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Proposals for maintained school inspections from September 2009: a response from the National Education Trust (NET)

Introduction

In 1992, the model of inspection developed by Ofsted was one that maximised accountability and minimised the involvement of those inspected. In more recent times, the model has encouraged schools to develop systems of self-evaluation and to play a more active part in the inspection itself. The rationale for this shift is that improvement is more likely to result from involvement in the process of inspection. It also appears to be an appropriate response to schools' increasing familiarity with inspection and ability to evaluate their own work more accurately than before.

Placing the emphasis on improvement in this way runs the risk of reducing the credibility of inspection in the public mind: "the inspectors have gone native". Thus, when we read in paragraph 17 that 93% of schools selected for light-touch inspections fulfilled their prophecy by being judged good or outstanding, improvers will see this as a cause for celebration while those more concerned with accountability may see it as a cause for concern. Schools' perception is often that inspectors care only about the data. Inspection moves from a position of open-ended enquiry to one where a hypothesis based on test results has to be disproved by inspectors who may well have insufficient time to gather the evidence to do so. The end result is that inspection adds little or nothing to what was known about the school beforehand, and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is important therefore to maintain the credibility of inspection by striking the right balance between accountability and improvement. In Scotland, a system of self-evaluation was developed in the 1990s, with inspection as an external and independent second opinion. Inspection was grafted onto self-evaluation, whereas in England the latter was a relatively late newcomer to an established and often unpopular system of inspection. In attempting to redress the balance, we need to convince schools of the importance and primacy of their self-evaluation, but ensure that inspection is sufficiently rigorous and robust to hold the schools to account, and be seen to do so.

The consultation document identifies the impact on national policy as a third purpose of inspection. It is probably at this macro level that improvement through inspection is most easy to demonstrate. There are considerable dangers in attempting to link inspection with improvement in individual schools. Inspection, or the fear of inspection, may be the catalyst for improvement, but causal links are elusive when the schools themselves are responsible for what happens after the inspection. Asking schools immediately after an inspection if they think that it is likely to lead to improvement is speculative at best. The dangers of linking inspection to specific targets are well illustrated in paragraph 11. The first two bullet points (reducing the number of learners receiving inadequate provision and increasing the number of good and outstanding schools) are likely to lead to scepticism if achieved because the goal scorer is also the referee. Improvement is more likely to result from improving the process of inspection than from attempting to pursue specific or questionable targets.

We now turn to the consultation questions in detail.

Question 1: inspection interval

The proposal to leave an interval of six years between inspections for good and outstanding schools seems sensible. It is pointless to direct scarce resources at schools with a track record of promoting or sustaining improvement. The inevitable congruence between the pre-inspection hypotheses and the post-inspection outcomes merely undermines inspection credibility in the minds of independent observers or cynics. However, in order for the system to have credibility with schools, it is important to develop a range of indicators such as those suggested in paragraph 22 and to ensure that they are benchmarked for the purposes of comparison and transparency.

A clear risk with these proposals is that a chasm opens up between grade 2 and grade 3. It is good that no-one will want to be satisfactory, but there are serious implications for grade inflation as inspectors discuss outcomes with schools. Resisting inappropriate pressure is an inspection skill that not all inspectors develop to the same degree, raising the prospect of inconsistency. The response to this problem suggested by question 12 (developing minimum standards for each grade) could lead to formulaic inspecting by numbers. Again, a careful balance needs to be struck.

Question 2: health check

The proposals are broadly appropriate, with the strong provisos that a range of indicators is needed and that the indicators should be susceptible to comparison with all schools and with like schools. Therefore it will be important to benchmark surveys of the views of children, parents and staff. A change of head teacher or turbulence of staff or leadership team should be factored in as significant elements of risk.

In terms of presentation, it may be appropriate to consider the ways in which many schools present their interim and end-of-year reports on learners, as there may be a parallel to draw. Interim reports (which the health check effectively is) often involve a series of grades followed by a brief summary at the end. In this way it may be possible to reduce the need for lengthy commentary. Reports arguably have too long a history of telling parents in words what is already there in numbers (see for example the inspection judgement form at the end of current reports).

Question 3: satisfactory and inadequate schools

The proposals for satisfactory schools are appropriate in terms of signalling to local authorities and others the urgency of action required. However, local authorities should be required to be explicit about the support they intend to give the schools with no-better-than-satisfactory capacity to improve. Schools in such categories often perceive the school inspection system as punitive, and make the justified point that they will not improve simply by being inspected more often. Support needs to be given, and be seen to be given, to such schools.

The proposals for inadequate schools are also appropriate, but it seems sensible in terms of resources to include the possibility of removing a Notice to Improve following a monitoring visit.

Question 4: unannounced inspections

In the proposals, the rationale for unannounced inspections is unequivocally that parents and pupils want them, or think they do. Such a view is firmly located at the accountability end of the spectrum, and appears to reflect a 'common-sense view' that the best way of checking up on people is not to tell them you are coming to do so. However, it completely ignores the practicalities of setting up an inspection designed to lead to improvement by involving schools and partners in the process. As indicated in paragraph 32, "significant challenges will be involved" in setting up no-notice inspections, and, it would appear, to no clearly articulated benefit, other than a perceived sharpness in holding schools to account. It is also questionable that being on a constant state of alert will

necessarily reduce bureaucracy and disruption. The power to inspect a school without notice when the circumstances require it already exists. The argument for unannounced inspections in these proposals is weak, and the proposal risks setting the wrong tone for inspections as a whole.

Questions 5, 6 and 7: national surveys

As previously mentioned, surveys of children and young people, school staff and parents are essential in order to secure comparative data. Without such data stakeholders will be unable to make proper sense of what is said about individual schools. It will be important to avoid over-simplistic approaches, particularly in analysing complaints about schools.

Question 8: involvement of senior management

The involvement of senior managers in inspections is highly desirable. It can lead to secure understanding of the judgements and the reasons for them, confidence in working with inspection criteria and an enhanced ability to self-evaluate in future. The danger is stated in paragraph 39: however we phrase it, these inspections are effectively done with the school, though we hope that inspectors maintain their distance and objectivity. This subtlety may well be lost on observers. Also, historically and not surprisingly, evidence shows that systems where self-evaluation plays a large part lead to an increasing congruence of grades between inspectors and inspected. It is important that senior managers are involved, but equally important that sufficient safeguards are built in to mitigate the charge that the “watchdog has no teeth”.

Question 9: focus on the achievement of different groups of pupils

The proposal that inspectors should spend more time observing teaching and its impact on learning is most welcome. This first-hand evidence is the necessary pre-requisite to a credible inspection and has been under-emphasised in current arrangements. It will do much to answer the charge, frequently and often justifiably heard, that inspections are “all about data”. This proposal, together with more time for inspectors than currently to carry it out, is a most welcome development in terms of securing more reliable and credible inspections.

The focus on different groups is also welcome, though it would be unfortunate if an emphasis on vulnerable groups led to an under-emphasis on the majority. Improvement comes from getting more from the unremarkable majority as well as from those who are vulnerable or manifestly underachieving. Experience shows that inspectors often have difficulty in saying meaningful things about different groups in inspection reports, just as schools, if issues for improvement are anything to go by, are frequently accused of an inability to differentiate properly. Targeted observation will need to complement pre-inspection analysis, which often fails to generate sufficient hypotheses in respect of minority groups. Further training for inspectors will be necessary.

Question 10: capacity to improve

Arguably, inspections are about two things: how good the school is now, and what is its capacity for improvement. Therefore, it is essential that inspectors pay proper attention to the school's capacity to improve, as judged by the accuracy of its self-knowledge, the appropriateness of its targets and priorities for improvement and the likelihood of their being achieved given current and proposed actions. To date, insufficient attention has been given to the extent to which such understanding and capacity is spread through the school's staff, particularly its middle and senior management. Such extended capacity is a necessary insurance policy for unforeseen circumstances or changes of leadership.

Question 11: use of CVA

The current grading scale is now well understood, but the reduction from seven to four grades has placed strain on some of the existing vocabulary. 'Outstanding', for example, begins to lose its primary meaning when it applies to one in six schools, and 'satisfactory' has overstretched its semantic limits by being declared not good enough, an impression reinforced by the inspection intervals in the current proposals. Consideration should be given to including further explanatory words: for example: 'satisfactory: adequate, but requiring further improvement'.

There is no doubt that CVA has been given too much weight by many inspectors, and is the major source of contention between schools and inspectors. Many inspections have little credibility with schools because a data-focused pre-inspection commentary is followed by a discussion that focuses on little else and an inspection that involves minimal collection of first-hand evidence in the classroom. However, CVA is an exceptionally useful tool, which will continue to be an important part of the inspection evidence. Schools need to become more adept at interpreting and interrogating the data, so that pre-inspection discussion of it can be minimised, or at least become a discussion between equals.

Question 12: defining minimum standards for learners' outcomes

As mentioned earlier, this proposal may reduce inconsistency but encourage inspection by numbers. If the criteria are drawn too tightly, the results of the inspection may be pre-determined. A best-fit approach involving a range of indicators may be more conducive to thoughtful and insightful inspection.

Question 13: inspecting the impact of partnerships

Giving routine inspections a particular focus based on information available locally seems an efficient use of resources. However, it would be good to see an emphasis on strengths, as well as weaknesses. Inspectors have traditionally given too little thought to explaining why things go well, as well as to why they need to improve. The identification of what works well is an important part of current survey inspections and reports, and its inclusion in reports on individual schools is overdue.

Identifying the impact of partnerships is often difficult for inspectors and for schools. It seems important to focus on 'additionality': in other words, in what way has the partnership or partnerships led to better outcomes than might otherwise have been expected. Schools need support to help them to identify in their self-evaluation the impact of partnerships on provision and a range of outcomes.

Question 14: more precise recommendations

Previous attempts to increase the precision of recommendations have been problematic, leading to lists not only of what the school has to do, but also how it should do it. How schools do what they are asked to do is their affair, and they will be judged on the outcomes of what they do. In this respect, there are inconsistencies in the way that inspectors judge outcomes. As it is, too-precise recommendations can be rapidly overtaken by events and become irrelevant. This approach seems more redolent of 'nanny inspections' than of a mature inspection system.

Question 15: letter to parents

More thought is needed about the audiences and purposes of the outcomes of inspection. If the main report is intended to be accessible to a lay audience, it is hard to see why a letter is required as well. If the letter to parents replaces the main report, it may be possible for the latter to be written more specifically for the professional audience. In the current proposals, there appears to be some duplication here.

Telling parents what the school should achieve by the next inspection is in principle a good idea, presumably going beyond what is achieved by the current recommendations for improvement. Greater precision here could help schools to communicate their progress more easily to parents, and parents to understand the context of what they receive. However, as indicated in our response to question 14, we have considerable reservations about tying schools down to specific actions, particularly if these requirements are to be made public.



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