

Read School: Inspection Report 2025; Dr Chris Ray, Society of Heads Safeguarding Adviser

As a former Reporting Inspector for the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) with considerable experience, I now advise schools on safeguarding and other educational matters. Following the recent ISI inspection the Head of Read School asked me to review and help her to strengthen the School's approach to staff recruitment, where the inspectors had found some minor weaknesses which now represent compliance failings to be remedied and reinspected, hopefully early next term.

The new approach to inspections replaces the judgments previously made about achievements and personal development with a 'narrative' report; there are no overarching judgments such as may still be found in Ofsted reports. Consequently, one needs to hunt through the rather dry text to discover the considered views of inspectors. The inspection report includes a summary which is not quite as balanced as one might hope; but sadly this is now normal.

As I read the complete inspection report on the school, five qualities stand out very clearly:

1. Individual pupils, including boarders, are respected and nurtured, promoted by the 'learning for life' programme, so that within the School there is a strong sense of community.
2. Staff fully understand their safeguarding responsibilities to ensure the safety of pupils.
3. Pupils including those with SEND typically make good progress in their learning and personal development, encouraged by enthusiastic and focused teaching from the early years onwards.
4. There is a wider commitment beyond the School to those in need.
5. There are tremendous opportunities for pupils beyond the academic curriculum

Together these findings provide me with a strong indication that the school is doing a terrific job.

One sentence, buried in the report, puts the two relatively minor failings identified in context: "Most necessary safer recruitment checks are carried out as required." At present, schools are required to carry out up to fourteen separate pre-appointment checks on staff and no problems were identified with any other required checks.

My own view is that the school was doing its utmost to ensure the safety of its pupils, but did not follow strictly the statutory guidance as it is now interpreted by inspectors in two areas. It is interesting to note that three previous inspections failed to warn the School of these same concerns and the School was told on those occasions that its approach was suitable. The rules have not changed; but how inspections are conducted has changed.

The problems identified at the school related to *prohibition from teaching* checks and obtaining two references ahead of the starting date. Two part-time peripatetic teachers had not been checked against the register of prohibited teachers; however, the required prohibition checks were carried out during the inspection and there were no issues. This check is not the same as the important enhanced DBS 'police' check which covers actual and suspected criminal and child protection offences. Every member of staff has been subject to this, which is regarded as the most important check of all.

The second problem relates to obtaining suitable *references* for each member of staff before the member of staff begins work. In a number of cases, mostly non-teaching staff, whilst the school was waiting for a second reference to arrive, the member of staff concerned was put under close supervision; this is a normal and acceptable practice when the DBS check is delayed. However, the 'small print' of the statutory guidance states that putting a member of staff under supervision for any other reason is not acceptable; this is a common failing which some inspectors overlook.

When safer recruitment failings are identified, however minor, other standards relating to leadership, management, and governance, safeguarding, and the detail of boarding and early years requirements are also deemed to have failed simply because the two problems identified were said to have failed.

Despite these two issues identified by inspectors and given the other important checks carried out including the key DBS police check, no pupil appears to have been in danger of harm. If that had been the case, a less positive view of safeguarding would have emerged. The actions now taken by the School have remedied the problems identified and strengthened the approach taken to appointments.

Chris Ray