

Speech: Amanda Spielman's speech to the NAHT conference

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to this conference.

You won't be surprised to hear that I'm going to talk about our new education inspection framework. And I would also like to touch on some of the current challenges that I see for schools – where we as the inspectorate have much common ground with you as school leaders.

But I'll start with the new framework. As most of you probably know, we expect to publish it later this month, to come into effect from September.

It follows a full consultation, which attracted well over 15,000 responses, from many quarters. In drawing up this framework, and in considering the responses, we have never lost sight of the impact inspection has, on schools and on their leaders.

We have considered all suggestions that have been made through the prism of what is practical. Many special interest groups have lobbied vigorously to have their particular cause or passion given greater prominence in inspection. If we adopted every suggestion, we'd have the weightiest inspection model in the western world, rather than one of the lightest, as we do at the moment.

But, having reviewed the comments, we are deciding how they can be used to improve the framework in the interests of children first and foremost, their parents and of course of schools and the wider education sector.

And that order – children first, parents, providers – is important to me, because it reminds us not only of the core reason why Ofsted exists, but also of the multiple purposes that our inspections must serve.

Ofsted has had the same strapline for over a decade: 'raising standards, improving lives'. And the reason it has survived so long because it says it all, and very concisely. As a motto, it wouldn't look out of place over any school door in the country.

And sometimes, when discussion about inspection gets heated, we can forget the children and families whom inspection is meant to serve. The framework is inherently interesting to most people here, as members of the teaching profession, but it's unlikely to be the hot topic of conversation on the buses of Clapham, or indeed Telford.

So it is important for us to pay close attention to the voices and expertise of schools, about what you believe is the best approach, but we must also pay attention to what parents want and tell us, even though their voices are not necessarily as loud or as well-orchestrated.

And sometimes, when much of the 'heat' around this consultation has been on

practical and logistical issues, such as where inspectors prepare for inspection – it has been easy to be distracted from the ‘light’: the guiding principles that sit at the core of our proposals.

And here, I’m really pleased to say, the replies to our questions show strong agreement between headteachers, classroom teachers and parents alike.

Our central aim is to encourage a focus on the substance of education, and to reward schools that do this with integrity. One aspect of this is to restore Ofsted’s former focus on curriculum, in its proper place at the centre of education. To achieve this, we have proposed a new Quality of Education judgement. We want to look at what children are being taught; how well it is being taught; and how effectively it is setting them up to succeed at the next stage of their lives.

And parents are strongly behind this approach, as are individual headteachers and teachers. Around three quarters of respondents in each category agreed with the new quality of education judgement. Thank you to all of you here who supported it.

Most, though not all, unions across the phases of education have been positive about this approach and also welcoming of our proposed gradual approach to implementing the new judgement, so schools have time to adjust. Everyone knows that good curriculum planning and implementation take time.

Basing our judgement on the quality of education, and giving more limited weight to test outcomes, is a better way to evaluate what a school does within its particular context.

We all know that too much weight placed on performance measures alone can lead to a degree of distortion, both in what is taught, what is not taught, and in other aspects of how a school is managed. We also know that it is the children with disadvantages – whether social, economic or personal disadvantages such as SEND – who are more likely to be directly affected when these distortions happen.

By focusing on the substance and integrity of education, we want to help limit the perverse incentives that can lead to some schools believing they have to narrow the curriculum and teach to the test in order to be judged a success.

The NAHT had reservations about the Quality of Education proposal, although it supports the shift in emphasis towards curriculum. And of course, we respect that and are considering your union’s comments carefully.

We also proposed changes to the length and focus of section 8 inspections of good schools. As many of you are primary heads, I know this proposal was significant for you.

The NAHT disagreed with the proposal, although there was support from other unions. We did recognise early on that many of the concerns centred on the potential impact of longer section 8 inspections on small primaries – and if this proposal goes forward, we will give this some further thought.

But interestingly, this was a proposal which put clear water between parents and schools. More than 60 per cent of parents think longer inspections were a good idea, whereas fewer than 30 per cent of heads agreed.

This is borne out by our annual parent survey. We published our most recent instalment earlier this week. One of the criticisms that parents make of our inspections is that they are just too short. So it's not surprising that parents support inspectors spending more time in schools.

Staying with our parent survey, it's also interesting to see that parents' views on the curriculum mirror some of the concerns that underpin our changes. Parents are not convinced that their children are being taught enough music, art, languages, history or geography, for instance.

It seems that more professional dialogue about the curriculum is an idea that chimes with parents and professionals alike.

The parent survey also highlighted a finding that is consistently strong year after year. 9 out of 10 parents know the grade of their child's school or childcare provider. That's quite a statistic and it underlines what we know about our inspection reports. They are reasonably easy to understand and they provide a straightforward and impartial narrative about the school – including its strengths and weaknesses.

Fundamental to this is a clear and consistent way of grading the important areas that make up a school.

There is, of course, a lively debate about the practice of grading a school. That's why, alongside the parent survey, we have published a brief review of the grading system, which considers both the strengths and the criticisms of the current system and looks at how our inspection findings are used by different audiences.

Quite apart from the transparency that grading provides for parents, it is also used for information and as a trigger for extra support by governors, local authorities, MATs and regional schools commissioners.

And here I should say that I think it was a very positive move by the Secretary of State to clarify that the only trigger for intervention by RSCs should be an 'inadequate' inspection judgement. Taken with the removal of floor standards and the coasting measure, which I know he confirmed here yesterday, schools can now be sure that the default model is to provide support to improve, unless the school falls into the bottom 2 or 3 per cent in the country.

I understand that the views of heads are mixed, and that grading presents some challenges to school leaders. But the vast majority of schools are rightly proud of their good or outstanding status, while very few have to write letters to parents explaining why the Ofsted report was disappointing.

And I genuinely believe, that for parents, that is accountability in action. We talk a lot about parents' ability to choose a school for their child and the influence Ofsted can have on that decision, but of course for many

parents – especially outside big cities, that choice doesn't exist. The local school is the only option.

I would argue that in these cases, the Ofsted judgement is more, not less important, as it provides an independent assessment that parents can discuss with their school's leadership. English schools have had a high level of autonomy for many years, about what they teach, how they teach it and who they employ and in what roles. This stands in contrast to many other countries, where central or local government exert much more direct control over how schools operate. Inspection, with its grading system, looks at whether that autonomy is being exercised effectively in children's interests – it's the scrutiny that a flexible system does require.

We will, of course, be monitoring the impact of grading under the new inspection framework, but we have no plans now to change the grading structure. It's simple, it's well understood and it works for parents.

I've spoken a lot about parents as a priority audience for Ofsted, but that doesn't mean that schools must do exactly what parents want, or that parents don't have the primary responsibility for children's upbringing and development.

I've said before that it's worrying and wrong that more children – and I'm not talking about those with very specific needs here – arrive at school without the basic skills, including toilet training, that they should have by school age. We should be concerned if any school feels it needs to hire somebody to change nappies, as was recently reported in the press. This really shouldn't be necessary. It's not what schools are meant to be doing.

And it is so often the case that schools are expected to be the magic bullet to deal with a whole range of societal issues, even when they may be ill-equipped, or inadequately resourced, or simply the wrong place to tackle the issues.

One example can be seen in some of the discussion around children's mental health. No-one expects health professionals to assess educational problems, or to help children and their families address them. Yet from the consultation we saw that many people are happy to suggest that schools and teachers should be responsible for making what amount to clinical diagnoses of psychological problems, and providing treatment. Of course children should get the medical care they need, whether problems are physical or mental, and identification of referral mechanisms, where schools do have a valuable role, should work swiftly and smoothly. But the answer isn't simply to say that schools should do everything. You just can't.

And then over recent months I have been involved, along with many others, in discussions about knife crime. As the terrible toll of young people losing their lives has risen, so has the determination to tackle the issue. As is always the case with societal problems, the causes are complex, and of course there is an understandable desire to find a neat solution.

Schools, inevitably, are seen as a potential agent to reverse the growth of

knife violence. Specifically, exclusions have become something of a totemic issue in certain quarters, with arguments made that they should never be used and that Pupil Referral Units are recruiting grounds for gangs.

The research report that we published in March, based on fieldwork in London, found that better partnership working that properly integrates schools, in the right way, is what is most needed.

Better partnership working is hardly a novel, or a unique message – but it clearly still needs repeating.

More generally, it is also not right to say that PRUs are failing. Many do a very good job. We know that around 80 percent of registered PRUs achieve a good or outstanding grade. Good PRUs provide the sort of targeted and specialist support that the most troubled pupils need if they are to turn their lives around.

And I have defended the right of heads to exclude permanently in the small number of cases where it is necessary to do so. It cannot be right that the ultimate sanction, used properly, be removed from head teachers.

Where we do have serious concerns – and this is an issue we have highlighted recently – is that so many children drop out of sight before they finish compulsory education. The number of children who are out of registered education by the end of Year 11 is many times the number who are ever permanently excluded.

Some of these children end up in unregistered alternative provision, which can be completely unscrutinised. Sometimes these providers don't realise that they are actually within the legal definition of schools and should be registered. Often what they offer falls a long way short, which is especially concerning when they often take the children with the greatest problems. I am concerned that not only are many operating illegally, but they are doing so in plain sight, accepting placements from local authorities.

We have long argued that more needs to be done to track the children who aren't in a registered state or independent school, for whatever reason – whether it's off-rolling, exclusion, home-schooling, or simple non-attendance. The DfE's recent announcement of a register of children not in school is therefore welcome to us. I know that as heads you always want to satisfy yourselves as far as you can, that any child who leaves, or is excluded from your school, has a good alternative education in place.

From safeguarding to social issues, there are many matters beyond actual teaching that exercise schools.

In recent years we have seen a worrying trend of extreme pressure being put on schools, especially primary schools.

The Equality Act is designed to enforce a number of different rights, and of course there are places where these different rights can bump into each other. We need to acknowledge and discuss this a bit more.

One clear tension exists in places where equality between the sexes comes second to religious belief and cultural preferences.

Another tension arises between religious belief and relationship education, in the context of LGBT issues. And that is all we are talking about here – not sex education, but a simple understanding that just as families worship differently, families also love and marry differently. And there are other tensions too – more than I can go into in this brief speech.

As a result, we are seeing protests at the school gates and children being withdrawn from schools. This is worrying on a number of fronts: the impact on community cohesion, the impact on teachers and most of all the impact on the children, in whose name – if not whose interest – the protests are made.

Clearly it's unacceptable to intimidate schools and teachers who are trying to do what is asked of them under the law. It would be a huge step backwards if schools became reluctant to teach children about the diversity of modern Britain.

I continue to hope that dialogue will remove misconceptions, help people see the bigger picture, and find sensible and workable solutions.

More generally:

Teaching a broad and stimulating curriculum; preparing children for life in modern Britain; and tackling social issues that are not of your making. These are huge challenges for schools and for teachers.

They are what unite all of us in education – heads, classroom teachers, support staff, and yes, Ofsted inspectors. We are all working in the interests of children and you, as school leaders, have an incredibly powerful influence on young lives.

This may be a good point to say thank you to many people in this room. I know many of you are Ofsted inspectors, or took part in our pilot inspections, so thank you for that.

After what has been a rigorous, robust and even enjoyable debate, I hope that once we publish the new framework later this month, it can become part of the fabric of education, supporting schools to improve and reassuring parents that their children are benefiting from the opportunity, inspiration and knowledge that a great education provides.

In short, I hope we can continue to work together to raise standards and improve lives.

Thank you.