

# Ofsted may watch us – but we must also watch Ofsted



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COLUMNIST



**> The late Chris Woodhead in a rather more jovial mood than he was when he heard Les Walton's joke in 1999**

**I**N 1999 I gave a speech at the Annual Chief Education Officers' Conference. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Chris Woodhead, was present.

I told the story about a headteacher who died, and, on entering Heaven, said all he wanted was a harp, a cloud and never to see an Ofsted inspector again. After a couple of hours, a person in a suit with a clipboard arrived. The head jumped off his cloud crying 'I've just seen an Ofsted Inspector.' 'That's not an Ofsted Inspector,' said the angel. 'It's God. He just thinks he's an Ofsted inspector.' The Chief Inspector didn't laugh.

School inspections have been around for a long time. In 1837 Seymour Tremenheere and the Rev John Allen were appointed school inspectors to monitor the effectiveness of the annual grant to societies which provided Church of England and non-denominational elementary schools for poor children.

Following the Education Act of 1902, inspections were expanded to state-funded secondary schools. After WW2, there were only 500 or so 'general inspectors'. Each inspector covered between 150 and 200 schools so it was not possible to operate a regular cycle of inspections. Over time more inspections were carried out by inspectors based in local education authorities, with Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) being the eyes and ears of the Secretary of State, reporting on education conditions across the country.

In the 1950s formal etiquette had to be observed. All male HMIs addressed one another by their surnames. Female HMIs wore hats. Grammar school heads received a warning of a visit, but it was deemed unnecessary for primary schools. Letters to grammar school heads would begin 'Dear Smith' but those to a secondary modern head would open with 'Dear Mr Smith'.

The Education Reform Act of 1988 brought radical change for the inspectorate. The new national curriculum would now have to be policed by a new system of monitoring inspections, taking place every six years.

Prime Minister Major had been concerned about the variable local

inspection regimes and decided to introduce a national scheme of inspections through a reconstituted HMI, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Under the Education (Schools) Act 1992 HMI would supervise the inspection of each state-funded school, and would publish reports for the benefit of schools, parents, and government instead of reporting to the Secretary of State.

In 1992 all things in my educational universe changed. I was standing amongst a group of secondary headteachers, talking about the new inspection regime, Ofsted. The joke 'there is only one F in Ofsted' was invented there and then.

At the end of the meeting the director of education sidled up to me and passed me a brown envelope. 'You've just won first prize.' My school would be one of the first to be subject to the new Ofsted inspections. What will it be like? What will they do? Who will they be? 'Haven't a bloody clue,' came the director's answer.

Happily, my school did well in the inspection and we felt the enormous relief that so many schools have felt since, of 'surviving' the inspection.

Prime Minister Major later asked me and another couple of headteachers to go to 10 Downing Street to give our views on the changes that were being implemented. During the meeting Major had to attend Parliament. Tiring of the gin and tonics and vol-au-vents, I persuaded the Bishop of London and another headteacher, Ian Kershaw, to pop across to the Red Lion for a pint. An hour later two policemen came into the pub to inform us that the Prime Minister was waiting to hear our views.

We reported that whilst the new inspections were very disruptive they were much better than local authority inspections, which tended to vary enormously in quality and approach.

In 2005 short-notice inspections arrived. We were 'strongly encouraged' to complete a self-evaluation form. Inspections were then generally two or three day visits every three years, with two days' notice. Ofsted was now inspecting our ability to inspect ourselves.

This massive expansion meant that, as we neared 2010, there were more than 2,000 additional inspectors (AIs) employed by external companies. In 2012, Ofsted admitted they needed to improve the quality assurance of AIs. During this period HMI mainly focused on leading complex inspections and supporting schools in special measures. Since then Ofsted directly employs HMI and all part-time inspectors (mainly serving school leaders) to ensure quality.

Ofsted has expanded its role more and more. Today Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. Ofsted inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages. It covers childminding, child day care and teacher training providers. Every week, Ofsted carries out hundreds of inspections and regulatory visits throughout England and publishes the results online.

Ofsted reports to Parliament and stresses its independence and impartiality. The problem has always been that Ofsted has had to respond to constantly different political views of what is a 'good standard' and exactly what it is that schools are trying to improve.

Ofsted has also been criticised for having too big a span, a lack of focus on its core mission, an over reliance on 'number crunching' and having a negative impact on teacher workload and morale.

Whilst accepting an inspection is a photograph of a point in time, I continue to place greater reliance on Ofsted judgements than many other commentators on schools.

As my joke to the chief education officers hinted, Ofsted Inspectors are not all seeing and all knowing. 'Who inspects the inspectors?' is, therefore, a crucial question. As they scrutinise schools we must, through Parliament, scrutinise Ofsted. Inspection has its place but an Ofsted Report judgement is not the main outcome of a school. Successful learners who continue to learn and achieve in life is surely our main ambition.

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