

Amanda Spielman at the AoC Annual Conference 2021

Good afternoon, it's great to see you today and it's fantastic to be here in person in Birmingham – after far too long restricted to Teams and Zoom.

I'd like to start this afternoon with some reflections on a very turbulent year in education and a difficult time for colleges. We all talk about 'recovery' these days, but that doesn't mean the challenges are over. I know how much you want to be full-time educators and not part-time COVID managers.

So I want to talk about the road ahead and as part of that I want to explain the role that Ofsted will play along the way. I want to tell you about some changes to our work emerging from the spending review. And I also want to leave a bit of time at the end to listen to what you have to say and I hope answer some questions.

The impact of the pandemic has been, and continues to be the single biggest issue for the education sector. It's been an astonishing year and I'd like to start by acknowledging the tremendous effort, ingenuity and dedication shown by the whole sector.

And we saw that up close. Although our routine inspections were suspended last year, we maintained a presence in nurseries, schools and colleges.

Whether through research into how the sector was responding to the pandemic, or by visiting establishments and talking directly to leaders, we kept up to speed with developments. And I hope we were also able to provide a useful and constructive sounding board. When the pressure is on, it often helps to discuss ideas and challenges with a sympathetic and well-informed outsider.

I'd like to give credit to colleges for the way you adjusted and adapted in such trying circumstances. Colleges were quick to move to remote learning – perhaps because the concept wasn't a new one for you. You were able to support students with IT and internet access; you provided welfare advice and support to help students manage through uncertainty. At the back end of the year, you navigated the tricky waters around exams and assessments for your students and the uncertainty around admissions for this year's intake.

I think, and I hope you agree, that there's a really strong working relationship between Ofsted and the college sector; a genuinely collaborative relationship that we saw at work during the difficult periods over the past year. I've talked about the visits that took place while inspection was suspended. They laid the groundwork for a return to monitoring visits in the summer, which were themselves the stepping stone back to full graded inspection this term. Throughout, we have been talking to college sector representatives. And as we look to the future, that collaborative approach will help us shape inspection as the sector takes on new duties – which I'll return to shortly. We were under no illusion that the return to full

inspection, whenever it came, would have to be handled carefully and appropriately. It was really important to us to listen to your concerns, understand the difficulties you face and make sure that the inspection process takes everything into account. And we needed to do that without watering down the rigour of the process, or undermining the credibility of our judgements. Because soft-peddling inspection would let down the people that we, and you, really work for – the students. They have had their education forcibly abridged by COVID. And it's the responsibility of the whole education system, including Ofsted, to pull together and help this cohort achieve its potential.

Because helping these learners achieve their potential has massive implications not just for individual advancement but for the recovery, development and success of the country as a whole. It's hard to overstate the importance of further education for a country emerging from cycles of lockdown. It's hard to over-emphasize how important upskilling our workforce is, as the country forges new economic and trading relationships. And it's hard to exaggerate, in the wake of COP26, the critical role of colleges in meeting the skills needs of next-generation cleaner and greener industries.

Quite rightly further education and skills remains high on the political agenda. In the spending review and budget, it was good to see political recognition backed up with some new funding, which is a step in the right direction. The skills bill marks another step, and as ever implementation will be key. Overall though, there is no doubt that this is an busy time for further education and an exciting time to be involved with colleges.

I've spoken about the importance of inspection in the current climate. I think that's because inspection doesn't only provide an assessment of education today, it's also a barometer to help predict the weather ahead. One of our most important roles is gathering and drawing on evidence to advise ministers about the quality of provision in the sector and the impact of policy initiatives. From T levels to boot camps – and across the whole gamut of education recovery, we will be gathering evidence to assess progress. We have 2 thematic surveys planned, on skills boot camps and T levels, but beyond this our inspections provide a wealth of data that we are able to interrogate and aggregate.

In the run-up to the spending review we'd been in discussions with government about how we could provide faster and more comprehensive assurance about education throughout this crucial period of recovery. The government is keen, as are we, to accelerate our inspection cycles – so we can reduce the time it takes to inspect every school and college across England.

For colleges, sixth form colleges and special designated institutes we have had funding confirmed that will allow us to reach every institution between now and 2025. In this cycle we will not undertake short inspections – so every college, sixth form college and SDI [specialist designated institution] will receive a full inspection between next September and summer 2025. I'm confident that this is a positive development and one that will be welcomed by the sector. It followed discussions with the DfE about how inspection can respond to the focus on local skills needs.

I'm in favour of assessing the extent to which colleges have regard to local skills. We've had concerns about mismatches in the past between courses that are popular and courses that really open doors. There is a moral imperative here on two fronts – both to help the economy thrive and to present students with realistic pathways. It's really important that we get a true feel for the local economy so we can properly consider the contribution of colleges. This work clearly doesn't lend itself to light-touch inspection. We need full inspections, with some enhancements, which I'm pleased government has recognised.

I would add that we're already starting to pilot our methodologies for inspecting skills needs, and we'll be seeking your input. That's part of the value of our collaborative relationship with the FE sector.

These changes to the way we inspect colleges will obviously provide greater assurance through the sector. I hope they will also give you the benefits of our curriculum-focused approach, and the professional dialogue between college leaders and inspectors. That dialogue is not only central to the assessment process, it also highlights opportunities for improvement and progress. The response to inspections under the new framework was very positive before COVID and remains so today – because of the dialogue at its heart.

We were confident that the EIF was supple enough to adapt to the current situation. We piloted extensively last term and we're now seeing the fruits of that in colleges (and in schools too). We talk to leaders about the COVID impact in their colleges; we discuss the adaptations and adjustments the colleges have made, and that helps us understand what success looks like in each individual context.

The first reports from this term's inspections are now starting to be published and they're certainly not giving any cause for alarm. You continue to perform well and to be recognized for doing so.

This term we're also starting to inspect previously outstanding institutions now that the exemption has been lifted. I have been very open about what this will mean. Since 2012 we have had a one-way valve attached to the outstanding grade. So for a decade we have been accumulating outstanding institutions without reassessment. As inspectors return to colleges declared outstanding many years ago, they will inevitably discover that some are now running off the pace. But we are starting to see others moving up the field. And I'm confident too, that plenty of outstanding colleges will have maintained standards over the years and through the pandemic.

In fact, the first published report from our September inspections was of the Sixth Form College Farnborough. An academy converter, its predecessor was inspected in 2007 and found to be outstanding. Fourteen years later it has maintained the top grade.

There are many siren voices who portray the education sector in the bleakest of terms. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has done damage to the education of millions of young people – and it continues to present stark challenges to

staff working in our schools and colleges. But as we've returned to full inspection this term, we have not seen a sector that is on its knees. Far from it. There is a resilience and a determination that we recognise and that should be encouraged. I would like to thank you all for the work you are doing and the tremendous difference you make for individuals and communities across the country.