

Commentary

This report presents the findings from the full range of Ofsted's work, bringing together evidence from inspections of education, children's services and skills with detailed surveys of specific themes, subjects and issues. It coincides with the completion of a full cycle of inspection of schools, colleges and work-based learning. The report, therefore, presents a particularly good vantage point from which to look back over inspection evidence in these areas: the success stories, and the critical weaknesses to be addressed.

The report also illustrates different aspects of improvement by considering three themes of national interest drawn from across Ofsted's wide remit: improving outcomes for looked after children; teaching and learning; and developing skills for employment. The first theme considers the changes needed to tackle a seemingly intractable challenge; the second explores progress from good to great; and the third looks at sustaining improvement in a rapidly changing environment. The context in which these issues are explored, and indeed in which Ofsted has carried out its inspection responsibilities, has changed dramatically since the publication of the last Annual Report, and this report reflects on the new challenges. In particular, the thematic section on skills for employment describes and evaluates how the skills sector is responding to the changing economic climate.

The national overview: strengths...

This commentary and the report itself draw on a remarkably extensive evidence base including evidence from some 40,000 inspections and regulatory visits. The overall picture of the quality of provision is positive and much inspection evidence is generally encouraging. For example:

- ✦ the large majority of childcare, whether provided by childminders or in day care, is good or outstanding; almost all childminders meet the learning and development requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage, and 65% do it well

- ✦ almost 70% of maintained schools inspected are now good or outstanding, with nursery schools and special schools judged to be particularly effective; the proportion of schools in Ofsted's categories of concern fell in 2008/09
- ✦ 88% of initial teacher education providers are good or outstanding in their overall effectiveness
- ✦ of the further education colleges inspected in 2008/09, 63% were good or outstanding; the level of employer engagement is a continuing strength of the learning and skills sector
- ✦ a greater proportion of the provision for learning and skills in prisons was judged to be satisfactory or better, including the first prison judged to be outstanding; achievements and standards in employability training have improved to good or outstanding in 22 of the 33 prisons inspected
- ✦ the quality of social care is good or outstanding in around 64% of settings, including children's homes
- ✦ the large majority of councils provide good-quality children's services, often in difficult circumstances. In many cases, youth work makes a valuable contribution to young people's development.

The report also provides evidence of sustained improvement over the past four years. For example, in 2005/06 only 11% of maintained schools inspected were outstanding, while 8% were inadequate; in 2008/09, 19% of schools are outstanding and only 4% inadequate. There has also been a trend of improvement in colleges of further education; again, more colleges are now outstanding and fewer are inadequate than was the case four years ago.

Commentary continued

...and weaknesses

While there is much that should give us encouragement, real concerns remain. There are still too many providers that are mediocre or worse. Given the considerable progress made over recent years in increasing the proportion of outstanding and good settings, the greatest challenge across childcare, social care, education and the skills sector is to raise satisfactory provision to the level of good or outstanding. Since so many have now made the journey successfully, I see no reason why every setting, every school and college, and every provider, should not aspire to be good and working towards excellence. That is the only way they can really improve the lives and life chances of the children and learners they serve.

There are more specific concerns which must be addressed with urgency today if our children, young people and adult learners are to benefit tomorrow. For example:

- ✦ some provision appears to be stubbornly resistant to improvement. Over 40% of childcare provision judged satisfactory at its previous inspection remains so, and maintained schools and colleges present a similar picture
 - ✦ schools with a high proportion of pupils from deprived backgrounds are still more likely to be inadequate. Moreover, 4% of previously outstanding schools and 17% of previously good schools were found to be satisfactory or inadequate at inspection in 2008/09
 - ✦ there is a 'stubborn core' of inadequate teaching; furthermore, too much teaching is just satisfactory and fails to inspire, challenge and extend children, young people and adult learners
 - ✦ of the 30 academies inspected by Ofsted in 2008/09, while over half were rated good or outstanding, eight were judged to be satisfactory and another five inadequate; for the latter, raising standards and establishing a settled ethos remain a considerable challenge
 - ✦ a small but increased minority of councils are performing poorly overall, principally because they are making an inadequate contribution to ensuring that children and young people are as safe as possible
- ✦ there is unacceptable variation in the quality of individual children's homes from one inspection to another
 - ✦ private fostering arrangements remain a concern, with six out of 36 rated inadequate this year
 - ✦ there is still much inadequate practice in the work of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. The improvement that is taking place is not fast enough; nor is the extent of the change sufficient. These weaknesses exacerbate the risk of harm within families already facing crisis or breakdown.

Outstanding provision in challenging circumstances

Much can be learned from inspection evidence about excellence. This year, for example, Ofsted published reports on the characteristics of outstanding schools in challenging circumstances. The schools described in the reports demonstrate that excellence does not happen by chance. It is found in schools which have leaders of vision, courage and conviction; leaders who have the ability to inspire teams whose members work consistently for each other, as well as for the students and the communities they serve. There is a strong personal connection between individual children and young people and the adults in the school. These schools spare no efforts in their search for ways of doing things better, and high aspirations and expectations underpin all they do. They show a dogged determination to prove that every child can succeed, no matter how long that takes.

Several common features of these exemplary schools stand out. Above all, there is a passionate and ambitious belief that all young people can be helped to progress, achieve and become successful. No challenge is regarded as insurmountable; indeed, they generate innovative and effective responses to problems and difficulties. High standards of work and behaviour are set and kept; there are no exceptions and no excuses. The schools have the hard-won respect and confidence of their communities because of what they do, not just what they say.

For these schools, 'every child matters' is an everyday objective which is understood, planned for and achieved, not just a worthy ambition. Outstanding providers are forensic in their assessment of the needs of each of their children and learners; they personalise the care, support and learning they provide, and they are rigorous in evaluating the impact of what they do on progress and outcomes. A variety of approaches is taken to the curriculum, but they all provide balance and breadth. These schools use data to shine a spotlight on themselves so they can honestly and with precision make use of strategies that work, and ruthlessly excise those activities which deflect children and staff from the core business of teaching and learning. The children and young people who attend these schools emerge as confident and capable young people, well equipped for the next stage of their lives.

A focus on literacy and numeracy

A key element in bringing about improvement is ensuring that children, young people and adults have the literacy and numeracy skills they need in their everyday lives and which will enhance their employability and their performance once in work. The infant and primary years are key, but weaknesses in the teaching of literacy and numeracy remain, despite the early achievements of the national strategies. Inspectors continue to report a lack of focus on basic literacy for lower attainers, limited opportunities for some pupils to use, extend and enrich vocabulary, and insufficient attention given to the skills of writing at length. Many schools identify problem-solving in mathematics as a priority for improvement, but few tackle it really well. For older students, evaluation of the implementation of Diplomas shows that, even in some successful consortia, the teaching of functional skills is less engaging and of poorer quality than the vocational elements.

The national strategies have been at the forefront of improving teaching in the core subjects and have been influential in providing a national focus on raising standards. Nevertheless, improvements in standards and progress have been too slow over the last four years and the potential effectiveness of the strategies is much diminished.

The recent White Paper signalled a radically different strategic approach to raising standards of literacy and numeracy, with greater devolution of funding and responsibility for improvement to schools.¹ At the same time, there must be clarity at national level about what needs to be done professionally to maintain and improve literacy and numeracy and the extent to which schools are to be held accountable for this. We now have to look back on what has been gained and learned from the national strategies and use this reflection to understand what more needs to be done to generate improvement. It is vital that gains in professional expertise are not lost, and the central importance of the acquisition of good basic skills is not diluted.

In the adult learning sector, significant barriers remain to supporting better acquisition of skills for life. There are shortages of staff suitably qualified in delivering skills for life; and employers remain reluctant to address basic skills issues with employees, which limits the extent to which support can be provided to those who may need it most.

Safeguarding

Last year's Annual Report said a good deal about the safeguarding of children and young people. Without apology, I am turning to the issue again; it is too important to leave until we can be confident that everything possible is being done to keep children and young people safe. Events such as the Baby Peter tragedy have clearly shown we are not there yet. This year's report is clear where weaknesses remain, including problems in a minority of local authorities and children's homes. To remedy these deficiencies, it is important to recognise the successful alternatives, so this year I shall comment on what we see in outstanding social care services. While responsibilities for safeguarding rest with a much wider range of people and services, it is social care services that bear the brunt of public scrutiny and media disapprobation when things go wrong.

¹ *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century school system*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009.

Commentary continued

Outstanding children's services have outstanding systems of performance management. They develop and use robust systems that ensure as far as possible that every child gets a good service, and they check to make sure this is happening in practice. They focus on a child's interests. They take the views and feedback of the young people, parents and carers they serve very seriously. Elected members and senior managers have a clear grasp of the challenges in providing good safeguarding practice. They know what good social care looks like, both in terms of policy and practice, and they question, check and challenge to improve both.

Partnerships are mature and effective, and include rich contributions from the voluntary sector. Management and leadership are strong at all levels, with even the most senior managers knowing the issues facing front-line workers and receptive to feedback from them. Communication is transparent and forms an unbroken thread that not only runs through and across each level of the organisation, but also links with key partners. This means they are able to draw together a comprehensive picture of each individual, their needs from different services and their development and progress. Accountabilities and responsibilities are absolutely clear; everyone knows where 'the buck stops'.

Important though they are, processes are only a means to an end for outstanding services; the acid test is whether they support staff effectively to ensure children thrive. This Annual Report indicates that such practice is far from universal.

Skills for life in an economic downturn

Lord Leitch's review of world-class skills made clear the significant challenge of improving the baseline of literacy and numeracy for our adult population and of raising overall adult skills levels. It also identified the trend towards a greater proportion of jobs requiring higher level skills.

Last year's Annual Report included a section on 'Skills for working lives', focusing on the critical importance of preparing young people and adults effectively for the world of work. Twelve months later the context in which providers of further education, work-based learning and employability training operate has changed dramatically. This year has seen a significant rise in levels

of unemployment and redundancies. The recession is particularly affecting young people leaving school or college and seeking their first jobs and, although the number of young people in education is going up, the proportion of 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training is also rising. The current economic climate is placing an increasing importance on having good levels of literacy and numeracy for those entering the job market or seeking to move within it. Yet there is continued resistance from employers, adults and young people to taking up skills for life training; adults in employment require particularly high levels of personal support and encouragement to tackle their basic skills needs effectively.

Alongside the challenges imposed by changed economic circumstances, the Government has set stretching targets to achieve the ambition of world-class skills by 2020. Developing these skills is even more important during a time of economic downturn; a more highly skilled workforce has the capacity to adapt to changing demands, learn quickly and improve productivity and efficiency, and thereby make a key contribution to economic recovery. Beyond this, the skills sector plays a vital role in increasing confidence and giving greater opportunity for social mobility, for example by supporting progression to higher education.

Two initiatives are of particular interest and importance within this context: the progress of the 14 to 19 reforms and the preparations for the raising of the school leaving age to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015. Early indications are that students are motivated and challenged by the applied style of learning in Diplomas. However, work to develop their functional skills frequently lacks coordination, and the quality of the teaching and learning of these skills varies considerably.

Undoubtedly there are tensions in the skills sector. The sector is complex and funding streams are changing; colleges are increasingly required to fulfil the roles of national experts, local community resource, collaborators with local partners, and competitors for resources. Nevertheless, the sector has a good track record of responding to changing needs, circumstances, funding and partnership arrangements. There has never been a better time to capitalise on the new and varied learning routes and the need of the population to learn. The best leaders

are holding their strategic course through the current uncertainty, focusing on the needs of learners and making the most of their strengths, including strong links with employers. They are also clear about how to deploy their resources to have the greatest impact.

Ofsted's role: raising standards and improving lives

In his report on the protection of children in England, Lord Laming wrote of inspection needing to embrace both challenge and support: 'inspection should not be a stand-alone activity... an isolated snapshot.' I agree. Inspection should drive improvement and Ofsted must be an agent for change, not just of scrutiny and challenge. I believe Ofsted can do more to promote further improvement through rigorous assessment and critique, well-crafted and precise recommendations, identifying and sharing good practice to inform professional development, and by celebrating success as well as exposing failure.

Fundamental to any regulatory and inspection system is the tension between stick and carrot. Fear of exposure is a powerfully motivating force, but this will only bring about improvement to the level of 'good enough'. So to be recognised for excellence has to be another powerful motivator. Ofsted celebrates success, principally to help others learn the lessons from it.

This Annual Report includes a section on the quality of services for children and young people in public care. There is evidence in some children's homes that insufficient priority is given to education: for example, some young people are not attending school regularly and staff take little action to address this. For these children, better support could transform their futures. This support has to be mediated through stable and close relationships with the professionals in their lives and it has to be both joined-up and of high quality. Inspection must focus on the needs, interests and voices of the people who rely on the services that we inspect, and we must focus on the detail of the professional practice, be that in social care, early years development or education and skills. Underpinning all this must be the highest aspirations and expectations; no limit should be imposed on the capacity of children,

young people and learners to improve, develop and achieve. Inspection supports improvement so long as it is focused on what actually matters: outcomes for children, young people and adult learners.

As I look to how inspection should develop over the next 12 months, several priorities stand out. First, inspection must engage with users and stakeholders at all levels; we need to ensure that the experiences of children, young people and adult learners are at the centre of everything we do. Second, we must do more to disseminate effective practice and what might be learned from it. Third, we must focus our work on what is happening on the ground, continuing to take performance data into account, but spending more time, for example, talking to social workers and observing teaching in classrooms. The presentation of local and national outcome data is accepted as routine now and enables the close scrutiny of absolute and relative performance. However, data must be corroborated by professional judgement. Direct observation of practice, talking to front-line staff and feedback from users are the core of our new approach to the inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services; and the annual assessment of children's services gives more emphasis to findings about services on the ground, and less to traditional performance indicators, such as those used in the Annual Performance Assessment, which it has replaced.

Fourth, we are putting in place a more systematic approach to the monitoring and evaluation of our own work, especially in the inspection of social care. In other words, I intend to put Ofsted's strapline of 'raising standards and improving lives' to the test. What difference do we make, and could we make more of a difference if we did things differently? Too many weaknesses identified in this report echo those found in previous annual reports. We must challenge those responsible for improvement to do even more – and we must challenge ourselves to do more too. But we must do that by keeping a tight focus on value for money.

Finally, when difficult decisions have to be made about the deployment of finite resources, I shall have no hesitation in demanding that Ofsted champions those for whom life is an uphill struggle, and especially those at risk of harm or failure. Too often they rely on poor services and they need Ofsted, on their behalf, to say so.