from the local community.
- Effective teaching strategies are regularly used and pupils, generally, display positive attitudes to learning.
- Pupils are progressing in line with normal expectations and their standardised test scores are satisfactory.

The following main recommendations are made:

- The Board should take a more active role in curricular policy development and ensure, where appropriate, that parents are included in that collaborative process.
- Teaching and learning should be more fully at the heart of all future school discussions and be the central focus of all future school improvement measures.
- The in-school management team should be given a more central curriculum leadership role, assigned duties should be reviewed on an annual basis and formal reporting structures should be put in place to facilitate school self-evaluation.
- A staff rotation policy should be developed by the board which puts the needs of pupils at the heart of staff deployment practices and which ensures that teachers are not de-skilled by spending too much time working with specific age groups or with specific cohorts of pupils.
3. **Quality of School Management**

- A new board of management has recently been established in the school. The board is properly constituted and individual members display a good awareness of the unique challenges facing the school and of the parameters within which school boards operate. This and previous boards have played a central role in the strategic development and maintenance of excellent school facilities. The school is well resourced and ICT provision is at an advanced stage. Parental questionnaire responses indicated that the parents surveyed consider the school to be well run.

- In the course of the evaluation, board members indicated that they have confidence in the principal and in the teaching staff, are satisfied with the general level of pupil attainment on completion of primary level and with the breadth and balance of curriculum provision. Parental questionnaire responses indicated that they held broadly similar positive views on the quality of educational provision.

- Given that the principal is newly appointed since 2010 and a new team dynamic is emerging within the school it is important for the board, in the context of maintaining standards of teaching and learning, to ensure that a more comprehensive distributed leadership model is now facilitated which harnesses the talents of individuals. It is also important to put in place internal structures which facilitate the regular rotation of staff in line with evolving school needs and to formulate a continuous professional development (CPD) policy which can address individual or whole-school CPD requirements when they arise.

- The in-school management team is comprised of the principal, deputy principal and three additional teachers with specific responsibilities. In a productive meeting with this team the importance of delegation and of empowering members to take leadership roles within the school community was discussed. Advice was given to the in-school management team and to the board on the need to review, on an annual basis, the priorities of the school and to re-assign in-school management duties in line with these. In addition, it was recommended that structures are put in place which allow for individual in-school management members to report to the board and to the parents, where appropriate, on the impact of their work at the end of each school year.

- The board has, traditionally, played a secondary role in the context of school policy development and this is an area where further improvements can be made. Advice was given on the need to review the relevance of all school documents within the term of the board, particularly in the context of their impact on teaching and learning and their relationship to current in-school practices.

- Relationships within the school community are positive and the board has facilitated the development of a parents’ association which plays an active role in school affairs. However, parental questionnaire responses indicated that the parents surveyed would like to further develop positive links with school authorities. In a meeting with representatives of the parents’ association a lack of clarity was apparent on aspects of the curriculum and on the teaching methodologies employed in specific areas. Advice was given on the need to involve parents in the collaborative review of school policy documents and to facilitate information sharing events on aspects of curriculum provision, where necessary.

- The board oversees the financial affairs of the school responsibly though it is important, in the future, to have accounts certified annually in line with Departmental guidelines and best practice.
4. Quality of School Planning and School Self-evaluation

- With the appointment of a new principal the relevance of whole-school planning has been re-evaluated and a review is underway. This is an important task in the context of developing a shared understanding of the work of the school in its community and, consequently, the collaborative aspect of the task should be paramount. A key role of the principal might be to create the positive environment in which these discussions might take place and to empower others to take leadership roles in the process. Advice was given in relation to the effective delegation of curriculum leadership roles to in-school management members and, to other staff with specific interest and talents, and on the importance of seeking the views of parents.

- All teaching staff members complete long-term and short-term plans in respect of all curricular areas and record progress on a monthly basis. A variety of templates are used and, in the context of future staff meetings, it would be worthwhile to consider the development of agreed internal school planning templates which would allow for the easy retrieval of information for the purposes of compiling summary monthly progress records in all curricular areas in order to facilitate whole school understanding and reflection.

- The board were advised of the value of presenting an annual report to the school community as a means to support internal school review processes and promote, where necessary, a school improvement agenda.

- Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.

5. Quality of Teaching, Learning and Pupil Achievement

- The school building is an excellent facility for teaching and learning. A wide variety of teaching strategies are employed and many well-constructed lessons were observed in the course of the evaluation. A good balance was observed between the process of learning and the end product in many instances.

- Pupils are articulate and well-behaved and, generally, have a good image of themselves and of their school. Standardised test results (Dumcondra and Sigma-T) indicate progress in line with normal expectations. Parental questionnaire responses indicated that they believed teaching to be good in the school and were happy with the overall work of the school. As a means to further enhance the learning environment it is recommended that greater priority be given to the presentation and display of pupils’ written work in school circulation areas and that the value of group work as a key whole-school learning methodology be discussed at a staff meeting.

- Múintear an Ghaeilge go hábalta sa scoil agus stiúírtar na ceachtanna go héifeachtaí. Úsáidtear modhanna múinte spreagúla agus baintear úsáid mhaithe as an gcéad bán idirghníomhach chun na daltaí a spreagadh chun rannpháirtiúilta. Bhí caighdeán an fhorbairt na cumarsáide go maith. Trasna na scoile bhí iarracht na foirme le moladh agus, cé go bhfuil gá béim sa bhreis a chur ar fhorbairt na cumarsáide bhí caighdeán an fhorbairt fhormhór na ndaltaí oiriúnach dá n-aois.
Irish is taught capably in the school and lessons are effectively presented. Engaging teaching strategies are used and good use is made of the interactive whiteboard to encourage pupil participation. The standard of learning was good. Across the school the efforts of staff were commendable and though more emphasis should be put on communicative language the achievement of pupils, generally, was age-appropriate.

In order to further improve standards it would be worthwhile for the staff to develop a new Irish plan with clear learning objectives in relation to vocabulary development and especially communicative language. It would also be worthwhile to identify and support a staff member with suitable skill to direct this work.

• English is taught effectively in the school and standards are high. Pupils, generally, listen attentively and communicate confidently both orally and in written form. Their literacy attainments assist then in their learning in other curricular areas and there is a commendable focus on language development across the curriculum. Pupil questionnaires indicated that all pupils have positive self images with regard to their ability to read and all parents believe the school is helping their child(ren) to progress with reading. Across the school, there is evidence of a balanced oral, reading and writing programme within which the abilities of pupils are developed and nurtured.

• It is recommended that, in the context of literacy development targets, consideration be given to further developing interest in reading through the provision of a wider range of appropriate reading material in school and in class libraries. It would also be worthwhile, in the context of reviewing whole-school curricular planning documents, to incorporate strategies for language development in a cross-curricular manner. It is also recommended that greater priority be given to the presentation and display of pupil’s written work.

• Standardised test results (Sigma-T) in Mathematics indicate satisfactory results in line with expectations. Lessons observed were well structured and learning outcomes were clear. Good use is made mathematical equipment and pupils display a good understanding of number facts and of mathematical skills. Undue emphasis on mechanical operation in mathematics was discussed at the post-evaluation meetings. In order to further improve mathematics teaching and learning it is recommended that the value of co-operative learning where children work in small groups to help each other learn should be further encouraged at all class levels.

• History is taught effectively in the school. Lessons are well structured and good use is made of appropriate resources and of the environment. Time lines were observed in many classrooms and History was effectively integrated with Drama Music and poetry in a number of settings. Pupils have a good sense of place, an age-appropriate understanding of time and chronology and an appreciation of change and continuity, cause and effect.

6. Quality of Support for Pupils

• Pupils with special educational needs are supported by a dedicated team of seven individuals and excellent areas have been developed for support teaching purposes. Included are, one full-time learning support (LS) teacher, one full-time resource teacher
(RT), a part-time RT (21.5hrs.) and an additional RT/LS teacher who is part of a local clustering arrangement. There are three special needs assistants (SNAs) allocated to the school. The shared RT/LS teacher, though based in the school, has no teaching duties there and works solely in the other schools which form the cluster. This is an unusual arrangement and needs to be reviewed in light of new Departmental guidelines around the rationalisation of services.

- Support is provided in both literacy and numeracy and a number of pupils have been allocated resource hours. A variety of strategies are used to support pupils with high incidence or low incidence learning needs. Individual learning programmes have been devised for all pupils in receipt of additional supports and measurable learning targets have been devised. A staff development priority has been identified regarding general up-skilling in specific areas of special needs such as Autism.

- Advice was given in relation to the need for flexibility in relation to the allocation of resources in line with identified areas of priority needs and of the need to set, for example, specific integration plans with regard to individual pupils into definite time-frames.

- Assessment practices are satisfactory and careful records are maintained.
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of Scoil Mhuire N.S. wishes to thank the inspectors for their courtesy during the inspection process.

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

Recommendations made by the Inspectorate will be implemented on an ongoing basis during the next two years and thereafter.

Cluster arrangements will follow recent regulations governing changes to the General Allocation Model and Resource Teaching Allocation. Contact time will continue to be maximised and travel time minimised as had been in place heretofore, and as agreed within the Cluster for the 2011/2012 School Year.