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Prior Park College, Ralph Allen Drive, Bath, BA2 5AH

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Dear Parents and Guardians,

As you will recall, Prior Park College was inspected by the Catholic Schools Inspectorate on Thursday, 29 February, and Friday, 1 March. A link to the full report can be found in the Appendix below. The Trustees and the College's Leadership Team felt it important to write to all parents and guardians alongside the report to place this inspection in context.

Whenever anyone visits Prior Park, it seems they always talk about the sense of community that they find here. The inspectors' experience echoes this. Their report states that the school is an *'inclusive community where diversity is valued, and relationships are underpinned by love and mutual respect.'* They noted that, *'Students are happy, confident and feel safe. They are well supported and proud of their college.'* We know how vital feeling safe and happy is to our young people and it is pleasing to see that your children spoke about their school in a manner which conveyed that they felt supported in being able to learn.

It is 17 years since Prior Park was last inspected by the Diocese, and the Inspection framework the use has been significantly altered during that time. The framework is now far more exacting in terms of its level of expectation that it has of how we operate. This new framework, active for the past two years, makes no allowances for the fact that Prior Park, whilst a Catholic School, is also an Independent School. It makes no allowance for the fact that many of our families choose our school for different reasons than parents may choose a state maintained Catholic school for their child. Instead, the Inspection framework is the same for all Catholic schools, whether they have 100% practising Catholic students and staff, or 0% practising Catholics. The current faith makeup of Prior Park College is under 20% Catholic students. We are very much a school of all faiths and none. We pride ourselves on not proselytising to our young people, but instead in encouraging them to engage with faith and spirituality on their own terms. We want them to live our school's values which, whilst underpinned by our Christian, Catholic, tradition, we see as accessible to all young people.


The new Inspection Framework that all Catholic schools must follow is one which is attempting to exercise a far greater degree of control over those schools than the Bishops' Conference and the Catholic Education Service have ever done before. Prior Park has not changed in terms of what it offers our students, Catholic, Christian, or not. However, under this new framework, we have been deemed to be requiring improvement as a Catholic school. The judgement is not one that relates to the general quality of education in our school, but only to how well our school fulfils the obligations of the framework relating to the religious life of the school alone. Their conclusions on our religious life though, are disappointing and fail to celebrate the enormous amount of good that we do as a Christian, Catholic, educational institution. In a world of falling church attendances, it is perhaps unsurprising that there appears to be a

greater level of expectation by the Church hierarchy for Catholic schools to do the job of bringing young people to 'the faith' that Churches have historically accomplished. However, we know that parents choose our school, and that students enjoy our school for a variety of reasons. We are not only chosen because we are a Catholic school, and we must, and do, always work hard to avoid alienating any of our students and families who are not Catholic.

We are proud to be a school which helps to ground our young people in a strong set of values and allows them to explore their own relationship with their own faiths. We are confident that what our school is doing, and has always done, is right for our students. There is so much in this report that is positive about our outstanding school. That the new Inspection Framework deems us to require improvement is not something we take lightly. Indeed, it is something that we take very seriously. We shall reflect upon the recommendations of the report, and where we can and should adapt our practices then we shall. At every turn though, we will aspire to continue to be the school that the first line of this Inspection recognises us as. That is, an *'inclusive community where diversity is valued, and relationships are underpinned by love and mutual respect.'* We believe that is why parents choose this school, and we know that is why our students thrive here.

If you do have any comments or questions about the Inspection Report, the Inspection Framework, or indeed this letter, then I should be more than happy to hear from you.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Horan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Ben Horan

Appendix - Detailed Inspection Response to Parents and Guardians

The school was inspected in three different and distinct areas: Catholic Life and Mission, Religious Education, and Collective Worship. The full report can be found on our website. The link to which is here: [Inspections and Reports | Prior Park College](#).

In the area of Catholic Life and Mission, the inspectors were complimentary about the fact that our students demonstrated, *'a strong understanding of the college values of generosity, curiosity and courage.'* They were though, critical of the fact that not all students could, *'articulate an understanding of the college's mission being underpinned by its Catholic identity.'* They said that *'relationships between staff and students are positive, affirming, and supportive'* and, *'students value the warm, inclusive ethos of the college and the many opportunities... afforded to them.'* The charitable endeavours of the College were praised, with the range of activities that students take part in showing that, *'Students understand the importance of supporting those in need locally, nationally, and globally and caring for our world.'* Again though, a critique is made in the report that students, *'do not express their actions as a response to the demands of faith.'* I, for one, am deeply proud of the fact that our students here at Prior Park understand the importance of being a globally aware citizen, who looks to make the world a better place. To implicitly critique these efforts as being 'less than' because students, irrespective of their own religious beliefs, do not make an explicit link to the, *'demands of faith'* seems strange. It appears that the framework the inspectors are operating under struggles to differentiate between the appearance and the substance of good works, and the way in which people of different faith backgrounds might feel comfortable expressing their desire to do good for their world. These philosophical differences between a school walking alongside our young people and encouraging them to think about the world around them, and a framework which appears to demand overt displays of religiosity and language from all students, perhaps explains why in this section, the inspectors decided that the College required improvement.

In the area of Religious Education, the inspectors stated that our, *'students develop secure knowledge in their learning of religious education,'* and that their, *'attitudes to their learning in religious education are generally positive.'* There was an implied criticism that, *'not all students and parents understand why religious education is... compulsory for all students.'* This is reflective of many comments in the parental survey that inspectors put out, in which a substantial number of parents questioned why Theology is a compulsory GCSE. This is, again, an interesting point. The framework inspectors operate with does not appear to allow for the fact that most of our parents and students are not Catholic and so perhaps may not always see the academic study of Theology to GCSE as integral to their own educational journey. Equally, the framework shows little appreciation of the fact that, within the Independent Schools' sector, many parents may well choose Catholic schools for reasons other than their teaching of the academic discipline of Theology as a core subject. It was hugely pleasing to read the inspectors' comments regarding the, *'committed, experienced subject specialists who are passionate about their subject and ambitious for their students'* that make up our Theology Department. However, the inspectors called into question the amount of Theology Teaching that takes place in our Sixth Form for those students who have not opted for the subject as an A Level. The school was adjudged to be non-compliant with the regulations that 5% of taught time should be given to religious education in *'each repeating cycle of the timetable.'* When our, outstanding, and often faith based, General Studies sessions are included, our provision exceeds 5%. However, because the framework is so rigid, those lectures are not deemed to 'count', as they happen outwith the *'repeating cycle of the timetable'*. The peculiarity of this situation means that the school was judged to be 'Good' in its delivery of Religious Education, but not *'fully compliant with the curriculum requirements laid down by the Bishops' Conference.'* We are, it will not surprise parents to know, confident that our current offering of both Religious, and General, Studies through our Sixth Form

Prior4Life programme keeps our students meaningfully engaged with broader, faith based, and societal issues.

In terms of the Collective Worship provided by the school, the inspectors stated that, *'students have regular opportunities to participate in prayer at the college either in their form group, their house or as a whole college.'* They remarked on the fact that *'students have a strong sense of belonging to their house'*, but critiqued the fact that some students only said their House prayer, *'confidently'* and not, *'reverently'*. The inspectors mentioned that *'many students do not have a developed understanding of the purpose and value of worship.'* Given that over half of our student body are neither Christian nor Catholic, it is perhaps unsurprising that some may struggle to understand the *'value of worship,'* as the framework deems they must. That any teenagers, Catholic or not, in our world today, are engaged with worship is impressive. That it is not deemed sufficient to be acceptable in the new framework is remarkable. Instead, it demands they must be suitably reverential and make direct connections between worship and their school life. As a school, we encourage students to have time to reflect every day, in House, or Tutor Time, or in Whole School Assemblies. We have Collective Worship through our House Services and the Weekday Worship that all students regularly take part in, and our Whole School Masses are joyous occasions. What we do not do, and would not ever do, is insist that our young people pray, or even pray in a particular way. To do otherwise, in a school with fewer than 20% of students being Catholic, would be to start down a path of shaping the way that they interact with faith in an overly directive and prescriptive fashion.