

Speech: Amanda Spielman at the National Children and Adult Services (NCAS) Conference

It has been quite some time since an Ofsted Chief Inspector has addressed this conference, so I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today. And I hope that this is a marker of what can be described, these days, as an increasingly constructive relationship between Ofsted and the sector.

It is no secret that my background lies in education. But when I took on the role of Chief Inspector, I was clear that every part of our work was of equal importance. And I made a commitment that I would get to know every aspect of our broad remit.

So, when it came to children's social care, understanding the issues and challenges you face has been one of my priorities. Eighteen months in, and my education is not over yet. But what I have seen, so far, has been both encouraging and inspiring.

It has been a real pleasure to visit some of you in person, both, in local authorities and individual service providers. Thank you for making me so welcome, and for letting me see first-hand what you do. It is very clear that this is a sector with boundless dedication and passion to improve the lives of children.

I am also lucky to be supported by equally talented social care colleagues within Ofsted, who have been invaluable in getting me up to speed. A special thank you to our new National Director for Social Care, Yvette Stanley, who has quickly made her mark too. The introduction of any new inspection framework can be tricky, for inspectorate and inspected, alike. But under her steady hand, the roll-out of our [Inspections of local authority children's services \(ILACS\) framework](#) is going very well.

Responsible, intelligent, focused

I will discuss the new ILACS framework later. But first, I want to talk a bit about the guiding principles of our inspection approach, across all of Ofsted's remits.

I have always said that I would use Ofsted's power responsibly and intelligently. Not just in my own personal approach, but also in the whole way that Ofsted inspects and regulates.

In practice, this means that we focus our inspections on the things that really matter for children's education, care, and safeguarding. It means we use the evidence we gather to inform, and to advise, as well as to make inspection better. And it means our time and resources are targeted at areas, as far as possible, where they will lead to improvement.

As I have said many times before, I want Ofsted to be a force for improvement across all of the areas we inspect and regulate.

But going past these principles, fundamentally, Ofsted exists to shine a light where children and young people are not getting a good deal in their education or care.

I know that all of you will share our concerns about outcomes for older children suffering from neglect, children in unregistered education (perhaps I should put inverted commas around that), or those unfairly and unnecessarily out of school – just a few of the issues we have put a lot of time into recently.

And we will continue to use our position to speak out on behalf of vulnerable children like these, often, hidden in plain sight and in need of help and care.

A new education inspection approach

But if Ofsted is to be a force for improvement, it is only right and proper that we look at how we operate, to make sure that inspection is up to the task.

We are very close to a formal consultation on our new Education Inspection Framework, or (here come the acronyms!) EIF, in the new year. This is to a large extent a rebalancing of what we do at the moment, rather than turning schools on their heads.

And, in this rebalancing, one significant change is increasing attention to the curriculum and to what makes the substance of a decent education. So, how are schools making sure that children get a full and rounded education?

Of course, qualifications are very important. But, they are not an end in themselves. It is the education children receive that counts. I want to make sure that inspection reflects this. At Ofsted, we should be focusing on the 'how' and the 'what': the essence of what performance tables cannot capture. This will let us reward schools for doing the right thing by their pupils.

This does not mean that there will be no link between the quality of education and what the published data says. They are, of course, somewhat correlated. But I see inspection as a different conversation. It should ask a different question. We want to know what is being taught and how schools are achieving a good education, not just what the results look like and whether they are likely to go up next time.

By perhaps putting a bit too much weight on exam results and outcomes, we have not always sufficiently recognised all that schools are doing for their pupils. The cumulative impact of performance tables, inspections, and the consequences that hang on them, has served to increase the pressure on school leaders, teachers and indirectly on pupils, to deliver perfect data above all else.

Few schools do not feel that undercurrent. We know that this pressure is what drove the popularity of certain qualifications, like the ECDL [European Computer Driving Licence]. Schools steering pupils into certain courses because they are likely to get a higher grade in them. Not really for the benefit of that pupil, more for better performance table results.

Undesirable incentives

So far, I have spoken a lot about the effect of these changes on schools. And indeed, most of you will have education responsibilities. But make no mistake, these changes are good news for children's social care, more broadly, too.

Because when schools put exam performance and league tables over the needs of individual pupils, the consequences can be dire. We all know, for example, that these undesirable incentives sometimes lie behind pupils coming off school rolls.

For too many children, falling out of school is the start of a downward spiral. Their future becomes uncertain. And, for your part, these children are increasingly difficult to keep track of. We often talk about children going 'under the radar'; a cliché, but so apt here.

Once children fall out of education, their options are slim. Some will be placed in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) or other alternative provision. Many PRUs and alternative provisions (APs) are doing well for their pupils, but many are chronically over-subscribed. Gaps are having to be filled by unregulated or unregistered education of some kind. Either option brings many challenges for wider children's services.

But attainment aside, once children are out of school, they are unlikely to be taught for as many hours a day as they would in a school. What happens to children outside this time? Who are they associating with?

We know that gangs are calculating and clever. They target vulnerable children wherever they are. As the [St Giles Trust recently reported](#), the majority of children involved in county lines exploitation seem to be outside mainstream education.

And sometimes, under duress and the threat of expulsion, parents decide to home educate their child. You will know from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) survey that these numbers are growing. This is quite understandable. What parent wants the stain of exclusion on their child's record?

The vast majority of home educators are well-intentioned and do a good job. But just as some schools struggle to cope with certain pupils, some parents struggle, too. They mostly aren't qualified teachers and their child may have complex needs. At the other end of the scale, as we have highlighted, there are some who exploit home-schooling legislation as cover for using provision that doesn't have to meet our national expectations for all children.

The crux of all this is that it becomes incredibly difficult, for you, for local authorities, to know whether children are safe and getting a decent standard of education.

That is why we have lent our weight to calls for a register of home education, run by local authorities, which would offer some assurance here. And I very much hope that the Department for Education moves quickly from its recent call for evidence to a concrete legislative solution.

So to bring this back to inspection. Being in full-time education is a first line of defence, if you like. It offers protection for many vulnerable children, meaning they are firmly in the sights of the authorities. That is why off-rolling will continue to be one of Ofsted's top priorities.

We are already paying more attention to off-rolling under our existing framework. Inspectors are being given information that flags secondary schools with unusually high pupil movement, so that they can ask the right questions of school leaders. And, by shifting our looking at outcomes in context, rather than in isolation, we want to empower schools to put the child first.

The education sector is increasingly diverse. But I know that you take your wider responsibilities for the children in, and indeed outside, local education provision very seriously. So please, do let us know what you think when we publish the draft framework. Your views are extremely valuable.

Inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS)

But it isn't just education inspection that is evolving. Our social care inspection has also seen some significant changes in the last year or two. We have introduced a [Common Inspection Framework](#) for most of the services we regulate and, this year, saw the roll-out of the new [ILACS inspections](#).

Both of these embody those important elements of intelligent, responsible and focused inspection that I mentioned earlier.

For anyone unfamiliar with ILACS, children's experiences and progress are still at the centre. But our overall approach is more risk-based and proportionate than what happened before. Inspectors have a wider range of tools at their disposal to address particular issues and areas.

The approach is squarely aimed at supporting improvement and catching those who aren't improving before they fall. Quite simply, we don't want to wait until the next full inspection to find out that performance has deteriorated.

And, so far, the picture is encouraging. About 60% of local authorities inspected have improved their grading and the proportion moving out of inadequate at re-inspection is similar. Of course, there is more to be done, but these are positive steps. And I want to be very clear that this is not a lowered bar: we are using the same grade descriptors and, where local authorities aren't performing well, we will say so.

I would like to offer my congratulations to the leaders and practitioners in local authorities who have improved, and to East Sussex, Bexley and North Yorkshire in particular, who all achieved the highest possible rating this year. No mean feat, as you will be well aware.

So far, you are telling us that ILACS is tough, but fair, and that our renewed focus on the front line is the right one. As many of you may have noticed, these inspections are not all about scrutinising paperwork or lengthy meetings with senior managers. Inspectors now spend most of their time talking directly to social workers on the ground, hearing about their cases and children's experiences.

And that is what I believe inspection should be all about. Dialogue, feedback and professional development.

Creating environments for good practice to flourish

This leads me onto another common principle across all the areas we inspect.

To achieve the very best outcomes for all children, the professionals who work with them must be able to do their jobs well. This is a simple fact.

Teacher or social worker, if you have mountains of paperwork to do each night, an ever-increasing caseload or lack of support, supervision or training, it is likely you won't stay in the profession for long.

And we all, whatever our professional background, want to do our very best work and make the most difference for all our children. That is why our inspections continue to emphasise the importance of creating environments where good practice can flourish.

National media are constantly discussing the unacceptable attrition rates we have in the teaching profession. But what of social work? The challenges local authorities face in this area are no less acute, though they may get less attention in the press.

Just as in teaching, social workers need the right conditions to do their jobs well. This includes, among other things, the right support and opportunities for professional development. And, more broadly, stable leadership that really understands what is happening on the front line – all the things you would expect in an effective, high-performing children's services department.

Manageable caseloads

We all understand how important manageable caseloads are to this equation. And this is why Ofsted will continue to point out where these are getting in the way of social workers doing their jobs well.

In councils with manageable caseloads, we see far better quality, direct work with children. At a very basic level, social workers get to know families, and know them well. They make decisions that are timely, appropriate and that

make a difference to children. Why? Because they have the time and space in which to do so. In these councils, there is less staff turnover, less reliance on agency staff and more continuity for children.

And, having looked more closely at working conditions for social workers, our inspection evidence shows that these messages are being taken on board. Places like Hartlepool, Hillingdon and Rotherham have made reducing caseloads a priority, and improved their performance as a result. This shows what can be done.

Despite this, the variation in caseloads between local authorities is still startlingly wide, from around 16 children in some, to more than double that in others. It sounds shocking just saying it.

I think it is safe to say that no social worker joins the profession wanting to spend fleeting moments with children and families, barely skimming the surface of issues and rushing through important decisions. Please, let us make sure we do all we can to make sure they can do the job that they set out to do in the first place.

Of course, it is difficult to talk about caseloads without the spectre of finances surfacing. And we are, of course, acutely aware of that context when we inspect.

We do understand the difficult position that many councils are in, and the difficult choices they must make. But Ofsted's role is to assess practice and its impact on children and families, and report on this as we find. I am sure you would expect no less.

We all know inadequacy comes at a high cost. Therefore getting it right: right child, right support, right time, is the most efficient use of scarce resources.

And many councils are achieving this balance, making effective decisions for children despite the tough financial climate. Maintaining a good and stable workforce is central to this.

Joining the dots

I've talked a lot today about our approach to inspection. But despite their importance, individual inspections cannot tell the whole story.

Ofsted has a unique position, a bird's-eye view nationally, if you like, of education and children's services. We cover the whole of childhood, and for some, all the way up to age 25.

This whole-system oversight is crucial. While local authorities have the key role doing this locally, I don't think any other single agency is better placed to 'join the dots' nationally. And without this oversight, our collective understanding of many children's experiences would be fragmented. Few can disagree that an inspection system that looks at all children's interests across the whole country is good thing.

One good example of joining the dots is our [local-area SEND inspections with the Care Quality Commission](#). An area-wide review of what works for children with special educational needs and disabilities has obvious benefits. And when we look at cumulative findings, even more so. Last year, our overview report from these inspections revealed starkly how these children are being disproportionately affected by unofficial school exclusions.

I have no doubt that Ofsted can add even more value by taking a system-wide view, using its insights, triangulating individual inspection findings with existing research and evidence, and reporting on what is working well. This is why we have been building our research and evaluation function.

We have a full and, dare I say – exciting – programme ahead, including [projects on knife crime in schools](#) (you may have seen some of our interim findings already), as well as a big piece of work looking at making good decisions in children's social care. We know that these reports have real impact on policy and practice.

And we continue to hear positive things from you about [our programme of joint targeted area inspections](#). JTAIs look at how agencies are working together to support children on specific issues, such as child sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, neglect and, most recently, criminal exploitation.

With the input of the inspectorates for health, police and probation, these inspections paint a rounded picture of practice. Looking at a sample of areas in real depth, then feeding the insights back to the sector, I think that is a pretty powerful tool to improve practice.

The results can be used by you all, to celebrate the good, stop the bad before it takes a hold and, most importantly, throw light on areas that have sometimes been neglected.

Criminal exploitation of children

And carrying on with the theme of children who too often go under the radar, I want to share some of the findings from our [most recent set of JTAI inspections, published today](#).

Building on our work on child sexual exploitation, these looked specifically at children who are criminally exploited, including so-called 'county lines'.

I'm sure I don't need to tell any of you about the scale of the problem. You will all have felt its impact on your day-to-day work. But for context, the National Crime Agency reports that almost 90% of police forces they surveyed are dealing with 'county lines' activity. And there are estimates of some 1500 'county lines' operating nationally.

Despite the ages of some of those involved, make no mistake, this is organised crime. It is perpetrated by dynamic, organised and ruthless gangs. And children from all walks of life are at risk of becoming targets. We underestimate this risk at our peril.

Though children who have fallen out of education are likely to be targeted, criminal exploitation isn't a problem confined to the most deprived areas and parts of society, or the most vulnerable. All children, including those in areas of relative affluence, are fair game for these criminals. We have heard of gangs targeting private school children, for example, because they are less likely to arouse suspicion.

As you would expect, our study finds that strong multi-agency work, and a system-wide approach, is the first and best line of defence. It is so important that all local partners work together, to share intelligence and identify and respond to emerging risks. And by that, I mean all, from local authority children and adult's services, health, police, and education.

All of us, in our daily lives, whether at work or outside work, may see things and report our concerns. And local businesses can be part of the problem, but also part of the solution, contributing to the flow of information that you need, as well as the community at large. But ultimately, poor practice in just one function limits the effectiveness of a whole partnership.

Most of all, we must all be prepared. I am very concerned that despite the hard lessons we have all learned from past failures to pick up on child sexual exploitation, similar mistakes could be being made now.

We have seen, before, the dangers of not discussing contextual or risk factors that relate to race or religion, for example. Doing so can be difficult and should always be done with care, in a way that doesn't inflame tensions or encourage prejudice. But if we are to do what we need to do for children, they must be discussed. Openly, carefully, responsibly and at the right time.

Local partners must be quick to learn, and quick to act. But not all agencies fully understand the scale of the problem in their area. And regional and national networks of exploitation of children are even less well understood. This means that agencies are not always spotting children who are at risk, let alone supporting them as victims.

It is also a concern that some agencies are still not looking past the behaviour of grooming victims to get to the root cause. If we have learnt anything from past exploitation cases, it should be to see the child, not the problem.

Better training will help. But a culture shift, as we saw with child sexual exploitation, is needed. Clearly, a child carrying Class A drugs or a weapon presents a child protection issue, even if they appear to be perpetrators themselves. Similarly, professionals need to stick with children who are persistently offending, even if they are difficult to engage with, and look at children's behaviour in the context of their often troubled, chaotic, lives.

Prevention, too, is better than cure. Work with children, parents, schools and local communities to raise awareness of the problem is crucial. As a

parent you might sense something is wrong with your child. But how many suspect their child is being groomed? For most, it is almost inconceivable.

Some areas have built on their approach to child sexual exploitation, and are incorporating all forms of child exploitation in their work. But given the nature of exploitation, and the reach of these criminals, this needs to be happening across the whole country.

There is good work going on, as today's report shows. Recent modern slavery prosecutions, linked to 'county lines', are a good step forward. And the newly established Coordination Centre should inform a more coordinated approach to disrupt and prevent exploitation.

I would just ask you all to think about your own local response. Don't wait until the next high-profile operation, court case, or newspaper headline. If partners are not already working together effectively, they need to do so now. Because there is a real urgency to this work. Children who are being exploited cannot wait for agencies that are lagging behind or failing to recognise the issue. And no one should be thinking "this does not happen in our area". The mix of areas in this survey shows that.

This is an area of complex crime, on a level and scale that did not exist a couple of decades ago. We are all having to get our heads around it. We have given our social care inspectors extra training, so we can be sure that they are having the right conversations with you about what is happening on your patch.

We know these are messages that will resonate with you. It is not a problem that any one agency can address on their own. Those who work in children's services have an important part to play, but are just one part of a much bigger picture.

Conclusion

So to conclude. As an inspectorate, we always try to talk plainly about what works and, equally plainly, when it doesn't. But you can be assured that we will do so responsibly, based firmly on the evidence we hold.

We will speak up for the front line, and highlight what needs to happen so that everyone on it can do their jobs well. And most of all, we will carry on shining a light on those children whose voices can get lost in the system.