



CATHOLIC SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE INSPECTION OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND ACADEMIES

A statement from the Catholic Schools Inspectorate

The Education Select Committee published its first report from the enquiry it conducted onto Ofsted's work with schools on 29th January 2024. The summary of the evidence gathered and the text of the first report are downloadable here:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7761/ofsteds-work-with-schools/publications/>.

The report lists a total of 28 recommendations, 15 of which are for Ofsted alone, 8 are for Ofsted and DfE together, and 5 for the DfE alone. This is in itself an indication of its complexity and the ways in which reform to Ofsted's systems will require wider regulatory reform. A précis summary of the recommendations is appended to this statement. Amongst these many recommendations, the report's call to Ofsted and the DfE to work together to develop an alternative to the single-word overall judgement inevitably raises questions for the Catholic Schools Inspectorate.

Before answering these questions, it is important to remind ourselves of the journey we have been on up to this point. In 2017, the bishops and diocesan schools' commissioners accepted concerns about inspection which was at that time carried out under 22 different diocesan inspection frameworks. It was clear to all that the inconsistency and disparity between these different frameworks were no longer acceptable. The CES was asked to work with diocesan officers to produce a single national framework for inspection. The agreed principles for the new framework were rigour, consistency, objectivity, accountability, and oversight. This framework was developed carefully and consultatively over two years and approved by the Bishops' Conference in Autumn 2019. The next two years were spent preparing the Inspectorate for a launch in September 2021 (although the Covid pandemic delayed the launch by a year). This context is important, since the authority of the framework comes from the consent of all the bishops and was underpinned by the further consensus achieved through the dialogue that was integral to the framework's drafting. There may need to be changes in the future, but any substantive changes to a framework that is only still in its second year of existence will require similar processes to achieve a similar consensus.

The goal of achieving rigour, consistency, objectivity, accountability, and oversight led to certain key decisions being made early in the process. These decisions were not made executively but were the consensus view and were supported by the consultation we did on the early drafts of the framework. The most significant of these was the perceived desirability of maintaining a parity with the secular inspectorates. Given that s48 and s50 inspections (and their equivalent elsewhere) are in effect the completion of a whole school

inspection for maintained schools and academies, this parity with the secular inspectorates remains important. However, the consensus on this matter preceded the tragedy of Ruth Perry's death. Ofsted's own credibility has been damaged by this and, although it is our biggest secular inspectorate, parity with Ofsted, whilst still an important consideration, may not be as persuasive with some as it once was.

The frequency of the availability of the grant is currently determined by a school's denominational inspection overall grade. Even if we were to cease reporting an overall grade to bishops, parents and schools, we are still currently required to provide such a grade to the DfE. Principles of transparency would suggest that a grade we are reporting about a school to the government, is a grade we should share with schools. A four-point grading system is not strictly necessary for this purpose, only one that is able to distinguish between good schools and those that are less than good. This would be to remove the outstanding and inadequate grades, but as the number of schools that have ever received a judgement of 'inadequate' is countable on one hand, it would really only have the effect of removing the outstanding overall grade. This is the current position of the SIAMS inspectorate (that which pertains to Anglican and Methodist schools), where a school will receive a judgement that it is either fulfilling its mission or it is not. A pass/fail grading structure like this may be more desirable than the current more gradated one, but the virtue of such a system would need to be carefully tested and moving to such a system would require a period of reflection, consultation and ultimately the presentation of a new framework for the approval of the bishops. The option of removing the overall grade given to the school may also be an option, but the lack of transparency it would imply, given our current duties to the DfE, would also need to be tested carefully and its implications fully understood.

The Catholic Schools Inspectorate is not in the same position as Ofsted in relation to how the 'less than good' grades are awarded. In Ofsted's case, a single safeguarding failure can lead to a school being judged as inadequate. We have no such automatic issuing of grade 3 or 4 judgements. If a school receives a requires improvement or an inadequate judgement under the National Framework, it should be clear from the descriptors, that the school requires urgent action to ensure it is fulfilling its mission as a provider of Catholic education. Such grades are arrived at far less often and for different reasons than they are in an Ofsted inspection.

However, while this explains why we have not made any changes thus far, change has not been ruled out and is something that we will be considering, but in tandem with whatever reforms emerge from the Ofsted 'big listen' under Sir Martyn Oliver's new leadership. In a recent conversation with him, he was clear that reform was clearly needed but that wisdom dictated that substantive reform would have to wait until after the general election. Much of the reforms for which school leaders and the select committee are calling require legislative change, as the current framework is set out in the Education Act 2005, which would require amendment. There is unlikely to be time for such legislation in this parliament, and any new government may have different policy objectives. Once the new

accountability landscape begins to emerge, it will be important to review our own practices and procedures at that point. There is already some good work that has begun with CST and think tanks, such as the Institute for Government, about moving to what they are describing as a system of 'intelligent accountability'. This period of reflection is enormously important, and it would not seem wise to hasten through substantive changes at this point, when we may well need to review those changes within the next couple of years once the thinking, research and legislative change has borne fruit. Better to do this work well and only do it once than have to do it twice within as many years. Frequent change to accountability structures is itself a source of pressure and stress for school leaders, so we should aim to do it as infrequently as possible, all other things being equal.

If and when change does come, it will be as consultative and collaborative as it was at the time of the current framework's drafting. It will no doubt include representatives of the system leaders that oversee the new Trust-led landscape of Catholic education and will have to consider how those academy trusts themselves can be included in the accountability processes – something for which the Education Select Committee also calls. It will also include a review of all the other inspectorates apart from Ofsted – such as Estyn, ISI and the inspectorates in other jurisdictions within our dioceses – parity with which is an additional consideration that our inspectorate must take into account.

Finally, it is important to revisit the reasons we gave for not suspending inspection as Ofsted did at the beginning of this term. Although questions about the policies and practice of the Catholic Schools Inspectorate are legitimate in the light of questions about another inspectorate, it is important to remember that we are not the same as Ofsted. Our inspection system has to be seen to embody the principles that it was set up to exemplify: rigour, consistency, objectivity, oversight and accountability. In this regard it is not different to Ofsted. But in other respects, its works should set it apart from Ofsted.

Our inspectors should be different to Ofsted inspectors since they, along with school leaders, are exercising a sacred apostolate in the service of an eternal end. Our goals are quite different to Ofsted's and, as a consequence, our inspectors should embody the virtues that reflect the Christ-centred nature of this work. Inspectors for the Catholic Schools Inspectorate should carry out all their work with love, integrity and compassion as the foundation of all they do. Indeed, this is the very first part of the training that all Catholic Schools inspectors receive. The reporting format also gives greater precedence to affirming good practice, than to areas for improvement. To assist in allowing a school to show itself in the best possible light, our inspectors are all trained to ensure that they keep in regular contact with school leaders and provide schools with every opportunity to respond to the emerging judgements from the inspection. All of this will be reiterated in the training we provide this term for all inspectors, when we look at how we can best embody inspection as an act of service, and how we ensure that it is ultimately able to inspire and encourage our school leaders, who are so vital to the mission of Catholic education.

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