

National Audit Office Value for Money Study: Ofsted's Inspection of Schools Official Response from Voice the Union

During the winter of 2017 Voice surveyed its members on the following three areas:

1. Is Ofsted well-placed to inspect schools efficiently and effectively?
2. Does Ofsted inspect schools in an efficient and effective way?
3. Does Ofsted know if its school inspections are having a positive impact?

10 We received responses from 55 members also gathering comments to allow us to understand and explain the responses we received. These have been combined to produce the following findings.

Ofsted has produced many reports to show the impact that it has upon schools. Its latest annual report states that 90% of primary schools and 79% of secondary schools are good or outstanding. The current Ofsted framework means that schools previously assessed as being outstanding are not routinely re-inspected; meaning that, despite risk-assessment of the data, some schools may now be less than good.

20 The impact upon a school when it receives a less-than-good outcome can be disastrous. Research from the Teacher Development Trust¹ suggests:

- *An emphasis on teacher collaboration with school principals creating time specifically for teachers to discuss and compare pupil performance and plan/share/discuss teaching strategies.*
- *External expertise brought in to bring about successfully targeted use of pupil data to monitor the success of teaching approaches in specific cohorts of pupils*
- 30 • *Strong leadership and management that focused primarily on the quality of teaching and the ability to learn clear lessons from data.*
- *Intensive, ongoing professional development that was closely matched to specific issues in the school's development plan.*
- *Low turnover of highly qualified teachers, with strategic teacher recruitment to fill gaps*
- *Use of mentors for the school leader, from the local district/authority.*
- *A push for greater parental involvement*
- *Modifying teaching practices to promote independent learning*

40 However, the most common approach in the UK is to remove the senior leadership team and under-performing staff, creating a staffing void and destabilising conditions for learning. This means that Ofsted inspections are anticipated with fear and trepidation. They are an action which is 'done' to a school rather than a professional dialogue in association *with* the school.

¹ <http://tdtrust.org/research-of-the-week-7-school-improvement>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 85% of respondents felt that Ofsted's inspections did not have a positive effect. Whilst some respondents understand inspectors to be professional and qualified, it is clear that inspectors' knowledge of education is understandably often limited to the phases in which they work. This can be illustrated by comments such as, "What learning is going on?" whilst KS1 children were dressing after PE, and "What is Singapore method?" during a maths lesson. Similarly there is a huge focus on data and targets rather than the individual needs of the pupils.

All inspectors are drawn from leadership roles, many of whom have not undertaken any teaching or pupil facing activity for a number of years. This suggests that inspection staff have the correct experience and expertise on paper, but their first-hand experience is dated since they are no longer practising. Teachers cannot become Ofsted inspectors although this may resolve a number of issues as teachers would be less likely to inspire fear and dread and may be capable of acting in a more valuable manner to support improvement.

Only a third of respondents feel that Ofsted is consistent in its approach to the inspection of schools, with many stating that consistency has always been an issue. A report in the TES² confirmed that Ofsted themselves are aware of this and this can be validated further by the comments from respondents, "I have had an occasion where an inspector informed the school that they NEVER award an outstanding grade." "Our school has had a variety of outcomes despite very similar exam data." "Our recent inspection focussed on GCSE results from 2016 when the 2017 results were available." Some other respondents noted that there has been change to the criteria and methodology of inspection with the introduction of short inspections, which is not helpful for consistency.

There was the view among some respondents that consistency has improved in recent years but the vast majority were still not confident in the consistency of the inspection judgements. Out of 52 respondents, just 23% were confident, with 77% not confident. No respondents were very confident.

Whilst 85% of respondents felt that the costs and impact were not proportionate, most of the respondents to our survey were unsure of the actual costs of an Ofsted inspection and so they focussed on the impact that it has on a school – before, during and the immediate aftermath. A number noted that during a time of austerity when schools are increasing class sizes, reducing curriculum areas and withdrawing support for the most vulnerable students, it is "a waste of money." Even in those schools who feel that they have "everything in place," a significant sum of money is expended to "satisfy Ofsted and not impact on teaching and learning." Too many schools

² <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-views/reliability-genie-out-bottle-ofsted-and-it-will-only-lead-more>

90 constantly prepare for a visit, meaning they are Ofsted ready but not necessarily meeting the needs of all of their pupils.

During the inspection, staff are displaced as securing accommodation is made available for the inspection team, and leadership and administrative staff are removed from their usual duties to perform shadow inspections and assist the team with documentation, some of which is dismissed.

100 The impact on a school placed in special measures is incalculable. One respondent noted, "A failing school needs to increase the number of teachers, reduce the number of contact hours and ensure a supportive peer to peer environment, not be told off like a naughty pupil." There is evidence³ to suggest that this would promote sustainable improvement; however, this mode of school improvement would likely be more expensive, both in terms of time and money.

110 Ofsted inspection reports have a multitude of end-users. Their primary end-users are the institutions themselves, but they are also read by parents and prospective parents, job applicants, local authority and trust executives and regional schools commissioners. It would be virtually impossible to produce a single document which provided the data and information all of these users require in a manner which is both concise and yet sufficiently detailed. Just 31% of respondents felt that the reports met the needs of the end user. Some believe them to be "too light touch" and "quite brief so that parents do not always get the full picture", whilst others noted that "the focus is too narrow" and "comparison of data [between schools] is misleading". Voice has noted before that throwaway comments can have a huge impact on education. For example, observations of good marking send the message that Ofsted expects everyone to mark in the same way. This has caused Ofsted to have to spend money on refuting these assumptions with its mythbusters document⁴.

120 When just 15% of respondents feel that Ofsted has a positive effect, questions need to be asked. It is not a positive experience for many schools. "Surely the role of Ofsted should be to encourage improvement rather than strike fear, discouragement and self-doubt into dedicated teachers ... During my last inspection those conducting the inspection were, at times, unpleasant and intimidating prompting one very young child to ask one of the inspectors if they 'liked their job' because they had a less than positive approach!"

³ The Tennessee Project STAR showed that smaller classes really benefited students in early education; further studies went on to show that this positive effect remained and that those enrolled in small classes early in their school life continued to outperform their peers in larger classes.

http://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/05_02_08.pdf

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015/ofsted-inspections-mythbusting>

130 Furthermore, the additional stress and anxiety can cause already stretched teachers to be overwhelmed, leading to staff absence and impacting on pupils.

140 In any performance review, one should be able to measure oneself against the criteria and determine whether or not they have been achieved. This does not happen in schools - "We are never confident of the outcome". This leads to issues with morale putting "untold pressure onto teachers which is passed on to the children." "It's basically not a fair system, it doesn't measure where the school is on a day-to-day basis and has far too much influence on applications for places - this then leaves some schools having to take all of the mid-term admissions, usually students who have been permanently excluded from other schools in the area - putting extra pressure on all of the staff."

The recent introduction of short inspections has had some positive benefits as they are a lighter touch and less intrusive; allowing teachers to teach. However, these have been subject to recent changes and it is difficult for schools to prepare if the goalposts continually move.

150 What schools need is a supportive programme which comes alongside them and pupils to drive improvement in teacher performance, encourage parental involvement and raise standards, not "be punished or feel undervalued" by the system where "the inspectors become the 'bogeymen' and worry assumes a disproportionate amount of time in the minds of staff."

In conclusion, Voice members believe that Ofsted is not effectively or consistently inspecting schools and that the improved standards are not due to Ofsted but due to the hard work of the school staff.

Ofsted needs to try harder!