

Chief Inspector warns against pursuing success without substance

Launching her third Annual Report as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman said today that the great majority of schools, colleges, nurseries and child minders in England are good or outstanding, reflecting the hard work of teachers, leaders and support staff who work there.

- 86% of schools are judged to be good or outstanding
- 96% of early years (EY) providers are good or outstanding
- 81% of inspected further education and skills (FES) providers are good or outstanding

This year's Annual Report also highlights improving developments in children's social care, with 48% of local authority children services now rated good or outstanding, while 84% of children's homes, fostering and adoption agencies, residential special schools and other social care providers returned a good or outstanding grade in their most recent inspections.

Ofsted's core job is to inspect, regulate and report objectively. The Annual Report provides a summary of findings from thousands of inspections and visits and research published over the past year. It presents a 'state of the nation' commentary on the quality of education, training and children's social care services in England. Ofsted is the only independent body that can provide this view across England.

Speaking to an audience of education and social care professionals and policy experts in Westminster, Ms Spielman said that, while the overall picture is good and improving, it's important not to let complacency creep in.

Ms Spielman said:

It's important that we don't allow complacency to creep in. We must ask the tough questions and highlight inadequacy, as well as excellence.

... So, as we look at the high standards of education and good quality care that most are achieving, we must ask: what lies beneath? Away from the excellent work going on in many places, what is getting in the way of further and faster improvement – and what does that mean for our children?

Ofsted launched a new education inspection framework (EIF) in September 2019, which put the quality of the curriculum at the centre of its approach, with less focus on performance data. Since then, there has been a real shift in emphasis in schools. School leaders and teachers have widely welcomed Ofsted's new approach and the opportunities it has given them to think carefully about their

curriculum, and make sure it gives every child the chance to acquire the same knowledge and learning.

However, the Annual Report warns that a minority of schools and other education providers continue to make decisions in their own best interests, rather than those of their learners. This includes various forms of 'gaming' that seek to maximise the school's attainment data and league table positions.

Ofsted is concerned that these providers are failing to act with integrity or focus on what really matters. As a result, some children – particularly the most disadvantaged – are not being well prepared for adult life. In her speech today, Ms Spielman said:

We must guard against restricting education excessively. Exam results are important but have to reflect real achievement. We should not incentivise apparent success without substance. This doesn't represent a good education for any child. And for those who aren't being read a different story every night, who aren't taken to the museum at the weekend, who don't get the chemistry set for Christmas, it is especially impoverished. These children need and deserve a proper, substantial, broad education, for as long as schools have them. She continued:

We recently inspected a school that had been requiring every child to take a sports science qualification, using up a valuable GCSE slot, whether or not they had any interest in sports science at all. We've seen schools requiring almost every child to take a qualification in English for Speakers of Other Languages, even though they were nearly all native English speakers who were also taking English Language and Literature GCSEs.

We've seen schools that have been cutting back drastically on all children's opportunities to discover the joys of languages, art, music, drama and humanities – so that most children have to give them up at age 12 or 13, when they have barely begun to discover what these subjects have to offer.

... We mustn't succumb to the seductive but wrong-headed logic that we help disadvantaged children by turning a blind eye to schools that narrow education in this way, as long as they deliver acceptable grades at the end. Grades are hollow if they don't reflect a proper education underneath. And we have no idea yet who the most talented and singular women and men are, who will drive this country forward in the 2030s, 40s and 50s. They could be in any primary or secondary school anywhere. All of them should have the chance to develop their talents. Poorer children shouldn't get a worse choice.

Other concerns highlighted in this year's Annual Report include:

- Ofsted continues to be worried about the number of pupils leaving schools during their GCSE years. Twenty thousand pupils left their state-funded secondary schools between Year 10 (2017) and Year 11 (2018). There are 340 schools with exceptional levels of pupil movement, of which around 100 have been inspected this year.
- This year, Ofsted's unregistered schools task force provided the evidence for three successful convictions of illegal schools and their operators. However, legal constraints still make it too easy for illegal schools to operate in defiance of the law. Ofsted urgently need stronger powers to seize documents and the Government needs to tighten the legal definition of a school and of full-time education.
- Ofsted's inspections of provision for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) has exposed a lack of coherence and coordination. Local leaders across education, health and care do not always see themselves as collectively accountable for this provision. Too often, parents encounter fractures in assessment and planning. In these cases, the system is not working well as a whole to make the best decisions and achieve the best outcomes for children and young people.
- Local authority children's services continue to endure significant financial pressures. Challenges across children's services are underpinned by a chronic lack of funding, set against increasing demand.
- The children's home sector is facing huge challenges in sufficiency and capability, which need national oversight and strategic leadership. There are not enough children's homes in the right places across the country, and there is no central joined-up strategy or plan to meet children's needs.
- In the FES sector, there has been rapid growth in the number of new apprenticeship training providers. However, a gap remains between the knowledge and skills required for the economy and current provision, in particular in relation to training for low-skilled workers. The sector needs to work much more in tandem with the government's Industrial Strategy.
- The early years sector has seen a continued decline in the number of childminders. Meanwhile, more and more nurseries are joining large national and international providers, but are inspected individually. These nurseries are more likely to be rated outstanding, which suggests that strong practice can be shared effectively across the whole nursery

chain. There may be benefits from a different inspection model that would allow individual inspections of nurseries to be brought together and features across the whole chain to be analysed.

- Increasingly, decisions that affect children's education and care are being made by central management in large multi academy trusts, nursery operators or children's home operators. Decisions about the curriculum, the model of care, staffing, safeguarding and behaviour policies go to the heart of what Ofsted needs to consider through inspection and regulation, but the legal framework for accountability is not keeping up with the evolution of the education and care sectors.

In the coming year, Ofsted will look more closely at some of these areas to see if things can be done differently to improve outcomes for children.