

# Parliamentary Brief

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Does the departure of you-know-who mean a different approach to school inspections?

**Chris Watkins**  
talks to successor  
**Mike Tomlinson**

# THE NEW FACE OF OFSTED

**P**eople walking down London's Kingsway probably don't notice Ofsted. Between the cafés and shirt shops, only grey-smoked glass doors and a small logo identify the non-ministerial government department which has been an unmissable part of teachers' lives since 1992.

Inside a modern bureaucracy functions, but on the top floor change has been taking place. The new man at the top is Mike Tomlinson HMCI — Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools. He is the first Labour appointment to this post in the Ofsted era, and successor to the ever-controversial Chris Woodhead — now a commentator on the *Daily Telegraph*.

Of Ofsted's many critics, some of the most serious say that their way of inspecting schools is holding back development, so I begin by putting that point: *The inspection framework embodies the government's view of what an effective school is. How does that get updated over time and would it ever embody a 21st century learning view of a school — because it doesn't at the moment.*

**MT:** The framework has been updated and changed on two major occasions now — once in 1996 and again in January 2000. In both there has been debate about the place and emphasis given to teaching and particularly learning — but there has not been up to now, any serious questioning of whatever this vision of the 21st century classroom is. The question of 'how pupils learn' is an interesting one — we still really don't understand enough about how children learn.

The framework that we are going to have to think about for the next phase of inspection has got to be fairly forward looking. What we must ensure is that it doesn't give a model of the learning process or the learning environment that might be at odds with what develops as new technology and all the rest swing into action. I think that will be quite a difficult challenge for us.

**CW:** A recent Ofsted report on ICT in schools says provision is patchy as is take-up of training, but it hardly ever mentions anything about whether ICT promotes learning. Lots of the ICT in schools does

*nothing of the sort.*

**MT:** I would agree with you. At the moment the view that ICT will improve learning is an act of faith — though I don't mind that. What we do know of course, is that it is certainly a motivating approach to teaching and learning for a large number of children. It is interesting how boys, for example, are much more happy and willing to sit down with a screen and write than they are with pencil and paper. And given that we have a problem with boys writing, if that's a way into helping boys to write, then there could be benefits.

But at the moment they are not there to be seen in any extent. I think that whether they will be, and how much benefit they'll bring remain unanswered questions.

**CW:** *There has been talk about the review of the whole school inspection system. How radical would that review be?*

**MT:** Well I am going to be cautious here — because clearly I want a consultation which gives schools a chance to say what they think. For me a number of

things have changed or are changing since inspection was introduced. First of all we have got performance management in schools. Second, we are moving to a position where we are getting more sophisticated in terms of the ways that we can analyse data and talk about school performance — notably by 2003 we are almost certain to have value-added data. And third, we have been actively encouraging the development of robust objective school self-evaluation.

So inspection has got to ask itself 'how does it fit in to that changed environment? — what is its place?'. From my perspective I have no doubt about the absolute need for a rigorous external and objective inspection system. The question is how often should it occur and what would be the focus and weight of that inspection — should it be the same in all schools?

We have moved to a differentiated bipartite model — short or full. Is there a continuum of some sort and to what extent is the agenda for that inspection open to the school making a contribution to it, as distinct from it all being determined centrally?

**CW:** *Is there anything behind that choice of adjectives you use — rigorous, robust and objective?*

**MT:** Experience — probably over the best part of 15 to 20 years — of what school self-evaluation looked like. In the early days, for example, it was very much about the amount of curriculum time, the question of resources, the question of buildings and all the rest of it.

It was very rare in those days to find a school self-evaluation document that actually focused on the core business of the school — teaching and learning. That is the starting point — what is happening in our classrooms, the quality of teaching, the learning that's going on, how do we measure the progress of pupils — schools are more sophisticated at measuring that than we are nationally.

The second point comes from a comparison we did of schools' self-evaluations and the outcomes of Ofsted inspections. In terms of their strengths, the schools were pretty much correlating with what the inspection team was saying.

With their weaknesses, there was much a poorer correlation and when you looked at where those differences arose, the school then recognised that it didn't know as much about the quality of its teaching and learning as it thought it did.

And it really didn't know enough about the quality of its management — because, of course, the people carrying out the self-evaluation were often the people doing the managing.

**CW:** *That raises issues about what are the conditions under which schools best learn about themselves. In a 'standards' environment there are some ways of talking for accountability purposes that don't actually help people examine what is going on in their own schools — including the quality of learning.*

**MT:** Indeed — I think that one of the dangers is as we move into an increasingly 'data rich' environment, that we become seduced with all of these numbers — and what they think they tell us about an education.

Now they do tell us something quite important but it isn't the whole story. There are other important things that we do which are not quantifiable — important not just to us as the professionals, but to parents, the community at large, and indeed the children.

The challenge is to get beyond saying there are these things, to identifying them. We have got to get to the point of being able to talk confidently — and in a way understood by the non-professional — about how a child's progress is measured and talked about.

Oddly, inspection can help to highlight these factors because the framework is not just about standards *vis-à-vis* tests — it has this ethos element. It is concerned about and with relationships in the school and development of young people, the element of 'enrichment', extra-curricular, and all the rest which adds up to a broad and rich education.

We have got to start talking about these and the sense of the school as a community. I think that's where we have to get better and I think equally that is where inspection can shed light in ways which raw figures can never.

**CW:** *In a future scenario with school self-inspection and an external system, would the relationship between these shift? People are interested in there being more dialogue with the external inspection system, including with the inspection teams, so that the hope of 'improvement through inspection' becomes more likely realised?*

**MT:** Inspection of itself does not bring about improvement — that I am clear about. Inspection is a catalyst for improvement and an agenda for improvement but it always assumes that the school itself has the capacity and the willingness to pick up on both and act on them. The evidence from second inspections is very encouraging in that in both primary and secondary schools some-

thing like nine out of ten schools are able clearly to demonstrate improvements since the previous inspection — acting upon the action plan.

And in the questionnaires filled in after inspection by the head and chair of governors, we ask whether or not they think that the inspection will contribute and further the school's improvement. Something like three-quarters of schools say 'Yes'. That is very encouraging.

Since we have moved to the short inspection (which does have a huge amount of dialogue between the headteacher, senior managers and the inspection team) 98% plus of headteachers say it was a hugely positive experience.

Dialogue helps in a number of ways: first it makes the school feel part of the process, which is very important. In other words the inspection — still with all its rigour and objectivity — is being done *with* them, rather than *to* them — a process which a school just feels it has to get over so it can then get back to normal business.

'We want people in school to feel that the process is actually going to be supportive of their thrust for improvement, and may yield information which they themselves haven't identified or haven't given the same emphasis to as has the inspection team — and so stimulating a discussion within the school.

**CW:** *You mention a school's 'capacity' for improvement, and that in itself brings in the question of teacher shortages. Has inspection contributed to that shortage and, if so, what is to be done?*

**MT:** I know the anecdotes flying around, but I would be more concerned with hard evidence.

I am quite clear that a number of teachers have left the profession as a consequence of inspection in those schools where the children were not being given the standard of education that they deserved. And in so far as that is the case, I think that it was probably right — that they were people in the wrong profession. I don't think that teaching is any more beset by these sorts of problems than the other professions, and increasingly it has fewer.

**CW:** *I think surveys show that teaching is the unhappiest profession.*

**MT:** The unhappiness of teachers cannot wholly be laid at the door of Ofsted. There are a whole raft of reasons why they feel as they do, and undoubtedly the way in which they have been made ac-



countable and the way in which that accountability has been held up into the public glare, is certainly a contributory factor.

But there are a whole set of others — about terms and conditions, about workload, about pay, about public respect for teachers, about the difficulties of managing poor behaviour and so on

What I do agree about, as I said in my annual report in February, is that teacher shortage does represent the biggest threat to the considerable gain and improvements that have been made in recent times. A major challenge is seeking to avoid people haemorrhaging from the profession, as distinct from getting vast numbers in — which we need, but which won't solve the issue if we are still haemorrhaging from the other end.

**CW:** *In your annual report in February a number of commentators said that they had seen a difference in the style of language as well as the issues mentioned, and in the last few months I have had people say to me that they feel that the style of working of inspection teams has changed. Are they right?*

**MT:** Without reducing anything of the rigour, what we have tried to do is to try and get the inspection teams to work with schools in this process of inspection, to consider the task as one that is shared between two groups of professionals — those that are being inspected and those that are doing the inspection.

I think I've evidence from headteachers' letters to me that there's a feeling this is happening on the ground. No one is suggesting that it has got softer — no one has suggested that it has got tougher either — but they feel that it is a regime which is firm but also which is being done in a way which is appropriate and professional, which is what I want.

As far as my own report is concerned, clearly my style of writing is not the same as someone else's. I also tried to explicitly recognise that some of the challenges that schools face were not wholly within the capacity of the school to affect, and that other partners had a role to play in that, and that it required all to play their part.

**CW:** *Some people suggest that on occasions Ofsted inspection of LEAs have been more to find evidence to impose an alternative, rather than lead to improvement.*

**MT:** I don't believe that. Firstly, Ofsted does not decide whether or not there would be any form of intervention: that is the Secretary of State's decision. We simply report our views on the present personnel, and whether the present structure within a local authority is capable of bringing about the improvement

that is necessary. Does a particular organisation have the capacity to act on this or not? If it doesn't, it's right that we should say so. What then happens is a matter for the Secretary of State to determine.

There are cases where there has been intervention and where subsequently — for example, in Islington — we have shown that the intervention is beginning to bear fruit. Equally we have gone back to local authorities where such interventions have not been undertaken —



**'We should give more credit..'**

**'We don't give sufficient credit and sufficient attention in the media to the very significant improvements achieved in recent years in our schools, in relation to the quality of teaching and the quality of leadership.'**

**'In 1994/5 20% of teaching was unsatisfactory and last year it was 5%. That is really quite dramatic. Last year 40% of primary schools inspected didn't have a single lesson which was judged less than satisfactory — and the proportion of good, very good and excellent teaching has gone up from 40 to 60%.'**

**'We have got what we need in order to go to the next level of improvement — yet we are not celebrating it and we are not actually acknowledging it as strongly as we could.'**

notably in Liverpool — where the improvement brought about by new improvements, new structures have led to us saying that this is a local authority which we have confidence in now that has the capacity to move ahead. There isn't a single-one-size-fits-all solution to this issue.

In fairness local authorities have undergone a period of enormous upheaval, uncertainty and change: it is hardly surprising therefore that some of them have simply not been able to position themselves to be as responsive and

organised. Others have — the West Sussex report shows it is still a model and has managed to stay that way despite turbulence. The changes have not deflected the authority or its schools.

**CW:** *In mentioning the relationship between Ofsted and the Secretary of State, do you think the accountability and reporting processes for Ofsted are right? Are the relationships with the 'government of the day' right — or should Ofsted have less short-term political masters?*

**MT:** Well, we are a government department — even though non-ministerial. Like any other government department, our duty and responsibility would be to implement government policy and the will of parliament. Where independence really kicks in is in terms of how I organise the programme of work within the department and my capacity to report, as chief inspector, when I want, how I want and without any interference from ministers — that is the crucial bit of the independence. There can be no interference with that — that is absolutely written in law and is a great strength.

As a government department, we are within the same accountability procedures as any other. The one difference, of course, is that I am not a minister and therefore I cannot personally answer to parliament, so my annual report is presented on my behalf by the Secretary of State.

However, parliamentary questions are not answered by the DfES, but by me — I reply in writing. I am also directly answerable to the select committee which has the right to request any information of me. On average I appear three times a year.

But there is more than that. Taken as a whole there are probably 20 different forms of accountability — so some of the criticism on that point simply doesn't stand the test of reality. One cause, I think, has been that in part accountability got mixed up with personalities — between Ofsted and individuals — which wasn't helpful.

**CW:** *My final question: what advice would you give a new headteacher who was taking over from a predecessor with a large reputation?*

**MT:** Be your own person — do it your way.

Although, throughout our meeting, neither of us had mentioned the name Chris Woodhead, I think Mike Tomlinson knew what my question was driving at. He also knew what message his answer was intended to convey.

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