

13 September 2011

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**Miriam Rosen**  
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Meg

### **Annual report on the quality of inspections and reports by the Bridge Schools Inspectorate 2010/2011**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their courtesy, cooperation and professionalism during the year. This has enabled Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to complete their monitoring of inspections and reports by the Bridge Schools Inspectorate (BSI) 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 66 schools confirmed to be in the inspection remit of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate: 39 members of the Association of Muslim Schools UK and 27 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. The Bridge Schools Inspectorate was established as an independent inspectorate with specialist expertise in schools with a distinctive religious ethos. Its work 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.

This year Ofsted's monitoring sample included both Islamic and Christian primary and secondary schools and a boarding school, where a concurrent inspection of welfare provision for boarders was conducted by Ofsted. This is Ofsted's third annual report on the work of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate.

Ofsted monitored four inspections and reviewed five reports by the Bridge Schools Inspectorate, representing around one in six inspections and one in five reports undertaken by the inspectorate this year. This is a lower proportion of monitoring activity than in the previous academic year when the inspectorate was still relatively new. It reflects Ofsted's proportionate approach to monitoring: last year we judged all BSI's inspection reports and inspections to be of good quality, and since then the small team of lead inspectors has remained virtually unchanged.

A formal meeting took place each term between the BSI and Ofsted. In the spring term, this meeting included a preliminary discussion on the inspectorate's policies for quality assurance and the recruitment and training of inspectors.

### **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.

BSI gives schools five days' notice of inspection. The schools are inspected on a three-year cycle. 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. 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 states that it conducts the required recruitment checks on its inspectors and that it has a written policy whereby inspectors are asked annually to state 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.

This 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 effective quality assurance arrangements help to ensure that the evidence bases from inspections are secure.

### **The quality of inspections**

Ofsted judged all four of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate's inspections in the sample monitored to be of good quality. Inspections were very well prepared and very effectively 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 comprised both Christian and Islamic faith experts, an arrangement that was welcomed by headteachers as being helpful to the team's understanding of their school's religious foundation. Serving practitioners brought to the inspection up-to-date knowledge of the different faiths. Lead inspectors used this expertise to good effect to bring rigour to the inspection of the faith curriculum. The balance of faiths in the teams helped to ensure impartiality in judgements as inspectors discussed their evidence.

Inspectors were very well prepared for inspection through the inspectorate's initial training and update sessions. These were reinforced helpfully through the information on the inspectorate's website. As a result, inspectors were suitably prepared for their roles on inspection. Team inspectors, who usually inspect only occasionally, were further guided and supported by lead inspectors whilst on inspection.

Lead inspectors provided excellent support to team inspectors, using their substantial expertise to guide them in recording evidence and in making secure judgements. Lead inspectors were rigorous in assuring the quality of team inspectors' work, spotting, for example, where evidence forms had not been sufficiently evaluative and stepping in promptly to improve them.

Inspection teams gathered a good range of evidence to substantiate their judgements. They considered carefully the school's self-evaluation and the views of its parents, carers and pupils. The regulations for independent schools and for safeguarding were checked thoroughly.

Where relevant to a school, the inspection of the requirements for the Early Years Foundation Stage was thorough. This aspect was led by an inspector with appropriate expertise for the age range. Findings from the Early Years Foundation Stage were fully considered when arriving at judgements about the quality of the school as a whole.

Schools reported that they were very happy with the conduct of the inspections and appreciated the good communication both from the inspection teams and from the inspectorate's administrator. This helped to put the school and its staff at ease. As a result, headteachers were clear about what to expect during the inspection, and lead inspectors kept them well informed about emerging findings. A typical comment from a headteacher was that the lead inspector was 'courteous, professional and thorough'.

### **The quality of reports**

HMI monitored five of the reports that were published during 2010 to 2011; all the reports sampled met the required standard and four of them were good. Reports were well-written and easy to follow. Examples were used effectively to illustrate inspectors' judgements and to paint a vivid picture of the school. The summary sections of reports provided a well-balanced view of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. The reports listed clearly the school's compliance with regulatory requirements with appropriate recommendations to help the schools improve further. However, in one report, these recommendations were worded in general terms and were not sufficiently specific about the action needed to bring about improvement. The reporting of the Early Years Foundation Stage remains good. The reports contained helpful descriptions of the key features of the provision together with clear judgements. This is helpful to parents who wish to compare provision across different settings.

Judgements in reports were clear and almost always well-substantiated and helpfully explained. In the one report that was judged to be satisfactory, rather than good, the rationale underpinning a judgement was limited. In this report, it was not clear why pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development was judged 'good', despite a number of weaknesses being noted. The report would have benefitted from more clarity about the evidence which demonstrated to inspectors how the regulation had been met. The report was otherwise clearly written, with specific suggestions as to how the school might improve further.

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

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. Inspection reports are generally good and continue to improve. For example, reports now helpfully explain to good schools why their work may not yet be outstanding. In this respect the inspectorate has acted promptly on a recommendation in the previous annual monitoring report.

To improve further, the inspectorate should consider refining its guidance to inspectors to assist them in making qualitative judgements, and to explain judgements more clearly for the reader. In particular, where there are concerns, inspectors need to weigh the evidence carefully and explain clearly the basis upon which difficult judgements are made.

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,*

*Miriam Rosen*

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