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Ms Christine Ryan
Chief Inspector
Independent Schools Inspectorate
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Sir Michael Wilshaw
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Chief Inspector

Annual report on the quality of the inspections and reports by the Independent Schools Inspectorate 2012/13

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their courtesy, cooperation and professionalism during the year. This has been very helpful in enabling Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to monitor the inspections and reports of the Independent Schools Inspectorate efficiently. I should also be grateful if you would extend my thanks to those schools which we have visited. Additionally, thanks are due to the staff at CAP House who have been most accommodating to HMI monitoring inspectors when they have visited. Further to Ofsted's monitoring, I have pleasure in sending you this summary of our findings of the quality of inspections and reports by the Independent Schools Inspectorate in 2012/13. A copy of this letter will also be sent to the Department for Education and published on Ofsted's website.

Introduction

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is approved under section 162A(1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, as inserted, to inspect schools in membership of the associations which make up the Independent Schools Council (ISC). Since September 2011 the Independent Schools Inspectorate has been approved also to conduct inspections of boarding welfare, inspections which were previously undertaken by Ofsted.

Ofsted monitors the work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate at the request of the Department for Education. Monitoring is carried out by HMI who monitor up to 10% of the inspections and review up to 15% of the reports published. This is Ofsted's 14th annual report on the work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

Inspections were sampled in each term during the academic year 2012/13. HMI monitored inspection evidence from various types of schools, including preparatory, senior, day and boarding schools.

There was a continued focus on boarding schools in this second full year of the Independent Schools Inspectorate inspections in this type of school. With the agreement of the Independent Schools Inspectorate, Ofsted introduced evidence base reviews of inspections whilst reducing the number of on-site visits. The proportions of each were approximately equal and achieved a wider range of monitoring evidence in an appropriately cost effective manner.

A formal meeting took place each term between the inspectorate and Ofsted. These meetings included discussion of the monitoring activities that were taking place and, in particular, the arrangements for monitoring the evidence base of inspections.

The arrangements for school inspection

The Independent Schools Inspectorate's framework for inspection has been in place since January 2012 and is based on an interval of up to six-years between inspections for those schools which, at the time of their last inspection, met all or almost all regulations and reached agreed quality standards. Schools which did not meet these criteria are inspected more frequently, at least every three years. Schools receive five days' notice of inspection.

Inspections are conducted as a single event, comprising both a check on regulations and judgements relating to the quality of education, care and welfare provided. Boarders' welfare is inspected every three years. This is inspected either as a stand-alone activity, known as an 'intermediate inspection', or integrated into the school inspection when the latter is due.

Integrated inspections include inspection of school, Early Years Foundation Stage and boarding welfare requirements, where applicable. The inspection takes place over four days. Where the school has a separate registration, judgements for the Early Years Foundation Stage are given in a distinct section in inspection reports. If a school is inspected at a longer interval than three years then additional intermediate inspections of Registered Early Years Foundation Stage and boarding requirements take place.

Intermediate inspections judge only the school's compliance with the national minimum standards for boarding schools, and do not make a judgement on the broader quality of the provision for boarders. These intermediate inspections are conducted over a two-and-a-half day period.

Integrated inspections of education and boarding last four days and usually have a larger team of inspectors, to cover both aspects.

Inspection teams are led by reporting inspectors (RI), who are experienced inspectors, generally former HMI, or retired or current headteachers from schools that are members of the associations.

Team inspectors are trained 'peer' inspectors who are mainly serving or, occasionally, former independent school senior staff. Inspection teams for boarding schools include specialist inspectors for boarding. A specialist inspector is also deployed to those schools which have pupils in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The information provided for inspectors includes a detailed self-evaluation form completed by the school, details of school policies and online questionnaires completed by parents and carers and by pupils.

The inspectorate's policy is to conduct recruitment checks on its inspectors and to require inspectors to confirm for each inspection whether they have any previous connections with a school that might affect their impartiality to inspect it.

Quality of inspections

Overall, the Independent Schools Inspectorate's inspections have been of good quality in this monitoring year. During the academic year Ofsted monitored 20 inspections through 12 on-site visits and 5 evidence base reviews. The outcome of our monitoring is that the Independent Schools Inspectorate continues to deliver inspections of good quality: all but one of the inspections visited were judged to be good, the other was satisfactory. All met the required standard.

Inspections checked thoroughly each school's compliance with the regulations for independent schools. The arrangements for safeguarding received particular and rightful scrutiny from inspection teams. School leaders were given clear and unequivocal feedback regarding any non-compliance. In boarding school inspections, similarly rigorous checks were made on the school's compliance with the national minimum standards (NMS) and these were reported back clearly to leaders and managers.

Reporting inspectors led inspections well. Their professionalism and clarity provided inspection teams with good expertise and experience. They continue to be a key strength of the Independent Schools Inspectorate inspections. Effective communication is a feature of reporting inspectors' work; they are well organised and efficient in their management of inspection teams.

The deployment of team inspectors makes good use of their subject or phase knowledge. Headteachers commented on the good match of team expertise to the type of schools being inspected. For example, in the Early Years Foundation Stage and in boarding schools, inspection teams had suitably experienced inspectors on the team for these specialisms.

The Pre-Inspection Commentary (PIC) is used by the Independent Schools Inspectorate reporting inspectors to record the details of pre-inspection planning and analysis of information and data about the school.

The PICs are thorough and include the reporting inspectors' evaluations of the outcomes of the school's previous inspection report, school performance data, the school's self-evaluation and any relevant information available from wider sources such as the school's web-site. As a result, reporting inspectors are able to focus the inspection team on the most pertinent issues for inspection. Pre-inspection questionnaires form an important part of the Independent Schools Inspectorate process. The returns from parents and carers and from pupils are used well to inform the PIC so that inspection teams are clear about their views on the school before they begin the inspection. This ensures that inspection teams get off to a good start.

Inspection teams establish a positive rapport with school leaders and governors. Combined with good communication during inspections, this ensures that key messages arising are conveyed clearly and promptly. In this way, there are no surprises for schools at the final feedback which reports to leaders at the end of the inspection. In particular, emerging evidence which shows any non-compliance is quickly brought to the attention of school leaders. During several inspections visited by HMI, governors and leaders commented that they were very pleased with the conduct and communication of the inspection team.

Inspectors are well served by the training and guidance provided by the Independent Schools Inspectorate. Inspectors view the training as helpful, informative and supportive of their work. Inspectors who are new to leading inspections are able to shadow an experienced reporting inspector who acts as a mentor. The Independent Schools Inspectorate guidance and inspection tools promote consistent approaches to inspection. For example, a discrete new suite of forms has been created, specifically tailored to intermediate inspections of boarding schools. The forms include banks of questions for use in interviews with staff, governors and pupils, and these were brought into use at the start of the academic year. These are helpful to inspectors because they are annotated with references to specific NMS and this helps ensure a full coverage of the NMS.

Evidence bases from the Independent Schools Inspectorate inspections provide a wide range of written records which fully support the inspection judgements.

Written evaluation forms are accompanied by completed PICs and individual inspector records of evidence. Evaluation forms (EFs) document observations of lessons together with a record of meetings with staff, governors and pupils, including boarders where appropriate. Also, some evaluation forms contain analysis of data. The questionnaires from parents and carers and pupils are included in the evidence base.

EFs vary in quality but most show a good match between the written text and the judgements made by inspectors. For the most part, EFs are evaluative and concisely written. The EFs which record the observations of lessons are generally of good quality though the details of how well different groups of pupils are making progress in lessons are a relative weakness. The EFs which record the discussions in meetings are occasionally more descriptive and this weakens the evidence for the judgements made.

In an overall positive picture, written records of team meetings are not convincing with regard to the depth of challenge or quality assurance procedures. In response to this issue being raised mid-year, the Independent Schools Inspectorate has strengthened its expectations of inspectors in this regard.

The quality assurance arrangements of the Independent Schools Inspectorate provide regular checks on the practice and quality of individual reporting inspectors and of the outcomes of inspection judgements. Effective performance management procedures are in place. HMI examined the Independent Schools Inspectorate anonymised records of quality assurance outcomes and judge the arrangements to be of good quality. Prompt action is taken by the Independent Schools Inspectorate leaders if an inspector's performance is judged to be of concern. This includes training and development opportunities to ensure inspectors improve and, where appropriate, discontinued use of individual inspectors.

Observations by HMI during on-site visits confirm the continued effective support and guidance given by the experienced reporting inspectors to less experienced team inspectors. A mentoring approach is often used to good effect so that team inspectors, who are often serving teachers, learn quickly from the professional lead. The quality assurance of the reporting inspector often includes a detailed scrutiny of the EFs completed by team inspectors. However, HMI monitoring shows that there are few EFs with written quality assurance comments in the evidence base of some inspections.

Quality of reports

HMI reviewed 14 inspection reports of both day and boarding schools including reports that resulted from both integrated and intermediate inspections of welfare. The good standard of report writing has been maintained. Thirteen of the reports were good; the remaining one report was satisfactory. All reports met the required standard and all were clear about regulatory matters. Regulatory failures were clearly listed. Main findings of the report gave a balanced overview of the school's strengths and weaknesses.

All reports were clearly written and many contained a good level of detail. The reports give the reader a good picture of how well the school is doing and how it has improved since the last inspection. The text of reports gives the reader confidence that any issues were checked by inspectors and the outcomes are crisply explained.

The text of reports justifies whether regulations were met or not. Where appropriate, there are specific references to what must be done to rectify any unmet regulations.

In the best reports there are clear links between the quality of the school's provision and the impact on outcomes for pupils.

Where judgements are good or excellent the text makes it clear why this is. The achievements of pupils, including their starting points, the progress they make and the standards they reach are plain to see. It is clear where progress is not good enough. The impact of the curriculum including extra-curricular opportunities are reported well and illustrated with suitable examples. In reporting on the quality of teaching there are clear links to the impact on pupils' learning. Judgements are consistent throughout the report and recommendations well matched to the findings in the main text.

The satisfactory report was still clearly written but some text did not fully explain the judgements or the provision for some groups of pupils such as those who are disabled or who have special educational needs. There were a few inconsistencies which the reader may find confusing or difficult to understand.

Overall summary

The work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate continues to be of good quality. The inspectorate responded well to the issues raised in the previous annual report letter. The integrated inspections of education and boarding in boarding schools have improved through the development of additional guidance and forms such as those highlighted above. Reporting inspectors are of the view that good quality training

provided by the Independent Schools Inspectorate prepares them well to lead inspections in boarding schools.

The inspectorate acts promptly on any points that arise as a result of Ofsted's monitoring activity, and continues to build on its good inspection and reporting practice.

Ofsted welcomes the dialogue that has taken place with the Independent Schools Inspectorate over the introduction of increased monitoring for the evidence bases of inspections and fewer on-site visits. Ofsted shares the Independent Schools Inspectorate view that the monitoring evidence this year has achieved an improved range and depth due to this change of emphasis. Also, Ofsted welcomes the discussions which have taken place regarding improvements to the protocol which governs Ofsted's monitoring of the inspectorate.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

In an overall good performance, the Independent Schools Inspectorate should consider fully embedding recent improvements to inspection practice in respect of the written evidence of both inspection team meetings and of the corporate way judgements are reached. Additionally, the inspectorate's reporting inspectors should improve the consistency of their written quality assurance comments on team inspectors EFs so that the inspectorate and Ofsted can have greater confidence in the regularity and rigour of this practice.

The inspectorate should consider improving the quality of written evidence produced by all inspectors in respect of the detail about the progress made in lessons for different groups of pupils such as those with a disability or with special educational needs.

I hope that these observations are useful to you and your staff in your work to generate further improvement, both in your inspection service and in the independent schools you inspect.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Wilshaw". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Sir Michael Wilshaw