

Education Committee

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

Wednesday 8 November 2023

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Nick Fletcher; Nick Gibb; Andrew Lewer; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 115-217

Witnesses

[I](#): Amanda Spielman, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Children's Services, Ofsted.

[II](#): Rt. Hon. Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for Schools, Department for Education; and Juliet Chua, Director General, Schools Group, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witness

Witness: Amanda Spielman.

Q115 **Chair:** This is the third and final session of the Committee's inquiry into Ofsted's work with schools. The Committee has the opportunity to question the outgoing chief inspector of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman, and the Minister for Schools, the right hon. Nick Gibb MP. We will be hearing evidence in two sessions. For the first hour, we will hear from Amanda Spielman, His Majesty's chief inspector of education and children's services at Ofsted—welcome. For the second hour, we will hear from the right hon. Nick Gibb, Minister of State for Schools in the Department for Education, and Juliet Chua, director general for schools at the Department for Education.

I remind everyone that the case of Ruth Perry is still before the coroner's court and we do not wish to interfere with or unduly influence that important process. Inquests are not discussed in Parliament while they are open, as the matter is still considered sub judice.

Chief Inspector, I understand that you want to make a brief opening statement.

Amanda Spielman: Yes; thank you for giving me that opportunity. I wanted to talk about what I have done overall for school inspection in my seven years at Ofsted.

First, we have built a new evidence-based inspection framework that really does have wide support in the sectors we inspect, and we know that the conception of quality it embodies is respected and valued in schools. Secondly—and within the limits of Government policy, which gives Ofsted only a diagnostic role—we have reframed the process of inspection with professional dialogue at its centre, to make it as valuable and valued at the receiving end as we can. Thirdly, we have improved and extended the scope of inspector training. We have done this to make sure that all inspectors have the same platform of up-to-date knowledge of education, as well as a good understanding of the framework. We make sure that inspectors really understand the importance of consistent application of the framework, and we have reinforced all the other quality assurance mechanisms that help bring high levels of consistency to a human judgment process. We have good evidence of all of these.

With school results, which are once again available to us after a two-year gap, we can also see that the overall relationship between school inspection outcomes and published results is just as strong as it was under the previous framework. We are also now routinely told that inspection feels more collaborative and more supportive. We are very open about how we work and are highly responsive to feedback. We work extremely efficiently on a tight budget, which necessarily means a small inspection footprint.

Relative to school budgets, school inspection gets about a quarter of what it was allocated 20 years ago. Compared with school inspectorates



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elsewhere, and adjusting for country size, we have about a quarter of the number of inspectors. To put that in absolute terms, what we spend on secondary education—not just the inspections themselves, but the training, the thematic work and all overheads—works out at the budget of about one largeish secondary school.

Yet despite all these positives, which I am very proud of, I recognise that there has been a surge of discontent this year, so I am really glad to be here today to talk about that, and about any aspects of inspection and accountability that you want to talk to me about.

Q116 Chair: Thank you. What would you say are the key purposes of Ofsted's inspections of schools? How well are inspections currently fulfilling all those purposes?

Amanda Spielman: Inspection is conceived with at least three purposes and at least three audiences in mind. The first and foremost has to be children and parents. We are there to see whether children are getting the education and the all-round experience they should be getting, and to report on that.

We are also used by the Government for many purposes. Intervention is the most visible, but we are an integral part of the wider regulatory system. Of course, one of the main functions of inspection is that it is the thing that connects the engine of policy to the wheels of what happens in schools. Everybody knows that schools respond more directly to the incentive of inspection than to almost anything else, which is why so often the first thing people want is a school to teach something, and the second thing they want is Ofsted to inspect it.

The third purpose, which we have given a lot of thought to within the constraints of this diagnostic role assigned to us, is how to make sure that inspection acts as a force for improvement; that the professional conversation at the heart of inspection really has value for the people who take part in it; and that it not only gets a valid and reliable judgment, but acts as a waypoint in the process of developing and building schools.

At the end of the day, our job is to identify what is good and to point out when things are not right. It is really important that somebody in the system can do that job of pointing out when things aren't right.

Q117 Chair: The Committee had a very interesting discussion yesterday with a number of current and former inspectors. We heard a number of concerns and views from them. There is a real challenge with trust in the system at the moment, and a concern that that has been particularly strained since the end of the pandemic, particularly in primary schools. You have acknowledged in your comments some of the discontent that we have heard in recent months. Is that something that you recognise? Where do you feel the solutions are?

Amanda Spielman: I absolutely do recognise that. I think there are several strands that deserve to be aired; the rest of the discussion will be



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better if I talk about them, and particularly about what is different this year.

I think you have heard a lot about consequences from a lot of directions. A lot of people clearly do dislike or resent the fact that a poor inspection judgment can lead to a change of control for a school, even though this DfE policy is clearly aimed at making sure that children's education is as good as it should be. It is not new that people dislike that, but the introduction of the additional policy of intervention on a second "requires improvement" judgment is new and has clearly raised the stakes for schools and MATs, and we see that pressure coming through into inspections.

Secondly, schools are unquestionably having a hard time dealing with the aftermath of lockdowns and all the different kinds of harm that they have caused. There is a sense among schools that it is unfair to be held to account publicly when they are working so hard with such difficult issues. I think people either don't know or perhaps don't want to believe that school performance is inspected, judged and reported on in exactly the same way as the rest of education, as every kind of healthcare service, as social services, as the police and as prisons. There is nothing that Ofsted does that is in the slightest bit unusual in that context. I am not a policymaker—it is for Government to decide if it wants to change the framework of public accountability—but I think we are feeling a bit of a push from the schools sector for exemption from that framework.

The third thing is a sense that schools want support rather than judgments—perhaps particularly the schools that have had the most difficult time over the last three years or that more generally have the hardest job to do. Again, Ofsted has a problem with a poor understanding of Government policy. For more than a decade, we have been responsible only for diagnosis; responsibility for support and improvement lies entirely with others. I think that confuses some people, because there have been times when Ofsted has done improvement work, but we stopped having either the remit or the funding to do that many years ago. There is a narrative that I have heard from many directions that I personally could and should turn Ofsted into a school support service, which in reality would cut directly across a clear and long-established policy.

Finally, I recognise that people sometimes simply want inspectors to be able to spend more time hearing their stories about the difficulties of what they are doing, perhaps particularly in the schools with the most difficult job to do, but I am afraid that this is where we currently bump up against our resource constraints.

Q118 Chair: The question of resource and focus is one that we will come back to. Another bit of feedback that we had from our meeting with inspectors was that the successive changes of chief inspector and of the framework have led to what they sometimes see as a seesaw effect in the approach of the inspectorate. During your time as chief inspector, what have you learned? What have you changed in your attitudes to inspection? What have you learned from the job that perhaps you wish you had known at



the beginning?

Amanda Spielman: I agree that stability is really valuable. I arrived as chief inspector at a time when the sector was in revolt, when it was very clear that the incentives of inspection were operating on schools in some very undesirable ways. There was no question but that a change was very badly wanted. The framework had changed several times in quite quick succession—I think the last time was in 2015—but I decided to do it once, slowly and carefully, so we introduced the new framework in 2019, two and a half years after I came.

We took time to build up the evidence base and to consult. I think that for the first time it was a framework that was truly built off the evidence. A lot of time went into that and into talking to stakeholders in all directions. The feedback I get is that it goes with the grain of what people in schools think they ought to be doing, and that it steers them towards the things that actually matter most for children, so they don't feel a conflict between doing well on inspection and doing well for children, as they might once have done. So I am absolutely with the "keep things slow and steady" approach.

There are two things I will say. One is that I have never had anybody ask me to revert to a previous inspection framework or to bring back a big element of one. The other thing that I was really pleased about is that post covid, when we were restarting, it was clear that the overwhelming message from the sector itself was, "Please stick with this framework. We don't need an emergency framework. This is the right direction." That, I thought, was quite a strong endorsement and really fitted with my instinct that continuity, evolution, time for people to adjust and progressive iteration off a strong evidence base is a good way to go.

Q119 **Chair:** Working off a strong evidence base requires consistency. We have heard a lot of debate and concern, from academic circles particularly, about the consistency and reliability of inspection judgments. You have talked a bit about training, but what other steps does Ofsted take to ensure that inspectors are as consistent as possible in making their judgments? What research have you undertaken to assess the level of consistency?

Amanda Spielman: There are a lot of different aspects of consistency: there is consistency between inspectors, consistency with other measures and consistency of process. People tend to conflate those when they are talking about inspection, but this really matters and we put a lot of time into it. I am going to have to talk at a little bit of length on this one, because it is really important.

How do we achieve consistency in a human judgment process? First, by having a strong construct of quality in a well-evidenced framework. Secondly, by recruiting people who have the right knowledge and experience and the right temperament for inspecting—how you do it matters—and training them really well. They need formal training sessions. They also need time working with and observing peers. You align



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standards, in a human judgment process, through people being with each other and calibrating relative to others. You give them good support on inspection, making sure that when they encounter tricky issues they can always talk to colleagues on site or to colleagues on a duty desk, so they really feel that the whole organisation is wrapped around them when they come across anything that they are not totally confident in dealing with.

Having good moderation and quality assurance processes is important, especially for the judgments that carry the most consequences. We know how much weight the “inadequate” judgment carries, so we have a whole extra layer of quality assurance. A single inspector never makes that judgment off their own bat; there is always extra quality assurance before even the provisional judgment is given.

We also have strong post-inspection processes. We are always willing to consider that we may have got it wrong. We use what we call gathering additional evidence: when we think that part or all of an inspection was not as good as it should have been, we will send out an inspector or team to redo it, and before it ever becomes a final inspection report, it has been redone.

Our model is absolutely built around getting the highest consistency. Process is something people do get muddled about, because for the last 20 years inspection has been a contained activity, not a full review of everything. We have to use the information we have ahead of time and have a planning conversation with the head to decide on areas of focus for the inspection. Sometimes people will say, “My friend was asked these questions, but I was asked those ones.” That is a feature, not an error. We focus on the things we think will most need to be covered in an inspection. We have to do so, to do it in the time.

Q120 Chair: Some school leaders and inspectors have raised the concern that that results in a sampling approach.

Amanda Spielman: It is a necessary consequence of running a very small model of inspection. Twenty years ago, with the old section 10 model, we reviewed every subject and every aspect. It is a Government policy choice. I have to work within the space I have. When we were setting up the EIF, we tested the sampling and concluded that it did give sufficiently reliable results.

I want to speak about the outcomes as well—

Q121 Chair: I will let you do that, but another concern that has been raised, particularly from academic circles, is that research into consistency of inspections is made more difficult by the lack of available data. As you are a public organisation, they feel that the data ought to be more publicly available to allow for that research.

Amanda Spielman: I will say that I think this is completely unreasonable. We make a tremendous amount available. We publish every month a spreadsheet that has every detail of every inspection.



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One thing we have been asked for is a lot of personal information about inspectors. We have looked at this very carefully, and there have been discussions with the Information Commissioner. We think that what we are being asked for goes beyond what is reasonable to give about our individual inspectors.

We put out an enormous amount of data. It is right that people cut it and investigate it in all sorts of ways. The differences that they manage to hypothesise are very small indeed—really small in the context of a human judgment—and they actually give reassurance that all the control processes we have are working well.

I will say that the published stuff has also related to previous frameworks, whereas our evaluation and consistency work is very much focused on the EIF and the work we have been doing since 2019. For example, we have just published a blog—apologies if it did not reach all of you today—showing the analysis that we have done on the consistency of inspections last year, both with the 2022 results, which the inspectors had at the time, and with the subsequent 2023 results, which relate to that year's work in the school but which inspectors could not have seen because they had not taken the tests yet. There was a good level of consistency with both. The gold standard study, which we have done one of, is to do parallel double inspections. That is extremely expensive. We did one seven years ago and it cost us about a quarter of a million; I could not find that in our budget today.

Chair: It is also probably not something that most schools would volunteer for.

Amanda Spielman: Constructing the sample was hard work, but we got 24 schools. It was a very well-designed and well-controlled study. In 23 out of 24, inspectors came to the same conclusion. For a human judgment process, that is a very good level of reliability.

Q122 **Anna Firth:** I have a quick overarching question, before we drill down into the details. It arises out of yesterday's roundtable, and it goes back to the question of the pendulum swinging according to the agenda of the current chief inspector.

The feedback was that there is not enough corporate memory. While in a leadership position you are of course going to have a vision, that lack of corporate memory tends to mean that the pendulum will swing more extremely than perhaps is ideal. Do you recognise that? Do you view it as a problem? If you think that there is something in that, how could we rearrange the system to minimise that, particularly as we are about to change inspectors?

Amanda Spielman: I think corporate memory is actually a strength in arm's length bodies, relative to central Government Departments, because people typically stay in arm's length bodies for much longer periods. Sitting behind me, I've got my COO, who came to Ofsted with the Adult Learning Inspectorate in 2007, and my retiring national director of education, who has been with Ofsted since before 2009—I can't remember

which year. Our new national director of education, Lee Owston, who is also sitting behind me, has been with us since 2009. There is a lot of continuity in senior roles.

The other point I will make is that I did something I don't think my predecessors have necessarily done: I did not make the inspection framework about my particular interests and preferences. I said I thought that was something Ofsted needed to move away from, so we set out to build the evidence base around the aspects of education quality that are testable on inspection and build a framework around that. We published the evidence base so that it can be iterated as more emerges, and the framework is designed to iterate as that evidence base updates. I think we have exactly addressed your point, Anna, by building the framework and the underpinnings that way, and the curriculum research reviews extend that approach through into subject teaching. What I leave behind is not the Amanda Spielman-preferred approach to education, but a broadly constructed and broadly supported concept of quality that I think should be able to iterate.

Anna Firth: Thank you. That is very helpful.

Q123 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you for coming in today. We have been told that Ofsted reports are too short and too generic to be useful to either the schools or the parents. Two questions follow on from that. First, who is the actual audience for these reports? Secondly, are you satisfied that the reports are providing the information to that audience?

Amanda Spielman: The reports are designed primarily for schools. They do summarise the key findings for everybody, but they are designed primarily for parents. We consulted extensively with parents on designing them—on the length, depth of information, presentation, formatting—

Nick Fletcher: You just said they were primarily for schools, and then you said they are primarily for parents.

Amanda Spielman: Sorry, I mis-spoke. I beg your pardon—I meant for parents. Just to explain how it works for a lead inspector, in the context of the inspection model we have to run, they have four days for an inspection. They have one day to prepare and for the long planning call with the school; they have two days on site; they have one day to write a report. That precludes the kind of 50-page reports that we wrote 20 years ago—you cannot write and quality-assure a 50-page report in a day.

We concentrate on making the reports as good as we can for parents. We know that parents have a huge awareness of this—I think eight out of 10 parents are aware of a school's inspection judgment. A very large proportion look at reports—probably far larger than ever look at their GP's inspection reports, say, or even know their GP's inspection judgment.

For schools, the main feedback is given orally in the meetings at the end of the inspection, which are attended by not just the senior leadership, but governors, relevant local authorities, MAT representatives and so on. The inspector goes through in enormous depth the legs of all the reasoning for



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the judgments and how that has built up to the overall finding. We are very clear to schools that that is the full, in-depth feedback, and that we do not have the capacity to provide a full written report of all that. However, we do everything we can to make that reasoning absolutely explicit and transparent and to give people the chance to capture it in that meeting so that they can reflect on it at more leisure.

Q124 **Nick Fletcher:** If you were able to, though, do you think it would be beneficial to have a more in-depth report, or not?

Amanda Spielman: I think it would be beneficial, but if I have four days to allocate to an inspection, I am not willing to put less than two days into the piece on site, otherwise we would be sacrificing the actual process of inspecting and having those important conversations for the writing up. If we have to prioritise, then the inspection itself and the quality of the judgments is the most important place to put it.

Q125 **Nick Fletcher:** You have just spoken of a meeting. Are parents able to go to that meeting, or is it for the governors and the teachers?

Amanda Spielman: That is for the head, the senior team, governors, MAT representatives, and the local authority if it's a community school. Parents are not included in that meeting.

Q126 **Nick Fletcher:** I believe your predecessor thought it would be a good idea to have a meeting with the parents. Is that something that you would encourage?

Amanda Spielman: First of all, that final feedback meeting can obviously be quite high-stress for heads. Introducing parents into the first exposure of that judgment of heads and the people with responsibility for schools would be a step too far. I think you would have to do it separately. I also think it is reasonable to expect that the judgment be final. At the feedback meeting, the judgment is provisional, and it is unrealistic to give the parents a provisional judgment. The school needs the chance to have those processes and steps that we give people to say, "Hang on, I don't think this is right," or, "I think the inspector didn't look at this thing that they should have seen," before it is presented to parents as the Ofsted judgment. It would have to be a separately funded activity to send inspectors back to meet parents when the inspection was final, if that was wanted.

Q127 **Nick Fletcher:** Is that something you would like to do, or that the school could do itself?

Amanda Spielman: To be honest, schools often do talk to parents about inspection. It is not something that I could simply add to the existing model, because it would need half a day or, probably, a day of inspector time for us to prepare, go to the school, hold the meeting and return. It is not something that has ever been floated before. I was quite surprised when my predecessor threw that one in.

Q128 **Caroline Ansell:** I was quite surprised by a few of the comments your predecessor threw in, including a wholesale dismissal of the nine in 10



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schools graded at “good”, so I did not get the opportunity to ask what inspection superpower he had to see through walls.

Moving on to one aspect of the report that has had more publicity than any other—the single-word judgment—I believe it was described in your submission as “an easy way for parents to understand the quality of their child’s school.” In session after session, however, we have been told variously by all sorts of different witnesses that it is a blunt instrument, that it lacks the detail and nuance to fully capture the work of a school, that it is the main driver of stress for leadership teams and headteachers, and that, in fact, it does not raise standards. What are your thoughts on this single-word judgment?

Amanda Spielman: There are quite a few things about that. First, if you look at any of our reports, they absolutely do give a rounded picture of a school. We talk about the quality of education, the behaviour, the personal development and the leadership, and in all our graded inspections, we report separately and grade each of them. There is no question but that the world pays too much attention to the “overall effectiveness” judgment relative to the pieces underneath. I constantly have to remind people that there already is a scorecard built into the inspection framework and the set of judgments that we use. We also know that parents value the clarity, as we have said.

Q129 **Caroline Ansell:** But that is only in the areas that are “outstanding” or “good”.

Amanda Spielman: No, absolutely not. It can also be helpful because, very often, when a school is not doing well, parents are aware of it at some level, are quite concerned and wonder what is happening or whether anything is happening. The judgment can be reassurance that the problems are recognised, that people are on to it and that something will be done about it. It can be genuinely reassuring, because people do not like to have the cognitive dissonance of a very old inspection report that says that a school is “outstanding” when they can see, from their child’s experience, that it is not outstanding, for example. Reassurance cuts both ways.

I come back to a couple of things that I touched on at the beginning. We are just one part of the whole regulatory system. The reason why the overall judgment has such freight and weight in the system is that it is the thing on which those interventions are hung. In my discussions with stakeholders about whether it is really about the words themselves or about the weight that hangs on them, when you get to the point and ask, “What alternative words would you use?” they acknowledge that it is not about the words but about the consequences. What they really want is to take out the consequences, and, of course, that heads off into a completely different conversation, which is not mine to have.

Q130 **Caroline Ansell:** Have you explored alternatives, then?

Amanda Spielman: Yes. None has been given to us, but I did suggest an alternative formulation for “inadequate” to the headteacher unions. It was



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very clear in that conversation that, as soon as I proposed an alternative, they recognised that the consequence thing was the real point at issue.

Q131 **Caroline Ansell:** Would you be surprised that, in my experience from one of our sessions, inspectors—serving and past—were unanimous in their rejection of this single-word judgment and said that it was now time for change?

Amanda Spielman: But it is not a change that I can make, because I would be deliberately thwarting the regulatory system that hangs off it. Then the regulatory system would be hung on something else, and that would become the new extreme pressure.

Q132 **Caroline Ansell:** From your experience, you don't see the case for making that change?

Amanda Spielman: But then what would become the new lever? Would it be the leadership and management judgment? Would it be some sort of points score averaged across the judgments? Something else would start to carry the same weight. I think our inspectors are excellent and do a very tough job. Some of the people you have talked to probably inspected in an era before the modern regulatory system and academisation orders existed, and are basically wanting to recreate that. But, as I said, that is not for me to create.

Q133 **Caroline Ansell:** Are these single-word judgments credible? Is there not a deficit when a school can be deemed as "requires improvement" and, just a matter of weeks or months later, can be "good"?

Amanda Spielman: No.

Caroline Ansell: There seems to be a huge chasm, in terms of how that is interpreted in the wider world.

Amanda Spielman: Absolutely not. It is a fine line. Schools are on a continuum. A school that is judged as "requires improvement" may be just on one side of that boundary. Another three months on, it can absolutely be—

Q134 **Caroline Ansell:** So a single word doesn't really do justice to the good work that is happening in a school if, in such a short period of time, by addressing one particular area, department or aspect of leadership, these things can dramatically change. There is a chasm, is there not, between "requires improvement" and "good"?

Amanda Spielman: That is the intervention threshold, and one of the reasons for maintaining a system of multiple grades—not just a pass or fail—is that if we had a two-grade system, there would be even more weight and pressure on that boundary. But there is always a trade-off between the clarity that grades offer and the downsides of the fact that two inspected entities can be pretty close but on opposite sides of that line. There is exactly the same challenge with exam grades. When the GCSE and A-level reforms were going through, something that was considered was whether to go for point scores with error bars rather than

grades, but the feedback came back that, actually, for all the limitations of grades, people preferred them.

Again, we sit with the CQC, the prisons inspectorate and the police inspectorate. The model of accountability could evolve, but I do not think that it is for Ofsted to unhook itself and say, "We're going to change public policy here." I would be inserting myself as a policymaker, and people are generally quick to criticise chief inspectors who turn themselves into policymakers.

Q135 Caroline Ansell: Would you be concerned if a judgment of RI led to real challenges around recruitment and retention? That, presumably, wouldn't be something that—

Amanda Spielman: Again, that is something that cuts both ways. If there are problems, generally it is better for them to be recognised and acted on. The worst thing is to have a school that looks to be doing fine on the surface—from the external information—and to arrive to find that, actually, there are problems. An RI judgment can be an opportunity as well: "There's scope to do stuff here; there'll be an appetite to do stuff because everybody knows that it is not perfect at the moment."

Q136 Andrew Lewer: One concern that we have had expressed to us repeatedly during this inquiry is about Ofsted inspectors lacking the relevant expertise for the school types and the subjects on which they are supposed to be making what can be an important and pressured judgment. You were saying earlier on that data was important, so do you have any data on the proportion of inspectors who inspect schools and subjects that are actually within their areas of expertise?

Amanda Spielman: Can I be clear? We do not judge subjects. We look at a sample of subjects in the context of forming a judgment on the quality of education overall. That is not the same thing.

Q137 Andrew Lewer: But how can you reach a credible assessment using that sample if you have someone doing it who does not have any expertise in the subject?

Amanda Spielman: Using the same training that we use for all our inspection, built off the curriculum reviews, and people who already have that level of expertise. Remember, first of all, that most inspection is primary inspection. Four fifths of the mainstream schools in the country are primaries, where the teachers are expected to reach across all areas, so we are training people who have had responsibility for teaching everything in that school.

In secondary, everybody has areas of expertise, and we build out from there. The curriculum training builds their understanding and ability to think about the principles of good curriculum. At the level that we inspect it, the characteristics of stronger and weaker also extend across. If you have been a physics teacher, you can start to look more broadly. We use a team. We use people's skills and experience as best we can, but we recruit



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strong people with experience in all the sectors we inspect. We select them very carefully and train them very well.

Again, it was a matter of Government policy going back 20 years that inspectors would be generalists in this reduced inspection system. It was pre-2005 that we were able to run separate workforces and send an inspection team that had an inspector who was a specialist in every subject. That feedback is harking back to a very, very old model of inspection.

Q138 Andrew Lewer: In terms of the people we have been hearing from, you have said several times, "That's all old-fashioned, and they are from ancient times," but they are not. We have had a lot of people who are very much contemporary and up to date giving us this evidence. I think the evidence we are receiving is credible and up to date. Do you acknowledge the preference, at least, of having subject or age-level relevance within the expertise?

Amanda Spielman: Of course.

Q139 Andrew Lewer: When you identify that that is out of balance and that too many people of one subject are inspecting ones that they do not necessarily have expertise in, what steps have you taken to try to redress that balance in the team?

Amanda Spielman: It works the other way round. We have a mix of people in our inspector workforce. Our schools workforce works across primary, secondary, special. We also have to cover teacher development and alternative provision. We have put in a lot of training so that people are fully prepared for the places where they are inspecting. When we construct a team, we make sure that everybody's relevant skills are best used. The lead inspector will consider the particular aspects. If one person has a lot of experience as a safeguarding lead, they will likely be given the safeguarding piece of the inspection, for example. We absolutely do, as far as we can, spread the inspection responsibilities around to fit people's particular skills and experience, but our inspectors are required to be generalists.

Q140 Chair: Can I just follow up on one point? You mentioned that the vast majority of inspections are of primary schools. Does the make-up of the inspecting workforce and HMIs, in particular, reflect that, or is there a challenge? Certainly, a lot of the feedback that we have heard from school leaders, as well as inspectors themselves, is about that primary/secondary dissonance.

Amanda Spielman: We don't label people as "HMI (primary)" or "HMI (secondary)", so I don't have that off the top of my head, but a fairly large proportion of our inspectors are primary, partly because civil service pay is nowhere near as high as school sector headteacher pay and MAT pay. I think we probably have a balance that broadly reflects the sector. It is certainly not the case that we are disproportionately secondary inspectors looking at primary schools, as some people assume.



Q141 Andrew Lewer: One of the other concerns that has been expressed to us is that school leaders who also work as Ofsted inspectors have an unfair level of access to the relevant materials and can therefore ensure that their schools are steered in the right direction when Ofsted arrives. If all those materials were available to everybody, that unfair and unlevel playing field would not arise.

Amanda Spielman: That, I'm afraid, is a bit of a myth. First of all, we publish the frameworks and handbooks—we are extremely transparent—along with all the curriculum research reviews from which the curriculum training is done, and a whole series of videos, blogs and webinars covering everything that we train inspectors in. We put it out in a form that is suitable for self-service use.

What some people particularly want are the specific materials that are used in our interactive training sessions. The problem is, those are designed to run interactive sessions where the senior HMI leading has been very carefully trained, and where the interactive parts are managed by an HMI on every table who has also been trained and prepared to facilitate those discussions. If we simply dumped those slides out, as people would like, we would get, first, the consulting industry picking them up and ramping up the “mocksted” industry even further. Secondly, we would get some terrible bastardisations of people using stuff that they were not trained for. We put that material out in forms that we think, if somebody wants to do this for themselves, give them the same information and insights, but in a way that is less prone to being misused or misinterpreted.

Q142 Andrew Lewer: Is that level of access something that you regard as open to review and that you look at from time to time? Or have you made a decision about it?

Amanda Spielman: It is something we look at pretty regularly, because it does get brought up. It is about people wanting to get a really high level of predictability so that they can bulletproof themselves, go through point by point and say, “We’ve ticked this one, we’ve ticked this one and we’ve ticked this one,” which is exactly the wrong way to approach inspection—to try to treat anything that comes out of Ofsted as a tick list. It is actually a counterproductive dynamic.

Q143 Andrew Lewer: What consideration have you given to the impact of the framework on small primary schools, whose staff have to take on multiple subjects or disciplines?

Amanda Spielman: We think a lot about the size of schools. Lee Owston—who is behind me—and Chris Russell will have spent a lot of time talking also to the groups that deal specifically with junior schools, for example. That work is to make sure that we are having the right conversations in the right way. It is just as important for a primary school that they are doing things that are worth doing with children—that they are actually teaching them things. Sometimes people are very concerned about how caring primary schools are, but forget that seven years is half of children’s school life. They can, and we should expect them to, learn a



lot in that time, so however a school organises it—primary schools are not typically run and organised like secondary schools—they need to make sure that what children are going to be doing and learning throughout that time has been mapped out in some way, and that there is some kind of mechanism that makes sure that that is happening and that people understand and adjust where it does not work. We are very flexible about how we look to see that, but we do need to see it happening.

Q144 Andrew Lewer: But you are alert to the danger—it is a danger all over 21st-century Britain, whether it is in planning for housing or education—of process-driven activity, which smaller entities do not always fit into as well because they do not have as many specialists to make sure they fit into the process.

Amanda Spielman: Absolutely. One of the principles for minimising workload and maximising flexibility is having no requirements whatever for what schools need to show and inspect, beyond the things that DfE requires them to do. We want to work with whatever schools work with—that is a really clear principle. I was horrified a few months ago when I went to visit a teacher training course at a university. I had a meeting with a group of trainees who had just finished their first placement. A number of them had been told that they must do things “because Ofsted”. Several of them had been told that they must do absolutely full lesson plans for every lesson, because Ofsted would want to see them. This is completely untrue. It has never been true—well, in living memory it hasn’t been true. I am really concerned that people use us as a way to push junior staff into doing more work than they need to.

Chair: We will come back to the issue of workload, but I want to bring in Miriam.

Q145 Miriam Cates: Quite a lot of what we have heard about how Ofsted operates seems to be about how it is driven by limited resources and what you can do with the resource that you have. On the frequency and depth of inspections, what we have heard a lot is “We can’t inspect more often,” or, “We can’t inspect in more depth because this is the resource that we have and we have to spread it over the number of schools that we have to inspect.” First, do you think that that is broadly correct? Secondly, if resource were no object, what do you think would be the optimum length of time between inspections, and how much of a deep dive would you do? In schools that do particularly well, would you extend the period before the next inspection, or do you think that regularity is an important part of accountability?

Amanda Spielman: The statutory requirement at the moment is to inspect every five years, which is broadly what we are funded to do. We try and do it a little more often than that. That is the starting point. Clearly, we have to fulfil our legal responsibilities. Inspection should not be a rollercoaster where one is done and the next is already on the horizon. Most schools exist in a wider landscape; for a MAT, with planning improvement work, some sorts of local authority processes or as part of collaborative hubs, to change and improve things it takes time to work



them up, embed them, get them right and iterate where you have not got them quite right.

One of the things we learned from the “outstanding” exemption was that it is a problem to have too long in between. On going back and re-inspecting outstanding schools, we have found quite a lot that schools have become just a bit detached from what the rest of the world had been learning, seeing and recognising. The whole debate and growth in knowledge about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment has sometimes passed them by. There has not been something that has prodded them to say, “We must keep looking outside. We must make sure that we’re continuing to check that we are up with the pace.” I also think that sometimes long gaps can be more stressful and create more time for anxiety to build up.

Miriam Cates: So you think that five years is broadly a good framework, but in terms of the depth—

Amanda Spielman: Three to five years.

Q146 **Miriam Cates:** If you had more resource, would you allocate more inspectors to each inspection? Would you spend more time in a school? Or are you broadly able to get a good picture of what is going on?

Amanda Spielman: We get a good picture of what is going on. In terms of whether we are getting to a valid and sufficiently reliable judgment, I am reasonably confident about that. But I can see that what we cannot do is give people as much time as they want to talk through all aspects and that some of the frustrations come from that. In an unconstrained world, I would probably want to do something more in line with what other inspectorates do—that is, typically, a week, or the inside of a week, and with a bigger team—but I am doing this job in an era of highly constrained public resources. This is not a pitch for more money tomorrow, though!

Q147 **Miriam Cates:** Let’s move on to notice periods. There is a lot of controversy about whether it is a good idea for schools to have lots of notice or a very limited amount of notice. Do you think the current notice period of two and a half days is sufficient? Is there anything that could be done to reduce the operational impact on schools? Or do you think the trade-offs are difficult to rectify?

Amanda Spielman: It is normally half a day, by the way. This is a sort of compromise that has evolved over the years. Parents, of course, would like no-notice inspections. Periodically, including from the last Prime Minister but one, we have a message to say that inspections are to become no-notice. Typically, what happens is that people work through the practicalities and realise that in so many cases heads or governors will be offsite for some reason, so you have a disproportionate number of inspections that feel unfair because people who really should have been there simply could not reorganise at the last minute.

At the other extreme, lots of notice paradoxically imposes more stress. There have been eras in the past when it has been many weeks of notice, and depending on the head’s anxiety levels, staff have sometimes been



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worked flat out for many weeks to have everything absolutely perfect to an inhuman degree, and that is not good for anybody. We regularly talk to stakeholders about it; it is the kind of thing that we discuss with unions. On balance, for most of the staff in a school, having a very brief period of notice is probably the kindest. It probably means having one intense evening, rather than seven weeks of their life.

Q148 Miriam Cates: Do you think there is any argument for fixed-term inspections so you know that it will be within a month's period and that, every five years, you will be inspected in May?

Amanda Spielman: I think that is a very slippery path. The reason is that, to go back to what I said at the beginning, one of the functions of inspection is to be that lever that encourages people to do the right thing. If you are certain that for four years you won't be inspected, you can take all the shortcuts. If you are a primary school, you can drop all the trips, the science, the history and the art in years 5 and 6, and say, "We are going to do nothing but English and maths all day, every day."

Q149 Miriam Cates: I'm not sure schools would do that, though, because obviously there is a data report every year that you can't—

Amanda Spielman: But they might do the things that make the data report look better but sacrifice the quality of education. I have had MATs acknowledge to me that that is what would happen. This is not just me; I have had people in the sector saying they know that is what the world would slide into.

Chair: We are going to have to make some progress. We are going to overrun slightly, so I ask for short answers wherever possible, please.

Amanda Spielman: I will do my best.

Q150 Chair: You stated in your written evidence that Ofsted is "fully committed to reducing workload for teachers and leaders". You have already made the point that there are some misunderstandings, perhaps, of what Ofsted requires. What steps have you taken directly to reduce workload, and what has been their impact?

Amanda Spielman: The best thing we can do before inspection is to have the greatest clarity we can provide about what the construct of quality is and how we inspect. That is what we do with the framework and handbook, and we try to set that out as plainly as we can. We do as much as we can in the way of webinars, videos and blogs—all the materials that can help to illuminate that. We get very good take-up and very good feedback about that.

One of the things we have done this year, which with hindsight I wish we had done earlier, is to put seminars in place for the outstanding schools sitting on very old inspection judgments, to help to familiarise them with inspection expectations and give them the chance to ask any questions that they want to ask. That has gone down very well indeed. Ahead of time, we give as much clarity, openness and certainty as possible. We try to be very engaged with the sector stakeholders, and we also have people



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at every kind of sector event to be there for people to talk to and ask as much as they can. That is ahead.

During the inspection, I have made the point that we do not ask for anything that schools are not required to have to comply with law or DfE guidance. We add nothing to that layer, and that has been a principle going back before my time. With the EIF, we are really clear that we don't look at internal assessment data. There are two reasons for that. One is that, within that tight window of an inspection, we couldn't possibly quality-assure it and work out how it had been collected, whether it was comparable with anybody else's, in what circumstances it had been collected and so on. The other is that we saw the data analysis industry that was going on and creating workload in schools. I have been very pleased by some Teacher Tapp findings showing that the amount of data analysis that teachers report doing has dropped very significantly. I think taking that out has been helpful.

Q151 Chair: It is fair to say that we have had mixed feedback on the EIF. We have had some positive feedback on the move away from hard data. We have also heard some concerns that the focus on curriculum and the depth of some of the curriculum studies you have referred to can be a driver of workload in themselves; that has come particularly from subject leaders. How do you respond to those points?

Amanda Spielman: We put out in 2018, I think—2017 or 2018—some curriculum reports that showed that for a lot of schools, particularly primary schools at that point, curriculum, at least outside English and maths, was often in a very poor state indeed. Something needed to happen to make sure that those strong and clear national curriculum expectations translated into practice. So I think there has probably been a bit of a one-off exercise to say, "Hold on a moment. We actually do need to think about curriculum across the board." I hope that maintaining that and iterating it over time will be significantly less work. But judging by what we saw five years ago, there is no question but that a lot of the sector really did need to think hard about what it was doing.

Q152 Chair: We heard from one witness that Ofsted should introduce reasonable adjustments to inspections to support school leaders and staff—for example, for people with disabilities. Do any such adjustments already exist, and if not, have you considered introducing them?

Amanda Spielman: Inspectors are very flexible. They have a planning call with the head the day before the on-site visit starts, in which they discuss whether there are any complications, any difficulties—there might be a disabled inspector, as well as a disabled member of staff in a school. I would expect anything like that to be surfaced in that planning call, so that the inspector is on notice if there are things they need to be careful or sensitive about. I can think of cases where, for example, an inspector has been warned that one of the senior team has recently had something very difficult in their personal life and may be feeling particularly fragile. It is very helpful for inspectors to have that knowledge.

Q153 **Chair:** Do you think that is, effectively, part of the system with regard to those planning meetings?

Amanda Spielman: Yes. Ofsted is not the employer of the people in schools—the language of “reasonable adjustments” is from employment territory—but we would expect inspectors to work sensitively and flexibly in the context in which they find themselves.

Q154 **Chair:** I take your point that Ofsted is not the employer, but in a similar vein Lord Knight suggested that we needed to move away from a high-stakes system to one in which Ofsted has a duty of care to people working in the system. I take the point you made about high stakes not necessarily being in the gift of the inspectorate, and that being partly a policy decision, but what is your response to that point about a duty of care?

Amanda Spielman: We hire inspectors for their bedside manner as well as for their knowledge and experience. We know that what makes a good inspector is somebody who can make the conversation about the person at the receiving end, not about themselves. Your typical inspector is a very modest and very conscientious person who unquestionably, by default, brings that care. I remind you that we get extremely positive feedback: we get over 90% of people expressing satisfaction with their inspection, in respect of both its fairness and how it was conducted.

Q155 **Chair:** People have challenged those surveys on the basis that they are conducted during the course of an inspection.

Amanda Spielman: No, they are not conducted during the course of an inspection. The link goes out with the final inspection report. This is a myth that is being circulated to try to discredit that survey, and it is unreasonable. We do publish this in our annual report and accounts. I am very clear that that link goes out with the final inspection report.

To come back to your original question, inspectors conduct themselves sensitively and carefully. They have all been on the receiving end. They understand the impact that inspection has. They approach these sometimes very difficult conversations with great care and sensitivity, in the main. Of course there are occasions when it's not right. We do everything we can to put that right. We monitor and make sure that any individual who needs additional training gets it. Nevertheless, fundamentally the kinds of people that we want and that we hire are the kinds of people who by default behave in that way.

Q156 **Anna Firth:** On outcomes, we have heard evidence from Ian Hartwright, the senior policy adviser at the school leaders' union, that Ofsted is unable to evidence the impact of inspection. It has had several goes at that over the years, but it has been unable to evidence inspection leading to improvement. I am sure that you would like to comment.

Amanda Spielman: I will. I remind you first of all that Ofsted is not an improvement agency. The policy distinction I reminded us of earlier is that our job in the system is the diagnosis; other people have responsibility for support and improvement. We of course take a strong interest in whether



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inspection acts as a force for improvement in the system. That is why we do the post-inspection survey. In that survey, nine out of 10 schools tell us that the inspection will help them to improve. We have added a tracker survey, nine to 12 months down the line, which I am afraid we are not yet ready to report on, but it will be in the next annual report. However, we have no reason to think that it will show something significantly different from what is shown in the immediate post-inspection survey.

Q157 Anna Firth: When did the survey go out in which nine out of 10 schools said that?

Amanda Spielman: After every inspection, we send a link to the post-inspection survey. I think just under half of people reply, so it is a pretty high response rate.

Q158 Anna Firth: The reason I ask is that the picture appears to be patchy if you look at different reports. In a National Audit Office report from 2018, 44% of headteachers surveyed said that their school's most recent inspection had led to improvements, notwithstanding what you just said about being a diagnostic agency. In the following year, Ofsted did a survey of teachers, in which 50% of teachers disagreed with the statement that inspection had helped individual schools improve. That seems to fly in the face of—

Amanda Spielman: No. You have hit on a crucial difference there. Inspection in a small incarnation is very much focused on the leaders in a school—that is who the main value accrues to. Particularly in secondary schools, but even in larger primary schools, many teachers will have very little direct interaction with inspections, so their experience of it is only being told by somebody else that they have to do something “because Ofsted”. You get a very different response from the people who have directly been part of an inspection, particularly an EIF inspection, and from those who have not. We are transparent and clear, and we communicate as much as we can, but I cannot directly involve every teacher in a school in every inspection.

Q159 Anna Firth: I understand that completely, but are you surprised that 50% of teachers disagree with the statement that the inspection had helped the school improve, and that only 27% said that they felt that it had improved? Would you like to have that evidence?

Amanda Spielman: I work in an environment where the biggest teaching union has been committed to abolishing accountability and inspection for over a decade, and is relentlessly pushing its members to be hostile to inspection. I don't think it would make a blind bit of difference if we did things in different ways; it is likely that that absolute opposition would remain. A great deal of negativity is pushed out at teachers from when they first start, and that is really difficult to counteract.

Q160 Anna Firth: Surely that is not positive, though. I understand exactly what you are saying—that of course your role will result in hostility—but are there not ways in which the system could be designed to limit that?



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Amanda Spielman: It is an interesting question, but perhaps it is not a question for me, because I do not control the levers that might be tweaked or adjusted there. Within my scope, I think we have done everything that we can to make inspection as open, constructive, fair and valuable as we can. Let me illustrate the kind of take-up we get: a while ago, we had over half a million downloads of our curriculum research reviews and reports. We get tremendous feedback on how useful those have been to subject leaders. Only yesterday, I saw that Charlie Stripp, one of the eminences of the mathematics world, commented very positively on how useful our mathematics report was, and I have had feedback from schools. Those pieces that sit around inspection—the things we do with our insights, sometimes in the first instance to train inspectors, but that we also make available for schools—have extraordinarily high value. Protecting those, and making sure that, even in a time of straitened budgets, we still have the capacity to maintain that flow, is one of the ways that we make sure that what we do is really valuable.

Q161 **Chair:** We have heard the significant suggestion, from a range of people from across the board, that safeguarding should be inspected more frequently, and that those inspections should be separate from mainstream schools inspections. What are your views about that?

Amanda Spielman: In standard school inspections, our inspection of safeguarding is normally just one part of the system. MATs would normally have some level of oversight, and some regular review of safeguarding. Similarly, many local authorities have assurance.

Including safeguarding in inspection is a way of making sure that, at least once in a while, there is a totally independent eye on the safeguarding arrangements. You could make a system where that moved to being entirely external, rather than our relying on the internal management oversight arrangements in MATs and local authorities; there are different ways to cut that. It is important that there be regular oversight. When safeguarding goes wrong, it is sometimes because there has not been a regular eye on it, just to make sure that nothing is slipping in any direction. Whether it is part of a standard school inspection or not, there is quite a lot about safeguarding that often links to schools' other work—around behaviour, for example. It would be difficult to slice it out and say, "We won't look at anything safeguarding-related" without compromising some of the other parts of what really matters.

Q162 **Chair:** We have heard arguments that safeguarding could be looked at as part of a leadership assessment, rather than as a separate issue, and that perhaps an organisation other than Ofsted might be better placed to organise regular safeguarding inspections.

Amanda Spielman: You would just be adding a whole extra layer of complexity and cost to the system, and schools would face another inspectorate as well, and try to get decent alignment. Our work cuts across mainstream schools and special needs and social care; we have to make sure that we have join-up in Ofsted across those. If you bring



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another entity into the mix, you have created another set of complicated interfaces touching on all those.

Q163 **Chair:** On the detail of safeguarding inspections, in June you announced that schools that were graded “inadequate” on safeguarding grounds would be revisited within three months. Has that process begun, and have you seen what impact it has had?

Amanda Spielman: It will have begun, I think. I am not sure. I may have to write to you about this, because I don’t know off the top of my head. I think it started in September. You may be able to see somebody nodding behind me, but I can’t.

Q164 **Chair:** I do, yes.

Amanda Spielman: It was something we were very pleased to do. We used to do regular monitoring visits to all schools that were judged “inadequate”, and it was generally seen as supportive and constructive. That was stopped, I think at DfE’s request, when the automatic academisation policy was introduced, because it was seen as unnecessary in that context. In practice, academisation typically takes quite some time to arrange. I was delighted to be able to reinstate those visits for this set of schools. I think it is sensible and constructive, and safeguarding is one of those things where, if everything else is in good shape and people really put the effort in, you can often pull things back in a relatively short time.

Q165 **Chair:** Do you expect that process to result in a number of schools getting a rating other than “inadequate”?

Amanda Spielman: Remember what a tiny proportion of schools this is in the first place. Since September 2021, we are talking about 17 schools in total in the whole of England. Rather more schools than that have been “inadequate” only by reason of quality of education, and I think many more have been “inadequate” only because of behaviour problems. There is a high threshold for being judged “inadequate” for safeguarding; that typically reflects multiple serious failures. When we looked at those 17 schools, we did not find any where it was about paperwork, box-ticking, or forgetting to file this thing with that thing—they all had serious failures. I think there was only one where it was only a single failure, but so serious that “ineffective” was the only place to go; in all the others, there were multiple failures. There is also a bit of a misconception that a very small thing can lead to you being judged “ineffective”, but this really does reflect serious weaknesses.

Q166 **Caroline Ansell:** This is my final question, and it is on complaints. We were told in one session that the complaints system amounts to Ofsted marking its own homework. I understand that you have put forward a number of potential reforms or changes. How will that consultation process you engaged in address some of those criticisms? When do you think the consultation will be published, and what is the potential timetable for any implementation?

Amanda Spielman: There are a few things here. First, throughout my time at Ofsted, we have taken complaints incredibly seriously. We have

had an external review system in place throughout that time. The reports from ICASO, which is run by the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution and commissioned by DfE, have consistently been very positive indeed about our work. Its most recent report found that we had dealt with 14 out of the 18 cases that went to them in line with the published complaints procedure, and overall it had no advice or recommendations to make about improving the service.

Q167 **Caroline Ansell:** How did they then address the other four of the 18?

Amanda Spielman: There were specific recommendations in those relevant to the cases, but they did not think that the cases reflected an underlying wider, systemic problem with how we addressed complaints. Those are published reports, and I can send them to the Committee. ISACO said that the level of attention to complaints and what can be learned from them at the highest level in Ofsted is very welcome. We take this extraordinarily seriously, and have done throughout my time.

We made some changes three years ago in response to the same kind of issues that you hear now. We piloted them—they looked very promising in pilot—but they have not worked as well as we had hoped, so we have piloted another model, we have consulted on it, and we are very close to publishing the final report—I think the revised model will be published before the end of the year.

There is a point that I think is important to understand: inspection judgments have to be made by trained practising judges. In just the same way that within the court system you can only get things looked at again by other judges, you cannot substitute your own opinion, or your lawyer's opinion, for that of the judges. We have the same issue with Ofsted. We can and do move things away from the original inspector and inspection team. For example, when we need to gather additional evidence, we send people entirely unconnected to the original inspection. What we cannot do is simply say, "Well, anybody can substitute their judgment for the inspection team's."

Q168 **Caroline Ansell:** What recourse, then, is there to the original evidence base on which some of those judgments or comments were made? One detail is access to inspectors' notes. Do you recognise that as a challenge?

Amanda Spielman: There are situations in which it is difficult to give the people who are challenging them every detail. There are confidential conversations; you would be betraying personal details about individuals, and sometimes their very difficult circumstances—for example, details of conversations with parents. We think it is important that parents tell inspectors honestly and openly about concerns they have. Sometimes there are quite difficult dynamics that mean that if all that information will be handed straight to the head, they will not speak honestly to inspectors. We try to navigate that, and to be as open as we can be without betraying—

Caroline Ansell: Would there be a difference, though, between the



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information insights that you would share and what you would be obliged to share under FOI?

Amanda Spielman: I am sorry; I don't think I quite understand the question.

Q169 **Caroline Ansell:** One challenge is that notes that were perhaps not proffered by the team, or made available under this system or this complex process, had been made available under FOI. Is that a redacted version, then?

Amanda Spielman: I think it would generally be a redacted evidence base, precisely to make sure that we were not handing over personal information that we should not be handing over. It may be that we need to write to you separately about the specifics, but we are as open as we can be. We recognise, particularly given that we have to have conversations about sensitive things like safeguarding, that inspection inevitably involves discussing details regarding children, which we have to be extremely careful with.

Q170 **Chair:** That concludes our first session, and I thank you for giving the Committee some extra time, for which we are very grateful. On this being your last appearance before the Committee, I have asked our Clerks to reach out to Ofsted about potentially having one more session with you, so that we can talk about Ofsted's broader remit. I appreciate that you probably have not had the chance to respond to that yet. I hope we can have that conversation with you or your officials later this year, but we will be in touch to enable that.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt. Hon. Nick Gibb MP and Juliet Chua.

Q171 **Chair:** For this second session, we have Minister Nick Gibb, who will be known to all the Committee, and Juliet Chua, who is the director general for the schools group at the Department for Education. I will open by asking the same question we asked HMCI, which I know you were diligently listening to, Minister: what would say are the key purposes of Ofsted's inspection for schools, and how well do you feel inspections are currently fulfilling each of those purposes?

Nick Gibb: I agree with Amanda: it is there for parents to understand the quality of the school to which they are entrusting their child's education. But from a Government perspective, it has a very important accountability role. Combined with performance tables, the Ofsted grading is crucial in holding schools to account. We believe very strongly in the autonomy of the teaching profession, but with autonomy comes accountability. The more autonomy you have, the stronger the accountability regime. It is a combination of Ofsted inspections and performance tables for GCSEs, A-levels, T-levels and so on, and for SATs in primary schools, that are the key accountability measures we use.

There is another role of Ofsted judgments: we have a whole raft of school improvement arrangements, such as curriculum hubs and the TCaF funding, and we use Ofsted judgments to make sure that the schools we are using to help spread best practice are providing a strong education to their children. It is just not the lower grades that we are looking at; we are also looking at the top grades—the “good” and “outstanding”—as well, to help us with school improvement across the system.

Q172 **Chair:** Those are important systemic elements of how the grades work. I guess there is also this point about the role of parents in engaging with those. How well versed do you feel parents are in the detail of Ofsted reports, as opposed to the headlines?

Nick Gibb: I would certainly encourage parents to read the full reports. They are not that long and are generally, if not always, written without copious amounts of jargon. I would encourage parents to read the actual reports, but even if they cannot do that, we know that 79% of parents are aware of their child's school's Ofsted judgment.

Q173 **Chair:** We heard quite a lot in the last session about areas that are not necessarily within the gift of the inspectorate or the chief inspector but departmental policy concerns. One of those was obviously the “outstanding” exemption, which I think everyone broadly agrees was in place for too long and needed to be moved on from. Are there any other areas where you think policy can be reviewed or changed in this space in a way that would help to improve the relationship between Ofsted and the teaching profession?

Nick Gibb: All the announcements that the chief inspector made in June were very important. They include the issues about more clarity on the



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timing of inspections, assurance of headteachers that they can share the provisional judgment of the school inspection with close colleagues and friends and family, greater clarity on expectations of what safeguarding is meant to cover and so on, and depersonalisation. Those changes are very important. The “outstanding” exemption was important. It was something we introduced in 2010 at a time when 68% of schools were “good” or “outstanding”, which implies that 32% were not. Therefore, the focus of the resource had to be on that 32%. As the figure of the schools that are not “good” or “outstanding” has declined—down to 12%—as has the length of time that those schools have not been inspected, I think it was the right moment to end that exemption.

Q174 Anna Firth: Minister, as you heard sitting in the room, we were concerned to hear that there does not seem to be conclusive evidence as to whether inspection results in school improvement. We also heard about consistency and reliability of inspection judgments. Given the crucial role that inspection plays in implementing the Department’s policies and priorities, and given what you have said about Ofsted grading being crucial for holding schools to account, would you agree that there should be a stronger evidence base of its effectiveness?

Nick Gibb: As Amanda says, I do not think Ofsted is there for school improvement. It is there as a diagnostic tool, and if it did engage in school improvement itself, there would be a conflict of interest, and its objectivity would be in question. The reliability of Ofsted judgments is a matter for Ofsted. I know that the brilliant work that Amanda Spielman has done in her seven years, in terms of improving the training and quality of recruitment of inspectors and the education inspection framework and the handbook that comes with it, which she introduced, is all a critical issue of improving the quality of inspection. There is always room for improvement, as Amanda found when she first became inspector. I am sure that Sir Martyn will also engage in improvements that he wants to introduce into the system.

Q175 Anna Firth: If the inspection regime is working and the diagnosis is made in year one, you would be hoping and looking for improvement by the time of the next inspection, would you not? I totally understand the distinction between the diagnosis and the person doing the treatment of the patient, but you would expect to see a change in the diagnosis between those two points.

Nick Gibb: Yes, you would. In 2010, 68% of schools were “good” or “outstanding”. Today that is 88%. That reflects genuine improvement. We know that standards have risen in that period. We know that because England’s schools have seen their schools rise in international surveys. So it has happened. We have a very extensive school improvement programme. We have 40 maths hubs, 34 English hubs, 30 computing hubs and the language hubs, all of which are designed to support schools that are “requires improvement” or “inadequate”.

Q176 Anna Firth: You would say the evidence base is good that schools are actually improving. Would you therefore agree that it is regrettable that



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when the teachers themselves are surveyed, they say that there is no improvement? It is not helpful for parents' confidence and for the profession as a whole to have that dichotomy, is it?

Nick Gibb: This is a distinction, again, that was drawn out in your questioning of the chief inspector, between teachers and—

Q177 **Anna Firth:** Maybe it is a communication issue, but as it stands, would you agree that that is not helpful?

Nick Gibb: Well, nine out of 10 schools responding to Ofsted's post-inspection survey say that the feedback they received from Ofsted will help them to improve. I think that the schools themselves acknowledge that the whole process of being inspected is a trigger for school improvement, for themselves or for others.

Q178 **Anna Firth:** Why do you think that we have this survey? Maybe you say that this is historical and has been superseded, but we would like to hear your answer. In 2019, when Ofsted surveyed teachers, 50% of them disagreed that the inspection had helped their individual schools to improve. Only 27% said that the inspection had helped the school to improve.

Nick Gibb: Yes, and I refer you to what the chief inspector said in her response to that question. It is a political issue. There is a major teaching union that opposes inspections of schools, but if you want to have a school system where teaching of reading in this country is the fourth best out of 43 countries that tested children of the same age in the 2021 PIRLS survey, you need to combine the professional autonomy of teachers and schools with strong accountability. Strong accountability brings pressures. I absolutely acknowledge that; it does bring pressures. But without that pressure, I do not believe that we would see the kinds of improvements that we are seeing in our state education system.

Q179 **Anna Firth:** You would expect me to completely agree with you that we want to see improvement and to completely agree with you about the results that we have seen in improvement in reading, etc, but is there nothing more that could be done to try to bridge this gap, if you like, between a strong inspection regime and the impression on the ground?

Nick Gibb: As I say, from a headteacher's perspective, you have nine out of 10 saying that it helps with improvement. Look—you have listened to Amanda, and you have listened to Sir Martyn, who I know you also had the confirmation hearings with. They both want this process to be as professional and well conducted as possible with as little pressure as possible, given the importance of inspection. They want this to be a pleasant experience for professionals in schools, as do we. Nevertheless, we have to have a school inspection system. It is a key part of ensuring that our schools are delivering a high quality of education for young people in our state schools.

Juliet Chua: It is also worth adding the amount of work that Ofsted has continued to do to try to address misconceptions that actually impact Ofsted in schools. If you look at the handbook and the detail of the sorts



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of things that are currently, at times, considered to be required for Ofsted and the reality of what inspectors are actually looking for, that is really important. Sometimes teachers perceive that the activity they are doing is because Ofsted needs to see it. I think that is work that Ofsted continually does. The description of the webinars and all the demystification is because it is actually about making it clear that school improvement is an activity that needs to take place on an ongoing basis and is not driven directly by the inspection process.

Q180 Chair: Before we move on, in terms of the distinction between diagnosis and improvement, obviously a number of the former inspectors we heard from in our session with inspectors did feel that that improvement work was valuable in both retention of the people there and inspiration for people to carry on working for Ofsted. Clearly, for some of those functions, the ship has sailed and they have been transferred elsewhere, and there is a role for MATs and the Department's regional directors in improvement. When we as a Committee want to hold Ofsted to account, we can have an accountability hearing and hear from them. Do you feel that there is sufficient accountability for the Department's regional structure, where regional schools commissioners are now regional directors?

Nick Gibb: Regional directors—regional schools commissioners, as they were previously named—are senior civil servants who report directly to the Secretary of State. So you are holding them to account now when quizzing me, and when you quiz the Secretary of State.

Chair: We will take that into account for future accountability hearings and ensure that we have some suitably detailed questions on those issues. I will bring in Miriam.

Q181 Miriam Cates: Thanks, Robin. I will ask the same question that I asked Amanda. Do you think that inspections are regular enough and in-depth enough? If not, has there been any consideration of increasing the Ofsted budget, or is that just not possible right now?

Nick Gibb: You can always spend more money. Ofsted is a standalone Department that negotiates its settlement with the Treasury. It has seen a reduction in funding since 2010. You know the pressures that public finances were under following the banking crash, the recession and the £150 billion deficit we were running each year in 2010. So difficult decisions were made across Whitehall. The only areas that were protected were schools, hospitals and the NHS, and international development. Other areas, such as Ofsted, were not protected and they did have to cut their cloth according to the funding that was available. There has been a cash terms decrease and, obviously, a real-terms decrease. I think Ofsted does a brilliant job, notwithstanding those pressures, and over that period—2010 to 2023—we have seen a significant rise in education standards in our schools.

Q182 Miriam Cates: Do you think that frequency of about five years is right? Or is that essentially determined by budgets?



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Nick Gibb: It is budgets, but it is also to do with the pressure you are putting on schools. If you were to send in 20 inspectors for three weeks, that would be phenomenally expensive, but it would also be a massive intrusion into the day-to-day life of the school. You have to balance budget and you have to balance the pressure it puts on schools. I think the approach we take now is a reliable approach. We can rely on the judgments that come out of that. Do you want to add anything, Juliet?

Juliet Chua: At the point of each spending review, the work that Ofsted needs to do in the coming period is negotiated with the Treasury directly. As Amanda described, the policy decision to revisit those schools that had previously been exempt was recognised as an additional cost to Ofsted, and so that was included within its funding. An additional £23 million was included for this spending review period to cover that additional cost. At each spending review, there is a conversation to have about what the remit looks like and what needs to take place.

Q183 **Caroline Ansell:** Minister, you will be very familiar with the challenge and some of the arguments around the single-word judgment. It has been variously described as high-stakes, leading to increased stress, and also as a blunt instrument, because it really fails to reflect the context or the progress that a school may have made. What are your thoughts on that single-word judgment?

Nick Gibb: I support it. I think it is the clarity that parents need. Although we encourage parents to read the whole report, most parents have other pressures on their lives—not like us, poring over Ofsted reports. So a one-word judgment I think is good. If there weren't a one-word judgment, people would pick out things from the report, like a theatre review. I am not sure that would necessarily reflect a balanced view of the school overall. I think that a one-word judgment is the most effective way, and as the chief inspector said, from that one-word judgment other good things flow. If they get a really good Ofsted judgment, schools can help support other schools. If they have got a "requires improvement" or "inadequate" then there is support that will come in for that school from the hubs and from our other trusts and school support systems.

Q184 **Caroline Ansell:** Do you think four single words are enough to provide that kind of nuance?

Nick Gibb: People always like there to be an even number, so people don't just pick the middle. These types of issues are always up for debate and discussion. It has stood the test of time, and it is a system used across other sectors, such as CQC. But these are always matters that can be changed and debated.

Q185 **Caroline Ansell:** So you would look to potentially debate that with the incoming chief inspector? From our evidence sessions, there has been quite a concerted push on this single-word judgment, and certainly some appetite.



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Nick Gibb: I am certainly in favour of a single-word judgment. I think the simplicity of it is important. You can overcomplicate things, and from the complication comes opaqueness, and from that you get less accountability.

Q186 **Caroline Ansell:** What if you saw that single-word judgment, “requires improvement”, and yet the quality of the teaching in the school was good, the quality of leadership was good, there was a wealth of creative, artistic and sporting opportunities for the children, outcomes were good, and the school was particularly effective for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but there was an element of safeguarding, say, around a technical question, which meant that it was “requires improvement”? Do you think that “requires improvement” would do justice to the wealth of experiences and really positive things that a school could be doing?

Nick Gibb: I think safeguarding is really important. It is not something that—

Q187 **Caroline Ansell:** So do I, but does that single-word judgment overshadow every and any other achievement or strength that the school has?

Nick Gibb: With RI, there will be a re-inspection within 18 months. Because of the changes announced in June, if the school had become inadequate because of safeguarding shortfalls and can put those things right within three months, there will be a return and a new judgment made.

Q188 **Caroline Ansell:** But 18 months will be a very long time to labour under “requires improvement”. The evidence suggests that it can inspire challenges around recruitment and retention. You can see a movement of pupils, because parents actively look to other schools that have that one word, “good”, emblazoned across the entrance. It might trigger intervention and support, but it can also trigger some pretty difficult and negative responses too.

Nick Gibb: But only 9% of schools are graded “requires improvement”. I cannot remember exactly, but something like 98% of schools have a safeguarding judgment of “good”. It will not even be the 9%—it will be a tiny proportion of the 9% of RIs where it is as a consequence of safeguarding. Juliet, did you want to come in?

Juliet Chua: I was going to say that there is a differentiation here. On safeguarding, 98.7% of schools are effective, and I think that is a really positive headline. Some 1.3% are identified as ineffective. That is clearly a critical judgment, and that can really come down to some really profound problems with the school that need to be addressed rapidly. As Amanda described earlier, the shift this summer—now, the inspectors can go back in rapidly, so the school can put in place the necessary changes to address those safeguarding issues—is really critical.

Alongside it, there is a separate but related conversation about “requires improvement” and the period of time it can take to put in place the necessary changes to address the quality of education and look at



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leadership and management. It can sometimes take longer for those improvements to come through. As the Minister has described, the judgment will trigger improvement activities, additional support, and input from a national leader of education, who will come in and spend time with that school, as well as obviously looking at sponsorship.

Q189 **Caroline Ansell:** Would a parent not think that “requires improvement” is an overall judgment that applies to the leadership and management, the resourcing of the school, and the results that the children or young people achieve?

Nick Gibb: Well, they could look at the report, and they would see what those other grades are too.

Q190 **Caroline Ansell:** What if they do not look any deeper than the presenting judgment? It does not say “requires improvement in” something; it is simply “requires improvement” overall.

Nick Gibb: Sure, and this issue would not apply in any of the other gradings; it is the issue of safeguarding. Now, you might take a view as a Committee that you do not think safeguarding should have that status in our school system. I would disagree with that. But as I said, it is a very small proportion—less than 1.3%—of schools that have a problem with safeguarding. Therefore a very small proportion of the 9% of schools that are “requires improvement” will be there because of safeguarding alone. The vast majority of that 9% will be there because of a whole range of issues in the school. So I think parents can rely on that RI judgment. Even if it were just “requires improvement”, safeguarding is so serious, and I think parents think it is important for their child to go somewhere that is safe.

Q191 **Caroline Ansell:** I think the Committee would absolutely subscribe to that, but that is just one of those considerations in the whole, where there are just these four judgments. Is there not a chasm between “good” and “requires improvement” in terms of understanding, yet in terms of standards perhaps not very much?

Nick Gibb: No. If a school has a “requires improvement” judgment, there are issues that that school needs to address urgently and pressingly. In most cases, those issues will not be safeguarding alone, or indeed the quality of education alone. There will very often be more than one category that led it to have a “requires improvement” overall grading. We are presiding over 24,000 schools, and we just need them to improve. Those schools that are not providing a quality of education, or indeed proper safeguarding controls, have to improve.

Q192 **Caroline Ansell:** Of course, but do you think that publishing “requires improvement” in isolation helps them to improve?

Nick Gibb: Yes, I do. It is part of the accountability system, combined with performance tables.

Q193 **Caroline Ansell:** Even though it is harder to recruit and retrain, and even though you lose funding because you lose pupils? These issues are part of



the dynamic around the judgment given.

Nick Gibb: Yes, but they don't necessarily stay in those judgments for long. As I said, they are re-inspected within 18 months. We want them to improve. There are consequences. As Amanda said, say you didn't have these judgments: if teachers were applying for jobs in a school, they would find other ways of finding out the quality of that school.

The RI is not a made-up thing that doesn't reflect reality. It will be a school that does require improvement, and teachers applying to those schools will know that with or without an Ofsted judgment. What it does is focus that school, as Amanda said. Some schools, particularly a small primary school, may not be engaged in the big debates about education, pedagogy and the curriculum, and the involvement of Ofsted periodically helps them to do that.

Then we have a whole raft of support that can come in on the curriculum, if that is the issue, or on behaviour or on safeguarding, to help that school improve. It is right that we hold schools to account and that we have the support mechanisms behind that to make sure that those schools improve.

Q194 **Caroline Ansell:** You wouldn't agree, then, with Sir Michael Wilshaw, who said that "the days of the one-word judgment are coming to an end"?

Nick Gibb: No. Well, it can be two words—it is "requires improvement". Certainly I think it should be kept simple and clear. Behind that one word, as I said, there are four different judgments, and behind those four different judgments there is a whole raft of evidence that is documented by Ofsted. It is based on evidence. Ofsted continues to look at its systems, its inspection approaches and how it can improve its processes, and that will continue. It has continued under Amanda; as I say, she has done a brilliant job over seven years of improving that, and I am sure that Sir Martyn will want to build on it.

Caroline Ansell: I understand your point about clarity. It is good for parents to understand that sort of immediacy, because they don't have time to read the reports, but if we were to ask any of those parents in what respect their child's school needs to be improved, I wonder whether they could say. I will leave it at that.

Q195 **Mohammad Yasin:** I will move on to workload and wellbeing. My colleagues and I regularly visit schools. The teachers are under pressure with workload, and it is really affecting their mental health and wellbeing. The Department has stated that it is "committed to taking a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing". What measures have been taken to support this? How effective have they been?

Nick Gibb: This is a key issue. For me certainly, workload, wellbeing and mental health have been a key issue for many years.

On workload, we did a teacher workload survey. From that, we identified the three causes of unnecessary workload. Of course professionals work hard, of course teachers work hard, but we do not want them working excessively hard on things they should not necessarily be doing. We



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discovered that it was to do with the marking approach—a thing called dialogic marking—and to do with unnecessary data collection and lesson planning. Some of those were driven by myths about what Ofsted wanted that had been put about; of course, it did not want those things. We have made it even clearer that Ofsted will not look at internal data. We want data collection by schools and teachers only if it helps them and is something that they want to help them improve the teaching of the children. We don't want data collection for DfE or for Ofsted. We have made that very clear.

As a consequence, we set up three workload taskforces—one in data, one in planning and one in marking—and they were each headed by an experienced headteacher. As a consequence of that work, between 2016 and 2019 we reduced the workload, on average, by five hours a week. That, unfortunately, has reversed due to covid and all of the pressures that teachers have been under during covid, but I want to get it back down again, not just by the five hours but by another five hours on top of that. We are working with the unions on a workload reduction taskforce to try to bring that down.

Mental health is a really important issue. We have the education staff wellbeing charter that we want schools to sign up to, and that is about ensuring that we take into account the workload of teachers and their mental health and wellbeing.

Q196 Mohammad Yasin: As you will know, headteachers are under even more pressure, and their mental health and wellbeing has deteriorated over the years because of the workload, pressure and financial issues facing schools. In June, the Department committed to doubling its mental health and wellbeing offer to support an additional 500 heads by March 2024, and said that it would further expand that offer beyond March 2024. Is the Department on track to meet its March targets? Can you provide more details on the expansion beyond March?

Nick Gibb: It is a £1.1 million fund that provides counselling to headteachers and college leaders. So far, more than 1,000 school leaders have benefited from that programme. I think that that is important. If you go into the private sector and look at senior leaders, this sort of counselling is commonplace for chief executives of big, major companies. I think that it is important that we have the same facility available for the leaders of our school system. It is a very pressured, important job, and this counselling is proving very effective.

Q197 Mohammad Yasin: Are they receiving the counselling now, or is that planned for after March?

Nick Gibb: It is happening now.

Juliet Chua: The facility is open. Essentially, the announcement was to increase the facility. As you say, it was available to up to 500, and now it is available to up to 1,000, and we are looking at what we want to do beyond March 2024 to be able to set out the next phase of support on that



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basis. As the Minister said, this is clearly a critical part of our overall support for leaders across the system.

Q198 Mohammad Yasin: Is that counselling help getting to every school in the country?

Juliet Chua: It is available for individuals to access, essentially. I do not have data with me on the distribution across schools, but certainly we know that it is being well received. We have had positive feedback about the nature of the support that is available.

Q199 Chair: To pick up on that point, obviously it is welcome if that has already been achieved for 1,000 heads, but that is less than 10% of the heads in the system, so presumably the aspiration is for that support to be available to people across the system, should they wish to take it up.

Nick Gibb: It is available. Not every headteacher will want it, but as I said, it is something that is commonplace in the private sector and in industry. I would like to see it becoming commonplace in this sector.

Q200 Mohammad Yasin: The schools that are rated “good” or lower are encouraged to join the Government’s behaviour hubs scheme, but as yet, we do not know how effective they have been. The interim evaluation report that was expected in June has been delayed.

Why has the report been delayed? When will it be published? Will the Minister share any learning as to the effectiveness of the hubs on improving behaviour and mental health in schools?

Nick Gibb: The behaviour hubs are really important. From speaking to schools, as I do all the time, the support that the hubs provide is valued by the partner schools that seek that support from the behaviour hubs. We have the brilliant Tom Bennett, who is our lead behaviour adviser, and his approach to behaviour in schools is absolutely superb. I am optimistic that we will have a good evaluation, but I am not sure why it has been delayed. It is certainly happening, and it will be published when it is ready.

The hubs system—we have maths hubs, English hubs, computing hubs and behaviour hubs, and we are just starting a new set of foreign language hubs—is a brilliant way of taking the best practice in the school system that is already there and spreading it out. Those hubs are usually supported by a national centre of excellence to give them extra support. That is how you change a school system: it is about professionals themselves helping to spread that practice to other professionals.

Q201 Mohammad Yasin: Can you do some research and tell us why the interim evaluation report is delayed, please?

Nick Gibb: I will happily write to the Committee about that, yes. I am not sure why.

Q202 Anna Firth: This follows on from what I was saying earlier—that we have heard there is not enough support available to schools to help them to improve following a negative inspection judgment. What support is available to schools, and are there any plans to increase that? The reason



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I ask is that this may well be a key factor in the teaching profession—encountering the obvious negativity, which one can well understand, that teachers on the ground may feel following that inspection framework judgment.

Nick Gibb: We have a huge number of school improvement programmes, and indeed a huge amount of CPD for teachers. We have created the golden thread based on evidence of best practice in pedagogy and best practice in curriculum, which starts in initial teacher training and goes through to their early career—the first two years of a teacher’s career—and then the national professional qualifications. We have all that, which will help teachers to improve their own practice and which gives them the letters after their name and so on.

We also have all the hubs we have been talking about. Help and support from those hubs will be available to schools graded “requires improvement”. We have the trust and school improvement offer as well, which is 10 days of support to those schools from a trust that has a really good track record of school improvement. There is a huge amount that we are doing to improve schools.

Q203 **Anna Firth:** Thank you for that. I suppose there are two questions that arise from it. First, are you confident that all schools fully understand the extent of help available? Secondly, do you have a good evidence base to show that this school improvement is having the impact that you want it to have?

Nick Gibb: The teaching school hubs that we have established around the country are often a fulcrum for various school improvement activities. Everybody knows who their local teaching school hub is.

I think there is always room for improving our school improvement system, but we are always seeking the best, looking at the best schools in the country and seeking to spread that best practice across the system.

Q204 **Anna Firth:** That is a wonderful way of putting it—that there is always room to improve an improvement system. So where is that room to improve the improvement system?

Nick Gibb: It is about understanding what is causing poor performance; I have spent 10 years or more in this job, and that is what interests me most. Why was maths a problem in teaching? We looked to Singapore and Shanghai, and we changed our curriculum and had teacher exchanges. We set up maths hubs to spread what is called the mastery approach to teaching maths—step by step and slowly, slowly. All that is part of the school improvement programme. If you are a school that is RI or “inadequate”, particularly because of its mathematics teaching, there is a whole raft of very experienced teachers and senior leaders in our system who will be available to help improve the practice in that school.

Q205 **Anna Firth:** You say you want to go further, but what does that look like?

Nick Gibb: If other issues emerge, as they always do, we need to understand the causes of that underperformance. For instance, why is it



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that music in a particular school is not where it should be? We do have music hubs, but we could look at other issues of how to improve music. For example, we have produced the national model music curriculum and we have a national plan for music education. All these are designed to improve the system.

What I would say about general education policy with regard to schools is that there is no one lever that you pull and, hey presto, it's done. It is a combination of understanding the causes of the issue: "Why was reading not properly taught before we introduced all the phonics stuff? What about history?", and so on. If you understand what the cause of the problem is, you can address it through a whole raft of means. It could be teacher training; it could be changing the national curriculum; it could be the curriculum hubs that we have to spread best practice.

That was a long and cumbersome answer. Juliet might want to add some clarity.

Juliet Chua: It is worth saying that regional directors will, within an area, be able both to provide an assessment and to work with a school or a trust on particular areas where they might want support—either through self-referral or if it is identified through an Ofsted judgment. The Minister has described a school and trust improvement offer, essentially, which is available. State schools are eligible for the curriculum-specific additional support that the Minister has been describing.

Essentially, school improvement is about a system, and about access to the very best practice across that system to draw it into a school appropriately. That tailored offer of the 10 days of support from within the system, or indeed moving into a trust partnership, can really be a powerful mechanism for addressing the different aspects and individual school needs to be able to improve.

Q206 **Anna Firth:** But are you confident that all of this improvement is having the desired impact? Do you have the evidence to back that up?

Juliet Chua: At a system level, we look internationally and see the significant improvements that have been made in our reading. If you look across the system, that is a massive step forward in terms of the improvement of our system. If you look at the shift from 68% "good" and "outstanding" to 88%, those are two indicators at a performance level of improvement overall across the system.

Q207 **Anna Firth:** Sorry to press you on this, but because it is public money, I just want to be clear. The answer may be yes, which is absolutely fine. Are you confident that the improvements we have seen can be tracked back to these improvements you are talking about, not other curriculum differences?

Nick Gibb: As I say, there is a whole raft of things we are doing. It is not about whether you can pinpoint one over another as the cause of the improvement; it is the combination of all those things that we are doing.



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One thing we have not touched on is the “inadequate” Ofsted judgment and what happens with the directive academy order. If it is a maintained school, it will become an academy. We know that seven out of 10 sponsored academies—the ones that became academies not out of choice, but because the standards were not high enough—are now graded “good”, whereas previously, generally speaking, they were not. The academisation process, in which a school is taken under the oversight of a strong multi-academy trust, is itself having an improvement process that we know is successful.

Q208 Chair: You have said a lot about the different mechanisms that are available for school improvement, and leadership plays a key role in that. One of the areas you have not touched on much, and which I think Amanda mentioned earlier, is the role of NLEs—national leaders of education. We are doing a separate piece of work on retention and the retention challenge. We hear a lot from the NAHT and other organisations about retention concerns. I have to say, in my experience, a number of NLEs that I know have recently retired. How is the picture in terms of the supply and engagement of those senior leaders who are able to support other schools? Are you confident that the Department has access to enough breadth of leadership talent who are still engaged in education to provide that support?

Nick Gibb: We have a brilliant teaching workforce and a brilliant headteaching workforce in our country. I think that the pay levels have increased significantly at all levels, but particularly at senior levels, in our system. We are doing a huge amount in terms of retention generally, not just via this but throughout the teaching profession. We do not want people leaving the profession in the first year or first five years to the degree that they have been doing. That is really what the early career framework is about; it is about mentoring and support, so that we are not throwing young people in at the deep end and expecting them to be fully fledged teachers, without the support of a mentor and all the support you would routinely expect in other professions. That is what we have introduced.

Q209 Chair: But at the other end of the scale, in terms of those leaders and particularly the experienced leaders who might be feeding into the national leaders of education programme?

Juliet Chua: On the golden thread that the Minister described, we need to continue to make interventions at each stage to continue to build out the pipeline of future leaders. The work that has been going on on NPQs at each stage to build the next generation of senior leaders who will be able to play those roles is critical. Obviously, we are investing in a MAT chief exec development programme to be able to build out the next generation in that context, as well as the investment in the National Institute of Teaching, to make sure that we have really strong leadership right across the system.

Nick Gibb: It is a good time to be a leader in our system. Because of the multi-academy trust system, if you have either a medium-sized or large



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multi-academy trust, it can afford to promote people fairly young to head of school, because they have that infrastructure above them for a difficult issue with the trade union or with staffing at a particular school that requires experience. There will be somebody above them in the trust to help them with that experience.

The other thing about the current system is that if you have been a head of school, you can then become an executive principal, an executive head, and so on. There is scope to go beyond being the head of a school now. I think the opportunities for ambitious, able people to come into teaching have never been better. The prospects for a well-rewarded, interesting and demanding professional career are greater now than they have ever been. There are many things that I am quite proud of since 2010, but one of them is that we have allowed teachers to have their own practices, which you could never have done, really, unless you set up a private school. There are now over 600 free schools, most of which were set up by groups of teachers. If you look at the top of the performance table, it is dominated by free schools that have been established. This is what real professional autonomy is about, and we have liberated the profession to do this. It is an exciting time to come into teaching, and I would say to any ambitious young graduate who is thinking about what to do that teaching is something they should consider.

Chair: I heard a lot about the pipeline there, what a great job it is, and about the great excitement. What I did not necessarily hear so much about was retention. I will just leave that comment there, because I do think that that is really important when it comes to leadership, as well as when it comes to specialist teachers in the classroom.

Q210 Nick Fletcher: My question is about safeguarding. You would not expect me to speak about safeguarding without speaking about RSHE materials that are coming into our schools, with issues around toilet times for kids. The issue of third-party literature coming into our schools is extremely concerning. I know that the Secretary of State wrote to schools about this and to the publishers, but it is still happening, and it is something that I am deeply concerned about. It has been suggested that safeguarding be taken out of the Ofsted inspection and dealt with separately. With safeguarding being such a huge issue, and an issue that we seem to be creating ourselves as well, do you think it would be better for that to be taken out and looked at separately?

Nick Gibb: I don't. On the issue of the materials, we are, as you know, revising the RSHE guidance to ensure that it is absolutely crystal clear about the age-appropriateness of teaching materials, and it will be absolutely crystal clear that parents have a right to see RSHE teaching materials. They cannot veto it, but they have a right to see it, and schools should be open and transparent about that material. Copyright will never be an issue that prevents them from doing that, and we have made that very clear.

In terms of safeguarding, I do not think that it should be separate. It is absolutely a key issue for schools, and schools know that. Some 98.7% of



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schools have been found by Ofsted to have effective safeguarding policies. Also, if you separate it out into another body, some of these safeguarding issues will be identified when an inspector is looking at the general curriculum and at general teaching. You will have missed all that exposure to the activities of the school if you separate it out to another agency that just looked at safeguarding. I think it is right for Ofsted to conduct this safeguarding part of the school judgment.

Q211 Nick Fletcher: I have seen so many RSHE materials that are readily available to buy but are completely age-inappropriate. What are you doing about that?

Nick Gibb: The RSHE guidance will provide more clarity. I think it is pretty clear already, but because of the concerns that you and others have raised about that material, we want to make sure that the guidance is even clearer and stronger about when certain issues should be taught, that the materials used in that teaching are age-appropriate and suitable, and that parents have a right to see it.

Q212 Nick Fletcher: I want to press a bit further on this. Obviously, some of the material has already been published and is already in the schools. When the guidance comes out and the new material, which is age-appropriate, is provided to these schools, are you going to make sure that the old material is taken out of circulation in the schools? If it is not, would that be a breach under safeguarding? I think it should be, because there is material in these schools now that is wholly inappropriate for children to see. It is so, so bad. It is not just a case of needing to revise and update it; we need to make sure that that material is taken out of schools with immediate effect.

Nick Gibb: Don't forget: we have 24,000 schools, so, with the best will in the world, I and x thousand civil servants are not going to go around and pick that material up. The procedure for parents who are concerned about the materials is to complain to the school. Every school has a public complaints procedure. At the end of that process, if they are still dissatisfied with the approach, it can be escalated to the complaints unit in the Department, and we will deal with it. The kind of action that you are talking about can then be taken, but it is better for that to be dealt with at a school level in the first instance.

My experience of headteachers and teachers is that they want to do the best. Sometimes schools resort to those kinds of materials because RSHE is a challenging area to teach. We have provided very detailed teaching modules for each of the more sensitive areas to try to support teachers, but inevitably teachers will look on the internet, will see what they think is a respectable organisation and will rely on it. What we are saying is: the fact that you are relying on an external third party does not take away your responsibility for the quality and age-appropriateness of that material, nor does it take away your responsibility to let parents see it.

The other issue is Oak National Academy. It is a teacher-led, arm's length body that produces really high-quality teaching materials across the



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curriculum. The next procurement from it will be RSHE materials. Unfortunately, there is a long lead time for that to be ready, but it will be material that they will get from schools that do this well. It will be carefully monitored and quality-assured by Oak before it is made available to schools.

Q213 Nick Fletcher: That is good to hear. I hope that, once that has all come through, schools will be forced to make sure that they are using the proper literature that is age-appropriate. In June, you said that these schools would be revisited within three months. If they are still using inappropriate literature or they still have safeguarding issues, are you going to put an academy order on them?

Nick Gibb: That will depend on the outcome of that inspection. If inspectors go back three months later and the school has assured them that they have sorted out all the safeguarding issues but Ofsted discovers that they have not, the “requires improvement” will not be changed—it may even trigger another full inspection. But two RIs in a row will lead to major intervention by the Department.

Q214 Chair: One aspect we have not touched on yet is the inspection of MATs. Ofsted has been calling for wider powers for inspection of MATs over a number of years. The incoming chief inspector suggested that it is “inevitable” that trusts will be inspected. What work has the Department been doing to assess the feasibility and practicalities of inspecting MATs, and when does it intend to give powers to Ofsted to do that?

Nick Gibb: This is a difficult issue because the whole academy landscape is evolving and it is new. We think it has been around for a while, but in the scale of things it really has not. When we came into office in 2010, there were 200 academies. Now, 80% of secondary schools and 40% of primaries are academies. The MAT concept—the multi-academy trust, where academies work together under an overarching trust—is relatively new and evolving. The back office, if you like, or the support mechanism for that trust and its governance is also evolving. There is some really good practice around the country. I was a trustee myself of a major multi-academy trust when I was not a Minister—in that short period of outrage—and I saw some really good practice. Actually, I was supported by Martyn Oliver. The way he runs his trust, Outwood, is superb. To say that Ofsted should go out and inspect MATs—

Chair: As he does.

Nick Gibb: You have to know how a MAT should be run. At the moment, that is still evolving. The danger of Ofsted going in and saying, “You should have this, this and this,” is that it may not be inspecting against best practice. All the schools within a MAT, of course, are being inspected. We have these things called MATSEs—MAT summary evaluations—where all the schools in a MAT are looked at. That really matters. We should be nurturing what is in the back office and providing advice to multi-academy trusts about what you should have: a director of primary, a director of

secondary, compliance, a really good finance director—all those things. Also, it all depends on the size of the MAT.

The short answer to your question is that I would not recommend it at the moment, because the system is still evolving.

Q215 Chair: The Committee may demur from that opinion, I have to say. MATs are forming an increasingly important part of the system. If the schools White Paper were followed through, they would become the system and they play a key role in school improvement. We have heard some concerning evidence as part of this inquiry that it is very difficult for inspectors to maintain a level playing field between schools when MATs are able to bring in resource and support for schools for inspection that other organisations are not necessarily able to. All that points to an increasingly important role for the accountability of MATs, which surely the Department in its interrelationship with the inspectorate needs to consider.

Nick Gibb: Ultimately, the MAT is held to account by the quality of the schools under its trust. Those multi-academy trusts also have regular meetings with the regional directors for the quality of education. They are overseen by the ESFA for the financial probity and solidity of their financial position.

Q216 Chair: They may well be working across different regions, of course, so they are not necessarily accountable to a specific regional director.

Nick Gibb: Also true, but the system will evolve, so we will have— I thought we had one regional director responsible for a particular MAT where they are cross-regional, but maybe Juliet can confirm.

Juliet Chua: We can take an overview of a MAT within the regions group. However, the point is that MATs are subject to rigorous accountability requirements for their financial performance and the educational performance of the individual schools through Ofsted, as well as through the relationship with the RDs in terms of their overall performance. Clearly, any change to that would require looking again at those requirements. We are clear that there is very strong accountability for MATs through those existing mechanisms.

Q217 Chair: I think that answers the questions we have as a Committee. Is there anything that you would like to add for our consideration as we consider recommendations to an incoming HMCI? Is there anything that we have not covered in this session that you would like to add, given your considerable experience in the school standards role?

Nick Gibb: I thought this was going to be Amanda's last, but you are now saying you may inflict another one on her.

Chair: We may give her a further opportunity.

Nick Gibb: I would pay tribute to her for her period as chief inspector. She has really brought about some critical changes to the functioning of Ofsted, particularly the education inspection framework, which has been



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positively received. I believe it has focused the minds of leaders in our school system on the curriculum. Frankly, the curriculum is so important in the school system, and there is a much greater focus now on curriculum because of the change that Amanda brought about with the EIF.

The other thing I would say about Amanda is that during the pandemic, when Ofsted inspections ceased, she was able to deploy her resources to help the education system deal with the pandemic. That was hugely important, as was the flexibility and energy that came about during that period. I would just like to say thank you to Amanda Spielman for her work as chief inspector, and I wish Sir Martyn Oliver every success. I have had one meeting with him since he was appointed, and I am very optimistic that he is going to be an equally successful chief inspector of Ofsted in the years ahead.

Chair: I am grateful for that contribution. Thank you, Minister.