

Independent Schools Inspectorate

**DRAFT for consultation**

## **Inspection Complaints Policy for Association School Inspections**

September 2026

<b>DATE OF POLICY:</b>	September 2026
<b>POLICY OWNER</b>	Chief Inspector
<b>APPROVED BY:</b>	ISI Board and Department for Education
<b>DATE OF NEXT REVIEW:</b>	March 2028

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## Purpose

1. The aim of this policy is to ensure that senior leaders in the association schools we inspect know:
  - how to make a complaint about an ISI inspection, and
  - how we will respond to complaints that we receive.
2. We will respond to complaints about our inspection work clearly, fairly and thoroughly.
3. We may treat communication with us as a complaint under this policy if we consider that this is the best way to respond to the content of that communication.
4. Throughout this policy 'us', 'we' and 'our' refer to ISI; 'you' and 'your' refer to the person making the complaint.

## Scope of policy

5. This policy explains how we receive, review and respond to complaints about an association school ISI inspection in relation to:
  - inspector conduct as set out in our inspector code of conduct and/or
  - inspection processes as stated in our inspection handbook and/or
  - inspection evaluations in accordance with our inspection framework.
6. Complaints about inspector conduct and inspection processes may inform individual feedback and training as appropriate. Complaints about inspection evaluations will result in detailed review of the inspection evidence as part of the post-inspection quality assurance process.

## Operation of this policy

7. The three-stage process outlined below allows for early informal review of issues immediately after the onsite inspection. Once the draft report is issued for factual accuracy checking, you may submit a stage two written complaint.
8. While the process does not provide an opportunity for you to submit further inspection evidence, it does provide the opportunity for you to make a case within the scope of the policy for us to review inspection evidence.

9. We will only consider complaints about inspections from a person who is to be named on the published inspection report. This may be the headteacher, principal, chair of governors or proprietor.
10. You must follow the process outlined in this policy for the submission of a complaint. We reserve the right to treat any correspondence from a school following an inspection as a complaint under this policy if it raises issues about that inspection. For the avoidance of doubt this does not mean that any such correspondence will be treated as a complaint.
11. ISI will endeavour to remain within the deadlines set out in this policy wherever possible, but if circumstances indicate that this may not be possible, we shall contact you with a revised deadline.
12. Throughout this policy, 'term-time working days' refers to the school's term-time Monday to Friday working days. If, as a result of this definition, our response to your complaint and/or the publication of the inspection report would be delayed until the following autumn term, you will have the option of receiving our response during the summer holiday.
13. All complaints received about the same inspection will be treated as one complaint.
14. We understand that issues may be raised that relate to the conduct of individuals. We request that any such complaints, while by their nature relate to individuals, are mindful of the potential impact on the individual and focus on the specific conduct issue that is being raised.

## **Principles**

15. **Clarity and accessibility:** We will publish our policy in plain English, with clear time limits and multiple access routes (webform, email, telephone, video call).
16. **Fairness:** We quality assure and moderate our processes and evaluations, reaching evidence-based decisions.
17. **Learning:** We use what we learn from complaints to inform training.
18. **Balance:** We identify and manage vexatious complaints and/or harmful behaviours to promote effective implementation of our complaints policy and to protect our staff.

## Stage 1 – Informal resolution during inspection and/or immediately post-inspection

19. Our inspection handbook sets out what you should do if you want to raise an issue while the inspection team is on site. We encourage you to raise any issues or concerns during the onsite inspection either with the reporting inspector or by phoning ISI head office on 0207 600 0100
20. If you feel the reporting inspector was unable to resolve an issue during the onsite inspection, you can request that the issues are reviewed as part of the post-inspection quality assurance process.
21. You must do this by submitting an [online request](#) for a video call within **four term-time working days** of the end of the onsite inspection.
22. We will schedule a video call with you. This video call will be between one person from the school, usually the headteacher, and one person from ISI.
23. This gives us the opportunity to clarify any misunderstanding or to resolve matters quickly and informally. If matters are within the scope of this policy, your comments will be considered as part of the post-inspection quality assurance process.
24. Once the post-inspection review and quality assurance process is complete and before we send you the draft inspection report, we will arrange a follow-up video call in which we will explain how we have considered the matters you raised.
25. We do not accept written submissions at this stage and we will not respond in writing.

## Stage 2 – Written complaint

26. If you wish to submit a written complaint, you must do so within **five term-time working days** of receiving the draft inspection report (please note that this is the same timeframe for the return of your factual accuracy check<sup>1</sup>).
27. If the scope of your complaint relates to evaluations reached, your complaint must clearly identify the paragraph(s) of the draft inspection report to which it relates, setting out a clear rationale for your complaint.
28. If you are making a written complaint about conduct or inspection process, you must clearly and succinctly set out your concerns.
29. You can make a written complaint whether or not you have previously raised the matter informally. However, if you have previously raised the matter informally you must set out how our informal response has failed to address your concerns.
30. To submit a written complaint, you must complete and submit this [online form](#). You are also required to submit the school's holiday dates for the current and following terms in the online form.
31. We will review your written complaint. We may request a video call if we need to clarify your complaint or explain the scope and/or operation of this policy.
32. We will normally respond in writing to your written complaint within **20 term time working days**. If we think our response will take longer, we will write to you with a revised timescale.
33. If your written complaint is upheld or partially upheld, we will acknowledge this. Our response will depend on the particular circumstances of the complaint. It may include an explanation, acknowledgement of responsibility, apology and/or remedial action<sup>2</sup>.
34. We will send our responses under this policy to both the person who submitted the complaint and the proprietor of the school (if different). We may at our discretion copy to or send the proprietor any correspondence relating to the complaint.
35. We will normally also issue you with the final report for publication with our written complaint response and we normally publish the final report on our website **five term time working days** after we have issued it to you.

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<sup>1</sup> The factual accuracy check (FAC) process is when we send you the draft inspection report for factual accuracy only. You must complete the factual accuracy check within five term-time working days of receiving the draft inspection report (see ISI Inspection Handbook).

<sup>2</sup> This may include: reviewing or changing a decision; revising published material; revising procedures, policies or guidance to prevent the same thing happening again; training or supervising staff; or any combination of these.

## Stage 3: Request for referral to independent adjudicator

36. If you consider that we have not followed this policy in handling your complaint and/or our response to your complaint was unreasonable, you may request referral of our response to your complaint to an independent adjudicator for review.
37. You must request a referral to the independent adjudicator by completing and submitting the [online form](#) within **three term-time working days** of receiving our response to your written complaint.
38. You must set out briefly and clearly how you consider we have not followed this complaints policy and/or specific reasons why you consider our response to your complaint is unreasonable<sup>3</sup>. We will review your request. We will notify you of the outcome of our review **within five term-time working days of your request**.
39. If you are unable to demonstrate either of these conditions, your request will not be referred. If your request is granted, we will notify you that it has been referred to an independent adjudicator. We will give you the name and brief biographical details of the allocated adjudicator.
40. As you will already have submitted a written complaint and we will have responded in writing, further evidence is not required and will not be considered by the independent adjudicator. For clarification, any duplicate, new or unrelated evidence, or evidence irrelevant to the scope of the referral to the independent adjudicator will be disregarded.
41. Please note that the independent adjudicator referral is not an opportunity to re-rehearse matters that have already been considered and answered by us, unless in doing so, we did not follow this policy and/or our response to your complaint was unreasonable.

### Postponement of publication of the inspection report

42. Referral to the independent adjudicator for review does not automatically postpone the publication of the inspection report.
43. If you wish to request a postponement of publication of the report pending the decision of the independent adjudicator you must, **within three term-time working days of issue to you of the final inspection report**:
  - **email the DfE** at [registration.enquiries@education.gov.uk](mailto:registration.enquiries@education.gov.uk) copying in [complaints@isi.net](mailto:complaints@isi.net)
  - providing the DfE with **the reasons for your request**
  - stating **the date when ISI issued the final report to you**.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this policy, the definition of unreasonable is that known as Wednesbury unreasonableness. A reasoning or decision is Wednesbury unreasonable (or irrational) if it is so unreasonable that no reasonable person acting reasonably could have made it (*Associated Provincial Picture Houses Ltd v Wednesbury Corporation (1948) 1 KB 223*).

44. Subject to ISI being copied in via [complaints@isi.net](mailto:complaints@isi.net), we will not publish the inspection report until a decision on postponement has been made by the DfE.

#### **Independent adjudicator review**

45. Following referral, the independent adjudicator will review whether:

- We followed this policy in handling your complaint; and/or
- Our decision making was unreasonable in response to your complaint.

#### **Independent adjudicator response**

46. The independent adjudicator will aim to complete their review within **20 term-time working days** of its referral, subject to the availability of an independent adjudicator to complete the review within this timeframe. If this is not possible, we will let you know the revised timeframe.

47. The independent adjudicator will send their draft response to us. If we consider that any part of the independent adjudicator's response goes beyond the scope of this policy and/or has factual inaccuracies, we will inform the independent adjudicator within **two term-time working days** with clear rationale for our view relating to scope and/or factual inaccuracy and required change(s). We do not otherwise comment on the conclusions and/or any recommendations drawn by the independent adjudicator.

48. Following our response to the independent adjudicator, within **three term-time working days** you will receive the final review directly from the independent adjudicator and it will be sent to ISI at the same time.

49. If the independent adjudicator finds that we did not follow this complaints policy and/or reached an unreasonable decision in response to your complaint, the independent adjudicator will tell you why and refer the complaint back to ISI for reconsideration. We will write to you to outline the steps ISI will take as a result within **five term-time working days** of receiving the review from the independent adjudicator.

50. If the report has not already been published and the independent adjudicator does not refer it for consideration by ISI, we will publish the report on the ISI website **five term-time working days** after receipt of the review from the independent adjudicator.

51. The decision of the independent adjudicator is final and concludes the complaints process. ISI will not engage in further correspondence after the complaints process has been concluded.

## **Independent adjudicators**

52. ISI has a pool of independent adjudicators who are appointed by the ISI Board. ISI independent adjudicators are recruited by the Board through an external process based on relevant knowledge, skills and experience. ISI publishes information about the recruitment process and person specification for the independent adjudicator role on the ISI website.
53. You will be sent in confidence and for information only, the name and a brief biography of the independent adjudicator allocated to review ISI's response to your complaint. You or your representatives are not permitted to contact the independent adjudicator directly. Should you do so, we reserve the right to consider your complaint as discontinued.
54. Independent adjudicators do not undertake any other work for ISI.

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## Our commitment to our complaints policy

55. We recognise that senior leaders in the schools that we inspect have the right to raise concerns or complaints about our inspection work and should have access to clear information on how to raise complaints and concerns.

56. We will:

- make sure our inspection complaints policy is on our website
- investigate and respond to complaints about inspections of schools promptly within the scope and timescales of this policy
- ensure there is an internal review process using members of the inspectorate who were not involved in the original inspection
- deal with such complaints in line with our Data Protection Policy
- keep a register of all complaints about inspections, which the ISI Board will review regularly
- ensure all staff and Board members read, understand and comply with this policy and its procedures
- report annually to the DfE and to the ISI Board via the Board's Assurance Committee:
  - the number of formal complaints about inspections that we receive
  - the outcomes; and
  - any actions we take.

## Persistent or vexatious complaints

57. The complaints procedure should be non-adversarial. It is expected that all involved in a complaint will conduct themselves respectfully and professionally.
58. Persistent or vexatious complaints cause stress to individuals and place undue strain on time and resources. ISI has a duty of care to its employees who manage complaints.
59. ISI will determine whether a complaint is persistent or vexatious on a case-by-case basis.
60. In assessing whether a complaint is persistent or vexatious, ISI will consider whether the complaint:
- is overly repetitious
  - pursues points that are outside the scope of this policy
  - expects unrealistic or unreasonable outcomes
  - pursues its points in an unreasonable manner
  - is intended to cause disruption and/or unreasonable delay to the inspection process and/or report publication
  - is persistent in not following the process outlined in this complaints policy.
61. Repeated communication by the complainant with ISI either by email or other means while the complaints process is underway may be deemed vexatious or persistent.
62. We will inform you in writing if we consider that your complaint is persistent or vexatious with our reasons. If this is the case, we will inform you of how we will deal with your complaint, which may include our decision that we will not enter into any further communication with you concerning the complaint.

## Data protection

63. We will only use the personal data you provide in order to process your complaint.
64. We may share information from your complaint with people whose actions you have complained about, relevant ISI staff who need it to do their job, an independent adjudicator, and/or external agencies as appropriate.
65. Apart from these exceptions, the complaints process is regarded as private and, as far as possible, we will maintain the privacy of anyone who makes or is referred to in a complaint.

66. We will retain data for six years following the date of closure of your complaint and then permanently delete data relating to your complaint.

## **Extract from ISI's inspection handbook regarding resolution of concerns during the on-site inspection**

67. School leaders can raise concerns with the reporting inspector at any time during the on-site inspection. If you feel unable to speak with the on-site team, call ISI's head office via the dedicated number provided in the arrival briefing. Where possible, issues will be addressed immediately and recorded contemporaneously.

68. On inspection, the reporting inspector will provide the headteacher with the phone number for ISI's head office. The headteacher or senior leader may phone this number to request a call back from a senior member of ISI staff during the onsite inspection. This number is provided so that the headteacher or senior leader can let us know if they have serious concerns that they feel unable to raise directly with the reporting inspector.

69. We value and prioritise open communication between school leaders and inspection teams on inspection. Our inspectors will have clear and regular communication with school leaders throughout the inspection.

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## Table of key changes

The following key changes were made to ISI's Inspection Complaints Policy in November 2025:

Cover sheet	Noting this policy does not include complaints relating to BSO inspections
Paragraph 1	Including reference to DfE approval to inspect iQTS providers
Paragraph 7	Insertion of clarification of correspondence with proprietor
Paragraph 8	New paragraph noting a separate complaints policy for BSO inspections
Paragraphs 9 -17	Reordering
Paragraph 14	New paragraph
Paragraph 15	Reworded for clarity
Paragraph 16	New paragraph
Paragraph 20	Removal of final word 'process'
Paragraphs 26, 27	Final sentences reworded for clarity
Paragraph 27	Change 'should' to 'must' in first sentence
Paragraph 40	Remove reference to BSO report as there is a separate BSO complaints policy
Paragraphs 53 - 57	Clarification of definition and actions in response to persistent or vexatious complaints.
Paragraph 53	Reworded for clarity
Paragraph 56	Bullet point 2: amended wording from 'without merit' to 'outside the scope of this policy'
Paragraph 56	Bullet point 6: rewritten referencing persistent failure to follow process outlined in this policy
Paragraph 57	Expanded paragraph
Previous paragraphs 59 - 65	Deletion of paragraphs relating to legacy consultation in 2024.