

Consultation on the removal of
provision for reporting a ‘significant
strength’ from ISI’s inspection
framework for association
independent schools

Consultation opens: 30 April 2026

Consultation closes: 11 June 2026

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Introduction

1. ISI introduced its current inspection framework for association schools, 'the Framework', in September 2023. By September 2026 ISI will have completed one complete cycle of routine inspections of association independent schools under the Framework and will be at the midpoint of the six-year inspection cycle.
2. During the academic year 2025 – 2026, ISI has undertaken a midpoint review on the workings of the Framework with a view to improving methodology, based on learning from the first cycle of routine inspections, for the second cycle of inspections from 2026 – 2029.
3. As a result of this review, ISI is consulting on a proposed change to its reporting approach from September 2026. No final decisions have been taken. The proposal set out in this document is at a formative stage and may be amended in light of responses to this consultation.
4. The purpose of this consultation is to seek views from independent schools, parents, pupils and other stakeholders before ISI decides whether, and if so how, to proceed.

ISI's role, functions and independence

5. ISI is an independent inspectorate, appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. ISI reports, in accordance with its appointment by the Department for Education, on the extent to which these schools meet the statutory Independent School Standards. ISI inspects association schools routinely once every three years.

About this consultation

6. This consultation focuses on ISI's inspection reporting practice relating to the reporting of 'significant strength' as contained in paragraphs 101 – 106 of the Framework. ISI is proposing to remove provision for specific reporting of 'significant strength' as set out in the Framework, paragraphs 101 – 106. It does not consult on any other aspects of the Framework.
7. Responses will be considered before ISI finalises its approach. ISI has not committed to adopting the proposal.

Background and regulatory context

8. Following consultation in 2023 the current Framework, which was introduced in September 2023, does not include graded evaluation judgements. The Framework does include provision for specific reporting of a 'significant strength' in a school's provision in certain defined circumstances.

Reporting of a significant strength in provision in the current Framework

9. From September 2023, the Framework states that the inspection team may report a significant strength in any aspect of the school's provision where such strength of provision results in clear, demonstrable and highly beneficial impact for pupils.

Evidence prompting ISI to review its approach and case for change

10. Since the introduction of the Framework, ISI has received feedback from a range of stakeholders on negative unintended consequences of reporting significant strengths. ISI has undertaken analysis of this feedback. ISI has also found unintended consequences arising from the provision for reporting significant strengths. ISI has considered this feedback in light of the Framework's aim to provide nuanced reporting and has also considered how the inclusion or removal of significant strengths may affect that.
11. ISI separately surveyed reporting inspectors and headteachers for their views on the working of the Framework at the midpoint stage. In relation to reporting of significant strengths, the majority of responses from both surveys suggested reviewing and/or removing this aspect of the Framework evaluation.
12. For reporting inspectors, the application of the guidance relating to significant strength received the lowest rating of all aspects of the Framework. Feedback from post-inspection quality assurance also indicates that discussion of significant strength on inspection can be disproportionate, despite clear guidance in the Framework that significant strengths should not be signposted by school leaders. In turn, this can skew the focus of the inspection and pose a challenge to the principles of collaboration and manageability.
13. Comments from the headteacher survey indicate a widely held view that the inclusion of significant strengths should be reviewed, with a clear view that its removal from the Framework would be beneficial at this mid-point stage. This view is consistent with feedback from the sector via ISI's termly feedback Association Inspection Meeting (AIM) with representatives from the Associations.
14. ISI's own research shows that, in some cases, the inclusion of a significant strength in an inspection report results in it being represented visually in a disproportionate way on the school's website. This may mislead the reader.

Case for change

15. ISI recognises that there may be differing views on whether change is necessary. We are consulting to test sentiment on the issue raised through feedback and whether consultees consider that the proposal is proportionate.

The proposal

16. The proposal below is intended to describe the possible approach ISI might adopt. It do not represent a settled position.

Alternatives considered

17. ISI considered maintaining the current framework without change, alongside the proposal below. We welcome views on whether we have given appropriate weight to each option, and on any alternatives not described here.

Likely impacts on independent schools

18. We are particularly seeking evidence from schools about the practical impact of the proposal, including any unintended consequences.

Equality, children's rights, and fairness considerations

19. A equality assessment has informed the development of this proposal. Consultation responses will be used to refine that assessment before ISI reaches a final decision.
20. The timing of the any change to coincide with the mid-point of the six-year cycle means that change would be effective from the commencement of the second three-year cycle of routine inspections within the overall six-year framework cycle. Schools have been routinely inspected with the provision in place. If the proposal goes ahead, the change will similarly apply to all schools during the second three-year cycle and therefore will be applied in an equitable way.

Consultation preamble

21. These questions are intended to prompt discussion. Consultees are not required to agree or disagree with ISI's starting assumptions and may raise any other relevant matters.
22. The proposal under consultation is to remove the 'significant strength' reporting from the ISI inspection framework. This would mean that inspection reports would no longer include a discrete identification of elements judged to represent a significant strength of a school's provision. ISI inspection reports would continue to describe a school's provision evaluatively. Reports will continue to include nuanced detail that will make clear where the school is doing particularly well in relation to the standards, and where, if applicable, provision is less well developed. ISI will continue to report the extent to which standards are met. If the proposal is not adopted, the Framework will continue in its current form for the second half of the current inspection cycle (until September 2029).

Consultation questions

1. Please give your role:
 - Headteacher
 - Senior leader
 - Middle leader (head of department, year group or house, or equivalent)
 - Teacher
 - Administrative staff
 - Governor
 - Proprietor
 - Parent of a pupil in an association school
 - Pupil in an association school
 - Association executive or employee
 - ISI reporting inspector
 - ISI team inspector
 - ISI employee
 - Other

2. To what extent do you think that from September 2026, **ISI should discontinue provision for the reporting of significant strength** in the inspection framework for association independent schools.
- strongly agree
 - agree
 - neither agree nor disagree
 - disagree
 - strongly disagree
3. Please give reasons for your response: (free text box)

Consultation period and engagement

23. The consultation will remain open for 6 weeks. ISI considers this period sufficient given the focused nature of the proposal and the school calendar, but welcomes views if consultees consider additional time necessary.

How responses will be considered

24. All consultation responses will be analysed and summarised for ISI's decision-makers.
25. ISI will publish a consultation response document explaining how key issues raised have been taken into account.

Consultation opens:	30 April 2026
Consultation closes:	17:00 on 11 June 2026
Analysis and consideration of responses:	11 June 2026 to 26 June 2026
Publication of consultation outcome	Week commencing 6 July 2026
Implementation of change, if any.	1 September 2026

Decision-making and next steps

26. Following the consultation, ISI may decide to proceed or not with the proposal. No outcome is pre-determined.
27. ISI considers that this consultation meets the requirements of fairness under public law, including consultation at a formative stage, provision of sufficient information, a reasonable period for response, and a commitment to give conscientious consideration to responses received.

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