

Short inspections of good schools

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,500 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
- 2 ASCL welcomes the commitment to improving inspection, particularly regarding the conversion of short inspections to full inspections. The burden of inspection continues to be a significant concern for school leaders and adverse inspection outcomes can have severe consequences for leaders, institutions and communities. The proposals outlined in this consultation have the potential to help schools achieve fairer and more consistent outcomes, albeit with significant caveats.
- 3 ASCL is disappointed the reasons given for the proposals focus almost exclusively on logistical considerations. Whilst logistical issues are of obvious significance to Ofsted, the consultation should also have made clearer how the proposals might serve to improve the quality of inspection for the benefit of the young people and staff in the schools inspected. It will be important to draw out any such points from the pilot feedback and share these with schools.
- 4 ASCL welcomes the proposal to inspect some good schools using a section 5 inspection, but only where there is clear and compelling evidence that, over a period of time longer than one year, the school's performance is highly unlikely to be deemed good.
- 5 It is crucial to understand that the qualifications and accountability systems are currently undergoing a period of significant and prolonged turbulence. The results of this are not yet fully understood and there is a potential for a school's outcomes to vary widely between years. As such, it is important to ensure that the risk assessment is a holistic process which avoids hasty or simplistic responses which might inappropriately deprive a good school of a short inspection. It will be important, therefore, to carefully monitor and evaluate the outcomes of such section 5 inspections in order to ensure that the decision not to carry out a short inspection has not pre-determined the outcome or been applied inappropriately. Therefore, data concerning the inspections of such schools should be clearly published and made available for scrutiny. Such information should be identified at school level in the monthly management information spreadsheet and summarised in the appropriate periodic reports on inspection outcomes.
- 6 The risk assessment process should ensure that Progress 8 data is adjusted to take account of anomalous results, widely referred to as 'outliers'. This should either be done by capping the impact of individual progress scores and by viewing Progress 8

data alongside another measure, such as the percentage of students who achieved positive progress. This will help to prevent anomalous results carrying a disproportionate weight in the risk assessment process. The same methodology should be applied to English and mathematics Progress 8 elements for all groups.

- 7 ASCL believes there are both advantages and disadvantages to the proposal to extend the window of conversion up to 15 days:
- 8 We recognise that feedback from schools which have experienced conversion to section 5 reveals that the process can be stressful and chaotic, with further disruption caused by the sudden arrival of a large team of inspectors, some of whom are not sufficiently briefed on the context or the strengths and weaknesses emerging from the inspection. The result of this can be that leaders struggle to recover from the initial, and often late, decision to convert. They have little time to regroup strategically and emotionally for such an important event and lack the necessary time to gather the evidence they need to address inspectors' lines of enquiry. ASCL believes the proposal to extend the window of conversion might help leaders to prepare strategically and emotionally for the section 5. Moreover, the extended window might reduce the frenetic nature of conversion and may lead to a more informed and more accurate inspection outcome. Leaders will have more time to brief stakeholders and allay fears ahead of the section 5.
- 9 The extended window of conversion has the potential to increase anxiety among leaders and staff. The consultation proposal makes it clear that Ofsted does not expect or desire to see leaders engaging staff in unnecessary activities. ASCL believes that school leaders will need to manage the period between inspections carefully in order to mitigate increased stress. Ofsted will need to support school leaders to do this by ensuring that they communicate the risks of undertaking unnecessary activities to leaders, governors and staff. Just as leaders should not expect staff to engage in unnecessary activities, governors should also ensure they don't place unreasonable demands on school leaders during this period. Inspectors must also understand the potential for this to be a stressful time and must ensure that they approach the section 5 inspection with empathy, understanding and genuine professional dialogue.
- 10 Many of our members, particularly those who have not experienced the current conversion arrangements, are concerned about the potential for heightened stress during the window of conversion. In order to address this Ofsted should establish certain constraints to limit the potential for unintended consequences. Firstly, it should be stated that no conversion can straddle a school holiday. Secondly, an upper limit of ten days, rather than fifteen, seems a more balanced period of time and would ensure that leaders' personal lives are not impacted for three weekends (as could be the case for a 15 day window of conversion).
- 11 ASCL feels strongly that schools should be informed of the date of their section 5 within 48 hours of the conclusion of the short inspection. There is potential for schools to suspend potentially difficult tasks and activities for three weeks due to fear of them clashing with the section 5 inspection. Many of these tasks might be in the interests of schools and students, such as holding interviews and running trips. Knowing the date of the section 5 will allow leaders to ensure they can make the best strategic decisions for their schools. Moreover, not notifying schools of the date would represent a material change from the current arrangements, whereby schools which convert know when the section 5 will take place. Under the new arrangements schools should continue to know when the second inspection will happen.

- 12 ASCL accepts that where significant safeguarding concerns are identified it is in everyone's interests to carry out the section 5 inspection within 48 hours, as is currently the case. However, inspectors should not disproportionately apply this principle when it is evident that safeguarding concerns are relatively minor and do not put children at immediate risk. In such instances, the extended window of conversion should allow schools to address minor concerns, which can then be reviewed as part of the section 5.
- 13 With the exception of when significant safeguarding concerns are identified (see paragraph 12 above), schools should be given a minimum of five days between the short inspection and section 5. Some members are concerned about the lack of compatibility and consistency brought about by having a widely varied window of conversion. Schools given just three days might feel at a disadvantage compared to those with ten days. Establishing a window of 5-10 days reduces the risk of inconsistency and also ensures that all schools benefit from a minimum period in which to draw together evidence for the section 5.
- 14 ASCL supports the implicit proposal in the consultation that larger schools should undertake a two-day section 5 (in addition to the short inspection) but with fewer inspectors. This will reduce the stress caused by having to accommodate large inspection teams and will help to ensure a more moderate pace of inspection. This should allow schools to engage inspectors in a better professional dialogue and ensure there is sufficient attention paid to evidence presented by the school. Again, this should be made clear to the school within 48 hours of the short inspection.

Conclusion

- 15 ASCL believes that increasing the time between short inspections and section 5 inspections might help to improve inspection, if the proposals are adjusted in line with our recommendations. ASCL also believes that not conducting a short inspection might be right for some schools, as long as this is underpinned by appropriate risk assessment and monitoring and evaluation of these inspections.
- 16 There are significant issues within the consultation which need to be addressed in order to ensure that a longer window of conversion does not have unintended consequences, such as increased anxiety and inconsistency.

With reference to your specific questions

Question 1

- 17 Not applicable.

Question 2

- 18 See paragraphs 2,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15 and 16.

Question 3

- 19 See paragraphs 4 and 15.

Question 4

- 20 See paragraph 5, 6 and 15.
- 21 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Stephen Rollett
Inspections and Accountability Specialist
Association of School and College Leaders
7 August 2017