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Mrs M Buckingham  
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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 Bridge 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 Bridge 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 Bridge Schools Inspectorate staff who have been most accommodating to HMI monitoring inspectors when they have required information and the evidence base from an inspection. 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 Bridge 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 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 inserted, selected registered independent schools which are members of the Association of Muslim Schools UK (AMSUK) or the Christian Schools' Trust (CST). There are currently 55 schools confirmed to be in the inspection remit of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate: 35 members of the Association of Muslim Schools UK and 20 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 2012/13 the inspectorate conducted 14 inspections. Ofsted monitored one inspection on-site, two evidence bases and reviewed two reports. This level of monitoring activity is similar to the previous academic year. In the last two years Ofsted judged all the Bridge Schools Inspectorate's inspections to be of good quality and its inspection teams have remained quite stable since. This is Ofsted's fifth annual report on the work of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate.

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate gives schools five working days' notice of inspection. Schools which meet agreed criteria are inspected on a six-year cycle, with a non-statutory 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. Five interim visits have taken place. Ofsted welcomes this approach by the inspectorate as it provides a means whereby schools whose circumstances may have changed to 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.

The inspectorate also conducted eight monitoring visits to schools at the request of the Department for Education to check on their progress or to assess the suitability of a material change such as an increase in pupil numbers or an extension to the premises. These visits are not monitored by Ofsted.

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

### **Arrangements for inspection**

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate's framework for inspection has been agreed with the Department for Education.

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 (SMSC). Inspectors have benefited from regular training led by the inspectorate.

This year, the inspectorate has provided training, updated advice and guidance on the revised regulations introduced by the Department for Education on 1 January 2013. The changes, which were mainly in SMSC and premises requirements, were also amended in all the inspectorate's frameworks and inspection tools. For example, an inspector was observed following the Bridge Schools Inspectorate's safeguarding procedures closely when a pupil made a disclosure during an on-site monitoring visit. In addition, the school information and evaluation form (SIEF) was revised on the inspectorate's website.

Quality assurance procedures are effective. Training for team inspectors and strong quality assurance arrangements help to ensure that the judgements from inspections are secure.

## **The quality of inspections and reports**

Ofsted judged the inspections and reports in the sample monitored in this academic year to be of good quality. All the inspections met the requirements of the Department for Education.

Lead inspectors were knowledgeable about the new regulations and team inspectors had received training and guidance in this respect. All inspectors showed a good understanding of the inspection framework. The inspection teams' composition were well matched to the schools' needs. In particular, all inspection teams benefit from a team inspector who is expert and experienced in the faith curriculum of the school.

Pre-inspection preparation was thorough and informative to the inspection team. This included detailed deployment of the team's responsibilities, timetables for inspection activity and domestic arrangements. Also, the lead inspector provided helpful background information about the school, details about the outcomes of the previous inspection and writing requirements. The school's SIEF was shared with team inspectors. Collectively, this pre-inspection preparation ensured that the inspection team was well informed and organised to start the inspection.

The inspections began with a team briefing which helped to reinforce the pre-inspection foci and to clarify any queries or issues raised by team inspectors. Lead inspectors provided a clear steer to inspection team members. Expectations were outlined and team inspectors appreciated the support and guidance from the lead inspector.

Headteachers praised the information which schools receive from the inspectorate. Also, they praised the inspectorate's administrative staff for their very effective communication throughout the inspection process. They felt that requests for information prior to the inspection were reasonable and manageable. Changes to the independent school regulations have been clearly communicated to schools by the inspectorate which headteachers found helpful in preparing for the inspection. Schools found the conduct of inspectors to be professional, rigorous and fair.

A strength of inspections is the emphasis placed upon observations in the classroom. Monitoring evidence shows a good balance and range of subjects, faith and secular provision and full coverage of the phases of education across the school. Lesson evidence forms (EFs) are generally well written. Lead inspectors are good role models for team inspectors in this regard. Most lesson EFs are evaluative and highlight the main strengths and weaknesses of teaching in a clear way. A notable strength of the evidence base is the way inspection teams summarise the outcomes of lesson observations on a spread sheet. This then informs the team discussions about the overall quality of teaching.

The inspection evidence of discussions and meetings, especially of inspection team meetings is not always well documented. Similarly, there is little evidence of inspectors scrutinising school documents. Although notebooks have some information about regulations, there are no written records of discussions with the school or scrutiny of documents. This is not a requirement, but such records of the progress of the inspection could provide a more detailed evidence base.

Good account is taken of parents and carers and pupils' views during inspections. Questionnaires from these groups are carefully analysed and their outcomes added to the evidence collected from individual discussions held during the inspection.

Effective quality assurance was seen during an inspection when the lead inspector showed a continuous regard for the performance of team inspectors. Especially strong practice was seen in the way the lead inspector guided team inspectors in their writing drafts before the final feedback to the school. This is commendable practice. However no written evidence was seen for the quality assurance of team inspectors' EFs.

Final team meetings were thorough and corporate judgements were reached. Careful use of the inspectorate's grade criteria ensured that accurate judgements were made soundly based upon the evidence base of the team. Good attention was made to the regulations. Final feedback to the school was detailed and enabled school leaders to explore the reasons for the judgements.

Inspection reports are clearly written in unambiguous language so that the reader can easily understand what the school does well and how it is improving. A particular strength of report writing is the inclusion of real examples to illustrate the school's faith aspects. Judgements are consistent throughout the reports and the reader is left in no doubt as to the differences between, for example, good and outstanding teaching. Good links are made between the school's provision and the impact of this on pupils' learning. Reports clearly identify the things which a school needs to do to improve. These are explained thoroughly in the main text of the report. The characteristics and key features which make each school distinctive are carefully woven through the report. Occasionally, reports use some terms which may not be generally well known to the reader and may cause a little confusion.

## **Overall summary**

The inspectorate continues to build on the strengths that have been identified in the first four years of Ofsted's monitoring. Lead inspectors utilise their expertise and experience to provide clear support and guidance for team inspectors. Evidence bases from inspections fully support the judgements made by inspection teams.

Reports provide clear commentaries and detailed evaluations of school's performance and include clear and meaningful points for school's improvement.

### **Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action**

The inspectorate should consider improving inspection practice in regard to the evidence recorded for inspection team meetings and the way final judgements are reached. Also, although an improving picture, lead inspectors should continue to improve the regularity of their written quality assurance comments on team inspector's EFs so that Ofsted and the inspectorate can have greater confidence in this aspect of inspection work.

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 that reads "Michael Wilshaw". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

**Sir Michael Wilshaw**