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Guidance

Interim phase: maintained schools and academies

An operational note for Her Majesty's Inspectors carrying out interim visits to state-funded schools from 28 September 2020.

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Introduction

On 17 March 2020, all routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Since this date, teachers, headteachers and support staff have been stepping up to support pupils, families and the communities they serve. We know that this work continues as staff and pupils return from the summer break.

As part of our [phased return to routine inspection](#), we are carrying out 'interim visits' to schools from autumn 2020. These visits are designed to support schools in their important work to welcome all pupils back full-time.

Interim visits will NOT:

- result in any evaluation or graded judgement of a school
- change a school's current Ofsted inspection grade
- use the education inspection framework and school inspection handbook
- judge schools on their response to COVID-19 during the spring and summer terms 2020
- require any pre-written planning, self-evaluation or other documentation
- require teachers to prepare any lesson plans or examples of assessment, or to put up any displays for the visit
- use lesson visits as a method of collecting evidence
- involve a general review of a school's policies

This operational note sets out the process and range of activities that inspectors will carry out in these interim visits, from notifying a school that an interim visit will take place to publishing an outcome letter.

Interim visits will take place from 28 September 2020 to December 2020 inclusive.

The purpose of interim visits

These interim visits are to reassure and inform parents, government and the public about how schools are managing the return to full education for all pupils.

Interim visits will help parents and the public to understand how individual schools are returning to the school's normal curriculum. We will not be evaluating what leaders did during the spring and summer term 2020, when schools were not open to all pupils, but we may need to understand the broad context of its impact on the school.

The lead Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) will write a short letter after each interim visit. The letter will summarise briefly the discussions inspectors had with leaders. This is to provide parents with information about what leaders are doing to help pupils back into full-time education. Letters will not provide any evaluation or graded judgement. They will be published on our [reports website](#).

We will also use our findings from the visits to report to the Secretary of State and the public on the picture across schools in England.

The legal context

The interim visits will take place at the discretion of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, using her powers under [section 8\(2\) of the Education Act 2005](#).

Inspectors' legal rights of entry and rights to consider and copy information under section 10 of that Act will apply.

How we will select schools for interim visits

We will not visit all schools. We will select a sample of schools to visit based on a broadly proportionate representation of the sector.

The sample will include:

- approximately 1,200 schools across all Ofsted grades, including all schools that are currently inadequate
- maintained schools, academies and free schools, special schools and centres of alternative provision
- those in cities and coastal, town or rural communities
- as even a spread as possible across different [Ofsted regions](#) and local authorities

No schools are legally exempt from an interim visit, because these are not full inspections.

Length and timing of interim visits

Visits will normally last for a day.

The lead HMI will discuss the start and end times of the day with the headteacher during the notification call. This is so that any staggered start or end to the school day can be avoided. Inspectors will not usually arrive any earlier than 10am on the day of the visit. They will normally leave no later than 4pm.

Before the interim visit

Notifying the school of a visit

The lead HMI will normally contact the school by telephone to announce the visit around 10am on the school day before a visit. If the headteacher is unavailable when the notification call is made, we will ask to speak to the most senior member of staff available.

The purpose of the notification call is to:

- explain the purpose of the visit
- allow the headteacher and lead HMI some time to discuss the context of the school, including the current circumstances in light of COVID-19
- allow the lead HMI and the headteacher to discuss the protective measures in place, including the arrangements for having visitors on site
- agree practical arrangements, such as who the inspectors will meet; this will normally include the headteacher and designated safeguarding leader, though headteachers are free to invite other leaders to participate in the visit, at their discretion
- make any other practical arrangements for the visit

The headteacher may request that the conversation is scheduled for later that day. Inspectors will do their best to accommodate any reasonable requests in terms of the timing of these discussions.

We will not carry out any of these visits without notification. This does not restrict our right to carry out a '[no formal designation](#)' (NFD) inspection under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 without notice, in line with our [section 8 inspection handbook](#).

Requests for deferral

Leaders may ask for the deferral of a visit by making a request to the lead HMI during the notification call. We will not normally consider deferral requests if we receive them after 4.30pm on the day the school is notified.

On receipt of a request, the lead inspector must immediately contact the relevant regional duty desk. The regional director or their delegate will decide whether a deferral should be granted in accordance with our [deferral policy](#).

During the interim visit

Preparation

Leaders should not prepare any documentary evidence specifically for a visit. If documentation is needed to support discussion, it should be part of the standard documents or policies that leaders use for the normal day-to-day business of the school.

Leaders should not prepare a self-evaluation or equivalent for the visit. Inspectors will not expect any information to be in any specific format or to be prepared only for Ofsted.

Inspectors will not have access to the school's inspection data summary report (IDSR). The lead HMI will have read the school's previous Ofsted inspection report, only to understand the context of the school at the time of the previous inspection.

Methodology of visits and evidence collection

Inspectors will work collaboratively with leaders to understand:

- the barriers that the school has faced, and may still be facing, in managing the return to full education for all pupils
- how leaders are ensuring that pupils resume learning the school's curriculum, including contingency planning for the use of [remote education](#) and the use of catch-up funding
- how pupils are settling back into expected routines and behaviour, including regular attendance
- how any identified and specific issues related to special educational needs, disabilities, health, care, well-being issues for particular groups of pupils are being addressed
- the school's safeguarding arrangements (focusing on arrangements at the time of the visit but potentially also looking at what was in place at the start of the COVID-19 response)

Discussions on these topics will be based around a series of open-ended questions that allow inspectors to understand the current position of the school. Conversations with senior leaders will be the main source of information.

Inspectors will not visit lessons or look at pupils' work. If it is agreed with the headteacher that it is safe and appropriate to do so, they may talk to staff and/or pupils.

Inspectors will not routinely meet with governors, trustees, multi-academy trust leaders or local authorities as part of these visits. However, if any of these wish to speak to inspectors, inspectors will try to accommodate a brief conversation. Inspectors can, however, only take into account any matters raised that they consider relevant to the purposes and methodology of the visit, as set out above.

We will not be using parent, pupil or staff questionnaires on these visits and so will not ask schools to circulate the usual links.

Inspectors will look at how approaches to remote learning are integrated into the wider curriculum design, and the plans leaders have in place to follow the [guidance from the Department of Education](#).

Inspectors will be alert to any differences in how pupils with different needs or different characteristics are supported. This includes understanding how leaders have involved parents and carers and, as necessary, other professionals and specialist services in working out how best to support pupils with SEND.

The visits are not inspections and so will not result in schools receiving a grade. As with other inspection visits, we will not require any pre-written planning or other documentation for the visit or ask schools for documents or records in a certain format. We will use what schools have already, if needed to support discussion. We will not require teachers to prepare any lesson plans or examples of assessment, or to put up any displays for the visit.

Reviewing safeguarding

Discussions with leaders during the visit will focus specifically on how leaders are managing safeguarding during the COVID-19 pandemic and in their local context.

Inspectors will discuss with leaders how they:

- identify pupils who may need early help and those who are at risk of harm or have been harmed
- secure the help that pupils need, and, if required, refer pupils in a timely way to those who have the expertise to help
- manage safe recruitment and allegations about adults who may be a risk to children, pupils, students and vulnerable adults

Significant concerns and NFD inspections

If, on a visit, inspectors have significant concerns about the school's arrangements for safeguarding or about a breakdown in the school's leadership and management, they can arrange to treat the visit as an NFD inspection. However, they would not, save in very exceptional circumstances, treat the visit as an inspection under section 5 of the Education Act because these routine inspections are suspended. If an NFD inspection finds serious concerns, we will prioritise the school for a section 5 inspection when these regular inspections resume (the DfE currently expects this to be January 2021, with the exact timing being kept under review).

The lead inspector will make any significant concerns clear to leaders during the visit.

To arrange an NFD inspection, the lead HMI should telephone their regional duty desk. The relevant regional director will then decide whether they should carry out this inspection.

Inspectors should also contact the helpdesk for advice if they find any evidence of pupils being treated differently on the basis of protected characteristics (such as boys returning to school before girls or pupils with some protected characteristics not being allowed to return).

If a visit has become an NFD inspection, inspectors will follow the guidance in our [section 8 inspection handbook](#).

Depending when the concerns are first raised, the NFD inspection may happen on the same day as the visit or within 48 hours.

Inspectors will report the outcome of an NFD inspection through a more detailed letter.

During autumn 2020, we may carry out other NFD inspections to schools in which significant concerns have been raised with Ofsted. These will be at the discretion of the relevant regional director.

Feedback to leaders

At the end of the visit, inspectors will not provide extensive feedback to leaders because they have not been evaluating or judging the work of the school. Constructive dialogue will take place throughout the visit.

Before leaving, the lead HMI will share the planned content of the letter with the headteacher to check for accuracy and to summarise their understanding from the discussions on the day.

After the interim visit

Letter to the school

Within 18 working days of the end of the visit, we will write to the school, setting out in a draft letter what inspectors found. This will have been quality assured. We may share the draft letter or findings with other public bodies.

The school will have 5 working days to comment on the draft letter, process and findings. We will consider all comments and we will respond to the comments when we share the final letter with the school within 30 working days after the visit.

If the school wishes to submit a formal complaint, it will have until the end of the fifth working day after receiving the final letter to do so.

We will normally publish the letter on our [reports website](#) within 38 working days of the end of the visit. We may delay the publication of the letter if a complaint is being investigated.

Post-visit surveys

Following the visit, we will ask schools for feedback about the process through a survey. We provide details about how schools can share their views when we send the final letter.

Quality assurance

We will monitor the quality of the visits through a range of formal processes. We may visit some schools or remotely monitor evidence to quality assure the visit. We will quality assure evidence bases and letters.

The evidence base

The evidence base for the visit will be retained in line with Ofsted's retention and disposal policy. This is normally for 6 years from when the letter is published. We may decide that retaining it for longer is warranted for research purposes.

Conduct and complaints

Inspectors must uphold the highest professional standards in their work and treat everyone they encounter during visits fairly and with respect and sensitivity.

Inspectors must at all times adhere to the [code of conduct for inspections](#). Any concerns and complaints during the visit will be handled in line with Ofsted's [complaints policy](#).

Incomplete visits

We will apply our [policy on incomplete inspections](#) where appropriate.

Privacy notice

During a visit, inspectors may collect information about staff and pupils by talking to them and by looking at documents and other recorded information. We will use this information to prepare the letter and as set out in our [schools privacy notice](#).

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