

Speech: Amanda Spielman's speech at the Nursery World business summit

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me here to speak you today.

It's great to be part of such a rich programme of speakers and discussions. You certainly pack a lot into a day. Apprenticeships, Brexit, workforce strategies – all before lunch – that's some work ethic.

When I took on the role of Chief Inspector, I was clear that every part of our work was of equal importance. I made a commitment to myself, and others, that I would engage with every aspect of our broad remit.

In particular, I wanted to get a better understanding of the issues affecting early years. After all, you are responsible for the crucial first stage of a child's development. I am grateful, therefore, to the nurseries that welcomed me as a visitor during my early months in post and the time the leaders in your field took in getting me up to speed.

So thank you to all of you, particularly members of our National Consultative Forum, for your efforts in educating me. And of course a tribute to Ofsted's own Gill Jones, our early years supremo, and her team who have helped me immeasurably.

One of the clearest messages I took away from those early discussions was the importance of the honest dialogue, from both sides, that exists between Ofsted and the sector. Through the work of our consultative forum, grassroots initiatives like the 'Ofsted Big Conversation' and the myriad of events like these, it is clearly 'good to talk'. I know that countless issues have been raised and resolved as a result of these efforts, from concerns about complaint-driven inspections to consistency of inspections. Long may the dialogue continue.

And in that spirit of openness, I wanted to share with you a bit of my story and what brought me to the post of Chief Inspector. My early career was spent in business and finance, but after 15 years, and having children, I realised that education was my real passion. So I took the plunge and did a Masters in comparative education, and a year or two later got involved in the Ark academy chain, just as it was starting out. A chain, incidentally, that built in primary education from the very beginning.

The work at Ark was very much focused on turning around tough schools. It was about making sure that children who had been getting a raw deal started to receive a proper education. The education they deserved. The experience of Ark's primary schools demonstrated first-hand how a solid early education sets young people up for life.

After Ark, I spent five years at Ofqual, steeped in the reform of assessment and qualifications. And then at the start of this year, I joined Ofsted as

Chief Inspector.

And it has been an incredibly rewarding year so far.

Ofsted turned 25 this autumn. And although the educational, political and economic landscape is now very different, our mission to raise standards in education and care remains unchanged. Because, despite momentous social and cultural shifts, our work to improve children's lives is as important today as it was quarter of a century ago.

As you would expect, much has changed in Ofsted since 1992. Today, we are more focused on what works and far more engaged with all of the sectors we inspect.

As part of our continuing evolution, at the end of September we published [our new corporate strategy](#), which will guide every area of our work, including early years, until 2022.

The strategy centres on one fundamental principle: that Ofsted will be 'a force for improvement through intelligent, responsible and focused inspection and regulation'.

Being intelligent: that means that our work will be evidence-led, and our judgements will be valid and reliable.

Being responsible: that means our findings will be clear and accessible, and we will be fair in our expectations of others.

And being focused: that means our time and resources will be targeted, as far as possible, where they can lead directly to improvement.

And just like you, we will always put children first.

I appreciate that talk of 'corporate strategies' and 'fundamental principles' might seem a bit removed from your daily concerns. You may well ask: 'all very nice but what does it mean for me and my nursery business?'

Perhaps I can unpick it a bit for you by relating it to the work we are doing specifically in your area.

Intelligent

So starting with intelligent.

For inspection to be intelligent, it must be led by a professional, highly skilled and well-trained workforce. With our early years inspectors back in house, we are in a better position to ensure the quality of training and support given to our teams. As these teams move into our established regional structures, I am confident that we will see further benefits through the sharing of insight and intelligence with colleagues from schools and social care.

We will also be using inspection evidence to offer perspective and insight to

those we inspect. That doesn't mean 'how to' manuals, but it does mean making the most of our bird's eye view of the totality of children's experience in education to help lead improvements right from early years to college. We will publish more research on what we learn about what works so that we can help others to improve.

Responsible

Then being responsible. I am, of course, intensely aware of the impact of Ofsted judgments. We must use our power responsibly. In your industry, perhaps more than any other area, a poor judgement can have significant financial consequences. There can be big impacts on funding and the ability to even continue in business.

Now, as you would expect, I will reiterate that first and foremost our concerns are for the education and welfare of children. We will always report honestly on provision that is not good enough. But our responsibility to you is to make sure that our expectations of you are clear. That they are not constantly changing. And that you have fair recourse when you believe something has gone wrong during an inspection.

That's why we recently expanded our successful myth-busting campaign into the early years sector. And why we will carry on being open about any future changes we plan to make to inspection. It is also why I have committed to there being no major changes to the common inspection framework until 2019, so that you can have certainty about what is coming and when. [When I say 'major', I don't mean to sound weasely, but simply need to acknowledge that sometimes changes are needed to make sure things are clear or because of new legislation].

Our duty to act responsibly also lies behind a major revamp of our online registration and payment systems. I know that our current systems aren't good enough. I appreciate that time and effort of your staff spent on working through these clunky and sometimes impenetrable systems is time away from children. That simply isn't good enough. That's why we are investing in a major overhaul.

The project is only part way through, but I am confident that when complete, your experience will be transformed.

It is only by learning what you need that we can design a service that is right for you. So we are testing and refining the service as we go, with input from the sector at each stage, to make sure that working with Ofsted and completing tasks online is simpler, clearer and faster.

Focused

And thirdly, being focused. Like all public sector organisations, Ofsted faces the challenge of doing more with less.

This challenge can be met, in part, through greater efficiency but we also have to be honest and realistic about the choices we face about how we target

inspection. We have to ask ourselves how finite resources can be put to best use.

This isn't just about deciding which nurseries and childminders we prioritise for inspection. It means working out how our models should evolve to match the changes taking place in the sector. As with the growth of multi-academy trusts in the school space, with the trend towards chain operators of nurseries I want to be sure that inspection properly reflects how things work. That it allows us to get the best assurance about young people's education and well-being, at minimum burden to providers.

So, over the next year we will be developing our conversation with you about how we can improve our regulation and inspection. And we will use your knowledge and insight to focus our inspections where they will have the most impact. Indeed, that conversation has already started.

Making sure our work is focused is not just about who we inspect and when. It also means thinking about what we look at during inspection and where the role of an inspector has the biggest impact. We need to ask: what are the elements of provision that are genuinely best explored through inspection?

As we work towards a new inspection framework for 2019, there are a number of areas that we are reflecting on.

Risk

One of these is risk. Earlier this year, I wrote about the importance of achieving the right balance when it comes to keeping children safe. That we must be careful not to deprive children of fulfilling educational experiences for fear of 'what if'.

For those of you who saw the piece in the news, I had more feedback, and it's been positive feedback, about this than anything else I've said or written before or since. It is clearly a debate that generates significant interest and passion. I believe it is debate that is just as relevant to the early years as any other part of the education world.

The welfare and safety of children, of course, are at the very core of all early years provision. For parents, handing over their precious child into the care of strangers is a hugely emotional act. We should never underestimate the level of trust those parents are placing in childcare providers. First and foremost, parents want to be sure that you can keep their child safe from harm.

And of course you must be able to assure them of that. But my concern is that in doing so, and through the best of intentions, we are creating overly risk-free environments. Young children do need to have the opportunity to explore the world around them, to develop their physical skills or even sometimes just to run around until they are exhausted.

I am acutely aware that Ofsted hasn't always got this right in the past. I want to be sure that our inspections and our inspectors aren't

driving any of the risk-averse behaviour.

So please understand that of course we expect you to take risk seriously and supervise young children properly. But we don't expect you to take away the climbing frame in case someone falls or avoid journeys to the park for fear of crossing the road. It goes without saying that children need physical exercise to develop their muscular strength and dexterity but it is also important that their natural instincts to discover and explore aren't stifled. This is, after all, one of the ways they learn.

Many of you are already striving to get this balance right. Happily, from what I observe, trends in the sector are also in the right direction. Indeed, I see one of your workshops this afternoon features forest nurseries. I know at least one of my children would have loved to spend their early childhood at one of those!

In the next few weeks, our inspectors will be doing some refresher training on how we look at safeguarding. And I do expect future inspection frameworks to be more explicit about the balance between risk and safety, always keeping in mind the requirements of the EYFS [Early Years Foundation Stage]. In the short term, we will be continuing our myth-busting campaign to make clear what we look at during an inspection and how we reach our judgements.

Speaking of myths, there is one that may be helpful for me to debunk right here, also in the spirit of being clear about what inspection does and does not focus on.

On my travels, I have had a lot of discussions about snack time and what Ofsted expects to see. I believe there are such things as 'rolling snacks', 'self-serve snacks', 'free-flow snacks', 'continuous snacks', 'communal snacks' – I could go on.

At first, I was perplexed. Why should the way a nursery organises its snack time be so important to Ofsted? Then I discovered that advice from various sources recommends the sort of snack that Ofsted prefers. That might have been born of a well-intended comment from one inspector to a single setting at some point, but it seems to have escalated into an enormous and pervasive myth.

So I will say here, inspectors do not expect to see any particular way of organising snacks. Communal snacks may be a useful way to introduce children to good table manners and help them to learn courtesy words, such as please and thank you.

But it is really a decision for you as providers to make. If children have other opportunities to pour water in play time, then self-service pouring is less important, and vice-versa. Ofsted is more interested in why you choose activities and the effect that they have on children's development.

Something else that I'd like to be clear on are my comments to the Education Select Committee last week. As you may be aware, I gave the view to the committee that the quality of care in early years was very good but that of

education not quite as good. I certainly was not intending to trash an entire sector, which might be the impression left from some of the follow-up coverage. I also made the point that, in my view, the problem lies, in part, with the EYFS. In the next few weeks, we will be publishing research on this issue which I hope you will find of interest.

Language development/the vital role of nurseries

This brings me to the final point I would like to raise today. There is a very important discussion to be had about the role of nurseries and childminders in preparing children for school.

The curriculum (or, to use EYFS terminology, the programme) that children experience in their early years is vital in this task. We know that young children are especially receptive between birth and age 5, when their brains develop at the fastest speed and they learn more rapidly than at any other age.

This means that the choices we make for very young children about the play things we provide, the games we play, the words we use, the stories we read and the songs we sing are all hugely important. I know that many of you here will have given the curriculum and the way you provide it much thought and I encourage you to do so.

I imagine most of you in the room today could stand with me now to recite 'Sing a song of sixpence' or 'The grand old Duke of York'. But I don't know that we can say that is still the case for children in lots of nurseries today.

That is a shame, because of the other great joy of nursery rhymes. They are a unifier. Providing a collective memory and experience for young children across the country. And often teaching a little bit of social history to boot. Which is why I would hope that every nursery and childminder would find the time for a nursery rhyme.

Nursery rhymes also help with vocabulary and we all know the huge value in helping young children develop their language skills. Put simply, the more words a child has heard by the time they start school the better. You have such an important job here, particularly to fill the gaps for those children who might not be exposed to the same range of vocabulary at home.

Children need to hear new language all the time. It might be taking the opportunity with a child looking at a pretty flower to talk to them about all the different parts of the plant. Or being more basic, talking to them while washing their hands, making suds from the soap, turning on the tap, running the water, oh dear too fast, too slow... I could go on because everything we do with children is an opportunity to introduce them to more words. Children are so open to absorbing new language. I remember when my younger daughter was 4, she had an Australian Reception teacher. I would often hear his voice in what she said – I must confess I wasn't always thrilled about it!

So please don't be afraid to teach them things. And before I get shouted down

by the 'save our childhood' brigade, of course I don't mean long lists on blackboards in formal lessons. I mean passing on new words, ideas and skills. Encouraging curiosity and rewarding inquisitiveness. Everything that helps a young child develop and be ready for school.

Conclusion

I know every one of you in this room shares the same ambitions that we all have at Ofsted. We all want the very best for young children across the country.

At Ofsted, we want to give you the space to do the right things. And we certainly don't want to waste our time and yours inspecting the wrong things. We are on a journey of change, much as you are as you adapt to the new 30-hours programme. There will always be room for all of us to improve, Ofsted included. I hope we can be on that improvement journey together.