

Amanda Spielman at NCASC 2020

Introduction

Thank you for having me. Staring at screens might be the norm these days, but that doesn't make it any easier, or more enjoyable! I hope you will bear with me for the next 20 minutes or so, before we open up to questions.

First, I want to thank you for everything that you've been doing over the past few months – holding it together for children in the toughest circumstances. There's no sign of this abating, with a new lockdown now in force. But, while there's been the stop, start and stop again of normal life, your work, and ours, has of course had to continue.

We've seen some of this work first-hand: despite routine inspections being suspended in March, we were determined to help the wider COVID effort where we could. From April, around 700 of our staff and inspectors were deployed to other organisations – from the Department for Education to the Department of Health and Social Care, and alongside you in many of our local authorities.

If there was any doubt at the outset, this was absolutely not about gathering intel! Rather, we wanted to help and to build capacity. In local authorities, this took many forms, from child protection work to manning foodbanks. Some of our staff even volunteered as foster carers. We really were guided by you on where we could be most useful.

The experience gave an insight into the challenges you have been facing, and our inspectors, I can tell you, really did value being closer to frontline practice.

In all areas, the hard work and dedication of your people shone through. Staff going through the same difficulties as the rest of us as lockdown began to bite, but who got the job done for children and families regardless.

I'm very proud that Ofsted was able to help, even if in quite a small way. Just as I'm sure that you are very proud of your staff.

COVID-19 issues

Like Ofsted, many of you watching today have a wide reach. Overseeing not only children's services and vulnerable families, but with responsibilities for early years, and schools too. COVID is still a significant challenge in every area of that work.

On the one hand, you're contending with the logistics of schools and early years providers operating in unusual circumstances – the nuts and bolts: making sure that children get to school, that transport works safely. Doing your bit to help schools, nurseries and childminders stay open, as well as all the other vital services.

On the other, you will have been trying to keep your eyes on the children at risk of falling from view. The impact of COVID on children's visibility has been one of our biggest concerns – as I've said repeatedly. A concern that I'm sure you share.

COVID has affected every one of us, but children have had to absorb much of the damage. Because time and again, they've come second to other national priorities. So, I'm pleased that, for this lockdown at least, closing schools is a red line. It really is so important that we have children in school, not just for their education, but for their safety and security too.

As you know, schools are among the top referrers to children's social care. But, over the summer, with schools closed and health visitors working in the acute sector, referrals to children's social care dwindled in some places. Helping the children you are aware of during a pandemic is a challenge in itself. But, you can't care for those you can't see. And just because the phone isn't ringing, it doesn't mean that children aren't suffering.

And of course, this vacuum has been filled, up to a point. Most schools are now open, which is of course reassuring. But the issues affecting children haven't magically been resolved. School referrals are still low, as is the attendance of vulnerable pupils.

And, although attendance figures are actually pretty decent, our autumn school visits have shown a rise in the number of parents opting to home educate their children. For some, it's a positive choice here – having enjoyed putting on their 'teacher hat' over the summer.

Heads tell us that many parents are keeping children at home because they're worried about their safety. Of course, as a parent, it's completely natural to feel concern and want the best for your child. But it's frustrating if much of this is being sparked by 'fake news' and misinformation on social media, which is what we're hearing.

And of course, schools aren't immune from misinformation either. There are myths doing the rounds about what schools 'have' to do, or must not do, such as no singing or swimming and keeping all doors open, no matter the weather. And there are indications that schools may sometimes be sending pupils home too readily. So, a consolidation and simplification of government advice for schools would be helpful for teachers and parents alike as we head towards the winter.

And, as I'm sure you'll recognise, there will sadly be parents who want to avoid scrutiny, to keep their children out of sight – exploiting the situation to their own ends.

And quite a proportion of the children now being educated at home have special educational needs. For children with severe disabilities in particular, the closure of schools and other services has been devastating. We really are talking about children being left without access to therapy and education for months.

And here, many parents haven't made an active decision to keep their child at home – they've been told that schools can't accommodate them. Because it's too difficult, because COVID risk assessments won't allow it. It's deeply concerning and, understandably, many parents feel cut adrift.

For the children with SEND that have been able to get back into education, it hasn't been plain sailing either. We're hearing that many have suffered setbacks in their communication skills – probably down to having reduced social interaction for such a long time. And, although some people are working really creatively to help families, this is an ongoing concern. We'll be looking at this more in the next report from our autumn visits.

Under-1s

I think it's fair to say that the effects of lockdown are being felt particularly keenly by very vulnerable children.

We're now on the second day in a fresh lockdown, and the message from government is that school closures remain a last resort. While this is good for our line of sight, there are other issues here. Tighter restrictions have brought increased tensions for many, especially in the most troubled families.

We're all spending more time at home these days. And for most children, that's a place of comfort at best, boredom at worst. But for some, sadly, it's a source of danger.

The pandemic has brought difficult and stressful times. Financial hardship, loss of employment, isolation and close family proximity have all put extra pressure on families who were already struggling. Poverty, inadequate housing, substance misuse and poor mental health – they all add to the toxic mix. You'll be well aware of the increase in domestic violence incidents over the summer – just one symptom of the COVID pressure cooker.

Perhaps one of the most alarming trends that we've seen is the continuing rise in incidents of harm to the youngest and most vulnerable of all children, the under-1s. Of course, babies can't tell an adult if there's a problem. Often, abuse is only uncovered when there's a critical injury, or when it's too late. Another young life damaged, and in the worst cases, lost, before it's really had chance to begin.

I'm sure you share our worry. Every week, we are seeing notifications from local authorities about babies that have died or been seriously harmed through abuse or neglect.

The figures are stark. Between April and October, we saw over 300 serious incident notifications. A significant proportion of these – almost 40% – were about babies, over a fifth more than in the same period as last year. And tragically, over half of these cases – that's 64 children – suffered non-accidental injuries. And sadly, 8 died as a result.

It doesn't bear thinking about. But we must all be alive to this hidden

danger.

Violence towards babies was already a worry before COVID. Over a quarter of all incidents reported to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel last year involved non-accidental injuries to babies. Children being abused, often by young parents, or other family or household members, who had very little social support.

As well as babies being intentionally harmed, we're seeing a high number of unexpected infant deaths. Some, apparently preventable tragedies: babies not being put down to sleep safely, sharing a bed or sofa with a parent who has been drinking, for example.

And we know that there has been good work going on to identify high-risk babies during lockdown before the unthinkable happens. For example, work to prevent harm to the children of parents misusing substances, or with serious mental health problems. Situations where professionals understand the risk factors and have acted decisively to give families the help they need, or take action where they need to.

There is a great deal of expertise out there and we know that you are well aware of the risks. But everyone needs to play their role. That includes professionals across whole communities. Midwives, health visitors, GPs and other health workers who have good relationships with families and can build on that trust. Staff working in schools and nurseries who may have information about a vulnerable infant because an older sibling attends the setting.

And help for younger parents is important, but without labelling or patronising them. Building their trust so that they accept advice and learn how to look after their children safely.

And as ever, we cannot overstate the importance of curiosity here. It may not always be comfortable territory. But the right questions protect children. All professionals who work with a family where there is a new baby have a role to play. Consider how well parents are coping, and if there's any help that they might need. And we need to make sure that all staff and volunteers understand the risk factors and what to do if they spot them.

Continuing restrictions may be hampering face-to-face visits. But, while these children are out of sight, they should never be out of mind.

Visits update

But the rebuilding effort has begun, and I believe that Ofsted has a role to play here. We're doing what we can to help education and care through a particularly tough period, and to help us all learn from the COVID experience.

Of course, safety is important. But it's also important that children get the education they need after so long without the usual structures in place.

We're making visits to give that assurance to parents, and to government and commissioners, about what's happening for children. As I've said before, this absolutely isn't inspection, and we aren't handing out graded judgements.

Out of all the evidence we gather, we are publishing [thematic briefing notes](#). These reports pull together what we've found is happening all across England. And they give everyone an overview of how schools, colleges, early years and of course local authorities and social care providers are responding.

I hope you'll have seen the reports we published in early October. We will be publishing another in a few days' time which will look at schools and local authorities. And there will be more reports in December, along with a fuller thematic report in the new year.

On the schools side, the visits are going well. Feedback so far has been heartening. Schools tell us that the visits are a positive experience, that there is true dialogue and that inspectors are genuinely keen to hear what has been going on. They are also clear that we are doing what we said we would: the visits were non-judgemental and genuinely collaborative.

And just as importantly, we're hearing that the conversations are helping schools to reflect on their plans, refine their priorities and celebrate the things that have gone well.

Because schools are doing some solid, thorough work. For example, I heard of one school, knowing that attendance might be quite patchy in September, that was doing a really good job providing absent pupils with all of the lessons they missed, to do at home. They'd done it in a really low-tech way, using their existing digital platforms, simple resources, careful communication with parents and a well-managed approach to teacher workload.

Let's not pretend that the challenges aren't great, but we are seeing schools approaching these challenges intelligently and having some notable success in returning to some normality.

Again, on the social care side, the visits have been very productive. We've visited 14 local authorities and more than 600 children's social care providers so far. Each visit results in a published letter, but we are reporting on the national picture too, as I've described.

Our most recent briefing note sets out what we found during our visits to children's homes in September. And despite the challenges that homes are facing, there has been a great deal of good work going on.

Staff have been working very hard to keep homes COVID-secure, while helping children live as normally as possible. Homes were making good use of technology to help children keep in contact with their families. For some children, this is actually having unexpected benefits, particularly those who normally find direct contact with family or social workers stressful. This could become a lasting legacy of lockdown in cases where direct contact isn't in a child's best interests.

Our next set of briefings, in a few days' time, will give a round-up of our

first visits to local authorities. On the one hand, we are seeing some excellent work with children and care leavers, despite the restrictions – although we still have concerns about the drop off in referrals and the children you can't see.

But it's also clear that pressures on the family court have significantly hampered your ability to issue care proceedings to protect children, as well as delaying adoption and other permanence arrangements. Clearly, this isn't good for children. We understand that virtual court proceedings are helping with the backlog in some areas, but it's not clear what impact these new arrangements are having on families.

Overall, the sector has been very receptive to the visits – so thank you. We understand the pressure that you are under, and do not want to add to it, in any way. This isn't about judging – rather, offering reassurance to families, those commissioning services and central government. Identifying shared challenges and providing feedback on areas for improvement.

We've been reflecting on the first set of visits and considering your feedback very carefully. You can be sure that we'll make changes where we need to. Yvette has already written to you to give you a heads up about our thinking. We will keep you updated as this progresses.

Now, of course, we are in another lockdown, so the position has to shift, though I hope temporarily. We will be working remotely where we can – only going on site where it's necessary to do so, or in response to urgent concerns. That means our programme of autumn visits to schools and colleges will be done remotely for the time being. But we will revert to in-person visits after the lockdown.

We're also pausing ILACS and area SEND visits. We appreciate that some of you will already have prepared for your visit. But we think this is the right thing to do, so that you and your teams can respond to local issues and focus on maintaining frontline services.

And we're pausing our SCCIF assurance visits, instead prioritising monitoring visits to homes based on our risk assessment, with a mix of on and off site work, depending on the circumstances.

We will still take action in response to safeguarding or other serious concerns, and carry out our vital social care and early years regulatory work, as you would expect. And we'll carry on registering new early years and children's home providers.

We will resume our assurance visits as soon as we can. And, looking ahead, our plan remains to bring back full ILACS and SCCIF inspections next April at the start of the regulatory year.

Work in lockdown

The first lockdown was an unusual time for us, as routine inspections were suspended. But of course, our regulatory work didn't suddenly stop in March.

In fact, demand for children's homes places increased, so we have been prioritising children's homes registrations. We wanted to make sure that there are as many places as possible for the children who need them.

We've worked hard to fast-track applications and register new homes. That includes using technology and virtual 'visits' to help us when visits in person weren't possible – all the while prioritising children's welfare. This isn't about cutting corners.

Since March, we've had more than 280 applications to register new children's homes, and around 80% of those are now open. But we haven't let standards drop though – not every application was suitable or successful.

Building capacity is vital, but we have to make sure children are safe and getting good quality care. COVID hasn't stopped us from taking enforcement action when we need to. Since March, we've suspended the registrations of nearly 20 children's homes and restricted accommodation at over 20 more.

Sufficiency

So, we do now have more children's homes registered than ever, and also a slight rise in places. But, while we can celebrate the increase in homes to a point, we haven't suddenly solved the sufficiency problem. Demand carries on increasing.

There weren't enough places when COVID began. And this pressure on places is only set to continue. Getting good-quality placements where they are needed has to be a priority for everyone.

Getting the right placement for a child really matters. And, not every local authority is doing all it can. Not only are people not matching well, they are also not making sure that all children are living somewhere decent – the use of unregistered placements does remain a concern.

We fully understand the challenging context – there is nothing like enough suitable specialist provision to go around. But that's no excuse for using placements that are patently unsafe. We always expect you to make good decisions for children, no matter how difficult the circumstances.

And we carry on sharing information, so you know about unregistered homes. That includes telling all councils in England and Wales when we issue a cease and desist letter, so that you know not to use these places.

And we'll carry on working with the DfE to make sure that our powers are fit for purpose, and to inform the debate on capacity. We know that these issues are very much on the government's radar, and despite the pressure on legislative time, I'd urge them not to lose momentum.

Foster care

Of course, sufficiency isn't just an issue in children's homes. Today we published our [report on matching in foster care](#). We all know the vital role

that foster carers play.

Yet, as our report shows, a chronic shortage of carers is making successful matches for children difficult. This is particularly acute for groups of brothers and sisters, for disabled children and teenagers.

You know the importance of really good matching. It can make all the difference to children's futures. Get a placement right, and a child will feel stable and loved, and that they have a real home. They can get on and enjoy their lives. But where matches don't work, there's more distress and instability for children who have had a great deal of disruption in their lives already.

We also know that unsuccessful matches are closely linked to foster carers taking a break from fostering or deciding to stop fostering altogether. Given the pressure that the care system is under, that's really the last thing we need.

Our research looks at what makes a really good match. As you'd expect, the best matches happen when a child's individual needs, as well as the skills and experience of foster carers, are properly understood.

Giving children the information they need about potential carers, taking their feelings into account and making sure that foster carers know everything that they need to know about a child all help matches to work and last.

We saw some really excellent work with children and foster carers. But this kind of practice isn't universal. There is much more that could be done to make sure children are as prepared as possible for a move, and that what they want is taken into account.

Going to live with people who are, to all intents and purposes, complete strangers, is an enormous step for a child. Their needs and wishes should always be at the centre of decisions.

Please, do give our report a read when you have chance.

Early years

It's only right that I touch on early years, as I've barely mentioned it yet. Again, as in children's social care, our regulatory work continued over the summer.

We wanted to make sure that there would be a steady flow of new providers to help parents. Quite early in the summer, we started getting back to on site pre-registration visits, so that new childminders could be registered, new nurseries could open, and new branches of nurseries established. Between June and August this year we were able to register 680 childminders and nearly 600 new nurseries and pre-schools.

Children's mental health

I also want to give a plug to our JTAI report on children's mental health, which we're publishing next month.

Mental health is something that everyone is taking more seriously these days, and that's generally a good thing. But, especially with children, we aren't always good at recognising where an intervention is needed, and where there are temporary problems and upsets that will pass with time.

We all remember how hard it is being a teenager! There are lots of emotions at play. Not to mention hormones! And, while some things clearly need professional treatment, others don't. There's a danger that we over-intervene in some cases, and not enough in others.

CAMHS are already under a great deal of pressure. If we don't get this distinction right, the system gets clogged. And then, when some children do desperately need specialist help, they don't get it when they need it.

Just because it's important for people working with children to be aware of mental health considerations, it doesn't make everyone an expert. We'd never encourage schools to diagnose children's physical conditions, and rightly so. And yet, we constantly invite teachers to use the language of mental illness when this is widely removed from their area of expertise.

Of course, teachers have a role here – they know their pupils and often notice when something isn't right. But it's equally important that they know when to hand the baton over to those with the expertise. That way, children are more likely to get the help that they need.

Our JTAI report takes a look at how partner agencies are working together to help children who need those specialist mental health services. The study is an overview of joint inspections with the CQC and others that we did before lockdown – but I think the findings have particular resonance now.

And the report actually presents a pretty positive picture, with agencies working well together to improve services and to make them more accessible.

In the areas we visited, specialist CAMHS had been restructured to improve pathways, and to provide better support to professionals and parents. Children were being identified and getting the services they need sooner – though there were still gaps in all areas, and some children were still having to wait too long.

Joint working

So, what should we all be putting our efforts into over the next few months?

It's a cliché, but joint working really is vital. Just because everyone says that partnership working is the key, doesn't make it less true. On one hand, this is about systems – every local partner sharing the right information at the right time, as I mentioned earlier. Equally, being confident in their own

roles and expertise, and when it's the right time to draw in other partners. And it's also about culture. All partners need a leadership approach that puts children first, and encourages professional support and challenge.

Unsurprisingly, COVID has reinforced just how important it is for agencies to collaborate. In fact, our autumn visits to local authorities have shown much better multi-agency working, with some professionals finding that the move to virtual communication has made it easier to join up. It's important that we don't lose these gains.

On our part, there has been a great deal going on behind the scenes. Along with your representatives, we've been working closely with government over the last few months to help influence and shape policy. Using our insights about you – and the challenges that you're facing – to help policymakers make sensible decisions.

Conclusion

And all that's left for me to say is to reiterate my thanks for everything that you're doing for children, in the most trying circumstances.

I know you see the importance of our role too. We are here to help, not hinder. Rest assured, we will carry on making sure that we play our part intelligently, responsibly and constructively – as we have done from the very start.

And no matter where your conference is next year, I am very much looking forward to being there in person.

Thank you.