

# THE OFSTED EXPERIENCE

—

## The Parents' Eye View

A Research Project for RISE by  
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# RISE

The Research and Information on State Education Trust

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**The OFSTED Experience: The Parents' Eye View**  
**Some parents' experience of OFSTED secondary school inspections**

## Summary

The research was planned to explore parents' experience of, and involvement in, the OFSTED inspection process. It also aimed to identify what parents felt worked well and the suggestions they had for change. It was a small-scale study and the findings should be taken as indicators to areas of satisfaction and concern. They should not be taken as typical of parents' views nationally, although it seems likely that many of the findings reported here would be replicated in a larger study.

The project consisted of a questionnaire and interview survey of parents whose children attended 18 secondary schools inspected in March and April 1994. Over 600 questionnaires were returned and 20 parents from 11 of the schools were interviewed.

Parents valued the following aspects of the inspection process:

- the requirement for inspectors to base their judgements on evidence
- the opportunity for parents to voice concerns to an external body
- the role for parents and governors in the monitoring of the implementation of the action plan
- the inspection process as a catalyst for change
- the openness and availability of some Registered Inspectors
- the interviews with students
- the involvement of parents
- the report as the 'backbone on which to build'
- the requirement for schools to take action.

Concerns and reservations about the inspection process were expressed by some parents. The following suggestions for improvement were made:

- the OFSTED parents' response form should take account of the special features of the school
- more specific information should be sought from the parents by inspectors
- the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity for parents in their communications with inspectors
- a pre-inspection meeting of parents prior to the meeting with inspectors
- clear and accurate information about the parents' meeting, and the inspection, should be communicated directly to all parents
- greater encouragement for a larger and more representative sample of parents to attend the parents' meeting
- the opportunity for parents to contribute items for discussion
- the timing of the meeting should be planned to enable as many parents as possible to take part
- the assurance of confidentiality at the parents' meeting, particularly if staff are present
- a meeting procedure which encourages parents to express their views

*The OFSTED Experience*

- more information from the inspectors about how they make their judgements
- a more careful consideration of the timing of the inspection, to avoid the busiest times of the school year
- greater involvement for parents and parent governors in the inspection process
- improved accuracy in identifying the school's strengths and weaknesses
- a reduction in the amount of stress for teachers and students
- a meeting with the inspectors after the inspection
- a reduction in the cost of inspection
- financial support for implementation of the action plan.

The research reported here was undertaken by Janet Ouston and Val Klenowski of the Management Development Centre, Institute of Education, University of London, for the Research and Information on State Education Trust (RISE).

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## Section One — Introduction

### OFSTED inspections

The Education (Schools) Act 1992 established the new inspection arrangements. These require independent inspections of schools to be undertaken under contract to the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). The content and process of the inspection is set out in the *Framework for the Inspection of Schools*, the *Handbook for the Inspection of Schools* and DFE Circular 7/93.

Information is sought from parents in two ways: a meeting with the Registered Inspector (RgI) who leads the inspection team, held before the inspection is undertaken; and a questionnaire to parents which asks about their satisfaction with the school and with their child's education. Concerning the meeting with parents, the *Framework* states that:

“... it will not be possible for the Registered Inspector to respond at this stage to parents' views of the school. Their views will, however, provide valuable background information and must be taken into account in the course of the inspection. Where reports refer to views expressed by parents, they should also indicate the extent to which inspection findings support those views. The Registered Inspector will, as soon after the meeting as is possible share the findings of the meeting with the Headteacher and the chair of the governing body.”

### The meeting with parents should seek parents' views on:

- pupils' standards of work
- the part parents play in the life of the school
- the information which the school provides for parents, including reports
- the help and guidance available to pupils
- the values which the school promotes
- homework
- pupils' behaviour and attendance.

Inspectors are advised that the inclusion of these topics should not prevent the expression of views on other matters, although it is suggested in the *Framework* that:

“Early in the meeting the parents should be advised to couch their comments in general terms as far as possible to avoid naming individuals, whether pupils, teachers or governors. This is to avoid the possibility of defamation of individuals, to protect personal privacy and to discourage time-consuming anecdote.”

Information from parents via a questionnaire may also be used to provide background information for the inspection.

After the inspection the Registered Inspector is responsible for presenting the findings of the inspection to the governing body. A full report, and a summary, is then sent to the school. The school is required to distribute copies of the summary to all parents. Parents, and others, may purchase a copy of the full report if they wish. The school then prepares an action plan in response to the inspection report, and this too is distributed to parents.

## **The research**

The 18 English secondary schools included in this research were all inspected using the OFSTED *Framework* in March and early April 1994. These included large and small schools, urban, suburban and rural schools, and Local Education Authority (LEA) and grant-maintained schools.

The schools' action plans were distributed to parents between June and October 1994. Each of the 18 schools agreed to distribute RISE questionnaires with the action plans. A total of 610 questionnaires were returned. Just under a quarter of the parents responded to the three open-ended questions. A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix A, and details of the analyses in Appendix B.

One of the questions asked whether the parents would be willing to be interviewed. Twenty parents, four of whom were governors, were interviewed, either face-to-face or by telephone, from 11 schools. Details of the interview schedule are given in Appendix C.

The research focused on parents' perceptions of the OFSTED process. How were parents involved in inspections? What do they consider to be strengths of the OFSTED inspection process? What are their suggestions for how parental involvement, and inspection generally, can be improved? Do they think that their involvement is valued by inspectors and by the schools? Some of the issues discussed in the report are specific to parent governors, reflecting their more central role, while others concern parents in general.

Qualitative analysis of the interviews, and the open-ended questions on the questionnaire, was used to identify dominant themes. These are illustrated by quotations from parents' written and spoken comments.



## Section Two — The Inspection

Parents were asked about their involvement in the inspection process before and after the inspection week. They were asked to describe how they were involved and their personal views about that involvement.

### Informing parents about the inspection

Of the parents who responded to the RISE questionnaire over 90% knew that their school was to be inspected before the inspection started. Most parents interviewed (18) said that they were aware in advance that their child's school was to be inspected. However, three of these parents said that they did not receive this information directly from the school. The information received by parents from the schools varied in quality, amount, method of communication and timing. Parents' views varied. Some were satisfied: "I think that parents were well informed at every stage" while others were not: "... did not find out about it until I was asked to fill this [RISE questionnaire] in".

The parent governors who were interviewed indicated that they knew well in advance that the school was to be inspected. They were aware of the amount of work that staff were required to do prior to inspection. As one parent governor commented:

"... so much documentation in advance comes through and so much has to go back. The Head and the senior management team were on the ball and there didn't seem a lot for governors to do but we had to be consulted. We went through the requirements of OFSTED and made sure that they had been met."

Another parent governor said:

"There was a lot of concern and apprehension prior to inspection. There was information required from the school committees and committee minutes were made available to inspectors."

### Pre-inspection preparation

Twelve of the parents who were interviewed and some of the parents who returned RISE questionnaires felt that the preparation for the inspection on the part of teachers was too paper-based, too stressful and/or too time consuming. For example a parent stated:

"A reduction in the paper work is required. The amount required is frightening, especially for teachers who are concerned with teaching and learning, exam paper work as well! It is immoral to require them to use their time to provide paperwork for inspection purposes. It is another case of wasted money."

Another view that emerged was that there should be no preparation and that inspectors should go into schools unannounced. It was felt that teachers were being pressured by inspection preparation and that either a school was 'running well or it was not.' These written responses highlight this issue:

"I think the whole scheme is flawed. I think inspectors should call at shorter notice. It is farcical to 'prepare' for inspection. A school should be busy educating not worrying."

and

"I think the school should not be informed of the date of inspection so that a true reflection of

school is obtained. When the date is known it seems that both teachers and children have increased pressure.”

### **The OFSTED Response Form**

In the *Handbook for the Inspection of Schools* it is suggested that:

“The Registered Inspector should invite the appropriate authority to seek, if they wish, the views of parents using the standard parents’ response form.”

The draft letter to parents and the parents’ response form are included in the *Handbook* in English and 11 community languages. The message to parents at the end of the response form states:

“PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM TO [Registered Inspector, c/o the school]”  
(A copy of this form is included in Appendix D).

Just over three-quarters (77%) of those parents who completed the RISE questionnaire said that they had received a response form from the school. Almost all (93%) of those who received the response form completed and returned it. Of the 20 parents interviewed only one parent did not receive one of these forms. The following issues were reported concerning this phase of the inspection process.

First, the number of OFSTED response forms returned was considered disappointing in some of the schools. Second, parents were critical of the design and the content of the response form. They were critical of having to tick boxes and described the response form as “biased towards moderate responses”, “vague” and “uninformative.” Some parents wanted changes to the form to meet the specific needs and special features of their child’s school. This parent’s comments illustrate the nature of parental concerns about the response form:

“The questionnaire [OFSTED response form] needs to be more specific, that is, subject specific. For instance, to ask if your child is happy is meaningless as one day they may be, the next day they may not. There is a need for more specific information and a move away from ticking silly boxes. Nothing conclusive is gained from the present questionnaire.”

Some parents commented that they had difficulty responding to some of the questions because they were not relevant to their children’s particular needs. For example it was difficult for a parent to evaluate the school’s educational provision for children with special needs if this was not part of their child’s experience.

Not all schools provided the opportunity for parents to raise their own particular concerns or give their views on aspects of the school which they considered to be important. On the other hand as one parent noted:

“... parents not only filled in the questionnaire [OFSTED response form] but also wrote letters directly to the inspectors and some of the issues raised in those letters have been picked up.”

A dilemma emerged for parents in those schools where they were given the opportunity to raise concerns. Not all of the parents took advantage of this opportunity because the forms had to be signed by the parent and returned to the inspector via the school. Parents were unsure whether confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Some feared that their comments might have adverse consequences on their children’s education. They felt that the response forms should be returned directly to the inspectors, in confidence, and that this might encourage parents to report their concerns more honestly.

### **The Meeting: How it was Organised?**

The majority of parents (18) who were interviewed understood the purpose of the meeting to be an opportunity for them to “put their views forward and for inspectors to look at the issues that were raised by parents”.

Parents also acknowledged that it was an opportunity for the inspectors to explain what was involved in the inspection and what they would be looking at.

The following issues associated with the process of the parents' meeting with the Registered Inspector were identified in the interviews and from the RISE questionnaires:

- the need for clear and accurate information about the meeting to be communicated directly to all parents
- greater encouragement for a larger and more representative sample of parents to attend
- a more careful consideration of the timing of the meeting to encourage maximum attendance from a cross-section of parents
- the preservation of confidentiality and anonymity for parents in their communication of information to the inspectors
- the opportunity for parents to contribute issues for discussion and for these to be included on the meeting agenda
- a meeting procedure which encourages parents to express their views.

These issues are discussed in more detail below.

### **Information and Communication**

Of the 20 parents who were interviewed 18 received prior notification of the meeting with inspectors. The amount of information and the manner it was communicated to parents varied from school to school. One parent expressed disappointment with her son's school for relying on the pupils to deliver it. Several parents suggested that the school could improve its method of communication by either posting the notification of the meeting directly to parents or publishing the details in the local press. Some parents could not attend as they did not have enough notice of the meeting date. One school had neglected to include the agenda for the meeting with inspectors so that parents were unsure of what to expect. Other parents commented that they did not realise the importance of the meeting because of the style of communication.

Satisfaction with the information and the mode of communication was reported by others:

"I was pleased that parents were asked for written comments and had a chance to meet the inspectors and ask questions before the inspection."

### **Attendance and Representation**

Parents' comments tended to question the idea that a parents' meeting could represent all parents' views:

"If you could get a representative section of the parent population it would enable parents to raise the misgivings they have about the school and for the inspectors to bear that in mind. I don't believe that you're ever going to get that at a meeting, or rarely, because people don't like to speak up in public. They are more likely to get it from a confidential response form."

and

"Parents were not brave enough to speak in public."

and

"We took the attitude that you don't wash your dirty linen in public."

Only two parents interviewed said that the meeting with the inspectors was "well attended" or "a good turn out". Only one-third of those who completed the RISE questionnaire attended the meeting. Twelve of the interviewed parents described those present at the meeting as unrepresentative of the entire parent population. These parents were described as: "a very positive self-selected group." For example, in one school it was noted that the meeting was dominated by:

"... a white, middle class majority with no ethnic minorities represented despite the school's large intake of diverse ethnic minority groups."

At another school a parent had observed that the majority of parents at the meeting had children in the first or second years and were extremely supportive of the school. Another parent from the same school agreed. He described the parents as: "brain washed — who had chosen that school and were very supportive." He felt that they gave a description of the school that was "too perfect" and he believed that "they were well primed

to defend the school. They saw the inspector as the enemy.” Other parents from this school had their names down on waiting lists at neighbouring schools which they considered better: apparently their voices were not heard.

A parent observed that at their meeting:

“A lot of parents attended but possibly it was not representative because there were more parents from the professions than the working class sectors. They were motivated, conscientious and supportive.”

One of the parents who indicated that they thought that the meeting was truly representative of the cross section of the parent body said:

“Parents who turned up at the meeting were not the backbone of the school support — they weren’t all the PTA members, for example. They were a whole cross section of parents who came — some who had genuine grievances and some were more genuinely supportive — year 7 through to year 11 parents attended, new parents as well.”

In all schools only parents and inspectors were present. But this often included governors, teachers and in one instance a Headteacher, all of whom had their own children at the school and were entitled to attend. Some interviewees felt that the participation of these parents had an inhibiting effect on other parents: they could not discuss openly issues that concerned them in the presence of school staff.

### **Timing**

There were a number of issues related to the timing of the meeting, and the inspection.

First, the timing of the meeting was problematic and prevented some parents from attending. For example, in one school an interviewee said that many children came from single parent families and their needs were not considered: some of these parents may have been unable to attend because of the cost of employing a ‘sitter’. It was suggested that perhaps a second meeting could be held during school hours to enable these parents to present their views.

Second, the timing of the inspection in the school year was a major concern for some parents. In some schools it occurred during the same week as the SATS. Parents were concerned that their children might feel pressured and that their performance might suffer knowing that they were being watched and assessed by inspectors at the same time that they were having to take SATS. One parent expressed her concern as follows:

“I think the inspectors should be very aware that the pressure on the children during the months of May and June is very intense. While the inspectors were as discreet as they could be, the children were well aware that they were there, and the teachers were stressed out. They had so much work to do in advance and it was a very difficult week for them. You get anybody observing you and you are not going to be your normal self! If children are taking exams or just coming up to the GCSEs (which they were) then I do think that it is unfortunate. They did appear to do it as sensitively as they could but certainly as a parent I was concerned about the timing. It was not what I would have liked.”

For some schools the OFSTED inspection, or the action planning, coincided with the busiest time of the year. This compounded the stress and intensity of the workload.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Several parents reported their concerns about the purpose of the meeting with the inspectors. If, as described in the regulations, the purpose is to “find out parents’ views on the school and the context in which it operates” this may inevitably raise issues about individual teachers. But parents are requested to “couch their comments in general terms as far as possible to avoid naming individuals”. They were therefore faced with the dilemma of how to be accurate when the guidelines for seeking their views only allow them to be general and vague. Apart from being frightened about repercussions for their own children if they were outspoken or critical, parents expressed concern about the nature and requirements of the response form and the very public nature of the meetings. Neither of these data collection methods offered them confidentiality

or anonymity. Some parents did want to draw the inspector's attention to what they considered unprofessional behaviour. They felt that without being specific the inspectors might assume that the practice or behaviour was typical of all teachers. Confidential access to inspectors by parents and governors appeared to be a major priority:

"There is a need to have a non-threatening, confidential means of conveying concerns to inspectors independent of the school. It needs to be remembered that at this meeting there are parent teachers who are present."

A code of practice was also requested so that parents could express their concerns of a more serious or sensitive nature. For example some parents wanted to report on the poor teaching methods of particular teachers, the inappropriate behaviour of some teachers, the use of foul language by senior staff, the lack of marking on the part of some teachers and the use of sarcasm by others. They felt these behaviours were adversely affecting their children.

Parents wanted a process which promotes honesty and trust and encourages them to air their misgivings truthfully. At the moment some parents feel the information received is vague and distorted.

Where confidentiality was respected it was greatly valued by parents. Some inspection teams made themselves as accessible as possible and were not intimidating. In some schools the inspectors went out of their way to put people at their ease in a very professional manner. One parent described the leader of the inspection team as:

"... an exceptional person. He put the parents' meeting at ease very quickly, he was very open and fair but not in a familiar way. I think parents were able to very quickly sum up that he was a man of integrity and he would take what they offered and would use it with discretion."

Where staff members are also parents at the same school the inspectors need to run the meeting with skill and tact. The opportunity to put views in writing was particularly valued in this situation.

### Agenda

The meeting with the inspectors was structured according to an agenda prepared by the inspectors. In some schools it was possible for parents to raise issues of specific concern whereas in others it was not possible for parents to do this. The following comment from a parent explained this:

"The inspector at the meeting had an agenda and a prepared list of questions — a prompt sheet. So although the opportunity was there for parents to raise issues, they were within the constraints or the structure of the agenda. Parents were not happy with the inspection process, yet there was no room on the agenda for this issue to be raised."

At another school the parents were particularly concerned about the impact of the inspection and were successful in raising the following issues with the inspectors:

- How was the inspection process affecting their children?
- What impact was the process having on their children's performance?
- What was the cost of the inspection?
- To what extent would the tension created by the inspection process impact on their child's progress?

Parents at this school were concerned about the inspectors' backgrounds, experience and competence to assess the school. They were not impressed with some inspectors' refusal to provide such information and their referral to the *Handbook* to support their position.

Some parents perceived the agenda to be quite remote from their concerns. It did not encourage parents to attend.

### Meeting Procedures

Parents who completed the open-ended questions of the RISE questionnaire and the majority of those who were interviewed were critical of the way in which the meeting was run. They indicated that a more open and informal style was needed to allow a greater number of parents to present their views. A parent observed that:

“It was quite difficult to raise issues except from the point of view that it had some bearing on what they [the inspectors] wanted to cover. It would have been very difficult for a parent to stand up and make a critical comment. It was quite a structured meeting. The parents gave their views on the points that they had in front of them.”

He went on to explain that although the inspectors might ask:

“Is there anything else you would like to say? Unless the parents attend meetings frequently or unless they hone in on something and ask a specific question, then the usual response is not to say anything.”

Parents made some constructive suggestions for improvement. For example:

“The meeting with parents by the Inspectors was ‘old fashioned’, involving Inspectors giving talks to a big audience and asking for questions. It is not an efficient method of data collection. There are better methods, for example, small groups using flipcharts and reporting to a plenary. Some parents may have been too shy to speak in a big meeting. Only one person at a time can speak in a big meeting; it is inevitably less representative. Inspectors need training in running big groups.”

### **The Meeting: Content**

Some parents were able to contribute items to the agenda. These included:

- bullying
- exam preparation
- teaching of foreign languages
- drug problems in the school and community
- the merit certificate system
- safety, smoking and the need for teacher supervision on buses
- sexism and macho image of a particular subject department
- uniform
- provision for special education needs
- lack of facilities.

Parents also sought clarification on a number of issues such as the values that the school teaches. At one school parents wanted to know what was meant by the ‘moral, spiritual, social and cultural development of the child’. At another school parents wanted an explanation of how students in unstreamed classes were given the opportunity to reach their potential.

A parent described the meeting with the inspectors as “very open”. She explained how:

“Parents were able to criticise, add or defend the issues on the agenda. Parents were not shy about raising issues that they were concerned about. On the whole they were not things that were destructive; they were raised in quite a constructive way.”

At this school boys are less successful in examinations than girls. This is due to the location of this school: there are a number of boys’ independent schools in the area which attract many of the local population of boys who otherwise might attend this school. Parent governors were concerned that the pattern of exam results might be misinterpreted and clarified this for the inspectors.

Parents reported the following items from the agendas of their school’s meeting:

- pupils’ standards of work
- GCSE results were discussed in many schools
- “the variation in mixed ability classes” was another concern as was the disparity between the results of girls and boys
- the part parents play in the life of the school
- the information which the school provides for parents, including reports
- parents at one school “were not happy with the computerised report system”

- open evenings were discussed at another school and “the need for parents to be kept informed of their children’s learning problems”
- the help and guidance available to pupils
- parents at one school indicated their satisfaction with the “curriculum and GCSE Years 10 and 11 options and the way the school had handled the decision-making related to this”
- in another school the lack of extra curricular activities was discussed
- the values that the school promotes, including religious education, pastoral care, the daily act of worship: “the spiritual and moral ethos as opposed to the actual teaching of religious education”
- homework and marking policy was discussed at all meetings
- pupils’ behaviour and attendance
- one parent governor indicated that parents expressed their satisfaction with the favourable change in discipline over the past years at the school
- at another school discipline problems and attendance were the main issues discussed
- class size was an issue at some schools.

The overall impression gained from the parents interviewed was that “parents were guarded and diplomatic.” This was particularly the case where parents themselves were involved in the teaching profession, or where teachers at the school were present at the meeting.

### **The Inspection Week**

During the inspection week parents were not actively involved unless they were governors. Therefore, most of the comments in this section are from parent governors. For example, one interviewee was aware that: “at the end of the procedures there was a meeting where three governors attended and parents’ views were taken into account.”

A parent governor described his involvement in the inspection process. He was involved in a very structured, two hour meeting with four inspectors, the Head, the chair of governors and five other governors. This meeting took place on an evening of the inspection week and in this parent governor’s words:

“In effect what they did was grill us on various aspects of the school — aims of the school, our understanding of what was going on. The inspectors asked a question and we gave them an answer.”

Issues such as discipline to finance were covered during this meeting and the parent governor felt that the inspectors wanted to know how well the governors understood the school’s mission statement and how it operated. He felt that questions were phrased rather carefully, were ambiguous, and designed so that governors were given the opportunity “to put their feet into it”. He concluded that:

“The governors demonstrated that they had quite a good understanding of what was going on. The focus on School Development Plan, and school aims, showed they understood what the school was about and what their role was.”

Another parent governor said that she knew what took place during the inspection week, but that many parents would not. The governors had a verbal report from the inspectors, but the parents did not.

“They [the inspectors] described how many hours teaching they had observed and how many children they interviewed. They interviewed every member of staff. I am also aware, again because I am a governor, that they visited the feeder primary schools and the village, the shops and spoke to community members to get their views as to how the students behaved out of school and to obtain their perception of the school.”

Both parents and parent governors were aware that during the inspection a wide range of students were interviewed by the inspectors. A parent explained:

“The children were chosen by the school according to criteria drawn up by inspectors — they had to produce all their homework and notebooks. The students were of varying ability. It wasn’t left to the school to choose. It had to be a cross section. The children were aware that the inspectors were around but not in an intrusive way.”

A parent governor whose son was selected for interview commented:

“I was aware that a fairly large number of students of varying achievement levels were selected randomly to talk through openly their views. My son was selected and feedback from him indicated that it was not an intimidating interview; he felt listened to and he felt it was an open discussion.”

Another parent described what happened at her child’s school:

“The inspectors shadowed students of a range of ability. All parents of students who were chosen were notified. The students commented positively about the inspectors and their involvement with them. The Head did inform the students of what was taking place and explained to them that they had a responsibility to behave well. The Head has a good relationship with the students.”



## Section Three — After Inspection

### The Report

The summary and final reports are prepared by the Registered Inspector reflecting the collective view of the whole inspection team, and sent to the school. The summary should be distributed to all parents. The full report can be obtained from the school, which is allowed to charge the cost of photocopying.

All parents who were interviewed received a copy of the summary report and just under 90% of the parents who responded to the RISE questionnaire said that they had received it. In most cases parents were also aware that they could purchase or have access to the full report if they wanted. Just under a quarter (23%) of the parents who completed the RISE questionnaire indicated that they had obtained a copy of the full report. Some parents objected to having to pay for it.

### Did the report reflect parental concerns?

Parental views about whether the report reflected the right issues and their perceptions of whether their input was valued varied from school to school.

Several parents commented on the “bland nature of the summary report”. In some schools parents believed that there were contradictions between the summary and the full reports. Parents wanted more information about the meanings of some parts of the report. For example, many parents are unsure of what statements such as “satisfactory but below the national average” actually mean. These comments highlight this parental concern:

“I believe that the Head played down the inspectors’ report. Where the comment was made that the school was satisfactory he indicated that it was really excellent. In some areas the school is below average and this was not explained.”

It was quite apparent in some reports that the concerns of parents had been confirmed by the inspectors. For example one parent said:

“Yes, there were some very positive points made by the inspection team. Criticisms included homework policy and reports to parents which had emerged in the parent meeting.”

At another school parental concerns were not so evidently reported. A parent observed:

“In the report it wasn’t so obvious that the issues came from the parent meeting because it couldn’t be substantiated as could other issues such as classroom practice or school issues. It did come through in the general tenor of the report.”

A parent governor from the same school added:

“Issues raised by the parents did appear in the full report. All parents received a summarised version of the report and as a parent governor a full version of the report was made available. Parents were aware that if they wanted to see the full report then they could.”

In other schools parents were dissatisfied and suggested that the issues raised by the parents were not fully covered in the report. This parent’s comment highlights her dissatisfaction:

“I had no confidence in the system when I saw the report. They wasted a lot of money on that report.”

According to this mother the inspectors did not focus enough on the quality of teaching and learning. What she felt was lacking was explicit criteria for evaluating this. She had hoped that the inspection process would pick up the teachers who were struggling.

At another school a parent was critical of the presentation of the summary report. The school had prefaced it with positive quotations from the full report. She was disappointed that the inspectors did not portray accurately issues of concern to parents. She concluded that the inspection was disappointing given the summary report and the information which was published in the local newspapers. She said that some teachers had lost control of their classes and needed help and support. She was also concerned about bullying. Yet the outcome of inspection was a denial of these problems; an opportunity to be honest about them was lost.

Parents in other schools also felt that the report was misleading. For example, one parent believed that the strengths of the school were the Personal and Social Education programme and the pastoral care system. However, they were reported as areas in need of improvement. She said: "It would be the last thing you would pick up on if you knew the school." She felt that the report failed to identify the weaknesses and this exposed the inspection for what she considered to be 'a sham'. A parent at a different school felt that music teaching was reported to be fair to good whereas she had expressed her concerns about this subject and the way it was taught.

A similar experience was shared by this parent:

"Some weaknesses of the school were not exposed. For instance, one of the dullest subjects in the school is science. The lessons have been uninteresting, which is tragic because science is exciting if it is taught with enthusiasm. At this school there has been no hands on or active learning in science and the inspectors didn't discover this. ... To further demonstrate the lack of achievement in the science subject, one year not one student attained an A in science. There were plenty of As achieved in other subjects. I think it is partly due to the school, the way the science has been handled over the years, but also the attainment targets and the national curriculum which has not allowed any slack in the system for teachers to pursue the liveliness in their teaching."

A criticism of the report for another parent was the way it appeared to gloss over issues. She disliked the fact that the report was full of statistics yet offered very few explanations for the number of exclusions, for example.

### **Did parents think that the right issues were reported?**

Eleven interviewees thought that the inspector's report reflected the right issues. Similarly, 91% of those returning the RISE questionnaires indicated that inspections looked at the right aspects.

The issues identified as being important included:

- student behaviour, discipline, bullying
- the quality of work and educational standards
- exam results
- teaching standards
- areas of specific subject curriculum weakness
- religious education
- homework
- Special Education Needs
- assessment and reporting
- school ethos
- student/teacher relations
- class sizes
- school management
- attendance and truanting
- facilities
- extra-curricular activities
- safety issues

- drugs
- poor performance of boys
- primary/secondary transfer.

Supportive comments for the inspectors' reports are given below:

"The right issues were addressed fully in the report. The report was fair, accurate and highlighted recognisable issues."

Some parent governors were able to identify issues of concern from the report that they felt were important. For these parent governors the reports will be a useful source of evidence to assist them in being more effective:

"In science the inspectors identified the curriculum area of weakness and also the macho culture of one of the subject departments was noticed and will now be attended to. While the governors had been aware of these issues they had no evidence to substantiate these claims. The report will help to do this."

Yet another parent governor said:

"The report reflects the right issues, the report highlighted a number of things ... as a parent governor I had feelings about and a lot of governors would agree. One thing is stricter reading standards. That's substantiated with evidence ... reading results and comments in the report were a shock. We had realised that reading was a problem but we had not realised the extent of the problem. On the whole the report reflects the right issues. It confirms the strengths and highlights the areas for improvement. I think that the other weaknesses will now be put right. They will have to be put right. The greatest difficulty is English as a second language and to a certain extent ethnicity."

While this parent governor agreed that the report did reflect the right issues she was frustrated with the fact that the funding issues were not considered. She explained:

"We are aware of the difficulties facing the school and we know that money is the stumbling block to putting it right. It's all very well that they [the inspectors] are coming and telling us what we already know but nobody is helping us do anything about that. Reading is one of the problems that most parents are concerned about and it came up several times in the report — the lack of proper books, the lack of good reading material for the child. We are all very aware of that, but it costs money! We would love to be able to put more books in the library!"

Another parent felt that the report did reflect the right issues but was surprised by the content:

"The report does reflect the right issues. I was surprised that teachers needed to update, and that the teachers needed to be more aware of career options for students. The report commented on the need to increase standards and the need for special needs training ... that the time is right for staff development and the need to link resources more closely to educational objectives ... that the planning at the school is in danger of becoming too complex — 'too many chiefs and not enough Indians!'. If the teachers don't update their skills then there is a danger that the education of our children will fall behind. There is a need for more training for subject specialist teachers, they don't appear to be completely trained."

For other parents the report did not reflect the right issues. One parent explained that what he considered to be the "simple issues" were reported. To illustrate what he meant he referred to the issue of homework and the need for students to use their homework diaries. He considered this issue to be less important than the issue of checking to see what the student had learnt from completing the homework or if indeed the student had completed the homework. He went on to explain that consistency in the setting of homework was good in theory but in reality could not be sustained because teachers needed to give homework when appropriate to the learning of a particular class. He suggested that it was futile to give homework just for the sake of it.

Another illustration was the preoccupation at this school with uniform rather than examining the more fundamental issue of why students were not attending school.

A contentious issue for some parents was religious education. It was not an issue raised by parents yet it appeared in the report. These parents' comments sum up the general tenor of some parental concern related to this issue:

"A school has its hours 'cut out' with the increasing demands on the teachers and the curriculum. How can religious education be taught at school?"

and

"I disagree with the emphasis placed on religion. I think that there is too much emphasis placed on this. The school has a large proportion of students from ethnic backgrounds and so certain rooms have been allocated for their worship. I think from the feedback of the 14 and 15 year olds they are mocking religion and consider it to be a waste of time. I disagree that religion should be forced onto students. The report tends to suggest this. I believe that religion is something to be developed at home not at school."

The following themes emerged from the RISE questionnaire responses concerning aspects of the school's work which were important to them, but not inspected. These parents wanted more comment and discussion on particular issues such as:

- homework
- equal opportunities
- Special Educational Needs
- standards of education
- bullying
- teachers who were not performing well
- sports participation
- examination results.

In relation to this latter issue one parent wrote:

"Emphasis on high exam results can be counter-productive and cause too much stress in teachers and children."

Other areas that inspectors should have reviewed included:

- the lack of discipline
- the lack of certain facilities (such as playing fields or an assembly hall)
- the need for safety measures in certain areas of the school
- the lack of provision for ethnic minorities.

Further issues which according to these parents were either not seen by inspectors or were overlooked include:

- the need to teach foreign languages in the earlier years
- a questioning of the relevance of the curriculum in certain subject areas
- the failure of schools to meet the skills required by industry
- the need to extend more able students who are bored.

Several parents were critical of the biased nature of what the inspectors saw and the consequent, 'coloured' report. One of these parents suggested that "Inspectors should concentrate on parents' attitude to school and should spend time on quizzing them." They felt that the teachers and students were on their best behaviour during the inspection and that the inspectors did not get a true impression of the school. The image portrayed by some parents at the meeting was also considered by other parents to be 'too perfect' or 'too positive'. This had led to what some parents perceived as a biased report.

### Did anything in the report surprise the parents?

Almost a quarter (23%) of the parents who responded to the RISE questionnaire said that they were surprised by something in the report. Their comments are summarised below:

- standards in relation to the national norm
- the emphasis on, standard of, and appropriateness of RE
- thoroughness of the report
- some low, mediocre or unsatisfactory teaching standards
- poor provision in particular subject areas
- inspectors' evaluation of the school exceeded that of parents
- failure of the report to reflect the 'true' situation
- low achievement of boys
- criticism of assemblies
- confirmation that this was a good school
- contradictory nature of the report
- lack of report on some specific curriculum subjects
- safety issues.

Those parents who indicated that they were not surprised by the report stated that it had confirmed their opinion of the school. These ranged from:

"I know the school needs improvement and this proved it."

to

"I recognised the school in the report and felt the inspectors had done a good job which would be helpful to the school."

### The action planning phase

After the inspection the school and its governing body have to develop an action plan based on the inspectors' findings. The *Framework* indicates that:

"The report should specify clearly the most important issues, including, where appropriate, the maintenance of good features. The points for action should be practicable, explicit and as few as are consistent with the findings. Mention should also be made of any provision or practice noted during the inspection which, in the opinion of the inspectors, may constitute a significant threat to health and safety or a breach of the law".

Some parents were aware that a meeting to develop the action plan had taken place and that this was the responsibility of the school and its governing body. There was limited parental involvement in the development of the action plan; therefore more parent governors' comments are included in this section.

The parent governors' involvement consisted of attendance at meetings after the inspection to discuss the strengths and the weaknesses of the school. In most schools, staff were responsible for the production of the action plan which was then presented to the governing body for approval. At one school every issue raised within the report was allocated either to a senior management member or to the appropriate head of department for their action. Governors along with other staff were then given the opportunity to check and offer suggestions for change to the resulting action plan.

Parent governors who were interviewed indicated that in their role they also needed:

"... to see that the plans are put into action in an understandable way and where money is required to see that money is found ...".

Funding the action plan was a whole governing body responsibility and had to take account of available resources "almost regardless of what the inspectors had decided." A parent governor said:

"If funds were more plentiful then we would try and tackle most of it but we know we can't. So we do have to prioritise and some things have to be delayed, so I don't think that anything came as a surprise to anybody. We knew what problems we had, we knew our strengths and we knew our weaknesses."

The parent governors were also aware of their monitoring role in the areas identified for action by the inspectors' and in the action plan.

Generally parents were aware of the action plan and believed that they would be able to monitor the plan when it was discussed at the annual parents' meeting.

### **Strengths of the action planning phase**

Many parents and parent governors perceived the action planning phase to be a strength because it forced the school, the governors, the individual staff to revisit certain issues and provided an opportunity for whole school evaluation. A parent governor noted how the action planning had "pulled the staff together" for the common purposes of developing whole school policy on issues like reading and setting. She went on to explain:

"Students are set in ability groups for most of the subjects — the criteria used for setting had become different in some departments. So they all had to work together."

In some situations the action planning phase caused schools to confront problems that they had actually discovered for themselves which had now been substantiated by the inspection process. Many parents felt that if the action plan did not take up the issues then it would be a missed opportunity.

### **Suggestions for change to the action planning phase**

Parents suggested a reduction in the use of jargon in the action plan. Some of the parent governors saw their role to check for this and to ensure that any confusion or ambiguity was avoided.

Parents felt it would be helpful if the action plan could specifically indicate the intended impact on their children's education. Parents want to know what is planned for each term in a clear manner. For example:

"There isn't much explanation. I would like more information about how much time will be involved, what resources will be allocated and how it is intended to extend pupils."

Several parents agreed that more information was needed about how the action plan was to be resourced. In some plans this was not made explicit. A meeting to discuss the action plan was requested by some parents so that they could be given the opportunity to ask questions.

The time schedule of the inspection process created problems for some governing bodies. Parent governors wanted more time to consider the action plan before they were required to present it. For example, in nine of the schools there was pressure to finalise arrangements for the distribution of the action plan in the last week of term. For four schools, the 40 days they are allowed to prepare the action plan was broken by the summer holidays and momentum was lost. These schools had to postpone the governors' meeting on the action plan until the beginning of September which meant that it was not distributed until the second or third week of September. A parent governor noted that:

"The inspection was at the end of April, document published mid July which takes us through to September and most of us are on holiday in the intervening period. That is quite difficult for consistent involvement of a governing team."

Other parent governor suggestions for improvement of the action planning process included the setting of definite dates for reporting back to sub-committees or the governing body on the writing of sections of the plan. It was also suggested that a governor should be allocated to each of the main areas of the plan to support, monitor and review its implementation.

Parents were aware that the inspection and the reports need to be relevant and accurate because of their impact on the action plan. As a parent observed: "The product is irrelevant if the process is wrong!"

## Section Four — Conclusions

This section presents parents' perceptions of the positive and negative features of inspection.

### **What did parents value?**

Parents valued the following aspects of inspection, and some of their comments are included to illustrate these.

#### **The requirement for inspectors to base their judgements on evidence**

“The good thing about these inspections is that nothing is said unless they have got the proof there. The old HMI inspection which I felt was really good could be very subjective, I think that these inspections are far more objective. As a parent I will be chasing up these points at parent meetings.”

For schools with an unjustified ‘bad’ reputation parents saw the inspection as a strength:

“I think that the inspection is worthwhile especially for a school that has had a bad reputation because it supports you if you have doubts about the school.”

#### **The opportunity for parents to voice concerns to an external body**

“Previously the parents could voice concerns at the LEA but with the decline in the LEA parents have lost this avenue of support. The LEAs in the past knew who was involved and how to take action but this situation no longer exists and the inspectors and the inspection process can fill this gap.”

#### **The role for parents and governors in the monitoring of the implementation of the action plan**

“Issues such as homework that have been identified will now need to be acted upon. Previously the governors didn't have the professional support to ensure that such action was taken.”

#### **The inspection process as a catalyst for change**

“The school was aware of the need for change but the inspection process has caused the school to do more about it. A lot of staff have been lost and this will be an opportunity for the Head to strengthen weak areas and really develop areas that have become stale. It's easy for teachers to get into a rut and lose their effectiveness.”

“Prior to the report a council for pupils was set up. There had been little opportunity for students to take on responsibility. After the inspection pupils were given more opportunity to take on the responsibility. The inspection provided the vehicle for change. The council had been set up before the report went to OFSTED — an immediate improvement!”

“I think that the inspection process is keeping people on their toes. I think that all of us when we are inspected tend to do better. I think teachers can lapse and slide down hill.”

“I don’t think that the Headteacher was hearing anything he hadn’t heard before ... I suspect that he took more notice of it than he would otherwise because it was raised in conjunction with inspection.”

Parents were pleased that action had to be taken. In some schools the pastoral care policy had been described as unsatisfactory. These schools were required to develop clear policies on bullying, homework and discipline. The parents from these schools considered this action to be “a step in the right direction”.

### **The openness and availability of some Registered Inspectors**

“The inspector made it clear that he was willing to accept information from parents either in written form or would speak to them directly.”

### **The interviews with students**

“I was astonished at how much interest the inspectors took in the young people they interviewed. I can’t recall a time in my teaching career where inspectors talked to children. So it was interesting that they were looking at a student viewpoint as well as a teacher and parent viewpoint of the institution.”

### **The involvement of parents**

Where parents were kept informed throughout the inspection process, and where the Head welcomed the inspection, parental involvement was facilitated. For example a parent from such a school said:

“At a PTA meeting after the inspectors had gone the Headteacher was pleased to say that she was proud to read the inspectors’ report. She saw the parents as partners in this and indicated that the report reflected on us and our children. It was to the parents’ advantage to get a positive report.”

Parents indicated that the OFSTED response form was one way of getting them involved. They also felt that the inspectors’ report had helped them realise that there were aspects of the school that could be improved. For example:

“I feel from what I have seen or read of the report so far that it has been a very fair assessment of the school and where they have been critical it’s about issues which the school already recognised needed improving. Like, for example, the examination results are fairly weak and the gender balance in examination results. The school already knew that and have asked the curriculum sub-committees to look at ways of changing that.”

### **The report**

In some schools where the report was favourable parents were able to take pride in their children’s school, particularly where the school was perceived locally to have a bad reputation. These parents saw the report as “another tool to defend the school and to have their choice of school (which was not the obvious one) confirmed by outside agencies.” They felt that their choice of school for their children was affirmed when it was acknowledged that the school was “on the right track” and had identified the right issues. They appreciated this confirmation.

The parent governors valued the report because they saw it as “the backbone on which to build”.

### **What did parents suggest could be improved?**

#### **The OFSTED response form**

Parents criticised the design and content of the response form. They suggested that more time be given for the return of the response form to allow for careful consideration of their responses. A space to raise issues of parental concern was requested.



### **The meeting**

Parents wanted more notice of the date and time of the meeting so that they could make the necessary arrangements to enable them to attend. They suggested that the importance of the meeting should be more fully explained to parents so that they are encouraged to attend. Parents should know that they are not only going to be asked to give information but will also receive information about the inspection process.

Parents also wanted to have more opportunities to put their views forward without the constraints of a rigidly structured agenda. Parents felt that it was important for the inspectors to understand the special features of their children's schools.

### **A reduction in stress**

Many parents commented on the stress experienced by the staff and pupils during the inspection process. A reduction in the paper work required by inspectors was suggested. The inspection process itself is very stressful and the paperwork makes it even more so.

In one school the governing body had been making classroom visits for the past three years. A parent governor reported that teachers, having had this experience as a normal part of their teaching, were used to having someone sit in on lessons and the pupils were also used to it.

Some parents reported that teachers were exhausted by the end of the inspection. One parent noted that the exhaustion was

“... as much to do with tension as to do with the time of the year that it came. The stress levels were very much increased for the teaching staff ... the teachers were expected to put on as many as eight performances per day, five days a week and to be at peak form every day. The inspectors actually looked at 150 lessons, 35 registration periods and a huge range of extra-curricular activities!”

### **Communication to parents**

Some parents suggested that most of the information to them could come from the governors rather than from the Head or the school. It was suggested that it should still be written by the Head but should be communicated to the parents via the governors. This more direct communication link might encourage more parents to participate in the inspection.

### **Greater involvement**

Parent governors in particular wanted greater involvement of the governing body to ensure that 'everybody speaks with one voice'. It was also suggested that a governor, a parent or a staff member should be a member of the inspection team. It was emphasised that the parent should be a spokesperson for the parents and should be chosen independently of the Head. The inclusion of these members would mean they could offer information, explanation or clarify points for inspectors. The addition of a parent on the inspection team would mean that he or she could ask the inspectors questions and raise common parental issues or concerns.

### **Pre-inspection meeting for parents**

It was proposed that a parents' meeting could be held by the school before the meeting with the inspector. This meeting could give parents an opportunity to clarify their ideas before meeting the inspectors and provide parents with an explanation of how the inspection would be undertaken.

### **Improved accuracy**

Some parents felt that inspectors needed to identify more accurately the areas in need of improvement. In some schools the weaknesses were not identified nor were the strengths of the schools clearly acknowledged. Examples of these have been provided in section three of this report.

### **Meeting with parents after the inspection**

For the majority of parents an essential addition to the process was the need for a post-inspection meeting with the parents. For example one parent wrote:

“It may have been helpful to have a meeting after the inspection, with the Inspectors. Education is very complicated with various levels being quoted. That is, it would be clearer to have the report verbally as well, and also for parents to ask any questions raised by the report.”

### **Future inspections and continuity**

Parents want to be assured that future inspections will preserve the continuity with this initial inspection. Parents wanted to know: "How will continuity be preserved? Will the same OFSTED team carry out the inspection of the same school in four years' time?"

### **Other suggestions**

The following suggestions were drawn from the open-ended questions on the RISE questionnaire:

- more specific and direct information needs to be sought from parents by inspectors
- include a parent on the inspection team
- improve the communication with parents
- there should be no need to prepare for inspection
- arrange a post-inspection meeting for parents
- maintain current level of parent involvement
- provide confidential access to the inspectors for parents
- reduce the cost of the inspection process
- inspectors to provide more information about how they make their judgements
- some caution expressed about increased involvement of parents
- improve the attendance of parents at the pre-inspection meetings.

### **What were parents concerned about?**

#### **Cost**

There was a concern expressed about the cost of the inspection. This parent's comments illustrate her attitude:

"I'm wondering whether the inspection process is justifiable. It is such a vast expense for really only a snapshot of school, after all it is only for one week and there are many more weeks in the school year! I remain to be convinced of its value."

The cost-effectiveness of the inspection process was questioned. Some parents felt the money could have been better used by the schools to implement their existing Development Plan.

"I don't think that the inspection has caused the school to come up with anything that they wouldn't have done anyway ... they may have altered their priorities slightly".

#### **Level of involvement of parents**

A number of parents did not want further involvement in the inspection process of their children's school. Some were concerned about the inspection itself while others felt that the educationalists were the professionals and needed to be left to get on with the work of teaching and learning. Some cautioned against further parental involvement:

"I think that the parents would get in the way. The Head, the teachers and the inspectors are the professionals and they need to get on with it."

Another parent expressed her opinion as follows:

"I think the role for parents is ameliorative rather than anything else. I think that the inspection is seen as a panacea and there is no need for parents to panic. I can't see the point of involving parents further."

And a word of warning from yet another parent:

"It is possible to go too far down this track with parents! If the professionals don't know why ask the parents?"

Some felt that the involvement of parents could be described as "cosmetic parental involvement" and that schools "only pay lip service to the concept". This was because they viewed the inspection process as a public relations exercise resulting from the Parents' Charter. It was felt that schools and educationalists did not want further involvement of parents (particularly their increased access to information). Too much parental involvement would slow down educational decision making. The attitude of some teachers was interpreted as: "Parents are a nuisance in the system."

#### **Relations between the school and parents:**

An unfavourable report can have a negative impact on the relations between the school and the parents. It is clear from some parental comments that the inspection has confirmed their beliefs "I know the school needs improvement and this proved it."

#### **Perceptions of OFSTED**

Parents expressed their concern regarding the image and overall effect of the inspection on the school. They spoke of "the threat of OFSTED" and in some schools "the inspectors were seen as the enemy". Parents indicated that if OFSTED were to be a vehicle for change then: "it needs to be less stressful for teachers. It needs to be supportive of teachers to do the job." Many parents were concerned that: "With the new system a lot of teachers have had the stuffing knocked out of them and have been undervalued!"

#### **Impact of the inspectors**

Parents were concerned that the inspectors might not see the school as it would normally be.

"... the children were better behaved than normal. Were the inspectors aware of their impact?"

Some parents noted increased marking by some teachers and, in another school, a parent noted "an over-enthusiastic use of merit certificates" to improve student behaviour before inspection.

#### **Role conflict for parent governors in OFSTED Inspections**

During the inspection process a role conflict emerged for parent governors. They are members of the governing body and therefore have a legal responsibility for the performance of the school, so they too are being inspected. The parent governors who were interviewed felt obliged to highlight positive aspects of the school while their anxieties as parents were not raised because it was considered to be disloyal to the school. To be too frank about the school's weaknesses was seen as conflicting with the role of parent governor. As one parent governor stated:

"The inspectors' role is to find out what the weaknesses are, it is not up to the governors to tell the inspectors. If we do their job for them, then in a way they are going to be side-tracked and they might miss the real issues, which could be catastrophic."

This role conflict also emerged for parent governors during the parents' meeting with the inspectors. It felt inappropriate for parent governors to debate parental issues in such a public forum.

#### **Were parents' views valued?**

Of the parents who were interviewed 12 felt that their views were valued by the inspectors and the school. Nearly all the parents (97%) who attended the parents' meeting reported that the inspectors were interested in their views.

The four parent governors who were interviewed felt that they were able to provide valuable information to the inspectors. In one school the parent governors were able to give the background and history of the school to the inspectors to explain the exam results. In this way the parent governors felt that they were educating the inspectors. In another school a parent governor stated:

"In the main I would say that my input was valued as a parent and parent governor. The input that I was able to offer was reinforcing of the ethos of the school, the working of the school, what it stands for. For instance, with regards the issues such as health and safety I was able to say; 'Yes the school does have a policy and it is an active policy!'"

Another parent governor's perspective:

"At the meeting they certainly made us feel that they were listening to what all of us had to say and that the issues raised, though most of it was positive, were going to be covered by the report and that as parents we would receive feedback. Which indeed we did! As a parent governor I think that they were totally unaware of me. I never met them except when they reported back verbally to the whole governing body. Inspectors met with the chairs of the various sub-committees and interviewed governors."

Parents who felt that the inspectors and the school valued their input, were supportive of the inspection system as a way of enhancing parental involvement. Where parents are confident that the school is "well organised and well planned" and know that "the school would have generated a way forward" they indicated that parents' views were already valued by the school.

Other parents felt that their views were valued, for example:

"Parents' views were valued. We think it is superb and a way to enhance parental involvement through inspection."

"I think the input from parents was valued by the inspectors but I'm not sure how much was passed on."

"Inspectors valued the input and indicated that they needed information from parents, this was apparent from the open questions at the meeting. Some of the issues raised by the inspectors at parents' meeting were derived from the questionnaire [OFSTED response form] responses."

Other parents did not think that more parental input would be valued. They were concerned that teachers might resent more involvement of parents.

### **Some areas for further research**

This report is based on a small scale study with a number of constraints. The researchers have been cautious in their interpretation of the data and in the formation of their conclusions — this study could be considered as a pilot study for a larger project.

**Parental involvement** How to involve parents to an extent that is beneficial and appropriate for all? This study has revealed a diversity of parents' views. For some, it was "cosmetic parental involvement" and for others "too much parental involvement".

### **The role of the parent governor in inspection process.**

**Communication before inspection** One-quarter of the parents returning the RISE questionnaire were surprised by some of the Inspectors' findings. Even though we might assume that these parents were well-informed about their children's school there were some issues that they were unaware of. Clearly, communication between school and parents is a key research issue.

**Attendance at meetings** Why do more parents return the OFSTED parents' response forms than attend the parents' meeting with the Registered Inspector?

**Why is parents' attendance at meetings rather poor?** (Only one-third of those who returned the RISE questionnaire attended the meetings.)

**Access to full report** Why do so few parents buy the full inspectors' report? (Less than one-quarter of those who returned the RISE questionnaire obtained a full report.)

**Cost effectiveness** Some parents felt that the inspection report told them nothing new. Do the outcomes from the inspection justify the costs involved?

**Implementing the action plan** Some schools were unable to fully implement their action plan because of a shortage of resources in the school. Implementation is clearly central to the longer term value of the inspection process.

## Appendix A — The Postal Questionnaire



**R·I·S·E**

The Research and Information on State Education Trust (RISE) is doing research on parents' involvement in the new School Inspections. Our findings could help other schools, strengthen parents' involvement and make sure that inspection reflects parents' concerns. This questionnaire asks you to say how much you have been involved in the recent inspection at your child's school. Please return the questionnaire even if you have not been involved in the Inspection. All returns will be treated in absolute confidence.

### About Your Family

How many children do you have at this school? *please circle*

1            2            3            4

How old are they? *Please give each child's age*

	age		age
Child 1		Child 3	
Child 2		Child 4	

### Before the Inspection

Before the inspection week began, did you know the school was going to be inspected? *Please circle the number by your answer*

No            1

Yes            2

*if yes—*

How did you first find out about it?

Letter from school            1

Child told me            2

Invitation to meeting            3

Questionnaire from inspector            4

Did you know then that the Inspection process included a meeting with parents?

No 1  
Yes 2

Did you attend the parents' meeting?

No 1  
Yes 2

If you did attend—  
Did you feel that the Inspectors were interested in parents' views?

No 1  
Yes 2

Did you receive a questionnaire from the school before the inspection?

No 1  
Yes 2

Did you complete it and return it to the school?

No 1  
Yes 2

**After the Inspection**

**Week** 

Did you receive the summary of the Inspectors' Report? Please circle the number by your answer

No 1  
Yes 2

Did you ask for a copy of the full Report?

No 1  
Yes 2

Did the school send you their comments on it?

No 1  
Yes 2

Did the school call a meeting with the parents to discuss the Report?

No 1  
Yes 2

Have you read any reports of the Inspection in the local newspapers?

No 1  
Yes 2

**In General**



Do you think the Inspectors looked at aspects of the School's work which were important to you?

No 1  
Yes 2

Please give details if possible

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Did anything in the Inspector's Report surprise you?

No 1  
Yes 2

Please give details if possible

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Any comments about how you think parents could have been involved in the Inspection?

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Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please fold into an envelope and return using the FREEPOST.

We are also hoping to interview a small number of parents about their views on the new School Inspections. If you would be willing to take part please write to:

RISE  
54 Broadwalk  
London E18 2DW

or ring the project administrator (tel: 081-542 9248), or write your name and address on this questionnaire.

## Appendix B

# Summary of Questionnaire Responses

### Distribution of questionnaires and responses

It was agreed that questionnaires would be distributed to all the parents at 18 schools — just under 15,000 questionnaires to an estimated 9,500 families (see Note). They were distributed to parents with the school's 'action plan', which it is obliged to prepare and send out after the inspection.

A total of 610 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 6.4%. This is not a very satisfactory response, but similar to other postal surveys. The implications of this return rate are discussed later.

The response rate varied considerably between schools, from between 15% to 20% in two schools, to a single reply in one. The very low numbers returned from two schools raises the question of whether they were actually distributed as agreed.

Schools were asked to place a note in their Newsletter (if they had one) to remind parents to return the questionnaires. The researchers had no other contact with their distribution.

### The Questionnaires

These were quite straightforward asking a series of mainly yes/no questions about the parents' participation in the OFSTED process. There were also some open-ended questions where parents could add comments if they wished. Parents were asked to give their names and addresses if they were willing to be interviewed. They could be returned to RISE via a Freepost number, so there was no cost to the parents. An example is shown in Appendix A.

### Replies to the Questionnaires

First, the overall pattern of replies will be presented. If there were differences relating to either family size or the age of the oldest child these are mentioned at the relevant point.

**About the families ...** Most of the families had one or two children attending the school: 56% of families had one child attending the school and 37% two children (Table 1).

The age distribution of the pupils is given in Table 2.

In 39% of the families the oldest child attending the school was aged between 11 and 13 years. In 55% the oldest child was aged between 14 and 16 years, and in 6% either 17 or 18 years (Table 3).

**Knowledge of OFSTED before the inspection ...** Over 90% of families knew that their school was to be inspected before the inspection started (Table 4). But families with more children at the school were more aware than those with single children (Table 5). Similarly, families with 17 or 18 year old pupils were more likely to report prior knowledge than those with younger children

Just over half first heard about the inspection via a letter from school (Table 6). Those with younger children were more likely to hear by letter, while those with 17 or 18 year olds were likely to hear directly from their child. Those with more than one child at the school were more likely to receive information from several sources (Table 7).

**The parents' meeting ...** A quarter of parents were not aware that the process included a meeting between the Registered Inspector and the parents (Table 8). The meeting was attended by about a third of respondents (Table 9), and those with 3 or 4 children were slightly less likely to attend.

**Inspectors' interest ...** Nearly all parents (97%) who attended the parents' meeting reported that the Inspectors were interested in their views (Table 10).

**The response form ...** Just over three-quarters of those giving a reply said that they had received a questionnaire from the inspectors (Table 11). But a large number of respondents (14%) didn't reply to this

question. If it is assumed that all these parents didn't receive a response form the overall percentage would drop to 66%.

Almost all (93%) of those who received a questionnaire completed it and returned it to the school (Table 12).

**The summary report ...** Parents were asked if they received a copy of the summary report. Just under 90% said that they had (Table 13).

**Asked for the full report ...** Parents may request a copy of the full inspectors' report. Just under a quarter said that they had asked for a copy (Table 14). Those with more children, and older children, at the school were more likely to ask for the full report (Tables 15 and 16).

**School's comments on the report ...** Respondents were asked if the school had sent them their comments on the report, and about three quarters had received these (Table 17).

**Meeting to discuss the report ...** About a fifth of parents reported that the school had held a meeting to discuss the report (Table 18) but a large number (22%) gave no reply.

**Reported in the local newspaper ...** About half the respondents had read reports of the inspection in the local newspaper (Table 19).

### **Parents' views of the inspection**

Parents were asked two questions: did they look at aspects of the school's work that were important to you, and whether there was anything in the report that surprised them. They were asked to make written comments on each of these points if they wished.

**Were the right aspects looked at ...** Nearly all the parents thought the right aspects of the work were looked at (Table 20) and about a quarter reported something that surprised them (Table 21).

**Were they surprised ...** Those with more children at the school (Table 22), and with older children (Table 23), were more likely to report that they were surprised by some aspect of the report. But they were the parents who were more likely to ask for the full report, so were aware of much more detail of the inspection. About 10% of parents did not respond to these questions with a yes/no answer, but they often added comments.

Summaries of the open-ended questions are presented earlier in this report.

## **Discussion**

**Response rate ...** There are always difficulties in interpreting surveys of this kind where the number of responses is relatively low. Those who responded are likely to be different from those who did not in ways that are difficult to identify.

**Information flow to parents ...** Every school distributed the response forms, but in all the schools a sub-group of parents (ranging from 3% to 42% by school) did not receive it (or recall receiving it). Summaries were not received by from 3% to 24% of parents by school.

This issue was explored further by comparing the parents who attended the parents' meeting with the inspectors AND asked for the full report (called here the 'keen' parents) and the rest. Seventy-nine parents came into the 'keen' category. Virtually all these keen parents were well informed about the procedures: they knew that their school was to be inspected, and they knew that a parents' meeting was part of the process, but 13% didn't receive response forms. Virtually all reported receiving the summary reports.

### **Note**

Questionnaires were returned by 610 families, of whom 588 gave the number of children attending this particular secondary school. These 588 families had 900 children. It is therefore possible to estimate that the number of families sending children to the 18 schools was  $(588 \times 14,500) / 900$ : approximately 9,500.



## Tables

**Table 1: Family size**

Number of children	Percentage of families	(N)
1	56.5	(338)
2	37.1	(222)
3	5.7	(34)
4	0.7	(4)
No reply		(12)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(610)</b>

**Table 2: Ages of pupils (where this information was provided)**

Age in years	Percentage of families	(N)
11	7.5	(67)
12	21.0	(187)
13	23.4	(208)
14	20.5	(182)
15	17.2	(153)
16	6.1	(54)
17	3.4	(30)
18	0.9	(8)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(889)</b>

(No numbers of 'no replies' are given. Twelve families failed to say how many children they had at the school and no ages were given for 11 children.)

**Table 3: Age of oldest child**

Age of oldest child in years	Percentage of families	(N)
11-13	38.9	(230)
14-16	54.7	(323)
17 or 18	6.4	(38)
No reply		(19)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(610)</b>

**Table 4: Prior knowledge of the inspection?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	8.4	(50)
Yes	91.6	(546)
No reply		(14)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(610)</b>

**Table 5: Prior knowledge of inspection and number of children at the school**

Number of children	Percentage of families reporting prior knowledge	(N)
1	90.2	(336)
2	93.6	(220)
3 or 4	97.3	(38)
No reply		(16)
<b>Total</b>		<b>(610)</b>

(These percentages are calculated using the number of families in each category as the base)

**Table 6: How did parents first hear about the inspection?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
letter from school	53.7	(301)
child told me	16.4	(92)
invitation to meeting	5.3	(30)
questionnaire from RgI	3.9	(22)
other	0.2	(1)
more than one of these	20.5	(115)
No reply		(49)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(610)</b>

**Table 7: Those reporting several sources of information by number of children at the school.**

Number of children	Percentage of families reporting several sources	(N)
1	18.3	(57)
2	22.3	(47)
3 or 4	28.9	(11)
Total		(115)

(These percentages are calculated using the number of families in each category as the base)

**Table 8: Knowledge that the OFSTED process included a meeting with parents**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	25.2	(151)
Yes	74.8	(449)
No reply		(10)
Total		(610)

**Table 9: Did you attend the parents' meeting?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	66.2	(397)
Yes	33.8	(203)
No reply		(10)
Total		(610)

**Table 10: Were the inspectors interested in parents' views?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	3.0	(6)
Yes	97.0	(194)
No reply		(3)
Total		(203)

**Table 11: Did you receive a questionnaire from the school?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	22.9	(120)
Yes	77.1	(404)
No reply		(86)
Total		(610)

**Table 12: Did you return the questionnaire?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	6.7	(27)
Yes	93.3	(374)
No reply		(3)
Total		(404)

**Table 13: Did you receive a copy of the summary report?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	11.0	(66)
Yes	89.0	(534)
No reply		(10)
Total		(610)

**Table 14: Did you ask for a full report?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	76.6	(459)
Yes	23.4	(140)
No reply		(11)
Total		(610)

**Table 15: Full report by the number of children at the school**

Number of children	Percentage of families	(N)
1	18.7	(331)
2	22.3	(219)
3 or 4	28.9	(38)
No reply		(22)
Total		(610)

(These percentages are calculated using the number of families in each category as the base)

**Table 16: Full report by the age of the oldest child**

Age of oldest child in years	Percentage of families	(N)
11-13	18.3	(229)
14-16	24.5	(319)
17 or 18	43.2	(37)
No reply		(25)
Total		(610)

(These percentages are calculated using the number of children in each age category as the base)

**Table 17: School sends comments on the report?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	20.9	(121)
Yes	79.1	(457)
No reply		(32)
Total		(610)

**Table 18: Meeting held to discuss the report?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	77.1	(368)
Yes	22.9	(109)
No reply		(133)
Total		(610)

**Table 19: Inspection reported in the local newspapers?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	52.0	(309)
Yes	48.0	(285)
No reply		(16)
Total		(610)

**Table 20: Were the important aspects of the school inspected?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	9.4	(52)
Yes	90.6	(502)
No reply		(56)
Total		(610)

**Table 21: Anything that surprised you?**

Reply	Percentage of families	(N)
No	77.0	(424)
Yes	23.0	(127)
No reply		(59)
Total		(610)

**Table 22: Parents surprised by report, by number of children at the school**

Number of children	Percentage of families	(N)
1	20.8	(308)
2	25.4	(197)
3 or 4	28.1	(36)
No reply		(69)
Total		(610)

(These percentages are calculated using the number of families in each category as the base)

**Table 23: Parents surprised by report, by age of the oldest child at the school**

Age of oldest child in years	Percentage of families	(N)
11-13	21.8	(211)
14-16	22.8	(294)
17 or 18	28.6	(35)
No reply		(70)
Total		(610)

(These percentages are calculated using the number of children in each age category as the base)

## Appendix C — Interview Schedule

The following questions were asked of all interviewees:

### Background Information

1. How many years have you been involved with this school?
  - as a parent?
  - as a parent-governor (if applicable)?

### The OFSTED process and parental involvement

2. Could you describe your involvement in the OFSTED inspection of your child's school?
  - prompts: personal views, opinions, feelings about this?
3. How did the school involve parents in general in the OFSTED process?
  - what took place?
  - how was the process organised?
  - who was involved?
  - was a parents' response form distributed?

### The Parents' Meeting

4. Before the meeting:
  - were you given prior notice of the meeting?
5. The meeting:
  - what was your understanding of the purpose of the meeting?
  - how many parents attended?
  - what issues were raised?
  - what opportunities were there for parents to express their views?
  - what input to the inspection process do you think parents made?
6. After the meeting:
  - Did the issues raised by the parents emerge in the report?
  - Did you feel parents' input was valued as part of the OFSTED process?
    - by the school?
    - by the Head?
    - by the teachers?
    - by the inspectors?

### Outcomes from the inspection

7. From your perspective, does the report reflect the right issues?
8. What were the strengths of the process for parental involvement?
  - at the meeting?
  - at the action planning stage?
9. What suggestions would you make to improve the inspection process?

10. What are your views about the process of implementing the outcomes of inspection through the action plan?

- were you involved in any way in the development of the action plan?
- does the action plan address the issues raised by the inspectors?
- what are the strengths of the action planning phase of the OFSTED process?
- what suggestions do you have for improvement?

## Appendix D — The OFSTED Response Form

Draft Letter from the Appropriate Authority Notifying Parents of the Meeting For Parents

Name and Address of the Appropriate Authority

Dear Parent or Guardian

INSPECTION OF (SCHOOL NAME)

NOTICE OF MEETING FOR PARENTS, (TIME), (DATE),  
(VENUE)

As you may know, our school is shortly to be inspected as part of the programme of regular school inspections arranged by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector in accordance with the provisions of the Education (Schools) Act 1992. The inspection team will be led by [Name] (Registered Inspector).

An important part of the procedure is the meeting of parents with the Registered Inspector before the inspection. This meeting is held in order to hear your views of the school and the context in which it works and to explain to you the inspectors' procedures. Naturally, before the inspection the inspectors will not be able to comment on parents' views, but they will take them into account in the inspection.

The Registered Inspector would be grateful if you would read the attached agenda and complete the parents' response form. Whether or not you will be attending the meeting, you are welcome to send your comments on the agenda items, or on any other issue, in writing before the meeting. The comments should be sent to:

(Name and business address of Registered Inspector / or name of Registered Inspector, c/o the school)

I hope you will be able to come to the meeting.

Yours faithfully

FOR THE APPROPRIATE AUTHORITY

**THE INSPECTION OF \_\_\_\_\_**

AT \_\_\_\_\_ ON \_\_\_\_\_

As the Inspector responsible for this inspection, I should be grateful if you would help me by commenting on the work of the school from your experience as a parent. Parents' views will be taken into account by the inspection team.

1 How many children do you have in the school?

2 What is the age in years of your oldest child in the school?

3 What is the age in years of your youngest child in the school, if you have more than one?

PLEASE TICK THE SPACE WHICH BEST REFLECTS YOUR AGREEMENT WITH THE STATEMENT

	I AGREE		I DISAGREE	
	Strongly	Moderately	Moderately	Strongly
1 I am happy with the values and attitudes that the school teaches.				
2 The school sets good standards of behaviour.				
3 The school works well to ensure attendance.				
4 The school encourages parents to play an active part in the life of the school.				
5 I am made to feel welcome in the school.				
6 I am content with the range of subjects taught.				
7 The school provides satisfactorily for pupils with special needs.				
<b>FOR THE OLDEST CHILD</b>				
8 I am satisfied with my child's standard of work.				
9 I am well informed about the work that my child is doing.				
10 My child receives proper help and guidance from the school.				
11 I am satisfied with the work that my child is given to do at home.				
12 My child is happy in school.				
<b>FOR THE YOUNGEST CHILD</b>				
13 I am satisfied with my child's standard of work.				
14 I am well informed about the work that my child is doing.				
15 My child receives proper help and guidance from the school.				
16 I am satisfied with the work that my child is given to do at home.				
17 My child is happy in school.				

If you wish to give further details of any of your answers above, or if you have any other comments on the work of the school, either strengths or weaknesses, please write them on the back of this sheet.

Parent's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM TO [Registered Inspector, c/o the school]

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

[NAME OF Registered Inspector]