

# Supporting Schools: how school inspection could be improved

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## School inspection

1. This paper is based on experience of around 150 Ofsted inspections of schools and training in United Learning<sup>1</sup> over a decade, including 23 this academic year, and on experience of many ISI inspections. While inevitably people's views of inspection are shaped by their own experience, we believe that no-one has been inspected more times than we have as a provider of education and training in this period and so this is the largest available sample of such direct experience.

## Principles of an inspection system

2. We should all acknowledge some important principles:
  - Accountability is not a necessary evil, but a **positive good**: we are all at our best when we feel accountable.
  - For there to be meaningful accountability in a large and highly devolved system, there should be a **transparent, consistent and reliable** way of informing evaluation of school performance: both parents and the taxpayer in general have a right to know how schools are doing.
  - Such a system must operate **independently** of schools, trusts, local authorities and Ministers.
  - Any reasonable approach to accountability in public services should be based on **firsthand knowledge and direct experience**, not just quantitative data.
3. These points of principle strongly make the case for something akin to our inspection system. A good inspection system can provide objective information to parents and taxpayers, protect the interests of children, identify and challenge poor quality provision and provide beneficial input to Heads, trusts and governors.
4. But for an inspection system to do this, it must fulfil some clear design principles. It should:
  - Put the interests of **children first**;
  - **Inform parents** about the quality of local schools;
  - Evaluate schools against **clear, publicly available criteria**, applied by unbiased **experienced people with appropriate expertise**;
  - **Complement published data and information**, scrutinising aspects which require a visit to the school;
  - Fit into a wider system of support and challenge so that it has **meaningful but proportionate consequences**; and
  - **Treat adults in schools fairly** and **command professional consent**.
5. These points of principle are developed further in the Annex to this paper. The current system meets some of the principles well but others less well.

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<sup>1</sup> United Learning is a national group of over 100 schools founded 130 years ago with 75,000 pupils and 12,000 staff, which aims to provide excellent education to children and young people across the country.

## **The inspection system does not command sufficient professional consent**

6. Perhaps critically, the inspection system is not currently commanding sufficient professional consent. Ofsted's own post-inspection feedback shows high levels of satisfaction immediately after an inspection and this is broadly mirrored in the most recent NAO examination of inspection. However, there is evidence of wider concern. For example, in the Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders (WLTL) study, 'pressure related to pupil outcomes or inspection' was the third highest reason given for considering leaving teaching in the next year<sup>2</sup>.
7. A lack of trust in the process of inspection and lack of faith in the outcome being fair seem to be the drivers of stress. These seem to relate mainly to perceptions and reports of what has happened to others, rather than individuals' own experiences. In the first wave of WLTL, only 18% of teachers/leaders agreed that 'the school inspection *regime* provides a fair assessment of school performance', whilst in a Teacher Tapp survey commissioned by Ofsted the same year, over 80% of teachers agreed that *their school's* latest inspection outcome was fair<sup>3</sup>. This mismatch between perception and experience may be partly the result of most teachers only experiencing an inspection every few years, but is an issue that needs to be addressed.
8. In United Learning, our scale, structure and the extensive support we provide to schools means that we are able to help Heads and staff prepare effectively for inspection and feel supported throughout the process. We help schools to be confident and reduce the uncertainty and importance of any one inspection. But not every school has this support: we should aspire to an inspection system where staff feel less negative, have more confidence and do not fear irrationality, a 'cliff edge' or the unjustified dismissal of hard-working and effective leaders.
9. This is partly the responsibility of Ofsted but what is being ignored in the current debate about inspection is that it is at least as much the responsibility of governing bodies, trusts, local authorities and government.

## **Governors, trusts and local authorities should change their behaviour**

10. School leaders are ultimately accountable to their school governing body or to their Trust Board. They are not accountable to government or to the inspectorate. Inspection may inform governors and trustees (and indeed local and national government) as well as parents, but inspectors cannot and do not hold schools to account, still less sack individuals.
11. More generally, inspectors cannot take any regulatory action in relation to schools and they are not school improvement agencies. They report the facts as observed, but they are not responsible for improving or intervening in schools – that is down to action by those working in and overseeing schools.
12. This is important because much of the controversy about inspection is really about the uses to which inspection is put and its place in a wider system of intervention. A two-day visit by other education professionals who then write up a report is not inherently a

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<sup>2</sup> [Working lives of teachers and leaders - wave 1: core report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/671112/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-1-core-report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [Ofsted survey of teachers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/671112/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-1-core-report.pdf)

frightening prospect – the difference between an Ofsted visit and any other visit of other professionals is the possibility of negative consequences. But those consequences are not in the hands of Ofsted.

13. In United Learning, no-one has been or will be sacked as a result of an Ofsted judgement. The leadership of the Group and school share responsibility for understanding how well a school is doing, discussing that openly and honestly, and agreeing the actions and support needed. If Ofsted ever identified something significant we had missed, then the responsibility for that would be collective – we as leaders in the trust should examine ourselves not scapegoat an individual school leader.
14. Every governing body and trust should take this approach. They should make sure that their own evaluations are sharp enough, and their own dialogue with leaders open and honest enough, to eliminate Ofsted surprises (except if Ofsted is itself wrong). With that in place, every governing body and trust could make the same guarantee to its staff as we do in United Learning: that no-one will be sacked because of an Ofsted report. That would sharply reduce the fear of Ofsted and greatly improve the quality of governance in the system.
15. Of course, it is also true that government uses Ofsted reports to trigger intervention in schools which are judged inadequate. It is right – indeed, essential – that there should be a way of identifying systematically schools which are letting children down so that they can be improved rapidly.
16. It isn't obvious that there is a better way of doing that identification than through systematic inspection of all schools – a system based only on data, for example, would have more 'false negative' judgements (schools doing better than results would suggest) and more 'false positive' judgements (critical failures – e.g. in safeguarding – which cannot be picked up by data alone).
17. It is also right that there should be a way of securing rapid change in a school which is seriously letting children down. The default setting here – that there should be a change of *governance* rather than leadership – seems correct. If a governing authority has overseen a serious collapse in any organisation, there should be change; new governance should then determine a new direction. However, this need not be entirely automatic: if a problem has been identified internally and is being addressed at the time of an external inspection, then there should be scope for judgement to be exercised as to whether external intervention is required.
18. Critically, everyone responsible for governance of schools – governing bodies, trusts and local authorities – should recognise that we play a part in the inspection system and in creating 'fear of Ofsted'. Heads are not dismissed by Ofsted, but by governance – so an overt change in the behaviour when they respond to Ofsted reports of those responsible for governance, well communicated, is the first and most important change that needs to be made.

### **We should avoid an excessive 'pendulum swing' and retain what is good**

19. Beyond this, the current narrative about inspection has a disproportionate sense that 'Ofsted is broken'. In our experience this isn't true. There are things that can be improved, which we set out below, but also some significant strengths which we need to keep:

20. First, **focus on children, their achievement and progress**. The key reason that inspection exists is to examine whether children are getting a good deal or not. Children are the most vulnerable people in the system, and have little voice if not well served.
21. There is a disproportionate sense in the current debate that Ofsted is a ‘box-ticking’ exercise, overly focused on compliance, process or preconceived ideas or only a ‘snapshot on the day’. None of these are accurate. Inspections do a decent job of hearing from a lot of children, teachers and parents, looking at work in books which has been completed over weeks or months and establishing whether children are happy, educated and well served.
22. The issues highlighted in negative Ofsted reports are almost always unhappy or unsafe children, the needs of vulnerable children not being met and/or generally poor educational provision. Often these reports also identify that staff have not been getting the support they need either. But the key issues driving judgements are the needs of children.
23. Second, **broad accuracy**. It is very unusual indeed to get a completely rogue Ofsted judgement. We have had two inspection results in a decade (less than 2%) where we thought the overall judgement was plain wrong (i.e. not ‘on the cusp’). (Though this is serious where it happens, and we return to this below.)
24. Where we have taken on struggling schools which have subsequently had much better Ofsted judgements, this reflects genuine, significant improvement for children: places where they are now safe, happy and able to learn in lessons free from disruption. A jump in Ofsted grade in a school which has never been judged ‘good’ is celebrated in school as an external validation, but only because it genuinely reflects a materially better experience, better outcomes, and better life chances for the children.
25. That is not to say that there is complete consistency – there isn’t, and we return to this below as well – but we have never had a case, for example, where we judged a school to be strongly good which wasn’t judged at least good by Ofsted. In other words, points of difference and inconsistency are narrower than this in our experience. In sub-judgements, it is more common in our view that Ofsted are over- rather than under-generous.
26. It is natural and understandable that cases where there seems to have been a serious injustice hit the headlines. But there is a risk that this creates a wider fear which is not justified by the reality of most inspections, which are conducted professionally and reach reasonable conclusions.
27. Third, **the framework** as a whole is the best we have had in recent years. It is coherent, conceptually sound and rooted in evidence about what leads to good education and outcomes. In starting from a school’s intentions, it is as un-prescriptive as is reasonable in a public service as to what those intentions should be; and it takes seriously the need to look at aspects of provision which cannot be assessed through data alone.
28. There are aspects of the implementation of the framework, especially in primary schools, which should be improved; there has at times been insufficient focus on outcomes achieved; and there is not enough examination of provision beyond the classroom. But the fundamentals are sound.
29. Fourth, the **importance of safeguarding**. Schools’ first priority is to keep children safe and it is the most significant form of inadequacy if they are not doing so. Safeguarding needs to

be examined through inspection, because data alone cannot tell us whether children are safe.

30. There is a confused debate about this issue at present. Some say that safeguarding needs a separate grade or should be inspected more frequently. Some say that it is over-emphasised as a 'limiting grade' such that inadequate safeguarding means an overall 'inadequate' judgement.
31. There is also a narrative that the assessment of safeguarding is 'box-ticking', which is not accurate. It seems that this criticism is about detailed scrutiny of DBS checks on the Single Central Record especially: but we should remember that the DBS system is a genuinely lifesaving process, introduced after the death of two young girls. We have never come across a school being judged inadequate because of an administrative error with no substantive effect, but if that does happen, then it should clearly change.
32. Fifth, **clarity of conclusions**. Inspection needs to provide information to parents and the public in a way that is clear and useful. It is possible to make judgements about schools – about standards of behaviour, about the personal development of children, about a school's climate and culture, its quality of education and so on. Inspection is supposed to make judgements about quality – and it is right that people are told clearly what those judgements are, without their becoming obscure, coded or only capable of interpretation by those in the know. Reports currently do a sound job of recording and reporting the judgements made in a way that is clear.
33. In our experience, overall summary judgements are meaningful, and the current categories reflect meaningful differences between schools. The system is not perfect: the replacement of 'satisfactory' by 'requires improvement' was supposed to represent a raising of the bar. In practice, it has been a lowering of the bar for a school to be judged 'good', with what would once have been the top end of 'satisfactory' being judged good. The 'good' judgement now encompasses too wide a spectrum of performance in including three quarters of all schools.

### **The inspection system can support school improvement better**

34. We need to take steps to reduce the level of fear about Ofsted. As set out above, fear arises in large part from the potential consequences of inspection, but these are not in Ofsted's control: Ofsted does not sack Heads. There is much talk of a 'high-stakes' inspection system, but the 'stakes' are largely the result of policy choices by government and operational decisions taken by those responsible for schools. We could have the same *process* of inspection with greatly reduced stakes, by making different choices about the consequences of inspection and the uses of inspection outcomes.
35. So first, we must **collectively reduce the emphasis we place on Ofsted**, as described above. Every governing body, Trust Board and local authority can and should commit to knowing their school or schools well enough that Ofsted will not identify unexpected problems during an inspection – and that they will never therefore remove a leader on the basis of an inspection.

36. Likewise, as argued elsewhere<sup>4</sup>, those responsible for schools – government, trusts, local authorities – need collectively to rebuild a high challenge, high support infrastructure for school improvement, so that the level of understanding of schools, challenge and support provided in the best Trusts and authorities is what all schools experience. Inspection can then take its rightful place, externally validating daily judgements being made independently by those who know the school best, and providing useful information to inform decision making, without being distorted by carrying more weight than it is designed to bear.
37. Second, **meaningfully improve the complaints process**. In our experience, as set out above, clear inaccuracy of judgement is very rare; poor conduct by inspectors equally so. The very large majority of inspections are carried out professionally and courteously and reach fair conclusions. But the rare cases are serious when they happen – and disproportionately affect perceptions. So to avoid these creating fear or anxiety, there must be effective redress and transparency about this.
38. Our own experience of complaining about an unsatisfactory inspection was itself highly unsatisfactory and felt like a ‘closing of ranks’. There was no engagement with us as complainants until we received a letter explaining that the evidence (provided by the person we were complaining about) had been reviewed and found to be sound. This isn’t a sound way to investigate complaints and Ofsted has already committed itself to change.
39. The best way to eliminate the fear of ‘rogue judgements’ is to find ways to demonstrate publicly that there is real and significant change in the complaints process. There must be clear independence in the process, meaningful redress if appropriate, transparency throughout and clear evidence that a non-trivial proportion of complaints lead to change.
40. Next, there needs to be action to improve the level of consistency of inspection. There are two factors which in our experience make it more likely that the process is less good or the judgements less sound: the first is inexperienced inspectors; the second is short inspections. Both of these have arisen as a direct result of budget cuts to Ofsted.
41. So third, **set higher minimum expectations of inspector experience and seniority**. Ofsted should aspire to ensure that they recruit only high-performing Heads, experienced deputy Heads or similarly experienced and senior staff as HMI and that those leading inspections have significant experience of inspecting in the same type of setting. Before leading inspections, they should have a wide experience of inspecting a good number of similar settings.
42. There are examples of HMI appointed with only a short period of working in school at middle leader/Assistant Principal level and of lead inspectors who have very limited experience of inspection either at all or of the type they are inspecting. However capable these individuals are, the sorts of judgements they are asked to make are essentially comparative and deliberative and require a depth of experience.
43. A lack of experience is a factor in all the examples we have seen of questionable judgments or less than ideal conduct (often seemingly the result of insecurity). To attract people with the right level of seniority – especially strong secondary Heads and Deputies – Ofsted needs to be prepared to pay inspectors more.

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<sup>4</sup> [Three core principles to make better education policy \(schoolsweek.co.uk\)](http://schoolsweek.co.uk)

44. Fourth, move to **longer or better resourced inspections** and the **abolition of the ungraded 'section 8' style of inspection**. The days of two week inspections with large teams are well behind us and in the main not missed. However, there is too little time and resource on a large number of inspections.
45. The only reason for the current model of s8 ungraded inspection is to save money. But the effect is that inspection disproportionately loses value. Underexperienced inspectors with too little resource to gather large amounts of evidence tend to default to the least controversial-seeming or difficult judgement. Insufficient evidence is gathered to provide meaningful insight.
46. Fifth, therefore, government needs to **increase the resources available to Ofsted** for school inspection. Ofsted is under-resourced through successive cuts to its budget. It is politically easy to cut Ofsted's budget compared to other education spending. Conversely, it is hard to protect resources for the inspectorate when they are being cut elsewhere.
47. This has been a false economy, though. Inspection has a disproportionate impact on the standards achieved in schools and the cuts have diminished the value of inspection much more than its costs. The inspectorate spends less than 0.1% of the more than £50bn school budget on school inspection but the leverage of this expenditure on standards is very high.
48. Putting more money into school inspection may seem a paradoxical choice at a time of concern about Ofsted and fiscal constraints on government. But improving inspection requires resource. If better inspections reduce fear on the one hand and improve information, supporting better school improvement on the other, then that additional resource is a high priority.
49. Ofsted spends only around £30m directly on school inspection, so even a 50% increase in this would have minimal impact on the resources available to schools. It would allow Ofsted to pay enough to attract enough people with the right experience; to increase the number of inspector days enough to ensure inspections are valid; and shorten what are currently long, exhausting inspection days, benefiting both leaders in schools being inspected and the appeal of being an inspector, especially to serving Heads.
50. Sixth, **simplify primary school inspections** – which are more demanding and anxiety-provoking than they need to be. The current methodology of curriculum deep dives is basically sound in secondary schools but can be problematic for primary schools. A subject co-ordinator in some subjects in a primary school may be a fairly new teacher who did not design the subject curriculum, whose role is more administrative than strategic and who does not have much allocated time for the role. It is neither fair to individuals nor a sound way of judging a subject in a school to put a spotlight on subject co-ordinators in primary schools as if they were a Head of Department in a secondary school.
51. Seventh, **avoid using Ofsted as an 'enforcer' of policy**, which undermines its independence, and **maintain a consistent framework**. Ofsted's job of informing parents as to how well their children are being educated should not be distorted by including in the inspection framework judgements about how well a school is implementing current government policy programmes or priorities.



52. For example: it is reasonable for Ofsted to report on how good PE and sport is in a school, but having them report on a school's implementation of the government 'sport premium' is distorting. Expecting Ofsted to report on the quality of a school's academic curriculum is obviously desirable; to have judgements affected by a school's implementation of a national 90% EBacc target is distorting. If children aren't making progress because they're not being taught enough, that is obviously an issue, but crowbarring into the inspection framework the government's current target for the length of the school day is distorting.
53. Ofsted should commit to a consistent framework and inspection handbook where there is a clear presumption against change and a very high bar to get over before change is made; government should commit to the same thing and to not inserting its own current priorities from year to year. This would serve the interests of schools and inspectors in reducing stress and uncertainty. Schools and teachers could start to expect that the criteria and experience they face in the next inspection will be broadly the same as on the previous occasion. This will start to build confidence and reduce fear of being 'caught out'.
54. There are also three key areas where we expect a new government to introduce change: in the following sections, we set out some key considerations for successful implementation of these changes.

#### **'Single word judgements'**

55. There is currently strong concern about the use of the 'four grade' Ofsted scale (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement and Inadequate). Around 90% of schools are good or outstanding and only 2% inadequate – around three quarters of schools are judged 'good', making this a particularly broad category; and in general the 'grade boundaries' are not stable over time. Nonetheless, our view is that these headline categories are meaningful and do communicate useful information.
56. It is of course possible to make reports clear without a single overall judgement. In the past, the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) had a three judgement system – assessing compliance (met or not met), achievement (on a 4 grade scale) and personal development (on a 4 grade scale). This was clear enough. However, the ISI's current approach shows that purely narrative reports are far from satisfactory. It is extremely difficult to discern school quality from the new style ISI reports, judgements are unclear even to professionals and parents would find it more or less impossible to compare the quality of two schools on a consistent basis.
57. In our view, if there is to be a change to the current 'four box system', then a new system must meet three key criteria:
  - There must be a clear way of identifying the schools which require urgent change. A very small proportion of schools are judged 'inadequate' – but children may be suffering a very poor experience in these schools. Inspection provides the one system-wide way of ensuring that there can be rapid improvement in them;
  - It should be clear which are the schools best able to lead change and support other schools. Our strongest schools have a responsibility to support others; and it is important that the strongest practice is identified on the basis of evidence rather than opinion; and

- In general, there must be clearly calibrated information for parents about the overall quality of their local schools. The current ISI model shows that a purely narrative model does not do this well. Parents should have access to the judgements made by inspectors without needing to 'de-code' a report.

### **Safeguarding – annual checks**

58. It is likely that an incoming government will look to introduce some form of annual assurance process for safeguarding. Given the resource pressures on schools, local authorities and Ofsted, we would argue against doing this by introducing additional separate annual external inspection of safeguarding. Within a finite Ofsted budget these would have to come at a further cost to the quality, frequency and length of main inspections.
59. An alternative approach to annual safeguarding checks would be to expect trusts and other governance authorities to carry out an appropriate level of safeguarding checking – and for this process to be validated periodically at the time of inspection. Within United Learning, we carry out our own safeguarding audits and support and it would be reasonable to expect this of all reasonable sized trusts (or of local authorities in the case of maintained schools) – and for schools to have records available for scrutiny at their next inspection. Schools could commission reviews and support from others if they do not have internal capacity.

### **The inspection of trusts**

60. Those responsible for running schools should be accountable, and we have argued elsewhere for stronger accountability of trusts as independent institutions, combined with much less process regulation. How best to 'inspect trusts' as part of this is an important question.
61. An answer to that question must begin from an understanding that a Trust is really only a group of schools with common governance. The best – and really only – measure of the performance of a Trust is the performance of the schools that comprise the Trust. If the schools that have been in a Trust for a long time are effective and improving and those joining the Trust improve quickly, then the Trust is strong. If the schools are weak and declining, then so is the Trust.
62. This understanding is critical. Inspection of a Trust is not like inspection of a local authority – which has separate statutory functions which can be independently assessed against separate criteria. A Trust does not have a separate set of functions to assess – the centre of a Trust should only be doing things for schools which are valuable in running and improving those schools. Functions should be centralised only if doing so adds value to the schools. There shouldn't be some other set of functions to inspect.
63. In that sense, inspection of all the schools of a trust is the inspection of that trust. That is: you haven't missed anything about what the trust does once you've inspected all its schools. However, there is a strong sense that in some sense Ofsted *is* missing something critical in not formally 'inspecting' and reporting on trusts. And that missing something is the strategic leadership of trusts: senior trust leaders may not even be part of many school inspections; and there is never any evaluation of the trust's overall impact.

64. It is reasonable and desirable for this gap to be filled. In order for this to be done effectively:
- The quality of a Trust and its strategic leadership needs to be assessed by reference to the quality and improvement of the schools which constitute the trust, and not in some other way. There are different types of trust and ways of working; there will be different ways to run an effective trust. The quality of school improvement work must be judged on how much the schools in the trust have in fact improved, not on, for example, what activity has taken place or what process has been followed. We do not want a framework that is homogenising in its effect.
  - There should be no less information for parents about local schools. By and large, it is of little interest to parents to learn that their school is run by a great trust. What they want to know is how good their local school is.
  - There needs to be clarity about the audience for reports and the purpose of inspection. School inspection reports have parents who might choose the school as the primary audience. Reports on Trusts might be mainly intended to inform schools which might choose to join a Trust and/or government – which might be looking both for a home for struggling schools and to make sure that they identify any struggling Trusts which need support or intervention. The purposes need to be made clear and inspection designed to fulfil the purposes – as with schools, inspection should add value over and above judgements which can be made directly from data.
  - There should be some efficiency gain from Trust inspection for schools, Trusts and Ofsted. If Trusts are evaluated by examining schools, the result should not be more inspection of schools. For example: if a Trust inspection evaluates the quality of education in a Trust, it will look at curriculum quality across a range of schools – some perhaps which have recently been inspected, others which receive an additional visit during the inspection. If as a result, the Trust inspection concludes that resources, support and challenge from the Trust are strong and providing significant assurance about these aspects of educational quality, then future inspections of the Trust's schools could take assurance from this and reduce scrutiny of this aspect of a school's work. Likewise, schools visited during the Trust inspection might benefit appropriately from the inspection evidence gathered during that visit.
65. In this paper, we have argued that some of the criticisms made of Ofsted might better be made of governance authorities or the government in relation to their use of inspection outcomes. The impact of inspection on teachers and leaders could be significantly ameliorated by changes to the behaviour of governance authorities. If we didn't have an inspection system, it would be desirable to invent something like it; and our current system is not fundamentally broken. However, there are important areas which can and should be improved and it is critical that there should be improved professional confidence in the inspectorate. Some of the improvements are in Ofsted's hands, but others rely on government action or indeed on changes in behaviour in the wider school system.

## Annex: Principles for an inspection system

In England's school system as it is with large numbers of independently governed schools, there is a strong case for a form of independent inspection or review to inform the evaluation of school performance:

- **Accountability** is a positive good, not a necessary evil. We are all at our best when we feel accountable. Everyone working in education should want the best for children and so want schools to be good. We should welcome and embrace accountability.
- For there to be meaningful accountability in a highly devolved system, there should be a **transparent, consistent and reliable** way of informing the evaluation of school performance. Schools provide the critical public service for most families and the one which most shapes the future of our society; schools spend some £50bn of taxpayers' money. Both parents and the taxpayer in general have a right to know how local schools and schools in general are doing. It is also in schools' interests in making the case for further taxpayer funding to be transparent about performance.
- As there are more than 20,000 schools in England, operating highly autonomously but providing a key service locally (and being sometimes the only local option) any realistic consistent system will need to operate **independently** of schools, trusts and government.
- Any reasonable approach to accountability in public services should be based on **firsthand knowledge and experience**, not only on quantitative data. Our national school performance dataset is important and useful in telling us how well children attend and how well they do in exams compared to in other schools. But data alone cannot tell us whether children are safe and cared for in a culture and climate of belonging; whether a school offers a broad and balanced curriculum or is just an 'exam factory'; whether a school prepares young people for the next steps in learning and life; whether there is good extra-curricular provision; whether adults working in the school are well-treated and professionally developed. These judgments can only realistically be made by human beings in person – who will need to talk to children, teachers and other adults, examine what is on offer at the school and what children are being taught and look carefully at the work children have done over the course of the year.

We think that these points of principle are hard to argue with and strongly make the case for something akin to our current inspection system. Equally, we think that there are some clear and compelling principles for the design of such an inspection system; some of which our current system meets well, some less well:

- Any legitimate approach to inspecting or evaluating schools must put the interests of **children first**. Any judgements made about the quality of provision or the value being achieved for public money must be made relative to their impact on children – their success, wellbeing and preparation for life.
- An inspection system must **inform parents** as to the quality of local schools. Inspection was introduced by the Major government as part of the 'Citizen's Charter' and informed by the view that parental choice (with money following the pupil) would be a market-like driver of school improvement. Whether you believe that or not, informing parents transparently about the quality of their local schools is good in principle and likely to lead to local action, agitation and support for improvement in practice.

- Any national system of evaluating schools must be made against **clear, publicly available criteria** by unbiased, experienced **people with appropriate expertise**.
- Inspection should look at matters which require a visit to a school and therefore **complement published data and information**. Performance data is important in showing whether children achieve as well as we would expect given their starting points. However, it is relatively blunt, devoid of context, only available after the fact, and does not include vital aspects such as safety and wellbeing. Inspection should give insight into aspects of schools which go beyond the data and look at quality in the round.
- Inspection should fit into a system of supporting and challenging schools in a way which means that inspection has **meaningful and proportionate consequences**. Inspection should specifically identify provision where children are not having a good experience or are achieving poorly, so that we can improve things for them. Likewise, it should identify particularly strong institutions which can support other schools. However, a great deal of the controversy about inspection is really about the uses to which inspection is put and the place of inspection in a wider system of intervention.
- Inspection should **treat adults in schools fairly** and **command professional consent**.