

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Ofsted's work with schools](#), HC 1507

Tuesday 24 October 2023

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Nick Fletcher; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns.

Questions 54 - 114

Witnesses

[I](#): Natalie Perera, Chief Executive, Education Policy Institute; Dr Sam Sims, Lecturer, UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities; Dr Bernardita Munoz-Chereau, Lecturer, UCL Centre for Educational Leadership; and Carole Willis, Chief Executive, National Foundation for Educational Research.

[II](#): Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector of Ofsted 2012–2016; and Lord Jim Knight, former Schools Minister and Chair of the Beyond Ofsted inquiry.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Natalie Perera, Dr Sam Sims, Dr Bernardita Munoz Chereau and Carole Willis.

Q54 Chair: Welcome to today's session on Ofsted's work in schools. We will be taking evidence from two panels. The first panel is Natalie Perera, chief executive of the Education Policy Institute; Dr Sam Sims, lecturer at the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities; Dr Bernardita Munoz Chereau, lecturer at the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership; and Carole Willis, chief executive of the National Foundation for Educational Research. You are all very welcome. We will move on at about 10.45 to a second panel, composed of Sir Michael Wilshaw, former Chief Inspector of Ofsted and Lord Jim Knight, former Schools Minister and chair of the Beyond Ofsted inquiry.

I want to make clear in the room today that while we were all very saddened to hear of the tragic death of Ruth Perry earlier this year, it is not possible to discuss the specific circumstances of her passing in this inquiry. Her case is before the coroner's court, and we cannot interfere or duly influence that important process. Inquests are not discussed in Parliament while they are open as the matter is considered sub judice. However, we will be addressing wider questions about Ofsted, its role and its impact, which have been raised this year, and we hope our inquiry will inform the new HMCI's approach when he takes up his post early in the new year.

I will start by asking the panel: overall, what would you say inspection is aiming to do and how effectively does Ofsted currently fulfil this purpose?

Carole Willis: Thank you, Chair. Accountability systems as a whole are around identifying schools that perform well, so that we can learn from them and identify schools that are struggling and may need more support. Inspection plays an important part of that process in adding value to performance data, and giving a more rounded picture of a school's performance and approach to helping children to develop.

The question of the extent to which the inspection regime as an independent regulator should support school improvement is more debatable because of the importance of maintaining the independence of the regulator. As to how successfully that is being done at the moment, I am sure we will come on to issues of reliability and consistency of inspections. Sam has done a lot of work in that area and there are possibly some other areas where the process could be improved to provide more valuable information to the system.

Chair: Thank you. Sam, do you want to go next?

Dr Sims: Thanks. I think that there is also an important point—that we have exams at the end of primary school and at the end of secondary school. This provides lots of performance data. It is quite rigorous and it



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enables us to hold schools to account and I think it is hard to see us ever moving away from a system like that. The question then becomes: why would you add an inspectorate on top of that for the purposes of accountability? Many countries don't, certainly not in the way that we do.

There is an important role for the inspectorate in checking that schools—in targeting and trying to improve the headline exam-based performance measures—are not cutting corners, not off-rolling pupils they think will get bad results, and not narrowing their curriculum to just aim at the things that contribute to the headline measure, and that they are also doing all the things that do not directly show up in exam results, such as safeguarding, extracurricular activity and so on.

That leaves a lot of questions about the overlap between those two systems: the exam-based accountability system and the inspection system. I think there are bigger questions to be asked about why we double up there.

Dr Munoz-Chereau: Adding to what has already been said, inspections are very important for the accountability system, to provide accountability for different choices from parents. Schools also feel that, for example, an Ofsted inspection is a stamp of approval of their work. Of course, they do not work the same nationally. There are some different aspects that we will come across later on, but I think that is an important aspect to consider. The accountability aspect has a very important role in how the overall system works.

Chair: Natalie, is there anything you want to add to all of that?

Natalie Perera: I agree with much of what has already been said. If we look at accountability more broadly, it ought to be delivering assurance to parents that their children are safe from harm. It needs to then identify weaknesses within a school system and hold schools to account. It needs to support them to address and improve where there are weaknesses, but it needs to do that within the context of the wider school and the challenges it faces, which I am sure we will come to. Then there is a question of what the role of inspection is within that wider accountability regime.

Q55 **Chair:** Thank you. Have any of you looked at how Ofsted compares with inspection bodies in other sectors? Bernardita, I know you have done research about other jurisdictions and you have already talked about some of the differences even within the UK, but are there any other useful comparisons that you think we should be looking at as part of our inquiry?

Dr Munoz-Chereau: I conducted a study funded by the Edge Foundation. We compared the theory of action or how each of the four inspectorates in the UK, in the four jurisdictions, are intending to produce school improvement. We found some similarities between the four but also a lot of differences in, if we think about Ofsted, feedback—the



mechanism that was expected to transform educational improvement. The other jurisdictions were much more interested in self-evaluation, in providing more trust to the schools and improvement through self-evaluation and self-reflection. This was a marked difference if we compare England with the other three inspectorates.

Carole Willis: I want to draw the Committee's attention to some interesting work we have been doing in Uganda, evaluating a model that brings together more closely the inspection regime with the school improvement regime. I am not suggesting that a model in Uganda can be picked up and dropped into England but I think some of the principles are interesting.

An independent school improvement organisation, PEAS—Promoting Equality in African Schools—attends the inspections alongside the Government inspectors. The Government inspectors then go away, maintaining their independence, and the school improvement agency works with the school over the coming months developing a school programme, providing support and guidance and monitoring visits.

We have done a small-scale evaluation of around 50 schools, but it suggests some very positive impacts on teaching approaches, attendance and wellbeing. I think that having independent but aligned systems for inspection and school improvements is quite a powerful issue to consider further.

Chair: Sam, do you have any other comparisons?

Dr Sims: Nothing on the international comparisons from me, no.

Q56 **Ian Mearns:** This has already been referred to: what does the evidence tell us about how consistently the education inspection framework is applied, and what impact does this have on the reliability of inspection judgments?

Dr Sims: We would like inspections to be reliable. They are high stakes for schools. We would like two different teams to reach the same judgments, clearly. We have very little evidence on this, which is remarkable given that Ofsted has been going for 30 years. We have a study from about five years ago from Ofsted, where it sent two inspections teams to 24 previously "Good" schools. Whether they reached the same conclusion, they conducted the inspection independently and they found that in 92% of cases they agreed on the judgment, "Does this remain a 'Good' school or not?" That is quite high. It is quite good, but there are a couple of things to think about there. One is that on a binary judgment like that, if they all flipped a coin, they would agree 50% of the time, so that is the baseline.

The second point is that in a short inspection like that with a "Good" school, the presumption going in is that the school remains "Good", and they look for evidence to overturn that. In an attempt to make some progress on this and test this further, colleagues Christian Bokhove and



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John Jerrim and I have tried to scrape together as much data as we can from inspection reports, the internet and charities. We have looked at simple questions like: does the judgment reached in an inspection correlate with things that it should not correlate with like, for example, the gender of the lead inspector? Where we find that, controlling for the progress 8 score of the school and the school's previous inspection judgment—these are schools that look very similar in how well they are doing—6% of inspections led by a female inspector and 4% led by male inspectors reach an "Inadequate" judgment. This difference is too big to be accounted for by chance, but with the simple data that we have managed to gather it is hard for us to dig into that any further.

We have also looked at things—and we have some new research coming out soon—like inspectors inspecting schools in a sequence. They go to one; they reach a judgment. They go to the next one; they reach a judgment. We have looked at: does the inspector's prior inspection judgment correlate with their current inspection judgment? Does the school you have just been to colour your views of the one you are at now?

Where we find one of these hard to explain findings that should not really be there, such that if the inspector reached an "Inadequate" judgment in their previous inspection—that happens in 3% to 5% of cases—the odds of them reaching an "Inadequate" judgment in the current inspection are about 40% lower. This holds, controlling for outward indicators of the quality of the school, progress 8 and so on. This again is a big difference. It cannot be explained by chance.

It is hard to know exactly what to conclude from this other than the classic academic statement, "Much more research required". To do that we need Ofsted to release more of its data. It is quite remarkable to me that a publicly funded body in 2023 does not release its data in a secure and safe way to qualified researchers. We also need Ofsted to run more of these "two inspection teams going to the same school" type studies. Only Ofsted can do that. In particular, we need them for schools that were previously "Outstanding", schools that were previously "Inadequate" and so on, so that we get a full sense of the reliability of inspections.

Q57 Ian Mearns: That implies to me, though, that it would be a very useful exercise, if Ofsted was to do more of those dual inspections—to do the comparisons between the two inspection teams inspecting the same school at around the same time.

Dr Sims: I strongly agree. We need more studies like that because we are very much holding everything constant. It is the same school. We also just need transparency on the data so that researchers can dig around and use clever research methods to try to—

Q58 Ian Mearns: You mentioned when it did that exercise that it came to the same judgment in 92% of cases. What happened to the other 8%? How different were the outcomes of the other 8%?



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Dr Sims: The other 8% did not agree on the simple question of, "Did this remain a 'Good' school or not?" As you probably know, that triggered further work and inspection and I am not sure what the ultimate outcome was.

Ian Mearns: It is a funny stat that sticks in your head because I always remember that 8% of the Apostles were Judas, so it is—

Dr Sims: This is a small study. It is 24 schools, so we need more and larger versions of that.

Q59 **Chair:** I want to bring in the other panellists on this but before I do, I will ask the question: how has transparency changed over time? We have obviously had a lot of different frameworks and a lot of different Chief Inspectors. Has there been a different approach to transparency of data in the past or has it always been very difficult for academics to get hold of the data?

Dr Sims: As you know, the inspection reports are always published as a PDF. We have gone to a lot of effort to try to convert some of that stuff into proper numerical data but, apart from that, there has not been really any marked increase in transparency over time. My understanding is that Ofsted is a creature of Parliament, essentially. It is there for legal reasons and it seems to me that Parliament has an important role in making sure that that data is transparently and securely released to qualified researchers.

Q60 **Chair:** There was a tool, Ofsted Data View, that used to allow you to look at Ofsted ratings by area and break that down. I remember Ofsted coming into Parliament to show that off to MPs, many years ago when I was a Back Bencher. I believe that is not being updated any longer; is that right?

Dr Sims: I am not sure about that, but the crucial thing for research purposes is that we can see who the inspectors were that did each inspection so that we can do more of this type of research.

Ian Mearns: Anyone else, please?

Carole Willis: Yes, I want to add a couple points to Ian's question about reliability and accuracy, but first I will reinforce some of the points that Sam has made about the importance of the quality of the inspection process. The international evidence identifies that this is one of the key factors that lead to inspection findings being adopted by schools or not. If schools do not trust the accuracy of the process, they are much less likely to take on board the findings.

On my couple of points, the first is that the Committee has heard already from other witnesses last week. It is around the length of the inspection. There is a huge amount in the education inspection framework and I imagine that it is very challenging for inspectors to cover all that in only one or two days. I think that the new Chief Inspector will want to look at



whether the inspection should be longer or whether there should be a narrower focus within the inspection to increase the validity and reliability of the conclusions that inspectors are coming to.

The second point is on looking at a fairer process of judging school performance. A number of organisations—including the NAHT accountability commission—have argued for looking at families of schools, so looking at schools with similar intakes in similar areas and comparing a performance within those families rather than against all schools, which would be more challenging for schools in leafy suburbs as well as fairer for schools in disadvantaged areas.

Chair, I think last week you raised the question of whether progress measures, rather than attainment measures, took full account of children's backgrounds. Well, they don't. They are a huge step forward in that they are much better than attainment, but it is still the case that children from low income backgrounds make slower progress, so there are other factors to take into account. Although it has been proposed as part of a better way of looking at the performance data, there may be ways to apply that to the inspection judgment as a whole.

Natalie Perera: I agree with what has been said, particularly about reviewing again the length of inspection times and, also, the expertise of inspectors and, where it is possible, to align subject and phase expertise with what is being inspected.

I want to talk a bit about impact, which you also asked about. We published two pivotal pieces of research on impact. I want to be clear that both of them relate to schools that were inspected under the old inspection framework, but there is no reason to believe that that has changed and some of the research published more recently under the new framework aligns with what we have found already.

Our first piece of research found that there is a clear relationship between disadvantaged schools and the likelihood of them being rated Ofsted "Outstanding", so the more affluent the school, the more likely they were to be "Outstanding"—and conversely for disadvantaged schools. When we controlled for our value added measures—we took into account the starting point of pupils—we found that only around 50% of the more affluent schools that were rated outstanding should have actually been rated outstanding once you take into account that value added measure.

In our second study, we looked at about 580 schools, over the period between 2005 and 2018, where those schools had been judged as less than "Good" in three successive inspections. We found that by the end of that observation period, the schools were more likely to have higher levels of free school meal pupils, higher levels of pupils with SEND and higher teacher turnover. When we tried to explore the relationship between the poor Ofsted judgments and those concerning outcomes, we found that Ofsted had an impact on the increase of FSM pupils and teacher turnover, but it was a very modest increase. It contributed to



those more challenging circumstances but it was by no means the main driver.

What this tells us is that we need to look again at the circumstances in which schools are operating so they are not disadvantaged by the inspection regime. If we do not do that, we risk particularly detracting some of the best teachers from working in the most challenging schools.

Dr Munoz-Chereau: In the same study that Natalie mentioned—we conducted together that study on stuck schools—we followed the quantitative analysis with case studies in 16 stuck schools. These are schools that received a below “Good” grade consecutively three times over more than a decade. We compared them with unstuck schools—schools that were stuck before but the last inspection was “Good”.

We found that headteachers, teachers and governors thought that inspectors did not have enough qualifications or training to inspect schools in disadvantaged areas. They thought that they did not understand all the complexities they were dealing with, and all their efforts to improve the schools were being stuck by the inspection rather than in their own narrative. They did not feel stuck at all. They were doing a lot of work to bring their teams together and to improve children’s outcomes.

In fact, one of the predictors of being stuck was not necessarily the academic outcomes of the students but their location and how close they were to an “Outstanding” school. How close a stuck school was to an “Outstanding” school was a stronger predictor of being stuck than the performance of the stuck schools. In some of these stuck schools there was academic progress in terms of attainment and progress 8. That was really concerning.

Q61 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much. Sam, you stated in your written evidence that the focus should be on ensuring that inspection judgments are consistent and reliable enough for the purpose of their use. In your opinion, is that the case and if it is not what should we do about it?

Dr Sims: I think the right way to think about this is that the judgments should be reliable in proportion to how high stakes they are for schools. Clearly, an “Inadequate” judgment is very high stakes for schools. It often leads to changes in senior staff. Therefore, in my view, we should not be seeing correlations between, for example, the gender of the lead inspector and your probability of receiving an “Inadequate” judgment. Again, it is quite hard to explain why we see that but it is now rational for a headteacher, based on this data, to hope for a lead inspector of a certain gender when they inspect their school. That cannot be right and it seems to me to be unsustainable as well.

How can you make them more reliable? Well, you can change the things they focus on. For example, a focus on curriculum probably makes it less likely that two inspectors come to the same decision on the grounds that



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this is a big subjective judgment call. People might argue that the curriculum is a very important part of what we want the inspection system to address. There is no free lunch there. There is a trade-off.

The other way to make the stakes and the reliability more proportional is to change the stakes, the other side of the equation where people have proposed that getting rid of the one-word inspection judgment and replacing it with multiple-word inspection judgments for different areas would reduce the stakes of that because failing in one area, for example, could automatically fail you overall. When I say “fail” I mean “Inadequate”. I think these are the kind of policy options but there probably is a trade-off between the reliability and the validity of Ofsted inspections, like the curriculum point.

Ian Mearns: Does anyone want to add anything to that?

Chair: I think we need to make some progress, if that’s all right. I will bring in Flick.

Q62 **Mrs Drummond:** Do you believe that inspections have changed over time in their accuracy?

Dr Sims: I was going to say that one important way in which they have changed—I think this is under appreciated—is just the amount of manpower or womanpower involved in each inspection. Decades ago, it wasn’t uncommon for there to be 12 or 13 inspectors turn up for a whole week. That allows you to have subject specialists and phase specialists in the inspection team, and they spend longer collecting evidence, so that could be 75 man days per inspection. Nowadays it is not uncommon to have one or two man days per inspection. If you believe in the ability of inspectors to collect evidence, it seems to me they must be able to collect less in those shorter inspections.

Chair: I guess the flipside of that is on workload, as you have 75 man days of inspection going on, that is potentially a lot of workload and a lot of pressure on teachers and leaders in the school, and that is part of the—

Mrs Drummond: At least you have more confidence that the actual outcome will be more accurate. I think they did that on the grounds of expense but perhaps it is not a good idea.

Natalie Perera: Like Sam, I think that the content of inspection has changed with the frequency and the duration, but what is really difficult, and I think at the heart of the challenge that we face, is that we do not really know whether reliability has changed, because of all the problems that Sam has mentioned. I do not think we can answer the question of, “Are Ofsted inspections more reliable now than 15 or 20 years ago?” because we simply do not have the data.

Q63 **Mrs Drummond:** Carole, did you want to comment on that? No? Okay. What can we do to make them more accurate? It would be great if you



could expand on your example of an “Outstanding” school next to a stuck school, and how that can be changed. I assume they are “Outstanding” because everyone is moving their children to the “Outstanding” school, but what was the reason behind it?

Dr Munoz-Chereau: It is difficult to know what the reason was, but it was something that made us think that these stuck schools were against—they are not on their own. There is a local market for schools. As you say, if one school is “Outstanding” and the parents can send their children there, they will. Not everybody has that choice; most of the stuck schools were located near other stuck schools. Also, the idea that was already suggested—that individual inspections that assume that schools are competing for students, from one to the next, does not apply in many spaces.

This idea of geographical approaches, where you can take into account the context more generally and you can look at how schools are working there, will also generate collaboration between those schools and not this idea of competition. We suggested in the stuck school report the idea of changing the inspection from individual to geographical or local, where you really take into account that context and what the schools are working for.

Mrs Drummond: You are saying they do not take it into account. Certainly, when I was an inspector, we took the area and the type of school into context. Are you saying that is not happening any more?

Dr Munoz-Chereau: I think less and less taken into account is the assumption that context does not really need to play into this equation.

Mrs Drummond: Does that go back to the quality of the inspectors and quality overall, but also lack of expertise maybe in the area or the curriculum subjects?

Natalie Perera: To add to that and to come back to your point, I think there are a few issues at play here. The first is that when a school gets a poor rating, particularly if it becomes stuck, we tend to see pupils leaving that school or not applying there in the first place. That has an impact on funding because of the per pupil funding nature of school funding. Therefore, what we have argued for is that rather than allowing schools to take that hit in the drop in funding, the DfE should provide a bit of contingency funding to help schools get back on their feet, as well as provide details of networks where they can get support from other schools. It is not inevitable that schools that are either in challenging circumstances or receive a poor Ofsted judgment stay that way. They can have high performance and they can go from less than good to “Good” and “Outstanding”, but those schools need a bit of peer-to-peer support to get there.

Sorry, I forgot the last bit of your question.

Q64 **Mrs Drummond:** So have I. What it leads me on to—I am thinking about



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it—is that we talked about the parents but previous evidence has said that Ofsted is way down the list of things they look at when they are choosing a school. Is it a useful source of information for parents when choosing a school?

Carole Willis: I am not going to steal Sam's thunder but just to say that parents do use Ofsted's inspection reports in making their choice of schools. There was some research published in 2021 looking at four years of administrative data on parental preferences, showing that parents change their preferences in response to new information about the Ofsted grade of a school. Whether they should or not, or how they should caveat, is something that I am sure Sam will want to talk about.

Dr Sims: Thanks, Carole. Yes, about half of parents in polls say that they use Ofsted inspections to inform their choice of school. The challenge comes around the question of how up to date the information in an Ofsted report is. We run a study where we ask the hypothetical question: "Say you are choosing a secondary school for your child this year and they are going to attend the school next year. The average Ofsted report in the period we were studying was about 1,000 days old at the point you are looking at it to make your choice. Your child is going to attend one year later, and you care about the five years after they get there. Fifty per cent of the time the head of the school will have changed between the Ofsted report you are reading and the school that you go on to attend. More importantly than that, we show that the Ofsted grade in the report you look at on average is not predictive of the amount of progress the pupils make at the school in the period your child would have attended, or parental satisfaction with the school measured in surveys, but it is predictive of attendance rates."

This comes to an important point: what is the purpose of inspection? If you want an inspection system that can inform parents' judgment, you want more frequent inspections, for which you need smaller teams and you want to be in and out of schools more regularly. On the other hand, if you want a school inspection system that is highly accurate and may be geared more towards the provision of advice or the careful identification of areas for improvement for a school and, for the same budget, you have to inspect less often, probably with a larger team, and do more of a deep dive.

Q65 **Caroline Ansell:** I will ask a follow-up question. You talked about how reliable reports are for parents choosing for years ahead, but what sort of volatility do you see in Ofsted ratings for individual schools? Is there not, for better or worse, some consistency over time where schools get stuck and perhaps they get stuck at "Good"? Perhaps there is wild variance.

Dr Sims: Yes. Well, not wild but there is a group of schools who get stuck but it is quite a small group, and then schools change over time and staff members come and go. I think on average 10% to 12% of teachers leave a school each year, so after five years it is like the old joke about how many times you can change the handle and the head of a



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broom and it still be the same broom! It is essentially a new school after a while. Particularly change in leadership is important. You get change in the area, in the catchment area for the school that changes the school—

Q66 Caroline Ansell: Is that longitudinal study available in understanding school ratings over time?

Dr Sims: I am sure it is somewhere but our study is based on data and so it is essentially showing the fact that the previous Ofsted report is not correlated with the results it would get when your child attends. It is telling us about that instability, essentially.

Q67 Caroline Ansell: Forgive me, I should probably move on to my own question now. It really strikes at the heart of the purpose of inspection and it is essentially about school improvement, which I think all the panellists mentioned in the preliminary question. What does the evidence tell us about whether and how far Ofsted inspections actually result in school improvement?

Carole Willis: I would say that the evidence is mixed. There has been extensive EPI work looking at stuck schools and how some schools can get into a downward spiral once they receive negative or lower Ofsted judgments. There is also evidence that finds that schools just failing an inspection improve over the next two or three years. I think that is about the nature of the individual school and its capacity to improve, but there is something important to think about in the theory of change.

What are the mechanisms through which we might expect Ofsted inspections to lead to school improvement? Is it about the threat or the incentive to get a higher grade? In which case, we need to think carefully about the capacity of the school to improve the pre-existing capacity. Is it as a result of the feedback that inspectors give during the inspection process, in which case we potentially need to make that much stronger focus consistently across all parts of all schools for all inspections, or is it as a result of the subsequent support that is then provided after the Ofsted inspection?

That is where I think we need to look at whether the existing system is sufficient to enable schools to improve. We still have 12% of schools rated “Requires Improvement” or “Inadequate”. We have these stuck schools and it does not seem that enough support is being provided early enough to help those schools get out of that cycle.

Q68 Caroline Ansell: You say that you observed that of the schools found “Inadequate”, a number make progress and improve. You said it is very individual and around the school’s own capacity for self-improvement. But can you discern or have insights been discerned as to what those schools have in common that means they have been able to do that? Are there any commonalities?

Carole Willis: The assumption is about their capacity to improve that was already there. They have that initial basis from which to move



forward and take action on the basis of the inspection findings. Colleagues might have more information, particularly on the stuck schools work.

Dr Munoz-Chereau: There were some commonalities for the unstuck—those that were stuck and managed to improve to “Good”. That had to do with stabilising the team; the headteachers need to be there at least three years to start looking at improvements. Those places were not favoured by many teachers—they had low recruitment—so they nourished their own early career teachers into leadership. They implemented distributed leadership to bring them into action and to give them responsibilities. They improved their work with parents. It is sometimes very difficult to engage parents, but they found different ways of communicating with them, diversifying with social media, and so on.

The overall grade made it more difficult for all these things that have to do with school improvement to happen because there was this stigma or reputation that was attached to the schools once they received a below “Good” grade. Even though they had a “Good” grade, people still thought that these schools were not very good.

One of my recommendations will be, as has already been suggested, to remove this overall grade, which provides a too simplistic definition of the quality of the school and is losing too many aspects that are needed.

Q69 **Caroline Ansell:** That answers the next question about how we can mitigate these negative Ofsted grades. Are there other ways in which that mitigation could happen? Obviously, the idea regarding one-word judgments is one. Are there other dynamics that would help the school to power out of that experience?

Natalie Perera: Certainly better training for Ofsted inspectors to make sure that their judgments are more reliable. As Bernardita mentioned, schools need more time to make those improvements and to improve the quality of their education offer.

I also think—and I mentioned this earlier—that the inspection system needs to take account of the challenges that schools are facing. Without that, we will always have a kind of bias or gradient in the system whereby schools in more challenging communities are, in general and on average, penalised under the current inspection framework. That could be readily addressed by Government.

Q70 **Caroline Ansell:** Understood. We have all heard it said that there is no better place to be than in a school that has just got a “Good” or “Outstanding” judgment. What do we know about the impact of that “Good” or “Outstanding” judgment, having understood the impact of a negative judgment? What special dynamic is at play there, Sam?

Dr Sims: I am not sure if I am going to directly answer your question here but, building on what Carole said, we have one really good study on the effects of schools being given different Ofsted grades: the one Carole



mentioned about just passing versus just failing. This shows that the benefits in increased pupil achievement are entirely for schools given an “Inadequate” grade because it triggers some sequence of things. From this one study, there is no evidence that receiving the other three grades changes pupil achievement.

I think this also speaks to the point that what is realistic for Ofsted to achieve in somewhere between one and four days is the diagnosis of a problem, not the improvement of a school. This relates to what Bernie is saying. Turning a school round is a two to three-year job. You can see this in the data very clearly, and no single PDF from Ofsted is going to achieve that level of improvement. The benefits for “Inadequate” schools—it is a kind of insurance policy against schools where things have frankly gone quite wrong.

- Q71 **Caroline Ansell:** Schools obviously undertake a great deal of self-evaluation, so they very often know where they need to improve and how they need to improve. What does the inspection ruling add to that? As you say, it is not currently aligned as strongly as it might be with school improvement, so what does that judgment and that experience give when schools very often have a development plan and they know their pupils, their staff and how they would like to move forward?

Dr Munoz-Chereau: This goes back to the study we did comparing the inspection systems. We have a low trust. In the current inspection system, there is low trust in the professional judgment of schools to judge their own performance or where they are at. The other three jurisdictions believe more in that self-evaluation. They take that into account and then the inspection looks more like a professional conversation. The way Ofsted inspections are conducted now is low trust in the schools and teachers to evaluate their own progress and their own improvement.

- Q72 **Ian Mearns:** From what has been said so far, we can take it that we do not think that Ofsted gives enough account of factors such as social disadvantage in their inspections. Natalie, with that in mind, in 2019 the Education Policy Institute suggested that the new education inspection framework had the potential to be fair on the schools with high numbers of vulnerable pupils. Has this potential been realised and has the new framework resulted in improvements to the way these schools are judged?

Natalie Perera: No, we do not see any evidence that it has been realised. If you look at the Data Lab analysis of inspection outcomes in 2020, we were still seeing the gradient between more disadvantaged schools and “Outstanding” judgments. That has continued. What we have also seen less of in practice is a focus on disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs. Promisingly, Ofsted talked in the new framework about off-rolling but we have not seen any schools taken to task under the new framework for off-rolling. Is it because it isn’t happening or is it because it is not being investigated in the school



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inspections? We do not know. There are things in the new framework that we thought were promising but we don't think they have quite come to fruition.

Ian Mearns: Just on that, how many inspection reports mention off-rolling at all?

Natalie Perera: I don't know off the top of my head, but very few.

Ian Mearns: Very few. Okay.

Dr Munoz-Chereau: If they find off-rolling, it will go in the leadership subgrade, so there is an awareness of unintended effects but it is not taken at a prime level.

Ian Mearns: I am just a layperson but also a school governor. If off-rolling is occurring, is it not also a safeguarding issue?

Chair: It has an impact on safeguarding in reality

Ian Mearns: Sam, did you want to add something? You were nodding your head.

Dr Sims: I think that there will always be some schools that are less well equipped to deal with any inspection framework. For example, with the new inspection framework, very often when I am talking to headteachers of small primary schools they say they are disadvantaged because they cannot dedicate a member of staff to leading the curriculum thinking and they do not have subject specialist teachers—they have one in each year group. We came up with a framework and over time we noticed that some schools are disadvantaged by it. We come up with a new framework that tries to address the problems in the rear-view mirror but inevitably there will always be some schools that are less well placed to deal with it.

Q73 **Anna Firth:** This is to Natalie Perera. The Education Policy Institute welcomed the focus on off-rolling in the education inspection framework in 2019. Four years on, has Ofsted's focus on off-rolling led to a reduction in the pupils who have been off-rolled?

Natalie Perera: We have not repeated the analysis that we did that was published in autumn 2019 and looked at schools under the old framework. I cannot say whether what we describe as "unexplained exits" is higher or lower under the new framework, because we simply have not done that research yet.

Anna Firth: Would that not be a sensible thing to do?

Natalie Perera: Yes, I would love to do it. Everything we do has to be funded, so it is difficult.

Anna Firth: It is clearly something that we should be looking to fund again.



Natalie Perera: I agree. There is also a role for Ofsted in this. They have a research team and they have the good will of all of us in the research community who would like to work with them to conduct research on off-rolling, and on best practice for teaching children from disadvantaged communities and children with SEND. I hope that when the new inspector comes in there will be a resetting of the relationship between the research sector and Ofsted to move some of these issues forward.

Chair: There is nodding on that. We are going to have to wrap up this session shortly. Does anyone mind if I bring Flick in quickly? I think you had a follow-up on this.

Q74 **Mrs Drummond:** Do you think that a register of home-schooled children would help to identify, and see whether it is, a problem?

Natalie Perera: Yes.

Q75 **Chair:** Carole, do you want to say something before we close this panel?

Carole Willis: I want to add one point, not on your question, Flick, but more generally about the one-word judgment. It seems that one-word or one-phrase judgments are rather reductionist in the huge amount a school does and how it helps its pupils to progress. The idea of a school report card is appealing, but I would just caution the Committee and Ofsted to be wary of the knock-on and unintended consequences.

Inspection grades are used throughout the system. They are used by regional directors to identify high-quality trusts. They are used in decisions about rebrokering and academisation. Further thought would be needed about what would replace them. We would need to be careful that a school report card did not expand and proliferate the information, making it overwhelming and difficult for parents to engage with but, more importantly, pushing decisions by parents or others in the system back on to the performance data alone. Those are just some words of caution.

Chair: Yes, that is very helpful and definitely something to be borne in mind. Thank you. I am very grateful to this panel. I am sorry we do not have more time to go into all of this, but that is always a pressure in these meetings. Thank you very much for your input and it will be taken into account.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Michael Wilshaw and Lord Jim Knight.

Q76 **Chair:** I think you both heard some, if not all, of the last session. We are very grateful for you coming to give evidence to the Committee today. I think that the Committee will all be familiar with Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector of Ofsted from 2012 to 2016, and Lord Jim Knight, former



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Schools Minister and chair of the Beyond Ofsted inquiry. You are both very welcome.

Could you give us a short overview of the main changes that Ofsted has made to the inspection of schools over the last 20 years—perhaps, Sir Michael, you are best placed to start on that one—and give some context to the Committee on that overall picture?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Chair, it is good to see you and your panel. I am not sure about the last 20 years, but I can certainly talk about the last nine or 10, since I became Chief Inspector at Ofsted. I went into Ofsted in 2012 from headship in an east London academy. I was persuaded to do the job by Michael Gove, who was Secretary of State at the time. I was somewhat reluctant to do that because although I thought I had all the skills to be a good headteacher, I was not sure I had all the skills to be a good inspector and certainly Chief Inspector. But I did it because Ofsted had enormously helped me to improve schools as a headteacher. It backed me in the challenge I had to introduce into the schools that I led over 30 years in a number of secondary schools, so I valued Ofsted hugely, and that is why I went into the job. It is a powerful organisation to do good and to improve the lives of children: “Raising standards, improving lives” is the mantra.

Within about two or three months of getting to Ofsted, I found it to be a dysfunctional organisation. We were holding schools to account for the quality of their provision, but we were not holding ourselves sufficiently to account. That became clear as I tried to challenge the system to do better. You may remember that there was the old “Satisfactory” grade, and there were something like 2 million children in so-called “Satisfactory” schools, which were anything but satisfactory, up and down the country. They were in those schools for more than one inspection and I felt I had to do something about that. We were not being straight with parents in saying these schools were okay when they were not okay, and I wanted all schools to get to “Good”—hence the “Requires Improvement” grade, which replaced “Satisfactory”.

There was a much greater challenge into the system, and of course the headteachers, particularly the headteacher associations, were up in arms about me introducing this grade and said that headteachers were falling like flies and threatening to retire early and all the rest of it, but I stuck to my guns.

Of course, the professional association said, “Well, physician, heal thyself. What about your own people? Are they good enough? What about the teams that are coming into our schools? Are they good enough? Isn’t the quality of inspection far too variable?” They were right. I had to defend the organisation, of course. It would have been wrong at the time not to, but when I looked at it, the criticisms were justified. Inspections had been outsourced. You may remember that. It had been outsourced to three or four private providers who were not doing a particularly good



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job. They were appointing the wrong people to inspect. The quality control at the centre was very poor indeed. We did not know at the centre how well these private providers were doing, so quality assurance was extremely poor.

I made up my mind fairly quickly that I would have to bring the whole lot in-house to get rid of the private providers and regionalise Ofsted into eight regions, put regional directors in charge, push all the His Majesty's inspectors into the regions, not just school inspectors but further education inspectors, college inspectors, social care inspectors and all the other remits of Ofsted inspectors. They all had to be moved into the regions.

There was a lot of opposition to that but I created a regional structure with regional directors and senior HMIs in charge of quality assurance, bringing it all in-house and putting them in charge of quality assurance. That improved the system over time. It was perhaps the only good thing that I did, but it did improve the quality of inspection.

I think the feedback that we were getting from the people that we inspected demonstrated that. The big issue for Ofsted is whether we have good enough inspectors and whether there is consistency in the inspection system—whether the inspections are secure, consistent and are led by good enough people. That has always been the case, and I tried to ensure that happened.

Q77 Chair: Before I go over to Lord Knight, how do you feel that the content of what Ofsted inspects changed over your time or from before your time, through your time and on to the new inspection framework? Obviously there have been quite significant changes in the focus of inspections. We have talked about the data, the progress versus absolute attainment and the other aspects of the greater curriculum focus of the inspection framework. What is your perspective on those changes over time?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: The focus in my time was very much on whether children were making progress in their schools and not so much on outcomes. The outcomes will be different, depending on the background of the children and the parts of the country and so on—the socioeconomic factors. It was very much about whether they were making progress from year to year, key stage to key stage, and if they were not making progress. One of the great things about our education system in England is that we have very good data and very granular data on our schools, which inspectors and headteachers have. If the data showed that children were not making progress we would want to know why.

There was a real emphasis on progress and there was a real emphasis on the different groups of children in the school, whether they were making progress or not—whether poor children were making progress, for example, or whether ethnic minority children were making progress, or whether the most able children were making progress from their starting points or not.



If they were not making progress, inspectors would use that as a starting point to look at what was going wrong. Was the quality of teaching poor; Was the leadership poor? Were expectations high enough? Was it the curriculum, and so on? The emphasis was very much on the progress that children were making, because my view is—and I speak as not just an ex-Chief Inspector but as an ex-headteacher working in challenging areas—that if children make progress, at the end of the day the attainment will be okay. Schools will vary in the final scores. We expect that, but attainment nationally will improve. By the end of my period, I could say that that is what happened.

Q78 Chair: Lord Knight, you were in Government before Sir Michael's time and you have been involved in school leadership during and since, it is fair to say. You have been doing a big piece of work in this area. Do you want to talk from your perspective of the changes over the last 20 years before we get into where Ofsted is now? What do you feel has been the impact of those changes?

Lord Knight: Thank you, Chairman. For the benefit of the Committee and anyone else interested, I have a range of educational interests that are all published in the register but in particular in this context, I chair a multi-academy trust, E-ACT, with 28 schools and the Council of British International Schools. I have been chairing this inquiry into the future of school inspection as part of my public service for the National Education Union.

Over the last 20 years, my sense of it is that we have been loading more and more upon Ofsted, while reducing the amount of resource that Ofsted has in to be able to do a good job. During my time as Schools Minister, when Christine Gilbert was the Chief Inspector, we added in a bunch of responsibility around children's services. We see Ofsted having to do a whole bunch of different things.

You heard from, I think, Sam in the previous session that 20 years ago you might have had a dozen experts in for a whole week. That is an opportunity for those experts to get an understanding of the individual school's context and what is going on across the school, and the reliability of the judgment is therefore going to be better than what we have at the moment.

Where we have got to with changes of Chief Inspector—some great ones—and with changes in the inspection framework that individual Chief Inspectors choose to make, the consistent pattern is one where you have fewer people, staying for a reduced amount of time, who are, therefore, in my view, less reliable in their judgments. That happens at the same time as Ministers like me have cranked up the relationship between inspection outcomes and accountability.

The politics of this—I am a recovering politician now in the House of Lords—is that Schools Ministers end up being worried about looking soft on standards, so they crank the pressure up all the time. Now that we



see the impact through forced academisation, through a number of different things as a result of Ofsted judgments, we have a whole system that is operating in fear and in stress. Once the Ofsted window opens—that they are going to be inspected in the next couple of years—that massively skews the behaviour of everyone in the system, and I think to the detriment of children's education.

Chair: Part of the reason we are doing this inquiry is to try to reset or give opportunities for a reset of that relationship between the inspectorate and schools. Flick wants to come in with a supplementary on that.

Q79 **Mrs Drummond:** I was a lay inspector in the 1990s. It has completely changed because we heard earlier that they do not seem to look at the context of the school, which is very odd. I am not sure how that works but also, as you said, Jim, there was the expertise going in. We find now that, particularly in primary schools, there are not the experts going in because of the curriculum and everything. I want to know how we can improve this and why the Labour party got rid of school inspectors as well.

Lord Knight: I honestly cannot remember why that decision was made, even if I was a part of it, but I think that there is a lot of benefit alongside HMIs in having lay inspectors. In the COBIS accreditation that we have for our 300 schools around the world I see the use of peer accreditors—lay inspectors—alongside people who have an ongoing relationship with a school, to help their improvement and to provide the quality assurance that we need. That was the lay inspector half of your question. Remind me of the first half.

Mrs Drummond: It was particularly about the context of the school, because we were talking about stuck schools and I find the fact that they are not looking at the context quite extraordinary. Do you have thoughts on whether they are doing that or not?

Lord Knight: The evidence that I have seen bears out that there are problems around people not understanding context. You might have inspectors coming in inspecting a school with a lot of SEND provision and they do not have any experience in SEND. They might be inspecting alternative provision schools and have no experience of alternative provision. They might be inspecting primary schools and they are secondary school specialists who do not have an understanding of early years in particular.

It is a sort of sausage machine. In trying to get all of these inspections done we are allocating people who have not been properly trained and do not have the proper expertise. My sense of what we do about that is that—borrowing from international comparisons, and we can get into this later if you want—you look at how to properly resource a self-improving system that has lead partners with a school, who work with them around



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their school improvement, and who understand over a period the context of the school. That is what many other countries and jurisdictions do.

That is very much a part of the improvement side of what Ofsted does at the moment, separate from the compliance side around safeguarding and so on, which I think could—not necessarily easily—be improved by separating off the compliance and safeguarding function and doing that more regularly.

- Q80 **Chair:** I have two quick supplementaries on that. First, on the point about school improvement and partnerships, wouldn't your successor as Schools Minister basically say that is the role of the MAT? As the chair of a MAT yourself, do you see the role that MATs can play in delivering the school improvement side of it? Secondly, on the structure of Ofsted and the issues around primary, secondary, specialist expertise and so on, does Sir Michael want to comment on the reorganisation that you carried out with the regions and how you sought to address that need for expertise? Jim, on MATs and their role in improvement.

Lord Knight: There is a lot of MATs, different sizes and different levels of consistency. There is nothing magical about MATs over local authority schools or anything else. But there are larger MATs and good ones—and I think E-ACT is doing a good job. We essentially have our own school improvement partners, as you could describe them. Our education directors who work alongside the school leadership provide feedback to governance and from that we see in our education committee, in dashboard form, and their human commentary and their expert commentary, how each school is doing. We rely on that quite heavily when Ofsted comes to call in order that they can understand, in a very brief half-hour conversation—normally with me over the phone—how well the governance of the academy is going in its school improvement.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: I tried to bring as many "Good" leaders in our schools into Ofsted. I removed something like 40% of the inspectorate after I brought everything in-house and regionalised. They were replaced, in the main, by "Good" school leaders—leaders of "Good" schools—at both primary and secondary level. It was particularly difficult, though, to appoint secondary heads because of the differential in salary; primary heads were much easier. I found it very difficult to bring secondary headteachers and leaders into the inspectorate. That is why—it is probably still the case now—there will be a lot of ex-primary heads as inspectors or lead inspectors inspecting secondary schools and not so much the other way round.

- Q81 **Chair:** A lot of the complaints we have heard are about the other way round. That is an interesting point. It is logical, of course, that there are many more ex-primary heads than there are ex-secondary heads.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Yes. I tried to bring in as many experienced and good headteachers, even for a short period being seconded from their schools. I think the quality improved. It was interesting to hear about lay



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inspectors. They were removed as well, much to the chagrin of many of those people, simply because I wanted them to go into lessons and watch what was happening and many of them had very little experience in schools and, therefore, could not make judgments on lessons.

While we are talking about teaching, I am a great believer—and I speak as an ex-headteacher and ex-teacher—in that old mantra that the quality of an education system is very much dependent on the quality of the teachers and the quality of teaching in our schools. My worry, having been around lots of schools since I retired from Ofsted, is that inspectors are not looking as much as they should at the quality of teaching in the classroom. They are focusing on the curriculum and on schemes of work and so on, but they are not spending as much time in lessons as they should.

If judgments are going wrong, it is because they are not looking as much as they should at the quality of what children are receiving in the classroom. I speak as an ex-head, and I worried more about that than I did about the curriculum.

Lord Knight: Can I add something about peer inspection that goes to your question, Chairman? One of the real benefits that I see elsewhere in peer inspection, and that we see in the COBIS system, is serving heads going in and adding value to the inspection process—to the quality assurance. They are also learning. That is part of a self-improving system. If you have serving heads peer assessing each other, you learn. I believe that every school has some outstanding practice and every school has some things that require improvement. That is part of the nonsense of the single-phrase judgment. If you have serving professionals going around looking at what each other is doing—Andreas Schleicher at the OECD talks about this extensively—that is part of the whole system being able to improve.

Chair: In fairness, that is part of the current system in that many of the Ofsted inspections involve a couple of serving heads or leadership team members alongside.

Lord Knight: It is, as long as they are allocated to the right type of school that they can reasonably assess on a peer basis.

Q82 **Andrew Lewer:** Building on this and your concern about one word and so on, we have had a lot of feedback from people that Ofsted reports and feedback these days are not that useful for schools and parents. Do you think that is right? How can they be improved and be more accurate? We are having, in some sense, conflicting evidence presented to us: first, that inspectors need to go in regularly and keep on top of a school and have a look at it regularly; and, at the same time, "But obviously we have not got enough resource to do that properly so we need to have an in-depth, week-long, 75 people coming in, looking at every aspect of the school, but it will be five years old by the time your child gets there."



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You either have somebody going to a hotel and saying, "This was a really good hotel 15 years ago" so you probably take it on trust it would be all right now, or you have somebody saying, "We have only been in and had a quick look at the first floor of this eight-floor hotel, but it looks all right so we will give it a good rating." How do you square the circle?

Lord Knight: I see the tension and, Andrew, I know you do a lot of work with the independent school sector. On the single-phrase judgment, you could look at what the Independent Schools Inspectorate does. It has four different words—slightly different words from Ofsted—that it uses, but it does not have a single judgment across the different categories. One of those four-word judgments apply. You can do that; that is one approach.

I do not think that goes far enough, but parents are perfectly capable of reading reports and understanding the whole picture of where a school is doing well and where it needs to do better. Having more accountability to parents through school report cards, you might call them—I do not like the phrase—and more transparency about the outcome data with expert human commentary so that you can understand the context that that data sits in, is the right direction of travel for parental accountability. Where you go from there on the role of Ofsted is a different question, and that is something that I am mulling on at the moment.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: I think the days of the one-word judgment are coming to an end. I was a big supporter of it but I am not any more because, for all the reasons that Jim has outlined and many others have outlined, it is not giving parents an accurate picture of what is happening in the school. It is providing parents with false comfort of what is happening in the school. Ofsted says that nearly 90% of schools are "Good". That is nonsense. It is complete nonsense that 90% of schools are good, having seen some of the schools judged "Good" over the last few years that I would not say were good.

Lord Knight: I had some visitors over from a large American education business the other day trying to understand the English system. They said, "Your system says that however many hundreds are 'Outstanding'. That is a really high bar. How could that possibly be?" And you are going "Yeah..."

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Ninety per cent of schools are being judged "Good". It is just a complete not having seen—when I have been into some of these schools and then looked at the report, I felt like going to Specsavers and getting another pair of glasses because they were not good. It is giving false comfort to parents: "Oh, this must be a good school so let's not look into this any further. Let's not challenge the school." The same with headteachers. Once they have a good judgment, they can relax and not address the weaknesses that there are in that school. I think that one-word judgment needs to go. Does it reflect what is happening nationally?



Q83 Chair: To challenge on that—which we heard towards the end of our last session—the judgment is attached to policy hooks. You could replace it with something more complicated and more nuanced but those policy hooks would still need to join up to something. Is there not a risk that you can replace the one-word judgment with something that is more detailed, but if the policy hooks remain the same, and the intervention measures for the DfE remain the same, you end up with another one-word judgment by default, buried somewhere within the report card?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: We should not patronise parents, in my view. Parents can read; 99.9% of parents can read. They know roughly how a school is doing. At the end of an inspection—this is one of the recommendations I hope your Committee makes—the feedback should be not only to the senior staff but also to the parents, before the report is published. I am sure that parents will come along if they know that this is an important occasion and the judgment is being made on a school—not a one-word judgment, but a judgment with all sorts of different criteria.

Chair: In the form of a meeting?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: A meeting before the report is published. I would make it mandatory on all schools that there is a parents' meeting at which the senior inspector or HMI goes over what the inspection found.

Lord Knight: The big consequence at the moment in policy terms is academisation. I do not think we should have school inspections to drive academisation. School inspections should be there to inform parents and the wider school community and the system as to how well a school is doing. If Ministers from whatever Government think that we should move to an all-academy system—I happen to think that we have passed the tipping point and we should now move to an all-academy system—we should get on with it, and stop faffing about and saying to parents, "Oh, yes, your school is not doing well enough and so we are going to force it to be an academy". That does not make any sense.

Chair: There is a wider policy debate around that process, and I totally accept that, but I still think there is a fundamental challenge in that, whatever the structure of what you do, DfE will have to have some intervention powers, as it always did even before academies were invented, and there will be a trigger for those somehow linked to the inspection regime. How you design a report card or a more nuanced reporting system will need to take account of that, I guess that is the point I am making.

Q84 Ian Mearns: Briefly—it is an observation—when was the last time a failing academy was forced to become a maintained school?

Lord Knight: That has not happened and that is because of the ratchet nature of the policy. If an academy has been found to be "RI" or "Inadequate" twice, it is likely to be forced to rebroker to a different multi-academy trust.



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Ian Mearns: But history has shown us that conversion to academy does not always guarantee success.

Lord Knight: I completely agree, and the evidence is totally mixed as to whether or not academisation has raised standards. I totally agree. It is just: do you go backwards? Do we have this complicated mixed economy or do we move forward with where we are?

Chair: I want to bring Flick back in and then I am going to go back to Andrew.

Q85 **Mrs Drummond:** It is not about structure, it is more about quality of teaching and leadership, isn't it? Michael, you talked about getting the parents in. At the moment they do not even get the teachers in. It is only the senior leadership team and the chair of governors. There also is a time when the school can challenge some of the findings but if you have the parents in straightaway, it would be all over the place and the school would be on the back foot from the start.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: I think that is a risk, but parents will know an inspection is taking place. They will be eager to know the result of that inspection and they have to wait a long time for the report to be published.

Q86 **Mrs Drummond:** That is different. Maybe the report should be published sooner but it gives the school time to talk and challenge some of the findings, which I think is quite important.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: They can do that very quickly. That is a logistics issue and it is up to Ofsted to deal with those complaints pretty quickly and then have the parents' meeting.

Lord Knight: I am reflecting for the first time on Michael's having a parents' meeting at the end, and I do not think it is a bad idea but it depends on the environment that Ofsted is taking place in. If it is still high stakes, I think your worries are valid. If it is lower stakes and it becomes a professional conversation, I could foresee that at the end of a two or three-day inspection, parents who are interested can come along and hear the feedback from the inspector about what he or she has seen. They can hear the response from the school leadership about whether or not they agree that that is great and that is not so great, and they can have a conversation. An action plan will follow around the bits that need to improve.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: The parents can hear from the senior team in the school. The senior team might say, "We disagree with some of these judgments and we are appealing a number of them".

Mrs Drummond: You need a period of reflection, so, yes, eventually, but not at the end of a one-day or two-day inspection. I do not think that gives the schools enough time.



Sir Michael Wilshaw: I have been reflecting on this issue of what do you do with the obviously failing school, and there will be failing schools even though you might move to a different way of describing it in a report card system. It will be quite obvious when there are a number of weaknesses and serious weaknesses in a school that a school is not doing well. It would then be up to an academised system with regional schools commissioners and so on and DfE regional directors.

It would be up to those people to say, "We have looked at this report" and of course the regional directors at Ofsted say, "There are serious issues here. We need to inspect again to make sure it is right, and then we will intervene in whatever you do with that school."

Mrs Drummond: I do not disagree with that. I am just disagreeing with the parents' meeting.

Lord Knight: There is the question as to whether or not MATs should be inspected. If we had more of a MAT system, they could be looking at the data, the commentary and what the governance is seeing, and go, "This MAT has a problem around its governance of school improvement, and we need to report on that, and we need to require some action for them to improve and to resolve things for the young people they serve".

Q87 **Chair:** I think I am right in saying it has been a fairly long-standing position of this Committee that they should be. Some of the evidence we heard in earlier sessions was that it is only a matter of time before they are inspected.

Lord Knight: But Ofsted should do it now.

Chair: Of course, the question of how you do it is vital, in that respect.

Lord Knight: Absolutely. Ofsted currently, certainly from my anecdotal experience and from talking to the chairs of other large MATs, does not have very good expertise around how MATs themselves work. There is quite a job of work to be done in the training of Ofsted inspectors on that.

Chair: Absolutely. Andrew, did you want to come back on the second part of your question?

Andrew Lewer: No, I think we have covered that. We will move on to the next, if that is all right.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Can I say something on MATs, Chair, before we move on? It will become a completely academised system sooner or later and I think that Ofsted has a duty to make a judgment on how MATs are performing. They can do that without having the power, and they do not have the power at the moment to inspect the centralised system within a MAT—the central services. They can look at a number of schools to see whether the central system is improving them or not. That is what I did at the end of my tenure. I did not wait for the power. I made a judgment about a number of large multi-academy trusts—E-ACT was one of them,



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actually—that were not doing particularly well because the schools were not improving. The support and intervention that they were receiving from the central team was not sufficient.

Lord Knight: We then recruited Michael as a member of E-ACT for a period and it is in a much better place.

Chair: That is an interesting context. I want to bring Ian in on this point about high stakes.

Ian Mearns: Andrew had another question.

Q88 **Andrew Lewer:** Briefly on expertise, we have already heard about primary and secondary, and I think there are other areas where differences in expertise are causing problems with inspectors, but what you have just said causes a different problem. I remember when I was leader of Derbyshire County Council, we had people who were extremely good social workers, and we would end up promoting them to be managers and they never saw any people at all.

If you end up having inspectors looking at the management structures of MATs, they will not necessarily have the same skillset for assessing who is a good teacher in the classroom. What is your view about some of the gaps in expertise in inspection and how can that be solved? That is to both of you. Then on from that, Michael, could you reflect on your decision to reform Ofsted so that inspectors were directly contracted by Ofsted? Did that affect the breadth and quality of the expertise of inspectors as well as you hoped it would?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: I think it did. The quality of inspection improved because I brought serving leaders into the inspection system and removed a large number—as I said, 40%—of underperforming inspectors. Regionalisation made a difference. I also removed quite a lot of the senior team at Ofsted because I did not think they were doing a particularly good job in monitoring the quality of inspection. There were radical changes in the first few years at Ofsted. We stuck closely in inspections in all our remits, but particularly in schools, to what the data were telling us.

Inspectors go into a school for a day and a half and make a judgment on that school. The data tells you what is happening over a period of years. We stuck closely to what the data were saying about a school. Facts do not lie. If the data show that a school is underperforming in relation to similar schools with similar intakes, Ofsted needs to say that and to investigate what is going wrong.

I think what is happening at the moment is that Ofsted has moved too far away from the data, from what I see as I go around the country. The judgments are much more subjective on the curriculum. We have the ridiculous position of schools with low progress scores, minus progress scores and terrible outcomes getting a “Good” judgment. That is a



nonsense. It annoys successful headteachers when they see that happening.

- Q89 **Chair:** Do you feel that the decision to focus as much as they have on curriculum is a mistake per se, or do you think curriculum should be one category that is looked at alongside everything else?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: It is one category. What makes for a good school? A good curriculum, good quality teaching and learning, good assessment, a good culture with good behaviour, strong intervention programmes for kids who are falling through the net, and so on. The curriculum is one aspect, and an overdue focus or too great an emphasis on one aspect of school improvement is a mistake, as I have already suggested. Ofsted are not looking enough at the quality of teaching.

Lord Knight: I was going to respond on the management expertise question. When we looked internationally, the Netherlands, Sweden, Wales and Scotland are jurisdictions that use qualified non-teachers as well as experienced teachers. Every system that we looked at pretty much uses experienced teachers but some use qualified non-teachers. Ofsted would have to get tooled up to look at some of the other aspects beyond what is going on in the classroom to provide valid judgments on how MATs are doing.

- Q90 **Ian Mearns:** We heard from witnesses last week, and also it has been mentioned today, that the high stakes nature of the current system is the key driver of stress for teachers and school leaders. Do you agree with that assessment? If so, how could the high stakes nature of the system be reduced while still ensuring that school improvement is appropriately promoted and successful?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: First, there is no point having an inspectorate unless it is a challenging one. No point. Get rid of Ofsted if it is not going to be challenging. There has to be an element of challenge in it. The great majority of headteachers I speak to accept that. They accept that they should be held to account for what they do, particularly in a more autonomous system, as we have at the moment. Headteachers and most staff accept that.

The critical issue is: do teachers think it is fair? Do they think inspection is consistent? Do they think that inspectors are looking at the right things? That is why I come back to this issue of inspectors looking at data and saying, "These are the facts; what is going on here?" and looking at more than one aspect.

One of the problems I see at the moment is that inspectors are going in, looking at the curriculum and spending a lot of time with middle leaders who may have been teaching for only a few years. If you are a headteacher, you know that you will be subject to stress, but you get paid much more than anyone else to have that stress. If you are a middle



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leader who may have been only teaching for a few years, should you have that sort of stress? I am not sure you should.

Q91 **Ian Mearns:** But is there not a dichotomy here: the fact that it is still high stakes but still very snapshot in its approach? Isn't that the problem?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Yes, and that is why I think we should get rid of these one-word judgments. We should look very closely at the data and also—this is an issue for your Committee as well—do we need routine inspection of every school? If we go for high-quality inspection with high-quality inspectors who are paid well, who represent both primary and secondary schools, I suspect we will not be able to afford that within the existing Ofsted budget unless we move away from routine inspection of every school. After all, most good schools on the second inspection get a "Good" judgment anyway. There is so much data out there that we could identify the schools that need focus.

Also, do not forget local authorities. They have been marginalised over the last 10 years but local authorities will know which schools are not doing as well and the authorities should be empowered to call Ofsted in to look at particular schools in their areas that are not doing well.

Lord Knight: There is some name and shame culture around inspection in this country and it does not just apply to schools. It applies to care homes, prisons and all sorts of things where we have single-phrase judgments and it is all very name-and-shame and high stakes. It is great for the media but I am not sure that it is great for improvement. I think it is something that we want to move away from, and that we should have a system that has a duty of care towards the people who work in that system, but that does not mean that it is not challenging. It does not mean that it is going soft on standards but is asking who we should be accountable to. In the case of schools, I think we should be much more accountable to parents and the school's community, furnishing them with the information to understand how the school is doing and working with the school around how it might be able to improve.

I think we should hold the governance to account much more and, indeed, the chief executives of the MATs to account much more. Why is it that Ofsted judgments are career-ending for headteachers and yet the people who are paid the really big bucks seem to get away with it? I think that is a problem we need to address.

We had a phase of risk-based differentiation around Ofsted when outstanding schools did not need to be inspected any more and I think we probably all agree that that did not go so well.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: It went on for too long.

Lord Knight: Yes, but I think an element of risk-based differentiation is the right thing. Pretty much every jurisdiction that we looked at has that.



I would like to see more parent and pupil surveys, and extending the range of data and indicators, embedded in the way we do things. If anyone understands how well a teacher and a school are doing, it is the people who experience it every day. There is no gaming for the pupils. If someone comes in and does a lesson on observation, the behaviour changes, but there is no gaming for a pupil.

Q92 Ian Mearns: I am wondering about that. If you have some sort of risk-based differentiation in how often inspections are taking place, does that not inherently probably mean that schools in poorer communities will be inspected much more often than schools in affluent communities?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: As long as inspection is tied to school improvement—one of the issues for Ofsted is that HMIs are staying for only four years and are moving on. They need to stay much longer than that. In the old days, HMIs spent their whole careers within inspection. They are not doing that any more and one of the reasons is because they get fed up with back-to-back inspections and nothing else. They want to get involved in school improvement and they should be given the opportunity to do so.

Where are the big issues in our English education system at the moment? We know what it is. London is okay. If you took London out of the equation, standards, our PISA rankings, would fall like stones. We know where the problems are. We know that the north, particularly in the secondary sector, is not doing particularly well, and much of the midlands is not doing very well. Your part of the world, sir, has lots of problems in the secondary sector, though not so much in the primary sector. Why do we not use the inspectorate to focus on those parts of the country that need more challenge but also more support?

Lord Knight: Some of the things that Ofsted does are important to continue. Take theme-based, subject-based inspections. We recently had one for music. It was published last month. Those inspections are important for holding the system to account. They might also be able to report on how things are doing regionally if they are done more thoroughly. Take the right of parents to be able to trigger an inspection if they do not like what they see. That is an important role for Ofsted to perform.

By and large, however, if we can move to a system that is based on trust in the profession—the intrinsic motivation of teachers to teach and school leaders to lead—that could help us with the recruitment and retention crisis, which I know your Committee is also looking at. I think the current system of school inspection is one of the things that is driving people out of the profession.

Q93 Chair: I want to come to your point about thematic inspections. The current HMI is very clear that she thinks they are valued and appreciated by the sector. The inspections, however, are driven by the focus in the current inspection framework on curriculum. Given what Sir



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Michael said about curriculum—that he sees that as an important but smaller part that should not be the sole focus—do you think the thematic reports can be generated sufficiently if the system moves away from that focus on curriculum?

Lord Knight: I think it is perfectly feasible. Assuming that we still have a national curriculum and that Ofsted is capable of visiting a number of schools across the country, and seeing how well that curriculum is being delivered, I do not think there is a problem.

Q94 **Caroline Ansell:** My question is about workload pressure and it is interesting because I think the starting place was that inspections as they stand are quite taxing. In the course of this session, as well as in previous inquiries, we have talked about how we need longer and more frequent inspections, and peer inspections and how we need to add in meetings with parents and allow parents to trigger inspections. This is feeling even more challenging as we progress in a bid to improve the system.

Lord Knight, you stated that the culture of being constantly under the microscope through Ofsted windows and mocksteds—to which you added peer assessments—today is the main cause of unreasonable work pressure. What do you suggest could be done to mitigate that?

Lord Knight: I was interested when you quoted to a previous witness that the best moment in teaching is just after you have had a “Good” Ofsted rating. My sense of why that would be is that all the Ofsted preparation—all the practice, the Monday to Wednesday carrying around the evidence in your bag just in case you get the call—has gone. You are free for the next three or four years to get on with your job. That is what I mean and what I meant in my written evidence about Ofsted windows and mocksteds being a problem.

I am also clear, particularly as someone who separates safeguarding and compliance for annual visits, that I do not think the answer to the problems of Ofsted is yet more inspection and that is very much from the point of view of the workload that you correctly identify. In my mind, you have to lean into a more self-improving system, the governance of self-improvement, and Ofsted having a role particularly around looking at what school groups are doing to ensure that that self-improvement system is working very well.

Q95 **Chair:** Sir Michael, workload is one of the big drivers of changes in the framework.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Teachers hate bureaucracy. They hate more paperwork. They want to get on and teach and do their best for the children in their charge. That is what they want. If Ofsted is adding to bureaucracy and paperwork, if inspectors are going in and saying, “I want to see your curriculum plans and how you sequence work” and so on—teachers want to get on and teach and teach well. That is what they are interested in and they hate anything that adds to bureaucracy. I hated it



as a headteacher. I was more interested in what teachers were doing in the classroom and that does not depend on the amount of paperwork and bureaucracy in the school.

Q96 Nick Fletcher: This session has been very interesting. My question is about the current length and frequency of inspections. Would we have a day a year or five days every four years? Also, there is the half-day's notice, which I believe causes some heads a lot of stress. We heard that by the time Wednesday came and they realised they were not being inspected that week, they were happy again until the following week. I have also heard heads say that was not an issue for them and that they were quite happy to have that system.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: When I got to Ofsted, the notice period was two or three days, but I shortened it to the afternoon before inspectors went in. I think that was a good move because we had what was colloquially known as the wet wall syndrome or the wet paint syndrome. If you gave schools too much notice, all sorts of things happened that did not happen before and we did not see schools as they really were.

What we have at the moment is probably right—the afternoon before, when the lead HMI contacts the school to say the team is going to come in and, “Let’s have a chat on the telephone about your perceptions of the school and what you would like us to look at particularly and what we would like to look at particularly”. I think the notice period is fine at the moment.

What was the other part of your question?

Nick Fletcher: Length and frequency.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: The length and the frequency. That comes back to the issue we have just been discussing. If you are going to go for routine inspections as we have now—for which Ofsted does not have the budget, unless the budget is doubled or trebled and I cannot see that happening—they can only be for a day or a day and a half, or a maximum of two days. That is why I think that at some stage, the Government will have to look at whether we need to inspect every school in a routine way. Why not focus on those schools and parts of the country that need more support? More support: let’s leave out inspection.

Q97 Nick Fletcher: Are you going end up in the same position as you were in before when “Outstanding” schools were not inspected? I think where anybody is not inspected, there is always a danger of letting standards slip.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: There is a fine line between a “Good” school and an “Outstanding” school. I have been to some “Outstanding” schools that I do not think are particularly outstanding and I have been to some “Good” schools that I think are so good that they should be outstanding. It is the same with a good judgment. Some good schools are only just slightly above the “Requires Improvement” grade—just about tolerable—



to the other end of very, very good. I would get rid of the "Outstanding" grade.

- Q98 **Nick Fletcher:** I want to challenge you on that quickly. It was only recently, wasn't it, that we were fourth in the world for English? Was that something that came about recently?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: It was reading.

Nick Fletcher: We must be doing something right. Yet you challenge this 90% being "Good". It is about outcomes, as well, isn't it? If we are getting that rating worldwide, obviously there is some good work happening, isn't there?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: It is worthwhile looking at where those results are coming from. They are coming from the primary sector. Primaries are doing much better than secondary schools, in my view. Look at the north-east of England—Redcar and Cleveland, for example. The primary schools in Redcar and Cleveland, one of the most deprived parts of the north-east, do as well as London schools. Go to the secondary schools and they are abysmal.

I have the statistics here. Regional outcomes are hugely different across the country. The average attainment 8 score has gone down since 2019. The EBacc APS score is also down from 2019, before the pandemic. The disadvantage gap has grown. It is the worst now since 2011. It has grown steadily over the years and is now huge.

At key stage 2, although primary schools are doing well, in 2023 59% reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths but in 2019 it was 65%. Not everything is rosy in the garden, although primary schools, which you were making a judgment about, are doing significantly better than secondary schools.

Chair: I would make the point, of course, that there is a big covid impact in those figures, which I think we all recognise.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: It has been two years now since covid and the schools should be getting their act together.

- Q99 **Nick Fletcher:** Sir Michael, you oversaw the introduction of short inspections for schools that had previously been judged "Good". What impact did that have?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Yes, in short inspections an HMI would go in—in a large secondary school, probably two or three—to judge whether things were okay, and if things were slipping we would come back to what is called section 5 inspections where a much larger team would come in.

Nick Fletcher: What impact did that have? Did you see slippage or not?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: It relieved stress. Why in a good school, which is obviously doing well, have five or six inspectors there for two days?



Nick Fletcher: Did you see any slippage?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: If there was any slippage—I can't remember the percentage, but let's say 10% of the schools that were subject to short inspections were slipping back—a fuller team would go in and inspect.

Q100 **Chair:** We have heard some criticism of the reports that are generated from short inspections as not saying very much and therefore confusing parents in some cases.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Now or previously?

Chair: Now.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: I have not looked at the short reports. They are short generally now, from what I have seen. They are very short and very perfunctory, not very detailed, and do not give parents a true flavour of the strengths and weaknesses.

Chair: That is the concern that has been raised—the point that if a school is being inspected, they expect to have something to show to a parent, and the reports do not necessarily give them that.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: The reports are abysmally short.

Q101 **Andrew Lewer:** Safeguarding keeps coming up as being different from the rest of the quantum of an inspection and that has led to some views that safeguarding should be a separate part of the inspection process all together, completely taken out of the rest of the judgment—the inspection of the school. Do you have a view on that? Do you think there should be either a different and more nuanced approach to safeguarding from what we have now or complete separation? How would either of those changes work in practice?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Yes. Ofsted should be about academic standards, and our children receiving a good education: academic standards; whether they are making progress; and whether they are being prepared for the next stage of their education and the world of work. That is what Ofsted should be about.

Ofsted is responsible for inspecting safeguarding but there is no reason why the local authority cannot do that. After all, they still have the statutory responsibility for safeguarding. They still have that responsibility so is there any reason why the local authority could not review safeguarding procedures in the schools within the local authority every year, not wait for five years, and do it every year? If there are real concerns, Ofsted should have a safeguarding team to go in and check it out.

Lord Knight: Andrew, I am supportive of separating safeguarding out and, as Michael has said, there is a difference between that focus on the quality of education—how education is improving and the strategies that need to be deployed across the piece to do that—and compliance against



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a set of standards, which applies in respect of safeguarding and health and safety and so on. I think it is appropriate that that should be done more regularly than it is at the moment because there is nothing more important than ensuring that all our children are safe when they are in school.

On whether or not it goes to a local authority, I have received evidence both that the consistency and quality of Ofsted's expertise around safeguarding leaves a lot to be desired, but equally we have a problem with local authority capacity. Some local authorities are not doing a great job in respect of their safeguarding and schools are receiving conflicting advice from Ofsted and the local authority office around what is the right safeguarding response to an incident. That needs to be sorted out and we do need to raise our game generally across the country around the quality of safeguarding and everyone's understanding of what that is. Part of that is annual inspection.

Andrew Lewer: The point about what safeguarding is is particularly critical but I sense that there is a whole other inquiry on that.

Q102 **Chair:** Can I press you further on that, Lord Knight, because I think that is a very interesting question? As a MAT leader, you have had experience of working with different local authorities and varying levels of support and expertise in that space. If safeguarding were to come out of Ofsted and if it were not to be local authorities that were doing it, who should it be?

Lord Knight: My view is that we need a national safeguarding authority responsible for quality assuring local authorities and the whole system. Whether that is within an agency but with very clear statutory responsibility or not is something for further reflection and for policymakers and Parliament to reflect on. My sense is that we need to have an organisation that thinks about safeguarding solely and clearly and is independently reporting across the piece. I have spoken to the Children's Commissioner for England and to others about it and that is my view.

Chair: That also reflects one of the recommendations from the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, which pointed towards creating a national organisation in that space.

Q103 **Caroline Ansell:** What impact do you think the new education inspection framework has had since its introduction? What is its impact four years in?

Lord Knight: In my written evidence I said that it is quite difficult to make a judgment because covid was during the period that it was introduced. I support the personal development of the framework and that shift. I would like to see more emphasis on that, if I am honest. I think that currently it is overly interested in the quality of education side of it, the curriculum and the curriculum intent and all those things that



inspectors are looking at as part of what I understand is 50% of the current framework.

In the end, whether or not this framework is working, the overall culture and the impact of Ofsted has not changed, and it has not changed as a result of this framework. When Martyn Oliver comes in, he may change it but unless he makes some bigger changes than just looking at different things in the inspection, and changes the regime around inspection, I do not think anything will change much.

Q104 Caroline Ansell: Is that how you would measure its success around positive impact—culture change? What would the KPIs be?

Lord Knight: I was very interested in the previous panel about whether there is any evidence that Ofsted is improving anything. I heard Sam Sims say that there was evidence for those with an “Inadequate” judgment and there was improvement, but that there is nothing beyond that. That chimes with what I hear from the system.

Ultimately, of course, what you want to judge Ofsted on is whether or not it is part of a system that is improving and improving across the curriculum, not just in things that we obsess about—very important things such as maths and English and to some extent science. We have a mental health crisis and an attendance crisis among young people. Is Ofsted part of a system-wide improvement? We have a massive teacher recruitment crisis. How are we all getting the bits of the ecosystem working together, including Ofsted, to drive that improvement?

Q105 Caroline Ansell: How would we better judge Ofsted in that landscape?

Lord Knight: I think we need some short-term measures and to listen to teachers and pupils—I had some excellent evidence from State of Mind, a group of young people, about the impact of Ofsted on them—to get a sense of how any changes in Ofsted are changing the way it is impacting the people who work in the system. Then pick on those parts of those schools—not picking on them in a bad way but selecting the schools—that are struggling in the system, like the secondary schools in Redcar and Cleveland, which will have some outstanding practice in them but by and large are struggling, to see how they are doing as a result of the changes. Do the research; be more transparent.

I think that the fact that schools currently cannot access their own reports—the detail of the notes that inspectors have made—to drive their own improvement is problematic. Open up Ofsted for academics to have a look and make a judgment.

Q106 Caroline Ansell: Do schools currently, in any shape or form—formal or informal—feed back on their experience of Ofsted and the value they believe Ofsted has added to their school improvement? Is there anything measurable and tangible for them around that—a two-way process?



Lord Knight: Yes. The complaints system at Ofsted is problematic, too, and that is what schools currently have to feed back if they are not happy.

Q107 **Caroline Ansell:** It is not about being not happy. They may be reporting that they had an incredibly positive experience, that the inspector in this or that field had made very relevant insights that they could build on. I am not talking about a default to complaint but rather like a school report itself—

Lord Knight: It would be perfectly valid to go to chairs of governors, chairs of MATs, leaders of schools and school groups, as well as teachers and pupils, and test the temperature and see whether or not things are changing or improving, and whether the reports are useful, including for governance and leaders to drive improvement.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: I have intimated what I feel about this framework: the curriculum is all very well but it should contribute, along with everything else that goes in schools—teaching and learning, assessment, culture—to the overall picture that inspectors should see. Are results improving? Are progress scores improving? Are children doing better year by year from their baseline scores or not? I find it difficult to understand how inspectors can go into two or three departments and curriculum areas and extrapolate what they find from that to an overall judgment of school performance. I find that impossible.

Caroline Ansell: That is an endorsing issue rather than the framework itself.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Yes, but inspectors should be looking at everything. That is why data is so important. They can home in on those parts of the school that are obviously not doing well: “Why are poor children not doing well in this school? Why is the gap wider than the national gap? Why are ethnic minority children not doing well in this school?”

Caroline Ansell: But the framework allows for those searching questions.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: No, because inspectors do not ask—don’t look. They take great pride in saying, “We don’t look at those things, internally or externally”. That is nonsense as far as I am concerned.

Q108 **Caroline Ansell:** Have disparities and inequalities been reviewed?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: That is a question you should have addressed to the Chief Inspector: why are you not looking more closely at the data on schools’ performance?

Lord Knight: To be fair, sometimes they do. From conversations that I have had with lead inspectors for inspections at school, sometimes they ask about that and we have a conversation about it but they will always



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ask about curriculum intent in the subjects they are looking at and the quality of education questions and those make up the bulk of the framework.

Q109 **Caroline Ansell:** In your estimation, does that mean that there needs to be a little bit of a rebalance or reset around the framework?

Lord Knight: Yes. I am hoping that will come.

Q110 **Chair:** We are running over time so I hope you do not mind staying for a few more minutes. While we have you here, Lord Knight—I have been a Schools Minister, you have been a Schools Minister—Ofsted will always want more resource to do its role. It is incredibly difficult for any Schools Minister to argue we should take money out of the school system to give to Ofsted. On the question of resources, how should that be determined?

Lord Knight: As ever with resources, it is a question of priorities and I think we ask Ofsted to do too much. One of the reasons for wanting quite a radical shake-up in the way that we do school inspection is to get it focused on the right things so we can get improvement without significant increases in resources.

Q111 **Ian Mearns:** I am tempted to ask this question in this particular way. In a single phrase, overall what would you say is the key purpose of a good inspection system and how well is Ofsted currently fulfilling that purpose?

Sir Michael Wilshaw: “Raising standards and improving lives”—that is the mantra. Is it raising standards? There is a question mark over that, looking at the present scores. Is it improving lives?

Q112 **Ian Mearns:** It seems to me that Ofsted is not worth having if it is not working in a complementary way with school improvement services, whether they are presented by a multi-academy trust or a local authority or some other body.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: It is absolutely worth saying that Ofsted is far too big. Look at the remit that the Chief Inspector has to worry about, which I had to worry about: the 25,000 schools in the country, further education, children’s social care, teacher training, prison education, and there are probably half a dozen more, I can’t remember now. You have to worry about those things and if you don’t worry about them, one of them will go wrong and will come back to bite you. It is too big and I think that at some stage, it needs to be slimmed down.

I remember that before I went to Ofsted I had a phone call from Chris Woodhead—remember him?—who said to me, “Congratulations. You are going to Ofsted. For goodness sake, slim it down. Make it focus on schools and standards in schools because if you get that right, society becomes better.”

Q113 **Ian Mearns:** Jim, as a former Schools Minister and Michael, as a former Chief Inspector, how do you think Ofsted compares with other inspection bodies in other sectors?



Lord Knight: In answer to your previous question, helping schools improve the lives and prospects of children.

Ian Mearns: Right. Thank you.

Lord Knight: I have learnt more at school inspection in other jurisdictions rather than looking at inspection in other contexts.

I think we are a bit stuck in England in wanting this single-phrased judgment, name and shame thing attached to the way we do inspection. I have looked at what Wales and Scotland have done in school inspection. They have been on a journey away from single-phrase judgment, which I applaud. I am interested in the Northern Ireland experience where, because of industrial action, they have not been able to do any school inspection—and the world has not stopped, incidentally. That is worth reflecting on perhaps. I am an advocate of school inspection and an advocate of what it can do in improvement but I do not feel equipped to comment any further on how we do inspection in other settings.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: The same. I cannot comment on how other sectors of public service are inspected. I don't know that much about it.

We have pointed out the deficiencies in Ofsted and how we would like to see it change. We have both been clear about that. However, I am old enough to remember what standards were like in our schools, in London—I am a London teacher—how low standards were in the 1970s and 1980s and much of the 1990s. They were terrible. They were shocking. We have come a long way since then and Ofsted has had a part to play in improving standards and saying things that needed to be said. Chris Woodhead was not much liked by the teaching profession but he said what needed to be said in the '90s.

Ofsted has played a big part in raising standards in our schools. Now we need to think about what it is doing and make sure that standards continue to rise, and you should worry as a Committee that maybe standards are falling, in part.

Lord Knight: I recall a conversation with Leora Cruddas from the Confederation of School Trusts, when she talked about regulation, which is slightly different but where you can regulate to minimum standards and to improve standards. It is worth thinking about both those things in this context, hence the interest in separating off some of the compliance so that you are focusing on making things better.

Q114 **Chair:** Thank you. Very quickly Sir Michael, how far is Ofsted able to fulfil its role independently and free from political interference? I am bearing in mind that you said you were persuaded to become Chief Inspector, but clearly there is huge political interest in the inspectorate.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Yes, and I did it not only because I thought Ofsted was a worthwhile organisation that had supported me in my role as a headteacher, but also because I admired Michael Gove and what he



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was trying to do to reform the education system and raise standards, so I joined the organisation.

It is a difficult thing for a Chief Inspector to challenge Government. It is always difficult because they wholly control the purse strings and I was very conscious that if I did challenge Government, they might turn off the financial taps and there were some robust conversations when I feared that was happening. Of course, the mood somewhat changed when we failed the first four free schools that were built.

I think it is important that an independent Chief Inspector and an independent inspectorate should be able to challenge not only the system to do better and schools to do better, but also the Government, when it thinks the Government are not getting things right and some of the initiatives are not working. For example, some academies and some academy trusts need greater focus, and getting an inspection framework for academy trusts is long overdue.

For example, we know that some regions of the country are not doing well and yet Government will always respond to that by saying these are opportunity areas. Do you know as a Committee how those opportunity areas are doing? Are they making a difference?

Chair: The latest iteration is education improvement areas rather than opportunity areas.

Sir Michael Wilshaw: Whatever they are called—how are they doing? Are they making a difference? Government never likes Ofsted poking its nose into those things that they say are making a difference, which may be evidence that suggests they are not.

Chair: Very good. I think we have already covered the last question, which is what are the main improvements that you would suggest. Is there anything more that you want to add to the list?

Lord Knight: I think I have probably said too much.

Chair: It has been a most interesting conversation. Thank you very much, both of you, for your evidence.