Speech: Amanda Spielman launches Ofsted's Annual Report 2017/18

Introduction

Good morning everyone, and thank you so much for taking the time to come and hear the findings from my second Annual Report as Chief Inspector. This report, as many of you will know, summarises the findings from all our inspections, visits and research over the past year. It's our opportunity both to comment on the quality of education, training and care services in England and, perhaps more importantly, our chance to highlight the areas where performance is lagging behind.

That bird's-eye view matters because, as our strategy makes plain, there is no point inspecting or regulating unless it supports improvement. And some of that improvement comes at the level of providers responding to their individual report. But equally important is how those of us acting at the system level respond to the big challenges that can't be tackled by one local authority or school or college alone. For that reason, I hope this report manages to cut through at least some of the Brexit din and to inform policy makers and help practitioners drive up standards in the years ahead.

Our focus on improvement does mean that media coverage of this report always leads on the areas that aren't yet good enough. At one level, that's how it should be: we're not in this business to slap each other on the back and tell each other what a good job we are doing. Young people get just one shot at childhood, which leaves no room for complacency. On the other hand, I know it can seem as though we paint an overly pessimistic picture. That's why I want to start by reiterating this message: the quality of education and care in England is good and it is improving. Our headline inspection figures tell that story:

- 95% of early years providers are at least good
- as are 86% of schools
- and 76% of general FE colleges
- and 82% of children's homes
- and, perhaps most importantly in terms of improvement, the number of local authorities judged good or outstanding for children's social care continues to rise

That is a reassuring picture and one of which the sectors should be proud. And it hasn't happened by accident. The high standards are entirely due to the hard work of teachers, lecturers, childminders, nursery workers, social workers and many others – professionals who work day in day out to deliver for young people.

Indeed, I reflected the other day: what would an HMI transported from a generation ago think of the education and care landscape of 2018?

Well for a start, she'd see a major expansion of high-quality, government-funded early years places, providing both education and childcare, helping to close the word gap and allowing more mothers in particular to enter work with the confidence that their children are being well looked after.

She'd see, as highlighted, by recent evidence from the IFS, more education funding now being directed at disadvantaged children than more affluent ones, addressing historic inequities.

In schools, she'd see behaviour vastly better than in the 1990s, with the quite frankly intimidating sink schools in inner cities all but gone – in fact, she'd see the educational performance in our biggest cities on a par now with the best in the world.

That performance has been powered in part by that of minority ethnic children, who in England buck a global trend that often sees minorities lag behind.

I think she'd take heart from the latest PIRLs survey showing literacy improving significantly in England over recent years. She'd see a real determination to create the strong vocational pathways that complement the academic track. She'd see a government committed to growing world-class apprenticeships. And when she looked at some of the most vulnerable children, she'd see that public awareness and demand for action on issues like neglect, abuse and exploitation are higher than they have ever been.

There's much that has improved over the past quarter of a century and much that we can be rightly proud of as a country.

But there are some things she would be disappointed to see haven't changed. There are still children who lag behind. Children for whom it seems the die is cast, even before entering nursery, and who never catch up in 12 years of schooling. Wealth remains a predictor, albeit a weaker one, of educational performance. And despite promises from policy makers, FE is too often seen as a poor relation to schools, somewhere for 'other people's children', while the outlook for too many children in contact with the care system remains bleak.

Perhaps more worryingly, she'd see new problems that have emerged as well. A child in Hackney is more likely to fulfil their potential than ever before, but in some of our coastal towns and White working class communities, attainment, progress and aspiration are too low. Sink schools may have disappeared, but some schools that haven't improved for more than a decade remain. Our colleges look less financially secure than in the past. Across the whole education sector, a mentality of 'what's measured is what gets done' trumps the true purpose of education, and curriculum thinking – the consideration of what needs to be taught and learned for a full education – has been eroded.

The counterpart in social care is that while statutory services have largely been protected from funding cuts, early help and prevention have indeed been cut back. And schools have become another front in the new culture wars,

expected to tackle an ever-growing list of societal issues.

So yes, there has been progress. Real progress. But there is still much more to do and it is in that context that I hope this speech is received today.

With that in mind, there are 4 of the Annual Report's key themes that I want to talk about today:

- the first is the crucial importance of getting the basics of education and care right
- the second is our concerns about the impact of lack of capacity in certain areas and its effect on standards and rates of improvement
- the third is the danger of expecting schools to become a panacea for all of society's ills
- and the last is the importance of focusing on the substance of education and care

Getting the basics right

The first theme I want to talk about is getting the basics right.

Here, I want to talk about the young people who seem to have the deck stacked against them. I often liken the path through education to a slope. For affluent and high-ability children, the slope is, in general, fairly shallow and the path to reaching their potential only moderately challenging. For others from poorer backgrounds, who face challenges in the home or who struggle with learning, the gradient is steeper and the path is harder. Our job as education and care professionals is to reduce that gradient, to make that path shallower. And perhaps the most important thing we can do to reduce that gradient is to get the basics right.

Some policy makers and practitioners are constantly looking for the next magic potion that will infallibly raise standards or reduce the numbers of children in care. Indeed, despite the history of snake oil, white elephants and fashionable gimmicks that have in the main been debunked, there does remain a curious optimism that the elixir of education is just around the corner. But the truth is, we don't need an elixir to help raise standards, because we already have the tried and tested ingredients we need.

That starts with early reading and learning to decode fluently through systematic synthetic phonics. I know it's a cliché to say it, but it cannot be repeated often enough: unless children can read, they can't learn to the full. They can't discover their own talents and interests; they cannot lose themselves in Wonderland with Alice or in Middle Earth with Gandalf; they are held back from exploring the limits of their imagination and creativity.

They live with that for the rest of their lives. We know where failure to learn to read well can end up: boredom and frustration translate into higher rates of exclusion, which in turn can lead to higher rates of unemployment and ultimately, in too many cases, it leads to higher rates of criminality. And of course, it feeds a vicious circle, with parents who cannot read well then unable to read to their children, meaning that their children start

school already behind. That is why improving early reading is a moral imperative and a central plank of social justice.

Breaking that cycle is possible. As we showed through our 'Bold beginnings' report, the most effective schools get it. They know that reading to young children in school, building their vocabulary and their knowledge of language, is a prerequisite of success. They read to children, they teach phonics well and they give children time to practise and consolidate their growing knowledge. They structure the Reception Year timetable, allowing for teaching and play but recognising the different purposes of the two.

And it does seem that more schools are adopting this approach. England's rise to eighth in the PIRLS international reading test and the year-on-year increases in the percentage of children reaching the expected standard in the phonics screening check are further causes for celebration.

But underneath the headline success, inequities remain. The percentage of children on free school meals who reach the expected standard on the check is 12 percentage points lower than of their more affluent peers. There is no excuse for that in a test based on the mechanics of reading. All, apart from those with the most severe special needs, can learn to read.

There is also significant regional variation – and this is not the usual pattern of advantage versus disadvantage. Areas such as Newham and Newcastle, that educate high proportions of disadvantaged children, excel in terms of their performance on the check. At the same time, more leafy areas like West Berkshire lag behind. To highlight quite how stark the divide is: in Newham, 80% of boys eligible for FSM achieve the expected standard, but in West Berkshire, only 51% of eligible boys reach it. Put more plainly – in places that underperform in the check, a substantial group of children who could have been on track with reading are instead being left with ground to make up.

Local authorities and schools that focus on early reading make a major difference, as Newham shows. Others need to do more. And to help them do so, we will propose changes that significantly strengthen our focus on early reading in the new inspection framework.

So this year's Annual Report is clear on the need to redouble efforts on literacy, in the early years and beyond. That same commitment needs to be shown to improving mathematics throughout school as well and not just because, as recent events over the road have shown, the difficulties you can get into when you can't count to 48.

Here, as in every other country, the home language and maths are the spine of children's learning. But they can't be the limit. They are the gateway subjects to a broad curriculum that includes the humanities, science, languages and the creative subjects too. Children should learn about the events that shaped our nation's history, the forces that create our natural environment, the key scientific principles that underpin the world and universe around us, the ability to both appreciate and participate in art and music, and develop some practical skills in crafts and technology.

That is why the draft new inspection framework will be based on the expectation that key stages 2 and 3 should be broad and deep. The consultation will also explain how inspection will support the government's commitment to make study of the EBacc subjects the foundation of the curriculum for key stage 4.

But we also know that there are some young people who will reach 16 having failed to master the basics of English and maths. And there we are confronted with a choice. Do we give up? Or do we re-focus in the final years of compulsory education to try and make up lost ground? For me, the answer has to be the latter. Even when jobs don't strictly require employees to be highly literate and numerate, these skills still help people to be effective in their first jobs and give them better and wider prospects beyond. For that reason, I support a focus on English and maths in further education for the young people who don't get a grade 4 at age 16, whether that is done through re-sits or by other means. In fact, my advice to policy makers would be to find ways to encourage all young people, regardless of GCSE grade, to continue to improve their English and maths beyond age 16.

And it is young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who are particularly vulnerable to losing out on the path to success.

Just last week, I was lucky enough to visit Bluecoat Wollaton Academy in Nottingham, which is not only a fantastic school but is one that prides itself on its high expectations for pupils with SEND, and sees them making strong progress as a result. But I'm afraid to say that the support offered by places like Bluecoat Wollaton is far from universal.

Our local area SEND reports from this year show that, despite the dedication and professionalism of frontline workers, provision for young people with SEND is too disjointed and too inconsistent. What our reports show for these children is:

- a continuing trend of rising exclusions
- mental health needs not being addressed early enough, with many reaching crisis point before getting the help and support they need
- those with autistic spectrum disorder waiting up to 2 years to be diagnosed, with some getting no education at all while they wait
- poor post-19 provision, which means some young people do the same thing after reaching 19 as before, getting no support to move into employment or self-supported living

Underpinning all of this is the fact that the quality of education, health and care plans remains too variable and the contributions from certain partners too weak. Some areas have led the way in showing what can be done with these plans to support better outcomes for children. But too many have not. The result is, to return to my analogy of the slope, the gradient for some young people with SEND is getting steeper, not shallower. Identification of SEND is often inaccurate or late, and the gap in outcomes for children with SEND is widening, which in turn places even greater strain on services.

Those who just fail to meet the threshold for a plan are too often dealt the

worst hand, with a lack of proper support. As a result, parents feel that to do the best for their children they must go to extreme lengths to secure a plan – driving up the numbers of referrals, filling up waiting lists with some who won't need a plan, and delays diagnosis further for those who do. We know of cases of parents who actually welcome their child being permanently excluded as it will finally unlock the possibility of getting a plan. Something is deeply wrong when parents repeatedly tell inspectors that they have to fight to get the help and support that their child needs. And I'm not talking about middle class parents wanting extra time in exams for their child. I mean adequate support for our most vulnerable children with SEND, which is a basic expectation of a decent, developed society. We need to do better.

The same is true of another set of young people – those in the secure estate. I used last year's report to draw attention to the unacceptable findings from our inspections of secure training centres. Again this year, we continue to have serious concerns about the experience of children in these centres, and in particular the high levels of violence and the low quality of education provision. As I have said before, the fact that these children have committed criminal acts does not remove the pressing need to give them the help and education they need to get their lives back on track.

The importance of getting the basics right doesn't just apply to education; it extends to social care as well. There are undoubtedly promising results emerging from the government's innovation funding. But it's also the case that the local authorities with the best children's social care are the ones that have got the basics right.

In January this year, we introduced new inspections of local authority children's services. These ILACS inspections allow us to look at how well local authorities support and protect vulnerable children. The new approach is just as rigorous as before, but it is also more proportionate, risk-based and flexible, and helps us prioritise inspection where it's most needed.

Reassuringly, despite the expectations in the framework being as high as ever, we have seen a decrease in the number of inadequate local authorities, and around 60% of authorities inspected have improved their grading. Those that have improved have done so by getting the basics right. That is, by:

- having a clear child-focused vision across the whole council
- by having a deep understanding of children's experiences and progress, and using children's feedback and strong quality assurance to improve practice
- by having a high challenge, high support culture for staff, with shared ownership and manageable caseloads
- by having highly visible leaders – both officers and members
- and above all, by remaining focused on doing the right thing for children

Capacity to improve

Which brings me to my second theme: capacity to improve. Because an institution can only focus on the basics if they have the capacity to do so. The second part of my commentary highlights the pockets of the education and care systems that lack the capacity to improve.

In social care, we know that local authorities have faced some of the most significant budget reductions across the whole public sector. Most authorities have managed to make savings without compromising resources for statutory care services. That must be welcome. But our concern is that, where savings have been found – mostly in preventative and youth services – they are a false economy, as they only serve to push demand downstream. In the handful of authorities where financial pressure has taken a real toll – Northamptonshire being the most extreme example – we have seen the double impact of both financial crisis and the diversion of senior officers' attention away from service management, with the result that social care services are suffering.

And a challenge for all local authorities is workforce stability, which we know is a crucial ingredient for delivering successful care services. That need for stability extends from frontline social workers through to senior leaders. Levels of agency staff in some LAs continue to be too high. We know the government is working to change this and taking innovative approaches to reduce the numbers of children in care safely and to improve social work practice. But this is still a problem in many local authorities. And at the leadership level, the Association of Directors of Children's Services highlighted a 40% turnover rate of directors in 2017 to 2018: the highest level of change in a generation.

Concerns about capacity extend to further education. As I made clear in my recent letter to the Public Accounts Committee, I do believe that further investment is now needed to safeguard standards in our colleges and that there should be an increase in the 16 to 18 base rate. While the overall grade profile for general FE colleges has improved this year, there are a number of colleges in financial intervention. And our inspection evidence, published reports and insights have indicated several areas where leaders and managers are having to make increasingly difficult decisions. There are colleges where significant staffing cuts have been made, where teaching hours have been reduced, and where the curriculum offer has been narrowed by reducing enrichment or tutorial time or by offering fewer courses.

Conversely, where we have seen colleges improve this year, good financial management has been at the heart of that improvement.

But when we talk about capacity in the skills sector, I am not just talking about money. Our monitoring visits to some of the new, often small, providers that are springing up in response to the new apprenticeship levy model have revealed a lack of operational capacity and also weaknesses in governance and scrutiny. Some of our biggest providers also continue to be a real cause for concern. We saw one provider that had swiftly recruited apprentices over the

past year for apprenticeships that were simply not fit for purpose, alongside other high-profile cases of mismanagement and some significant falls in standards.

Alongside this, the number of under-19s starting apprenticeships has declined for the second year running, leaving me with real concerns for the third of students who leave school without a full level 2 qualification. That stands in contrast to the welcome news that a growing number of learners are starting a higher apprenticeship.

But alongside this positive development sits our concern that levy spending, while in line with the rules, is in places falling well short of the spirit of the policy. So for example, we see levy funding subsidising re-packaged graduate schemes and MBAs that just don't need it. We hope that government will give more thought as to how to direct levy money better: to where it is most needed.

Capacity isn't just about funding: it's about having the workforce, leaders and institutions that can bring about improvement. Last year, I drew attention to the plight of a group of schools inspected in 2017 that had never been good at any point in more than a decade. This year, we have been looking in more detail at a wider group of almost 500 'stuck schools' that have never been judged good in over 10 years, trapped in a cycle of underperformance that has failed a generation of young people.

We should absolutely celebrate that the vast majority of schools are not in this category. But as long as children are attending schools that are perpetually less than good, we have a problem.

What makes the inequity even starker is that many of these schools are concentrated in particular parts of the country, serving the same demographic groups – often the White working class. I make no apology for not giving these schools an easier judgement; I would never want us to be saying that this education wouldn't do for Chelsea children, but it's good enough for Grimsby. The moment we allow for a different quality of education based on demographics is the moment we concede defeat in the battle for equality of opportunity. It would be the moment we wrote off the Einsteins, Mozarts and Brontes of the future who don't happen to grow up on the right side of the tracks.

Instead, we need a real focus on improving standards in areas and schools that lag behind. We need to inject capacity, which is why I welcome the Secretary of State's recent announcement of Opportunity North East to bring together different partners and to improve standards. It is also right that the recognition that schools require improvement should trigger effective support, not knee-jerk action.

But across the country, however, turnaround rates in schools remain too slow. The government's policy of matching inadequate schools to a sponsor trust has led to some substantial improvements. The problem is that a lack of sponsor capacity means that there is a mismatch in available support, particularly in under-performing areas. As a result, we have seen some schools left in limbo

for over 18 months before becoming a sponsored academy in a MAT. While regional school commissioners are doing important work to improve sponsor capacity, the current halfway house approach to academisation is not working. For that reason, I believe there is a case to reinstate some of the incentives to encourage the best schools to become academies and to use their expertise to sponsor.

Schools and communities

My third theme is around the role of schools and in fact, all educational providers in the community. Our education institutions don't exist in isolation from the local areas they serve. They are and should be a central part of our communities.

But being part of a community means being very clear what your responsibilities are and about what issues, however important, should only be tackled beyond the school, college or nursery gates. Through our inspections and research, we are seeing increasing evidence of a blurring of the lines of responsibility. Yes, schools have a responsibility in terms of identifying risk and making appropriate referrals, but to go beyond that can distract them from their core purpose. And at the same time, it puts too strong an expectation on non-specialists to tackle issues that should properly be dealt with by those with the knowledge and expertise to do so.

One of these issues is childhood neglect. We looked this year at the neglect of older children and found a pattern of children being neglected in the home, then being vulnerable to abuse and exploitation outside it. These older children tend not to get the sympathy and public support that younger children facing neglect receive. In part, this is because, as well as being victims, they are also sometimes committing nuisance or criminal acts. While any offending behaviour needs to be tackled, it is also important that all professionals address the causes as well as the behaviour, recognising that these older children are still children who need parenting and protection.

Related to this, there is perhaps no issue involving young people that has caught the public eye more in recent months than the rise in violence and knife crime. We have done our own study on the role of schools in safeguarding and educating young people about knife crime. Most of our schools are safe and we fully support measures, including zero-tolerance policies on the carrying of knives, to keep them that way. But beyond that, while schools can play a role in educating young people about the dangers of knives, they cannot be a panacea for this particular societal ill. Instead, preventing knife crime requires all local safeguarding partners to work together to protect children from harm while the relevant agencies tackle criminal activity and bring to justice the youths and adults who cause harm to children.

It is easy to overuse the word 'crisis' when talking about issues affecting young people – the 'social media crisis' jumps to mind – but I think we can all agree that knife crime is an issue worthy of that title.

Another less immediate crisis, but one which will claim many more lives in

the long term, is the rise of childhood obesity. When they start school, almost a quarter of children in England are already overweight or obese. This rises to over a third by the time they leave primary school. Again, the easy – and I dare I say it lazy – solution is to put responsibility for tackling obesity on schools. But our research this year found that there was no real difference in obesity rates between schools that took great steps to tackle obesity and those that didn't.

This is consistent with other recent research. It's an issue that sits largely beyond the school gates. Yes, schools can and should teach children about the importance of healthy eating and exercise in line with their core purpose, and their PE lessons should get children out of breath! But beyond that, schools cannot take over the role of health professionals – and above all, of parents. The answer to the obesity crisis, particularly among younger children, lies in the home and parents shouldn't abdicate their responsibility here.

Obesity isn't the only issue where schools are being expected to pick up responsibilities that should fall to the family. Both teaching union surveys and reports from our visits and inspections find that more children are arriving in Reception in nappies or perhaps 'pull-ups'. This is difficult for teachers, disruptive for other children and has a terrible social impact on the children affected. This is wrong. Toilet training is the role of parents and shouldn't be left to schools. Only in the most extreme cases should parents be excused from this most basic of parenting tasks.

That brings me to the other community issue we have focused on this year: the rise in elective home education and the use of unregistered schools. Those of you who have attended my speeches before will know that this is not a new concern, but I'm afraid to say it is one that grows every year. When it comes to home education, lots of parents do an excellent job. But we also know that some young people are being home educated for the wrong reasons. Sometimes, it is happening as a result of pressure from schools. I'll talk about that in a moment. Sometimes, it's because parents want to isolate their children from wider society and they may in fact be sending their children to illegal unregistered schools. We will only get a grip on this problem when we know its scale and it is my sincere hope that the government will soon bring forward a legislative solution for the registration of children in elective home education so at the very least, we collectively know where these children are.

When it comes to unregistered schools, we were pleased this year to see the first successful prosecution of proprietors running an illegal provision and hope to support more prosecutions in the coming year. But until we are given proper powers to tackle these operations and the definition of a school is set out more clearly in legislation, we are fighting the problem with one arm tied behind our back.

I don't need to remind you of the sorts of things our inspectors have found in these places: dirty, squalid conditions; sexist, homophobic, discriminatory literature; staff lacking basic qualifications. Many of these places are unsafe and without proper oversight we have no way of knowing if

children are being exposed to abuse, or to radical and extreme views. But in the meantime, as we wait for the government to bring forward a long-term solution, I would urge parents to avoid these schools and to resist any community pressure to use them, because your children deserve better.

That to me is the overarching message I want to give about these wider societal issues. As I started this speech by saying, we have world-class dedicated professionals in the education and care sectors, but they can only do their job if parents step up. It takes a village to raise a child, and to be sure a school is part of that village. But the fundamental purpose of schools is to educate and inspire children, not to parent them. Which isn't to say that it's an easy job to be a parent.

Schools themselves can add to the pressure faced in the home by pushing pupils out of school to be home educated, often by those least able to do so. I'm talking, of course, about 'off-rolling'.

I want to be completely clear here, that when I talk about off-rolling, I'm not talking about justified exclusion. The ability of school leaders to exclude is an important one, and one I will always be happy to defend when a decision is properly made in the light of the interests of children: the excluded child and other children in the school.

But off-rolling is not exclusion. It is the illegal or unethical removal of pupils, most often to boost exam results, and it is something we intend to do more to tackle. Already, we have done some work to look at instances of high pupil movement between Years 10 and 11. That revealed the startling finding that in the middle of GCSE courses, almost 10,000 pupils disappear each year from the roll of any state-funded school. While some of these instances will be legitimate, the sheer scale of young people dropping out of sight is alarming. So, I will be unapologetic in developing the new framework, in finding ways to point out the schools that are off-rolling, and to reward the schools that don't just see low-attaining pupils as data points to be managed out, but that, instead, retain their focus on what really matters: giving every child a good education and start in life.

Returning to the substance

Which links back to what has been my central theme as Chief Inspector so far: ensuring that we return to a focus on the substance of education and care.

The substance of education will be at the centre of the draft new education inspection framework that we will publish for consultation in the new year. I will not repeat the case for change here; most of you have heard me outline it many times before. But what I will say is how heartening it has been to hear so many people agree on the need to start putting the curriculum – what children are actually being taught – back at the heart of our inspection of early years, schools and colleges. And that you want us to reward the institutions that are all about education, rather than a numbers game, and to recognise teachers as professional subject experts, not simply data managers – valuable as good data managers are.

Ahead of our consultation, coming up in January, I want to say 3 things. First, next week we will publish phase 3 of our curriculum research, which will explain some more about how we intend to inspect the curriculum.

Secondly, the very last thing I want for this framework is to see anyone dashing off to a consultant who promises to sell them the ‘Ofsted curriculum’. Because there is and will be no ‘Ofsted curriculum’. What we will be interested in is the coherence, the sequencing and construction, the implementation of the curriculum, how it is being taught and how well children and young people are progressing in it. So please, don’t leap for quick fixes or superficial solutions just to please Ofsted. That would be the wrong response. From September, we’ll be just as interested in where you are going and how you intend to get there, not just whether you’ve arrived there yet. But I do look forward to saying more in January.

And third, when we consult on the framework in January, this is a genuine consultation. Although the new framework is an evolution not a revolution, it is a shift and a shift we want to get right. That means we want plenty of feedback to help us improve our proposals.

So, all that remains is to say thank you most of all to everyone who works in education and social care today. And to you for listening today. I hope you’ll take time to read the full report and that you find it interesting and, more importantly, that it helps to guide your work in the year ahead.