

Twenty years inspecting English schools – Ofsted 1992-2012

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1976-1992: Why was inspection reformed?

Proposals for a new national inspection service for schools in England emerged from growing disquiet about state schools from the late 1960s onwards.

In 1976, Prime Minister James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College criticising schools had led to a national debate. Education was given increasing priority by the Thatcher government in its later years, culminating in the introduction of a national curriculum in 1988 but it was only after the replacement of Margaret Thatcher by John Major in 1990 that the government decided to reform school inspection (Wilcox and Gray [1] also Dunford).

Previously, school inspections nationally had been carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) whilst most local education authorities (LEAs) had teams which both inspected and advised schools in their area. HMI had advised ministers on the state of publicly funded schools since 1839.

They undertook regular full inspections, with teams of up to 15, as well as short inspections on particular aspects of schools. After 1983, inspection reports were published.

But although widely respected in schools they were increasingly seen by Conservative ministers as part of the problem with education, with Kenneth Baker claiming they had encouraged a 1960s liberal, egalitarian consensus (Lee and Fitz). Furthermore, some ministers thought the annual report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, such as that of 1989 which condemned the state of school buildings, provided too much ammunition to government critics (Thomas).

But, in any case, with fewer than 500 members the inspectorate was too small to undertake what the Major government intended to establish, a system that would inspect and report on every school every four years. The idea of an increase in HMI or the handing over of responsibility to LEA inspectorates was rejected by the government.

Kenneth Clarke, the new education secretary, made clear that choice for parents was to be a key driver of the new system. He intended, 'to take the mystery out of education by providing the real choice which flows from . . . independent inspection' (Wilcox and Gray [1]).

Key points

- Ofsted was set up following a period of sustained criticism of English state education. Government policy after 1992 was to ensure all schools were inspected regularly by a rigorous and transparent process. Reports were to be written to a common format accessible to parents and judgements on schools consistent.

- By the late 1990s all English schools had been inspected in a process which was now a major part of English school life whilst the high profile and controversial views of the chief inspector, Chris Woodhead, fuelled a continuing debate over standards.

- After Woodhead's departure, Ofsted adopted a more collaborative approach to schools and encouraged them to evaluate their own performance. Ofsted's responsibilities had increased but its role in the failure to protect a murdered London baby led to renewed demands for more effective inspection.

- The coalition government elected in 2010 is simplifying and toughening inspection. Arguments continue over Ofsted's accuracy and fairness, particularly towards schools in deprived areas, and its effectiveness in improving schools.

- Debate also continues over:
(i) how wide the inspection remit should be; (ii) where responsibility for improvement after inspection should lie; and (iii) whether three companies should have a monopoly of provision.

1992-1993: Ofsted is established

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) was created by the Education (Schools) Act 1992 shortly before the election won by John Major. The new organisation was to be led by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMI) but there would be fewer HMIs and these were left, at least initially, with a largely monitoring role. Teams of inspectors, led by a registered inspector, from both the private sector and LEAs, would bid to win contracts to inspect schools.

They had to include a lay inspector with no prior involvement in education (a stipulation later dropped). Reports were to be published faster than in the past, within 25 days, and governors were then given 40 days to produce an action plan to address key issues.

The bill passed relatively unscathed, although a clause that would have given schools responsibility for choosing their own inspection team was amended in the Lords to ensure that Ofsted would decide on both inspection timings and teams for each school. Another proposal to stop LEAs inspecting their own schools was also defeated (Dunford).

The new organisation and its first head, Professor Stewart Sutherland, faced a formidable task. Between March and September 1992 they had to produce an inspection framework and handbook, recruit thousands of inspectors and train them before the first inspections in 1993.

Schools would be graded on a seven point scale from 'excellent' (1) to 'very poor' (7). The handbook included evaluation criteria with descriptions of what 'good' (3) and 'satisfactory' (4) would mean in all aspects of school life to be judged. Ministers had previously criticised HMI reports for lack of clarity and all reports were now to follow a single framework with the same main headings:

- Basic information about the school and its pupils.
- The inspection's main findings and key issues for action.
- Standards of achievement (progress) and quality of learning.
- Efficiency of the school.
- Pupils' personal development, behaviour and attendance.
- Subjects of the curriculum.
- The factors contributing to the findings,

including teaching quality, assessment, curriculum quality, special educational needs, equality of opportunity, management and resources, pupil welfare and parental links.

Today's reports are shorter and individual subject reports have been largely dropped. Nevertheless, the main elements of those first reports from 1993 remain prominent in those of 2012 although, over time, comments on resources and accommodation have reduced significantly.

By 1994, when Stewart Sutherland retired as HMCI, much had been accomplished. The first inspections had taken place in September 1993 and by May 1994 over 7,500 inspectors had been trained; most were local authority advisers with some retired HMI, heads or teachers and a few serving heads. Within three years Ofsted was inspecting 6,000 schools annually and had inspected every state school in the country.

1994-2001: A new regime

Stewart Sutherland was replaced by Chris Woodhead, who, over the next few years, was to become one of the most influential and controversial figures in English education. To his supporters he was a fearless upholder of traditional standards and critic of bad teaching. He was dismissive of most educational research and sceptical of the way deprivation had been made an excuse for low standards in many inner city schools.

However, his opponents claimed he was unfairly negative about state schools and used performance and inspection data in a selective, sometimes misleading, manner.

Shortly after his appointment he claimed that inspectors had found that 15,000 teachers in England were incompetent and should be removed. Arguably, the figure itself was not particularly contentious: it represented, after all, barely 3% of the teaching force. But furious union leaders and others pointed out that Ofsted lacked the data to uphold the claim.

In 1999, Robin Alexander, who had worked with Woodhead on the influential report *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools* (1992), wrote, 'what HMCI presents as fact may well be at variance with the evidence', citing Chris Woodhead's insistence that primary schools would be unable to meet literacy and numeracy targets 'unless the non-core elements of the curriculum were drastically slimmed down'. But Alexander quoted an Ofsted survey reporting that 'schools which did well in the tests at KS2 in English and maths were the ones which provided a broad curriculum' (Alexander).

There was also concern about significant alterations to inspection reports that changed the original meaning. A report into reading in 45 inner London primary schools was presented as highly critical of the standards achieved. But, according to Colin Richards, then a senior primary HMI, much of what those undertaking the inspection had originally written was removed from the final report, including details of the number of pupils with special educational needs, from deprived backgrounds or who were not English speakers.

Also omitted was the finding by HMI that these pupils 'placed exceptional demands on the skills and resourcefulness of teachers' (Richards).

During Woodhead's time, Ofsted's role

widened considerably. In 1998, the Labour government, having reappointed Woodhead for another four-year term, extended Ofsted's responsibilities to include the inspection of local authorities and teacher training establishments. Another change, later dropped, included the reporting to headteachers of inspectors' grading of lessons.

In 1997, the cycle of inspection was changed from four years to six years and whilst this partly reflected the pressure on Ofsted of maintaining a punishing schedule of inspecting 20,000 schools every four years, it also signalled an increasing questioning of part of the rationale behind Ofsted.

Before Ofsted had been established, much had been made of ensuring parents learnt what was really happening in classrooms. But two key findings had emerged from the early years of inspection.

First, although, as chief inspectors' reports had stressed for years, there was significant under-achievement, in some poorer districts and in coasting schools in more affluent areas, most schools were effective and well run. So how often was it necessary or cost effective to revisit schools to confirm this in view of the increasingly sophisticated pupil performance data now available?

Secondly, whilst parents wanted to hear the main inspection findings and be reassured about their child's school, they had shown little interest in the minutiae of inspection. Most had neither perused the lengthy early reports nor used inspection, except rarely in some failing schools, as weapons against school leaders. The term 'proportionate inspection' was increasingly heard from the late '90s.

In 2000, Chris Woodhead left his post, making clear his disillusionment with the government (Woodhead). According to one senior member of the government of the time Woodhead's main achievement had been to build on the foundation of Ofsted and establish it as a permanent and influential part of the English education system; it is difficult to envisage any government in the foreseeable future abolishing Ofsted.

The same politician, however, felt he had stayed in the post too long and that his combative style had led a significant number of teachers to view Ofsted as the enemy rather than a partner in the common task of school improvement.

2001-2005: Proportionate inspection and self-evaluation

Over the next four years the inspection of schools in England was to change significantly, so that by 2005-06 Ofsted could claim it was both less bureaucratic and more responsive to the circumstances of individual schools.

Inspections became proportionate. Outstanding and good schools were now inspected only every six years and satisfactory schools every three, whilst inadequate schools received regular monitoring visits. Inspections in primary and secondary were shortened and the size of inspection teams reduced.

Teams of up to 15 inspectors (in large secondary schools) covering every national curriculum subject and cross-curricular aspects were replaced by three or four inspectors, often led by an HMI. The already smaller teams in primary schools shrank to just two inspectors. The length of secondary inspections was

reduced from four or five days to two or three. The long notice given to schools of up to six weeks was replaced by 48 hours.

Schools were expected to produce far less paperwork, although the quantity provided had often been far in excess of what inspectors needed. Whilst many teachers found the shorter notice less stressful, others thought the reduction in the amount of teaching observed led to judgements about schools being increasingly based on performance data. The loss of individual subject reports was regretted by some, including heads of successful departments.

Inspection was now based on a four rather than a seven grade system:

Descriptor	Grade
Outstanding	1
Good	2
Satisfactory	3
Inadequate	4

Inadequate schools would be deemed to be 'causing concern'. Inspectors had to decide whether a school should be placed in special measures, where the school leadership lacked the capacity to improve alone or, if the school had the potential to improve by itself, it should receive a notice to improve.

Changes also took place in the way inspection contracts were awarded. Many local authority teams had already stopped inspecting to concentrate on school improvement and smaller inspection companies had been swallowed up by larger ones. Inspection was now regionalised with, controversially, only three companies covering the whole of the country. Currently (2012) contracts are held by CfBT Education Trust for the North, SERCO Education and Children's Services for the Midlands and Tribal Education in the South.

A major change to inspection in 2005 was the emphasis placed on a school's own self-evaluation. Schools were expected to offer judgements of their own performance across the inspection criteria. They were asked (although it was never compulsory) to fill in an online self-evaluation form (SEF), available to inspectors prior to arrival, and were expected to support their judgements with evidence to be tested during the inspection (Bubb and Early). Inspectors were asked to involve school leaders more in the inspection, sharing their early impressions with them, inviting them to team meetings and undertaking joint classroom observations.

Arguably, the 2005 innovations had almost as big an impact on schools as the establishment of Ofsted itself 12 years earlier. It became difficult for a school to achieve a good grade from Ofsted unless it undertook regular, systematic self-evaluation throughout the year, including both observing teaching and tracking the performance of pupils and intervening to improve it where necessary.

The mid-2000s also saw Ofsted adopt a more positive tone towards schools. In fact, Ofsted's own data had often revealed a better picture than that suggested in the speeches of HMCI but in 2005 the new Chief Inspector, David Bell, in his annual report, went further, attacking those he called 'doomsayers':

'Commentators are too often wont to describe the past as some mythical golden age. The facts tell a different story . . . As the performance of schools has improved over the

past years, it is only right that we have higher expectations.'

2005-10: A wider remit

The mid-decade also saw a significant enlargement of Ofsted's remit. It had already taken over responsibility for the inspection of childminding in 2001 but in 2005 its responsibilities and powers grew further as four separate organisations were merged into Ofsted: the Commission for Social Care Inspection, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration and the inspection remit of the Adult Learning Inspectorate. The education secretary, Ruth Kelly, claimed that Ofsted would now be able to follow learning from early years right through to adult and work-based settings, 'whilst at the same time sustaining focused, high-quality inspections of standards in our schools and across wider services for children'. (*The Guardian* 13/12/05).

Two years later Ofsted assumed responsibility for the oversight of child protection in England. This was to lead to the darkest hour in the organisation's history. After a young child, Peter Connolly (Baby P), was killed by his mother's partner in Haringey in August 2007, Ofsted was severely criticised by MPs and the media for failing to report serious shortcomings in Haringey's childcare and protection provision.

In December 2008, HMCI Christine Gilbert admitted to failings in Ofsted's oversight of Haringey council; she acknowledged that inspectors were misled by positive data provided by education officers and consequently gave the authority a 'good' rating for child protection only weeks after the toddler's death. Gilbert said: 'I think that if the grades that we gave [in 2007] gave a false assurance we have to take some responsibility for that. I'm absolutely not washing my hands of it.' (*The Guardian* 06/12/08).

But others, like Graham Stuart MP, the Chair of the House of Commons Education Committee, went further, questioning whether Ofsted's resources were spread too thinly and asking whether it possessed the right skills mix to inspect services provided for children virtually from their birth to their late teens (*Times Educational Supplement* [TES] 06/08/10).

The Baby P scandal also dealt a blow to any view that inspection could be largely data driven. Although organisations such as the Fischer Family Trust were producing sophisticated pupil performance and progress measures, which enabled comparisons to be made with similar schools, the need for inspectors to determine what was really happening on the ground had been tragically demonstrated.

In 2009, another new inspection framework was produced, which, according to Christine Gilbert, was intended to ensure that inspectors would spend a higher proportion of their on-site inspection time in the classroom, place greater emphasis on the performance of particular groups of pupils, especially the most vulnerable, and take more account of the views of parents and pupils. Following the heightened concern about child protection, safeguarding was given a high priority. This was to lead to stories, which Ofsted denied, of otherwise good schools being downgraded because a door had been left open or a fence built too low (*TES* 09/07/10).

2010-2012: A new government – slimming down and toughening up

In May 2010, a new coalition government took power with the Conservative Michael Gove as secretary of state for education. He was committed to a new, slimmer but tougher, inspection regime and was determined to remove what he saw as the dumbing down of educational standards under Labour. Yet, an early announcement that outstanding schools would no longer be inspected caused concern as it seemed to imply that no such school would ever deteriorate. The proposal was later modified.

In April 2011, the House of Commons Education Committee called for fundamental reform of Ofsted (www.parliament.uk 17/04/11). It suggested the organisation was too large and should be split into two new inspectorates – one for education and the other for children's care.

MPs thought too few inspectors had recent, relevant experience in the setting they were inspecting and called for more senior staff from schools to be seconded to Ofsted. Their report said the range of progress measures used to judge schools was too narrow and progress across all ability groups should be reported more prominently.

The government refused to split Ofsted but agreed on more secondments, whilst secondary school performance tables now include progress made by top, middle and lower ability ranges in each school.

In Autumn 2011, Michael Gove announced that Sir Michael Wilshaw, executive head of Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, would succeed Christine Gilbert as HMCI in January 2012. A new framework for inspection was also published. The number of key areas inspectors had to report on was reduced to four: pupils' achievement, teaching quality, the behaviour and safety of pupils, and leadership and management. The change was welcomed by many heads, who felt inspection had grown unwieldy with too many aspects of school life included.

Further changes in September 2012 meant a school could no longer be classified as outstanding if teaching was not outstanding whilst the term 'satisfactory' was to be replaced with 'requires improvement'. An earlier suggestion to make all inspections 'no notice' was dropped as impractical (what happened if the inspectors arrived on sports day?) and schools would be informed the day before the inspection. Parent View, a new online questionnaire, was launched, allowing parents to express views on their child's school at any time.

Shortly after his appointment, Sir Michael made clear his intentions: 'I believe we need radical improvements to the education system in this country . . . We've got to up our game . . . My view is that we have tolerated mediocrity for far too long – it has settled into the system.'

But amongst some longer-serving heads and teachers his remarks created a sense of déjà vu. A headteachers' association officer, Malcolm Trobe, said that Sir Michael's comments were 'damaging and demoralising dedicated professionals' (bbc.co.uk/news/education 09/02/12).

So, 20 years after Ofsted was established, opinion is still sharply divided over its value to the English education system. There are

clearly two issues which are key to judging the organisation: how accurate it is and how effective it is in achieving its aims.

How accurate is Ofsted?

Since September 1993 Ofsted has overseen many thousands of inspections of English schools, involving observations of hundreds of thousands of lessons and other activities, and published a vast array of reports on schools and aspects of education. The credibility of Ofsted must surely rest on the accuracy of the judgements in those reports.

In the early years of Ofsted the emphasis placed on ensuring accuracy and consistency impressed many. In the 150 years since school inspections in England had started nothing like the Ofsted inspection handbook and framework, making explicit what inspectors were looking for, had existed. Local authority inspectors interviewed in 1995 were unanimous in their approval of both, ' . . . an excellent tool. A real treasure', said one. The inspectors commended Ofsted for its 'thoroughness . . . and comprehensiveness' (Wilcox and Gray [2]).

Nevertheless, surveys towards the end of the first round of inspection in the late '90s found as many as 35% of heads thought the overall judgements on their schools were inaccurate. Although this might be dismissed as predictable complaining by those disappointed with inspectors' findings, a third of this group actually thought their report had been too positive (Ouston, Fidler and Earley), whilst other research has suggested that, 'a good [Ofsted] report for an ineffectual teacher had undermined heads' efforts to deal with the case' (CEPPP).

Professor Dylan Wiliam, of the Institute of Education, recently challenged Ofsted to evaluate the reliability of its school inspections and publish the findings, asking: 'If two inspectors inspect the same school, a week apart, with no communication between them, would they come to the same ratings?' (*TES* 03/02/12).

Further doubts were raised by accusations that inspectors had 'cut and pasted' parts of old reports into new ones (bbc.co.uk/news/education 08/06/12) and that one Ofsted contractor had appointed lead inspectors who were not qualified teachers (bbc.co.uk/news/education 26/06/12). Jan Webber described the difficulty schools have in challenging Ofsted. She wrote of one report 'riddled with inconsistencies and inaccuracies as well as an unfair assessment of the school'. Senior staff spent weeks gathering evidence to contest the report.

The school received strong support from the local authority, the school improvement partner and governors and eventually Ofsted upheld the complaint and upgraded the school. Webber concluded that 'disputing an Ofsted report . . . is not easily done' (Webber).

Concerns have also been raised about Ofsted's judgements on schools with the poorest and most challenging intakes. The weight to be given to the socio-economic circumstances of pupils had concerned HMI for years. In 1966 HMI devised a separate category for 'schools in very poor areas . . . which could not . . . match the achievements of the higher categories but . . . did splendid social work' (Gray).

After Ofsted was established, those in charge felt such an approach might embed low expectations in some schools and let down

the most needy. Yet, after the new inspections started, it quickly became clear that schools with more favoured intakes were far more likely to receive good judgements than those serving poor areas.

The difference was stark, as shown by a 1995 study which reported that 90% of schools in the two highest social contexts were judged favourably by Ofsted compared with only 10% in the two lowest social contexts (Matthews and Smith).

Although Ofsted has increasingly used contextual information – such as the number of children on free school meals – to compare the performance of schools with those with similar intakes, the debate continues. The head of a Bristol school, where exam results had improved considerably but which only received a 'satisfactory' rating, told the BBC in 2012 that, whilst she agreed that every school should aspire to be at least good, it was very difficult for those in challenging circumstances.

In response, HMCI noted that 700 such schools were rated outstanding by Ofsted (bbc.co.uk/news/education/09/02/12).

In June 2012, Michael Wilshaw tried to move the debate on by announcing a review into under-performance in deprived areas and invited heads to take ownership of the review. Headteachers' leaders responded positively and the report will be published in 2013 (bbc.co.uk/news/education/15/06/12).

How effective is Ofsted?

In 1993, the first Ofsted annual report stated that, 'Ofsted is fundamentally concerned with securing improvement of schools' (Ofsted). How far has it succeeded in that aim and that of making parents better informed?

Initially, it is worth reflecting that, as an examiner said to the writer, before Ofsted was set up it was common for a teacher to spend decades without ever being observed teaching (or, in the words of a retired senior HMI, 'the teacher shut the classroom door on their first day and it remained closed for 40 years'). In the midst of criticism of Ofsted today, it is easy to lose sight of how questionable this was in a publicly funded service and how transparent schools are today compared with those of 30 or 40 years ago.

A number of studies have looked at the extent to which Ofsted has improved schools. Some considered the effect on examination results the year after inspection and found that, instead of improvement, there had been a small but significant deterioration (Rosenthal, also Shaw et al). This may be due to the effect of 'post-Ofsted blues', which some researchers have commented on (CEPPP) although, arguably, one might look for improvements in exam results over a longer timespan than a year.

Certainly, heads and teachers seem unconvinced that inspection, in its present form, is an effective way of securing school improvement. One study found two-thirds of heads felt inspection did not lead to improvement, whilst another for Ofsted suggested only 35% of schools felt

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the benefits of inspection outweighed the bad effects (Thomas). Both were in the early days of Ofsted but a survey in 2008 found only 5% of teachers thought inspection had positively influenced their teaching 'to a great extent', whilst another 40% felt it had made no difference at all (ofsted.gov.uk/node/2315). In 2004, however, a study commissioned by Ofsted had claimed that inspection did lead to widespread improvement (Ofsted [2]).

It is difficult to determine Ofsted's role in securing school improvement as there is so little agreement as to whether schools have improved at all in the past 20 years and, if they have, by how much.

Debates about standards continue despite Ofsted's own evidence pointing to schools having improved (Ofsted [1]). Nor have changes to the Ofsted process – 'the fiddling at the margins', as one senior ex-HMI described it – clari-

fied its contribution to school improvement. In the 20 years since Ofsted's foundation there have been 10 new inspection frameworks. The impact of other educational reforms and wider social factors must also be considered.

Kenneth Clarke had said that informing parents better about schools would be a key aim of Ofsted and an early survey found most parents thought inspection reports helpful and accessible (Tabberer).

In 2004, 85% of parents surveyed by Ofsted said they would read the inspection report if choosing a new school (Ofsted [2]), although other evidence suggests many parents place more weight in choosing a school on local reputation than any published material (Maras, Moon and Bradshaw).

Some 20 years after its foundation, Ofsted's role in the English education system remains both significant and highly controversial.

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