

# [Amanda Spielman's speech to the Confederation of School Trusts'](#)

## **Covid recovery in a rapidly evolving sector**

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me.

It's great to be here in Birmingham.

I have just come from meeting three community school heads in the city. I always enjoy these visits and being here in a conference hall feels reassuringly normal. But despite the end of restrictions, the tail of covid is long, for children and young people, and for those who work with them. The post-Covid labour market is really tight and that has implications for all of you. And more generally I know the pandemic has taken a disproportionate toll on leaders.

It's exam season now, the first we've had for years. So that there are 18-year olds for whom this is their first public exam.

You've helped them prepare, helped manage down their anxiety, and I know you'll be prouder than ever come results day in August.

As you will be of all the children you have helped get through the last two years, exam year groups or not.

And I want to start with what we at Ofsted know about where the school system is right now.

Throughout the pandemic we published insights from the ground.

Inspectors visited many of your schools, sometimes purely for research, other times to monitor and, more recently, to inspect.

[Our reports](#) have highlighted all the many difficulties children have faced, and the endlessly evolving complexities you have had to manage.

And they have chronicled the great work done by your staff, families and of course children themselves to get over the hurdles, and for children to learn.

I know that these insights were useful to government as it responded to each phase of the pandemic.

I hope that they reflected your experiences, and perhaps reassured you that others were in the same boat.

During the pandemic, Leora and Steve asked us to look at how you as school trusts supported your leaders and teachers.

And we found you were doing a good job.

Many trust schools told us that the support with safeguarding, interpreting COVID-19 guidelines and developing remote learning was crucial.

We heard how you helped your schools manage social distancing, source PPE and organise remote recruitment.

These were things you would never have had to think about before 2020.

But thanks to the strength of your work, your school leaders were able to give a good slice of attention to the day-to-day business of teaching.

We know from our insights work that the work you and school leaders did during lock down, has resulted in smaller knowledge gaps than there could otherwise have been and is now helping pupils catch up.

But of course, significant challenges still remain. At every stage children have lower and more variable starting points. Gaps have widened. Younger children are often behind in language, communication and social skills. We hear that more effort is having to go into teaching older children behaviour and routines, and more work in managing behaviour.

There is still too much persistent absence. And many vital SEND, mental health and other support services have yet to return even to their creaking pre-pandemic levels, while needs continue to be exceptionally high.

We all recognise the importance, now more than ever, of using assessment well to identify pupils' knowledge gaps, and of making changes to curriculum and teaching in response.

Please don't be afraid to make curriculum changes because you are concerned that inspectors won't understand or will take a dim view.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact I encourage you to continue to work to understand your pupils' needs, and to make the curriculum changes that they need with confidence.

And we are finding that, despite all the challenges, many schools have managed to improve over the past couple of years.

More schools than before are raising their grade to Good, and although some are losing a historic outstanding grade, others are achieving what is undoubtedly an exacting standard.

With the upheavals of the last years, it is also easy to forget that the school trust sector has been rapidly evolving.

The great majority of primary and secondary schools are now academies and there are almost 1,200 trusts, made up of more than 8,000 schools.<sup>1</sup> Almost half of all pupils are in a school that are part of a trust <sup>2</sup>.

Today, trusts are embedded to the point that you are an integral part of the school system, although one that's not always well understood.

You are a fundamental part of the government's education strategy. Yet for many parents a trust's influence on their children's schooling isn't entirely clear.

School trusts, even the smaller ones, are much more than a group of individual schools.

I understand some of the challenges you face as trust leaders. I was there right at the beginning, as part of the founding team of what's now one of the bigger trusts.

I was involved with those early conversations with DfE, negotiating funding agreements and pushing for recognition of the role that trusts play.

At that time government still did nearly everything through the lens of individual schools. It was still somewhat reluctant to acknowledge that the contract was with the trust and that was where the main lines of communication needed to be.

That trust was, and is, all about the children and schools with the steepest path to climb.

I'm proud, as no doubt you all are, to have played my part there in transforming education for thousands of children.

That's also how and why I lead Ofsted.

To have a transformative impact on the children who have the hardest start in life, for whatever reason, who aren't getting a good enough education. As well as to recognise and record where schools are doing great things.

## **Multi-Academy Trust Summary Evaluations (MATSEs)**

Over the past few years, as the sector and our inspection framework have evolved, we've interacted more closely with school trusts both through the inspection process and through conversations with trust leaders, CST, and other sector representatives.

A few years ago, there was a perception that not all our inspectors understood the trust structure, but today the picture could hardly be more different.

Indeed, the inspectors that we recruit as HMI and our serving OIs have often worked in a trust structure. Some have been chief executives. I'm keen to build on this and recruit more OIs with senior level trust experience.

Our summary evaluations of school trusts are currently carried out only by HMI, but we want to expand this over time to trust-experienced OIs. This will enable people like you to bring your experience to help us evaluate trusts. And we hope this will also benefit you by showing you the range of practice

in different trusts.

We have also done our own research on school trusts, particularly the larger ones.

None of the findings will surprise you – you are living and breathing this every day. But I think it's helpful for Ofsted to add to the body of evidence that we now have about the value school trusts bring to the system.

Not just the back-office support and economies of scale, it's about the wealth of opportunity that comes with having the time and resource to think deeply about school models, the curriculum being taught, the development of your teachers, the innovations you can make and so much more.

Our programme of summary evaluations continues, and most recently we evaluated the Birmingham Diocesan Multi-Academy Trust.

We have several more lined up over the coming months, so we look forward to visiting some of you soon.

Our summary evaluations do not grade the trust. They use the recent inspections of schools in the trust to probe trust leaders on the work you're doing, to support and challenge you through professional dialogue, and to help us understand the sector better.

We no longer look only at the largest trusts, or at those that are causing concern. Instead, we look at a broad range, to get a good cross-section.

We recognise that trusts have much freedom to choose how you do curriculum, teaching, CPD, behaviour and so on.

We're not in the business of prescribing a model for you to follow.

And like senior leaders in every sector, you are making difficult decisions about your priorities, and where to put your resource. We aren't second-guessing this, but we are interested in the impact it's having.

And we do take the role of the trust into account when we inspect one of your schools.

We will always ask school leaders about how a trust is organised and how the school sits within it, so we can fully understand the context in which the school is working.

And, of course, we see many of you and your teams on school inspections as well.

We are interested in the level of involvement that the trust has with an individual school, as well as whether delegation and governance arrangements are clear and effective.

## **Holding decision-makers to account**

But our summary evaluations and our school inspections only take us so far.

As we all know a white paper was published this spring, and the schools bill translates a proposed new set of government policies for schools and trusts into draft legislation.

Of course any new set of policies has to build on the strength of the sector now, as well as responding to the challenges of the post-covid state, and tackling longstanding issues.

I'm sure that many of you agree that current accountability arrangements for school trusts are not yet in the best possible shape.

And government has recognised this too, with its plans to set a new regulatory regime for trusts.

This is an important opportunity. I'm pleased that CST is thinking deeply about trust regulation, and making your views known to ministers.

The papers that CST has published around this topic are insightful and clear.

And of course the discussion about how to regulate trusts effectively will at some point consider inspection.

It's important not to consider inspection as an end in itself. Inspection is one tool among others in the regulatory toolbox.

The government needs to work with the sector to work out how regulatory decisions are best made, which will help clarify where and how trust inspections can inform those decisions.

Of course there is a great deal of school-level data that can be aggregated at trust level and reviewed by government, but data can only ever give part of the picture. It can only take us so far. That's why at Ofsted our mantra is that "data is only the start of the conversation".

If trusts were held to account through data alone, many hugely important aspects of a good quality education could be missed. Inspection can fill in those gaps and provide a rounded view.

You and your teams are making important decisions that affect the quality of education children receive. How that's translated into action on the ground is so important, and school inspection picks this up well.

But where decisions are being made in central offices, it's right that we talk to those decision makers about why they took that decision, what they're hoping to achieve, and how they know they're achieving it.

Trust level inspection would help get to the heart of how trusts influence the education our children are getting every single day.

So it is my view that there is a clear place for trust inspection in the new system.

And this fits with one of the main commitments in our new [five-year strategy](#). It is to make sure that accountability expectations are applied at the right level, in a way that reflects how you actually work. Schools in trusts are an integral part of the trust, not connected but separate entities.

So we do believe that trusts should be held to account through inspection in a new regulatory system.

And, in the meantime, I hope that trust leaders who have had a summary evaluation agree with the feedback that we have been getting, that the process and findings were helpful.

## TrulyCivic

It must be an exciting time to be a trust leader. Watching the evolution of the sector is so interesting, seeing you reach out beyond the core role:

- Into teacher education. As well as the SCITTs that many of you have established, the new National Institute of Teaching – is trust-led and some of the delivery partners involved in this space are trusts. We've recently started inspecting the lead providers of early career framework and NPQ programmes. It's a fascinating area.
- Oak National Academy is a great example of harnessing the skills and expertise that you have in your trusts and directing them to an important cause.
- Your work supporting your children strengthens the fabric of your local communities, and has a positive effect on the lives of children and their families.

And this sense of trusts as civic leaders, with a wider set of activities and responsibilities, has been supported by CST.

I know it has been something Leora has championed in particular, and I want to pay tribute to the work she, and indeed many of you, have done to expand our collective understanding of what a trust can and should be.

There is so often a misunderstanding of our role. Only this week I saw a story saying that we weren't doing a good job because few teachers thought Ofsted had improved education at their school.

But as you all know, school improvement has not been part of Ofsted's remit for more than a decade – that responsibility sits with you and to some extent with other parts of government. A clear policy distinction has been drawn between inspection and improvement.

But what I am very clear about is that within the remit we're given, we work to be a force for improvement. That principle lies behind all we have done in recent years.

And as we all move forward, I look forward to working with you and with government to help make sure regulation is simple, transparent and fair – and as well-designed as it can be.

Because we know regulatory systems are hard to get right. And there will always be unintended consequences, that have to be thought about and managed.

At Ofsted we've spent a lot of time considering how we affect the sector.

We are all too aware that our words and actions have weight, in part because of the consequences hung by others on our judgements.

But we aren't the only player in the system.

You and your schools are measured not only by Ofsted grades, but also by performance tables, and by compliance with the academy handbook.

We've all learned that if each of these taken in isolation can create incentives that pull in different directions.

We've put a lot of thought into this balancing act in our current inspection model, and I'm confident we are getting it largely right.

We will be evaluating the impact of the EIF and it will be important to hear from you about your experience of it.

Professional dialogue is at the heart of inspection. I'm very pleased to come to events like this and engage in professional dialogue with all of you. I find it immensely valuable, and I hope you do as well.

Thank you.

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Source: MAT sector analysis, Schools Data and Analysis Team, March 2022. As at the end of February 2022 there were 1,185 MATs. Collectively, MATs run 8,464 schools.

Source: Schools Data and Analysis Team – 46% of pupils are in a school that is part of a MAT, and 56% of pupils are in academies