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Mr Simon Bennett
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Sir Michael Wilshaw
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Chief Inspector

Annual report on the quality of inspections and reports by the School Inspection Service 2012/13

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 complete their monitoring of inspections and reports by the School Inspection Service efficiently. I should also be grateful if you would extend my thanks to those schools which we have visited. I have pleasure in sending you the following summary of Ofsted's findings from our monitoring work this year. A copy of this letter will also be sent to the Department for Education and will be published on Ofsted's website.

Introduction

The School Inspection Service is recognised by the Secretary of State as an approved body for the purpose of inspecting, under section 162A(1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, as inserted, registered independent schools which are affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust, schools accredited as members of the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship and those schools belonging to the Cognita Group which are not members of the Independent Schools Council and its constituent associations. There are 93 schools in the inspectorate's remit, of which 35 are affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust, 24 are members of the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools and 34 are Cognita schools.

The Focus Learning Trust is a national organisation which brings together schools that are owned and maintained by local assemblies of the Brethren or Exclusive Brethren. The schools are small day schools that cater for pupils of both primary and secondary age.

Schools in the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship provide education for pupils of primary and/or secondary age. Many also accept younger children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. A very small number of the schools have boarding provision. The welfare of boarders in those schools is inspected separately by Ofsted and does not form part of the sample of inspections chosen for monitoring.

The school curriculum reflects the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner which relates education closely to a child's stage of development, for example the age at which a child is felt to be ready to learn to read and write. Accordingly, in Steiner Waldorf schools, an individual approach is taken to the delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage to reflect any exemptions that have been granted to schools regarding the learning and development requirements. The School Inspection Service takes account of such exemptions when inspecting the schools.

The School Inspection Service maintains its independence from the Focus Learning Trust, the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship and their member schools and the Cognita group through an independent board that oversees the inspection policy and process.

The framework for the inspection of schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust, Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools and those schools belonging to the Cognita Group which are not members of the Independent Schools Council and its constituent associations, requires systematic inspection and reporting of the school's compliance with the registration standards as set out in The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, as amended. Ofsted monitors the work of the School Inspection Service at the request of the Department for Education. This is Ofsted's sixth annual report on the work of the School Inspection Service.

In the academic year 2012/13 the School Inspection Service inspected 18 schools. Of these, Ofsted monitored one inspection on-site, two evidence bases and reviewed one report. This is a similar monitoring sample to last year, because the inspection teams are relatively unchanged and the inspections of Cognita schools have recently been added to the inspectorate's remit.

Interim inspection visits supplement the full inspections in schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust and provide a further check on quality. Their purpose is to check that a school's strengths have been maintained and to alert the Department for Education to any school that may be showing signs of decline and may therefore need to be inspected at an earlier date than anticipated. Three interim visits have taken place. Ofsted welcomes this approach by the inspectorate as it provides a means whereby schools whose circumstances may have changed can be identified early and, where necessary, helped to improve.

However, these do not form a part of the sample of schools Ofsted has selected for monitoring as they are non-statutory visits and do not result in a published report.

A formal meeting took place each term between the inspectorate and Ofsted to update on new developments and provide on-going feedback.

Arrangements for inspection

With the agreement of the Department for Education, the School Inspection Service has this year moved to a six-year cycle of inspections for schools which meet agreed criteria. Schools, which at their last inspection did not meet the minimum criteria, are inspected in full more frequently, every three years. Schools are given four days' notice of inspection. They are invited to provide an evaluation of their own performance. Parents' and carers' and pupils' views of the school are canvassed via questionnaires. The inspections are supported well by appropriate inspection instruments and a handbook of guidance for inspectors, for whom regular training is provided.

The inspectorate is staffed by a chief inspector and a team of inspectors, nearly all of whom are former HMI. A specific strength of the inspectorate is that all inspections are staffed by teams of professional inspectors who are deployed according to their particular areas of expertise such as special educational needs, post-16 education, the primary phase, the Early Years Foundation Stage and school management. School inspection teams are led by inspectors who have significant relevant experience, including a good understanding of Steiner Waldorf philosophy and substantial experience of inspecting these and Focus schools.

Where appropriate, inspection teams are complemented by a lay inspector either from the Brethren community or the Steiner Waldorf community. The lay inspector is nominated by the appropriate community for the purposes of inspecting areas such as the financial management of the school and its distinctive ethos. The lay inspector is trained and approved by the inspectorate. To ensure the integrity and objectivity of an inspection, all lay inspectors are required to formally declare any connection they may have, or have had, with any particular schools. The inclusion of a lay inspector from the community is a strong feature of the inspectorate's framework as these colleagues often provide helpful background for the inspection team. They bring additional insight to the inspection of leadership and management and the effective promotion of a school's distinctive ethos. This information is helpful for parents, and makes a positive contribution to inspectors' professional development.

It is the inspectorate's policy to conduct the required recruitment checks on its inspectors. The inspectorate also requires a declaration from professional inspectors of non-connectivity with the school they are inspecting, in order to ensure their impartiality.

The quality of inspections

All of the inspections that were monitored met requirements and indicated that the inspectorate continues to provide a good quality of service.

The inspectorate has improved its inspection arrangements by developing the role of the lay inspector so that they play a fuller role in the inspection team and make a fuller contribution to the judgements which are made. Lay inspectors receive helpful guidance through structured forms used to inform the agendas for meetings with the trustees and leaders of the school during the inspection. All inspectors, including the lay inspectors, have benefited from training about the new regulations for independent schools introduced by the Department for Education in January 2013. Inspectors are well supported through regular School Inspection Service updates and briefings which ensure that they are fully prepared for their inspection roles. The chief inspector is readily available for advice and this is appreciated by inspectors. The inspectorate has updated its inspection framework and guidance to inspectors in the light of the new regulations.

Evidence from the inspection visited on-site and from the review of the two evidence bases shows that inspection teams are very experienced, have suitable expertise and a good awareness of the different types of schools. Communication before, during and after the inspections was good. Reporting inspectors made rigorous pre-inspection preparations which included a detailed written briefing for team members. The briefing clearly outlined each inspector's responsibilities and the deployment of the team was carefully matched to individual expertise. Included was a summary of the outcomes of the school's previous inspection, its strengths and weaknesses and areas were identified for the inspection to focus on. Inspection timetables showed that reporting inspectors ensured a good coverage of different subjects and phases of education in the school. For example, where the school has an Early Years Foundation Stage there are specialist inspectors assigned to this age group.

A comprehensive checklist is made of the school's compliance, or non-compliance, with the regulations. Evidence forms are used to record the outcomes of lesson observations, meetings, scrutiny of pupils' work and of school documents. These show that inspectors write largely evaluative records. The lesson evidence forms are sharply written highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of teaching very well. However, few evidence forms detail the progress made by different groups of pupils such as disabled pupils or those with special educational needs.

Also, evidence forms which detail the discussions and meetings during an inspection do not identify the key issues as sharply. Written evidence of team meetings and the way corporate judgements are reached were not seen. A high priority was given to checking the school's safeguarding procedures and paperwork conscientiously.

Quality assurance procedures provide robust scrutiny of inspectors' work. For example, a new team inspector was subject to careful monitoring of her judgements and written evidence. This was shown by helpful written comments from the reporting inspector on evidence forms. Similarly, quality assurance arrangements for the written report are of good quality with skilful editing and careful corrections of administrative errors in the initial draft. The final report fully met the requirements of the Department for Education. Notably good features include very clear main findings which are easy for the reader to understand, accurate judgements which are founded upon a good evidence base and good reporting on the school's level of compliance with the regulations.

The good quality of inspection teams combined with the small pool of inspectors continues to effectively deliver good quality to the inspectorate's work. Good opportunities are given for inspectors to work alongside reporting inspectors as an integral part of their induction and training prior to taking on such responsibility themselves. The role of reporting inspector is rotated amongst the small group of inspectors giving equity and variety to their work. This ensures that all inspectors are given the opportunity to learn from working for an experienced reporting inspector in a team role.

The quality of reports

HMI monitored one report in full and examined the evidence contributing to the written reports of two other inspections as part of the evidence base review process. All the reports met the required standard and each was judged to be good. Reports were clear about the school's compliance with the independent school standards and the individual regulatory requirements. The arrangements for safeguarding pupils were appropriately reported. Reports were well written providing readers with easy to access information about the school's performance. Points for improvement were included in each report and provided helpful guidance for the future development of the schools inspected.

Overall summary

The School Inspection Service has provided inspections and reports which are of good quality. The inspectorate has worked closely with Ofsted to improve the availability of inspection evidence as shown by the full review of two inspections this year. This is a good response to the suggested area for improvement Ofsted provided in last year's report.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

The inspectorate should consider providing training for all inspectors to improve their evidence form writing on the progress made by different groups of pupils such as those who are disabled or who have special educational needs. Similarly, reporting inspectors should be encouraged to improve the written records of discussions during the inspection especially those in team meetings when corporate judgements are made.

I hope that these observations are useful to you and your inspectors as you are bringing about continuous improvement both in your inspection service and in the schools that 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