

Briefing note for headteachers of independent special schools

Please share this information with all staff

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What are the main features of the inspection of my school?

This briefing note has been designed to help you to prepare for the inspection. It describes the type of activities which will take place during our time in your school. It provides answers for some of the questions you may have about the inspection. It is a guide and inspection activity may differ as we take account of your context.

Through inspection, HMIE aims to:

- provide assurance and public accountability
- promote improvement
- inform the development of educational policy and practice.

We will take close account of the context and nature of the school. We will undertake inspection activities only to the extent necessary to provide a robust evaluation. Our inspections and reviews are always proportionate. This means that we only seek the evidence that we need to make a sound judgement.

As with all inspection models, teams will observe a sample of lessons; and engage with a sample of children and young people, parents¹ and stakeholders. The inspection team will not cover all aspects of your school's work. It is important that your staff are aware of this.

We use the **PRAISE** framework (Appendix 1) to guide our approach to inspection. This helps us to establish and maintain positive relationships with all involved. We intend that all our discussions and engagements with you and your school community are opportunities to share and develop ideas, and to learn from each other. Throughout the inspection, team members will involve you and your staff in professional dialogue, with the aim of supporting improvement.

Your own self-evaluation is important. We will use this as the starting point of our inspection. This helps the inspection team to take account of the context and nature of the school.

¹ Throughout this briefing note, the term 'parents' should be taken to include foster carers, residential care staff and carers who are relatives or friends.

You will be notified of the inspection in an email from the inspection administrator (IA) who is supporting the inspection. This email will inform you of the date of inspection and details of where to find further information from our website.

Your notification email will also contain links to an online pre-inspection questionnaire and helpful tips on sharing the questionnaire links with your stakeholders. The closing date for completing the pre-inspection questionnaire will also be shared with you in this email.

The IA will follow up the notification email with a telephone call to you to discuss the administrative arrangements, confirm that you have the necessary information and respond to any immediate enquiries. The Managing Inspector (MI) will contact you soon after your contact with the IA to arrange an appropriate time to discuss the inspection visit with you.

Your inspection will involve a visit for a few days from a team of inspectors. This is typically Monday afternoon to Wednesday morning. The team may consist of a combination of HM Inspectors (HMI), associate assessors (AA) and/or assistant inspectors (AI). The MI will outline the inspection team to you and the exact dates that the team propose to visit your school during the first phone call or online meeting. The MI will discuss with you the meetings that need to be planned across the week and may ask you to develop a draft activities schedule in advance of the inspection.

We recognise that schools and settings are familiar with the quality improvement framework [How good is our school? \(4th edition\) \(HGIOS? 4\)](#). Staff use this quality framework and quality indicators (QIs) for their own self-evaluation and planning for improvement. Therefore, we will use this framework as the focus for our inspections for session 2026-2027.

Inspectors will use selected QIs from HGIOS? 4. These QIs will be graded. They are:

- QI 2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment
- QI 3.1 Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion

We will continue to have a focus on safeguarding in every school inspection.

Reporting on findings

We will produce a summary of inspection findings (SIF). It will summarise our findings from all the evidence gathered during the week of the inspection. These messages will form the basis for the sharing of findings meeting at the end of the inspection.

We will also prepare a letter to parents and carers which will report our inspection findings. The letter will highlight the strengths of the school and aspects for improvement. We shall provide a statement of the confidence we have in the school's capacity to improve the quality of its own work.

We will share evaluation grades for the QIs from [HGIOS? 4](#). If any further inspection activities are planned, this will also be outlined in the letter.

After the inspection, we will share a draft of the letter and SIF with the headteacher and a representative from the proprietors to allow for a check for factual accuracy.

The final letter and SIF will be published on HMIE's website.

What should I do in advance of the inspection?

We aim to carry out inspections in a way that seeks to minimise the burden on staff, and we will keep paperwork required to a minimum. We will ask for a self-evaluation summary of your school in advance of the inspection.

For advice on what to do in advance of the inspection, please read:

Appendix 2. Guidance on completing the self-evaluation summary form

Appendix 3. Documents to be provided in advance of the inspection

Appendix 4. Relevant documents which can be provided during the inspection

Appendix 5. Meetings required during the inspection week

Please contact the IA if you need any clarification.

Pre-inspection questionnaires

An important aspect of the inspection is ensuring that your stakeholders have the opportunity to share their views of the school. To gather the views of children and young people, parents, staff and partners, we ask that you direct stakeholders to a pre-inspection questionnaire.

Within the email notifying you of the inspection, you will find links to an online survey containing the pre-inspection questionnaires.

In line with our responsibility under the [Equality Act 2010](#), our approach to questionnaires is inclusive. We encourage everyone to take part and, where necessary, they are supported to do so. To help us do that, we would appreciate your support in ensuring that people who may find completing the questionnaire challenging, for example those with protected characteristics, have the same access to the questionnaires as everyone else. We ask that you put in place appropriate arrangements for anyone who may have difficulty accessing or completing the questionnaire. If you are unable to do that, please advise us as early as possible so that we can offer support in making alternative arrangements.

Children and young people

You should send all children and young people in your school (P4 and above) the survey link.

If you do not already have existing arrangements in place for children to complete questionnaires digitally, you should consider how best this can be achieved in the context of your school. Please make sure that children have privacy to complete the questionnaires. You should reassure children that once they have completed the survey, no-one in the school will see their answers. Inspection team members will not discuss children's written responses with school staff unless there are health and wellbeing, safeguarding or child protection concerns. In such instances, inspectors will discuss concerns with senior leaders as appropriate. Where required, those children with additional support needs should be helped to complete the questionnaire, while respecting confidentiality.

Parents

You should send the link to the pre-inspection questionnaire to all parents. Parents may complete a pre-inspection questionnaire for each of their

children attending the school being inspected. The pre-inspection questionnaire asks parents to indicate if they shall be providing one response only or if they are providing one response for each of their children who attend the school.

As part of the inspection, members of the inspection team will meet with a range of stakeholders. Parents are asked within the pre-inspection questionnaire to indicate whether they would like to meet with a member of the inspection team and, if so, to provide their contact details. The IA will contact parents to invite them to the meeting.

Staff

All staff should receive the link to the pre-inspection questionnaire. We have created pre-inspection questionnaires for the following broad groupings:

- teachers
- pupil support staff
- school support staff.

A questionnaire link will be provided for each staffing group.

Partners

We define partners as all individuals or organisations that deliver learning and contribute to the life and work of the school. This may include:

- other agencies
- health visitors
- community learning and development services
- colleges
- universities
- employers
- third sector
- community organisations
- libraries.

You should send the pre-inspection questionnaire to all those who work in partnership with your school.

Distributing the links

You should use existing digital channels to inform these stakeholders of the inspection, the information that is available from our website and the appropriate link to the pre-inspection questionnaire. When sharing the links, it is important to include the date which all responses must be completed by. We usually refer to this as the date the survey will close.

Methods for sharing the links include:

- using internal email for staff
- adding the links to your website (remember to remove when the survey has closed) for parents and partners
- including the information within a group call or newsletters for parents, staff and partners
- connecting with children through  Glow.

You are best placed to know the most effective ways of communicating and engaging with your stakeholders to ensure that as many as possible have the opportunity to provide their views about your school. We have found that some schools have, in addition to sending the links digitally, provided parents with devices to complete the pre-inspection questionnaires.

We recognise that schools will want to encourage as many of their stakeholders as possible to complete the pre-inspection questionnaire. To support this, the IA can provide you with a regular update on responses rates. Where, for example, the response levels are lower for a particular stakeholder group, you may wish to send another communication which reminds and encourages more responses.

What should I expect on the first afternoon?

The team will usually arrive between noon and 12.30 pm on the first day (usually Monday) of the inspection. Final arrangements will be confirmed by the MI in their pre-inspection discussions with you. When they arrive, the inspection team will have a brief team meeting. Before any inspection activity begins, the MI will meet staff at the end of lunchtime, if possible, to introduce members of the inspection team, brief them on the inspection and answer any questions they may have. Attendance at this meeting is

voluntary for staff. The MI will arrange the best time for this with you prior to the inspection.

An introductory discussion, based on your submitted self-evaluation summary, will take place at a convenient time in the afternoon. This should last approximately one hour. Please invite a member of the Board of Governors or equivalent. There is no need to prepare a presentation as the focus should be a discussion. The MI will chair this introductory discussion. The MI will invite you and your senior leadership team to outline your priorities for improvement related to the QIs and the progress you have made with them, along with the evidence of impact on learners so far.

The MI and possibly some members of the team will join the introductory meeting while other team members may begin inspection activities. This could include visiting classes or undertaking learning walks around the school, exploring learning on walls and talking with children or young people they meet in and around classes. After the introductory discussion, we may break into smaller groups for more focused professional dialogue. For example, inspection team members may meet individual members of your team who are leading on aspects of your work such as ensuring children's wellbeing at a strategic level. The MI will discuss with you the best way the inspection team can build on the information you send us in advance of inspection and points raised at the introductory discussion.

The MI will discuss with you any meetings and specific activities that need to be arranged. These will build on previous discussions. Your support with these arrangements is greatly appreciated.

Please remember that proportionality is a core principle of our inspection approach. This means the inspection team will not need to cover all aspects of your school's work.

Discussions around planning activities might also include:

- a focus on particular groups of learners (for example, children with additional support needs)
- a focus on features of learning and teaching which are having a major impact on children's experiences and achievements
- a discussion about how children's learning is planned across the curriculum

- aspects which link to priorities in the improvement plan
- a discussion/review of relevant documentation relation to safeguarding.

What happens from Tuesday onwards?

Inspectors will undertake a wide range of activities, building on discussion at the introductory meeting(s). Inspection activities will typically include:

- visits to classes
- working with groups of children
- reading relevant documentation
- discussing specific aspects of the school's work with groups of children and young people, staff and parents.

Members of the inspection team will engage with learning across, in and beyond classrooms. In addition to the inspection team selecting learning to observe, the MI may ask you to choose a sample of lesson observations for inspection team members to visit during the inspection. At the end of each day, the MI will meet with you to reflect on the day's activity and confirm arrangements or plan any further activity for subsequent days, as appropriate.

What engagement will staff have with the team?

Inspectors will meet with staff for discussions throughout the inspection.

For senior staff, engagement with inspectors will usually start with the introductory discussions after lunch on Monday. For some staff, this may begin on Monday afternoon with a classroom visit. However, all staff (teaching and non-teaching) will usually have the opportunity, at some point on Monday, to meet the inspection team, hear a short briefing and ask questions about the inspection process.

Professional dialogue with staff takes place in a range of situations over the inspection, for example during classroom visits, in focus groups, during voluntary discussion sessions and at the final sharing of findings. Teachers are welcome to engage in professional dialogue with inspectors following a learning visit. Inspectors will try to do this during the observation where this

is possible and does not disrupt learning. Alternatively, teachers are welcome to engage in discussion at another point during the inspection. At the end of the first or second day, inspectors will like to meet with groups of staff for professional dialogue. The MI will discuss with you the most appropriate format for the professional engagement session(s). Participation in this professional dialogue session is voluntary for staff.

Meetings will be arranged throughout the course of the inspection with selected members of the staff to discuss aspects of school improvement. Members of the inspection team may also meet with individuals and/or particular groups of support staff. Please take the opportunity to discuss potential individuals and/or groups with the MI. It is important that all staff feel encouraged to engage in professional dialogue as part of the inspection.

The MI will invite you or a nominated colleague (promoted member of staff) to accompany an inspector on one or more learning visits, to support professional dialogue about features of learning and teaching. This is entirely voluntary.

What engagement will children and young people have with the team?

Inspectors will meet with children and young people for discussions throughout the inspection.

The team will meet groups of children and young people for different purposes. For example, we may discuss with them any issues raised in the pre-inspection questionnaire or listen to how their views are sought and acted on. In all lesson visits, inspectors will aim to engage with children and young people about their learning. We may also ask for small groups of children to discuss with them their learning in aspects of wellbeing.

What engagement will parents and carers have with the team?

Our inspections take the views of parents and carers into account and seek to engage with them in a number of ways. Members of the inspection team

will meet the Chair of the Parent Council. Topics for discussion include the Parent Council's involvement in supporting and improving the school.

When parents complete the pre-inspection questionnaire, they are asked to indicate if they would be willing to meet a member of the inspection team. The IA will then contact parents who have said they would be willing to meet the inspection team and confirm those who are able to attend. The IA will then arrange for a member of the team to meet the group at the agreed time(s) during the inspection. This could be in person or virtually. The focus of this discussion is to understand how parents are involved in their child's learning. In exceptional circumstances, it may be possible for a member of the team to have a meeting with individual parents and carers. Please discuss this with the MI if you believe it would add to the value or enhance the inspection.

What engagement will partners have with the inspection team?

It is important for the inspection team to understand how you work with your partners to deliver learning and contribute to the life and work of the school. We will ask you to arrange a meeting for members of the inspection team to meet with some of your partners to discuss this work. This meeting can either take place in person or virtually at a suitable time during the inspection.

What happens after the inspection?

Once the findings have been shared, the inspection team will leave your school.

Following the visit, we will provide you with a confidential draft of the letter for parents and carers. This draft letter will highlight strengths and aspects for improvement. It will also outline the evaluations for the QIs. The letter will provide a statement of the confidence HM Inspectors have in the school's ability to improve the quality of its work. It will also inform parents and carers of any intended further inspection or engagement, if applicable.

You and the proprietors will receive a copy of the draft SIF once it has been through our quality assurance process. We ask that you check the draft SIF

for factual accuracy and return your response to the MI within one working week. In addition, you and the Chair of the Board of Governors or equivalent will receive the draft letter. You and the Chair will be asked to provide any comments or suggested amendments for factual accuracy within one working week of its receipt.

Once finalised, the letter and SIF will be published on the HMIE website alongside an analysis of the questionnaire returns. We aim to publish the letter and SIF within 10 working weeks from the end of the inspection.

Appendix 1. The PRAISE Framework

Best Practice Framework for HMIE inspections and reviews

The Framework is based on data gathered from: representative samples of experienced inspectors from HMIE and heads of organisations that have been inspected; and feedback from post-inspection questionnaires.

The following principles were identified as underpinning best practice.

- Purpose – being clear about the overall purpose of the inspection and retaining this throughout. Creating a shared agenda with staff in the organisation and amongst members of the scrutiny team.
- Relationships – building and maintaining constructive relationships throughout the process as the basis of a high-quality inspection/review.
- Awareness – maintaining a high level of awareness of the context in which staff are operating, of their feelings and reactions to the process and of the inspector's own approach and its impact.
- Information gathering – careful inquiry to gather and analyse evidence. Retaining an objective stance, testing assumptions and assimilating data before evaluating.
- Sharing information – communicating thoroughly throughout the process to prepare and inform staff. Encouraging staff to be open in providing their perspective and providing appropriate feedback as the inspection/review progresses.
- Enabling – treating people with respect, engaging them in professional dialogue, recognising their efforts and providing feedback in a constructive way to encourage ownership and learning to take place.

Appendix 2. Completing the self-evaluation summary form

Please return the completed form within six working days before the inspection.

Please use the self-evaluation summary to highlight aspects of the school's work as a starting point for discussion with the inspection team.

You are asked to focus on the three self-evaluation questions from [How good is our school? \(4th edition\)](#) (page 9) and consider how you triangulate your evidence to ensure that your evaluative judgments are robust.

- How well are we doing?
- How do we know?
- What are we going to do now?

Please ensure that the information you provide is clear and concise, using bullet points to indicate high level evaluative messages. This can then be the focus of the discussion at the scoping meeting.

Stakeholders should know the school's strengths and areas for improvement from the school arrangements for self-evaluation. The self-evaluation summary paper should be shared with relevant stakeholders so that they are aware of what has submitted.

Self-evaluation summary form

How well are you doing? What's working well for your learners?	How do you know? What evidence do you have of positive impact on learners?	What are you going to do now? What are your improvement priorities in this area?	How would you evaluate this QI using the HGIOS?4 six-point scale?
QI 2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment (Learning and engagement; Quality of teaching; Effective use of assessment; Planning, tracking and monitoring)			
Click here to insert text	Click here to insert text	Click here to insert text	Choose an item.
QI 3.1 Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion (Wellbeing; Fulfilment of statutory duties; Inclusion and equality)			
Click here to insert text	Click here to insert text	Click here to insert text	Choose an item.

Appendix 3. Documents to be provided in advance of inspection

Please email only the following items to the IA prior to the inspection. Unless specified, **please return them at least six working days before the inspection.**

	Item	?
1	The most recent and previous annual reports which you issued to parents and carers on the standards and quality of the school's work.	
2	The current and previous school improvement plans.	
3	Names of all teaching and other staff, and details of their responsibilities. Please indicate any job-sharing arrangements.	
4	School, class and visiting teachers' timetables and those of partner agencies.	
5	Information about children and young people's wellbeing and how support needs are gathered and tracked.	
7	A draft meetings schedule where agreed after initial discussion with MI.	
9	Completed self-evaluation summary form (see Appendix 2)	
10	You should complete the child protection and safeguarding self-evaluation form and send this to the inspection administrator.	

Appendix 4. Documents which can be provided during the inspection for the school

If available, please provide the following information in the HMI base on Monday of the inspection. There is no requirement to share in advance.

Item	?
Location plan/map of the layout of the school (one for each member of the team please).	
Information about children and young people's progress in relation to QI 3.1 over time and any available benchmarking data.	
Samples of children's work in literacy and numeracy, across learning, from each class (primary stages only).	
Samples of moderation activities and resultant impact on progress/overall attainment.	
Information about your curriculum, for example curriculum overview, and details of partnerships to enhance the curriculum.	
Brief details of any out-of-class activities, after-school care and supported study initiatives.	
Sample agendas and minutes of pupil council, Parent Council and staff meetings.	
Examples of school communications with parents and the wider community, for example newsletters, prospectus, parent handbook.	
Whole school timetables.	
Information used by the school to monitor and evaluate the quality of learning and teaching.	
School timetables (indicating department/subject staff).	

We may require access to the following confidential documents during the inspection week. These should only be made available at times when the inspection team is in school.

Access to records of complaints, bullying incidents, accidents, administration of medicine.	
Access to pupils' records.	
List of children with additional support needs and brief details of support provided. Details of children or young people with regular/long-term absence.	
List of children who have experienced care.	
List of children who are on or have been on the child protection register.	
Access to Co-ordinated Support Plans (CSPs) and Individual Education Plans (IEPs).	
List of children or young people on shared placements where relevant.	

Appendix 5. Meetings required during the inspection week

The MI will discuss with you the composition of the inspection team, the days each of the team members will be in attendance and the meetings that will be required during the inspection.

They may send you a template to complete in advance, asking you to add details of the meetings, attendees and allocated rooms. As the team respond to findings during the inspection and work with you to gather evidence, there are likely to be ongoing adjustments.

Please note that for the meetings to be effective, there should be no more than eight people invited to any one meeting. Meetings should be planned for no more than one hour. Where it is likely to involve the same member of the inspection team or school staff, please leave around 15 minutes between meetings to allow the writing up of notes.

The meetings that will be needed include²:

Monday

- Whole-staff briefing (voluntary for staff).
- Introductory meeting to discuss self-evaluation.
- Possible one-to-one meetings to start discussions with members of the senior team responsible for particular aspects of the work of the school.

Tuesday

- Meetings with parent groups (IA will identify parents from pre-inspection survey returns).
- Possible meeting(s) with Chairperson of the Parent Council.

² Please note that this is provided as a guide only and the MI may wish to make changes to this depending on circumstances.

Tuesday or Wednesday

- Meetings with groups of children (can be agreed at the start of the inspection week).
- One-to-one meetings with members of the senior team or appropriate staff (timings can be agreed at the start of the inspection week). This will include meetings with the relevant people responsible for learning and teaching, assessment, and ensuring wellbeing, inclusion and equality
- One-to-one meeting with child protection coordinator to sign off the completed safeguarding form.
- Meeting with the Chair of the Board of Governors or equivalent
- Meeting with a member of the Board of Governors or equivalent responsible for child protection and safeguarding.
- Meetings with partners. This will be dependent on your school's local community and how you engage with them to deliver your curriculum.
- End of day: staff professional dialogue.

Wednesday

- One-to-one meeting with child protection coordinator to sign off the completed safeguarding form.
- Discussion of findings (timing to be agreed with MI).