

Safeguarding is too important to be left to Ofsted

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April 2022

We have an orthodoxy that needs challenging.

It says something about our education system - and maybe our society - when we insist that a financial audit is an annual requirement, yet our check on children is left to a passing inspectorate, perhaps every seven to ten years.

We rightly check annually that our kitchens serve healthy food (including notices of allergens); we ensure year-on-year checks of science, technology and gym equipment - but our children's safeguarding we approach more casually.

I have long argued that Ofsted should pass on this crucial responsibility of safeguarding to local authorities and that *they* be given the resources to carry out an annual audit of every school's practices.

Ofsted does of course lead in-depth safeguarding visits when prompted by complaints or serious case reviews, and conducts well judged annual reviews of residential schools. In my experience, these are rigorous, professional and welcomed by leaders.

But a safeguarding check within an occasional Section 5 or Section 8 inspection can be an unproductive game of cat and mouse between inspectors and heads; and, with an ever-expanding definition of safeguarding, may often miss something important. The emotion needs taking out of this aspect of inspection. The purpose is to improve children's wellbeing, not shame schools.

If proof were needed that safeguarding should not be left to the passing inspectorate, take a look at the significant number of schools this academic year with published reports which read to parents as simply bizarre. Typically, the school hasn't been inspected for a decade or more, it has quality of education judged as good, but, because of safeguarding failures, the school is deemed inadequate overall. This is high stakes and in no one's best interests.

In the context of the recent White Paper's promotion of strong trusts, it is worth noting that trusts with capacity ensure annual safeguarding checks across all their schools. They do not leave this vital aspect to chance. It is sometimes in single academies without regular external supervision where problems arise.

Further, talk to heads and trust leaders: recruiting safeguarding governors is increasingly difficult. These governors feel exposed and weighed down by excessive demands on their volunteer time. They are 'amateurs' in the best tradition, unqualified to monitor the wealth of

procedures that are part and parcel of contemporary safeguarding. And they do not warm to the hostile questioning they receive from some inspectors.

A headteacher colleague who works internationally made a fascinating observation when he first read the 2019 inspection framework. 'With all its mention of county lines, off-rolling, gaming, separation, assumed sexual harassment, the framework tells me more about little England than it does about your education priorities'.

He had a point when looking from afar. I often think the same when I arrive at a school reception desk and am given the ubiquitous safeguarding leaflet - but nothing about teaching and learning, and I am in a school!

Ofsted is committed to inspecting all schools against the current framework by the end of the summer term 2025. By definition, most schools inspected this academic year will then not have had an inspectorate check of safeguarding for at least three years. That leaves too much to chance.

Two recommendations follow:

First, at the earliest opportunity, legislation should pass school safeguarding from Ofsted to rejuvenated local authorities which, when all said and done, remain ambassadors for every child in their geographical area. And this would roundly support the integrated education, health and social care agenda.

Second, HMCI should place *wellbeing* front and centre of the next inspection framework.

An orthodoxy challenged. Safeguarding belongs elsewhere.