

The New Framework for Ofsted Inspections

For the last decade Ofsted inspections have followed what has become something of a “routine” approach. This has involved advance notice, typically 6 to 10 weeks, of the forthcoming inspection, a meeting with parents, several days with the Inspection team in the school, feedback and the school’s response (and action plan) to that feedback.

With effect from September 1st 2005 a revised framework will come into force, involving a significant number of changes. The first, and most obvious, is that the notice of the inspection will be dramatically reduced, to, typically, two days. Secondly there will be no meeting with parents. Next the duration of the actual inspection will be shorter and more focussed. Feedback will be faster and response will still be required. Gradings will still be given but will be based around a four-point scale rather than the present more extensive scale.

So, why the changes? Firstly, after nearly ten years of conducting inspections, Ofsted has learned from the experience and is responding to criticisms frequently voiced about the process. The 6 to 10 weeks’ advance notice meant that schools spent a great deal of that time in “preparing” for the inspection and, not infrequently, creating a rather artificial image of the school when the team arrived – paperwork was updated, lessons often specifically prepared to present the school in the best possible light. It was not unknown for certain (more troublesome) students to have work experience opportunities created or parental holidays approved, neither of which might otherwise have happened. In other words the change will mean that the inspection team has a far better chance of seeing the school “as it really is” rather than “wearing its best bib and tucker”. Ofsted has, of course, in the process, to accept that this must mean that, unless a school really is 100% on top of every aspect of its administration there will be occasional gaps in what they might like to find – so long as the inspection team accepts that this is reasonable and as long as the gaps are not too numerous or too critical, this would seem to be quite fair.

The short notice (which may even involve, possibly, no notice at all) will mean that a meeting with parents is simply impractical – there is no intention on the part of Ofsted to deny parental involvement but it passes the responsibility onto the school to find other ways of achieving it. However, from the governors’ point of view the short notice might well mean that the Chair is simply unable to be present because of existing

business commitments; this may create issues of representation which the Governing Body will have to address.

The inspection itself will be far shorter and more focussed; there are going to be two significant factors in this. The first is the introduction of the Self-Evaluation Form (SEF); this is an on-line document providing for an in-depth self-evaluation of the school's own perceptions of its strengths and weaknesses. This document is going to be a key element and it may be updated at any time – it provides evidence that the school community (and this, critically, includes governors) do really know their own school. The role of Ofsted will therefore involve satisfying themselves that those elements that the school deem to be good really are good – elements that the school themselves describe as being unsatisfactory will require evidence of steps being taken which will lead to improvement. It has been suggested already that a good indicator of an impending inspection is the inability of the school to change the content of the SEF online, since Ofsted will “freeze” it for the duration of the inspection.

The second “driver” in the inspection relates to the five oft-quoted outcomes from “Every Child Matters”. The school needs to be able to demonstrate just how it is ensuring that children (1) stay healthy (2) stay safe (3) enjoy and achieve (4) make a positive contribution and (5) achieve economic well-being. These, some of them quite new, will necessitate that schools and governing bodies have to address a wider range of issues than hitherto to satisfy this wider definition of the school's duties.

Feedback from this inspection will involve the following gradings. Grade 1 is deemed to be “outstanding”, grade 2 is “good”, grade 3 “satisfactory” and grade 4 is “inadequate”. The familiar adverse categories of “serious weaknesses” and “special measures” remain although there may be marginal differences in the definitions; however there is a new category of “underachieving” – where a school has failed to raise standards over a period of time when it would be reasonable to expect that it should. Quite what Ofsted will do about such “underachieving” schools is not yet fully clear but it seems quite certain that such schools will be closely monitored (by HMI?) and, if they fail to improve sufficiently, may well be placed in one of the other adverse categories.

The new framework should ensure that the report back from the inspection is back in the hands of the school rather more rapidly than has

traditionally been the case. It should be shorter than before and, as has already been indicated with regard to the inspection itself, more focussed.

A typical inspection may now involve a primary school having two or three inspectors on site for two days – a secondary school may get rather more but the general picture is one of there being about one half of the level of time spent inspecting on-site when compared with the previous regime. Of course, inspections may now occur with greater frequency and we should think of there being a three-year cycle of inspections rather than the five-or-six-year cycle which has prevailed up to this point in time. The inspection team may include HMI as well as independent inspectors and this is most likely to be the case with the inspection of secondary schools.

So what are the essential implications for Governors as a result of these changes?

- Firstly the short notice means that governors will need to ensure that all policies and other relevant paperwork are up-to-date at all times or as near so as may be given the implications of time constraints on any volunteer group
- Secondly the short notice may possibly mean that the Chair cannot meet with the Ofsted inspection team. Hence there needs to be a “deeper” structure of governors able to meet with the team at short notice and all will need to be conversant with the school’s strengths and weaknesses as defined by the SEF
- The Self-Evaluation Form must be completed and updated regularly. This must be a joint activity between the governing body and the Headteacher and senior staff of the school if it is to be meaningful and the GB must have ownership of this form. Furthermore it will be expected not only that governors “know” their school well but also that they know how to set the strategic direction of the school, monitor (such as) the School Improvement Plan and ensure a satisfactory level of accountability.
- Fourthly all governors need to be familiar with the implications for the school of “Every Child Matters” and the Children Act 2004 which followed its publication. In part this will require significant input from Governor Training since many of the constituent elements do not (necessarily) form the subject-matter of many governor meetings, such as “learners’ being encouraged to take regular exercise”, “learners’ having opportunities to develop their enterprise and financial skills”. These may be dealt with currently by some governing bodies but the five outcomes from “Every Child Matters” need to be identified as a mantra against which every school activity may be judged.

- Since the Ofsted meeting with parents has, as such, been discontinued, every Governing Body needs to investigate ways wherewith they can ensure that parental involvement with the school is maximised and so that they can gather parental opinion about the school on a regular basis. Ofsted will certainly be expecting evidence of this and an annual questionnaire or its equivalent should be thought of as minimal.
- Above all else governors will really be expected to “know” their schools thoroughly – and the SEF represents an important, even vital constituent in this process. To get this in perspective “Management (of the school) is unsatisfactory if the headteacher, senior managers and governors do not know of the strengths and weaknesses of the school fairly accurately and therefore are largely ineffective”. The last thing any governor wants is to see the school graded 4 (i.e. inadequate) under the heading in the feedback of “The Quality of Leadership and Management” – a grade 4 under any heading is undesirable but this one is the one most relevant to the governance within the school.

The more successful schools, which are aware of their strengths and weaknesses can realistically expect “light-touch” inspections leaving inspectors to focus on those schools which demonstrate concern.

The new framework will also include some new language, for instance “Introduction” becomes “Context and Overview” and “Key Issues” becomes “Issues for the School”. These are largely cosmetic and, indeed, it is hard to understand why Ofsted should choose to muddy the water by such changes. However the general principle is that Ofsted will use language which is more accessible to the lay reader.

The framework has been trialled at a number of schools already and it was the subject of a consultation exercise in the early part of 2004. The two elements of the consultation process which attracted the least support were the twin ones of “shorter notice of an impending inspection” and “more frequent but shorter inspections”; given that even in these cases over 80% of respondents supported the suggestions, it is clear that in general most respondents to the consultation appeared in favour of the changes proposed.

One important aspect of the new framework is that it represents a move to ensure a consistent style of inspection for the whole of the 0 – 19 sector, encompassing nursery and childcare settings, primary, secondary and

tertiary schools and colleges as well as special schools. The consistency of approach is laudable but may not happen “overnight”.

Whatever else may be suggested, external inspection of any organisation does offer a means of comparing it against others locally and nationally, and thereby provides an important means of assessing standards and of driving them up. This, surely, is what we, as governors, would want to be achieved for the benefit of all our young people. The new framework has, as yet, to be really put to the test, but it does offer the potential for doing more for education than did its predecessor. Only time will tell whether that potential is converted into hard results.