

1. Home (<https://www.gov.uk/>)
2. Education, training and skills (<https://www.gov.uk/education>)
3. Inspections and performance of education providers (<https://www.gov.uk/education/inspections-and-performance-of-education-providers>)
4. Inspection and performance of schools (<https://www.gov.uk/education/inspection-and-performance-of-schools>)

Speech

Amanda Spielman's speech at the ASCL annual conference 2018

Ofsted's Chief Inspector addressed the 2018 Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Annual Conference in Birmingham.

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Can I start by saying how pleased I am to be here today. Those of you who were at last year's conference may remember that it was my first big speech as Chief Inspector (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/amanda-spielman-speech-at-the-ascl-annual-conference>). I used that speech to lay out some of my priorities for Ofsted and what I hoped to achieve. So it's great to be back here today to present my own self-evaluation for year one. I got some feedback from some of you last night, and look forward to getting more today.

What a year it has been. I'm a strong believer that chief inspectors and politics don't mix, so I won't dwell on some of the more high profile events of the past year. But even in our own world of education we've seen some major changes, including the arrival of both Geoff and Damian.

I must admit there was some trepidation in Ofsted Towers at Geoff's election. I think it's fair to say the platform he ran on wasn't entirely 'Ofsted friendly'. But since taking up office, we've found him to be – yes, tough and determined – but also constructive and pragmatic. Working together, we've already been able to find solutions to some thorny issues and I think there's much more we can do in future.

Returning to the substance

Last year I made clear my desire for all of us to shift our focus back to the ‘substance of education’. The question I asked was: how do we make sure our efforts are directed at giving young people a knowledge-rich education that sets them up to succeed, as opposed to hunting for performance table prizes and stickers. It’s a theme I continued throughout the year, developed through a big research programme looking at the curriculum in schools and in colleges.

I have been genuinely thrilled with the debate and discussion that have followed. Although I know not everyone has agreed with all of our conclusions, many have and there is an almost universal agreement that the essential diagnosis is right. For too long, the curriculum – the thing that should lie at the heart of educational thinking – has come second to the pressures of accountability and performance tables.

Ofsted has of course played its part here: we haven’t put enough emphasis on curriculum in the framework and, as a result, may have contributed to a vicious cycle, whereby schools have done the same.

I am pleased that ASCL recognises many of these issues. I have enjoyed sitting on your commission on ethical leadership, which I know has reported at this conference. Its emphasis on making sure school leaders make the right decisions, for the right reasons, is entirely correct.

Here, I have to put in my usual disclaimer, lest there be any mischief from our friends in the education press. I am not opposed to accountability: indeed it would be a rather odd position for the head of an inspectorate to take. I think that Progress 8, new SATs, GCSEs and A-Levels are broadly good things. But I do maintain that success in these measures should flow from a rich curriculum, rather than tests of all kinds and performance tables dictating the curriculum itself.

Spending time on the right things

So today I want to continue that theme of the substance of education, but from a different perspective. Following on from Geoff, I want to look at how Ofsted can play its part in reducing workload, so that you’re able to focus on the things that matter to you and to your pupils.

Because, at the end of the day, it really doesn’t matter what an inspectorate thinks if we can’t attract good people into teaching. The record number of good and outstanding schools won’t be sustained if the people, who make them run so well, are burning out, and leaving the profession.

When I see NQTs brimming with passion to change young lives for the better, I think it’s an utter travesty that so many end up losing their early enthusiasm because of the pressures of the job. Especially when so many of those pressures are entirely unnecessary.

Because that’s what endless data cuts, triple marking, 10 page lesson plans, and, worst of all, mocksteds are: a distraction from the core purpose of education. And a costly distraction at that. Many will say that these have been driven by Ofsted and the wider accountability framework, not

by school and college leaders themselves, and I'll come to that in a minute. But, as Geoff has said so clearly, ethical leadership is what should drive your actions.

That said, clearly Ofsted isn't blameless and we must go on doing all we can to support removing unnecessary workload for teachers and school leaders. So I want to talk about some of the steps that we have been taking to cut out the guff and direct the focus back to what matters.

I want this to be a frank discussion. Because, we know there is no silver bullet. As I see it, there are 5 major drivers of workload:

1. Government policies and requirements, which schools and teachers must follow.
2. Accountability through performance tables and inspection.
3. The consequences of accountability – what governing bodies, LAs, MATs or RSCs do as a result of an Ofsted judgement or a set of results.
4. The fear of litigation if schools do not take a belt and braces approach, particularly on things like health and safety.
5. And finally, how policies and accountability measures are translated by school leaders into day-to-day management tools such as policies for planning, assessment and marking.

Set out like that, it should be clear that it's only in my power to change one of these things directly – and only half of one at that! But nevertheless I want to turn to what we can do to ensure that inspection does not generate unnecessary workload.

To start with, we have been clear about what we actually look at on inspection and, more importantly, what we don't. I've said it before and I'll say it again, we do not want to see a performance on inspection. We do not want anything special to be created. We do not want you to produce "Ofsted-ready files". And, above all, we do not want you to employ consultants to perform mocksteds.

What we want to see on inspection is an accurate reflection of what happens in your school. Yes, we want to see how you approach assessment. We want to see good teaching. We absolutely want to be sure that your leadership is effective. But we want to see all of that just as you approach it day-to-day, not as a special presentation for Ofsted.

Some of you will say I'm naïve; others might use more choice words, if I were to suggest that we can make inspection a low stress event just like any other day. Fair enough.

After all, if you were to say to your pupils: "Oh, don't worry about that GCSE or that A-Level; it's just a reflection of what you've learnt", you'd get a similar response.

Inspections will always to some degree induce anxiety, which might lead to stress: that's human nature. You want to give the best account of your work. But most inspections are for just a day, so that stress shouldn't build up for weeks and months before. If your school is working well week in,

week out, you will get a good Ofsted judgement regardless of how much preparation you put into it.

I really hope that you do listen when we try to bust specific myths about inspection (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-handbook/ofsted-inspections-myths>). I am sure many of you already follow the one-man, Twitter myth-busting machine that is Sean Harford (<https://twitter.com/HarfordSean>), and if you don't then you probably should.

I won't repeat all of those individual myths here today, except to say that, when you see a myth being busted, please make sure your staff know it as well. Few things are more depressing to me than reading the results of our latest teacher survey and finding that most teachers still think we have a preferred style of teaching. Significant minorities think we still grade individual lessons or want to see lesson plans. In truth, we cannot reach every teacher directly, but through you, we can.

At the same time, if there are new myths emerging, let us know and we will be more than happy to take steps to bust them. Even though I am sure Sean's wife would appreciate it if he spent slightly fewer evenings playing triple-marking whack-a-mole.

So that's the myths, what about the reality?

Well, we are also trying to make sure that the process of inspection is as painless as possible. Since January, we have been running a new model for short inspections of good schools. The early feedback from those inspections is very positive, and I want to thank Steve Rollett here for his work in helping us get this model right.

Underpinning our new approach is our belief that it is better to catch an institution before it falls, than to give it an immediate requires improvement judgement. The new model gives those with a few areas of weakness time to improve, before we return for a full inspection. In the meantime, there should be no confusion: your 'good' judgement remains, and you avoid the consequences that can flow from an RI [requires improvement] grade.

There will be times when we find more severe weaknesses or where our risk assessment model indicates that a school could be experiencing a major decline. In those situations, it is right that a full inspection happens immediately. But, for schools with just a handful of areas to improve, we think the right approach is to give them the time to do so.

In a similar vein, we have removed the 3 strikes rule. There was a presumption that a school should be graded inadequate, if after two RI outcomes a third inspection did not show that it had improved to good. Instead, we are letting our inspectors use their discretion to judge a school as it stands, regardless of its inspection history.

Other steps we have taken include a new approach to safeguarding. In training our inspectors this year, we have moved away from a compliance approach. I'm thinking here, for example, of stories of fences being too low. Instead, we want our inspectors to look at whether a good safeguarding culture runs throughout the school. Fewer tick boxes; more focus on how schools identify risks of serious harm, and help young people to be safe.

We've also stopped reporting on performance management arrangements. Inspectors are not requesting anonymised lists of teachers who did or didn't achieve an increment on the pay scale.

And that leads me on to one of my biggest bugbears in the world of education; the misuse of data. Anyone who has ever worked with me will know that I'm not averse to a bit of analysis. Evidence-based approaches to education are the right approaches. I don't believe that an HMI can walk into a school, take a quick sniff and come to an instant judgement.

But that doesn't mean that our inspectors should need, or want, to see endless pages of data, cut to the nth degree on 10 different pupil characteristics. The other day I was horrified to see an example from a school of a pie-chart of pupil performance data based on the results of 3 pupils. Torturing data is not just pointless. There is work in creating those analyses. There is work in discussing them and all too often many of the differences they may seem to show are probably just statistical noise. And there is work in designing and delivering interventions to address those apparent differences, and some of those aren't really justified. And I know that some of it happens because we have tended to over-analyse data too.

So we have been working on this one too. Our intention is always to use data as the starting point, not as the end point, for inspection. We have redesigned inspection data reports to reduce the likelihood of over-interpretation. We have trained our inspectors to know what inferences they can and cannot draw from the data. And since September, we have operated a new analyst helpdesk to support inspectors.

There are also more direct measures looking at workload. In September, we added a new question to our staff questionnaire (<https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2017/09/14/tackling-workload-together-a-new-question-for-staff-at-the-point-of-inspection/>). It asks whether 'Leaders and managers take workload into account when developing and implementing new policies and procedures, so as to avoid placing unnecessary burdens on staff'. Quite a mouthful.

But, I can now share the first results from that question. Only 8% of staff disagreed or disagreed strongly, which I am sure will come as some encouragement to you. In fact 77% agreed or agreed strongly that leaders do take workload into account.

Of course, there is an inevitable bias to the positive in this question. Few people want to jeopardise their school's inspection. So we are looking at how we can best use this question. On inspection itself, we are not using the responses to downgrade leadership and management. We are using them as part of the discussion with leaders about the way they run their schools.

I am loath to go any further, just at the moment, to commit Ofsted to directly judging leaders' approach to workload. I am sure there is room for us to look at more under the leadership and management judgement. But adding something to the Ofsted framework never has a subtle impact. Unless we think through our approach carefully, perverse incentives will follow. And the very last thing I want is for Ofsted to become a wedge between staff and management. So I am not ruling out taking a closer look at workload on inspection, but I want to do this gradually, and in discussion with the sector.

That takes me to the final area where I see scope for us to tackle workload. That is through the new education inspection framework that my team is developing for 2019.

A top priority for me is to make sure that the framework explores the things that either give a good judgement of educational effectiveness or are vital to young people's development. The alternative is a giant basket full of things that dilute the validity of our judgement and create lots of extra work for you.

To give you a flavour, here are just some of the things that have been suggested for inclusion in the Ofsted framework in the past year:

- volunteering
- gang education
- school meal quality
- swimming capability
- home cooking skills
- first aid
- school to school collaboration
- knife awareness
- resilience
- democratic engagement

And there are many more. Don't get me wrong, I think all of these are valuable suggestions. But every time we add something to our framework, we dilute the focus on the substance of education and we create more work for schools. So I intend to make sure that the new framework is as sharply focused as possible on the things that matter most.

The framework development is supported by our research programme, which currently includes:

- the curriculum survey, which is helping us to define what a good curriculum looks like, in terms of intent, and implementation and impact
- international research on lesson observation, and what can and cannot be gleaned from it
- a review of book scrutiny practice and, again, what it can and what it cannot tell inspectors about standards in a school

- broader work on the validity and reliability of our inspections and the link with educational effectiveness
- and finally, in response to feedback from teachers – a research programme on workload and well-being, focused on schools that manage this well.

I hope you can see from the steps we are taking, that I do not believe excessive workload is inevitable! I know that you, and all the dedicated professionals who work for you, will always want to go above and beyond for young people. But what we can do is to make sure that you're going above and beyond for the right reasons.

And that does mean you as school and college leaders playing your part – and Geoff has talked eloquently about that today. You have to take tough decisions in your institutions all the time. Some of those decisions create work, that's inevitable. But when you do take them, please be clear why you are taking them, and accept where the responsibility is yours. In the long run, to do anything else only undermines confidence and morale.

Thank you for listening today, and for the opportunity to share a platform with Geoff and Damian. I am really confident that by working together we can make a real difference and make sure that teaching is the attractive, challenging and rewarding profession it deserves to be.

Thank you.

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