INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

NORTH CESTRIAN GRAMMAR SCHOOL

INTEGRATED INSPECTION
North Cestrian Grammar School

Full Name of School: North Cestrian Grammar School
DfE Number: 358/6003
Registered Charity Number: 525925
Address: North Cestrian Grammar School
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          Altrincham
          Cheshire
          WA14 4AJ
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Email Address: office@ncgs.co.uk
Head: Mr Lee R Bergin
Chair of Governors: Mr Ian Parrott
Age Range: 11 to 18
Total Number of Pupils: 243
Gender of Pupils: Mixed (183 boys; 60 girls;)
Inspection dates: 24 Sep 2013 to 27 Sep 2013
PREFACE

This inspection report follows the ISI schedule, which occupies a period of four continuous days in the school. The previous ISI inspection was in November 2007.

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is the body approved by the Secretary of State for the purpose of inspecting schools belonging to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) Associations and reporting on compliance with the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010. The range of these Regulations, which replace those first introduced on 1 September 2003, can be viewed on the website www.legislation.gov.uk. Additionally, inspections will consider the school’s accessibility plan under Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 and the ban on corporal punishment introduced by the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

The inspection was also carried out under the arrangements of the ISC Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership.

The inspection of the school is from an educational perspective and provides limited inspection of other aspects, although inspectors comment on any significant hazards or problems they encounter which have an adverse impact on children. The inspection does not include:

(i) an exhaustive health and safety audit
(ii) an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features
(iii) an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures
(iv) an in-depth investigation of the school’s compliance with employment law.

Inspectors may be aware of individual safeguarding concerns, allegations and complaints as part of the inspection process. Such matters will not usually be referred to in the published report but will have been considered by the team in reaching their judgements.

Both Ofsted and ISI inspect and report on the Independent School Standards Regulations. However, they apply different frameworks and have different criteria for judging school quality that are suited to the different types of schools they inspect. Both use a four point scale when making judgements of quality but, whilst the ISI terminology reflects quality judgements that are at least equivalent to those used by Ofsted, they also reflect the differences in approach. ISI reports do not provide a single overarching judgement for the school but instead give a clear judgement on each aspect of the school’s work at the beginning of each section. **These headline statements must include one of the ISI descriptors ‘excellent’, ‘good’, ‘sound’ or ‘unsatisfactory’, and where Achievement is ‘exceptional’ that term may be used for the top grade.** Elsewhere in the report, inspectors may use a range of different adjectives to make judgements. **For EYFS registered provision (for pupils aged under three), reports are required to use the same terminology (‘outstanding’, ‘good’, ‘satisfactory’ and ‘inadequate’) as Ofsted reports.**
INSPECTION EVIDENCE

The inspectors observed lessons, conducted formal interviews with pupils and examined samples of pupils’ work. They held discussions with senior members of staff and with the chair of governors, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended registration sessions and assemblies. Inspectors visited the facilities for sick or injured pupils. The responses of parents and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires were analysed, and the inspectors examined regulatory documentation made available by the school.

Inspectors

Mrs Gwen Caddock Reporting Inspector
Mrs Nicola Boddam-Whetham Team Inspector (Former Head, ISA school)
Mr David Ibbotson Team Inspector (Former Director of Studies, HMC school)
Mr Colin Haddon Team Inspector (Deputy Head, ISA school)
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1. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOL

1.1 North Cestrian Grammar School was founded in 1951 in central Altrincham as a day school for boys to offer opportunities to those with grammar school aspirations. The school first admitted girls to the sixth form in 2005 and became fully co-educational in 2008. The school was founded as a charitable educational trust limited by guarantee. The governors of the school are the charity trustees; currently the board has twelve members.

1.2 The school’s mission is to develop potential in young people, whatever that potential may be by having high expectations and offering broad academic and extra-curricular opportunities within an educational community in which individual needs can be met and strengths can be developed so that every pupil, including those with a special educational need and/or disability (SEND), can be recognised as an individual and grow in confidence.

1.3 The school has developed on the original site, with facilities provided in the original Victorian house and in a range of modern buildings including the new science block, which was opened in 2010, to offer laboratories, a third information and communication technology (ICT) suite and support rooms. Since the previous inspection provision has been updated to provide facilities for girls joining the school, and areas for the performing arts, food technology, sports and fitness and further ICT facilities. The school has 20 acres of playing fields adjacent to the school on a long term lease from the National Trust. The head took up his position in the school in September 2013.

1.4 The school has 243 pupils on roll, 183 boys and 60 girls, with 26 pupils in the sixth form. The ability profile of the pupils in Years 7 to 11, assessed using nationally standardized tests, is in line with the national average. No standardized tests are used to assess the ability of the sixth form. Pupils come from mainly local, business and professional families with some pupils travelling from other parts of the Greater Manchester area. A wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds is represented. Seventy-one pupils have been assessed as having SEND including dyslexia and speech and communication difficulties. Twenty pupils have a statement of special educational needs. Thirty-seven pupils receive specialist learning support for academic difficulties or help with social skills. Eighteen pupils have English as an additional language (EAL); none of these pupils receives specialist teaching for their English but support includes specific timetable arrangements.

1.5 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school.
2. THE SUCCESS OF THE SCHOOL

2.(a) Main findings

2.1 The quality of academic and other achievements is good, meeting the school’s aim to enable pupils of all abilities develop to their full potential. Pupils develop good skills for learning. New initiatives such as the virtual learning environment (VLE) are enabling pupils to work independently and think for themselves. Using nationally standardised data, achievement at GCSE is judged to be similar to that of pupils in all maintained schools and progress is good. A-level results have been generally below those for maintained schools, but achievement is judged to be in line with pupils’ abilities. The curriculum is good, providing wide experience, appropriate to the abilities of the pupils and supports the aims of the school by allowing for individual timetables for pupils where appropriate. Teaching is judged to be good overall characterised by careful planning and good pace.

2.2 The quality of the pupils’ personal development is good, supported by the personal, social, health education and citizenship (PSHCE) programme. Pupils develop confidence and self-esteem, they have a good understanding of moral values and behave well. Senior pupils value their posts of responsibility, pupils throughout the school said they are eager to take on responsibilities. Pupils undertake fundraising for many charities. Assemblies provide opportunities for developing an understanding of other cultures and faiths and the school is a harmonious, multicultural community. Staff know their pupils well resulting in good pastoral care which is well supported by efficient systems of communication and consultation. Welfare, health and safety is good, with appropriate policies and carefully implemented procedures. Safeguarding of pupils is managed effectively in line with the policy and staff are fully trained at the appropriate levels.

2.3 Governance is good; legal obligations are met including the annual review of the safeguarding policy and its implementation. Governors offer support and challenge to the senior team. Prudent financial management has enabled the significant development of the school. The chairman and the head meet regularly, other governors attend only formal school events, limiting first hand oversight of the work of the school, also health and safety is an item on the agenda at each meeting but no regular report is received. The quality of leadership and management and links with parents are good. The new senior team has well-defined roles and responsibilities and there are clear priorities for the next stage of the development of the school. The role of middle managers is less clearly defined and their work is under review and development to ensure I planning and monitoring in their departments is more rigorous. The responses to the parental questionnaire were generally positive and highly supportive about the care of pupils and the curriculum and extra curriculum activities. Some of the concerns expressed were found to be fair, including the monitoring of progress for pupils with SEND. Communications with parents and the way concerns are dealt with are effective and in line with school policies.

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2.(b) Action points

(i) Compliance with regulatory requirements

2.4 The school meets all the requirements of the Independent School Standards Regulations 2010.

(ii) Recommendations for further improvement

2.5 The school is advised to make the following improvements.

1. Consolidate the school tracking system to provide information to support pupils in making appropriate choices at both GCSE and A level.

2. Develop the provision and monitoring for pupils with SEND who do not have a statement of special educational needs, to support their development.

3. Provide specialist support for EAL students who arrive with very limited English.

4. Create opportunities for pupils throughout the school to take posts of responsibility enabling them to contribute to the school community.

5. Increase the involvement of the members of the governing body in the day-to-day life of the school and particularly in the area of health and safety.

6. Strengthen the links between senior and middle management to ensure effective monitoring within the classroom and consistency of good practice.
3. THE QUALITY OF ACADEMIC AND OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

3.(a) The quality of the pupils’ achievements and learning

3.1 The quality of the pupils’ achievements and learning is good.

3.2 Pupils are successful in their learning across the curriculum. In many lessons and in their written work they show good subject knowledge, apply appropriate skills well and make good progress. The school fulfils its aim to ensure that pupils of all abilities develop their potential. The pupils speak and read with confidence. They are generally confident in talking to their peers and adults alike, and often engage in classroom discussions with their teachers, which enhance their learning. Pupils work well together showing good listening skills. They acquire good mathematical skills and can use these appropriately across the curriculum. The pupils’ ICT skills are used to good effect and the introduction of the VLE is enabling further development of these skills across the curriculum. Logical thought is successfully developed through many opportunities in lessons, such as when a class were considering terminal velocity of falling objects and were able to come to conclusions for themselves through reasoned discussion. Independent research is seen in lessons and written work, and these skills are being further developed through a new initiative to set open-ended tasks as recommended in the previous inspection report.

3.3 Pupils’ physical skills develop well through sport and outdoor activities. Many pupils enjoy their sport and are keen to do well in matches against other schools. The under-fifteen football team recently won the highly prized Trafford Cup. The school golf team competes successfully in national schools competitions. A number of pupils successfully complete Duke of Edinburgh Awards (DofE) each year including at the gold level.

3.4 The following analysis uses the national data for the years 2010 to 2012. These are the most recent three years for which comparative statistics are available. Attainments at GCSE are similar to the national average for maintained schools. The analysis of the 2013 results, for which national comparative data are not yet available, shows that they are broadly in line with previous years. At A level, results are below the national average for maintained schools.

3.5 Progress is good overall. The school’s own analyses and records show that to GCSE, pupils progress well in relation to their abilities and individual needs. Progress in the sixth form is judged to be in line with the ability of the pupils, demonstrated by work seen in lessons, in written work and in discussions with pupils about their studies.

3.6 Careful tracking and monitoring by the school shows that pupils with SEND attain at least as well as other pupils, often demonstrating high levels of personal progress to do so. Pupils with EAL make suitable progress, particularly when supported in lessons.

3.7 Pupils have a positive attitude to learning and in their responses to the pupils’ questionnaire and in their interviews with inspectors, the overwhelming majority expressed satisfaction with the progress they were making. A small minority of parents showed some concern; overall, the evidence of the inspection shows that the progress made by pupils is good in relation to their start points.
3.(b) The contribution of curricular and extra-curricular provision

3.8 The contribution of curricular and extra-curricular provision is good.

3.9 The school meets its aims to offer a broad curriculum in which individual needs can be met and strengths developed so that every pupil, including those with SEND, can be recognised as an individual and is able to grow in confidence. The curriculum provides good opportunities for experience in the required areas of learning. Pupils benefit from the broad curriculum offered for Years 7, 8 and 9, which contains English, mathematics, French, science, geography and history and creative and technological subjects together with physical education. Opportunities to learn a second modern foreign language are limited by the generous allocation of time to French. Further breath is introduced in Year 9 with three separate science courses and the introduction of business studies, providing the foundation for making informed choices for GCSE. At GCSE the good range of subjects offered means that pupils of differing abilities make choices from a suitable range of optional subjects. Wherever possible, the school tries to provide pupils with the mix of options that they need, although on occasions, this can mean that support staff are thinly spread. Where necessary, pupils may take a reduced range of options in order to receive extra teaching in their other subjects. The recent introduction of extended and self-directed pieces of homework within all curriculum areas provides an opportunity for independent study and the development of additional skills and so enhances the curriculum. In the sixth form a good range of subjects is available enabling progression to higher education for those who wish to do so.

3.10 A thorough PHSCE programme is in place for Years 7 to 12. This has been enhanced recently with a focus on life skills. Some careers education is included from Year 9 and makes use of a national careers advice service. In Year 10, pupils benefit from valuable work experience which also builds links with local businesses and the community.

3.11 A suitable range of extra-curricular activities is available during the lunch hour and after school. These include opportunities in music, drama and a variety of sports and an afterschool homework club. Work within the curriculum is supported by clinics and drop-in revision sessions, which pupils value greatly. The extra-curricular provision is enhanced by the availability of outdoor pursuits and the DofE scheme, which encourage independence and provide personal challenge. Regular trips for all year groups also help pupils to develop good links with the community. In response to the questionnaires, a large majority of pupils expressed satisfaction with the range of activities available and parents were overwhelmingly happy with it.

3.(c) The contribution of teaching

3.12 The contribution of teaching is good.

3.13 Teaching is effective in promoting the progress of pupils in the acquisition of knowledge and skills and supports the school’s aim to develop potential in young people. Teachers care about their pupils and know them well, resulting in carefully-planned lessons which ensure that the needs of pupils are met, that the pace of the lesson and the activities chosen are appropriate to the range of abilities of the pupils, and that all have an opportunity to progress. Pupils of all ages and abilities speak appreciatively about the willingness of their teachers to devote extra time to them at break or lunchtime to help them when they have not fully understood a lesson or are having difficulty doing a particular piece of work.

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3.14 Teachers have good subject knowledge, enabling them to respond fully to any questions posed by their pupils. This is complemented by very good relationships between staff and pupils. Teaching in particularly effective lessons combines stimulating content and forms of delivery which catch the imagination of pupils, together with high expectations and more open-ended tasks to significantly enhance learning. In the small proportion of less successful lessons the pace or content of the lesson did not meet the needs or capabilities of the pupils so that occasionally the more able were insufficiently challenged or those of a lower ability were left behind.

3.15 In almost all lessons, the teaching takes proper account of the needs of pupils with SEND. The needs of more able pupils are also met through the provision of suitable tasks and thoughtful questioning. Where pupils have a statement of special educational needs, provision complies with the requirements of the statement. Teaching assistants are used well to support learning for those with SEND, although support for those with EAL is more variable in quality, and on occasions, language barriers can reduce the progress made by such pupils.

3.16 Teaching methods include appropriate use of a good range of learning resources. As recommended at the previous inspection, there has been training in the use of ICT to support learning. Inspectors saw good examples of imaginative and creative use of ICT and music technology being used in lessons. Pupils also make use of various web-based services to help learning; these are also accessed from home. Pupils and teachers are beginning to explore the opportunities provided by the new VLE.

3.17 Teachers make use of a variety of suitable ways of assessing pupils to guide lesson planning. Whilst work is regularly marked, there is inconsistency in its quality; it is at its best for older pupils. Here, helpful comments are made on pupils’ work; these are valued by the pupils. The recent introduction of a target-setting scheme to GCSE and A level is providing good feedback to pupils so that they are aware of their attainment and progress when measured against national targets. This system is well understood by the pupils and helps them to understand what they must do to improve. In the previous inspection report, it was suggested that there should be effective monitoring of marking throughout the school and this has recently been put in place, but further work remains to be done.
4. THE QUALITY OF THE PUPILS’ PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

4.(a) The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

4.1 The spiritual, moral social and cultural development of the pupils is good.

4.2 Pupils’ personal qualities develop well, in accordance with the aims of the school. Pupils are confident in their general demeanour and in their ability to relate to each other and to adults. In interviews and written comments in response to the inspection questionnaire a number of pupils said that the school had taught them that they can achieve highly. Pupils are self-aware and mature, particularly in their realistic appreciation of their own abilities.

4.3 Pupils demonstrate a sense of right and wrong, and the norms of good conduct in their daily interaction with others. For example, pupils in Year 8 had not been asked to help the new Year 7 pupils settle in, but described how they had looked out for them in the playground and made them feel welcome. Pupils are courteous and mindful of their fellows’ needs. The PSHCE programme provides valuable opportunities to reflect on morality, which is further explored in lessons, for example in drama where a class explored issues relating to prejudice, using effective role play techniques which aided their understanding of this difficult issue. Senior pupils from Year 13 take on roles of responsibility within the school, for example as head boy, deputy head boy and girl and prefects.

4.4 Pupils undertake enthusiastic fund raising for a variety of causes including a local cancer charity and an adventure farm. They also frequently support the causes of the varied speakers who talk at assembly.

4.5 Pupils are helped to understand and respect other faiths and cultures by attending a wide variety of talks given by local religious leaders. Individual pupils are also encouraged to speak of their faith and religious practices and celebrations within PSHCE lessons. The school has pupils of differing faiths, cultures and nationalities who work harmoniously together. Lively wall displays reflect the Western cultural tradition, aspects of which are covered in various subjects including history and PSHCE and supported by a range of visits including theatre trips. Pupils’ personal development is good; many arrive at school lacking confidence and with low self-esteem, but as they grow up and move through the school, they become well-rounded and confident individuals.

4.(b) The contribution of arrangements for pastoral care

4.6 The contribution of arrangements for pastoral care is good.

4.7 The staff provide effective support and guidance for the pupils, realising the school’s aim to enable every pupil to fulfil his or her potential. In their responses to the inspection questionnaire pupils indicated strongly that they feel safe, and in interviews pupils spoke of the school having a family atmosphere which encourages them to progress well. New pupils settle quickly. Communication of pastoral concerns, using the electronic information system, is fast and well monitored, allowing help to be given speedily, and staff to be aware of any potential problem. Relationships between staff and pupils are positive; the size of the school allows staff to know children well, for example welcoming them at registration and talking with them about their interests, emphasising the importance of the individual. Relationships between the pupils are also good, with different years mixing freely.
4.8 The school canteen provides well-balanced meals and healthy eating and the benefits of regular exercise are encouraged in the PSHCE and physical education programmes. The school successfully promotes good behaviour which is evident as pupils move around the school and relax in the playground. In responses to the questionnaire, a minority of pupils questioned the fairness of teachers in the use of sanctions and rewards. Inspectors judge that the school’s recent formalisation of the system of sanctions and rewards has improved consistency. A significant minority of pupils also indicated that they felt that there were problems with the procedures to deal with bullying. Inspectors found that during interviews, younger pupils said bullying was rare, whereas some older pupils mentioned teasing, and in the pupil questionnaire the majority of pupils said they knew who to go to for help. Records show that concerns are dealt with in accordance with the anti-bullying policy and are properly recorded and monitored. The pupil questionnaire also indicated a desire for pupils to have a greater voice in the way the school is run. The head announced at the recent speech day that he is starting a student council immediately. The school has a suitable plan to improve the educational access for pupils with SEND.

4.(c) The contribution of arrangements for welfare, health and safety

4.9 The contribution of the arrangements for welfare, health and safety is good.

4.10 The safeguarding arrangements have regard to regulations and national guidance and are appropriate for the nature of the school. The safeguarding policy and procedures and safe employment procedures meet requirements and are well implemented. Staff have been trained at the required levels and frequencies in relation to their levels of responsibility for safeguarding in the school, and training on these matters is included in the induction procedures for new staff.

4.11 All the required measures are in place to reduce the risk from fire and other hazards and regular checks are undertaken and carefully recorded. Careful arrangements are in place to ensure high standards of health and safety supported by full risk assessments, checks and maintenance.

4.12 The school medical room, located next to the reception area of the office which is supervised by a well-qualified first aider, is appropriate for the care of pupils who are injured or unwell. Careful records are kept and parents are fully informed of any medical problems occurring at school.

4.13 The admission and attendance registers are properly maintained, and correctly stored for the previous three years.
5. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNANCE, LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

5.(a) The quality of governance

5.1 The quality of governance is good.

5.2 The governing body provides generally effective oversight of the school through the work of its committees, through meetings between the chairman and the head, and through the head’s reports to meetings of the governing body. In addition heads of departments make presentations to the full governors’ meeting at the start of the new school year. Oversight of health and safety matters comes through contact between the governors and the bursar, who is the clerk to the governing body and who sits on the school’s health and safety committee. The finance committee reports to the full board and excellent financial management and prudent planning has enabled the governing body to provide high quality facilities, most recently the new science block, together with the very well maintained accommodation and good staffing levels throughout the school.

5.3 The academic committee receives detailed briefings from the head and sets appropriate challenges and precise targets for the development and improvement of academic standards in the school. The chairman of the governing body meets the head regularly but as yet, the governors attend only formal occasions in the school calendar. There is no regular contact during the school day to provide a first-hand insight into the work of the school. The governors receive and review the school development plan but there is no direct input into strategic direction at this level.

5.4 The governing body is effective in discharging its responsibilities for statutory requirements, including the annual review of safeguarding and implementation of child protection arrangements throughout the school. In addition, the governor with responsibility for safeguarding meets regularly with the member of staff with this duty and keeps governors in touch with the work of the school in this area.

5.(b) The quality of leadership and management, including links with parents, carers and guardians

5.5 The quality of leadership and management, including links with parents, carers and guardians is good.

5.6 A new management structure has been introduced under the leadership of the recently appointed head. This structure, with clearly delineated roles and responsibilities, is beginning to establish good communications across the school. The new senior leaders have a clear vision for the school and have established, in conjunction with the governing body, appropriate targets and areas for development to maintain the distinctive ethos of the school and ensure progress in academic areas as a first priority. The team is to review the school development plan in conjunction with the staff. As yet the roles of middle managers are not fully developed resulting in inconsistencies in the quality of planning and marking and monitoring by middle managers is not yet fully established. Work is in progress on new departmental handbooks and policies to bring long and medium term planning up to the standard of the best.

5.7 Work is continuing to meet the recommendations of the previous report to ensure that practice in all areas matches that of the best by further developing the
procedures for monitoring of the quality of marking, the provision and use of a range of activities to suit pupils' differing needs and ensuring that the more able pupils reach their full potential through the further development of independent learning opportunities and activities that extend and challenge them. The senior staff are effective in discharging their responsibilities for safeguarding pupils. The staff are suitably qualified and trained for their roles in meeting the needs of the pupils, including safeguarding, welfare, health and safety. The central register of appointments is properly maintained and appropriate checks are undertaken to ensure the suitability of staff and governors to work with children.

5.8 The responses to the questionnaire show that links with parents, guardians and carers are good and that parents are highly satisfied with the range of subjects and areas of experience offered and with the range of extra-curricular activities offered. Responses showed that parents feel that their children are happy and safe at the school and that they are well looked after. They indicate that they appreciate the opportunities to be involved in school events, that they find information about the school accessible and their view is that the school is well managed.

5.9 A minority of parents expresses some concern about the information they receive about the progress their child is making. Inspectors judge that provision is appropriate. The new system of reporting to parents provides two full reports each year and informative half-termly progress reports, supported by regular parents' meetings. A small number of comments also expressed concern about the progress of pupils with learning difficulties as well as the more able. The inspection found that the school has effective systems established to monitor the progress of pupils but that occasionally in lessons, teaching did not provide fully for the learning needs of these pupils. As yet there is no specific monitoring in the classroom of pupils with SEND other than those with statements. A minority of parents indicated concern about behaviour in the classroom, and in a small number of lessons low-level disruption was observed but this was generally well-managed. Bullying was also mentioned by a small proportion of parents; the school has an appropriate anti-bullying policy and the records of incidents show that appropriate action was taken. Inspectors also considered the comments from a small number of parents who said that they did not feel that concerns were well handled, or that they received timely responses to their questions. Current records show that emails are responded to quickly, that appointments are arranged to take place as soon as possible, usually within a day or two, and that the head monitors all concerns raised by parents to staff. The school deals with concerns and complaints as set out the complaints policy and careful records are kept. In their comments parents praised the atmosphere of the school and appreciated the use of the parent mail system with both email and text messaging for effective communications. A small number of comments expressed concerns related to academic standards, about the quality of teaching and about changes such as the introduction of the VLE. The evidence of the inspection shows generally good standards in these areas.

5.10 The weekly newsletter, published on the school website gives a detailed picture of the life of the school and all the required information for parents and prospective parents is published on the website.

What the school should do to improve is given at the beginning of the report in section 2.