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Mrs M Buckingham
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Sir Michael Wilshaw
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Meg

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

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their courtesy, cooperation and professionalism in enabling Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to complete their monitoring of inspections and reports by the Bridge Schools Inspectorate 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 (DfE) and published on Ofsted's website.

Introduction

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate was recognised in 2008 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 amended, selected registered independent schools which are members of the Association of Muslim Schools UK (AMSUK) or the Christian Schools' Trust (CST). There are currently 63 schools confirmed to be in the inspection remit of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate: 38 members of the Association of Muslim Schools UK and 25 members of the Christian Schools' Trust. All are either Islamic or evangelical Christian schools, serving faith communities, which provide a distinctive religious curriculum alongside secular studies.

Three are boarding schools. Inspections of boarders' welfare in those schools are conducted by Ofsted and consequently do not form part of the sample of inspections that were monitored this year.

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate was established as an independent inspectorate with specialist expertise in schools with a distinctive religious ethos. Its work also provides an opportunity for the different faith groups to cooperate on issues of common interest.

Ofsted monitors the work of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate at the request of the Department for Education. During the academic year 2011 to 2012 the inspectorate conducted 11 inspections. Ofsted monitored two inspections and reviewed one report. This monitoring activity is less than in the previous academic year as the inspectorate conducted fewer full inspections. Furthermore, the inspectorate has now been established for a longer period. Last year Ofsted judged all BSI's inspections to be of good quality and its inspection teams have remained stable since. This is Ofsted's fourth annual report on the work of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate.

BSI gives schools five working days' notice of inspection. Schools which meet agreed criteria are now inspected on a six-year cycle, with an interim one-day inspection visit part way through this period. Schools which at their last inspection did not meet the minimum criteria are inspected in full more frequently, every three years.

Interim inspection visits supplement the full inspections 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. Seven interim visits have taken place. Ofsted endorses this move 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 'keep in touch' meeting took place in the autumn and summer terms between the inspectorate and Ofsted to update on new developments and provide on-going feedback.

Arrangements for inspection

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate's model of inspection has been agreed with the Department for Education and is set out clearly in the inspectorate's framework for inspection. The inspection framework is similar to Ofsted's in its focus on the regulations for independent schools. It also reports on whether the schools continue to meet the expectations of membership for their respective associations.

Inspection teams are led by experienced, former HMI who understand the distinctive characteristics of faith-based education and have substantial experience of leading independent school inspections. Team inspectors are drawn from the staff of schools which are members of the AMSUK or the CST and bring with them the expertise in the relevant faith curriculum. Each association puts forward candidates with substantial experience of teaching, leadership and management to be trained as accredited inspectors for the Bridge Schools Inspectorate. In order to remain accredited, inspectors must participate in at least one inspection a year and inspect at least one school from outside their own association every four years.

The inspectorate's policy is to conduct the required recruitment checks on its inspectors and to require an annual declaration from them in writing whether they have any previous connections with a school that might affect their impartiality to inspect it. The inspectorate takes note of these declarations in its deployment of inspectors.

In most cases one Christian and one Muslim inspector, normally serving headteachers, are deployed to each inspection to ensure that inspection teams arrive at a secure and well-balanced view of the school's secular and faith provision. This continues to be a good feature which enables inspectors to look widely at the school's provision for promoting understanding and tolerance of other cultures and faiths, which is one of the independent school regulations concerning pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Inspectors have benefited from regular training led by the inspectorate. This year this has included updated advice and guidance on approaches to inspecting these specific regulations. For example, inspectors have been briefed on the importance of preventing extremism in schools and preparing pupils for life in the wider community. The handbook for inspectors is to be updated once the revised regulations are made known by the Department for Education.

The inspection model is effective. The small size of the inspectorate and the continuity of service provided by experienced lead inspectors continue to result in high-quality inspection and reporting procedures. Quality assurance procedures are effective. Training for team inspectors and strong quality assurance arrangements help to ensure that the evidence bases from inspections are secure.

The quality of inspections and reports

Ofsted judged both the inspections in the sample monitored to be of good quality. Inspections were very well organised and led, with a high degree of professionalism.

The experience of the lead inspectors and the composition of their teams continue to be strengths of the inspectorate's work. Inspection teams gathered a good range of evidence to substantiate their judgements.

Headteachers appreciated the courtesy and respect shown by the inspection teams towards their religious beliefs. Lead inspectors used the expertise of serving practitioners of different faiths to good effect to bring rigour to the inspection of the faith curriculum. This helped to promote impartiality in judgements as inspectors discussed their evidence. Headteachers commented also very positively on the initiative shown by lead inspectors in coping with last-minute changes in inspection arrangements and in the school's circumstances. On both these inspections, the conduct of the inspection teams was said to be 'exemplary'.

Through initial training and updates, the inspectorate has ensured that inspectors have been suitably prepared for their roles on inspection. Lead inspectors provided excellent support to team inspectors, using their substantial expertise to guide them in making secure judgements. The small size of the inspection teams was used to good effect in regular team meetings, where emerging evidence was weighed up very carefully by the lead inspector to check that inspectors' judgements about the quality of aspects of a school's provision were well-rooted in evidence.

Lead inspectors, in particular, had excellent knowledge of the regulations. The regulations for independent schools and for safeguarding were checked thoroughly. Inspection teams considered carefully the school's self-evaluation and the views of parents, carers and pupils. This year the inspectorate introduced a means of benchmarking the responses to questionnaires to help guide inspectors as to what might be considered typical response rates. This approach is in its infancy, but provides a useful additional tool for inspectors when discussing findings from questionnaires with headteachers and senior staff.

The good standard of writing in reports has been maintained. Owing to the lower number of full inspections conducted this year, HMI monitored just one report resulting from an inspection which took place between 17 and 20 October 2011; this report met the required standard and was of good quality. The report explained clearly the quality of education, the regulatory failures and the school's capacity to correct these.

The report reflected well the concerns of parents and carers that had been conveyed and did not fight shy of stating where the school had not met regulations. The main findings section provided an accurate summary of the report, with the urgency for action expressed appropriately.

The report explained well how the school's new management were tackling the shortcomings, thus reassuring parents and other readers.

Overall summary

The inspectorate continues to build on the strengths that have been evident since its inception, in particular, the high quality of the lead inspectors and their experience and skills in leading and managing inspections. Reports explain judgements convincingly and clearly for the reader.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

The inspectorate has refined its training to inspectors to assist them in making qualitative judgements. The documents in the inspectorate's handbook are useful. BSI has plans in place to update its documentation once the revised Independent School Standards are issued.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Wilshaw". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Sir Michael Wilshaw
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector