

'humane' model o

FRANK COFFIELD on what he would do with Ofsted – the “sergeant major of the education system”

OFSTED has too much power. It always has had, and that's no accident.

It was deliberately set up to ensure that the National Curriculum was enacted in the ways the government wanted. It has consistently badgered ministers to increase its powers, while abusing those it already has. For instance, Ofsted has delayed introducing its new inspection framework until September, but will begin examining on that framework in November, giving professionals only a few weeks to understand what will be asked of them rather than the full term Ofsted promised.

For over 30 years, Ofsted reports have been responsible for the closure of schools, the destruction of careers, and competent professionals have been forced into early retirement and others have been driven out of jobs they loved.

The current relevance of these comments is that the present government will soon be announcing what changes it will make to the National Curriculum and it will expect Ofsted to act again as the sergeant major of the system, putting the stick about to enforce compliance with its plans. Before that happens Ofsted's powers need to be severely pruned and the time to act is shortening.

In his recent speech at the Festival of Education, Sir Martyn Oliver, the Chief HMI, claimed that his organisation puts “disadvantaged and vulnerable children ... at the heart of what we do as an inspectorate.” But its actions have consistently worsened their prospects. Research by Jane Hutchinson (2016), Christine Farquharson et al (2022) and by Natalie Perera (2024) has shown repeatedly and convincingly that it is those schools serving the most deprived areas which most often receive the devastating label of “inadequate.” This makes it harder to recruit or retain able staff, while students transfer to other schools, making the finances of stigmatised schools ever more precarious. Ofsted has always refused to accept any responsibility for pitching such schools into a downward spiral and it still fails to take into account the impacts of the social



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and economic context of such schools. Ofsted, far from closing the gap between the achievements of the most and least disadvantaged, has seen it widen during its watch.

Over the same period Ofsted has also failed to raise achievements in reading, maths and science, as shown by international studies (such as PISA), which show that standards have flatlined for decades. And yet Ofsted insists that it has been instrumental in raising standards, but what evidence does it point to? The rise in the number of schools awarded the grade of “good” or “outstanding”, a statistic which is in its power to manipulate to suit whatever case it wants to present. Criticisms of its methods have also been numerous, vociferous and incisive from its earliest years, for example, by Carol Fitz-Gibbon in 1993, but it has never responded to any of them adequately.

Minor adjustments have been made, a consultation asking no fewer than 64 questions has been carried out, but the central criticisms of its unreliable and invalid methods have been denied, ignored or batted away.

What could be done? The anger in the profession about Ofsted is now so strong and pervasive that only radical reform will quell the

animosity. What follows is a seven-point action plan.

First and foremost, power needs to be re-distributed from Ofsted to all the professional that it evaluates, and especially to the teachers' unions and professional associations like the National Association for the Teaching of English.

A reformed Ofsted needs to be completely independent of government with, for example, the Chief HMI being appointed by the House of Commons Select Committee on Education rather than by the Secretary of State.

A fairer complaints procedure should be introduced with the power to challenge, and at times overturn, Ofsted's judgements.

Complainants should also be given the same funding as Ofsted for legal support.

Every inspection team should be joined by a senior member of the

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