Dear Meg,

OFSTED INSPECTION OF SCHOOLS

I am writing as requested in the Committee’s report ‘Ofsted inspection of schools’ on two issues: the exemption of outstanding schools from routine inspection, and the level of assurance provided by Ofsted’s short inspection model.

The outstanding exemption

The Committee asked that the Department re-examine the rationale for exempting schools graded outstanding from routine re-inspection, and report back in December.

As the Minister for School Standards, Nick Gibb MP, set out in his recent letter to the Chief Inspector, when the exemption policy was introduced in 2012 it was a reflection of the Government’s commitment to ensure that inspection arrangements are proportionate and give our highest performing schools more autonomy so they can focus on providing an excellent education. The Secretary of State reinforced that commitment in his speech earlier this year at the NAHT conference, where he made clear that he trusts our best schools to get on with improving the education of their pupils without intervention.

It has always been the case that schools judged by Ofsted to be providing outstanding education are not exempt from accountability. We publish sophisticated performance data for all schools every year, providing transparency on performance for parents. In addition, Ofsted has had the ability to determine, through its risk assessment process, which exempt schools have warranted re-inspection, and the power to inspect exempt providers for the purpose of survey visits.

The Department has considered the concerns raised by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, and indeed the Chief Inspector herself,
about the impact of our exemption policy in schools. We have considered these concerns against the original rationale for the policy, and the likely workload implications for the schools affected by it.

As a result, ministers have asked that Ofsted reviews its risk assessment arrangements and increases its inspection of exempt outstanding schools over the coming year to 10%. This is in line with the expectation agreed in Parliament when the exemption was introduced, and will allow Ofsted to build a stronger picture of the provision in these providers.

It is important that I stress that the Chief Inspector will retain the power to inspect any school, exempt or otherwise, if she has concerns about the quality of provision or safety of pupils. The policy will remain under review, particularly as we learn the impact from Ofsted’s changes to its risk assessment.

**Short inspections**

The Committee also asked that the Department, jointly with Ofsted, review the short inspection model to ensure it provides sufficient, meaningful assurance about schools’ effectiveness.

The operation of inspection is rightly a matter for the Chief Inspector and she explained to the Committee when we met that she considers the current inspection arrangements do provide sufficient assurance on a schools’ effectiveness.

The Committee will be aware that Ofsted is in the process of designing a new inspection framework, and it will consult on these proposals in January. As you would expect, the Department has worked closely with Ofsted as it has developed these proposals. Ofsted has considered the inspection model and what is practical for inspectors to deliver alongside the need to deliver value for money for the taxpayer and the Chief Inspector’s clear commitment to maximise the amount of time that inspectors spend on site, engaging with school leaders, teachers and pupils.

Ofsted has already started a series of pilot inspections to inform the development of its new framework, and these will continue throughout the rest of this academic year. Further detail about the proposed changes to the short inspection model will be included in Ofsted’s consultation and the Department will continue to work closely with Ofsted as it considers the responses to that consultation and any further changes to its inspection model.

JONATHAN SLATER
PERMANENT SECRETARY