

Speech: Amanda Spielman on the launch of Ofsted's Annual Report 2016/17

Thank you all for coming today.

This is my first Annual Report. I want to start by saying what should be obvious but is all too easily forgotten at events like this.

The quality of education and care in England today is good and it is continually improving. The life chances of the vast majority of young people in 2017 are the best they ever have been. That is the story that our inspection reports are telling:

- 94% of early years providers are rated good or outstanding
- almost 80% of secondary schools and 90% of primary schools are good or outstanding
- almost 80% of further education provision is also good or outstanding
- more local authorities are on a path to improvement in their provision of children's social care: in fact, two-thirds of inadequate authorities that have been reinspected have improved their judgement

This sort of positive news rarely makes for good copy. If this speech generates any headlines, I doubt they will be 'English education is good'. But that makes it all the more important that I acknowledge it up front. These are achievements that we can and should be proud of. They are the result of the hard work and dedication of childminders, teachers, school and college leaders, social workers and many others, often in very challenging circumstances.

Part of our future work, not least as we develop a new education inspection framework for 2019, will be to set high aspirations for the sector and to encourage ever improving standards. We should celebrate how many schools are now good and look at how they can be supported to become even better.

But there is a flip side to this level of good provision. It is that the contrast between the good providers and the less good is becoming even starker.

Our goal is to ensure that every child gets a good education and that every child in need of help, protection or care gets the right support. The destination is a society in which every child can reach adulthood capable, safe and prepared to succeed in modern Britain. If we are to achieve that, we must be ruthlessly focused on the parts of the system that are not doing well enough for children and learners.

Earlier this year, I launched Ofsted's strategy for the next 5 years. In that strategy, we set out our role as a force for improvement in the sectors we inspect and regulate. We committed to doing that through inspection that is:

- intelligent – doing all we can to make our work valid and reliable

- responsible and fair – being engaged and responsive and using our influence with care, not as a sledgehammer
- and focused – directing our resources and energies into the areas that aren't yet good enough and exploring what needs to change

It is that focus that will be the subject of my discussion today.

'Intractables' and capacity: schools

That includes a group of schools that I would call 'the intractables'. These are the schools – around 130 of them – that have never been judged good at any point in the last decade. Whole cohorts of children have passed through these schools without ever receiving a good standard of education. And they are joined by another group of schools – of around 500 primary and 200 secondary schools – that have been judged to require improvement in at least 2 recent inspections.

The performance of these schools is not a result of lack of effort on the part of people working in them. In many cases, new leadership teams have arrived, bringing fresh energy and dynamism. Green shoots have emerged but, every time, progress has stalled.

Why is this?

It does not make sense that there are communities that can never have good schools. We have countless examples of schools such as those in the Annual Report – like Dixons Kings Academy in Bradford – in equally challenging environments as many of the intractables, but which have improved. St Peter's School in Huntingdon, which I visited just last week, or Herbert Morrison Primary School in Vaxuhall are other examples of schools that have finally overcome a history of underperformance.

There is no doubt that the leadership challenge facing some of these schools is great. We recognise the scale of their challenge in our leadership and management judgements. But progress is possible and we should all be wary of using the make-up of a school community as an excuse for underperformance.

And I do find myself frustrated with the culture of 'disadvantage one-upmanship' that has emerged in some places. A few years ago, you couldn't go into a school without being told the number of home languages spoken by pupils. Now, it often seems that school leaders are constantly comparing notes about how high their pupil premium or SEND (special educational needs and/or disability) rates are. Even more depressing, we still hear things like 'If you met my pupils' parents, you'd understand why results are as they are'. Indeed, listening to these conversations, I am sometimes reminded of the Monty Python sketch about the 4 Yorkshiremen. But I realise I'm showing my age.

It isn't that there aren't many children facing disadvantage and difficulties: they are there in all our schools, and more in some schools than others. But the narrative of disadvantage can become all-absorbing. Fixating on all the things holding schools back can distract us all from

working on the things that take them forward. Schools with all ranges of children can and do succeed. Where this is difficult, what is needed is greater support and leadership from within the system. That means making sure the system has the capacity to provide this support.

I am a believer in the school-led self-improving system. Not because of ideology, but because of the clear evidence of what happens when we unleash great leaders and teachers. Multi-academy trusts (MATs), teaching schools, national leaders of education (NLEs) and others have had an immense impact. As a result, much of the improvement of education standards in recent years has come not from central or local government or – dare I say it – Ofsted, but from the school system itself.

With such a large proportion of schools rated good or outstanding, it should be possible for them to provide support to the remaining few. But we can see that this is not happening or, where it is happening, it isn't making enough difference inside these intractable schools.

And this isn't about just about incremental 'interventions' or 'challenge'. Good schools teach a strong curriculum effectively and they do it in an orderly and supportive environment: getting this right is the core job of any school.

So we need to ask ourselves: why is support not reaching or working well enough for the schools that need it most? Are the incentives in the system strong enough to encourage our best MATs to grow? How can we encourage outstanding schools to exist not as islands in standalone trusts but as active sharers of their expertise? At the other end, how do we make it plain to struggling schools that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness?

There is a real challenge here for both policy-makers and for the school system to do more to break down ivory towers and realise the full potential of a self-improving system.

I am not someone who believes that extra funding for schools is the solution to all of our problems. Indeed, a greater focus on efficiency can sometimes help to sharpen minds about what really matters. Nor do I want to reward failure. But in the case of these intractable schools, extra investment and incentives are needed to make the right things happen. The government's 'opportunity areas' are a welcome move in the right direction, but further work is needed to make sure we build capacity in these schools, rather than relying on propping them up from outside.

Too big to fail: further education and skills

I do not want this to become the annual lecture for criticising the state of further education (FE), but it would be remiss of me not to say that the sector continues to lag behind. Despite some promising recent inspection outcomes, the headline figures show a further 2 percentage point decline in the number of good and outstanding general FE colleges and a rather larger drop of 8 percentage points for sixth form colleges.

The government has recognised the problems in the sector and has begun a series of welcome initiatives investing in skills education. However, I do believe that until base rate funding is increased, the sector will continue to struggle.

It would also be remiss of me not to comment here on our inspection of learndirect. In any sector, becoming reliant on a handful of super-providers is dangerous. Too often across government, we have seen what happens when institutions become too big to fail. learndirect is one such institution. At the time of its recent inspection, learndirect was the largest provider of training in this country, with just short of 100,000 learners. A third of these were apprentices. The inspection found learndirect to be inadequate, with poor outcomes and many of its 30,000 apprentices not acquiring the skills they needed to succeed. Failure on this scale is a travesty for the young people involved. It also points to the need for more assurance across the FE and skills sector, particularly with the introduction of the new apprenticeships levy.

Whenever you inject large amounts of cash into a system, all kinds of unsavoury operators zero in to claim a share. Investment in our skills sector does not have a happy history. My fear is that without adequate scrutiny, we risk sending billions of pounds of levy money the same way as past failures, such as Train to Gain. Already, we are seeing reports of levy money being directed away from the intended purpose. And too many examples of poor provision. That is why at Ofsted we want to bolster the level of assurance that we offer in this area; to play our part in making these reforms a success.

Because whether we are talking about the apprenticeship levy or the broader reforms to technical education, there is a pressing national interest in making them a success. No speech in 2017 is complete without a reference to the need for home-grown skills in an era of Brexit. But the truth is, the need to improve English skills education long pre-dates the referendum. There is a national interest in improving skills education, with our country experiencing a persistent productivity shortfall. And just as important, there is the individual human need as lower-skilled workers risk being left behind in this age of automation and the gig economy.

The right measures: childcare and early years

The childcare sector also relies heavily on the market for provision. Here, it is generally working well. The rollout of 30 hours has largely been a success, though I continue to believe that supply could increase further if the government allowed the additional 15 hours for working parents to be used for childcare rather than for early education. Early education is vitally important, which is why the government makes the first 15 free hours universally available. But the second 15 hours is explicitly designed to support parents to work. Greater flexibility would enable other providers to enter the market, boosting supply and providing more support for parental work patterns, such as shift work.

But, despite the fact that most early years providers are doing well, our recent research into the Reception Year raised some questions about the suitability of the statutory framework under which they operate. The findings from that work do cast doubt on whether the early years foundation stage provides a strong enough curriculum, especially for the children who arrive at school further behind. Reception teachers also told us that the assessment framework, the EYFS profile, imposes unnecessary burdens on providers that detract from education itself. For this reason, I am pleased the government has committed to reviewing them both to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

It is worth my spending more time on the [‘Bold beginnings’ report](#), given the reaction to it from some corners of social media. Most feedback on the report has actually been very positive. But I was taken aback by some of the more extreme reactions. I happen to share the view of one education commentator, who said that the report is about as ‘controversial as custard’.

Yes, we reported that the best schools – the ones in which disadvantaged children do best – place a strong emphasis on early reading, on having children sitting properly at a table when learning to write and on developing early number skills. But the report is also very clear that the Reception Year should be filled with opportunities for young children to play and to develop their social and personal skills. The dichotomy here is not about formal learning versus play. It is about understanding the different ways in which children acquire different kinds of knowledge and skills. You don’t learn phonics quickly and efficiently by playing with soggy letters near the paddling pool. The sandpit is not a great place for early number work. But both the paddling pool and the sandpit are important in developing children’s social interactions, their motor skills and their imaginations. That doesn’t sound very controversial to me.

Social care: getting the basics right

A look at the headline judgements for children’s social care might suggest the opposite story to the early years but this is not a failing sector overall. Improvements certainly need to be made. Thirty-four per cent of local authorities being judged good or outstanding is not a cause for great celebration. But more important than that headline measure is the rate of improvement being made. Of the inadequate authorities that have now been re-inspected under the single inspection framework, two-thirds have improved, one directly from inadequate to good.

We should not underestimate the achievement of turning round local authority children’s services in such a short space of time. These are big organisations, much larger than most other providers we inspect. What’s more, they are reliant not just on their own work but on the work of many partners across the breadth of children’s services. It is a testament to the leadership of the local authorities that have taken the lessons from our inspection report and turned themselves around.

How have they achieved that success? First, because it seems that our message

about the importance of creating the best conditions for social work has been taken on board. In particular, having emphasised the importance of reasonable caseloads, we have seen a number of local authorities taking action to reduce them, with social work practice improving as a result.

Across the country, we are seeing more local authorities get the basics right. That means having robust processes in place that support social workers in using their professional judgement. Good processes, along with good management and good oversight, allow social workers to have a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting a child's life. This in turn means they can plan early and effectively for the child's next steps.

We want local authorities to build on this work. It is critical that the children who need help get the right services, and speedily. That is why we want to see authorities taking steps to maintain a good 'front door' – the first point of contact a child has with social services. Alongside good information-sharing and partnerships, a healthy culture, targeted use of early help and well supported social workers: these are the ingredients for success in social care.

Losing sight of the substance: curriculum

A focus on the basics is not the same as a blind focus on systems and targets to the exclusion of all else. The best local authorities never lose sight of the importance of the child. It is a lesson that some schools would do well to heed.

I made the curriculum the focus of my first year because in recent years I have seen and heard so often that what is taught has been compromised and diluted in the face of all the many pressures on schools.

That should worry us all. The curriculum isn't an esoteric concern. It goes to the heart of what our schools and colleges are for: it is about the very substance of education. Twelve years of education should give children a lot more than a disposition to learn and some ill-defined skills. Yet the evidence from the first stage of our research this year is that the focus on substance, on the knowledge that we want young people to acquire, is often lost in the dash for grades and stickers. League table positions are trumping learning.

That is absolutely not an attack on accountability. Accountability is a good thing: it is right that schools are held to account for the quality of the education they provide. I believe that the government's new accountability measures, including Progress 8, are a marked improvement on their predecessors. Just as I believe the level of challenge and content in reformed SATs, GCSEs and A levels is a step in the right direction.

But test performance and league tables should be reflecting what children have learned. Tests should exist in service of the curriculum. But too often, schools are getting this the wrong way around. Curriculum should be designed to give children the best pathway to the future, not to make the school look good.

I will not repeat my [recent commentary](#) here. But I will remind you about some of the greatest areas of concern:

- the primary schools we found that give up teaching most other subjects in Year 6 to focus intensively on SATs prep, rather than meaningful work to improve reading and mathematics or a broader curriculum
- the widespread shortening of key stage 3 to 2 years, when this means that many pupils lose a whole year of study of the humanities, of languages and of the arts. As my colleague Sean Harford has pointed out, it is ironic that some of the strongest advocates of a condensed key stage 3 are the same people who are most critical of what they claim to be curriculum narrowing caused by the EBacc.
- and at key stage 4, we saw too many schools pushing lower-attaining pupils away from studying EBacc subjects. These are core academic subjects that should be the norm for all but a small minority of pupils.

No wonder many universities complain that students arrive ill prepared for undergraduate study. If their entire school experience has been designed to push them through mark-scheme hoops, rather than developing a deep body of knowledge, they will struggle in later study. I recently heard from a lecturer at a top university whose students regularly complain about not getting enough training in exam techniques.

And problems with curriculum aren't confined to schools. Our study of level 2 courses in colleges revealed lots of excellent work. The best colleges are designing courses hand in glove with local employers to meet the need of the local economy. At the same time, they are teaching mathematics and English well and putting extra effort into their students' personal development.

In other cases, though, the needs of the learner are coming second to the desire to maximise college revenue. This is not a good response to underfunding. It leads to too many colleges majoring on courses that are interesting and engaging – so for example, performing arts and sports subjects, which appeal to many – but which ultimately will leave too many students disappointed when they cannot find a job in those sectors. It is right to have some flexibility in the system and good vocational education prepares students for more than just a single occupation. But when the mismatch between college provision and the labour market gets too great, we are being unfair to students and to the taxpayer, and we are setting up skills shortages.

Student interest is important and it does take extra effort to re-engage many of the level 2 learners who have been disaffected by their education to date. But that ought not to be in tension with courses that have a clear line of sight to jobs or meaningful further study.

A cohesive society: British values and unregistered schools

Preparation for life in modern Britain isn't just about knowledge and skills. It's also about understanding the values and culture that bind us as a

society. This is an age in which the collective institutions that traditionally brought people together – churches, social clubs, even the 6 o'clock news – are in decline or are splintering into a thousand Twitter feeds. Education is one of the few unifying structures we have in society.

That is why it is right that we use compulsory education to make sure children acquire a deep understanding of and respect for the British values. The values of democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, respect and mutual understanding and the role of these values in shaping the country we are today.

Imparting those values can sometimes be in tension with parental wishes or with community norms. We are seeing this tension playing out in some of our schools. In recent years, Ofsted has found schools that are deliberately resisting both British values and the requirements of equalities law:

- we have found texts that encourage domestic violence and the subjugation of women
- we have found schools in which there is a flat refusal to acknowledge the existence of people who are different, so for example lesbian, gay and bisexual people
- we also find well-meaning school leaders and governors who naively turn to religious institutions of a particularly conservative bent for advice about religious practice, not realising when this advice does not reflect mainstream thinking
- and of course, there are the so-called schools that operate off the radar entirely, as illegal unregistered schools; often deliberately, to bypass legal requirements

None of this is comfortable territory. We have a proud tradition in this country of respecting religious freedom. The great religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Hinduism all make important and unique contributions to British society. But there are occasions when multiculturalism can and does come into tension with the expectation that students should be prepared for life in modern Britain.

This is emphatically not a criticism of faith schools. The vast majority of faith schools we inspect provide a good education. In very many cases, we find exemplary teaching of British values in faith schools. Good faith schools, from all of the major faiths, see no tension with practising their beliefs and setting their pupils up to succeed in both education and in adult society. It is a small core of institutions about which we have real concerns.

As a public body, the easiest thing for us to do would be to ignore the problem, to hope it goes away or to dismiss it as someone else's concern. I know there are those who would like me to say a little less. But we cannot in good conscience ignore these findings, because we all know what happens when cultural tensions become undiscussable, when we allow concerns to be silenced. We saw that in Rotherham and far too many other places as well.

When I see books in schools entitled 'Women who deserve to go to hell',

children being educated in dank squalid conditions, children being taught solely religious texts at the expense of learning basic English and mathematics, I cannot let it be ignored.

We will continue to expose the problem in the schools and to provide the Department for Education with the information it needs to take action. At the same time, we maintain our call for new powers under legislation because the current legislative framework is not adequate. We need a better definition of a school so that institutions that should be inspected cannot evade scrutiny and also the powers to collect the kinds of evidence needed to take action.

Out of sight: off-rolling and secure provision

Young people who are being exposed to extreme views are not the only group of vulnerable children about whom we have concerns.

Thanks to the work of [Education Datalab](#) and others, a long overdue spotlight has been shed on the problem of off-rolling. Now, I absolutely support the right of schools to exclude pupils, for example when their behaviour is violent, threatening towards teachers or affecting the learning of other pupils. But what is never acceptable is the exclusion of pupils, either formally or through pressure on parents, where the main goal is to boost school performance.

Off-rolling is in some ways an even more extreme and invidious example of where some schools have lost sight of the purpose of education, which should always be to give children the support that they deserve.

The problem of off-rolling affects many children, but our [local authority SEND reports](#) show that the pupils most at risk are those who have special educational needs or disabilities. Again, I am not saying it is never right to exclude pupils with SEND. But it is a concern that the exclusion of SEND pupils was high in a third of local areas inspected. Almost half of local authorities had poor attendance of pupils with SEND. In the worst cases, we heard from parents who had been asked to keep their children at home because school leaders said that they could not meet their children's needs. This is inexcusable and shames our education system. Dealing with students with different needs isn't always easy but simply passing the job to parents, who rarely have the right professional expertise, is passing the buck. Children with SEND are not a problem to be pushed out of sight and out of mind.

To play our part in tackling this, our inspectors will be looking even more closely for signs of off-rolling. That includes exploring the related problem of reports that troublesome children are being sent home on inspection days.

Finally, I turn my attention to somewhere where I believe the failings are greater than any area I've yet touched on. That is secure training centres. There are 3 of these centres in the UK, 2 of which are judged inadequate and one judged requires improvement. Over the past year, our inspectors found increasing levels of violence and poor educational outcomes, most recently at Oakhill Secure Training Centre. A similar picture exists in our young offender institutions. There are 10 young offender institutions in England,

of which 4 are less than good. This year, we contributed to the HMI Prisons inspection of Feltham. The prison was found to not be safe for either staff or the boys in it. There was an increase in serious violence, including attacks involving multiple assailants and the use of weapons.

Our number one priority when it comes to juvenile offenders should be to tackle the cycle of reoffending. If we cannot give them a decent education, we are closing down the avenues that lead away from crime. Without proper education and training, we are coming close to passing de facto life sentences on juvenile offenders.

Conclusion

If that sounds bleak, then I want to end by reminding you how I started: to say again that education and care in this country are good. We are lucky to have millions of hard-working professionals who have chosen to work with children and help them make the most of their lives.

We have heard a lot about social mobility recently. It is undoubtedly true that we can do more to raise the attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. But what I will also say is this: that the extensive reforms of the past 15 years will take time to bed in. As they do, I believe that social mobility will improve. There is a regular flow of reports from various quarters advocating radical measures. But I would urge policy-makers to build on the work that has been done to date and to help reforms to bed down.

I commend the approach of the Secretary of State in this area and her work to champion social mobility across government. At Ofsted, we look forward to playing our part in supporting the forthcoming social mobility action plan, because I am determined to honour our commitment to be a force for improvement.

In the next year, we will begin our new inspections of local authority children's services, with a greater focus on catching authorities before they fall. We are also working hard on developing our new education inspection framework. This will build on all that we have learned in recent years, incorporating a new focus on curriculum.

Our collective mission – and by that I mean not just Ofsted, or policy-makers, but everyone involved in education and care – should be to create a society in which every young person, regardless of birth or background, can achieve their full potential. Everything I see in my job, looking at the work of thousands of children's homes, colleges, apprenticeships providers, schools and nurseries, shows me that isn't a pipe dream. In fact, the areas I have identified today are some of the last remaining barriers that stand in our way. Tackling them will not be easy. But the prize is great – a country that is both caring and bold, innovative but unified, aspirational and at the same time fair.

Thank you very much.