

Summerhill had two inspections in 2016 with the new ISI (Independent Schools inspectorate) that we moved to last year when we felt that our relationship with OfSTED had broken down irretrievably. The first, in June, was a 'compliance' inspection where there are 240 regulations to meet. The second, in October, was a 'quality' inspection where the value of education as well as pupils personal and emotional development is judged.

The quality inspection report gave the school a 'good' for education and an 'excellent' for personal development. Of course we were delighted with this. The inspection process was hard work but we felt that the school was being fairly judged and that our explanations were both respected and noted.

In the 'compliance' the school failed on one regulation. Although the inspectors gave it a pass overall, for some reason the Department of Education overrode their judgement and failed it on an accommodation fault - namely that in some areas both boys and girls share the same corridor, though in single sex rooms.

National Minimum Standard 5.1.

*'Suitable sleeping accommodation is provided for boarders. It is well organised and managed with risk assessments undertaken and findings acted upon to reduce risk for all boarders. Where boarders are aged 8 years or over, sleeping accommodation for boys is separate from sleeping accommodation for girls.'* (DfE. Boarding schools. National minimum standards. April 2015, p.8)

Summerhill has had the same living accommodation systems since its inception almost one hundred years ago!

Gender and age equality are a huge part of the Summerhill philosophy of education. It could be argued that a pronounced or a '*complete separation*' of the genders simply exacerbates the gender inequality that already exists in society at large and encourages gender discrimination. We see results throughout our school that living closely together is a positive experience for both boys and girls which they carry with them throughout life and which is often commented upon by former pupils.

After some correspondence between the school and the DfE it was decided that we would get a visit from two officials from that department to give us an opportunity to show them how our very rigorous systems of safeguarding and risk assessments actually work.

To be honest, the visit could not have gone better. We had it well planned and everything went smoothly. Three of last year's graduates who offered to come and put their retrospective point of view were wonderful, putting their case with passion and clarity. The present pupils were wonderful too -talking eloquently about living together with both sexes as equals and how it affects them.

The school meeting had a mixed bag of cases and it was as if each one was there to answer their questions (this was not planned).

When I drove them to the station they said they had enjoyed the day and learned much. This was evident in their manner and faces as the day went on.

We have subsequently heard from the DfE in which they said the following:

*"In the light of the information gained at the school about safeguarding, and the arrangements available to any pupils who have concerns, it has been decided that*

*no requirement for a statutory action plan will be imposed, and the school can continue with the current residential arrangements. However, when ISI next inspects the school, we shall ask it to look particularly at whether safeguarding, pastoral and pupil voice arrangements continue to justify this unusual position – in other words to corroborate the conclusions we reached based on our visit”.*

We are so very grateful that there were people in the DfE who decided to break the mould (they do not usually visit schools) and come to actually see what we do. They were very friendly, open minded and I felt they had learned something from their experience of Summerhill.

You can find both reports here:

<http://www.isi.net/school/summerhill-school-9177?results=true>

There is further information on our risk assessment and safeguarding work regarding this issue on our website – *Policies and Paperwork*