

The Work of Ofsted

**Submission to the House of Commons Education and
Skills Select Committee, October 2004**

1. The Association offers the following comments on aspects of the current work of Ofsted to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, for consideration prior to its meeting with Mr Bell on 3 November 2004. The Association enjoys regular contact and dialogue with HMCI and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) on issues of current concern to inspectors and to LEAs, schools and colleges, as well as with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and other national agencies.

Summary of submission

2. Our submission may be summarised as follows:
 - The projected new Ofsted school inspection model relies upon honest and robust school self-evaluation, but the actual quality of school self-review in England remains variable. It may require more than new national guidelines and market-generated self-evaluation 'tools' to ensure satisfactory progress in this area, since significant cultural change will be necessary within many schools in order to achieve effective self-evaluation
 - The new inspection proposals are not 'linked up' sufficiently with LEA and other local school improvement services to secure a genuinely holistic approach to raising standards of attainment in schools. 'Snapshot' inspections and longer-term external developmental support should be carefully interconnected, to build a sustainable framework to assist school improvement, broadly reflecting the type of model now emerging in Scotland
 - The Ofsted lead role in developing the future inspection of better-integrated children's services is to be welcomed, given the centrality of schools to overall government strategy on children's service delivery and Ofsted's own track record in successfully extending the range of its formal inspectorial responsibilities.

Raising the quality of school self-evaluation

3. An evidence-based approach is required to assess the actual quality of local school self-evaluation in England and to inform the practical steps necessary to strengthen this key aspect of the proposed new model for Ofsted school inspections in England from September 2005. At this stage, the available evidence suggests a mixed picture. Published material on this subject is limited, but includes documents from Ofsted (1998), the National Foundation for Educational Research (2000), and other more recent but narrower studies. Unpublished work includes Ofsted research on inspection-related self-evaluation documentation, pointing to a relatively weak overall picture prior to 2001 and concluding "following the introduction of the revised Form S4 in 2001, the quality of self-evaluation has improved, but it is still variable."
4. The practical experience of our membership in the field underlines the point that self-evaluation has to be an ongoing process, frequently involving a significant level of cultural change, as well as focused activity, within an individual school. As previous evidence submitted by the Association to the Select Committee noted "this is especially relevant where a school retains a traditional, 'authoritarian' headteacher leadership style, with the staff consequently wary of exposing problems and failures." Ofsted and the DfES have usefully identified six broadly-defined "acid tests" of honest and effective school self-review, including the involvement within the school-level process of "staff, pupils, parents and governors at all levels". However, current proposals for positively encouraging schools to make concrete progress in their area, over the coming period, are apparently restricted to the preparation of a national guidelines document, supplemented by a mixture of market-generated self-evaluation products. This may prove to be insufficient. While paperwork and, where affordable and well-designed, one-off training courses can assist, there is no substitute for the more regular, face-to-face, support for and challenge to the school self-evaluation process which skilled, external school improvement professionals can offer on a consistent basis. The link to the LEA is, therefore, particularly

important in this specific connection but other aspects of the wider government 'New Relationship with Schools' programme currently carry a risk of weakening this support at a time when school self-review will require additional priority attention.

Linking inspection & developmental services

5. The recently-published Select Committee sixth report on the work of Ofsted noted that "the value of inspection is diminished if it is not coupled with advice...the DfES should ensure that schools which receive negative Ofsted reports are guaranteed to receive support from LEAs...". Indeed, the practical advantages of appropriate forms of LEA or similar school improvement service involvement with the specific issues highlighted by formal inspections of individual schools are evident. HMCI's annual report for 2002/3 noted that: "school improvement strategies are at least satisfactory in all the LEAs inspected...LEAs perform their monitoring, challenge and intervention support roles increasingly well, particularly in targeting underperforming schools." LEAs, by their nature, are in a unique position to furnish relevant holistic support, drawing on a wider system with a range of specialist resources.
6. A practical example of carefully linked-up external inspectorial and developmental services is now available from Scotland. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) in Scotland have introduced a new school inspection model, designed to recognise the distinct responsibilities which fall on schools and on education authorities to secure improvement, and to take due account of school self-evaluation.

It is a proportionate model, under which the extent and nature of HMIE engagement with schools will vary (depending on the school's capacity to ensure improvement), each school will have a 'core inspection', and follow-through activity from the inspection will itself be proportionate.

Under this model, the core inspections will identify the key strengths of a school, and HMIE will evaluate the capacity of the school to ensure further improvement – taking account of, for example, the quality of leadership, the ability of the school to accurately identify priorities for improvement, and earlier successes in ensuring improvements. HMIE then indicates the appropriate follow-through arrangements.

7. The range of follow-through options are flexible and matched to the needs of the individual school, and include:
 - The school and the education authority take responsibility for planning further improvements and reporting to parents
 - The education authority progress report to HMIE on improvement after two years and the education authority report to parents
 - HMIE discusses action plan with school and the education authority and arranges visits and meetings as needed to monitor and provide advice. Follow-through inspection and report to parents after two years
 - HMIE works with the school and the education authority to draw up an action plan and agree a programme of activities to support implementation. Follow-through inspection and report after one year (interim) and two years
 - HMIE visits school to gather more details of good practice.

The specific role of relevant education authority educational advisory staff is, first, to provide an evaluative pre-inspection briefing. Then, the education authority officer will join the headteacher for feedback at the end of the core inspection. Later, education authority staff will work with the school (and HMI where appropriate) in planning further improvements and maintaining high standards and reporting to parents (and HMIE) on the outcomes.

8. The key principles behind this new approach to school inspection in Scotland may be summarised as:
- Stronger contribution to supporting improvement, and developing capacity for further improvement, through core and proportionate follow through
 - Focused on meeting needs of all, across a broad front covered by national priorities
 - Increased emphasis on impact and outcomes.

While the New Relationship project in England and the associated Ofsted inspection regime changes are based on different components, certain practical points may be considered in the light of this new system in Scotland. First, the formal inspectorial and the external developmental systems are positively linked, to ensure shared knowledge and approaches, but in ways which do not add to meetings/bureaucracy involving the school and which do not detract from the independent nature of these external systems. Second, the growing importance of school-self evaluation is recognised, but via an approach which specifically identifies and assists internal capacity building within the school, to ensure genuinely sustainable educational improvement. Such features should be considered in relation to the new system now projected for England.

Inspection of children's services

9. The lead role awarded to Ofsted in developing an integrated inspection process for the broad range of children's services identified in the current Children Bill represents a welcome and justified development. Schools, with their many existing points of close connection with local communities, are increasingly viewed as an appropriate base for the citing of, or closer linkage to, a wider range of different services devoted to children, and Ofsted enjoys a decade's experience of inspecting local schools. In addition, Ofsted, as a central organisation, has already demonstrated, in practice, that it can successfully extend the scope of its formal inspectorial responsibilities into new areas, for example in early years and childcare settings.
10. There are, of course, a number of practical issues to be addressed in designing the final form of the new inspection arrangements for children's services, presently under consideration. A common interpretation of basic principles carefully identified for this purpose will be required, duly reflecting the level of risk, and the distinct strengths and weaknesses, in the different areas involved, to undertake the projected Joint Area Reviews (JARs) in local authority areas.

Yet the various inspectorates involved have difficult structures, traditions and staff skills and training. The Association does not underestimate the size of this task of shaping the new system, but remains confident that suitable opportunities will be provided for detailed views and input from inspectors, based on their own experience in the field to date.

Further information

11. The Association trusts that the above points will be of interest to the Education and Skills Committee, and would be willing to respond to any requests for further information which may assist the Committee's deliberations on the work of Ofsted at this time of significant change.