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Guidance

Pausing state-funded school inspections

Ofsted's policy for pausing state-funded school inspections.

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Applies to England

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Ofsted exists to be a force for improvement through intelligent, responsible and focused use of inspection. It is important that inspectors establish and maintain a positive working relationship with providers, based on professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect. We expect our inspectors to uphold the highest professional standards in their work, to act with integrity and to treat everyone they meet fairly and with sensitivity. This is set out in our [code of conduct](#). Inspectors should take all reasonable steps to prevent undue anxiety and to minimise stress during inspections and regulatory activities.

Definitions

Deferring an inspection refers to an inspection or visit being rescheduled because it cannot go ahead on the planned dates. This usually happens during the notification process, before inspectors arrive on site. Please see our separate [deferrals guidance](#).

Pausing an inspection refers to when an inspection or visit that has already started is paused, with inspectors leaving the site and resuming the inspection at a time or date beyond the originally scheduled inspection days. The lead inspector will normally initiate a pause, but the headteacher or responsible body (the organisation or individual with legal responsibility for the well-being and/or management of leaders in a school or provision) can also ask for an inspection to be paused. Open, honest and professional discussion sits at the heart of the decision-making process. The lead inspector should contact the regional duty desk, who will seek advice from the national safeguarding and well-being duty desk.

If the headteacher or responsible body have concerns and they do not feel that they can discuss them with the lead inspector, they should contact a senior inspector on the number given to them during the inspection notification process.

Inspectors should be considerate of the well-being of all staff and the additional pressure that an extended pause can have on all those involved in an inspection. Our starting point will be that, if an inspection or visit is paused, it will usually resume the next working day. However, the length of the pause may be up to 5 working days, depending on the school's capacity to maintain its typical day-to-day operations and/or inspector availability. This gives the responsible body time to, for example, make any necessary arrangements for the inspection to continue. As such, it will not normally be necessary to use our [gathering additional evidence policy](#). In some very exceptional cases, a pause to inspection may need to be longer than 5 working days, and may therefore need to be treated as an incomplete inspection (see next paragraph).

An incomplete inspection is an inspection that is deemed incomplete after the on-site activity has ended but before the final inspection report is published. Our [gathering additional evidence policy](#) sets out how we deal with these inspections. It gives examples of when an inspection may be deemed incomplete, such as when our quality assurance or complaints processes identify that further inspection activity is required to ensure that the evidence and judgements reached are secure.

Responding sensitively during inspection

Lead inspectors should seek to support anyone who becomes distressed or upset during an inspection.

Inspectors should treat all those we meet on inspection with professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect, and work in a way that does not lead to significant additional stress on leaders. It is entirely appropriate and acceptable to take a break from inspection activities, provided the inspection can be completed within the planned tariff and timescale. This would not be considered a pause to inspection, and is separate from any responsibility for reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010.

Inspectors will aim to complete the inspection wherever possible, with adjustments to the timetable. However, if the lead inspector believes that the inspection activity needs to be stopped, and that this means the inspection cannot be completed within the planned tariff and timescale, they will need to consider formally pausing the inspection.

When a pause would be considered

If a headteacher has a concern about the timing of an inspection, whether for personal or professional reasons, they

can request a [deferral](#) before the inspection starts by discussing the circumstances with the lead inspector during the notification process.

Once an inspection has started and inspectors have arrived on site, the inspection can be paused where there are exceptional circumstances that mean it cannot reasonably proceed.

Inspectors will make every effort to protect the integrity of the inspection, which is carried out in the interests of children and their parents and carers, and so only exceptional circumstances will result in a pause. Exceptional circumstances are likely to include:

- circumstances that compromise our ability to gather sufficient evidence to reach valid and reliable judgements, and where the headteacher (or other leaders) require support from the responsible body (that is, the local authority or the trust)
- any other notable incident that has a significant effect on the routine day-to-day running of the school

The lead inspector needs to be aware of who is responsible for the well-being and/or professional oversight of the headteacher (the responsible body). Before the inspection, the lead inspector will have asked the headteacher who this is and recorded their contact details. If inspectors have significant concerns about leaders' well-being, they should make sure that the responsible body is aware of this or, if they are not satisfied that someone has contacted the responsible body, they should refer the concerns themselves. Any discussion of a pause must include the responsible body and a senior inspector, as set out in the paragraphs below.

Pausing an inspection will usually not be appropriate where we are concerned that children and young people may be at risk of serious harm. The safety and well-being of children and learners are our first priority. In these circumstances, we would not normally pause the inspection, but may take other steps, such as adding additional time to the inspection. In deciding this, we will consider how quickly the responsible body can assure themselves and confirm to inspectors that the significant health and well-being issues have been addressed and there is no significant detrimental effect on the day-to-day operations of the school.

Process for an inspector pausing an inspection

If an inspector considers that an inspection may need to be paused, they should contact the regional duty desk to discuss the circumstances and take advice from a senior inspector, including the national safeguarding and well-being duty desk.

The senior inspector and the lead inspector will discuss and record whether a pause is needed. They will then discuss this further with the school and the responsible body and seek the necessary sign-off from the national safeguarding and well-being duty desk.

In either case, the national duty desk should discuss the following:

- the reason for the proposed pause, and whether a pause is necessary
- where inspectors are concerned about the health or well-being of senior staff, how to make sure the responsible body is aware of these concerns, including who should make contact and who will keep trying if there are difficulties making contact. The lead inspector should also inform the responsible body that they need to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to ensure continued leadership during the pause
- whether the possibility of the inspection being paused has been raised with leaders. It may not always be possible to pause the inspection, but, wherever possible, the lead inspector should discuss it with leaders and should make clear that a pause would not affect the inspection grade
- the length of the pause being considered. In most circumstances, the inspection should resume on the next working day. However, the length of the pause may be up to 5 working days, depending on leaders' capacity to maintain the typical day-to-day operations of the school and/or inspector availability. In some very exceptional cases, a pause may need to be longer than 5 working days. The length of the pause should balance the views of the responsible body with the wider well-being issues of leaders and staff and the need to put children and learners first

Process for requesting a pause to an inspection

If a school or responsible body wishes to request a pause to an inspection, they should normally ask the lead inspector. If the issue is connected with the lead inspector or the inspection itself, and cannot be resolved with the lead inspector, the school or responsible body should contact a senior inspector using the contact number provided during the inspection notification process. The senior inspector on the helpline will listen carefully and record what has been said. They will then contact the lead inspector to discuss the concern and decide how to proceed. This may include, for example, a remote, desktop review of the electronic evidence by a senior inspector, deploying a senior inspector to quality-assure the inspection on site, or, where

differences are irreconcilable but the inspection can continue, a change of lead or team inspector. The senior inspector and the national duty desk should discuss whether a pause is necessary, the length of the pause being considered and the reasons why the pause has or has not been agreed.

Next steps

In both of the above cases, the national duty desk should record carefully the detail of all calls received, including the final decision.

If the decision is taken to pause the inspection, the lead inspector or senior inspector must tell leaders (usually in person but always with a follow-up email from the lead inspector or senior inspector on behalf of the region):

- that the inspection is being paused
- the likely timeframe for returning
- that this will not affect the outcome of the inspection, and no judgement has yet been reached
- that we will inform them when the inspection resumes, which will be within the timeframe already stated

The lead inspector should make sure that all relevant information about staff welfare and the welfare of children and young people is passed to the appropriate representative of the responsible body before leaving the site.

If the decision is taken not to pause the inspection, the lead inspector/senior inspector should tell leaders that a pause was considered, and why the decision was made to continue the inspection without a pause. They should also set out what other steps (if any) are being taken. The lead inspector should keep a record of these details too.

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