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Mr S Bennett
Chief Inspector
School Inspection Service
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Sir Michael Wilshaw
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Simon

Annual report on the quality of inspections and reports by the School Inspection Service 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 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; in particular, where a school has accommodated an extra inspector. 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 amended, registered independent schools which are affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust or members of the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools. There are 59 schools in the inspectorate's remit, of which 35 are affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust and 24 are members of the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of 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 through an independent board that oversees the inspection policy and process.

The framework for the inspection of schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust and the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools 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. Ofsted monitors the work of the School Inspection Service at the request of the Department for Education. This is Ofsted's fifth annual report on the work of the School Inspection Service.

In the academic year 2011–2012 the School Inspection Service inspected 17 schools. Of these, Ofsted monitored four inspections and reviewed one report. This is a smaller monitoring sample than last year, because the inspection teams are relatively unchanged.

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

The School Inspection Service has this year completed a three-year cycle of inspections. 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.

Inspection teams are complemented by a lay inspector either from the Brethren community or the Steiner Waldorf community, as appropriate. 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, and 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 four of the inspections that were monitored met requirements. For three of these inspections HMI also made a quality judgement: they were all good.

The small size of the inspectorate and the stability of its inspection teams continue to underpin the good quality of the inspectorate's work. Inspections were led by highly experienced inspectors who had a strong understanding of philosophy and practice within both the Steiner Waldorf and the Brethren schools. This ensured that inspection judgements were secure. Inspectors showed excellent knowledge and understanding of the regulations for independent schools. Regular briefings are provided by the inspectorate to ensure that inspectors keep this knowledge up to date. Good opportunities are given for inspectors to shadow reporting inspectors as a practical part of their induction and training prior to taking on such responsibility themselves. Amongst highly experienced inspectors the role of reporting inspector is rotated across inspections so that the small teams benefit constantly from each other's expertise.

Headteachers commented that inspectors were 'rigorous but fair' and that their findings were useful in helping their school to improve. They praised the 'exemplary conduct' and 'flexible approach' shown by inspectors in responding to their school's particular circumstances. They appreciated the insight shown by inspectors regarding their school's distinctive approach to education. Excellent communication from the inspectorate prior to the inspection helped to alleviate any concerns headteachers might have had about the inspection process.

Inspections were thoroughly prepared and well organised. Reporting inspectors made good use of the self-evaluation information provided by the school and sought out the views of parents and carers and of pupils. They used this information effectively when identifying suitable areas to explore during the inspection and when reporting on them subsequently.

Inspectors' judgements were backed up by a good range of evidence. Inspectors used the inspectorate's grade descriptors effectively for judging the quality of lessons. This helped to ensure that inspectors were consistent in their judgements. High regard was given to checking a school's procedures for safeguarding pupils' welfare, health and safety. Inspectors checked safeguarding requirements rigorously.

In schools in membership of the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship inspectors considered carefully how best to judge the achievement of any pupils in the Early Years Foundation Stage within that school's context. Inspection of this stage was conducted thoroughly.

The quality of reports

Owing to the lower number of full inspections conducted this year, HMI monitored just one inspection report. This met the required standard and was judged to be good. It was clear about regulatory matters. The school's compliance with the regulations for independent schools was clearly stated. The report was well written, providing a clear picture of the school's work, with good examples provided as to how the quality of teaching was meeting the needs of different groups of pupils in the school. Detailed information was provided about the school's excellent arrangements for the welfare, health and safety of pupils, which would reassure parents. The inspectors' judgements were consistent throughout the report.

The report included helpful comments to the school as it seeks to improve still further. The summary of main findings provided a balanced view of the school's strengths and the 'next steps' that inspectors were suggesting.

Overall summary

The work of the School Inspection Service continues to be of good quality. The inspectorate has built on its strengths and has addressed the minor points for development raised by our monitoring last year.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

Monitoring HMI scrutinise a number of sources of evidence when on site, such as the pre-inspection analysis and inspection arrangements; and the evidence forms inspectors write following lesson observations and interviews with staff and pupils. This is sufficient to enable HMI to judge whether or not the inspection meets requirements. Further detail is stored by inspectors on an electronic record. This record can be consulted after the inspection has finished, but is not always easily accessible during the visit. It would be beneficial for Ofsted and SIS to work together to ensure in all circumstances that monitors and reporting inspectors enable both parties to achieve their objectives in a constructive manner.

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, appearing to read "Michael Wilshaw", written in a cursive style.

Sir Michael Wilshaw

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector