ASCL annual conference

Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be here in Birmingham and to be almost the last speaker at this year's conference. It's the slot before the main draw – which helps my audience figures, so I'm not complaining.

And I believe that Amanda was the warm-up woman last year for Lenny Henry and this year it's for Ruby Wax. Little did you know until yesterday that you were actually getting the stand-in for the warm-up for the stand-up!

I'm sure there are many things on which I would agree with your final speaker, but I'd be surprised if Ruby was interested in the ins and outs of inspection. So I'm on safe ground in talking about it before she arrives.

Just a word on the coronavirus though. It's at the front of everyone's minds. You and your colleagues are rightly making plans to deal with staff absences on a large scale. You will be thinking about what to do if you have to close your schools. How to make sure children are safe, first and foremost.

I know many people are worried about the toll this will take on them and their teams – and the toll its already taking. The government advice for now is to keep schools open and go about your business, paying extra attention to hygiene. And this has to be right. Schools keep children safe and fed. And for some, that is the most important thing that you can do.

For our part, we're working closely with the Department for Education, and monitoring the situation day by day. As of last night we have a new, temporary, deferrals policy. This means we can defer the inspection of any school or college that's affected by the virus – and we will. We will be proactively asking schools and colleges if they want to request a deferral because of coronavirus, and clearly we will look very favourably on all such requests. In fact, HMCI has asked to be personally involved in any decision not to defer in these circumstances. I also expect further measures to be taken by government in the coming days and weeks, and we will continue to work with them.

Like you, Ofsted has staff that are already ill, or anxious about the future. We have no desire to increase the worry, or get in the way of good, sensible planning for the next few weeks. You and your teams are working hard, in the interests of children, and of the country. We are too, and we will do what we can to support you.

But eventually, normal service will resume. Even if it doesn't feel like it right now. We are almost two terms into the new inspection framework and have carried out around 1700 school and college inspections so far. So, on behalf of Amanda, I want to share with you what we've learned, what we're hearing from you, and how that is helping us carry on improving inspection.

We have had an enormous amount of feedback already, much of it very positive, but some of you do have a range of concerns. And I want to talk about all of

this today, the positive and the negative.

Positives

First, the positives.

As you will know, we survey all schools after inspection, to see whether you thought the process was fair, and whether the feedback you got was constructive and will help you improve.

What this has told us since September is that close to nine out of ten schools and colleges that have been inspected are ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the experience. Heads have been telling us that the process was fair, and that the inspection gave them a strong base from which to improve. ASCL’s own survey this morning showed that three quarters of members think the new framework improves on what came before. Although it also clearly raised other issues for us to think about. But more of those in a minute.

I’m not saying you always enjoy inspection, or that you necessarily get the outcome you hope for. But even among the schools that are probably disappointed by the result, most tell us that the process was fair and the feedback constructive.

To quote from our survey feedback: ‘the process was incredibly fair, done with and not to, and inspectors were genuinely looking for the positives’ and ‘it was professionally done, in partnership with me, focused on exactly the right things’.

And the wider impact of the changed model is also showing up. In a recent conversation on Twitter, I’m told that school leaders were discussing the merits of bringing curriculum squarely back into school leadership conversations, and the development potential this had both for themselves and for middle leaders.

One contributor said: “As somebody who came into the profession because I loved my subject, I think it’s empowering for teachers. Thinking about curriculum is intellectually stimulating, unlike so much of what has passed for CPD over the years.”

This kind of feedback tells us that we are in the main getting to that true professional dialogue with you and your staff that we set out to achieve. The widening of inspection to include discussions with more of your staff seems to be valued, as we hoped and expected.

Another aim was to reduce the workload associated with collecting and analysing internal data. It had become the many-headed hydra of inspection.

It was creating so much work for teachers. It required explanation and interpretation. It was impossible to know whether valid comparisons could be made across schools. And too often it reduced children’s education to a spreadsheet.

As we promised, we have cut right back on this. While I know there are some who disagree, I'm glad that we no longer look at internal performance data.

If you cast your minds back to when we consulted on the new model, you as school leaders – and actually also teachers – supported the changes. Around three quarters agreed with the core proposals. In our surveys an even higher proportion of those that have been inspected are now saying that they are happy with the model in practice.

So we do believe this framework is well on the way to fulfilling the aim of contributing to raising education standards, by focusing on the substance and integrity of education. Things I know this association hold dear.

Negatives

But, and I stress the but, this doesn't mean that we are getting everything right. Some of you have entirely legitimate concerns, which have indeed attracted quite a lot of coverage. So why is this?

First, inspection is a human process, and even in the steady state, there are going to be blips that need sorting. We can and do work hard to minimise these, but we will never be able to eliminate them entirely.

Then, when inspection changes, there are inevitably going to be some more questions while it settles down. With many thousands of inspections to be done, it is unrealistic to think there won't be any, no matter how much training and preparation we do ahead of time.

Some of the negative feedback we've had relates to specific inspections: an inspector's understanding of the new framework, or how they carried out an inspection. We really do our very best to sort out problems with individual inspections as quickly as we can, and to correct our mistakes.The feedback from complaints also tells us what we need to reinforce through school inspection updates, training and quality assurance.

But sometimes we will come to a conclusion that we believe is fully justified, and that doesn't line up with the school's view. I can't pretend that isn't and won't always be the case. Ultimately our job is to report fairly and objectively on education standards, as independent experts.

But there are some other concerns which go beyond individual inspections.

Myth creation

We know that any problems that arise early on in a new framework can have a disproportionate impact on the whole system.

Given the public nature of inspection reports, we know that a single awkward phrase can be relayed round the education world at astonishing speed, and with undue impact. And many people also pass information on their inspections around the system, especially when things go wrong, with a similar result.

But the problem is wider than this. The full context of a question or the nuance of a particular judgement isn't always communicated. Something that made sense, and perhaps reflected a finely balanced judgement in its context, can look disproportionate or overwhelming when taken out of context. In fact, this can make a judgement that was actually fair and reasonable sound unfair or unbalanced.

Either way, this can give rise to Ofsted myths, and sometimes even fear. And hard as we try, it isn't easy to correct misperceptions that have grown legs. So, I'd like to talk about some of these here, and put them on record in a way that I hope will give you some more confidence.

Exam results

I'm proud of the work we have done to bring the curriculum back to the centre of the education discussion. It's the right place for it. A broad and rich curriculum is best for all children – rich and poor, north and south – so that their success in exams is built on strong foundations.

But please don't make the mistake of thinking that we have simply replaced 'exam results' with 'curriculum planning' in how we assess schools and colleges. That wasn't the intention and isn't the case.

When we published this framework in draft, we said very clearly that outcomes remained important, but would be looked at in the context of the curriculum, teaching and assessment, rather than in isolation. Outcomes still contribute significantly to the 'quality of education' judgement, which is in turn the weightiest contributor to overall effectiveness.

As Amanda has said in speeches ever since she became chief inspector, results matter, to children and to their parents. From age 16 onwards, qualifications and grades are used to assess young people for the next stage of education, and for employment. Of course it matters that pupils and students achieve highly, and that their sets of grades reflect a solid education, in the subjects that will give them the best prospects for the future. And it is not just about access to the next step. It's about having the best set of choices for their next step, and the best chance of doing well after they get there, and of doing well subsequently.

So we do take account of published performance data. We do analyse results and performance measures, to frame that first conversation with the school or college leadership. Inspectors study the IDSR reports carefully ahead of their work on site.

And of course, what we then want to see and what the framework is really looking for, is a school or college where those good results flow from doing the right things. That means teaching a broad, balanced, ambitious curriculum; and it means acting with integrity, in the best interests of pupils and students.

If we haven't taken sufficient account of good results in an inspection, or if at the other end of the scale we have been over-generous, that's clearly

something we need to correct through quality assurance. And we have asked our QA teams to look harder at this.

Secondary curriculum

Then there has been an enormous amount of talk about secondary curriculum, and about shortened Key Stage 3s in particular. And we do care – a lot – about whether your curriculum stacks up across the whole course of secondary education. To go back to what we said when we published the draft framework:

“In restoring the curriculum to its proper place, we have done much work to make sure we pitch our criteria at the right level. Too weak, and a poor curriculum that leads to little learning, and to the most disadvantaged making the least progress, would go unscrutinised. Too strong, and the diversity and innovation that are an important aspect of our education system would be hindered.”

And it isn’t for us to make curriculum policy. So, for maintained schools, we link back to the national curriculum, which is the statutory expectation. And for academies, where the funding agreement is framed simply in terms of broad and balanced curriculum and preparing children for statutory tests and qualifications, we use the national curriculum as a reference point. We want to see whether a school’s curriculum is comparable, at least, with the national curriculum in breadth and ambition. But this is not an expectation that you need to match the national curriculum, subject by subject; this is not a tick-list approach.

We really don’t have a narrow focus on whether your school runs a two year key stage 3, or a three year key stage 3. In fact, there is a whole spectrum of curriculum models, encompassing many other variations. Plenty of schools with a short KS3 have achieved good or even outstanding judgements this year.

So, we have no unspoken hurdle here that blocks schools from being judged good or better unless they have a three-year KS3. We will want to understand how you are providing a broad and balanced curriculum to children in those crucial first three years of secondary school. And we will guard against unnecessary narrowing if it is simply to make way for three years of teaching only to GCSE specifications. We will also want to see how you set every child on the best pathway for them for GCSE and beyond, which won’t always be the one that would notch up the highest Progress 8 score for the school. If you have a bit of time available, please take a look at my blog on this.

This month’s training for all inspectors revisits this topic, as it is one that has clearly been challenging on some inspections. And again, it is something we are looking out for in quality assurance.

Primary subject leadership

Another concern has been that we are expecting primary schools to be run like secondaries, with specialist subject leaders for every national curriculum subject. This really isn’t the case. All we are trying to do is to make sure

that we are talking to the person or people who make the relevant curriculum choices.

Even if a primary school has a topic-based curriculum, someone in the school (or perhaps in their MAT) is responsible for thinking about what it is meant to cover, that it plays its part in the coherent sequencing of subjects and how the school knows whether children come out with the level of knowledge and skills they will need to do well in secondary education. We just want to make sure we talk to the right person. And that person absolutely can be joined by a senior colleague such as the head teacher if they want.

We aren't judging that person, nor are we judging the curriculum in the subject covered by that deep dive. The evidence from each deep dive simply contributes to the evidence for the quality of education judgement, which is made at school level.

Outcomes profile – overall and disadvantage

Some people have said the new framework is tougher than the last, and it is harder to be good. In fact, the proportion of schools that are good or better has been stable for a while now, and I expect it to stay stable. Under the EIF we are seeing around two thirds of schools keeping their grade. And of those that have changed, as many are going up as are going down, similar to last year. This is a more accurate barometer of performance than simply looking at the profile of inspections we've done so far this year. As we inspect weaker schools more frequently than stronger ones, the mix of schools we inspect in any given year is not representative of all schools. And so the grade profile for any particular month, term or year is likely to be lower than the state of the nation. The fact that most schools are staying where they are, and as many are improving as declining, tells us we've got the bar in about the right place.

Inspection outcomes for schools in disadvantaged areas is a perennial issue, that's been the case for a long time. And we have seen that inspections under the EIF continue to reflect the simple fact that it can be harder to run a school in a challenging context. But clearly, just because schools are less likely to get a good or better in these areas does not mean the teachers or leaders in them are any worse, or that Ofsted has a bias. It is because some schools in challenging areas find it harder to maintain attendance. They can find it harder to manage behaviour that in turn affects pupils' learning. They often endure more staff sickness. And on average they find it more difficult to recruit teachers and have higher turnover. This is something we all know, and instinctively sympathise with.

However, inspection grades can only highlight the problem. Our job is to report on the quality of education as we see it in each school we inspect. The moment we allow for a different quality of education based on location is the moment we let go of the idea of equality of opportunity. The challenge is to local and central government to help schools in these areas overcome these obstacles. And they are indeed working on it, through behaviour hubs, the recruitment and retention strategy and curriculum programmes. It's vital for

the whole system that these are successful.

And as Amanda said when we published our research on school funding, the fact that standards have been maintained over the last few years of funding cuts is testament to an incredible amount of skill and effort from you and your teams.

Outstanding grade

It is fair to say that we haven't judged many schools outstanding this year. That's partly because of the exemption. Most of the schools that might earn the grade if inspected now are currently exempt, so aren't in the stats.

But as we said when we published the draft framework, outstanding is now a challenging and exacting judgement. It is not an accolade that is easily won. Schools and colleges must achieve highly across the board to get the grade. They must marry excellent results with curriculum substance, an effective behaviour model and that wider personal development. It's a tough nut to crack and, again, we're not going to apologise for making it so.

Amanda discussed the purpose of the outstanding grade with the previous secretary of state, to make sure that what we designed fulfilled the policy intention. The grade marks a school or college out as an exemplar. It signifies excellence that others can learn from: strong outcomes achieved in the right way.

I know that there have been a few schools that expected, or at least hoped for, outstanding this year – but didn't quite get there. And I do understand the disappointment. Raising the bar for outstanding isn't the kind of change that can be trickled in over time: the framework had to come in as a coherent package. So I know that some find it hard that they didn't reach outstanding this year, when they might well have done if inspected in previous years.

We also know that a vintage outstanding judgement can be a bit of a millstone. A school that was last inspected over a decade ago may be on its second or third head since then, and have few if any of the old staff. If it is no longer really outstanding, that decline may have happened a good few years ago. So it can be tough for the current head if a perfectly respectable 'good' judgement makes it look as though they have overseen a decline in standards, when of course, that's often not the case. So we've added standard lines into our reports to make this point to parents and others.

The government's consultation on removing the exemption has already closed, so I hope we will all soon know where we are heading on this one. Our views haven't changed: it's outdated and needs to go.

Consistency and outliers

We have heard concerns about consistency. Some commentators have made the point that while schools and colleges are facing a big change, so are inspectors. I would like to reassure you that our inspectors – both HMIs and Ofsted Inspectors, often drawn from your leadership ranks – have adjusted

quickly and well to what has been asked of them. And we train inspectors regularly, drawing on feedback from recent inspections, and we have extensive quality assurance processes, on and off-site.

But inspectors are human. And inspection is neither a science, nor an art – it relies on a set of decisions, some of which are inevitably subjective. However much we train, develop, coach and guide inspectors; however clear our guidance and however objective our quality assurance processes, each inspection can look and feel slightly different. And that isn't wrong.

But we are always interested in the outliers – the schools that achieve quite strong results, but nevertheless come out as RI; the schools that don't do particularly well at key stage 2 but still come out as good.

We look at these carefully. Often, the apparent anomaly is explained in the detail of the report. For example, a school that has been transformed in the last two years into a bastion of excellence may nevertheless have only middling GCSE results, because the pupils sitting exams last year benefited from the changes for a relatively short time.

But even so, it would be wrong to discount the possibility that individual inspectors might, on occasion, over-play the curriculum and underplay results, or indeed vice versa. So we look at that possibility through quality assurance. In almost all cases, we are confident that the inspection came to the right judgement. But every now and then judgements do change in QA. And that's entirely right. We are strengthening our quality assurance so that we look at each and every one of these apparent outliers.

So we're not apologetic about what we are trying to achieve with the framework. But we're not cloth-eared either. We have been listening hard to the concerns and complaints and using them to shape further inspector training and QA where it is needed.

And as I said earlier, the full range of feedback is reassuring us that you support the direction of travel, and are more satisfied with the experience of the new inspections. As one person put it to me, they are just as tough, perhaps more so, but tough in the right way.

But in the business we are in, the job is never finished. We'll always be able to refine the way we inspect. One of the reasons we value working with representative associations like ASCL is that you do such a good job of reflecting members' feedback, in a way that helps us improve what we do.

Transition extension

I hope we've shown that, when we announced the extension of the transition period on curriculum for another year. That means schools and colleges that hover between 'good' and 'requires improvement' will have had two years to plan and make any changes to their curriculum. During that time we will consider what you are trying to do, and how you are planning to do it – not just what's currently being taught.

The transition is limited – it won't absolve an inadequate school with multiple weaknesses; nor will it elevate a good school to outstanding – but it is a genuine attempt on our part to recognise that good curriculum work takes time.

Reports

Some people have reservations about the new-style inspection reports. We know that some of you, and some governors and trustees, don't like the fact that they no longer summarise all of the inspection feedback.

For schools, we've said that we now write inspection reports mainly for parents, who want a concise summary in everyday language, explaining what a school is like to go to and how well it is doing its job. We need to keep these public-facing reports accessible to people who don't talk in education-speak.

The feedback to the school comes in the professional conversations that flow right through the inspection, and that are summarised in the feedback meetings. The final feedback meeting is an opportunity for you and your Chair of Governors or trustees to capture and record what you need to help you take your school forward. And if these meetings are being cut short because of time pressures, then we need to look at what we can do to mitigate that.

During the election campaign, the Conservatives indicated one possible way forward: longer inspections.

Whilst this will clearly divide opinion, it could just make the process of inspection feel less rushed, even more collaborative and more constructive. Which is, after all, something I think we could all sign up to.

Conclusion

What's really important to us, as we move forward, is that we don't leave myths to grow and misconceptions to fester. For the last few years we've included a dedicated myth-busting section in our handbooks that we update with each iteration.

And if there is one myth that needs destroying – one myth to rule them all, if you like – it's that we expect schools 'to do things for Ofsted'. This is the great, pernicious myth. It suggests we are policy makers, not inspectors. And it is plain wrong.

We don't want schools or colleges to change for us. We want to see you doing what you do best – teaching the nation's young people, giving them a great education.

You, as leaders, rightly have great freedom to do your job as you choose. So our job rightly, is to judge whether your approach is working.

And it's a tough job you have to do. Money for schools and colleges has been tight for years (and by the way, if you were riled by that widely reported

headline from the Telegraph, please do read what we actually wrote about school funding). Many kinds of outside support for children are no longer there, and you are having to make up the difference.

You'll be as disappointed as me that Amanda wasn't able to be with you today and have the opportunity to hear about your own experiences and thoughts about inspection. However, as the 'stand-in, warm-up act', I am happy to stay around for a bit to talk. I always learn something new.

Over the next year we'll be talking more about what we are learning about schools and colleges through the EIF, and what we can see is changing.

But for now, for this year, thank you.