

Copy of Press Association News Release 14th March 2020.

Ofsted would “look very favourably” on any schools asking for inspections to be postponed during the Covid-19 outbreak, the watchdog’s national director has said.

Addressing the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) conference on Saturday, Sean Harford also said the chief inspector of schools Amanda Spielman would personally sign off on “any decision not to defer” an inspection.

Earlier on, ASCL’s general secretary Geoff Barton called on the Government to immediately halt all inspections amid a time of “national emergency”.

He added it was not a time of “business as usual”, saying the matter would be raised with Education Secretary Gavin Williamson during a scheduled meeting with teaching organisations and unions on Monday.

#ascl2020 – departing from his scripted speech, @RealGeoffBarton calls on #Ofsted, in this time of national emergency, to call a halt to all routine inspections. We will raise this directly with Sean Harford this afternoon and @GavinWilliamson on Monday #CoronavirusPandemic pic.twitter.com/WmaMNZen5c

— ASCL (@ASCL_UK) [March 14, 2020](#)

Afterwards, Mr Harford told delegates in Birmingham: “As of last night, we have a new temporary deferral policy.

“This means we can defer inspections of any school or college affected by the virus – and we will.

“We’ll be proactively asking schools and colleges if they want to request deferral because of coronavirus and clearly we will look very favourably on all such requests.”

To applause, he added: “In fact, the chief inspector has asked to be personally involved in any decision not to defer, in these circumstances.”

He said the watchdog had “no desire to increase the worry or get in the way of good sensible planning” by schools and colleges and expected “further measures” to be announced by the Government.

Mr Harford said he was personally aware of one college which had asked for – and received – a deferral.

We are very open to the request linked with coronavirus for deferral. Sean Harford, Ofsted

Later, he said: “We are very open to the request linked with coronavirus for deferral.”

Mr Harford added Ofsted was “not able to say that we’re ceasing inspections, that’s something for the Government to decide” and would need “legislative change” to do so.

He said: “We have a deferral policy that takes account of exceptional circumstances – we just wanted to make sure people had their attention drawn that this is clearly an exceptional circumstance.”

Asked if Ofsted would call directly on the Government to stop inspections, Mr Harford said: “That’s not up to us, our job as civil servants is to work with the Government, with the current advice to keep things going.

“Obviously what we will do is we will feed back the evidence we get of the number of schools requesting deferral.”

He added: “We want them (schools and colleges) to know we really are listening to that.

“Hence, if that request comes through via the inspector...if it is knocked back, Amanda will have personally signed that knock-back off.”

In light of the Government’s decision to move to the ‘delay’ phase, we have reviewed our deferral policy so we can now defer inspections of providers that are affected. We will look very favourably on any requests to defer inspections because of coronavirus. — Ofsted (@Ofstednews) [March 14, 2020](#)

Mr Barton said he, in discussion with ASCL president Rachael Warwick, decided to call for an immediate halt to inspections, after hearing first-hand accounts of coronavirus-related absences during conference.

He told delegates that in one case a teacher had said to him “you do realise in my school I’ve got 15 members of staff off”.

Mr Barton said the Government should move to suspend all routine inspections, with the exception of establishments where there had been specific safeguarding concerns.

He was greeted with applause from 1,000 delegates, when he said: “This is a time for the inspectorate to show that it understands the extraordinary pressures on schools and colleges and for the Government to suspend all inspections during this crisis.

“We acknowledge that Ofsted has taken a step in the right direction by accepting that the current situation may be a reason for an inspection to be deferred.

“However, it has not gone far enough. A case-by-case basis is not good enough.”

He said ASCL was “calling on the Government to call a halt to all routine inspections, to enable schools and colleges in a national mission to focus on supporting their students”.

ASCL earlier published a survey of members’ attitudes to Ofsted, showing that while a majority supported the new inspection regime introduced in 2019, 90% backed reforming the watchdog’s four-rank grading system.

On Friday, Ofsted had tweeted it was “operating business as usual”, but added it would take account of the “challenges” headteachers faced by the spread of Covid-19.

The watchdog then apologised when it was highlighted that its updated guidance to schools on when inspections could be deferred, referred to whether inspectors would visit “in the case of illness or death of the headteacher”.

Headteachers responded on Twitter, with one calling it “tone deaf”.

Ofsted said the passage in the deferral policy was “historic”, having been in the guidance since 2016, and had since been removed, with corporate strategy director Chris Jones tweeting: “I’m sorry for any distress caused.”