

Written Evidence from Place2Be

Introduction

Place2Be is a children's mental health charity with nearly 30 years' experience working with pupils, families and staff in UK schools. We support school communities and facilitate a 'whole school approach' to mental health. We currently provide an embedded mental health service in almost 500 primary, secondary and high schools, supporting a school community of around 243,000 children and young people. We also provide expert mental health training to school leaders and staff to build their knowledge and understanding of mental health and wellbeing.

It is upon this experience that we base our submission to this inquiry.

Summary findings

- We believe the purpose of Ofsted inspections should be to assess how effectively a school is developing and educating its student population, preparing them in a holistic way for their future lives. This includes supporting and enabling their wellbeing, building resilience, and equipping them with the life skills needed to thrive. This is the basis of a *whole school approach* to mental health. We recommend that Ofsted works with a positive and constructive approach with schools to validate and help them to improve.
- Ofsted inspections place a significant amount of strain on schools, both on workload and wellbeing. This is exacerbated by several factors, including the narrow window given to prepare, the impact of Ofsted grades on the school's and school leadership's future, and the current punitive nature of inspections.
- The nature of Ofsted inspections places the burden of responsibility for the school's success on the school leader. As a result, we have heard that leaders feel incompetent, that they have personally failed and feel driven out or forced to leave the profession because of this pressure.
- Schools do not currently receive the necessary guidance or support in between inspections to help improve their outcome. Schools could benefit from sharing best practice and peer learning, with Ofsted facilitating a professional dialogue. We would advocate this more collaborative approach, as opposed to the competitive nature of the inspection framework in its current guise.

Recommendations

- The role of Ofsted should be reformed to be the accountability body that can assess how effectively a school is meeting the needs of its pupils holistically.
- Ofsted's inspection framework should be extended to include an explicit measurement of student and staff wellbeing and 'soft skills' gained by pupils outside of academic attainment. Schools can help collect this data independently in advance of inspections.
- School leaders and staff should be given greater time and notice to prepare for the inspection, with clearer understanding of what will be assessed. This notice should be reasonable. Based on feedback from our school network, we would suggest approximately one school week to allow the staff to appropriately prepare – however schools should be confident in collecting and preparing data on student satisfaction and the effectiveness of implementing the whole school approach *in advance* of inspections.

- Schools should receive more support in between inspections, including guidance on areas to improve, and more frequent contact with Ofsted to measure progress collaboratively. Schools should also be given resources to enable them to put these improvements into place.
- The wellbeing of school staff needs greater consideration within the school system and culture. They should be better equipped with training and/or mental health and wellbeing resource to support them in their roles and further develop their own resilience throughout the school year. School leaders and governors have a key role to play in delivering this.
- A whole school approach is evidenced and recommended in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidance 'Social, emotional and mental wellbeing in primary and secondary education' (NG223). This sets out the best practice for schools and education settings to support their pupils. We recommend that Ofsted plays a key role in encouraging the implementation of this NICE Guidance in schools.

Issues to consider.

1. The usefulness of Ofsted inspections and inspection reports, and whether inspections are carried out in sufficient depth to meet the expectations of schools, governors and parents.

Ofsted inspections in their current form have several elements that do not allow an effective evaluation of the entirety of a school's culture, environment or ethos.

The one-to-two-day notice given to staff and leaders does not give sufficient time to appropriately prepare for an inspection, and schools do not feel confident in understanding what will be required of them. Clear guidance and longer notice to prepare would allow schools to compile more in-depth evidence of the school's values and achievements.

Whilst we recognise that Ofsted needs to see the school on an average day, the intense stress an inspection causes means teaching staff do not feel equipped to show their normal work under these conditions.

This largely ties into the punitive nature of inspections, where HMIs are looking for faults rather than allowing the school to demonstrate their successes. If schools felt more confident that Ofsted was there to support, not penalise them, they may feel more confident to discuss areas they feel they need to improve, therefore allowing a more open and honest conversation, in which Ofsted could give the necessary advice and guidance. This would be more fruitful in helping the school to improve.

Staff have also expressed that inspections feel largely formulaic, with a one-size-fits-all approach to assessment that focuses on academic attainment and other quantitative data around attendance and behaviour. This fails to account for pupils who have skills and strengths in areas outside of traditional academic attainment, as well as the effectiveness of a school in building a positive culture and enjoyment.

Recommendations:

We believe the core function of a school should be to nurture the students into independent, engaged and resilient young adults in preparation for their future. As such, the role of Ofsted as an accountability body should be to assess the effectiveness of a school in delivering this purpose. However, in its current

framework, the inspections do not sufficiently hold a school to account for creating a positive culture and there is an overreliance on academic attainment.

To meet this proposed core function, a school should provide effective mental health support, to help pupil wellbeing and assist with removing barriers to learning. Place2Be [research](#) has found that after having counselling, students who were previously struggling with mental health challenges, are keeping pace academically with their peers.

To support the entirety of a child's development, we advocate for a whole school approach to mental health. This allows for early intervention, helping schools to promote good mental health and wellbeing, build resilience, understand and identify mental health problems, enable children and young people to focus on learning and give them tools to cope with challenges throughout their lives.

A whole school approach is recommended in the NICE Guidance '[Social, emotional and mental wellbeing in primary and secondary education](#)' (NG223). This sets out the best practice for schools and education settings to support their pupils, however it is not compulsory to follow.

As such, we recommend that Ofsted plays a key role in overseeing the implementation of this NICE Guidance in schools. Ofsted should praise schools that do this well. Similarly, given the breadth of Ofsted's reach they could build collaboration across schools to share best practice in delivery of NG223, rather than fostering competition, as often happens currently.

2. The impact of Ofsted judgements on schools and pupils, and the adequacy of the support schools can access to enable them to improve following an Ofsted judgement.

The burden of inspections and responsibility for the outcome falls primarily on school leaders, most notably on Headteachers.

"Ofsted appears to have become the 'judge and jury' and hence 'executioner'; as its judgement holds immense sway over the careers of school staff and especially school leadership teams. After a 'bad' Ofsted, Headteachers can lose their jobs virtually overnight and this naturally sets up immense anxiety over inspections." - Place2Be Area Manager, London

Whilst an Ofsted report is available and published after the inspection, teachers felt that too much emphasis was given to the one-word grade, which is used by parents to judge the merits of the school. This creates a quasi-leaderboard in local areas without allowing for the nuance needed to show the categories where a school performed well.

Given schools are required to meet all the criteria in each category to receive the top grades, this is often unmanageable and means that 'one slip up' and schools are downgraded, risking the future of their success and leading to parents withdrawing from that school.

There are concerns that schools shape their provision and curriculum based purely on the Ofsted inspections framework, rather than the needs of their unique school populations. The prioritisation by schools of meeting Ofsted academic and behavioural standards can negatively affect pupils with alternative or additional skills or needs. For instance, it is commonly understood by the sector that there

is a concerning trend of schools intentionally ‘off-rolling’ pupils with additional support or behavioural needs, so they are not observed by the HMI and impact the school’s grade.

There are limited opportunities for specific, individual feedback after an inspection. Whereas the headteacher or school leaders may receive notes from the HMI around the reasoning for their judgement, they are prevented from sharing this with wider staff until the report is made public. This isolates the school leader who has the burden of actioning the improvements alone.

Recommendation:

Schools would benefit from more regular visits and clear advice on where best to allocate their resources to improve. This should focus on peer support and sharing best practice by Ofsted, who can use their vast breadth of knowledge.

3. The impact of Ofsted inspections on workload and wellbeing for teachers, school leaders, governors and pupils, specifically relating to workload required by the inspection process, and what measures are put in place to mitigate this.

Place2Be has heard from several former and current school staff about the negative effect of Ofsted inspections on their wellbeing. This affects not only school staff but also leaders and governors.

While we appreciate that inspections are designed to assess the school on an average day, the nature of this significantly adds to the workload required with minimal mitigating measures.

“Once you get that phone call letting you know Ofsted are coming, you’re at the school until midnight getting everything ready, preparing the right documents, notifying parents, choosing school staff and pupils to participate and getting them prepared to do so. Then you’re back in school at 5am the next morning to finish. This is on top of your day-to-day teaching or supervisions that you can’t let slip.” –

Former Headteacher

A lack of staffing, capacity and funding for schools can also exacerbate the stressful Ofsted Inspection period. The shortfall of specialist teaching staff means many staff are teaching subjects that sit outside of their expertise, thereby reducing the overall student experience and impacting the Ofsted grade. According to a report by [the Gatsby Charitable Foundation](#), 23% of teachers reported that some of their Year 11 GCSE cohort were taught by non-subject specialists, largely due to the staffing crisis.

Many school staff are also newly qualified or new to a particular school. According to [DfE data](#), the number of teacher vacancies posted by schools (an indicator of staff turnover) was 93% higher in the academic year up to February 2023 than at the same point in the year before the pandemic. This means that the staff who are being observed may not feel appropriately prepared to deliver a lesson that meets all the criteria required of them, further exacerbating the stress with a negative impact on their wellbeing as well as their leadership and delivery in the classroom.

Ofsted inspections also affect the workload of governors – which is already considerable and can exceed the normal expectations of a voluntary role. The nature of governing a school is often exclusive to certain demographics with more free time and expertise to invest in a voluntary capacity. The added

burden of work to be done during an inspection further excludes groups who may not have the capacity to commit to this, reducing the overall effectiveness of diversifying governance and leadership boards.

Recommendations:

Ofsted should consider bringing in longer periods between notification of an inspection occurring, extending the notice from one-to-two days to a school week. Schools should also be given advance notice of the specific documents that will be required of them, as well as any further information that could be useful to appropriately prepare for the inspection.

To reduce the workload and improve wellbeing during inspections, schools need to be better equipped throughout the whole school year to ensure teaching remains excellent and staff retention is upheld. A whole-school approach to mental health provision would also support creation of a work environment that supports school staff to manage their own wellbeing and develop greater resilience to deal with stressful events such as an Ofsted inspection. Place2Be runs two mental health training courses for school staff – [Senior Mental Health Leads](#) and the [Mental Health Champions](#) – Foundation programme. Over 17,000 teachers and school staff took part in the Foundation programme in 2022 – of which 93% said they felt the course had increased their capacity to lead a positive approach to mental health and wellbeing. The Senior Mental Health Leads programme also helps schools to develop a whole school approach, and the learning outcomes are aligned with the eight principles outlined by Public Health England (PHE) and the Department for Education (DfE) in their [Promoting children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing: A whole-school or college approach](#) publication.

A positive culture of wellbeing should be driven by school leadership and governors who can implement several measures to promote mental resilience and help a school to fulfil their commitment to nurturing the student population. The [National Governance Association](#) (NGA) have a guide on supporting staff wellbeing, which outlines some ways in which school leaders can build a supportive culture. We also recommend that schools have a dedicated governor with oversight for mental health policy and provision. Ideally, they would come from a mental health background, but with a responsibility to oversee mental health support and ensure it aptly benefits school populations.

4. The impact of the new Education Inspection Framework introduced in 2019.

Several school leaders told us that changes to the Inspections Framework have reduced the ability of schools to show their best, as HMIs do not gain a comprehensive view of the school, focusing too tightly on narrow categories.

Previous frameworks contained multiple different categories - such as ‘community cohesion’ which allowed for judgements on how well the school interacted with others in the area. This included involving parents and families and community events, showing the importance of a broad social network for the children and young people. These categories have now been streamlined, so schools are no longer able to demonstrate this as clearly.

Student and parent surveys in their *current form* are an ineffective tool to appropriately measure unique pupil experience and wellbeing and assess the effectiveness of a school in implementing a whole school approach. The responsibility for promoting these surveys lies with the school, meaning it adds to the

burden of preparation. Many parents may not have time or capacity to complete the survey, usually at very short notice, and while we support pupils having the autonomy to express their views towards school, there are concerns that it is unreliable to solely rely on this measure.

Recommendations:

We recommend that schools should independently assess student satisfaction, wellbeing and attitudes throughout the school year, and evaluate how effectively they are implementing the NG223 guidelines for a whole school approach. There are several means to do this. Place2Be works in partnership with [ImpactEd](#) – an organisation committed to supporting schools to evaluate their impact across various outcomes and interpret and learn from findings. The [Anna Freud](#) National Centre for Children and Families have also developed a toolkit for schools to use to assess pupil wellbeing. Place2Be, in collaboration with the Law Family Charitable Foundation has also commenced a three-year research study to investigate the whole school impact of embedded mental health support, through measuring pupil, school staff, parent, school-level indicators.

More thorough and rigorous self-assessment by schools throughout the school year will better equip schools to self-improve in advance of Ofsted inspections. They will also have a more comprehensive evidence-base to demonstrate their positive culture and show their achievements more tangibly outside of traditional and somewhat narrow data on attendance, grades, or behaviour.

Ofsted inspections can be used to assess the school-reported data and hold schools accountable for the ways in which they are supporting the entirety of the student's experience and embedding a whole school approach to mental wellbeing in line with the NG223 guidance.

It is important that reforms to the Inspection Framework do not add to the burden of schools to prepare for inspections, but instead incentivise schools to deliver for the students and build the necessary skills they need to become healthy, functioning, resilient adults.

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