Some reflections on the implications of the new Ofsted Framework and Handbook for inspection on Religious Education

Introduction

The new education inspection framework from Ofsted was published 14th May 2019 along with the inspection handbook. Much has been written elsewhere about the implications for schools more widely, for example in Schools Week. This document simply aims to highlight those areas where the handbook might support our campaign for more school accountability in relation to Religious Education (RE). NATRE believes that schools providing their students with outstanding RE should be properly recognized for their work and those denying pupils their entitlement should be held to account, whether they be local authority maintained or academy schools.

The current framework has offered a degree of accountability to schools, for example with references in Ofsted reports to schools achieving the RE Quality Mark. A small number of schools have been criticized for failure to provide RE at all. You can read more about these reports of primary schools here and to secondary here. The current framework does not lend itself to a thorough examination of the curriculum, especially because inspections can last only one day. One of the effects of this is that schools that are non-compliant with their Agreed Syllabus or in the case of academies, their funding agreements, appear to be inspected and not challenged about these failings at all.

The new framework reverses this trend. Inspections will last two days and there will be a much greater emphasis on the curriculum. It is likely that a small number of subjects, possibly four, will be chosen as a focus for examining the curriculum and this could just as easily be RE as any other subject. A bonus from this approach is that over time, the information collected about each individual subject could (and should) be collated to create subject reports that identify national trends.

Commentary

Here are some sections of the handbook which we found interesting:

1. Paragraph 14 “in a risk assessment, we analyse: school workforce census data”

Regular readers of NATRE articles will know that this data set has been very useful in our lobbying of government. It contains each secondary school’s report on the number of hours of teaching provided in each school year for each subject. NATRE will be encouraging Ofsted to flag any school reporting minimal or no hours of Religious Education using its algorithm so that this can be followed up during an inspection.

2. Paragraph 22

In addition, exempt schools may be inspected between risk assessments if:

- We have received a qualifying complaint that, taken alongside other available evidence, suggests that we should inspect the school
- concerns are identified about the curriculum (including if the statutory requirement to publish information to parents is not met)

SACREs, parents and others are beginning to use the formal complaints process when schools fail to provide the appropriate level of provision for RE. We will be seeking clarification from Ofsted about how complaints, especially those that reach the Secretary of State, can be made available to Ofsted inspectors.

3. Paragraph 44

OFSTED will:
- report on any failure to comply with statutory requirements when they form part of the inspection framework and evaluation schedule, including those relating to the workforce

It is not clear if or how this might identify schools failing to meet statutory requirements in relation to RE.

4. Paragraph 166

"Before making a final judgement on overall effectiveness, inspectors will always consider the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils at the school, ...

Attention to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development in the current framework for inspection has often led to mention of good practice in relation to RE in inspection reports. The new framework specifically mentions religious education in this section which should clarify expectations. (paragraph 216 and 219)

5. Paragraph 172

"All pupils in maintained schools are expected to study the basic curriculum, which includes national curriculum, religious education and age-appropriate relationship and sex education. Academies are expected to offer all pupils a broad curriculum[68] that should be similar in breath and ambition."

Footnote 68 "… academies must include English, mathematics, science and religious education in their curriculum."

In our opinion, this paragraph has the potential to have the greatest impact on the issue of accountability in RE. It is perhaps unsurprising to see a clear statement of the law in relation to the curriculum in this context. However, in relation to standards, the expectation is that even given academy freedoms, (see 173 below), the curriculum should be similar in breadth and ambition as the curriculum offered in maintained schools.

NATRE intends to seek clarification of the meaning of this paragraph. The implication is that just as the national curriculum is to be used as a benchmark for 'breadth and ambition' for the core and foundation subjects, so the curriculum for RE must be as broad and ambitious as that required of LA maintained schools.

6. Paragraph 173

"We will judge schools taking radically different approaches to the curriculum fairly. We recognise the importance of schools' autonomy to choose their own curriculum approaches. If leaders are able to show that they have thought carefully, that they have built a curriculum with appropriate coverage, content, structure and sequencing, and that it has been implemented effectively, then inspectors will assess a school's curriculum favourably."

Some teachers have expressed concern about this paragraph because they believe it might provide a means of explaining away the lack of a rigorous and comprehensive RE curriculum. Time will tell if this concern is justified. It is difficult to see however, how a curriculum could be said to have 'appropriate coverage and content' if a subject which is so unequivocally listed as a requirement for inclusion were missing or covered in a tokenistic manner. We also note that the recent letter to NASACRE from the DFE clearly states that RE must be taught in all year groups. This is further emphasised in paragraph 177 below

7. Paragraph 177

Sources of evidence specific to curriculum intent

Inspectors will draw evidence about leaders' curriculum intent principally from discussion with senior and subject leaders. Inspectors will explore:

- whether leaders are following the national curriculum and basic curriculum or, in academies, a curriculum of similar breath and ambition

8. Paragraph 180 -181

Implementation

180. In evaluating the implementation of the curriculum, inspectors will primarily evaluate how the curriculum is taught at subject and classroom level.

181. Research and inspection evidence suggest that the most important factors in how, and how effectively, the curriculum is taught and assessed are that:

- Teachers have expert knowledge of the subjects that they teach. If they do not, they are supported to address gaps in their knowledge so that pupils are not disadvantaged by ineffective teaching

Inspection reports based on the current Ofsted Framework frequently mention the detrimental impact of teachers' poor subject knowledge on the quality of RE. This is more frequently mentioned in reports on primary schools. The text in this paragraph of the new handbook is much clearer about expectations on schools.

9. Paragraph 216 and 219

216. Provision for the spiritual development of pupils includes developing their:

- ability to be reflective about their own beliefs (religious or otherwise) and perspective on life
- knowledge of, and respect for, different people's faiths, feelings and values

219. Provision for the cultural development of pupils includes developing their:

- ability to recognise, and value, the things we share in common across cultural, religious, ethnic and socio-economic communities
- interest in exploring, improving understanding of and showing respect for different faiths and cultural diversity and the extent to which they understand, accept, respect and celebrate diversity. This is shown by their respect and attitudes towards different religious, ethnic and socio-economic groups in the local, national and global communities.

We are pleased that Ofsted has supported our recommendations that the descriptors of spiritual and cultural development should include a recognition that knowledge and understanding underpins tolerance and respect.

10. Paragraph 222

Sources of evidence specific to personal development

Inspectors will use a range of evidence to evaluate personal development, including:

- how curriculum subjects such as citizenship, RE, and other areas such as personal, social, health and economic education, and relationship and sex education, contribute to pupils' personal development

Access the following documents below:

School inspection handbook
Inspecting the curriculum
The education inspection framework