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Department
for Education

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1. Purpose

This document sets out a joint understanding between the Department for Education (DfE) and the Independent Schools Council (ISC) in relation to independent and state school partnership working (ISSP cross-sector working) in England.

Schools which are in membership of [ISC member associations](#) operate as independent bodies. This understanding demonstrates a commitment on the part of ISC associations, on behalf of member schools, to support the raising of educational standards in state schools where independent schools have the capability and capacity to provide expertise and resource and a commitment on the part of government to creating circumstances under which this can operate most effectively.

2. Principles of cross-sector partnership

- ISC schools are encouraged to operate independently in the knowledge they are an integral part of the national education system. They are acknowledged to include some of the best schools in the country and worldwide. Operating independently allows these schools to develop particular strengths and

pursue a broad, challenging and ambitious curriculum. ISC schools will be encouraged to promote cross-sector partnerships.

2. The government will continue to positively promote and recognise good practice in partnerships on the part of ISC schools.
3. The DfE will encourage the state sector to participate in partnership activities, developing a range of partnership options, helping to overcome barriers. This will include the DfE providing support in matching independent and state sector schools based on need and expertise so that they can develop partnership working.
4. A strength of ISC schools is their diversity, each has its own capacity and capability. The focus will be on what each school does best and how, and to what extent each school can deploy a distinctive contribution to the good of the wider school system. It's acknowledged that partnerships only flourish effectively if they are voluntarily entered into by both partners.
5. All ISC schools in England will be encouraged to build upon existing partnership activity with state schools, including supporting academies, multi-academy trusts (MAT) and new free schools according to their individual circumstances and capability. Partnerships will respond to local needs and utilise the expertise available in individual schools. The DfE will work with schools to support the development of partnership arrangements through developing a network of good practice and case studies.
6. There is a wide range of support activities that ISC schools in England can and do offer when they are able to. This ranges from membership of school governing bodies and MAT boards to curriculum support, teaching support, sharing of expertise through mentoring, minority subject assistance, joint activities and sharing of facilities. ISC census data will help demonstrate this activity, and ISC schools will be encouraged to include this material on their pages on the [schools together website](#).
7. ISC schools spent £385 million in 2017 on means-tested bursaries and scholarships for children from lower income households and from disadvantaged backgrounds. ISC schools will be encouraged to target bursary support at those on the lowest incomes as well as looked after children, to increase opportunities for these children and to support social mobility. The new Boarding Schools Partnerships Service will also see pupils from troubled homes going to ISC boarding schools next year.
8. The development of national level schemes, including school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) in shortage subjects, will be supported by the DfE and ISC schools.
9. ISC will collect a range of partnerships information and publish an annual report of partnership activity
10. ISC and the DfE will stand together, taking opportunities to promote and celebrate the good work done in independent and state schools through partnerships across sectors.

3. Background

The ISC brings together seven associations and four affiliate associations to represent 1,300 independent schools. These schools educate more than 500,000 children. Around half of UK independent schools are ISC schools and these educate around 80% of all independent school children.

The Independent Schools Council represents the independent education sector on behalf of its seven constituent associations:

- Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools (AGBIS)
- Girls' Schools Association (GSA)
- Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC)

Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS)

- Independent Schools Association (ISA)
- Independent Schools' Bursars Association (ISBA)
- The Society of Heads (SoH)

ISC operates as a trade body, representing the interests of members. It has no power to force any school leader into action. School membership of associations accords with each association's criteria for membership. Independent schools are mostly small and cannot be expected to offer meaningful support to all state schools across the country. Only 59 ISC schools in England have over 1,000 pupils and the typical ISC school has 165 pupils (source: ISC census 2017). They do not all operate with significant surpluses and very few are backed by wealthy foundations. Therefore the government has noted that any expectation of partnership activity must be proportionate to the means and strengths of a school.

The DfE has undertaken to support the development of new partnerships, and to strengthen existing partnerships, between independent and state schools. They will assist in bringing schools with particular needs together with schools which offer particular resources or expertise. We know that effective and sustainable partnerships depend upon the establishment of good relationships between schools.

4. Context

Independent schools operate according to education legislation and, where they are charities, they are subject to charity law. Approximately 80% of ISC schools are charities. A higher proportion engage with cross-sector partnership working because schools are aware of their civic duties in relation to local and national communities and value opportunities to support educational standards and social mobility across the country. There are approximately 10,000 state schools involved in cross-sector partnerships (ISC census, 2017) and the number is growing.

Schools which are charities must be accountable for public benefit activity and demonstrate that they operate according to their individual charitable objects, established at the foundation of the charity. They do this through annual reporting to the Charity Commission. The commission's guidance (updated 2016) encourages full disclosure of partnership activities with the community and state schools when these activities support the school's charitable objects.

A judicial review in 2011 confirmed that the advancement of education is a charitable purpose and trustees of schools which are charities must be responsible for setting the scope of charitable activities according to their objects.

The Secretary of State for Education recognises that independent schools are an asset to the school system and encourages the independent sector to support the state sector as far as possible.

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