

# HMCI's monthly commentary: January 2016

Ofsted's Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw reflects on what Ofsted has learnt from the first term of short inspections of 'good' schools.

Since September 2015, Ofsted has been inspecting schools judged 'good' at their last inspection in a radically different way.

We were able to introduce these landmark changes because of the overall rise in education standards over the past decade and because we recognised that around three quarters of 'good' schools, when re-inspected, either retained their previous judgement or improved to 'outstanding'.

Our new model of short inspections for 'good' schools, which represent the majority of schools in England, is designed to reduce the burden of inspection without losing any of the rigour that parents rightly expect from Ofsted.

I agreed with those who said that the model of inspection for good schools needed to be more proportionate and more flexible.

Furthermore, I made a pledge to headteachers and others that these new short inspections, which are now taking place approximately once every three years, would:

- be led by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI)
- start from the premise that the school remains a good school
- focus on leadership and culture
- take a pragmatic view of any isolated pockets of weakness as long as the school was heading in the right direction and that leaders had identified what needed to be done

Make no mistake: the new arrangements mark a major departure from what has happened before. They are designed to encourage challenging, professional and, above all, honest dialogue between HMI and senior leaders, including governors. After all, how many schools can genuinely claim to be perfect institutions with no room for improvement?

During the first, all-important meeting with the headteacher at the start of the short inspection, HMI seek to establish whether the leaders know their school well and have a clear plan to improve its performance.

The rest of the day is given over to validating the leaders' own evaluation of the school. Inspectors will do this in a variety of ways, including:

- discussion with staff, pupils, parents and governors
- lesson observation
- learning walks

- work scrutiny

[Since September, Ofsted has conducted over 300 short inspections](#) and confirmed that in the majority of cases, the school remained 'good'.

After 4 months, we are beginning to get a sense of how these new-style inspection arrangements are going and the sort of things they are telling us about the current state of leadership in our schools.

Read Sean Harford's blog: [10 things you need to know about short inspections.](#)

I am pleased that headteachers have generally been open and candid with inspectors about the relative strengths and weaknesses of their schools. Just as important, most have robust and practical plans in place for addressing their particular areas of concern and can show how these plans are making a difference to performance.

At one secondary school in Staffordshire, for example, inspectors could clearly see that leaders had acted swiftly to halt a decline in standards in the English Department caused by a period of staff turbulence. Inspectors were reassured that while there was still more work to be done to improve reading across the school, leaders demonstrated that they had acted quickly and decisively to turn round the quality of teaching in such a key department.

In one junior school in the South West, leaders were honest in acknowledging that they needed to do more to evaluate the support being given to their disadvantaged pupils. However, inspectors did not take long to conclude that the headteacher and his team were focused on continuous improvement and had a good understanding of how the school was performing. The school was tidy, clean and litter free. The culture was good and pupils took obvious pride in their work and were keen to learn well.

In one secondary school in Hertfordshire, inspectors noted how leaders were working conscientiously to improve middle leadership, previously identified as an area of relative weakness. With greater challenge from the top and purposeful training, these middle leaders were becoming more accomplished in monitoring teacher performance as a means of improving standards.

HMI usually say that within a few hours they know whether the culture of the school is orderly and positive, and that the school is well led. One key characteristic shared by many of the schools that retained their 'good' rating last term was that headteachers had created a culture in which pupils were, for the most part, well behaved and showed respect towards teachers and each other.

In one East Midlands secondary school, incidents of poor behaviour and previously high exclusion rates had reduced because leaders had made this a priority in their work with pupils, parents and external agencies. Things weren't perfect but inspectors heard from children that behaviour in the school had much improved and, as a result, they were learning a great deal more.

In short, in the cases I've highlighted, HMI encountered self-critical leadership and a respectful and aspirational culture where the whole school community was striving to do better. Inspectors were satisfied that the weaknesses identified by leaders and corroborated by inspection evidence were not having a detrimental impact on overall standards. These schools, to all intents and purposes, remained 'good' schools.

In a proportion of the short inspections carried out last term, inspectors felt they had not seen enough evidence during the day to form a clear view that the school was still 'good'. Under our new arrangements when this happens, the HMI converts the short inspection into a full 'section 5' and calls in more inspectors to gather the additional evidence. In some cases, this will confirm that the school, indeed, remains 'good'. In other cases, the judgement declines to 'requires improvement' or below.

The same conversion occurs if HMI feel the school may now deserve to be judged as 'outstanding'. Last term there were 27 schools that moved from 'good' to 'outstanding' through converted short inspections. Right at the heart of their success were exceptional heads providing inspirational leadership and producing consistently high quality teaching as well as impressive pupil progress and outcomes. Typically, it was a commitment to enriching all aspects of school life that set these schools apart from those that retained their 'good' judgement. As well as demonstrating outstanding leadership, teaching and outcomes for pupils, they were committed to equipping every pupil for the next stage of their education and for their future as responsible citizens.

Inevitably, of course, some schools went in the opposite direction. In those schools that declined from 'good', inspectors invariably found a leadership team that had not accurately evaluated the school's performance and, in a number of instances, had an overly generous view about the quality of teaching and school standards. In schools downgraded to 'requires improvement', leaders and governors had often been slow to identify weaknesses across the school. There was typically too much inconsistency and variation in performance across the school, particularly in terms of the quality of teaching, the behaviour of pupils and middle leadership. In a minority of cases, HMI found that previously 'good' schools had declined more sharply and were now failing their pupils. A culture of complacency had set in and problems had been left unaddressed for too long. These failing schools were characterised by leaders who did not have a clear grip on what was happening in the school. HMI saw poor strategic leadership and a lack of clarity on a number of key performance issues.

It is, of course, still early days for these new arrangements. However, the feedback we have received so far from headteachers who have undergone a short inspection has been largely positive. HMI are also saying that a one-day inspection is usually enough time to make a proper assessment of the school and to collect the views of teachers, governors and pupils as well as the leadership team. The process of converting short inspections straightaway to a full section 5 inspection rather than keeping schools 'in limbo' also appears to be working effectively so far.

As the volume of short inspections starts to increase significantly over the next two terms, I want to assure schools that we will apply the same level of quality assurance to all our inspections in order to maintain confidence in the new process.

I also want to stress, once again, that school leaders should not spend an inordinate amount of time preparing for our inspections. It is far more valuable for them to simply focus on maintaining and improving standards, and acting in a way that serves the interests of pupils and their parents. If they do this, their inspection – when it happens – will invariably look after itself.