



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS COUNCIL INSPECTIONS
A report on the operation of inspections in 1999

A report from the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector Of Schools

INTRODUCTION

1. This report evaluates the progress made by the Independent Schools Council (ISC) on the inspection of schools which are members of associations forming the Council. Since January 1999, the ISC has been providing published reports and advice to the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) on their schools' compliance with registration requirements. The schools are to be inspected on a six-yearly cycle. Such inspections replace the regulatory work formerly undertaken by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) in OFSTED, who continue to inspect schools not belonging to ISC.

2. Until April 2000 there have been two inspection regimes, each with their own framework. Schools belonging to the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) have been inspected by HMC's Schools Inspection Service (SIS). The Accreditation, Review and Consultancy Service (ARCS) has inspected schools in the other associations which form part of the ISC. In April 2000 these two inspection services merged to form a common inspection service called the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), working to a common framework and procedures. Before the amalgamation ARCS published inspection reports under the banner of ISI. This report therefore refers to HMC (SIS) and ARCS (ISI) inspections, the latter relating to the former ARCS system.

3. OFSTED's evaluations in 1997 of earlier inspection practice referred to both HMC (SIS) and ARCS inspections; the recommendations which were made are annexed to this report.

4. Under an agreement between the DfEE and the ISC associations, which took effect from January 1999, OFSTED undertook to monitor the new inspection arrangements. In future HMI would normally visit association schools only if they presented serious concerns or if a visit was requested by the DfEE.

The basis of ISC inspections

5. The associations undertook to inspect all their schools on a six-year cycle, and to publish reports and summaries. They agreed to:

- guarantee objectivity and independence from the associations' membership interests;
- adopt inspection processes, standards of judgements and codes of conduct consistent with those used by HMI;
- incorporate improvements in inspection practice recommended in OFSTED's 1997 evaluation;

- allow for monitoring by OFSTED;
- report to the DfEE on the extent to which the schools inspected comply with regulatory requirements;
- enable the DfEE and OFSTED to take follow-up action if necessary with schools in relation to report findings.

6. The inspection frameworks for HMC (SIS) and ARCS (ISI) are similar to those employed by OFSTED, with variations of detail and emphasis which reflect the differing requirements of the associations. They follow the same code of conduct and standards of inspection as are set out in OFSTED's framework for the inspection of independent schools. The ISI common framework is now being adjusted in the light of experience and to reflect changes in OFSTED practice, notably on the presentation in the main findings of what the school does well and what could be improved.

7. Both HMC (SIS) and ARCS (ISI) have mechanisms designed to ensure that members of inspection teams are free from partiality. The constitution of the ISI will include an explicit section requiring the independence of the inspection system.

OFSTED's monitoring role

8. OFSTED undertook to monitor 10 per cent of the inspections carried out by the ISC agencies and to check 15 per cent of their reports. The sample size and methods used were broadly similar to those used in relation to Section 10 inspections of maintained schools, modified to take account of the nature of the agreement and without the direct evaluation of the competence of reporting inspectors. HMI were also able to look at the approach of the associations to the setting up and administration of the inspections.

9. HMI were able to carry out most of the planned activities. Some time was lost as a result of the late issue of some reports by ARCS (ISI), which has meant that fewer checks on reports have been done than planned.

10. In addition to visiting inspections and checking reports, HMI attended a training session and three association committee meetings. These meetings were part of a regular cycle of meetings to monitor completed inspection reports, to review membership by the schools of the respective associations and, where necessary, to determine the need for, and nature of, follow-up visits.

MAIN FINDINGS

11. The first year of monitoring inspections by the two inspection agencies shows that the system is functioning satisfactorily. In particular, the tenets of independence and objectivity are being upheld in inspections. A good response has been made to the recommendations in OFSTED's 1997 evaluations of inspection practice. However, improvements are still needed in some important respects.

12. Leaders of inspection teams are generally effective in their duties. Some need additional training in aspects of the work of independent schools, especially those relating to pupils' welfare and the requirements for registration. The main weaknesses in the quality of the inspections centre on the variability in the expertise and training of team members, many of whom lack experience and continuity of inspection practice. This can affect the team's confidence in making judgements.

13. The majority of reports on schools follow the criteria of the relevant framework and are written to an adequate standard. The best reports identify strengths and weaknesses effectively, giving a clear picture for both the school and parents. However, not all reports present the findings of the parental questionnaire. Registration requirements are dealt with in accordance with the agreement with the DfEE but the relevant issues are not always identified and commented upon within reports. The use of comparative data within reports is variable.

14. HMI have limited direct evidence on the training of team leaders and inspectors. The training session seen was of very good quality and team members with whom this issue was discussed were very appreciative of their training. However, there are substantial issues relating to the extent and timing of training of team members, as identified in this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) The deployment of team inspectors needs to ensure that all have appropriate expertise, training and regular experience of inspection.
- (2) Appropriate training should be given to those team leaders who have had limited experience of the independent sector.
- (3) Reports should give clear evidence within the body of the text that the requirements for registration are met by the school.
- (4) Reports should make more consistent use of performance data, including a clear reference to the ability, or prior attainment, of pupils in judging standards.

- (5) Significant variations in the standards achieved between subjects or between pupils of different ages or abilities should be highlighted in the relevant sections of reports and, where necessary, in the main findings.
- (6) Quality assurance procedures should be strengthened so that there is better internal consistency, for example to ensure that subject paragraphs follow a consistent pattern and that all criteria in the framework are met.
- (7) To ensure consistency, inspection reports should include the results of the parental questionnaire.
- (8) It would be helpful if the outcomes of future monitoring visits made by ISI could be made available to OFSTED, together with evidence of any action planned or taken.
- (9) OFSTED should be informed by ISI of the outcomes of any complaints from schools about the inspection process, or the inspection report, and of the action taken on such complaints.

THE QUALITY OF INSPECTIONS

15. HMI monitored 26 inspections in 1999. All but one was of at least satisfactory standard and met the requirements set out in the original agreement.

16. Most inspection team leaders were retired HMI. Some were retired headteachers of HMC schools, and an increasing number were OFSTED-trained in the inspection of maintained schools. Thus, the inspections have been led by experienced personnel. The inspections were usually well led and managed by team leaders who were well prepared, had good documentation and briefed their teams well. Some team leaders have had limited experience of inspecting independent schools and need further training in this regard, in particular with respect to boarding and welfare matters.

17. There has been a steady improvement in the extent of monitoring undertaken by team leaders of the work of team members. However, this is variable, depending on the size of the team and the time available. Whilst all team leaders are aware of the need to scrutinise inspectors' lessons observation forms, not all do so thoroughly, and only a few have undertaken joint visits to classrooms. Most are good at offering advice to team members. Team leaders have to work hard to train and support team inspectors during the inspection.

18. Team members on inspections are usually practising teachers or headteachers. They often lack much experience of inspection. Although all have received some training, this has not been extensive and has not necessarily related to current inspection practice. For example, inspectors may have had training several years before being used on inspections, or found themselves being used as inspectors only infrequently. Not all inspectors, therefore, have the benefit of continued experience through which they can hone their skills. The result, inevitably, is that there is considerable variation in the quality and confidence of team members' work. In some inspections this can lead to lack of real debate in team meetings and an over-reliance on the team leader in reaching collective judgements.

19. Particular difficulties arise when team members, notably in small teams, are expected to inspect across a range of subjects or aspects in which they lack expertise. In such cases the evidence they can gather on the quality of provision or standards can be very limited, giving rise to weak oral reporting to departments or subject co-ordinators and insecurity in the contribution to the written report. In both cases, the inspectors' uncertainty can be evident in reporting which is poorly structured and lacking clarity of judgement.

20. The inspection system, therefore, needs to ensure that team members have appropriate and recent training relevant to the task in hand. Refresher courses are

needed, together with inspection planning that ensures the effective deployment of team members.

21. The two inspection systems have allowed for some monitoring of inspections by experienced personnel. The results of monitoring visits have not been reported to OFSTED, and therefore their effectiveness and the extent to which they influence the system cannot at present be judged.

22. The use of analysis of examination data in judging outcomes has improved. HMC inspections have used comparative data on similar schools in order to gauge value-added performance. This is an area for continued development.

THE QUALITY OF REPORTS

23. HMI monitored 13 inspection reports, five from HMC (SIS) and eight from (ARCS) (ISI). Those undertaken in accordance with the ARCS (ISI) framework included reports on schools from all the member associations. All but two of the reports monitored, one from HMC (SIS) and one from ARCS (ISI), were of at least a satisfactory standard. Neither of these two reports was seriously misleading.

24. However, at least one school, the inspection report on which was not one of those checked by HMI, has complained to ARCS (ISI) both about the inspection and the report. OFSTED has not received information about any other such complaints or the action taken in relation to this complaint. It would aid the monitoring of inspections if information on complaints and their outcomes were provided to OFSTED in future.

25. All reports have a cover sheet that declares whether or not the school meets the requirements of registration. HMI have reservations about the effectiveness of the current format. Some reports make brief but explicit reference to regulatory matters and, in so doing, indicate that such matters as the welfare and protection of children have been thoroughly covered. However, in some cases, although the cover sheet is completed to state that requirements are complied with, there is a lack of reference to these issues in the report. It would be helpful if the cover sheet were modified to require reference to specific sections of the report where issues are covered.

26. Most reports have followed the criteria of the relevant framework. For the most part they are clearly written and usually free from ambiguity and jargon. Occasionally, the language used is inappropriate and the background descriptions too lengthy. The best reports contain forthright and well-substantiated judgements, clearly identifying strengths and weaknesses in a way likely to be informative to readers. All reports have been checked by someone not on the inspection team. A minority of reports has needed better editing.

27. The main findings of reports usually reflect the strengths and weaknesses of school, but in some they do not reflect well enough the principal issues identified in the main body of the report, including the subject sections. In a few, insufficient attention is given in the main findings to nursery or early years provision. Occasionally, indications of what appear to be weaknesses in management are not referred to in the section on management.

28. Most reports make clear reference to pupils' abilities, or prior attainment, in evaluating standards and, in the best cases, make appropriate use of comparative data. However, the use of such data is variable and several reports make insufficient or inconsistent reference to the ability or prior attainment of pupils. In particular, the sections on attainment and the main findings are not always precise enough in identifying the standards attained between subjects, age groups, or pupils of different abilities or prior attainment.

29. Consistency in the quality of subject sections is a matter for improvement. In some reports the evaluation of attainment in subject sections do not use sufficient concrete examples of what pupils can actually do. The variability in the quality of subject sections in some reports relates to inconsistent adherence to framework criteria, as well as inadequate quality control, and reflects the limited expertise or experience of some team members. There is a tendency in some reports to smooth over differences in quality and effectiveness across subjects taught in the school.

30. All reports included summaries for parents. Most are likely to be helpful and accessible to parents and fully reflect the main findings in the report but, occasionally, this is not the case. The best summaries include clear indications of pupils' attainment and provide reassurance to parents that welfare issues, including checks made on staff suitability, have been inspected. There is some inconsistency in references made to the views of parents based on their responses to the questionnaires issued prior to inspections. All reports are now made available to parents, but few include data on parents' responses to the questionnaire. There is no description to parents explaining the inspection system.

31. Weaknesses highlighted by HMI checks on reports have normally been readily acknowledged by the respective inspection body and highlighted as issues for future training. In addition, responses from team leaders to letters from HMI following report checks generally accept the need to address weaknesses.

ANNEX: RECOMMENDATIONS IN OFSTED'S 1997 EVALUATIONS

32. In 1997 OFSTED published evaluations of the inspection systems of both HMC (SIS) and ARCS (ISI). These reports highlighted areas where improvements would be necessary and gave recommendations for improvement. They were as follows:

In respect of the ARCS system:

- *“ARCS needs to specify more clearly what statements must be made in its reports and which of the criteria are mandatory and which are not.”*
- *“Team leaders need to follow the criteria more systematically, particularly ensuring that full team consensus is reached on standards and that evaluations are explicitly related to pupils’ levels of ability.”*
- *“Team leaders need to monitor the evidence as it is collected, to ensure its security, and to provide more guidance to team members.”*
- *“ARCS needs to make more extensive and rigorous use of external indicators, both those made already available by ISIS and others.”*
- *“ARCS should insist on a more common approach to reporting on standards and to the compliance with its own requirement that the conclusion should be a distillation of the full report, weaknesses as well as strengths.”*
- *“ARCS needs to look for some economical mechanism for monitoring its inspections directly”.*

In respect of the HMC system:

- *“Ensure that the work of team inspectors is monitored more thoroughly, for example to check that lesson observation forms make consistent use of the available criteria”.*
- *“Develop a system to enable the work of Lead Inspectors to be monitored.”*
- *“Ensure that the main inspection judgements are corporately agreed.”*
- *“Ensure that the judgements in all sections of the written reports are clear and balanced, and that an unequivocal view is given about whether the standards actually achieved are in line with pupils’ capabilities.”*
- *“Improve the transparency of the system, especially to parents, by describing its aims and procedures more widely and by making all reports routinely available.”*