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Sir Michael Wilshaw
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

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Dear Christine

Annual report on the quality of the inspections and reports by the Independent Schools Inspectorate 2011/2012

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their courtesy, cooperation and professionalism during the year 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, including those schools who accommodated more than one HMI on visits where Ofsted piloted approaches to the monitoring of boarding inspections. This has proved helpful in training and preparing our team of inspectors for this important aspect. 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 2011/2012. 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 (ISI) is approved under section 162A (1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, as amended, to inspect schools in membership of the associations which make up the Independent Schools Council (ISC). From September 2011 ISI 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 Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) who monitor up to 10% of the inspections and review up to 15% of the reports published. This is Ofsted's 13th annual report on the work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

Inspections were sampled in each term during the academic year 2011-12. HMI monitored inspection evidence from various types of schools, including preparatory, senior, day and boarding schools. Ofsted extended its monitoring activities in the year to encompass the monitoring of inspections of boarding welfare.

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 inspecting boarding schools, which was new to ISI this year. With this in mind, the sample of inspections monitored by Ofsted HMI in the spring and summer terms of 2012 had a particular focus on boarding schools. HMI attended these inspections at different stages and times to see both the initial steps that were being taken to organise these inspections; and at later stages, how inspection teams arrived at their final judgements.

The arrangements for school inspection

ISI's framework for inspection changed in January 2012 and is now based on a six-year interval 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, every three years. Schools receive five days' notice of inspection.

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. Where relevant, the inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage is integrated with the inspection of the school as a whole, including where the school has a separate registration for this stage. Where the school has a separate registration, judgements for the Early Years Foundation Stage are given in a distinct section in inspection reports. The inspection takes place over four days.

The academic year 2011 to 2012 was a period of change for ISI inspections. During the autumn term ISI standard inspections continued to be conducted in two separate parts.

These arrangements were discontinued from January 2012. Since that date inspections have been conducted as a single event, comprising both a check on regulations and judgements related to the quality of education provided. Short, interim inspections were also discontinued in this academic year.

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.

Frameworks for the integrated inspections were piloted by ISI during the autumn term and were introduced as final versions in January 2012. Intermediate inspections judge only the school's compliance with the national minimum standards (NMS) for boarding schools, and do not make a judgement on the 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, 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, retired independent school senior staff. Inspection teams for boarding schools include a specialist inspector for boarding. A specialist inspector is also deployed to those schools which have pupils in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

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

ISI has continued to run inspections of good quality. During the academic year Ofsted monitored 30 inspections. This figure is higher than in the previous year because of the introduction of the new aspect of ISI's work to inspect boarders' welfare in boarding schools, and ensured that HMI were able to see examples of both integrated and intermediate inspections in boarding schools. All inspections sampled met the requirements of the Department for Education.

The outcome of our monitoring is that ISI continues to deliver inspections of good quality: all but one of the inspections sampled were judged to be good, the other was satisfactory. All met the required standard.

ISI has made a good start to inspecting welfare in boarding schools. Appropriate new frameworks have been introduced for boarding inspections that are based soundly on the national minimum standards for boarding schools. Inspections have run smoothly and the new arrangements have been implemented effectively. In this new aspect of ISI's work, HMI identified only occasional minor shortcomings and shared these with ISI as points for development, with a view to refining inspection practice still further.

Inspections checked thoroughly the school's compliance with the regulations for independent schools, including those related to safeguarding, and reported back clearly to the school's leaders on which regulations had, or had not, been met. In boarding schools inspection teams reported unambiguously, additionally, on the school's compliance with the national minimum standards.

ISI's stated policy is to allow schools the opportunity to remedy minor omissions in its policies or practice during the inspection, and so the school's compliance with regulations and with the national minimum standards is not judged finally until the end of the inspection. This helps schools to put minor matters right. ISI ensures also that non-compliance on more serious matters is noted at the appropriate point in the inspection. Inspectors make good use of the helpline to ISI to clarify how to proceed, if this arises.

The expertise of the reporting inspectors continues to be a real strength of the inspectorate's work. The reporting inspectors' strong leadership ensured that team inspectors were very well prepared, supported and appropriately challenged to fulfil their roles. Inspections were almost invariably planned thoroughly. Reporting inspectors made good use of team inspectors' subject knowledge or management expertise when deciding how to deploy them. Planning included appropriate consideration of the school's self-evaluation and the views of its parents and carers and its pupils. Accurate and reliable inspection judgements were made, founded on a good range of evidence. Reporting inspectors guided new or relatively inexperienced team members particularly well during inspections, ensuring that their judgements were based on secure evidence.

Headteachers and their staff commented regularly about the highly professional conduct of the inspectors. Headteachers appreciated the good communication from the inspection team and from the ISI administrative team.

Inspectors continue to be supported well by good documentation, guidance and instruments for inspection. This support is reinforced effectively by the regular training inspectors receive from ISI, the provision of online information and a helpline to ISI for further advice.

Inspectors are making more extensive use of grade descriptors when judging aspects of a school's provision than previously. In this respect, ISI has acted promptly on a suggestion given in the 2011 annual report on its work, promoting further consistency in inspection practice.

The quality of evidence forms has continued to improve. These now evaluate more carefully the impact of the provision inspectors have observed, and what could have been improved, rather than just describe it. On the one inspection that was judged to be satisfactory the evidence forms were more variable in quality. On this inspection there were a number of good features but consideration by the inspection team of all the evidence collected was less thorough, in particular for judging the quality of the Early Years Foundation Stage. As a result, the written evidence did not sufficiently well substantiate the high grade awarded for the overall effectiveness of this stage.

Inspection teams paid very close regard to safeguarding. Reporting inspectors' training had equipped them well for this and they had been suitably briefed to seek further advice from ISI if they encountered any shortcomings in a school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils. In such situations, inspection teams were alert to the potential impact of any shortcomings when arriving at quality judgements on other aspects of a school's provision, including its leadership and management. ISI makes suitable provision to review the evidence and moderate judgements made by an inspection team where a judgement might be contentious. In all these respects, during the year, ISI has strengthened still further the guidance and support it provides to its inspectors.

Integrated and intermediate inspections of boarding schools

ISI has deployed inspectors with highly suitable experience and expertise in boarding schools as reporting inspectors and as specialist team inspectors for boarding. Many are current senior staff or headteachers and are often highly-experienced reporting inspectors. These inspectors showed good awareness of boarding schools and they had been well-briefed regarding the NMS.

Inspections were well planned to make best use of time and ensure that a robust evidence base was assembled. All inspection teams checked the requirements for safeguarding very closely.

Some reporting inspectors showed a particularly acute awareness of these requirements and were an asset to their teams and a source of helpful advice to schools.

Inspection plans for boarding schools included a good range of interviews with key staff and with boarders to probe how effectively the standards were being implemented. Inspection teams checked the school's compliance with the NMS thoroughly. In the most efficiently organised inspections, evidence forms showed clear links to specific numbered standards, making it easy for the reporting inspector to monitor the quality of the evidence gathering and to check that all the standards were being covered. The best evidence forms gave succinct supporting evidence of how a standard had been met.

Inspectors were supported well by the inspection tools and guidance provided by ISI. These included sharply-focused prompt questions for conducting interviews. The guidance provided for inspectors for each type of inspection, integrated or intermediate is clear and distinct, and is proving helpful to inspectors. However, some of the forms used by inspectors for collecting evidence do not distinguish sufficiently between integrated and intermediate types of inspection. Some of the detail required on forms being used on intermediate inspections was superfluous for this type of inspection, for example questions asked and grades required referred to lessons than to aspects of boarding welfare.

There is no overt link in the ISI framework between boarding provision and pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Nevertheless, in practice the impact of boarding provision on this aspect of pupils' personal development was discussed appropriately in inspection team meetings, where inspectors reflected on emerging evidence and its meaning.

Pre-inspection commentaries prepared by the reporting inspector were usually thorough and on most integrated inspections reflected well both aspects, education and boarding in equal measure, indentifying suitable inspection trails for both. This enabled all members of the inspection team to have a full picture of the existing evidence about the school from the outset, and ensured that the inspection was conducted in a fully integrated way. Occasionally, there were minor shortcomings in planning, such as where the commentary for boarding had not been made available to the reporting inspector and team members at the start of the inspection.

On all inspections, pupils' views were explored appropriately. When there was a glitch in the operation of information technology systems for processing pupils' questionnaires, inspectors followed ISI's procedure correctly in seeking advice from the helpdesk as to how best to proceed to obtain pupils' views. In coming to a decision, due regard was given to the circumstances and size of the individual school.

Intermediate inspections of welfare focus solely on the school's compliance with NMS. However, when feeding back to the school, inspectors also helpfully discussed aspects of a school's work in more detail with senior staff as part of a professional dialogue about school improvement.

All inspections met requirements and the few minor shortcomings identified were acted on immediately.

Quality of reports

HMI reviewed 25 inspection reports of both day and boarding schools including reports that resulted from both integrated and intermediate inspections of welfare. For this reason, the number of reports sampled this year is higher than in the previous year, ensuring that HMI had reviewed a good spread of reports in various types of school. The good standard of report writing has been maintained.

Twenty-three of the reports were good; the remaining two reports were satisfactory. All reports met the required standard and all were clear about regulatory matters. Regulatory failures were clearly listed. Summary sections of the report gave a balanced overview of the school's strengths and weaknesses. When writing summary sections of reports, reporting inspectors now ensure that any regulatory failures are highlighted more prominently in the report. ISI has addressed effectively a recommendation from Ofsted's report of last year.

Integrated inspection reports on boarding schools explained clearly the school's compliance with the NMS and outlined the impact of the school's provision on outcomes for pupils. Reports from these inspections wove together effectively inspectors' findings on both aspects of the school's work, so that an holistic view of the school overall and the impact of its provision on outcomes for pupils was obtained.

Reports were very well written, with many strong features and were clear about how the school could improve further. The vast majority were coherent and consistent throughout. The views of parents and pupils were reflected at appropriate points.

Reports usually provided a clear picture of the progress of various groups of pupils, such as those who have special educational needs or disabilities, or who have English as an additional language. Most reports helpfully indicated how far a school had improved since its previous inspection.

Two reports were judged to be satisfactory, rather than good. While these reports had several good features, such as explaining well to the reader how and why specific NMS had been met, one report was less helpful regarding the recommendations from the previous inspection. It would have been reassuring for the reader to know more, in addition to the numbers of NMS that had previously not been met, such as what exactly these recommendations were and how successfully the school had subsequently acted on them.

In one of these two reports, there were a few inconsistencies in the text and in places the findings in the report were less clear for the reader than in other reports. For example, the judgement on pupils' achievement was not wholly convincing as it was not made clear why pupils' progress was judged to be good overall when it appeared that not all groups of pupils were making the progress they should.

Overall summary

The work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate continues to be of good quality. The inspectorate has acted appropriately on the recommendations of the previous year's annual report from Ofsted. It 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.

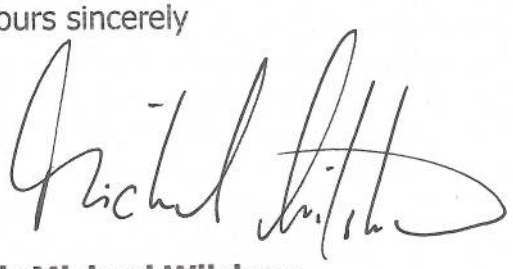
The inspectorate has enhanced its guidance and training for inspectors and supports them well. Inspectors undertaking inspections of welfare in boarding schools have been suitably equipped to do so and draw on a good range of inspection tools to help them in this. Ofsted welcomes the dialogue that has taken place with ISI over approaches to inspecting boarders' welfare and the open way in which ISI has received suggestions at this early stage for how these might develop further. For example, inspection practice observed over the summer term addressed points raised in the spring term.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

In an overall good performance, ISI should consider how integrated inspection of education and boarding in a boarding school could be further developed in order that reports provide a fuller picture of how both aspects interrelate and demonstrate the impact that boarding has on wider outcomes for pupils. ISI should refine the evidence recording forms used on intermediate inspections of boarding welfare so that these are more closely tailored to reflect the inspection activities undertaken.

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



Sir Michael Wilshaw
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector