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Committee

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The Children, Schools and Families Committee

The Children, Schools and Families Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Children, Schools and Families and its associated public bodies.

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The following members were also members of the Committee during the inquiry.

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Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

1. We are satisfied that schools should be held publicly accountable for their performance as providers of an important public service. We concur with the views expressed in evidence to us that the two major consequences of the accountability system should be school improvement and improvement in broader outcomes for children and young people, including well-being. (Paragraph 15)
2. The New Relationship with Schools policy was a laudable attempt by the Government to simplify the school accountability system, particularly in relation to inspection. However, the Government has continued to subject schools to a bewildering array of new initiatives and this has in many ways negated the good work started in New Relationship with Schools. (Paragraph 24)
3. We are concerned that the Government's 21st Century Schools White Paper signals even greater complexity in an already overly complex system of school accountability and improvement initiatives. There is a real danger that schools may become overwhelmed by the intricacies of the proposed reforms and that School Improvement Partners and local authorities may not have sufficient time or resources to mediate effectively between schools and the myriad providers of school improvement support. (Paragraph 36)

Schools' Self-Evaluation, Self-Improvement Partners and Local Authorities

4. We note that Ofsted is actively considering ways of involving governing bodies more in the inspection process, particularly where inspections are conducted without notice. However, it would have been preferable had the 2009 inspection framework been introduced following a satisfactory resolution of this issue. We recommend that Ofsted bring forward at the earliest opportunity firm proposals setting out how governing bodies will be appropriately involved in all inspections. (Paragraph 45)
5. We urge the Government to reconsider the proposals to place additional statutory duties on governors. We support the principle of better training for governors, but we recommend that the Government set out a detailed strategy for encouraging governors to take up training opportunities without training requirements becoming a barrier to recruitment. (Paragraph 47)
6. We are persuaded that self-evaluation—as an iterative, reflexive and continuous process, embedded in the culture of a school—is a highly effective means for a school to consolidate success and secure improvement across the full range of its activities. It is applicable, not just to its academic performance, but across the full range of a school's influence over the well-being of the children who learn there and the community outside. (Paragraph 53)
7. We believe that Ofsted should do more to encourage schools to be creative and produce evidence of the self-evaluation process which works for them and speaks to

the true culture and ethos of their own school. Ofsted should ensure that its own inspection processes are flexible enough to accommodate and give appropriate weight to alternative forms of evidence of self-evaluation. (Paragraph 59)

8. We are attracted to a model of accountability which encourages and supports schools towards a meaningful, continuous self-evaluation process, evidenced in a form which the school considers most appropriate and verified through inspection. We are persuaded that true self-evaluation is at the heart of what a good school does. For a school which is performing at a good level, embedding processes which encourage continuous self-improvement are likely to be of far more practical benefit than an inspection every few years. The latter is necessary mainly as a check to see that a school is performing at the appropriate level. Inspection should be a positive experience, reinforcing good practice and fostering dialogue with schools in relation to areas where further improvement can be made. The Government and Ofsted should endeavour to do more to help schools which have not yet come to terms with the concept of self-evaluation in its fullest sense. (Paragraph 63)
9. We welcome the fact that the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services is being asked to review its training and accreditation procedures to support School Improvement Partners in their new role. (Paragraph 76)
10. The Government must take care that it does not exacerbate the existing problems with recruitment of School Improvement Partners by increasing the training burden and introducing requirements that existing School Improvement Partners be re-accredited and that they all carry an ongoing licence to practice. (Paragraph 77)
11. We recommend that the Government produce clear plans to show how and from where enough School Improvement Partners (SIPs) with appropriate skills and experience will be recruited with sufficient time to dedicate to the expanded remit for SIPs which is proposed in the Government's White Paper. (Paragraph 84)
12. We agree with the Audit Commission that local authorities should be more involved with monitoring, supporting and, where necessary, intervening in school budgets and finance. It is indefensible that the expenditure of such vast sums should attract so little scrutiny. Central government should make clear that schools must make a proper accounting of their expenditure to local authorities; and that local authorities should be as engaged with the monitoring of finance as they are expected to be with the monitoring of performance and standards. We do not advocate an erosion of schools' autonomy, but we consider it important that the correct level of financial support is available to them in order to derive maximum value for money from the schools budget. (Paragraph 91)
13. We approve of the collaborative approach to school improvement taken by some local authorities; and we consider that partnership working between local authorities and all schools in the local area is a valuable means of providing support and spreading best practice. We urge central and local government to work together to ensure a more consistent approach across local authorities in this regard. (Paragraph 96)

14. We urge the Government to recognise the good work done in the local authorities which demonstrate a systematic, collaborative approach towards the identification of schools in need of improvement and the provision of support in raising their standards of performance. We recommend that the Government should be sparing in the use of its extended statutory powers to intervene in relation to school improvement. We consider that these powers should be used only in cases where the relevant local authority has failed in its duty to secure school improvement. They should not be used as a mechanism for central government to increase its control over the way in which schools are managed. (Paragraph 102)

The Inspectorate

15. In general terms, we support the approach to inspection set out in the 2009 inspection framework. We consider that a frequency of inspection in proportion to a school's current levels of performance is sensible, although some concerns remain about identification of schools where there is an unexpected slide in performance. We consider that a short notice period for inspection is sensible, but schools must be given sufficient time to collate all the necessary evidence and ensure attendance of key personnel. Without-notice inspection is appropriate where there are particular concerns about performance, and safeguarding in particular, but this approach should not be used without good reason. (Paragraph 111)
16. If visits to schools are to be as short as two days—and bearing in mind that some of those days will be taken up by preliminaries rather than by inspection itself—inspectors will need to be highly trained and well qualified if they are to make an accurate evaluation of school provision (Paragraph 112)
17. We remind Ofsted of the need for transparency and publicity for the way in which inspection data are combined to form final judgments on schools. (Paragraph 113)
18. We support the principle of increased emphasis on the views of pupils and parents, but we have some reservations about the level of responses to questionnaires, particularly for schools with a challenging intake. We urge Ofsted to make transparent the approach that inspectors will take when forming judgements on schools where there has been a low level of response to questionnaires from parents; and it should not rule out the possibility of meetings with parents. (Paragraph 114)
19. We are persuaded of the need for an inspectorate, independent of government, which can assure the quality of provision in individual schools, as well as producing more general reports on aspects of the education system at a national level. We consider that the latter are particularly important, not least because they should provide a sound evidential basis for policy-making by the Government. (Paragraph 121)
20. Both Ofsted and the Government should be alert to any sign that the growth of Ofsted's responsibilities is causing it to become an unwieldy and unco-ordinated body. (Paragraph 122)

21. We believe that Ofsted should aspire to have HMIs lead all inspections. Schools causing concern should always be inspected by a team headed by an HMI. (Paragraph 127)
22. We note that Ofsted has a duty to encourage improvement in schools. However, we do not accept that Ofsted necessarily has an active role to play in school improvement. It is Ofsted's role to evaluate a school's performance across its many areas of responsibility and to identify issues which need to be addressed so that a school can be set on the path to improvement. Ofsted has neither the time nor resources to be an active participant in the improvement process which takes place following inspection, aside from the occasional monitoring visit to verify progress. (Paragraph 137)
23. We recommend that Ofsted's role in school improvement be clarified so that the lines of responsibility are made clear to all those involved in the school system. Ofsted's function is a vital one: it is, in the purest sense, to hold schools to account for their performance. It is for others—schools themselves, assisted by School Improvement Partners, local authorities and other providers of support—to do the work to secure actual improvement in performance. The Chief Inspector already has a wide and important remit: she should feel no compulsion to make it wider. (Paragraph 138)
24. We recommend a review of the data underlying comparator measures or sets of measures to ensure that they accurately reflect the range of factors that can impact on school performance. (Paragraph 150)
25. We consider that the quality of school provision beyond the teaching of academic subjects is extremely important and that Ofsted has a duty to reflect this in a fair and balanced manner in its inspection reports. (Paragraph 157)
26. We urge Ofsted to rebalance its inspection framework in two ways, in order to reflect better the true essence of the school. First, when evaluating academic attainment, we recommend that Ofsted gives less evidential weight given to test results and derivative measures and gives more weight to the quality of teaching and learning observed by inspectors in the classroom. Second, when evaluating a school's performance in terms of pupil well-being and other non-academic areas, we recommend that Ofsted should move beyond the search for quantitative measures of performance and that it should focus more effort on developing qualitative measures which capture a broader range of a school's activity. (Paragraph 161)

Achievement and Attainment Tables and the School Report Card

27. Performance data have been a part of the educational landscape in England for some years. Like it or not, they are a feature of the school accountability system and we recognise the manifest difficulties in retreating from that position, even if a watchful eye should be kept on the consequences of the abandonment of performance tables linked to test results in other parts of the United Kingdom. If such data is to be collected, much can be done to mitigate the more unfortunate aspects of the publication. We take a pragmatic view and believe that the focus of debate should

move towards a more fruitful discussion of the types of data and information collected and the method of presentation. (Paragraph 167)

28. The Achievement and Attainment Tables present a very narrow view of school performance and there are inherent methodological and statistical problems with the way they are constructed. For instance, they are likely to favour independent and selective schools, which have a lower intake of deprived children or of children with Special Educational Needs. It is unsurprising, therefore, if such schools consistently top the academic league tables. Yet most of those who may wish to use the Tables, particularly parents, remain unaware of the very serious defects associated with them and will interpret the data presented without taking account of their inherent flaws. As a result, many schools feel so constrained by the fear of failure according to the narrow criteria of the Tables that they resort to measures such as teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, an inappropriate focusing of resources on borderline candidates, and encouraging pupils towards 'easier' qualifications, all in an effort to maximise their performance data. There is an urgent need for the Government to move away from these damaging Achievement and Attainment Tables and towards a system which gives a full and rounded account of a school's provision. (Paragraph 176)
29. We urge the Government to work closely with Ofsted in order to produce a model of the school report card appropriate for use by the inspectorate. However, if in Ofsted's view the school report card ultimately takes a form which is unsuitable for the purpose of risk assessment, as an independent regulator, Ofsted should not feel compelled to adopt the school report card as a replacement for its interim assessment. (Paragraph 184)
30. We welcome in principle the introduction of the school report card as a rationalisation of current accountability mechanisms and an attempt at providing a broader evidence base for assessing schools' performance. However, the Government must take care in developing its proposals that it tailors the school report card to the particular needs of the English schools system. Lessons can be learned from international practices and the case of the New York school report card will be particularly relevant; but the Government should not assume that what works elsewhere will necessarily work in the English system. (Paragraph 196)
31. Schools should be strongly incentivised by the accountability system to take on challenging pupils and work hard to raise their levels of attainment. To this end, we support the proposals to introduce credits on the school report card for narrowing the gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. However, we strongly caution the Government against the introduction of any penalties for increasing gaps in achievement. If the Government were to attach such penalties, it is likely that schools would seek to deny school places to challenging pupils in order to avoid the risk of a lower school report card score. They might also create incentives for schools not to push gifted and talented students to reach really high levels of achievement. (Paragraph 206)
32. We have been struck by the weight of evidence we have received which argues against an overall score on the school report card. It is true that Ofsted comes to an

overall judgement on a four point scale, but this judgement is meant to be the result of a very extensive analysis of a school's provision across the board, relying on quantitative and qualitative evidence and first-hand experience of the school at work. A school report card is not, and in our view never can be, a full account of a school's performance, yet the inclusion of an overall score suggests that it is. (Paragraph 211)

33. The range of discrete measures proposed for inclusion in the school report card certainly present a broader picture of a school than the current Achievement and Attainment Tables; but they cannot be the basis for a definitive judgement of overall performance in the same way as we are entitled to expect an Ofsted judgement to be. On balance, we think that parents and others should be able to decide for themselves those measures of performance most important to them. We approve of the proposal both to grade and rate performance in each category on the school report card, but we are not persuaded of the appropriateness of and need for an overall score. (Paragraph 212)
34. We recommend that the Government guards against serial changes to reporting criteria for the school report card once it is introduced nationally. The ability to track school performance on a range of issues over time is potentially a valuable feature of the reformed system, but this will not be possible if the reporting criteria are in a constant state of flux. (Paragraph 216)
35. There is potential for substantial confusion to be introduced if the reasons for differences between scores on the school report card and Ofsted judgements are not clear, leading to a perception of incoherence in the accountability system. This would be unfortunate, as the success of any accountability system depends on the extent to which users have confidence in it. We recommend that DCSF and Ofsted work together to find a way to eradicate, or at least minimise the impact of, this problem. If the Government accepts our recommendation not to include an overall score in the school report card, the potential for conflicting accounts of school performance would be greatly reduced. (Paragraph 217)
36. The Government must address the methodological problems inherent in basing important indicators on survey evidence. It is unacceptable that schools with the most challenging intakes might suffer skewed performance scores because of a low response rate to surveys for the purposes of the school report card. (Paragraph 222)
37. Academic research in the field of school effectiveness is lacking in the field of pupil well-being and wider outcomes beyond assessment results. In the absence of robust, independent research evidence, the Government should exercise great caution in pursuing its otherwise laudable aim of widening the accountability system beyond simple test scores. (Paragraph 223)
38. We do not believe that the indicators based on parent and pupil surveys, together with data on attendance, exclusions, the amount of sport provided and the uptake of school lunches, provide a balanced picture of a school's performance. In the absence of a set of performance indicators which are able to provide a fully rounded and accurate picture of how well a school is supporting and enhancing the well-being and outcomes of its pupils, the school report card should not purport to give a balanced

view of a school's overall performance in this or any other area. The Government should make clear on the face of the school report card that its contents should only be considered as a partial picture of the work of a school. This is not to say that we do not consider the inclusion of well-being indicators to be a welcome development: we are merely concerned that parents and others should understand the limits of the information which is presented to them on the school report card. (Paragraph 224)

39. We are pleased that the Government is now moving away from the Achievement and Attainment Tables based on a narrow set of measures of academic achievement derived from test results. We believe that the move towards the broader evidence base proposed for the school report card is a step in the right direction. However, we reiterate our warning to the Government that it should not make claims for the school report card which do not stand up to scrutiny. It will never constitute a definitive view of a school's performance but it might, if properly constructed, be a useful tool in assessing a broader range of aspects of a school's performance than is possible at present. (Paragraph 225)
40. At the start of the pilot study of the school report card, it is too early for us to make detailed recommendations about its precise contents. At this stage, we simply urge the Government to take account of the concerns raised by witnesses to this inquiry. There is still much work to be done in developing the school report card into a workable format. (Paragraph 226)

Conclusion: complexity, consistency and coercion

41. The complexity of the school accountability and improvement system in England is creating a barrier to genuine school improvement based on the needs of individual schools and their pupils. We support the message in the 21st Century Schools White Paper, that schools should be empowered to take charge of their own improvement processes. However, the Government's continuing tendency to impose serial policy initiatives on schools belies this message and the relentless pace of reform has taken its toll on schools and their capacity to deliver a balanced education to their pupils. We urge the Government to refrain from introducing frequent reforms and allow schools a period of consolidation. (Paragraph 239)
42. Inconsistencies in the approach to school accountability and improvement and inconsistencies in the judgments which are made in different parts of the accountability system are both confusing and damaging. Confusion undermines the credibility of the accountability system and schools which find themselves pulled in different directions are unlikely to be able to give their full attention to the fundamental task of providing their pupils with a broad and balanced education. (Paragraph 249)
43. We recommend that the Government revisits the proposals for reform of the school accountability and improvement system set out in the 21st Century Schools White Paper with a view to giving more substance to its claims that schools are responsible for their own improvement. We have received strong evidence that schools feel coerced and constrained by the outcomes of Ofsted inspection and programmes set up by central government, such as National Challenge. We have consistently noted

the adverse effects that targets have had on the education of children and young people. The Government should seek means of delivering support and challenge to schools without what many witnesses perceived as a harmful ‘naming and shaming’ approach endemic in the current system. (Paragraph 260)

44. The problem with the Government’s assessment of the accountability system is that it implies that schools welcome the opportunity to take “ownership of their own improvement” but then provides the perfect example of how they have been prevented from doing just that. The “flexibility” of the system, allowing a constant shift in priorities by central government, is precisely the reason why schools are struggling to engage with the accountability regime and myriad school improvement mechanisms. The Government refers to the flexibility of the accountability system as if this is an inherent benefit. The opposite is true. Schools and, indeed, local authorities are in sore need of a period of stability so that they can regroup, take the necessary time to identify where their priorities lie and then work, with appropriate support, to secure the necessary improvements. (Paragraph 262)
45. It is time for the Government to allow schools to refocus their efforts on what matters: children. For too long, schools have struggled to cope with changing priorities, constant waves of new initiatives from central government, and the stresses and distortions caused by performance tables and targets. (Paragraph 265)
46. The Government should place more faith in the professionalism of teachers and should support them with a simplified accountability and improvement system which challenges and encourages good practice rather than stigmatising and undermining those who are struggling. In doing so, it is vital for effective accountability that the independence of HM Inspectorate be safeguarded and maintained at all times. We believe that the Government should revisit the plans set out in its 21st Century Schools White Paper and simplify considerably the accountability framework and improvement strategies it proposes. (Paragraph 266)

Summary

A parent or carer who sends a child to school expects that the school will help that child to learn to the best of his or her ability, in a caring environment. Anyone who funds a school, whether through payment of taxes, fees or sponsorship, will expect that school to demonstrate good value for money. Employers, colleges and universities rely upon schools to lay the foundations for their pupils to become able and productive members of the workforce.

Schools therefore bear heavy responsibilities, and they need to be held publicly accountable for the services which they provide. Any system of accountability should in turn lead to improvement in those services, in terms of both education and broader outcomes, including wellbeing.

Self-evaluation by schools is widely recognised as an essential element of accountability. For a school which is performing at a good level, embedding processes which encourage continuous self-improvement is likely to be of far more practical benefit than an infrequent inspection. Self-evaluation is a starting point for Ofsted in inspecting a school; but we believe that Ofsted should do more to encourage schools to be creative and produce evidence of the self-evaluation process which works for them rather than allow schools to gain the impression that the standard Self Evaluation Form (SEF) provided by Ofsted is mandatory.

There are now nearly 5,000 School Improvement Partners (SIPs), principally serving or former head teachers, appointed to help school leaders evaluate their school's performance. Many witnesses welcomed SIPs' work in providing the support and challenge necessary to support school improvement; but others found their effectiveness to be variable. The Government now proposes an enhanced role for SIPs, who would become in effect gatekeepers for all those who wished to engage in supporting and improving schools. However, the Government needs to do more work to ensure that there will be enough SIPs with the appropriate skills and experience and with enough time to fulfil this expanded role.

We are persuaded of the need for an inspectorate which is independent of government and which can assure the quality of provision in individual schools. However, Ofsted has grown enormously. Its responsibilities now encompass inspection of not just schools but also early years settings, colleges, initial teacher education, adult education, children's social care and local authority children's services. Whether this is sustainable for a single organisation in the long term is debatable, and both Ofsted and the Government should be alert to any sign that the growth of Ofsted's responsibilities is causing it to become unwieldy or unco-ordinated.

Ofsted is now using a new inspection framework. In general, we support the approach which it takes, matching frequency of inspection to levels of performance. Short notice periods for inspection are sensible and reduce the stress of preparation; without-notice inspection is appropriate where there are particular concerns about performance—particularly in relation to safeguarding—but it should not be used without good reason.

We do, however, recommend that Ofsted should rebalance its inspection framework in two ways. In evaluating academic attainment, Ofsted should give less evidential weight to test results and give more weight to the quality of teaching and learning observed by inspectors in the classroom. Also, when evaluating performance in non-academic areas such as pupil well-being, Ofsted should focus on developing qualitative measures which capture a broad range of a school's activity.

Ofsted employs some 200 HMI inspectors. Approximately 1,000 more inspectors are supplied by contractors to work full-time or part-time. Although there was little direct evidence of a major gulf in quality between the two types of inspector, HMI inspectors are generally better respected and are rated highly. We believe that Ofsted should plan to have HMIs lead all inspections. Schools causing concern should always be inspected by a team headed by an HMI. We believe that all inspectors should be rigorously trained to the highest standard.

The Government intends to replace Achievement and Attainment Tables with a School Report Card for each school, published annually and setting out key outcomes in pupil attainment, wellbeing, reducing the impact of disadvantage, perceptions of the school, and possibly partnership working. How the Report Card would mesh with the interim assessments by Ofsted of high-performing schools—which only receive inspections approximately every five years under the new inspection framework—is unclear. The Government and Ofsted should work closely to produce a model of a School Report Card which can be used by Ofsted to make decisions on which schools should undergo a full inspection within the five year period.

We welcome the introduction of a School Report Card which provides a broader evidence base for assessing schools' performance. We support the proposal to introduce credits for narrowing the gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers; but there should not be penalties for increasing gaps in achievement. Such a policy would discourage schools from admitting challenging pupils and might create perverse incentives for schools not to push gifted and talented students to reach really high levels of achievement.

We are not persuaded that an overall score on a School Report Card is either needed or appropriate. A Report Card is unlike an Ofsted inspection, which is based upon extensive analysis of a school's provision across the board, and based upon quantitative and qualitative evidence as well as first-hand experience. It can never be a full account of a school's performance, yet the inclusion of an overall score would suggest that it was.

The main message in this Report is a warning against the complexity which results from overlapping accountability structures and serial policy initiatives. The Government is correct in saying in the 21st Century Schools White Paper that schools should be empowered to take charge of their own improvement processes; but shifting Government priorities and the pressures of inspection, targets and Government programmes for school improvement combine to prevent schools from having the freedom to take ownership of their improvement. The "flexibility" of the accountability system, championed by the Government, may not be quite the benefit which it appears to be. Schools and local authorities now need a period of stability so that they can regroup, take time to identify

where their priorities lie, and then work to secure the necessary improvements.

1 Introduction

Context for the Inquiry and Report

1. Since its establishment in the autumn of 2007, this Committee has been engaged in a series of inquiries which have looked at the pillars on which the national management of our school education system is founded. In May 2008, we published our report on Testing and Assessment in schools and the wide-ranging and often damaging consequences of our national testing regime.¹ Then, in April 2009, we reported on our inquiry into the National Curriculum, which we found to be overly prescriptive of what teachers could do with their class time.² This inquiry into School Accountability is the third and last in the series. Our Report considers the roles of a variety of different agents for accountability in the English school system: schools themselves, including their governing bodies; local authorities and the School Improvement Partners they appoint; the main schools inspectorate, Ofsted; and central government, which sets policy and compiles information on each school which is made publicly available by way of the Achievement and Attainment Tables.

2. This Report considers accountability arrangements for mainstream primary and secondary provision in the maintained sector in England. It does not consider early years, sixth form or further education provision, or provision by independent schools not inspected by Ofsted; nor, except insofar as they are referred to specifically, does it consider the particular circumstances of Academies, which are accountable to the Secretary of State through the Young People's Learning Agency. The Committee noted that there were some additional serious accountability issues associated with Academies, not least those arising from the limited role of local authorities and the central involvement of Academy sponsors.³ In its report on the National Curriculum, the Committee raised concerns about the different requirements on Academies in relation to the National Curriculum.⁴ In the current inquiry, the Committee chose to focus on issues relevant to all schools rather than those that apply specifically to academies.

3. It is difficult to draw the line between accountability and arrangements for school improvement. Although this Report is primarily concerned with the mechanisms of school accountability, we also discuss the processes which are in place to promote school improvement because the two areas are in some respects inextricably linked. We will not, however, undertake an exhaustive account of school improvement policy and practice as this is largely outside the remit of our inquiry.

4. We issued our Terms of Reference and Call for Evidence on 18 December 2008. Since then, we have taken a broad range of evidence, both written and oral, on school accountability from a wide variety of stakeholders. In addition, we travelled to New York

1 *Testing and Assessment*, Third Report of the Children, Schools and Families Committee, Session 2007–08, HC 169-I and HC 169-II

2 *National Curriculum*, Fourth Report of the Children, Schools and Families Committee, Session 2008–09, HC 334-I and HC 334-II

3 Curtis A., Exley S., Sasia A., Tough S., and Whitty G., *The Academies programme: Progress, problems and possibilities*, Sutton Trust and Institute of Education, University of London, December 2008

4 *National Curriculum*, Fourth Report from the Committee, Session 2008–09, HC 344-I, paragraphs 70–75

and Washington, DC to see for ourselves how school accountability policy is formulated and practised at both federal and state level in the United States. New York uses a school report card as part of its accountability system, and it was the model to which the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families referred when he announced the new school report card proposed by the Government for implementation in England.⁵ We were grateful to the many organisations and individuals we met on our visit for being so generous with their time, views and information. They provided us with a broader context for our assessment of the strengths and weakness of the accountability system in England and helped us to formulate our views on the fundamental principles of accountability. The following paragraphs will outline the aspects of the school accountability system which we will consider in detail in this Report.

Self-evaluation, School Improvement Partners and Local Authorities

5. We start by considering the context in which schools operate. Schools are, first and foremost, responsible for their own improvement, with the governing body setting the strategic framework.⁶ In recent years, schools have increasingly been encouraged to formalise the self-evaluation process as part of their improvement strategy, culminating in the requirement by Ofsted that they provide a written self-evaluation form to inspectors as evidence of their work in this area. Schools are assisted in their self-evaluation and improvement processes by School Improvement Partners (SIPs) who are appointed by the local authority. SIPs provide support and challenge to schools and help them to commission the services they need to improve their performance.

6. School provision is commissioned by local authorities, who also have a remit to monitor local schools' performance. Local authorities monitor the performance of schools in their area using a variety of sources of information, including the SIPs they appoint, data provided by the school and Ofsted inspection judgements. Local authorities often use informal mechanisms to challenge schools and support them in making necessary improvements. However, local authorities can, and sometimes must, use their statutory powers of intervention where there are concerns that a school is not performing to an expected standard.⁷

The Inspectorate

7. In this inquiry, we have focused on the work of Ofsted in the maintained schools sector and have not considered the work of other inspectorates, such as the Independent Schools Inspectorate. The remit of Ofsted was broadened significantly from 1 April 2007 when it became The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. HM Chief Inspector is now responsible both for school inspection and for inspection of a very wide range of settings and services connected with children and skills more generally. We take regular evidence from HM Chief Inspector on the full range of her responsibilities. This Committee and its predecessor have published a series of evidence

5 Statement by Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families to the House, HC Deb, 14 Oct 2008, Col 677

6 DfES and Ofsted (2004) *A New Relationship, our future with Schools: Improving Performance through School Self-Evaluation*; DCSF (June 2009) *Your child, your schools: building a 21st century schools system*, Cm 7588, para 4.1

7 *Local Authorities and School Improvement: The Use of Statutory Powers*, NFER, March 2009

and reports setting out findings on the details of Ofsted's work and practice.⁸ It is not intended, therefore, to duplicate some of this work here: this inquiry has focused more on whether a school inspectorate is a necessary component of an accountability system, what its role should be, what its aims should be and what outcomes should be expected. School inspection reports are a major source of information about a school's performance, and inspection is often the trigger for a school to address its performance issues. It is in this context that we examine the role of the inspectorate in the accountability system.

Achievement and Attainment Tables and the school report card

8. Other major sources of information about schools are the Achievement and Attainment Tables, formerly known as performance tables, compiled and published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The tables contain statistical information on the school cohort, test results, a contextual value added measure,⁹ a series of comparative annual data on test scores, statistics on absence, and statistics on pupils with special educational needs (SEN). The tables have been the subject of controversy for many years because, although they do not actually rank schools according to their performance in national examinations, they permit others, especially the media, to do so.¹⁰ This is considered unfair by those who argue that the Achievement and Attainment Tables in general, and test scores in particular, give only a partial view of a school's overall performance.¹¹ The Government's proposal for a new school report card is an attempt to address this issue, amongst others, by providing more information on a wider range of performance indicators. We consider the consequences of the Achievement and Attainment Tables, how the school report card might change the accountability landscape, and how useful these tools are for parents and others who are interested in a school's performance.

Conclusion: complexity, consistency and coercion

9. The final part of our analysis considers some cross-cutting issues which are relevant to all three of the preceding areas of discussion. A number of messages have emerged from the evidence submitted to this inquiry. First, the school accountability and improvement system has become extremely complex, with new programmes and policies emerging piecemeal from central government over a number of years to produce an intricate accountability system, with multiple lines of accountability to different bodies for different purposes. Linked to this is the impression that some major elements of the accountability system are giving conflicting messages, leading schools, parents and

8 The most recent of these are: Oral and Written Evidence taken on 12 December 2007, 14 May 2008, 10 December 2008 and 9 February 2009, published together as HC 70, Session 2008–09; Sixth Report of the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2006–07, HC 165.

9 CVA is a measure which allows comparisons to be made between schools with differing intakes. Data derived from test results are adjusted to take account of prior attainment (hence 'value added') and 'contextual' factors such as gender, mobility and measures of deprivation. It is essentially a progression measure which shows how much actual progress a school has made with pupils with certain characteristics by comparison with the progress predicted for those pupils by the CVA model based on progress of pupils in all other schools.

10 See, for example, the top 50 primary schools in England in 2008 as ranked by *The Times* at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/multimedia/archive/00513/school_table_513406a.pdf

11 See *Testing and Assessment*, Third Report of the Children, Schools and Families Committee, Session 2007–08, HC 169-I and HC 169-II

others to worry about the consistency of the various mechanisms which are supposed to hold schools to account and support them towards better performance. Finally, schools are receiving mixed messages from the Government and Ofsted about who and what is driving school improvement. The language of self-evaluation and schools taking charge of their own improvement processes permeates many official documents, yet the reality is rather different. Schools in need of improvement are still subject to programmes devised and applied by central government through its agencies and have limited control over the improvement programmes to which they are subject.

The need for an accountability system

10. In setting the scene for this inquiry, the first, and most obvious, question is whether we need an accountability system at all. We found a general consensus in the evidence submitted to us that schools should be held accountable for their performance. We received no evidence from witnesses arguing that there should be no accountability system, nor have we received evidence arguing against an independent regulator charged with inspecting schools and reporting on standards. Indeed, there were some unfavourable references to the situation which obtained prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum, with its associated tests and performance reporting, introduced in the Education Reform Act 1988; and of the modern, centralised inspectorate, constituted under the Education (Schools) Act 1992.¹² A survey of parents by the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations (NCPTA) found that 96% agreed that it was important for parents to know how well each school performs; 87% of parents wanted to be able to compare schools; and 90% wanted to be able to compare the performance of schools that were alike in terms of context, location and circumstances. 78% thought that Ofsted inspections were of value to parents.¹³

11. Many witnesses stated that it is appropriate that schools should be held accountable, not only for their academic standards, but also for their wider contributions, especially in terms of child welfare and the *Every Child Matters* outcomes.¹⁴ The NCPTA survey found that 78% of parents considered test results to be an important measure of school performance, but 96% wanted test results to be part of a wider range of information, including pupil health and other outcomes.¹⁵

12. It is worth noting the reasons given in the evidence for having an accountability system. Many witnesses stated that the fact that schools were funded with public money and provided an important public service was reason enough that they should be held publicly accountable.¹⁶ The NASUWT echoed the views of other witnesses in saying that:

12 Q 145; Q 146

13 Ev 34 App 1

14 Audit Commission response to DCSF/Ofsted consultation on the School Report Card, para 7; Ev 185; Ev 187; Ev 62; Ev 113; Ev 190; Ev 146; these outcomes were introduced in the eponymous green paper published by the Government in September 2003 and have achieved wide significance in children's services ever since. The outcomes are: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and economic well-being.

15 Ev 34 App 1

16 Mathematics in Education and Industry; Ev 176; Ev 9; Ev 187; Ev 113; Ev 189; Ev 145; Q 1; Q 2

As a publicly-funded universal state service, the education system is held and managed in the public interest and must, therefore, be accountable at national and local level to those democratically elected by the public.

In a similar vein, Keith Bartley, Chief Executive of the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE), told us that:

Education is a major public service affecting the life chances of every child and young person, and it must therefore be held to public account.¹⁷

This last statement also points towards other justifications for the accountability system, which look to its purposes over and above the basic proposition that public services ought to be run properly. Schools are viewed as providing a critical public service in that they are concerned with the fundamentally important task of educating and shaping children and young people. For this reason, public accountability is seen as the means by which to secure the standards of service which are considered necessary to assure the welfare of pupils and the best possible educational and social outcomes for individuals.¹⁸ However, the current accountability system remains focused on test results and contextual value added measures derived from them. Even Ofsted places heavy emphasis on test results when coming to an inspection judgement. The accountability system will require significant development and reform before it is to move beyond the current, academic attainment-based system and become broad enough to take significant account of the welfare of and outcomes for pupils, as suggested in the 21st Century Schools White Paper.¹⁹

13. The final group of justifications for a school accountability system focuses more specifically on school improvement than on pupil outcomes. Put another way, accountability mechanisms are a means to draw attention to the need for improvement and to unlock the available resources for supporting that improvement. The Royal Statistical Society presented a vision of an accountability system which supported teacher and school improvement rather than identifying failure. It stated:

Every child needs to attend a good school so a key purpose of the accountability system should be to identify what schools need to improve and what support (if any) they require.²⁰

The GTCE considered that, given the resources necessarily invested in meeting accountability requirements, an accountability framework should serve both the aims of scrutiny and practice improvement.²¹ Ofsted explained its role in the current system as inspecting and regulating in order to promote excellence and considers that it has been

17 Q 1

18 Ev 170; Ev 171; Audit Commission response to Ofsted consultation *A focus on improvement: proposals for maintained school inspections from September 2009*; Ev 183; Ev 62; Ev 114;

19 *Your child, your schools, our future*, Cm 7588, DCSF, chapter 4

20 Ev 180

21 Ev 2

successful in this respect in that the proportion of good and outstanding schools, as judged by Ofsted, has increased from 59% in 2005–06 to 64% in 2007–08.²²

14. However, we should maintain a clear distinction between the accountability of a school for its performance and the consequences of its being held to account which, according to many witnesses, should include improvements in school performance, pupil well-being and outcomes. Insofar as these latter considerations are used as a justification for an accountability system, it is very much a functional, rather than a principled, justification.

15. We are satisfied that schools should be held publicly accountable for their performance as providers of an important public service. We concur with the views expressed in evidence to us that the two major consequences of the accountability system should be school improvement and improvement in broader outcomes for children and young people, including well-being.

16. If there has been broad consensus in principle on the need for an accountability system which leads to school improvement and enhanced well-being and other outcomes for pupils, there has been considerable disagreement about the details of how the accountability system should work and the precise effect the current system has on schools. In the next section, we outline the current accountability system, before moving on in the following chapters to consider in turn the different elements of that system.

Overview of the accountability system

17. Prior to the major reforms of the education system started in the late 1980s, schools were largely responsible for their own curricula and national testing was limited to the 16+ age group. Inspection was carried out by Local Education Authority-employed inspectors. In 1988, the Education Reform Act started a process of centralisation of the schools system by introducing the National Curriculum and allowing for national testing at regular intervals for younger children and associated national performance reporting on the basis of these test results. Later, the Education (Schools) Act 1992 reformed the inspectorate into a national institution under Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in England. The Chief Inspector's office became known as Ofsted and it has overseen a national set of standards across England ever since.

The New Relationship with Schools

18. The recent background to the current school accountability system is largely provided by the Government's New Relationship with Schools reforms, introduced in 2004.²³ The centralisation of the schools system had, over time, produced an increasingly complex system of regulation and requirements for schools. As a result of this, the Government stated that, under the New Relationship with Schools:

22 Ev 114; Ev 115

23 DfES and Ofsted (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools*

We set ourselves the task of delivering an intelligent accountability framework, a simplified school improvement process and improved data and information systems.²⁴

19. In essence, the New Relationship with Schools was intended to help schools raise standards, with clearer priorities and less bureaucracy, and to provide more information for parents. It was also intended to support schools as they implemented the *Every Child Matters* agenda, facilitating schools' involvement with local children's trusts and helping schools adapt to the multi-agency working and joint-commissioning structures being put in place. Major points of the New Relationship with Schools were:

- School Improvement Partners (SIPs): introduced to help school leaders to evaluate their school's performance, identify priorities for improvement and draw up improvement plans.
- The reduction of unnecessary bureaucracy: multi-year school budgets were introduced, with fewer distinct funding streams, to promote greater certainty and predictability for schools in their future funding. Schools were allowed to produce a single school plan to use for multiple purposes. The monthly mailing of paper to schools was stopped and a more modern system of communication put in place.
- Building the capacity of schools to drive their own improvement: more emphasis was placed on self-evaluation, which was to form the basis for planning, inspection and SIPs' work with schools. Schools were required to ensure that their approach to self-evaluation was appropriate. To this end, the DfES and Ofsted jointly published high-level guidance for schools, *A New Relationship with Schools: Improving performance through school self-evaluation and development planning*. The Implementation Review Unit also published guidance on completing the self-evaluation form.
- Establishing a more intelligent, coherent, evidence-based accountability framework. This included the goal of providing to parents and the general public a broad and balanced view of a school. The chosen tool was the new School Profile, which combined standardised data with a school's description of its own work. The School Profile was intended to replace the need for the statutory requirements for governors to hold an annual meeting with parents and to produce an annual report to parents. In addition, given that the School Profile was supposed to promote a balanced picture of a school, the requirements for the school prospectus were simplified to allow greater flexibility over what was included.
- Making better use of data: use of the latest electronic data and information systems was intended to make interpretation of pupils' progress fairer and reflect the context of the school. These systems were also intended to help schools make contact more easily with other practitioners to support individual children with additional needs.
- Securing better alignment between schools' priorities and the priorities of local and central government.²⁵

24 DfES and Ofsted (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools*, p1

25 DfES and Ofsted (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools*

20. The New Relationship with Schools was also meant to facilitate schools' involvement with local children's trusts and help schools adapt to the multi-agency working and joint-commissioning structures being put in place under the Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme.²⁶ The Common Assessment Framework being introduced under that programme was intended to help schools to identify their role in meeting pupils' needs and to target referral to other specialist services when needed. Schools would be able to work with local children's trusts to find places for hard-to-place pupils. In that sense, the New Relationship with Schools was intended to support the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes for all children:

- being healthy;
- staying safe;
- enjoying and achieving;
- making a positive contribution; and
- achieving economic well-being.

21. The elements of the New Relationship with Schools which pertain to inspection were backed up with the necessary primary legislation under the Education Act 2005. This inspection framework has been operational since September 2005 and is the system to which most evidence submitted to this inquiry refers. The 2005 regime introduced shorter and more regular inspections, known as Section 5 inspections;²⁷ shorter notice of inspection; and an inspection time of no more than two days. In addition, more emphasis was placed on a school's self-evaluation which, since 2005, has formed part of the evidence base which a school must provide to inspectors as part of the inspection. The categories of schools causing concern were simplified, so that a school would either be placed in special measures or be issued with notice to improve. The stated aim of this regime was to lighten the burden on schools while retaining a rigorous inspection system.

22. Despite the aim of simplification underlying the New Relationship with Schools, the Government has nevertheless introduced myriad initiatives over the intervening years which were aimed at specific problems. Many of these have been delivered through the National Strategies, set up in 1998 as a professional development programme, but expanded since to cover a wide remit which includes support for and initiatives aimed at school improvement. A high-profile example of such an initiative is the National Challenge, a programme which targets schools which fall below the threshold of 30% of pupils achieving five A*–C grades at GCSE (including English and mathematics). The large number of new initiatives has led to the charge that accountability mechanisms operating on schools have become overly complex, leaving school leaders and others confused about which, sometimes conflicting, measures they should focus on, where the

26 Department for Education and Skills (2004) *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*

27 Under the previous regime, inspections had been longer and were carried out at four- and then six-yearly intervals.

most suitable help might be available, and which initiatives are effective in promoting school improvement.²⁸

23. Professor Peter Tymms of Durham University pointed to another aspect of this problem of complexity which goes to the heart of policy-making. He told us that the questions set out in the call for evidence to this inquiry were “vital to the future of our educational system” but that satisfactory answers to these questions would be difficult to achieve, “given our present state of knowledge”. He argued that the true consequences of using certain measures such as test scores and CVA for accountability purposes were impossible to ascertain:

This is because so many other things are happening simultaneously in our society and in our schools. There have been numerous initiatives: inspections have changed, the nature of the tests has changed, the population of school children has changed and so on. We are seeing changes in the schools but what has caused what? We simply cannot know, and that is a problem that faces us nationally and internationally.²⁹

He urges policy makers to take an experimental approach to reform, testing different initiatives systematically in order to ascertain the precise effects they have on the education system. This would allow policies to be formulated on the basis of firm evidence of what works and what is less effective.³⁰

24. The New Relationship with Schools policy was a laudable attempt by the Government to simplify the school accountability system, particularly in relation to inspection. However, the Government has continued to subject schools to a bewildering array of new initiatives and this has in many ways negated the good work started in New Relationship with Schools.

The 21st Century Schools White Paper and the new Ofsted inspection framework for 2009

25. The Government’s recent 21st Century Schools White Paper sets out the Government’s current proposals for reform of the schools system and details plans in a number of different areas:

- preparing children for the challenges of the 21st Century;
- excellent teaching and additional help for children who need it;
- partnership working for schools;
- strong school accountability and rapid intervention where necessary;
- the roles of local and central government in supporting and challenging schools; and

28 Ev 170; Ev 186; Q 79; Q 144

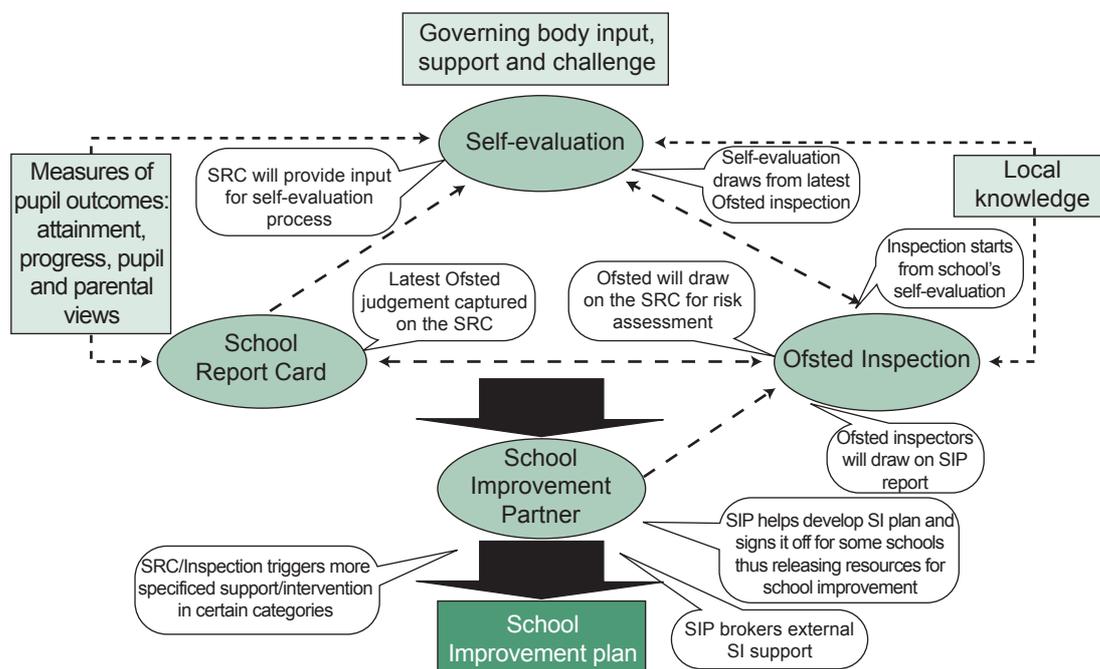
29 Ev 170

30 Ev 170

- the provision of a skilled workforce with good leadership.³¹

For those parts of the White Paper concerned with accountability and school improvement, the Government's starting position is that every school is responsible for its own improvement and should be seeking to improve continuously. The Government wishes to move towards a "more differentiated approach, in which every school receives tailored challenge and support", to which end it proposes further reform of the accountability system with increased emphasis on progression in attainment and the wider aspects of school performance.³² The essential components of the accountability regime under the proposed reforms are school self-evaluation, the school report card, Ofsted inspection and School Improvement Partners. The associated mechanisms are represented in Figure 1.³³

Figure 1



Source: DCSF (June 2009) *Your child, your schools: building a 21st century schools system*, Cm 7588, p61

26. There have already been some moves towards a "differentiated approach" and the White Paper gives the example of the secondary school improvement strategy *Promoting Excellence for All*, published in June 2008. Within this strategy: the National Challenge is applied to schools with GCSE results which do not meet the minimum standard of 30% of pupils achieving five A*–C grades at GCSE including English and maths; and *Gaining Ground* addresses those schools whose pupils' achievement is above this threshold but who "are not making fast enough progress".³⁴

31 DCSF (June 2009) *Your child, your schools: building a 21st century schools system*, Cm 7588

32 DCSF (June 2009) *Your child, your schools: building a 21st century schools system*, Cm 7588, p55

33 DCSF (June 2009) *Your child, your schools: building a 21st century schools system*, Cm 7588, para 4.19

34 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.2

27. The White Paper proposes a further range of initiatives aimed at school improvement, including:

- The *Good and Great Schools* programme: to include ‘open door’ visits so that schools can learn from each other’s good practice; help for local authorities and schools to establish local groups to share expertise and key staff, and develop centres of excellence; and work with key stakeholders to build on the High Performing Specialist Schools programme to identify and reward the best schools. Consultation on these proposals will start in autumn 2009.³⁵
- Investigation into the causes of high in-school variance and volatility in performance. Work with some local authorities and schools to develop a voluntary collaborative programme to address these issues will begin in autumn 2009.³⁶
- More focus on primary schools which, whilst performing at or above the minimum target standard, show poor rates of progression or inconsistent results. Local authorities will be asked to develop tailored plans for primary school improvement and schools will be encouraged to work in partnership, with the best schools assisting others to improve. Relevant existing programmes will be expanded to help with primary school improvement.³⁷
- Extension of the Families of Schools approach nationally.³⁸ This is intended to encourage schools to visit each other and share best practice.³⁹

28. The White Paper states that the Department will largely cease to provide or fund directly the provision of school improvement support. The Department will assure a sufficient supply of improvement support from a range of different providers across the country. Individual schools will be enabled to identify for themselves, on the basis of self-evaluation and advice from their School Improvement Partner (SIP), the type of support they require and the resources they intend to invest.⁴⁰ The current, central contract for National Strategies will not be renewed and the funding will be delegated to schools; and it is intended that they, with their SIPs, will use it to invest in improving literacy, numeracy and other core skills.⁴¹ The current centralised support for certain subject areas will continue only where there is a need for it, for example, to address a national shortage of teachers in a particular subject. Funding will be devolved where possible, in accordance with the new model, as current contracts come up for renewal.⁴²

35 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.3

36 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.4

37 The Improving Schools Programme, the Leading Teacher programme and the Local Leaders of Education programme; paras 4.5–4.7

38 Families of Schools is currently operating in City Challenge areas and groups schools according to prior attainment and socio-economic factors, enabling them to draw comparisons and share good practice with schools in similar circumstances

39 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.10

40 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 4.8–4.9

41 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.11

42 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.12

29. To draw all of these measures together, the White Paper states that local authorities will be asked to draw up a costed menu of school improvement support services to cover all five Every Child Matters outcomes. The range of services should take into account the particular needs of local schools. The commissioning and brokering of support from a range of providers would gradually replace the employment of local consultants; and schools and SIPs would then be able to choose which services they require, regardless of provider.⁴³ Irrespective of the possible merits of this proposal, it seems to us that there is a distinct risk that it will add complexity to the process of school improvement and could place new burdens on local authorities.

30. The Government states that, under the proposed reforms, externally-marked, national tests will remain central to the accountability system. Primary schools will be judged on Key Stage 2 test results (or single-level tests if, as intended, they replace Key Stage 2 tests) and secondary schools will be judged on their GCSE and Diploma results.⁴⁴ These performance measures have, until now, been reported in the Achievement and Attainment Tables. However, it is intended that these will be replaced by the school report card as the main source of accountability information from 2011. The school report card will set out the key outcomes expected of schools, to include pupil attainment, progress and wellbeing; reducing the impact of disadvantage; parents' and pupils' perceptions of the school and the support they receive; and, possibly, partnership working.⁴⁵ The legal requirement on schools to produce a School Profile, introduced under the New Relationship with Schools reforms, will be removed with the introduction of the school report card.⁴⁶

31. It is envisaged that the school report card and Ofsted inspection report will be "complementary and different evaluations of the school's work".⁴⁷ DCSF and Ofsted are working together to establish a consistent set of priorities for schools which will be reflected in the school report card, Ofsted inspection report and school self-evaluation form (SEF). The school report card will present quantitative information on an annual basis; the normally less frequent Ofsted report will present more qualitative information resulting from an inspection which is a snapshot of a school's performance. The latest Ofsted judgement will be reported on the school report card.⁴⁸

32. These proposed reforms tie in with Ofsted's new inspection framework, which took effect in September 2009.⁴⁹ This new framework applies to school provision for all age groups up to age 19, including all maintained schools, Academies, City Technology

43 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.13

44 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.18

45 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 4.20–4.25

46 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.24

47 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.27

48 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 4.26–4.27

49 Ofsted (July 2009) *The framework for the inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009*

Colleges, City Colleges for the Technology of the Arts and some non-maintained special schools in England.⁵⁰

33. The new framework is intended to focus inspection resources where they are most needed. It extends the principle of proportionality, in that frequency of inspection will be proportionate to the need for inspection according to measures of past and present performance, including the result of a school's previous inspection and annual assessments of subsequent performance:

- Schools judged good or outstanding in the previous Ofsted inspection will, subject to certain exceptions, be inspected at approximately five-year intervals. Ofsted will produce an interim report if a school is not to be inspected within a three-year period.
- Schools judged satisfactory at the previous inspection will be inspected within a three-year period and about 40% of satisfactory schools will be subject to additional monitoring inspections to check on progress.
- Schools previously judged inadequate will either have been placed in 'special measures' or given 'notice to improve'. They will receive monitoring visits and will be re-inspected following a specified period.⁵¹

34. Schools will receive between zero and two days' notice of inspection; no notice is given of monitoring visits.⁵² Before inspection, inspectors brief themselves with a range of information about the school, including previous inspection reports, the school's self-evaluation, Contextual Value Added data, and examination and survey data. Inspections will not normally last more than two days and more emphasis is now being placed on classroom observation than has been the case under the previous framework.⁵³

35. If the goal of simplifying the accountability system under New Relationship with Schools was never quite achieved, that goal is arguably even further away under the proposals in the White Paper. Even if the School Improvement Partner remains central to the accountability system, the sheer diversity of programmes inherent in the "more differentiated approach" signalled in the White Paper presents a barrier to simplicity.

36. We are concerned that the Government's 21st Century Schools White Paper signals even greater complexity in an already overly complex system of school accountability and improvement initiatives. There is a real danger that schools may become overwhelmed by the intricacies of the proposed reforms and that School Improvement Partners and local authorities may not have sufficient time or resources to mediate effectively between schools and the myriad providers of school improvement support.

50 Early Years provision is inspected under the Childcare Act 2006 and is not considered part of this inquiry, although such provision within a school is inspected by Ofsted at the same time as provision for older children under the Education Act 2005.

51 Ofsted (July 2009) *The framework for the inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009*

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

2 Schools' Self-Evaluation, Self-Improvement Partners and Local Authorities

37. We start by considering the context in which schools operate. Both the *New Relationship with Schools* and the 21st Century Schools White Paper underscore the position that schools are, first and foremost, responsible for their own improvement, so that teachers and governing bodies work together to assure the standards of performance attained by their school.⁵⁴ Self-evaluation, supported by School Improvement Partners (SIPs), is meant to be a fundamental part of a school's management processes, to the extent that evidence of the self-evaluation must now be submitted to Ofsted to be considered as part of the inspection. As well as assisting with a school's self-evaluation, local authority-appointed SIPs provide support and challenge to help the school improve its performance and to commission the necessary services to assist in that goal.

38. Local authorities have a remit to monitor local schools' performance using a variety of sources of information, including the SIPs they appoint, data provided by the school and Ofsted inspection judgements. Local authorities may use informal mechanisms to challenge schools and support them in making necessary improvements, but they also have statutory powers of intervention where there are concerns that a school is not performing to an expected standard.⁵⁵ These issues are discussed in greater detail below.

School governance

39. The National Governors' Association states that governing bodies are currently the front line in school governance, as school accountability is "fully devolved to school level".⁵⁶ Section 21 of the Education Act 2002 provides that the conduct of a maintained school shall be under the direction of its governing body and that the governing body shall conduct the school "with a view to promoting high standards of educational achievement". The governing body sets the vision, values and aims for its school and is responsible for setting the strategic framework, then monitoring and evaluating the progress of this strategy. The governing body appoints and performance manages the headteacher, who is responsible for the executive functions of the school, within the framework set by its governors.⁵⁷ In this sense, the headteacher is accountable to the governing body for the performance of the school. The SIP oversees the performance management process.

40. Despite the crucial role played by the governing body, we were told that governing bodies are not always involved fully in accountability and improvement processes

54 DfES and Ofsted (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools: Improving Performance through School Self-Evaluation*; DCSF (June 2009) *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system*, Cm 7588, para 4.1

55 NFER (March 2009) *Local Authorities and School Improvement: The Use of Statutory Powers*

56 Ev 98

57 DCSF (April 2009) *A guide to the law for school governors*, at <http://www.governornet.co.uk/linkAttachments/GTTL%20pdf.pdf>

external to the school. For example, the National Governors' Association cites highly variable practices by both SIPs and local authorities in relation to the degree to which governing bodies are involved in decisions and the information they provide direct to governing bodies. Ofsted has also been criticised for not involving governing bodies in the inspection process to an appropriate degree, and there are concerns that this situation may become worse with any increase in no-notice inspections under the 2009 inspection framework.⁵⁸ Even HM Chief Inspector acknowledges that this is an issue about which Ofsted is "thinking hard".⁵⁹ The National Governors' Association believes that all the other organisations involved with school accountability should recognise the governing body as the primary accountable body and involve it fully in the school improvement process.⁶⁰

41. However, it was put to us that governing bodies are not always well equipped to deal with the complexities of accountability and school improvement. The Local Government Association argued that "the complexity and analysis around performance management can be an area not well understood by governing bodies", and it expressed concern over the quality and capability of some governors in relation to difficult areas such as safeguarding, SEN pupils and employment.⁶¹ The Audit Commission noted that governors and headteachers are responsible for large budgets and are in need of ongoing training to enhance financial management skills.⁶² Where training for governors is available, the level of take-up can be low and there is currently no requirement for governors to undertake any training. To a certain extent, a School Improvement Partner (SIP) who is engaged and working closely with a school and its governing body can mitigate some of these problems. The National Governors' Association told us that:

The role of the SIP is vital to [governing bodies] who need the professional input for validating judgements. [Governing bodies] can also be less than realistic about the impact of unexpected results and CVA scores which fail to improve, offering reasons which stray into the realm of excuses. ... some can lack the confidence to insist that regular updates on the quality of teaching are made available, and to challenge the head on the appropriateness of the curriculum.⁶³

42. Several witnesses have described a vision of effective accountability which relies on strong intra-school accountability.⁶⁴ However, such a vision is difficult to realise if governing bodies are lacking in the requisite skills. In addition, as recognised in the 21st Century Schools White Paper, there are concerns about the number of vacancies for volunteer governors on schools' governing bodies.⁶⁵ In particular, schools classified as

58 Ev 191; Q 76

59 Q 355

60 Ev 99

61 Ev 41–42

62 Ev 177

63 Ev 100

64 Ev 177; Ev 192

65 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 6.39

“causing concern”, which are possibly most in need of strong governance, can find it difficult to attract governors of sufficient calibre to help with the improvement process.⁶⁶

43. The 21st Century Schools White Paper acknowledges the importance of school governors in improving school performance by holding headteachers to account. The Government intends to enshrine in legislation a governing body’s duty to ensure the education, development and wider well-being of the school’s pupils; to promote the education, development and wider well-being of all children in their area; and to support the needs of the wider community.⁶⁷ In addition, the White Paper proposes improved governor training and more highly-skilled governing bodies, advised by a trained clerk, in order to raise the standard of school governance. All chairs of governing bodies will be expected to have specific training for this role. The existing rules on the composition of governing bodies will be relaxed to allow for more flexibility.⁶⁸

44. We expressed concern to the Minister for Schools and Learners, Vernon Coaker MP, that adding to the responsibilities of governors and increasing the training requirements would exacerbate the current problems with recruitment of governors. The Minister accepted this concern to a certain extent, but he considered that the proposals in the White Paper would make governors feel more valued than they do at present. He undertook to encourage governors, praise them for their good work and, thereby, put the role of governor in a positive light in order to encourage recruitment.⁶⁹

45. We note that Ofsted is actively considering ways of involving governing bodies more in the inspection process, particularly where inspections are conducted without notice. However, it would have been preferable had the 2009 inspection framework been introduced following a satisfactory resolution of this issue. We recommend that Ofsted bring forward at the earliest opportunity firm proposals setting out how governing bodies will be appropriately involved in all inspections.

46. The proposals set out in the Government’s 21st Century Schools White Paper place additional burdens on governors in terms of both responsibility and training. Given the serious concerns which exist in relation to the recruitment of governors, these proposals have the potential to deter individuals who may otherwise consider volunteering as a school governor. In particular, potential governors may be daunted by the introduction of statutory duties relating to matters outside their immediate control, including duties in relation to all children in their area, not just those on the school roll, and the needs of the wider local community outside their school.

47. We urge the Government to reconsider the proposals to place additional statutory duties on governors. We support the principle of better training for governors, but we recommend that the Government set out a detailed strategy for encouraging governors to take up training opportunities without training requirements becoming a barrier to recruitment.

66 Ev 185

67 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 6.38

68 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 6.39–6.43

69 Q 459

Self-evaluation

48. All systems designed to assess school quality are constantly striving for the appropriate balance between internal and external evaluation. At one extreme is the view that only schools have the detailed knowledge to assess their own performance; at the other extreme is the view that only an external, objective body can provide a true picture of school performance. Professor John MacBeath, Chair of Educational Leadership at the University of Cambridge, has written that most commentators and policy makers now see the ideal as a combination of strong self-evaluation with rigorous external support and challenge, sensitive to the school's context and he told us that this is the model which he, himself, advocates.⁷⁰ He sees true self-evaluation as:

... a continuing process of reflection which is implicit in the way people (teachers, students and administrators) think and talk about their work and what they do to make their practice explicit and discussable. ... schools that are able to take charge of change, rather than being controlled by it, are more effective and improve more rapidly than ones that are not.⁷¹

49. At the heart of the New Relationship with Schools agenda for school accountability and improvement was the school's self-evaluation. This was conceived as a process integrated into a school's management systems. A school produces a self-evaluation document as evidence for this process, either the standard Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) provided by Ofsted or a form of the school's choosing. The self-evaluation was intended to assist the school in managing its own improvement; to form a starting point for Ofsted inspection of the school; and to provide a focus for ongoing engagement with the local authority-appointed SIP. In essence, the increased emphasis on self-evaluation represented the stated intention to make schools more responsible for their own improvement and, as such, was central to the New Relationship with Schools agenda.⁷²

50. An evaluation of the New Relationship with Schools programme published in 2008 found that improved self-evaluation by schools had resulted in better assessments of performance and understanding of the necessary steps to address areas of underperformance. The evaluation report found that there was still some need, particularly in the primary sector, to develop further skills in relation to data use and self-evaluation. Some progress had been made towards the engagement of middle managers and teaching staff in the improvement process, but more work was required in this area. In addition, the evaluation report identified some good progress in terms of engaging pupils and parents in the improvement process but, again, more work was needed. It concluded that schools should also focus more on developing more accurate judgements and producing evaluative rather than descriptive self-evaluation forms.⁷³

51. Ofsted has also noted sustained improvement in the effectiveness of schools' self-evaluation. HM Chief Inspector noted in her report of 2007–08 that the quality of self-

70 Q 199; MacBeath (2008), "A New Relationship with Schools?", in de Waal, ed., *Inspecting the Inspectorate: Ofsted under scrutiny*, London: Civitas, p33

71 MacBeath (2008), "A New Relationship with Schools?", in de Waal, ed., *Inspecting the Inspectorate: Ofsted under scrutiny*, London: Civitas, pp 39–40

72 DfES and Ofsted (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools: Improving Performance through School Self-Evaluation*

73 Georgina Cowen, York Consulting LLP (2008) *New Relationship with Schools: Evaluation Report*

evaluations was good or outstanding in 72% of maintained schools. This compared with only 30% ten years ago.⁷⁴ She continued:

Settings that can identify honestly and clearly their strengths and weaknesses are likely to be well placed to identify their most important priorities and from these to bring about improvement.⁷⁵

52. There is considerable support in the evidence for the proposition that self-evaluation is a highly effective mechanism for school improvement if it is robust, honest and continuous.⁷⁶ The GTCE believed that, if schools could demonstrate that they were adept at self-assessment, they could make an increasingly strong case for taking more control in terms of setting their own priorities.⁷⁷ The GTCE supports the prospect that school improvement should, over time, rely less on external inspection and more on the self-evaluation process, quality assured with a light touch by Ofsted; and it welcomes the progress that has been made in this direction.⁷⁸

53. We are persuaded that self-evaluation—as an iterative, reflexive and continuous process, embedded in the culture of a school—is a highly effective means for a school to consolidate success and secure improvement across the full range of its activities. It is applicable, not just to its academic performance, but across the full range of a school’s influence over the well-being of the children who learn there and the community outside.

54. However, there is strong evidence that the stated intention of the New Relationship with Schools programme to make schools more responsible for their own improvement may have been subverted by the standard SEF (self-evaluation form) provided by Ofsted. Ofsted’s SEF is not compulsory, but it is used by “the very large majority of schools”.⁷⁹ The SEF is intended to make inspection a more collaborative process, yet Professor John MacBeath and others argued that it does not amount to true self-evaluation but rather a tick-box exercise, top-down, rigid and laborious. Professor MacBeath has expressed concern that the SEF has “reinforced the conception of self-evaluation as a major, and often disruptive, event rather than an ongoing seamless process”. Many headteachers considered the SEF mandatory, despite guidelines stating that schools were free to choose their own approach. There existed schools with a long tradition of robust self-evaluation, but even many of these eventually felt compelled to conform to the Ofsted SEF.⁸⁰ John Bangs, Assistant Secretary for Education, Equality and Professional Development of the NUT, reinforced the point that there are only a small number of schools with the confidence to move beyond the SEF and be creative in the presentation

74 The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2007/08, HC 1114, Session 2007–08, pp 8, 22, 30

75 The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2007/08, HC 1114, Session 2007–08, p 8

76 Ev 173; Ev 3; Ev 13; Ev 186; Ev 113; Q 1; Q 3; Q 43; Q 199

77 Ev 1

78 Ev 3

79 The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2007/08, HC 1114, Session 2007–08, p 22

80 MacBeath (2008), “A New Relationship with Schools?”, in de Waal, ed., *Inspecting the Inspectorate: Ofsted under scrutiny*, London: Civitas, p38

of the self-evaluation.⁸¹ Professor MacBeath has described the contrast between true self-evaluation and the kind of ritualised process symbolised by adherence to the SEF as follows:

[Self-evaluation] understands the iterative relationship between classroom life and school life, and between school learning and out-of-school learning. It recognises that students' learning and teachers' learning are integrally connected and that teachers' learning feeds from, and feeds into, organisational learning. It is this complexity and dynamic that is the missing ingredient in ritualised and formulaic approaches to self-evaluation, the box-ticking and form-filling that makes it such an onerous and tedious process for teachers and school leaders.⁸²

55. The National Governors' Association stated that self-evaluation was becoming embedded in school practice but that schools feel that they are required to spend a lot of time evidencing their judgements, meaning that they have less time to evaluate impact. The NASUWT told us that a significant bureaucratic burden is attached to the collection of evidence to justify self-evaluations for the purposes of inspection; and that this gives rise to a culture of "self-inspection involving inappropriate, intrusive and unnecessary managerial scrutiny of teachers' professional practice". The NUT agreed that self-evaluation has, in effect, become self-inspection according to criteria laid down by Ofsted, rather than a liberating and constructive process of gathering information about life and learning in school and planning for the future.⁸³ The NUT told us that:

Such an approach is a long way from the model which has captured the imaginations of teachers and local authorities. ...

Whilst appearing to adopt self evaluation, as advocated by the Union, OFSTED are using this in a negative and punitive way.⁸⁴

56. In a similar vein, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) argued that self-evaluation had been undermined by the SEF, which it viewed as having been imposed on schools and "increasingly subverted to provide extra accountability". The ASCL stated that:

Self-improvement has been obstructed by a fixation on categorising schools as failing in various ways, leading to a culture of fear which stifles creativity and leads instead to mere compliance.⁸⁵

Keith Bartley, Chief Executive of the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) explained how he thought the SEF subverted the true goals of self-evaluation and led schools down the wrong path:

81 Q 47

82 MacBeath (2008), "A New Relationship with Schools?", in de Waal, ed., *Inspecting the Inspectorate: Ofsted under scrutiny*, London: Civitas, p39

83 Ev 14; Q 4

84 Ev 16

85 Ev 10

... excessive accountability contains mutually contradictory evaluation criteria, and some of the restrictiveness around the SEF starts to go towards that territory. It contains performance standards that extend beyond established good practice and that invite subversive behaviour and goal displacement. It is that latter area in which the restrictive nature of the SEF takes schools towards unintended conclusions or an inability to set out their own store in the language that they would use.⁸⁶

57. In fairness, Ofsted has emphasised in guidance, reiterated by the Chief Inspector in public, that the SEF is not a mandatory format for self-evaluation.⁸⁷ Professor MacBeath described to us the work of the children and staff at a school in Sheffield who had produced a DVD evidencing the quality of learning, school culture and leadership, and he used this as an example of what is possible “when the school has genuine ownership of self-evaluation”.⁸⁸ He was clear that such evidence was acceptable to Ofsted in place of the SEF.⁸⁹ When we asked the Chief Inspector about this issue, she was clear that the SEF itself was not a process of self-evaluation, it was the outcome of that process. Schools did not have to fill in the SEF. Nevertheless, she did say that 95% do use the SEF and added that “I think that it would be a brave decision not to fill it in”.⁹⁰ The new inspection framework specifies that “Schools are strongly encouraged to record the outcomes of their self-evaluation in Ofsted’s online self-evaluation form (SEF) for schools, whose structure matches that of the evaluation schedule of judgements for school inspections”. It seems, therefore, that although the SEF is not mandatory, Ofsted has a strong preference for schools to use that format, at least in part because it follows the structure of their evaluation schedule.

58. We are concerned that Ofsted is giving mixed messages about schools’ self-evaluation and the role of the standard SEF provided by Ofsted. The SEF may be a useful starting point for schools who are not sufficiently confident to create their own form of evidence. However, the functional convenience of a SEF constructed to mirror the evaluation schedules used by inspectors is not a good enough reason to indulge in wholesale distortion of a process which should be fundamental to a school’s internal management processes. It is clear to us that schools who are most adept at the self-evaluation process and most successful at improving their performance are those who own the self-evaluation process and make it work for them.

59. We believe that Ofsted should do more to encourage schools to be creative and produce evidence of the self-evaluation process which works for them and speaks to the true culture and ethos of their own school. Ofsted should ensure that its own inspection processes are flexible enough to accommodate and give appropriate weight to alternative forms of evidence of self-evaluation.

60. Even if the SEF is not a mandatory format in which to submit the self-evaluation, the objections to the way in which self-evaluation is treated within the context of an

86 Q 37

87 Q 37; Q 227

88 Q 227

89 Q 228

90 Q 351

inspection remain. Witnesses have suggested to us alternative approaches, which recalibrate the balance between true self-evaluation and Ofsted inspection. Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found that schools perceived the main benefit of inspection as providing external confirmation of the schools' self-evaluations and, indeed, the NFER found a high degree of consistency between schools' views of their own effectiveness and Ofsted's judgement of the same.⁹¹ The NUT stated that self-evaluation should be at the heart of the accountability system, fully integrated into systems for supporting teaching and learning, with external inspection used as a means of evaluating a school's definitions of its own successes, performance and development plan.

61. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) considered that, if a school's self-evaluation is robust and valued by the inspectorate, then inspections "will become effectively moderation procedures with recommendations". If, on the other hand, self-evaluation is not trusted and valued by the inspectorate, more time and resources will be required to allow for a re-examination of every aspect of a school's performance.⁹² The NAHT stated that schools find it very disheartening when a self-evaluation, which has taken considerable time and effort, is disregarded by inspectors and too much emphasis is placed on contextual value-added data (CVA) and test scores.⁹³

62. The ATL considered that self-evaluation should be validated locally and provide the main mechanism for school improvement.⁹⁴ Martin Johnson, Deputy General Secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), emphasised that the ATL saw self-evaluation as a major factor in effective performance management, but only if it were a self-reflective process owned by the whole staff rather than an "exercise conducted for a high-stakes external observer".⁹⁵ The Local Government Association (LGA) also favoured a model which involved local validation of a school's self-evaluation, but the LGA's vision is perhaps more mechanistic than the ATL would like. The LGA believes that performance management should be achieved through simple and robust systems based on self-evaluation against standardised data, ratified by the local authority and checked by inspection. Standardised reporting to interested parties should be through the school report card or similar.⁹⁶

63. We are attracted to a model of accountability which encourages and supports schools towards a meaningful, continuous self-evaluation process, evidenced in a form which the school considers most appropriate and verified through inspection. We are persuaded that true self-evaluation is at the heart of what a good school does. For a school which is performing at a good level, embedding processes which encourage continuous self-improvement are likely to be of far more practical benefit than an inspection every few years. The latter is necessary mainly as a check to see that a school is performing at the appropriate level. Inspection should be a positive

91 Ev 194–195; Ev 195–196

92 Ev 7–9

93 Ev 9

94 Ev 12

95 Q 34

96 Ev 42

experience, reinforcing good practice and fostering dialogue with schools in relation to areas where further improvement can be made. The Government and Ofsted should endeavour to do more to help schools which have not yet come to terms with the concept of self-evaluation in its fullest sense.

School Improvement Partners

64. School Improvement Partners (SIPs) were introduced as part of the New Relationship with Schools and the scheme has since been rolled out to all primary and secondary schools. As at 1 April 2009, there were 2,890 primary school SIPs, 1,534 secondary school SIPs and 402 special school SIPs.⁹⁷ There are two major rationales for their appointment. First, in order to deal with the problem of multiple lines of communication between schools and local and central government, SIPs are appointed as the conduit for what was known as the “single conversation” with schools. Second, it is considered that schools needed tailored support and challenge to move the improvement agenda forward.

65. A SIP is “a credible and experienced practitioner” who is in a position to provide professional support and challenge in order to secure school improvement.⁹⁸ SIPs are appointed to help school leaders to evaluate their school’s performance, identify priorities for improvement and plan effective change. The intention is to:

- involve experienced serving heads in leading the process of reform;
- offer every school a searching, professional, supportive challenge from outside in a way that was sensitive to the school’s circumstances;
- build the collective capacity of the school system.⁹⁹

66. SIPs are drawn from: headteachers who either continue to run their schools and work as a SIP part-time or work out of their school full-time for a period; ex-heads working as independent consultants; and some LEA advisers with the correct experience. In order to qualify as a SIP, those with the required experience undertake a brief training and accreditation administered by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services.¹⁰⁰

67. The SIP’s goal is to balance challenge and support, focusing on the school’s plans and targets in order to:

- identify the needs of the school, using the school’s self-evaluation and other evidence;
- moderate the school’s self-evaluation, agree the school’s priorities and targets for improvement, assist with preparation of the school plan and help the school to align these with national and local priorities;

97 Ev 208

98 DfES and Ofsted (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools*, p9

99 DfES and Ofsted (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools*, p9

100 Ev 208

- sign off the School Improvement Grant, offer support and broker access to external support, including access to useful networks; and
- act as the main conduit between the school and the external agencies of local and national government.¹⁰¹

68. An evaluation study of the New Relationship with Schools programme found that SIPs had led to “the development of more evaluative and accountable school structures and culture”; a more consistent focus on improving outcomes for children and addressing under-performance; more challenging but realistic targets; and the identification of school support needs and the provision of advice and support for school improvement. The SIP role was found to be effective in supporting headteachers and senior leaders in data use and analysis, understanding performance issues, prioritising areas for improvement, engaging pupils and parents and focusing on outcomes. Further, SIPs had enabled greater local authority understanding of school performance and a firmer foundation for non-statutory strategies for school improvement.¹⁰²

69. On the negative side, the evaluation study found that SIPs in primary schools were generally perceived as being less effective and having less impact than those in secondary schools. The study also identified a lack of clarity in the role of the SIP and different practices across local authorities in brokering support for schools. There were differences in the support role played by the different types of SIP: full-time local authority-employed SIPs; SIPs employed as external consultants to the local authority; and serving headteacher SIPs. Generally, local authority-employed SIPs were more involved in capacity-building, monitoring, brokering and managing support packages than the others. In some local authorities there was a lack of clear definition between the role played by SIPs and other local authority staff. The different types of SIP appear to have led to differing views of effectiveness, with serving headteacher SIPs viewed as being the least effective. Headteacher SIPs “are more constrained than other SIP types to deliver additional resource for schools or to be more flexible to emerging demands”.¹⁰³ The evaluation report found that, in local authorities where the SIP is used to channel a wide range of issues, monitoring and reporting requirements, the role of the SIP as enabling a “single conversation” with schools is in conflict with their support and challenge role as, in enabling the former, they inevitably have less time for the latter.¹⁰⁴

70. Many witnesses have been largely supportive of the concept of the SIP as facilitating the “single conversation” with schools and providing the support and challenge necessary to bring about school improvement.¹⁰⁵ The Department points to surveys of headteachers by National Strategies indicating that 80–90% believe that the school benefits from its SIP and around 90% consider that the SIP has had a positive effect on performance management.¹⁰⁶ Research by the National Foundation for Educational

101 DfES (2004) *New Relationship with Schools*, pp 9–10

102 Georgina Cowan, York Consulting LLP, *New Relationship with Schools Evaluation*, August 2008

103 *Ibid* p 79

104 Georgina Cowan, York Consulting LLP, *New Relationship with Schools Evaluation*, August 2008

105 Ev 186–187; Q 35

106 Ev 151

Research (NFER) has identified a generally positive attitude towards the SIP programme and the wish that it should survive the next rounds of policy changes. However, some respondents to that study expressed concern over the structure and status of the SIPs programme, and certain respondents considered it to be wholly unnecessary.¹⁰⁷

71. Likewise, some of the evidence submitted to this inquiry has been critical of the way the system works in practice. The Association of Professionals in Education and Children’s Trusts (Aspect) stated that the proportion of practising SIPs who are also serving headteachers is significantly below original Government targets. According to Aspect, the low level of time commitment to the role required of SIPs and the lack of central funding for adequate skills-based training for these postholders have been contributory factors. Aspect considered that the SIP role, as originally conceived, “has proved of limited value and the resultant trend is rightly towards greater professionalism in external school monitoring, support and challenge activity”. It argued that a cadre of professionals was needed, who have the ‘soft’ skills necessary to negotiate and influence in order to bring about change in the absence of direct line management responsibility. Interestingly, it is this ‘power without managerial responsibility’ scenario which prompted the Association of School and College Leaders to comment on a “mismatch between power and responsibility”, with some SIPs advising schools in the expectation that their advice will be followed, perhaps backed up with the threat of sanctions, yet SIPs have no direct responsibility for implementation of the advised plan, nor its outcome.

72. Other criticisms have focused on the variability in the effectiveness of SIPs. Ofsted has stated that its evidence suggests considerable variability in the level of challenge and support provided by SIPs. Similarly, the National Association of Head Teachers told us that SIPs are of variable quality, with some acting as critical friend and supporting improvement and others taking “the role of proxy inspectors for the Local Authority, placing unnecessary stress on School Leaders and conducting their work in an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust”.¹⁰⁸ The National Governors’ Association expressed concern at the variability in the extent to which SIPs engage effectively with governing bodies, particularly with respect to providing professional guidance on self-evaluation.

73. Others have identified the potential for uneasy relationships between SIPs and schools due to SIPs’ status as appointees and part of the accountability system.¹⁰⁹ The NUT argued that SIPs should not be appointed by the local authority; rather, a “critical friend” should be chosen by the individual school with funding from the local authority.¹¹⁰ In a similar vein, the NASUWT reported feedback from its members which indicates that, rather than facilitating the ‘single conversation’ with schools, SIPs focus disproportionately on the “achievement of outcomes designed to satisfy the requirements of the school accountability system”. However, SIPs appointed by Warwickshire County Council told us that they had experienced no undue problems in being a “critical friend” to their schools, while facilitating the flow of information back to

107 Local Government Association

108 Q 36

109 Q 34

110 Q 36

the local authority. They admitted that there is, to some extent, “a local authority perspective on the agenda” and were clear that they would report back to the authorities on problems which needed addressing. Nevertheless, they emphasised the need to build a relationship of trust which would allow them to ask difficult questions without the schools becoming alarmed.¹¹¹

74. Against this background, the 21st Century Schools White Paper, published in June 2009, proposes an enhanced role for SIPs, with their status as the channel for the “single conversation” strengthened. The White Paper states that their role as “the single agent for challenge and support to schools across all Every Child Matters outcomes on behalf of local authorities” will be strengthened. SIPs will be considered the “gatekeepers” for all those, including local authorities and central government, who wish to engage with schools. An exception would be made in urgent situations such as safeguarding situations regarding the intervention of appropriate services.¹¹²

75. SIPs will remain responsible for monitoring and challenge, as well as for brokering support for school improvement with external providers. SIPs will:

- monitor a school’s performance;
- advise the governing body;
- ensure school improvement plans are “realistic and ambitious”;
- support the school’s self-evaluation and the improvement process;
- broker appropriate support from external bodies;
- signal when a school does not have the capacity to improve; and
- take decisions about a school’s specialist status, taking account of its overall performance, any partnerships and local pattern of specialist provision.¹¹³

76. The White Paper states that various adjustments will be made to support SIPs’ work in these areas, with new legislation being planned where necessary:

- the role of SIPs as the primary intermediary between schools and local authorities will be clarified;
- the amount of time SIPs spend in schools will be increased, with up to 20 days per year for the weakest schools;
- introduction of a requirement that the weakest schools have their improvement plans signed off by their SIPs in order to release the funds for improvement, with adjudication by the local authority if the school and SIP cannot agree;
- movement towards provision of a single SIP for schools in formal partnerships;

111 Q 111; Q 115; Q 116; Q 127; Q 137; Q 138

112 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.34

113 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.35–4.36

- the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services (the National College) will be asked to review the SIP accreditation programme in order to ensure that it is appropriate for the expanded role of SIPs;
- all existing SIPs will be required to be re-accredited by the National College under the new programme;
- National College will assure the quality of SIPs by issuing an ongoing licence to practice;
- National College will maintain a national register of SIPs and their specialist expertise;
- governing bodies will be able to choose from a list of appropriate SIPs and to reject the SIP proposed by the local authority; and
- SIPs will be attached to a school for only three years, reduced from the current five years.¹¹⁴

We welcome the fact that the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services is being asked to review its training and accreditation procedures to support School Improvement Partners in their new role.

77. The evidence to our inquiry was prepared before publication of the 21st Century Schools White Paper. However, it is clear from the terms of this evidence that some of the proposals in the White Paper will not command full support. There may be concern about any increased burden in the training and accreditation process, as we have been told that the existing system is already found to be “very rigorous and stressful for many people” and that it could act as a deterrent to people who might otherwise apply.¹¹⁵ **The Government must take care that it does not exacerbate the existing problems with recruitment of School Improvement Partners by increasing the training burden and introducing requirements that existing School Improvement Partners be re-accredited and that they all carry an ongoing licence to practice.**

78. The reduction from five to three years in the length of time a SIP is attached to a particular school may prove unpopular. SIPs themselves told us that schools value the ongoing relationship and the trust and understanding of a school’s context that can be built up over time.¹¹⁶ Lynda Jones, a SIP in Warwickshire, told us:

The quality of the relationships is built up over time. Heads have said to us, “Don’t change these about. You have just got to understand our context, which we need you to do. We don’t want it to change.”¹¹⁷

79. The strengthened role for SIPs also suggests a considerably increased workload. This is potentially problematic for the recruitment and retention of SIPs, especially those who

114 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 4.37–4.40

115 Q 109; Q 140; Q 141

116 Q 118

117 Q 118

also practice full-time as headteachers, who say that they are already over-stretched.¹¹⁸ Witnesses told us that the role is already so onerous that many headteachers consider that they could not possibly consider becoming a SIP in addition to their duties as a head. Even those that are already on the SIP register may turn down work when contacted by the local authority because they have no more time available for it.¹¹⁹ The Minister painted a different picture, stating that there were currently more people wanting to be SIPs than there were places available. He told us that, under the reformed system, a SIP would spend up to 20 days each year in a school, but that the number of days would be differentiated according to performance and only the lowest performing schools would need 20 days of SIP time. He said that there were already a number of headteachers doing this level of work in schools under the National Challenge programme and that this indicated the presence of a pool of people with the resources and experience to do the job.¹²⁰

80. Where a SIP is available, with an allocation of only five days per school per year, the SIP may well not be the only person to whom schools turn when they need support. Other local authority personnel may become involved and this seems to us to be an indication that the “single conversation” envisaged in the New Relationship with Schools is not, in reality, working as such.¹²¹ Lorraine Cooper, a SIP in Warwickshire, told us that:

One of the issues is that very many SIPs, particularly the external consultant SIPs and head teachers, are not always able to give more time than that, even if it is needed, because they are employed in other work as well. That can be an issue—it is one of the constraints. It means that the local authority School Improvement Service working absolutely hand in glove with the SIP is essential, because if a school really fell into trouble, it might well be that their SIP would not be the person who could instantly respond by putting considerably more time in. So, we have to look at how that can be managed at local authority level. Generally, that sort of increased level of work might have to come from within the School Improvement Service as opposed to from just the SIP.¹²²

81. There is also a potential problem with the widened remit of a SIP’s responsibilities. Even before the current proposals for expansion of the role, John Bangs of the NUT told us:

The idea that an individual school improvement partner can be this Olympian character through which advice can go two ways, data can pass two ways—that they can be the person who provides the judgment about the individual school to the local authority—I find extraordinary.¹²³

118 Q 129

119 Q 141

120 Q 456

121 Q 117

122 Q 129

123 Q 54

With the proposed White Paper reforms and Ofsted's new inspection framework, the work of SIPs becomes even more crucial in the accountability system. For example, with Ofsted increasing the period of inspection to five years for many schools, SIPs are likely to be the first of those outside a school in a position to notice a significant dip in performance which needs to be addressed with urgent action. Some witnesses saw a greater role for SIPs under the new Ofsted inspection regime in providing continuous monitoring of a school's performance, perhaps triggering an inspection earlier than otherwise planned.¹²⁴

82. We are persuaded that a SIP is ideally placed to assist a school with its self-improvement processes and identify problems relatively soon after they become visible. However, in order to be effective, SIPs need sufficient time and resources. SIPs who are overstretched because of an expanded remit and insufficient time to dedicate to the task are less likely to notice when a school starts to enter a period of decline and alert the local authority and Ofsted to the possibility that intervention may be necessary. We are also not convinced that the existence of a pool of headteachers and others giving up to 20 days to a school each year under National Challenge necessarily indicates that sufficient personnel will be available to do the same as SIPs.

83. The Government appears to be aware of the potential difficulty in recruitment. The Secretary of State, when giving oral evidence to the Committee on the 21st Century Schools White Paper, acknowledged that it would be “a challenge to ensure that ... we will have the quality of SIPs that schools will need”; and Jon Coles, Director-General of the Schools Directorate at the Department, added that “I think that it is true to say that we need to do some significant work to build the school improvement market over the next 18 months, so that we are ready to bring this in”.¹²⁵

84. We are concerned that the Government proposes to expand the scope and remit of SIPs' role considerably without having in place a clear strategy for recruiting the additional SIPs which will be necessary and giving them sufficient time and resources with which to perform their functions effectively. **We recommend that the Government produce clear plans to show how and from where enough School Improvement Partners (SIPs) with appropriate skills and experience will be recruited with sufficient time to dedicate to the expanded remit for SIPs which is proposed in the Government's White Paper.**

The role of local authorities

85. Over the last 20 years, the 150 English local authorities have progressively engaged less in day-to-day management of schools, but they retain duties for strategic planning of education in their areas. They have a duty to promote the fulfilment by every child of his or her educational potential.¹²⁶ The authority must promote the best interests of the pupil and listen to the concerns and interests of parents and carers. It must monitor the

124 General Teaching Council for England; Ev 186

125 *21st Century Schools White Paper*: Q 39 from evidence taken before the Committee on 21 October 2009, published as HC 116, Session 2008–09

126 Education and Inspections Act 2006, section 1

performance of maintained schools in its area and ensure that, where improvements are necessary, these are carried out effectively and expeditiously.

School performance and improvement

86. The Local Government Association (LGA) considers that the outcomes for children and young people in the local area, their parents, local community services and employers are of primary importance, therefore schools should be accountable, first and foremost, to these groups for the quality of their service.¹²⁷ This view puts local authorities at the heart of the accountability system. As Councillor Les Lawrence, then Chair of the LGA board on children and young people told us:

At the end of the day, the local authority is the accountability of last resort. It is for the local authority, by working in partnership, to seek to ensure—using all sorts of performance management techniques that do not interfere, but just provide oversight; a comfort blanket if you like—that the trends of attainment and the processes of financial management of the school are such that you can detect at an early stage if things are going slightly awry, be it at a particular key stage or throughout the school as a whole.¹²⁸

Other witnesses acknowledged the importance of the local authority's role in school accountability and emphasised that accountability was best achieved through local authorities as they are democratically accountable bodies with unique local knowledge and relationships.¹²⁹ The local authority's role in school improvement, together with its School Improvement Partner, was seen as vital, as the contact between a school and its local authority was far more frequent than that with Ofsted.¹³⁰ Martin Johnson, Deputy General Secretary of the ATL, took the argument a stage further by advocating the relocation of inspection with the local authority, although this aspect of his argument was not a view shared by other union representatives. He told us that:

We need less accountability to Whitehall and more to county hall. We need to put local communities back in the driving seat and schools back under local democratic control. We need better integration of inspection and support. Since Parliament has located the latter with local authorities, it should locate the former there, too.

87. Local authorities are responsible for taking a strategic role in supporting schools' improvement and monitoring progress in schools' responses to challenges from SIPs and Ofsted. The LGA states that a "school is accountable to the inspectorate and local authority for devising and implementing improvement plans".¹³¹ Where additional assistance is required, local authorities are responsible for designing, commissioning and brokering an appropriate and tailored support package. The local authority will then

127 Ev 40

128 Q 74

129 Ev 172; Ev 190–191; Q 1

130 Ev 174

131 Ev 40

monitor the progress of this intervention.¹³² The LGA sees school improvement as a key local authority function, underpinned by local understanding, expertise and challenge.

“National bodies may come in and deliver verdicts or support over a short timescale or a narrow scope. Local accountability is required because improvement actually happens best at the frontline with local professionals supported by those with local understanding.”¹³³

School budget and finance

88. Schools are funded via the Dedicated School Grant (DSG) from central government and this funding may be topped up by further local authority funds.¹³⁴ Schools are therefore accountable in value for money terms to both central and local government.¹³⁵ Councillor Les Lawrence, then Chair of the LGA board on children and young people said that a school and its local authority should work in partnership, with the local authority providing the oversight and financial support to enable the school to manage its resources, but the local authority must do so without interfering in day-to-day management.¹³⁶

89. However, the Audit Commission has criticised the limited amount of involvement by local authorities with school budgets and finance. School expenditure represents the largest single element of local government expenditure, yet it attracts the least detailed scrutiny. Over the past eight years, the number of schools in deficit has remained steady at around 2000, although this was reduced in 2007–08. The Commission states that, in responding to past requirements from central government to delegate funding to schools and support school autonomy, local authorities have been restricted in their capacity to monitor, support and intervene in school finance and budgeting:

Councils have distanced themselves, and been expected to do so, from monitoring and challenging schools budgets other than to deal with critical incidents. The budget controversy in 2003 revealed that nowhere in the system is there a secure picture of the state of school finances and the likely impact of any changed funding arrangements on them. Reliable information about how schools’ actual spending relates to budget is not available until well after the year end.

Engagement with individual schools is often very limited. Councils appear to be unsure about the extent to which they can and should exercise closer scrutiny and challenge in relation to schools’ spending.¹³⁷

90. The Audit Commission recommends that local authorities should have robust, accurate and current information about the state of school budgets and should adopt a

132 Research commissioned by LGA from National Foundation for Education Research on the local authority role in school improvement

133 Ev 42

134 Ev 40

135 Ev 40

136 Q72

137 Ev 176–177

formal budget reporting structure to provide an accurate and up-to-date picture of school spending.¹³⁸ It argued that they should be supportive of strategic financial planning in the same way as they are in relation to school performance and improvement.¹³⁹ Although local authorities have statutory responsibilities to monitor and challenge resource management and financial decisions, this function is not performed consistently and is not integrated into the wider monitoring framework within which School Improvement Partners and other school advisers work. The statutory power to withdraw the delegated budget is the ultimate sanction, but it is a cumbersome mechanism and widely regarded as a last resort.¹⁴⁰ The Audit Commission considers that there is considerable uncertainty surrounding local authorities' role in financial scrutiny of schools and recommends that the position should be clarified by central government.

91. We agree with the Audit Commission that local authorities should be more involved with monitoring, supporting and, where necessary, intervening in school budgets and finance. It is indefensible that the expenditure of such vast sums should attract so little scrutiny. Central government should make clear that schools must make a proper accounting of their expenditure to local authorities; and that local authorities should be as engaged with the monitoring of finance as they are expected to be with the monitoring of performance and standards. We do not advocate an erosion of schools' autonomy, but we consider it important that the correct level of financial support is available to them in order to derive maximum value for money from the schools budget.

Statutory powers

92. Local authorities have statutory powers of intervention available to them. Section 60(2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 allows a local authority to issue a warning notice to a school where:

- the standards of performance are unacceptably low and likely to remain so unless the local authority exercises its statutory powers of intervention;
- there has been a serious breakdown in management or governance prejudicial to standards of performance;
- the safety of pupils or staff is threatened.¹⁴¹

Where a school does not comply with a local authority warning notice within 15 days, or where Ofsted has placed a school in Special Measures or has judged that it requires Significant Improvement, a local authority has recourse to a series of possible statutory interventions under Part 4 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. These are:

138 Ev 176–177

139 Ev 177

140 Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy

141 DCSF (2007) *Statutory Guidance on Schools Causing Concern*, p14

- requiring a school to work in partnership with another institution for the purposes of school improvement;
- appointing additional governors;
- replacing the governing body with an Interim Executive Board; and
- taking back a school's delegated budget.

Table 1 summarises the types and purpose of these interventions and, in exercising them, a local authority must have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State.¹⁴²

Table 1

Intervention	Purpose of intervention	When to be used	Pre-requisites of use
Require a school to work with another school, college or other named partner	To require a school to enter into collaborative arrangements to secure improvement.	Where a school, or key figures within it, refuses to collaborate with an appropriate partner.	LA must consult the governing body of the school, plus the diocesan or other appointing authority. The LA must also find a willing school, college, other organisation, or individual to act as a partner.
Appoint additional governors	To strengthen the local authority's voice on the governing body and/or to provide additional expertise to the governors in key areas to support a school's improvement.	Where the governing body needs additional expertise, or the headteacher and senior management team need further challenge and support.	None, although it is good practice for the local authority to inform the diocesan or other appointing authority for foundation governors, who are also entitled to appoint additional governors.
Replace the entire governing body with an Interim Executive Board (IEB)	To secure a step-change in the leadership and management of a school through the use of a specially-appointed governing body for a temporary period.	Where the governing body is providing insufficient challenge to the headteacher or senior management team of the school, is providing an obstacle to progress, or there has been a breakdown in working relationships that is having an impact on standards.	LA must apply to the Secretary of State for consent to use this power.
<i>Take back the school's delegated budget</i>	To secure control over staffing and spending decisions in order to secure improvements.	Where the governing body is providing insufficient challenge to the headteacher or senior management	None.

		team of the school, or where management of the budget is providing a distraction from improvement priorities for governors.	
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Source: Research commissioned by LGA from National Foundation for Education Research on the local authority role in school improvement

In addition to these local authority powers, the Secretary of State also has powers under Part 4 of the Education and Inspection Act 2006 where Ofsted has issued the school with a Notice to Improve or placed it in Special Measures. The Secretary of State may, subject to a duty to consult with the local authority and others, appoint additional governors, direct closure of a school or replace the governing body with an Interim Executive Board.

93. Research commissioned by the LGA from the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) has found that warning notices and statutory powers are used only rarely by local authorities.¹⁴³ Although it is generally considered that they are useful powers to hold in reserve, local authorities see them very much as a last resort, to be used only when non-statutory strategies for supporting school improvement have failed. Although practice differs across local authorities, the NFER identified several common strategies used by local authorities in order to deal with schools requiring improvement:

- producing policy statements on school improvement and schools causing concern;
- regular monitoring and reviewing of the performance of local schools;
- use of multiple data sources (quantitative data on exam results and attendance records; qualitative, contextual data from SIPs, consultants and local authority officials working with schools; informal, local knowledge about schools' performance);
- categorisation of schools, differentiating according to level of need for support;
- provision of differentiated levels of support;
- use of an integrated, cross-sectoral policy approach;
- use of SIPs to challenge schools and feed information back to local authorities;
- peer support networks; and
- collaborative approach to school improvement.¹⁴⁴

94. Once a school has been identified as in need of improvement through local authority intervention, local authorities typically employ some or all of the following, informal strategies:

¹⁴³ Keating A., Marshall H., and Rudd P., (2009), *Local Authorities and School Improvement: The Use of Statutory Powers*, LGA Research Report, NFER

¹⁴⁴ Research commissioned by LGA from National Foundation for Education Research on the local authority role in school improvement

- contacting the school;
- preparing a flexible and tailored action plan;
- providing additional expertise to the school;
- supporting and strengthening school leadership;
- close monitoring and regular review;
- working in collaboration with schools.¹⁴⁵

Taken together, these strategies are intended to secure continuous improvement in all maintained schools and to deliver tailored assistance to schools in need of improvement. The NFER found strong support for these strategies from the local authorities, SIPs and headteachers interviewed as part of the study. They considered that early intervention strategies were highly effective and significantly reduced the need for statutory interventions. The reasons for this success appear to be rooted in, amongst other things, a collaborative relationship between local authorities and schools, ongoing communication, deep understanding of local context, clear roles and responsibilities and support for schools to become self-sufficient.¹⁴⁶

95. Councillor Les Lawrence emphasised that, as far as the LGA was concerned, there was a deliberate strategy on the part of local authorities to use a collaborative approach to school improvement. He pointed to the need for local authorities to work in partnership with schools, and to encourage schools to work in partnership with each other in order to spread good practice.¹⁴⁷ However, some School Improvement Partners have noted that not all local authorities employ the collaborative approach identified by the NFER as prevalent in local government and other witnesses have certainly emphasised the variability in local authority practice.¹⁴⁸

96. We approve of the collaborative approach to school improvement taken by some local authorities; and we consider that partnership working between local authorities and all schools in the local area is a valuable means of providing support and spreading best practice. We urge central and local government to work together to ensure a more consistent approach across local authorities in this regard.

97. DCSF guidance from 2007 suggests that statutory interventions should be used as a last resort and that local authorities should attempt to secure a school's voluntary cooperation first.¹⁴⁹ However, under the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, the Government's role in intervening in schools causing concern has been strengthened. In its proposals for this legislation, the Government stated that:

145 Research commissioned by LGA from National Foundation for Education Research on the local authority role in school improvement

146 Research commissioned by LGA from National Foundation for Education Research on the local authority role in school improvement

147 Q 91

148 Research commissioned by LGA from National Foundation for Education Research on the local authority role in school improvement; Q 190; Q 240

149 DCSF (2007): 35

There is evidence that some authorities are not taking the opportunity to use [their statutory] powers appropriately. This is important because they are designed to prevent future failure and to address issues before they become more serious. The Government therefore proposes to take a new legislative power in the [Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009] to require authorities to consider formal warning notices when these are clearly justified by the school's performance. ... It is also proposed to extend the Secretary of State's current power to require authorities to take additional advisory services. It is proposed that in future this power may apply to authorities with large proportions of schools with low standards, as well as to those with high proportions of schools that have formally failed inspections.¹⁵⁰

The 21st Century Schools White Paper re-emphasised this position, stating that, where early interventions by the local authority to tackle declining performance are unsuccessful, local authorities must "move urgently" to use their statutory powers. The White Paper continues:

Where local authorities fail to take the steps needed, the Secretary of State will use the powers available to him to ensure provision is improved, whether in individual schools, or across the local authority.¹⁵¹

Provisions in the Children, Schools and Families Bill introduced in the House on 19 November 2009 would extend the powers of the Secretary of State yet further, enabling him or her to direct a local authority to close a school or issue a performance, standards and safety warning notice in certain circumstances.¹⁵²

98. As a further example of how central government is taking decision-making powers away from local authorities, on 13 November 2008, the Secretary of State announced a new strategy to improve performance in "coasting schools" which were achieving GCSE targets under National Challenge but were not considered to be fulfilling their pupils' potential. He said that the Government would work with local authorities to identify schools which could benefit from the programme with the sanction that, if these schools did not improve, the Government would expect the local authority to use their powers of intervention. Whilst we understand that the Government's motivation is to make sure that all schools are striving for improvement, it seems to us strange that serious statutory interventions should be invoked at the behest of the Secretary of State for schools which may have received a perfectly satisfactory inspection grade from Ofsted.

99. Taken together, the new measures outlined above indicate that the Government is increasingly moving towards a centralisation of power over school accountability and improvement, despite assertions elsewhere in the White Paper that power is being devolved from the centre to the local level.¹⁵³ Simply put, a strong, collaborative approach to school improvement, of the type identified in the NFER report referenced

150 *Delivering the Children's Plan: Proposals For Revisions To Legislation For Schools Causing Concern*

151 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 5.36

152 Children, Schools and Families Bill, Bill 8 of Session 2009–10, clause 22

153 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 4.8–4.15

above, is a much more proportionate response to coasting schools which may, nevertheless, be providing a perfectly adequate service as judged by Ofsted.

100. Councillor Les Lawrence, then Chair of the LGA's board on children and young people, said that he did not think that there was sufficient understanding between central and local government of their different roles and of what the other was doing. He considered that this was as much the fault of local government as of central government and said that the LGA was actively seeking to address this issue.¹⁵⁴ The Minister sought to reassure us that the Government's position was that it would continue to collaborate with local authorities in order to bring about necessary improvements in education; but that, where there was continuing failure on the part of a particular local authority to address serious issues of underperformance, the Government would step in and bring about change. He said that the Government would no longer tolerate a situation where "progress is not being made or it is too slow or there is resistance to change because it is difficult".¹⁵⁵

101. We are concerned that the Government is shifting decision-making power in relation to schools needing improvement away from local authorities and towards central government. Central government is not necessarily best placed to make final decisions over, for example, whether or not a school should close. These are properly matters for the local community, represented by their local authority, and for Ofsted who have the specialist expertise in this area. Whilst we do not dispute that it is appropriate for the Government to be able to step in where a local authority has genuinely failed, we do not approve of the aspects of the White Paper which tend to suggest that the Government is taking to itself more general power in this area. There is little merit in the Government's claims that schools, supported by their local authorities, are being empowered to take charge of their own improvement strategies if the Government is to create for itself even greater powers to change fundamentally the structure of those schools or to close them down altogether.

102. We urge the Government to recognise the good work done in the local authorities which demonstrate a systematic, collaborative approach towards the identification of schools in need of improvement and the provision of support in raising their standards of performance. We recommend that the Government should be sparing in the use of its extended statutory powers to intervene in relation to school improvement. We consider that these powers should be used only in cases where the relevant local authority has failed in its duty to secure school improvement. They should not be used as a mechanism for central government to increase its control over the way in which schools are managed.

154 Q 95

155 Qq 442–444

3 The Inspectorate

Background: the duties of the Chief Inspector and the functions of Ofsted

103. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Schools in England, which eventually evolved into Ofsted, was set up in its modern form in the Education (Schools) Act 1992. Since then, there have been a number of changes to the remit and functions of Ofsted and the Chief Inspector, the most radical of which was the extension of the remit to cover education, children’s services and skills under the Education and Inspections Act 2006. The 2006 Act established the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills and Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector—and Inspectors (referred to as HMI)—of Education, Children’s Services and Skills.

104. We take regular evidence from the Chief Inspector on the full range of her responsibilities and it has not been our intention in this inquiry to duplicate some of that work by going into the details of how the inspectorate operates.¹⁵⁶ This inquiry has focused more on whether a school inspectorate is a necessary component of an accountability system, what its role should be, and what outcomes should be expected. We are concerned here only with that part of Ofsted’s remit which covers the inspection of maintained schools. Under the current legislative regime, section 5 of the Education Act 2005 provides that, for each school inspected, the Chief Inspector must report on:

- the quality of the education provided in the school;
- the extent to which the education meets the needs of the range of pupils at the school;
- the educational standards achieved;
- the quality of the leadership and management, including whether financial resources are managed effectively;
- the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils;
- the contribution made by the school to the well-being of its pupils; and
- the contribution made by the school to community cohesion.

Such inspections are known as “section 5 inspections”. Pupils’ well-being, referred to in this list of requirements, is defined in the Children Act 2004 as:

- physical and mental health and emotional well-being;
- protection from harm and neglect;

¹⁵⁶ The most recent of these are: Oral and Written Evidence from 12 December 2007, 14 May 2008, 10 December 2008 and 9 February 2009, HC 70, Session 2008–09; Sixth Report of the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2006–07, HC 165. We received a substantial amount of evidence to this inquiry about structural issues such as the complaints mechanism for those wishing to query the inspection process, and the competence of inspectors for the work they are doing. We have chosen not to present this evidence in our report as these are largely issues of detail which are more appropriately dealt with in our regular *Work of Ofsted* inquiries.

- education, training and recreation;
- the contribution made by them to society;
- social and economic well-being.¹⁵⁷

This definition translates into legislation the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes by which children's services are judged. These outcomes were introduced in the eponymous green paper published by the Government in September 2003 and have achieved wide significance in children's services ever since. The outcomes are:

- being healthy;
- staying safe;
- enjoying and achieving;
- making a positive contribution; and
- economic well-being.¹⁵⁸

105. In addition to the requirements for a section 5 inspection set out in the 2005 Act, the 2006 Act requires Ofsted and the Chief Inspector to carry out their work in such a manner as to encourage the services they inspect and regulate to improve, to be user-focused, and to be efficient and effective in the use of resources. It is, therefore, part of Ofsted's statutory duty to *encourage* school improvement.

106. Ofsted has operated under a new inspection framework since September 2009. The 2009 framework extends the principle of proportionality, so that the frequency of inspection is proportionate to need: 'good' and 'outstanding' schools will be inspected approximately every five years, with a 'health check' report in the interim (known as an "interim assessment"). 'Satisfactory' and 'inadequate' schools will receive more regular inspection and monitoring checks. The majority of schools will receive one or two days' notice, but without-notice inspections will be used for a minority, especially where there are particular concerns about provision. Inspections will normally take no more than two days. The inspection framework includes particular emphasis on the following:

- engaging headteachers, staff and governors in the process of inspection so that they understand the judgements made;
- promoting improvement: inspectors will make specific recommendations based on their diagnosis of the school's strengths and weaknesses;
- inspectors will spend more time in classrooms and emphasise quality of teaching and its impact on learning;
- an increased focus on the quality of partnership working with other education providers, with a grade being awarded under this heading;

157 Ss 2 & 10 Children Act 2004

158 *Every Child Matters*, September 2003, Cm 5860

- continued use of ‘limiting judgements’ in key areas, such as pupil progress, safeguarding and equality, so that schools must achieve a certain level of performance in these areas if they are to achieve a ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ grade; and
- evaluating the achievement and well-being of all pupils and of particular groups of pupils; and assessing the extent to which schools ensure that all pupils, including those most at risk, succeed;
- assessing how well schools promote equality of opportunity, and how effectively they tackle discrimination;
- gathering, analysing and taking into account the views of parents and pupils;
- use of more indicators of pupil well-being;
- checking schools’ procedures for safeguarding children.¹⁵⁹

Ofsted inspectors hold discussions with staff and students during the course of inspections.

107. The increased emphasis on proportionate inspection according to a school’s need is based on the view that inspection drives improvement. The General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) has been supportive of the “proportionate approach to inspection of schools” developed since 2004 as part of the New Relationship with Schools framework. The GTCE considers this approach more effective and cost-effective than the preceding inspection regime and approves of the placing of schools in categories.¹⁶⁰ Schools previously judged ‘satisfactory’ or ‘good’ must, however, be able to demonstrate ongoing improvement in order to maintain that grade. It is arguable that, where a school is already extremely good, there may be little room for improvement. In the parallel context of school report cards, the Committee heard in New York from high-performing schools such as Bard High School Early College that, because of the emphasis on progression measures in the New York school report card, they found it nearly impossible to achieve the highest grade. They considered it counter-intuitive that the highest-performing schools should receive a B rather than an A grade.

108. Ofsted maintains that notice periods under the new regime should be short and that this has “been found to reduce the stress of over-preparation”.¹⁶¹ John Bangs, Assistant Secretary, Education, Equality and Professional Development at the NUT, told us that NUT members felt that between two and five days’ notice of an inspection was fair, providing them with sufficient preparation time without allowing the same degree of tension to build as under the previous regime where much longer notice periods were in operation. Witnesses reported that teachers are not in favour of the without-notice inspections which were piloted by Ofsted prior to the introduction of the 2009 framework.¹⁶² The National Association of Head Teachers stated that only sufficient notice can allow for a pre-inspection briefing to identify issues inspectors will want to pursue;

159 Ofsted (July 2009) *The framework for the inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009*, p5; para 4.31

160 Ev 3

161 Ev 116

162 Ev 1; Ev 12; Ev 19

sufficient time to collate the necessary evidence for inspectors; and time for the headteacher to make arrangements to be present for the inspection.¹⁶³ Mr Bangs said that NUT members were alarmed that the Chief Inspector appeared to be pandering to a perception that parents were in favour of without-notice inspection. Mr Bangs stated that he could find no evidence of such a wish on the part of parents.¹⁶⁴ However, a survey by the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations of its members, which returned 2,226 responses, showed that over 60% of parents thought schools should receive without-notice inspections.¹⁶⁵ An Ofsted consultation found that 65% of parents would welcome a notice period shorter than two days.¹⁶⁶

109. Cambridge Assessment¹⁶⁷ believed that formal inspection, which formerly focused on the quality of teaching at classroom level, had in recent years been redirected towards school-level performance as evidenced by qualification and national test results. Cambridge Assessment argued that inspection needed to refocus on interaction between teacher and pupil in the classroom in order to address the quality of educational provision.¹⁶⁸ The 2009 framework will focus more on classroom practice, although it remains to be seen whether, over a two-day inspection, this will achieve the rebalancing advised by Cambridge Assessment.

110. Some have claimed that parents' views have been marginalised in the shorter section 5 inspection regime and the increasing reliance on test data in forming inspection judgements. For example, previously, parents were interviewed by inspectors and were given the opportunity to have a full and frank discussion with inspectors. Under the current regime, they are sent questionnaires and this may be problematic in schools where parents have low levels of literacy, an aversion to filling out forms or where English may not be the first language.¹⁶⁹ In some cases, parents have found themselves in stark opposition to an Ofsted judgement which has had profound consequences for their school, but have found that there is little they can do to remedy what they see as an unfair judgment. There is a perception that Ofsted's complaints procedure, much of which is handled in-house, offers little hope of redress. On the other hand, the 2009 inspection framework does give parents the power to call for an inspection in cases where they have serious concerns.¹⁷⁰

111. In general terms, we support the approach to inspection set out in the 2009 inspection framework. We consider that a frequency of inspection in proportion to a school's current levels of performance is sensible, although some concerns remain about identification of schools where there is an unexpected slide in performance. We consider that a short notice period for inspection is sensible, but schools must be given

163 Ev 8

164 Q 30

165 Ev 96

166 Ev 150

167 A department of the University of Cambridge, incorporating three examining boards

168 Ev 64

169 de Waal, ed. (2008), Ch 6

170 Ofsted (July 2009) *The framework for the inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009*

sufficient time to collate all the necessary evidence and ensure attendance of key personnel. Without-notice inspection is appropriate where there are particular concerns about performance, and safeguarding in particular, but this approach should not be used without good reason.

112. If visits to schools are to be as short as two days—and bearing in mind that some of those days will be taken up by preliminaries rather than by inspection itself—inspectors will need to be highly trained and well qualified if they are to make an accurate evaluation of school provision

113. We note drawbacks inherent in the use of “limiting judgments”, in which a certain level of performance in a particular area (such as safeguarding or equality) has to be achieved if the school is to receive a “good” or “outstanding” grade overall. This can lead to strongly-performing schools being “tripped up” on a seemingly minor criterion, with no opportunity for strengths elsewhere in the school’s provision to compensate. Examples recently reported by teacher unions and by the press include schools supposedly judged by Ofsted to be inadequate or failing overall because inspectors had not been asked for identification on arrival (thereby indicating security and safeguarding lapses). In another case, a fence surrounding the playground had been deemed by inspectors not to be high enough to prevent children from being snatched by outsiders: it was claimed that this had caused the school to be judged as “inadequate”.¹⁷¹ We have not, in the time available, established the accuracy of these claims; but **we remind Ofsted of the need for transparency and publicity for the way in which inspection data are combined to form final judgments on schools.**

114. We support the principle of increased emphasis on the views of pupils and parents, but we have some reservations about the level of responses to questionnaires, particularly for schools with a challenging intake. We urge Ofsted to make transparent the approach that inspectors will take when forming judgements on schools where there has been a low level of response to questionnaires from parents; and it should not rule out the possibility of meetings with parents.

The need for an independent inspectorate

115. Ofsted stated that “Ofsted inspection provides an objective and independent evaluation, by a national body, working to an agreed framework and with no direct interest in the outcomes”.¹⁷² It not only inspects and regulates individual schools, but also produces more general reports which give a national picture of the strengths and weaknesses of particular aspects of school provision and inform the advice Ofsted gives to the Secretary of State.¹⁷³

116. Ipsos Mori polls from both 2006 and September 2008 indicated that 92% of parents were in favour of external school inspection.¹⁷⁴ Witnesses to this inquiry have generally

171 See Timesonline 19 November 2009

172 Ev 114

173 Ev 114

174 Ofsted

been in favour of an independent inspectorate, although not necessarily in agreement with the way the current inspection regime is run.¹⁷⁵ Keith Bartley, Chief Executive of the GTCE, stated that “It is vitally important that we have independent, authoritative, secure and robust voices offering commentary on the effectiveness of both national policy and its local translation into practice.”¹⁷⁶ The National Association of Head Teachers was satisfied that an independent inspectorate is appropriate in principle, but considered that Ofsted fell short of this ideal, on the basis that its independence is compromised by Government pressure and inspections are unduly focused on attainment data and Government targets.¹⁷⁷ We note that the School Report Card Prospectus published alongside the 21st Century Schools White Paper in June 2009 was produced jointly by the Department and Ofsted. Nevertheless, the Department itself said that it viewed Ofsted as an important part of the accountability framework, providing “external validation and challenge, the value of which is derived from the inspectors’ independence.”¹⁷⁸

117. There is, then, support for an independent inspectorate in England. However, not all jurisdictions have an independent, national inspectorate. For example, when we travelled to the United States, we visited the New York City Department of Education, which does its own “quality reviews”. These are similar to Ofsted inspection reports, setting out what a school does well and where it needs to improve. The reviews are “conducted by experienced educators and draw upon each school’s collaborative self evaluation as well as conversations with the principal, teachers, staff, students, and parents. The reviewers assess student performance results and talk to principals, teachers, students, and parents to find out how schools use information about outcomes to guide teaching and learning and set goals for improvement”.¹⁷⁹ The New York City Department of Education’s description of this process looks very similar to the process employed by Ofsted, yet the “inspection” process is not independent from the Department of Education.

118. Much as in New York today, until 1992 Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) was part of the Department for Education, reporting to the Secretary of State on the condition of the nation’s education system. Some witnesses considered that this arrangement had had merit. John Dunford, General Secretary of the ASCL, told the Committee that, since the inspectorate had moved out of the Department, departmental policy had suffered as a result because of the lack of regular input from professional inspectors. Nevertheless, he considered Ofsted’s independence to be important because of the need for it to stand between the Government and the profession. He thought that it should be reporting on both the effectiveness of individual schools and the effectiveness of the overall system without fear or favour. He argued that the former HMI attached to the Department had been much more concerned with reporting to government on the latter, whereas Ofsted was overwhelmingly concerned with the former. Dr Dunford thought that Ofsted should

175 Q 17; Q 191

176 Q 18

177 Ev 7

178 Ev 148

179 <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/SchoolReports/QualityReviews/default.htm>. An example of a quality review can be found here: http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2008-09/QR_K382.pdf

now move to a middle position (although it should be noted that Ofsted does still produce thematic reports on aspects of the schools system as a whole).¹⁸⁰

119. An alternative view of the inspectorate was that it might work at a more local level. Before the creation of Ofsted, HMI had regional divisions and, separately, Local Education Authorities employed inspectors to inspect their schools. One of the reasons for the creation of Ofsted was the perception that there was too much variation between the practices of the different LEAs and that there was a need for national standardisation in inspection practices in order to raise educational standards across the board.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, some believe that Ofsted has gone too far. John Bangs, representing the NUT, told the Committee that the NUT would like to see “a more localised approach to a national framework”. Rather than advocating local inspection, the NUT would like to see inspection teams more locally based than they are at present, inspecting other local authorities’ schools within a national framework for quality assurance.¹⁸²

120. We have found no strong evidence to suggest that there is an appetite for the complete abolition of Ofsted. When we put the question of abolition to Christine Blower, Acting General Secretary of the NUT, she replied, “I think it is important to have an inspector of schools, yes, and I think that it is important that there is an inspectorate that can publicly give an account of what is going on in schools, but that has to be a proper and genuine account that is based on the experience of colleagues in schools”.¹⁸³ This, together with the evidence presented above, leads us to the conclusion that, although there may be some widespread concerns about the way the inspectorate operates, there is general support for the concept of Ofsted as an inspectorate independent from government.

121. We are persuaded of the need for an inspectorate, independent of government, which can assure the quality of provision in individual schools, as well as producing more general reports on aspects of the education system at a national level. We consider that the latter are particularly important, not least because they should provide a sound evidential basis for policy-making by the Government.

122. We have yet to see, however, whether the expansion of Ofsted’s responsibilities over the years, to encompass not just inspection of schools but also of early years settings, colleges, initial teacher education, adult education, children’s social care, and local authority children’s services, is sustainable for a single organisation in the long term. The pressures placed on Ofsted by such a diverse and demanding range of duties could lead to a mass of competing priorities and a loss of direction. **Both Ofsted and the Government should be alert to any sign that the growth of Ofsted’s responsibilities is causing it to become an unwieldy and unco-ordinated body.**

180 Q 17

181 Perry (2008) “From HMI to Ofsted”, in De Waal (ed) pp42–52

182 Q30

183 Q14

The role of Ofsted in school improvement

123. With the introduction of Ofsted in 1992 came a significant shift in the relationship between the inspectorate and schools and some argue that Ofsted now takes a more forceful role.¹⁸⁴ The statutory task of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) was not to become involved in school improvement but to report to the Secretary of State on the state of the nation's education. School improvement was the duty of the school, its governors and the local authority. In 1991, the then Prime Minister, the Rt Hon John Major MP, expressed concern about standards in public services and, in relation to education, he was advised that inspection could be used as a tool to raise standards in schools. Inspections should be more frequent, with inspectors keeping professional distance from schools and teachers and focusing on the needs of pupils, parents, employers and taxpayers. It was decided that all schools should have a full inspection every four years and, for this reason, many more inspectors would need to be recruited. The number of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) were reduced and the additional numbers were mainly supplied by commercial companies.¹⁸⁵

124. Ofsted would not report to the Secretary of State, as Her Majesty's Inspectorate had done; it would be independent and responsible for its own published reports. The practical implications of this included the fact that inspectors would no longer stand back from the detail of school improvement and report on the state of the nation's education, but were involved in judging individual schools on their performance and plans for improvement. They had the power to place schools in 'special measures', with significant impact on the school and local community.¹⁸⁶

HMI inspectors

125. Ofsted now employs some 200 HMI inspectors working on schools inspection; approximately 1,000 more are supplied by contractors to work full-time or part-time.¹⁸⁷ Longstanding contracts between Ofsted and external providers came to an end in August 2009. When the contracts for inspection from September 2009 onwards were let, the number of external providers was reduced from five firms to three: CfBT Education Trust, Serco Education, and Tribal Group.¹⁸⁸ Ms Gilbert acknowledged that HMI were generally "well respected" but she maintained that "additional inspectors are also good inspectors",¹⁸⁹ and she insisted that flexibility rather than cost was the reason for employing non-HMI inspectors.¹⁹⁰ However, we were told that the reduction in numbers of HMIs and the move towards inspection services provided by commercial companies was still mourned in some

184 de Waal, A., (2008) "Introduction", in *Inspecting the Inspectorate: Ofsted under scrutiny*, de Waal, ed., Civitas: London, p2

185 Perry, P., (2008) "From HMI to Ofsted", in *Inspecting the Inspectorate: Ofsted under scrutiny*, de Waal, ed., Civitas: London, Ch 4

186 Perry, P., (2008) "From HMI to Ofsted", in *Inspecting the Inspectorate: Ofsted under scrutiny*, de Waal, ed., Civitas: London, pp49-50

187 Q 279

188 Ofsted Press Release NR 2009-11, 25 February 2009

189 Q 325

190 Q 333

quarters.¹⁹¹ The NUT reported from a recent survey of its members that the approval rating of HMI inspectors continued to be “relatively high”;¹⁹² and John Dunford, General Secretary of the ASCL, said that “we would much rather have a system in which HMI was always leading the teams”.¹⁹³

126. There seemed to be little direct evidence, however, of any major gulf between the quality of HMI inspectors and those supplied by external contractors. Some, such as the National Association of Head Teachers, had concerns about inspectors’ experience and qualifications but did not explicitly attribute those concerns to the outsourcing of inspection.¹⁹⁴ A common view was that the quality of inspectors was variable or depended heavily upon the composition of the team itself.¹⁹⁵ On the other hand, the NFER told us that it had collected evidence indicating that those who had been inspected had “a very positive view of the professionalism and qualifications of inspectors”.¹⁹⁶

127. Ofsted maintains that additional inspectors—those not employed as HMIs—are “trained and extensively mentored, including supervised participation in ‘live’ inspection and grounding in ECM outcomes and safeguarding”. It pointed out that no inspectors may undertake inspection without supervision until HMI have declared that they fulfil requirements. 75% of inspections of secondary schools and 85% of inspections of schools causing concern are led by HMIs.¹⁹⁷ **We believe that Ofsted should aspire to have HMIs lead all inspections. Schools causing concern should always be inspected by a team headed by an HMI.**

The purpose of inspection

128. Ofsted describes the purpose of inspection as being to provide an independent external evaluation of a school’s effectiveness and a diagnosis of what it should do to improve. The inspection report presents a written commentary on the outcomes achieved and the quality of a school’s provision, the effectiveness of leadership and management and the school’s capacity to improve. Ofsted’s inspections of schools perform three essential functions: providing parents with information; keeping the Secretary of State and Parliament informed about the work of schools; and promoting the improvement of individual schools, and the education system as a whole.¹⁹⁸ It has been relatively uncontroversial in this inquiry that Ofsted’s role includes providing information and the evaluation of standards of performance in schools. There has been an ongoing debate, however, about the precise role of Ofsted in school improvement.

191 See Councillor Les Lawrence, Q 76

192 NUT para 10

193 Q 23

194 Para 5.1

195 NGA para 10 (Ev 99), NUT Annex 2 para 9 (Ev 18), NASUWT supplementary memorandum para 10 (Ev 204)

196 Ev 195

197 Ev 116

198 Ofsted (July 2009) *The framework for the inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009*, p 4

129. Ofsted states that school inspection promotes improvement in a number of ways. The criteria for inspection and the guidance issued by Ofsted set expectations for standards of performance and effectiveness of schools. Where inspection endorses a school's assessment of its own performance, this increases the school's confidence; and a "sharp challenge" and motivation to act is given where inspectors disagree with the self-evaluation. The inspection report recommends priorities for future action and progress will be monitored where necessary. Inspection fosters constructive dialogue between inspectors and the senior leaders and staff of the school. Finally, Ofsted inspection complements the school's self-evaluation and promotes rigour, thereby enhancing the school's capacity to improve.¹⁹⁹

130. The research evidence that Ofsted inspection can lead to improvement is mixed. Some research has found that, in schools where achievement was already much higher or lower than the average, Ofsted inspection was associated with *slight* improvements in GCSE achievement.²⁰⁰ Other research has found a small negative effect associated with Ofsted inspection for the year of inspection.²⁰¹ A joint report by the Institute of Education and Ofsted in 2004 states that "inspection is neither a catalyst for instant improvement in GCSE results nor a significant inhibitor".²⁰² The precise effect of inspection on standards does not seem to be clear-cut.

131. Nevertheless, *should* the inspectorate seek to involve itself in school improvement above and beyond its duties to evaluate performance, diagnose problems and suggest solutions? There is support for the view that inspection and school improvement should be more closely linked, but this has been combined with the assertion that Ofsted is not achieving this link. Christine Blower told us of the NUT's concern that Ofsted was separated from the support for school improvement.²⁰³ The inspection and wider accountability system "have failed to bring about sustained improvement because of their separation from developmental support and from schools' own improvement work".²⁰⁴ A survey of NUT members revealed that they viewed Ofsted inspection as being separate from support for school improvement: inspections did not stimulate support or help from external sources to help schools improve.²⁰⁵ Christine Blower thought that Ofsted should engage in a dialogue with a school, not only about what needed improving, but also about how improvement might be brought about.²⁰⁶ John Dunford, General Secretary of the ASCL, was also of the view that there was no coherent relationship between external inspection and support for schools: an adverse Ofsted judgement led to several different bodies getting involved in supporting the school, which led the school to feel pressurised rather than supported.²⁰⁷

199 Ofsted (July 2009) *The framework for the inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005*, from September 2009, p4

200 Shaw et al (2003)

201 Rosenthal, L (2004)

202 Institute of Education and Ofsted (2004) *Improvement through inspection: an evaluation of the impact of Ofsted's work*

203 Q 14

204 Ev 14

205 Ev 19

206 Q 15

207 Q 19

132. Over the years, different Chief Inspectors have placed a different emphasis on Ofsted's role in school improvement. David Bell, for example, was clear that Ofsted had no role in following up on school improvement.²⁰⁸ Professor John MacBeath told us:

That has been an ongoing issue back and forward: should inspections, should Ofsted help to improve schools or should it simply conduct an evaluation and then leave it to others? I put that question to David Bell when he was chief of Ofsted—he is now Permanent Secretary. I said, “What about your strapline ‘Improvement through inspection?’” He said, “Frankly, we don’t.” He said that inspection does not improve schools; on occasions, it is a very good catalyst and can help schools to rethink, but that is not the function of inspection.²⁰⁹

Professor MacBeath stated that he agreed that school improvement is not a function of inspection on the basis that, once inspection had taken place, it was then the role of others, such as local authorities, SIPs, other critical friends and even universities, to step in and work over time with the school to address the problems identified by Ofsted. He did not think that it was possible for Ofsted to be responsible for both accountability and improvement.²¹⁰ Martin Johnson of the ATL expressed a similar view. He argued that the drive for school improvement was often mistakenly conflated with the drive for school accountability. He noted the addition to Ofsted's statutory remit of a duty to encourage improvement, but stated that school improvement was not reflected in Ofsted practice, nor could it be: “The way to embed school improvement in our schools is not through accountability mechanisms, but through growing the culture of a school as a learning institution and a reflective one”.

133. The current Chief Inspector, Christine Gilbert, places considerably more weight than her predecessor on the capacity for Ofsted to bring about improvement. The precise term used in the Education and Inspections Act 2006 is that Ofsted and the Chief Inspector must perform their functions for the general purpose of *encouraging* the improvement of activities within their remit. The Chief Inspector explained her role to us as follows:

I took the Education and Inspections Act 2006 really seriously. I was new and the Act created my post and created the new Ofsted. That charged us with three things: regulating and inspecting to secure improvement, which was very different from what was there before; regulating and inspecting to secure the engagement of users, which meant pupils children and learners, essentially—parents and employers; and ensuring value for money. Those three things were set out very clearly in the Act. They influenced and informed all our planning and thinking at Ofsted.²¹¹

134. Despite the precise wording of the Act, the Chief Inspector clearly interprets her remit as “securing improvement” in schools.²¹² In its submissions to this inquiry, Ofsted presented a variety of evidence to demonstrate its role in school improvement. It stated

208 Q 212

209 Q 212

210 Q 212

211 Q 269

212 See also Q 281; Q 289

that teachers and parents agree that school inspection promotes improvement.²¹³ Ofsted cited research by the NFER and other statistics which it says provide “evidence that the inspection system contributes to improvement”.²¹⁴ In its recent publication on the 2009 inspection framework, Ofsted stated that “We know, and independent research has confirmed, that regular monitoring of schools has a positive impact on improvement”.²¹⁵ The Chief Inspector gave as further evidence that inspection leads to improvement the example of schools placed in categories of concern:

The evidence of schools being placed in the category of concern is really strong and has been strong for a number of years. If you look at the speed with which schools now go into special measures and come out of special measures, it is quicker than it ever was. In our surveys of head teachers, schools in special measures come absolutely at the top of the list on how effective the support from Ofsted has been. They say that they find the monitoring visits very helpful, not just in keeping the pace of progress going, but in helping them to be sharper about assessment, evaluation and so on. Our evidence shows that, as does the work done by the National Foundation for Educational Research.²¹⁶

135. However, a close examination of Ofsted’s position and evidence suggests that the reality is not so much that Ofsted *secures* improvement directly, but that it creates the conditions in which the improvement process can start, evolve and be monitored. The quotation above contains a statement which makes a very direct link between inspection or monitoring visits and improvement, yet it makes no mention of all the local authority resources, for example, which are devoted to schools in a category of concern. Diagnosis of problems, suggestions for action and discussions with inspectors may well be helpful to school leaders, but it is likely that they will receive much more time, detailed advice and support from other sources as a result of having been identified as causing concern. Despite her claims that inspection secures improvement in schools, the Chief Inspector has not, in our view, countered the proposition: that Ofsted identifies the issues which need to be addressed and may make suggestions about how they should be addressed, but it is mainly others that are addressing those issues directly and are active in improving school performance.

136. The evidence demonstrates that there are problems for schools which cannot access the support they need to secure their own improvement. It is certainly true that the variety of support available from both national and local sources could be bewildering to an already struggling school, still reeling from an adverse Ofsted judgement. School Improvement Partners (SIPs) may not have the time to assist in brokering and accessing this support to the extent that schools might like. Some schools may not have an ideal relationship with their SIP in any event: we saw in the previous chapter that there were concerns about the SIP as a local authority appointee, essentially “spying” on the school. Although we have received evidence of good practice in many local authorities, this is not

213 Ev 113

214 Ev 115

215 Ofsted, *A focus on school improvement: proposals for maintained school inspections from September 2009*, para 27

216 Q 310

universal.²¹⁷ The process by which schools access help and support certainly needs to be addressed and we consider that inspection and support for school improvement could be linked more closely. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that Ofsted is not the appropriate body to deliver the latter.

137. We note that Ofsted has a duty to encourage improvement in schools. However, we do not accept that Ofsted necessarily has an active role to play in school improvement. It is Ofsted's role to evaluate a school's performance across its many areas of responsibility and to identify issues which need to be addressed so that a school can be set on the path to improvement. Ofsted has neither the time nor resources to be an active participant in the improvement process which takes place following inspection, aside from the occasional monitoring visit to verify progress.

138. We recommend that Ofsted's role in school improvement be clarified so that the lines of responsibility are made clear to all those involved in the school system. Ofsted's function is a vital one: it is, in the purest sense, to hold schools to account for their performance. It is for others—schools themselves, assisted by School Improvement Partners, local authorities and other providers of support—to do the work to secure actual improvement in performance. The Chief Inspector already has a wide and important remit: she should feel no compulsion to make it wider.

The evaluation of provision: the need for a balanced picture of school provision

Performance data based on test results

139. School performance is multi-dimensional: academic attainment, happiness, take-up of extra-curricular activities, attendance rates, punctuality, health, safety, and levels of deviant or criminal behaviour (such as drug-taking), are all examples of things for which a school could be held accountable, to a greater or lesser degree. The Government emphasises the importance of indicators of pupil attainment, since “pupils’ life chances are to a great extent determined by their attainment in school”, but it says that performance data should not determine inspection judgements in a simplistic way.²¹⁸ Ofsted reports on a school's performance across a range of dimensions, including overall effectiveness; achievement and standards; personal development and well-being; quality of provision; and leadership and management. It has also been working on enhanced indicators of child well-being for incorporation into the 2009 inspection framework.

140. The extent to which Ofsted has been successful in producing a rounded account of school performance has been the subject of sustained debate. We have for a long time been alert to concern in the school education sector about the Government's standards agenda and the perception that Ofsted inspects in a manner tailored to this agenda.²¹⁹ This has placed a heavy emphasis on educational attainment over and above other aspects of school provision. We noted this position in our Report on Testing and Assessment and made

217 National Foundation for Educational Research

218 Ev 149

219 Ev 7

recommendations about a move towards a more holistic evaluation of school performance.²²⁰

141. Many have claimed that Ofsted attaches overriding importance to statistical evidence of academic attainment derived from test and examination results and that this is problematic.²²¹ The recent origins of the problem appear to lie in the new ‘light touch’ inspection regime, introduced in 2005, as a result of which individual curriculum subjects have no longer been specifically scrutinised and schools have been judged chiefly on their performance data and self-evaluation. The previous inspection regime was considered burdensome, not least because of the length of each inspection. However, longer inspections did provide significant opportunities for lesson observation, and account was taken of a wide range of a school’s activities. There is concern that, as inspections have become shorter, inspectors are forced to rely more heavily on data provided in advance and there is far less opportunity to witness the school at work in a more general sense. An NUT survey reveals a strong perception that test and examination results are relied on too heavily as indicators of quality, in part because inspectors now spend less time in schools. Respondents to the survey indicated that a “crude link” between test results and inspection grades meant that quality teaching in challenging schools was often marked down.²²² The Independent Schools Inspectorate emphasised the narrow range of school activity reflected in inspection reports:

Changes in the maintained school inspection framework in recent years have led to greater reliance on self evaluation and test and examination results. We would question whether the current inspection tariff for maintained schools provides sufficient opportunity for inspectors to directly observe practice in schools in order to test the validity of self-evaluation and to make a reliable assessment of the outcomes for pupils beyond test and examination results.²²³

This view has some support in evidence derived from a survey conducted by Phil Goss of University of Central Lancashire with the National Association of Head Teachers. A reduced emphasis on performance data in determining inspection outcomes was the change to the inspection system most commonly requested by respondents. Mr Goss thought that this indicated:

... a strength of feeling about the way data on testing and CVA may pre-determine inspection outcomes, particularly in Primary Schools; as well as how inspection grades arising from this may overlook the quality of work done with pupils generally, and the overall leadership in a school.

142. The Royal Statistical Society expressed the view that school inspections rely very heavily on performance statistics, yet inspectors, in many cases, had limited statistical expertise and inadequate statistical training.²²⁴ The NFER noted the concerns of some

220 *Testing and Assessment*, Third Report from the Committee, Session 2007–08, HC 169-I, paragraph 106

221 Mathematics in Education and Industry; Ev 173; Ev 180; Ev 11; Ev 188; Ev 7; Ev 191; Ev 196; de Waal (2008) in *Inspecting the Inspectorate*, pp3–5

222 Ev 19; see also Ev 11

223 Ev 188

224 Ev 180

schools inspected between October 2005 and March 2006 about the way performance data had been interpreted by inspectors. According to the NFER, this suggested a need for more consistency in the use and interpretation of data: it was now time that indicators of aspects of performance other than attainment should receive greater emphasis; and for more sophisticated indicators of pupil progress and school improvement to be developed.²²⁵

143. In 2006–07, 98% of the 6,331 primary schools inspected and 96% of the 1,281 secondary schools inspected received the same inspection verdict overall as they received for the ‘achievement and standards’ sub-heading. The association between overall verdict and other aspects of school life is much weaker. For example, 41% of primary schools received the same inspection verdict overall as they received for the ‘enjoyment’ sub-heading.²²⁶ Ofsted has stated that “achievement is arguably the most important of all the grades. Other aspects of the report—personal development ... leadership and management—all contribute to how well learners achieve”.²²⁷ From these figures, it seems that the method by which schools in need of improvement are currently identified places a very strong emphasis on test and examination results.

144. In our Report on Testing and Assessment, we concluded that we “would be concerned if Ofsted were, in fact, using test result data as primary inspection evidence in a disproportionate manner because of our view that national test data are evidence only of a very limited amount of the important and wide-ranging work that schools do”.²²⁸ In its response to our report, Ofsted stated that:

Solid evidence of performance through test and exam results, particularly in English and maths, is essential to learners’ future access to employment. Proficiency in these subjects is also vital for access to a wider curriculum. Inspection evidence shows that the most successful schools focus on national testing and assessment without reducing creativity in the curriculum.²²⁹

The question is, “successful” on what terms: in terms of academic achievement or in terms of the provision of a balanced and rounded education to pupils? It was the importance of the latter which we have emphasised in our Reports on Testing and Assessment and the National Curriculum.

145. In May 2008, the Committee raised with the Chief Inspector the issue of the apparently strong correlation between a school’s test results and its Ofsted category. The Chief Inspector responded that the focus on raw test scores shifted considerably with the introduction of contextual value added (CVA) scores, which measure the progression of pupils’ attainment in the core subjects, taking into account the characteristics of a school’s intake. She added that:

225 Ev 196

226 A touch too light, Ofsted, TES, 22 February 2008, p.1; Mansell (2008) Ofsted: Overseeing the Tyranny of Testing in *Inspecting the Inspectorate*, de Waal (Ed.), Civitas, London.

227 Ofsted statement to Warwick Mansell, 20 February 2008, quoted in (2008) de Waal, pp58–59

228 *Testing and Assessment*, Third Report from the Committee, Session 2007–08, HC 169-I, para 102

229 *Testing and Assessment: Government and Ofsted Responses to the Committee’s Third Report of Session 2007–08*, Fifth Special Report from the Committee, Session 2007–08, HC 1003, p12

I do not think you would find a straight line between test results and what we are saying about overall effectiveness. I am pretty certain you would not. ... I cannot stress enough the fact that it is based on the inspectors' judgments about the data, about what they see in the school, the judgments they make on what they see and hear, and on progress, which, for me, is absolutely key. The inspectors are looking at progress and outcomes and making a judgment using a whole range of indicators.²³⁰

146. The Chief Inspector subsequently provided some further detail. Of the section 5 inspections carried out between 1 September 2007 and 31 May 2008, 39% of schools were graded as satisfactory in relation to the 'standards reached by learners'. The grades for 'overall effectiveness' (ie the summary judgement on the inspection report) for all those schools judged to have satisfactory 'standards reached by learners' are set out in Table 2 below. Just over half the schools received the same grades for 'overall effectiveness' as they did for 'standards reached by learners'. Just over 40% received a judgement on 'overall effectiveness' that was higher than the grade for 'standards reached by learners'. 3.5% of schools had satisfactory 'standards reached by learners' but were judged to be inadequate overall.

Table 2

'Overall Effectiveness' grade for schools judged to have satisfactory 'standards reached by learners'		Percentage
1	(outstanding)	3.4%
2	(good)	37.1%
3	(satisfactory)	55.9%
4	(poor)	3.5%

The Chief Inspector affirmed that:

The headline grade '*how well do learners achieve*' given in inspection reports takes into account both standards (comparison with a national norm) and progress (this takes into account the value added by the school, and considers a variety of contextual factors and a range of first hand evidence gathered by inspectors). In reaching this achievement judgement greater weighting is given to the progress learners make.²³¹

147. Despite the considerable evidence to the contrary received by this inquiry, Ofsted told us that "schools no longer feel that inspectors are over-reliant on data".²³² Ofsted stated that inspections look at more than just test data to assess the performance of a school. However, although good data are available to inspectors about standards and progress,

230 *The Work of Ofsted*, and oral and written evidence taken by the Committee on 14 May 2008, Q 105; evidence published as HC 70, Session 2008–09

231 *The Work of Ofsted*, and oral and written evidence taken by the Committee on 14 May 2008, Ev 41; evidence published as HC 70, Session 2008–09

232 Ev 117

Ofsted admits that the same is not true of all the *Every Child Matters* outcomes. Consequently, it told us that it has worked to improve the range of data available for the 2009 inspection framework.²³³

148. The 2005 inspection framework distinguished standards of attainment by learners from contextualised progression measures, and Ofsted told us that most emphasis was given to the progression measures. Under the 2009 framework, Ofsted proposes that the balance will be changed, so that attainment receives more emphasis than under the previous framework when judging how “pupils achieve and enjoy”.²³⁴ Arguably, this places more, not less, emphasis on raw scores as an indicator of performance, although we note that Ofsted has said that inspectors will spend much of their time observing classroom practice from September 2009.

149. The continuing focus of the 2009 inspection framework on core subjects during inspections is likely to remain unpopular. Respondents to an NUT survey thought that the revised inspection framework would do nothing to tackle the fundamental problems of the previous regime. Although this survey revealed an increased level of support for the view that inspection reports were generally accurate and fair, there was also an increased perception that inspection failed to assess accurately the value added by schools.²³⁵ Nearly two thirds of the written comments submitted to the survey expressed a strong view that test and examination results were relied on too heavily as indicators of school quality. The NUT summarised the points raised:

The main arguments used were that pupil performance data was being used exclusively by inspectors because of the reduced amount of time in school; that this was deeply unfair and inaccurate for small schools, special schools and those serving the most disadvantaged communities; that inspectors arrived in school with preconceived ideas because of the focus on data and were often unwilling to consider any alternative evidence the school might have to offer; and that crude links between these data and the inspection grades meant that provision, particularly quality of teaching, would be marked down in order to match the overall grade dictated by the data.²³⁶

150. It is likely that, as the 2009 inspection framework moves Ofsted towards attaching minimum expected results to inspection judgements and more frequent inspection of schools performing less well—judged largely according to test results—test scores and CVA measures will become more, not less, central to the inspection process. It is also important that inspectors, parents and other interested parties have a good understanding of a school’s achievements compared with equivalent schools. To that end **we recommend a review of the data underlying comparator measures or sets of measures to ensure that they accurately reflect the range of factors that can impact on school performance.** Professor Stephen Gorard has described the dangers of a reliance on current measures of school effectiveness based on test scores and CVA:

233 *Testing and Assessment, Government and Ofsted Responses to the Committee’s Third Report of Session 2007–08*, Fifth Special Report of Session 2007–08, HC 1003, p17

234 Ev 117

235 Ev 19

236 Ev 19

School effectiveness is associated with a narrow understanding of what education is for. It encourages, unwittingly, an emphasis on assessment and test scores—and teaching to the test—because over time we tend to get the system we measure for and so privilege. Further, rather than opening information about schools to a wider public, the complexity of CVA and similar models excludes and so disempowers most people.

Indicators of other aspects of provision

151. The lead inspector prepares a pre-inspection briefing for the school and the inspection team using a variety of materials, including:

- data from the most recent RAISEonline report;²³⁷
- the SEF or other self-evaluation presentation;
- where relevant, sixth form performance indicators;²³⁸
- the previous inspection report;
- the reports from any other survey or inspection of the school carried out by Ofsted;²³⁹
- information from any upheld complaints to Ofsted by parents about the school;
- the results of any surveys showing the views of both the pupils and their parents; and
- any additional information the school wishes to bring to the inspectors' attention.²⁴⁰

This inspection evidence can be categorised as performance data, self-evaluation, previous inspection reports and survey results. We have already discussed the issues surrounding the performance data and self-evaluation, and the previous inspection reports will have relied heavily on that information as it was at the time of the previous inspection. Until the inspection team has the opportunity to observe the school at first hand, the only additional information outside the closed system formed by the first three elements is the survey evidence on the views of pupils and parents.

152. There has been considerable movement over the years in terms of the extent to which parents and pupils are involved in the inspection process. As we have previously noted, before the 2005 framework was introduced, parents were invited to meetings with inspectors, and those who attended were given the opportunity to have a full and frank discussion face to face. Under the shorter Section 5 inspection regime introduced from 2005, there was no time for interviews in person and parents were sent questionnaires. The

237 RAISEonline is the source of information on academic attainment and progress of pupils at Key Stages 1, 2, 3 and 4, including contextual information.

238 These are derived from Ofsted Performance and Assessment reports, and from Framework for Excellence reports, being trialled in some sixth forms from September 2009.

239 These would include subject or aspect surveys carried out in the school, monitoring inspections, and section 48 inspections, which apply to the collective worship and denominational education aspect of schools designated as having a religious character under section 69(3) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

240 Ofsted (July 2009) *The framework for the inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009*, para 49

2009 inspection framework states that inspectors will give particular priority to, amongst other things, gathering, analysing and taking into account the views of parents and pupils. In addition, from 2010, parents will be able to “influence the choice of which schools are to be inspected” where they have concerns about a school’s performance.

153. From September 2009, Ofsted is conducting a trial study on the use of parent and pupil surveys. Many schools already commission their own surveys for the purposes of self-evaluation, but these will be standardised surveys administered nationally.²⁴¹ The Ofsted survey data is being used for a number of purposes, including the development of indicators of pupil well-being according to the *Every Child Matters* framework, and indicators of parents’ and pupils’ perceptions of school provision. These indicators will complement quantitative indicators derived from the National Indicator Set.²⁴² It is expected that these indicators will be used both to inform Ofsted inspection and for inclusion in the school report card.²⁴³ The indicators of pupils’ well-being and the school’s contribution to it currently proposed are extensive and are presented in Box 1.

Box 1

The indicators of pupils’ well-being and the school’s contribution to it currently proposed are the extent to which the school:

- promotes healthy eating, exercise and a healthy lifestyle and (for younger children) play;
- discourages smoking, consumption of alcohol and use of illegal drugs and other harmful substances;
- gives good guidance on relationships and sexual health;
- helps pupils to manage their feelings and be resilient;
- promotes equality and counteracts discrimination;
- provides a good range of additional activities;
- gives pupils good opportunities to contribute to the local community;
- helps people of different backgrounds to get on well, both in the school and in the wider community;
- helps pupils gain the knowledge and skills they will need in the future;
- offers the opportunity at 14 to access a range of curriculum choices;
- supports pupils to make choices that will help them progress towards a chosen career/subject of further study;
- pupils feel safe;

241 Q 7

242 Currently available are indicators on attendance and persistent absence; proportion of pupils with access to at least two hours of sport each week; number of permanent exclusions; proportion still participating in learning one year after leaving compulsory schooling; and uptake of school lunches.

243 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, para 8; see also Ofsted (June 2009) *Indicators of a school’s contribution to well-being*

- experience bullying;
- know who to approach if they have a concern;
- enjoy school;
- are making good progress;
- feel listened to and are able to influence decisions in the school.

Source: *Ofsted (June 2009) Indicators of a school's contribution to well-being*

We are aware of the difficulty of developing a robust methodology for measuring against these indicators. If the time taken by the Department to develop satisfactory measures for Contextual Value Added scores is any guide, this process of development and refinement could take several years.

154. The Audit Commission highlighted the importance of involving parents in the inspection process as having a positive effect on children's learning; and it considered that a parental survey gave a clear message that their engagement was necessary and valued.²⁴⁴ There are, however, problems with survey evidence and the methodological issues are well-known: the strength and validity of the indicators will only be as good as the survey instrument itself and its administration. In schools where parents have low levels of literacy, an aversion to filling out forms or where English may not be their first language, there may be low response levels to surveys and this will have a profound impact on the representative nature of the views expressed in the responses.²⁴⁵ The NASUWT stated that it had no objection in principle to the contribution of parents' and pupils' views for accountability purposes, but considered that the use of surveys was problematic:

...views of pupils and parents on the quality of provision in schools may differ significantly depending on individual circumstances, such as whether a parent's child has SEN or accesses some other form of specialist service and ... not all parents are inclined to or well placed to provide feedback in this way. This highlights the point that while information gathered in this way may be useful, a degree of caution has to be exercised over its use.

The Royal Statistical Society also urged caution in the use of survey data and it emphasised that the proxy nature of measures of well-being was pronounced. It therefore argued that "any attempts to use these for school accountability purposes should be viewed with even more care and indeed scepticism, than test and exam scores".²⁴⁶ Professor John MacBeath was also concerned about the measurement of pupil well-being. He considered that some things defied quantification, and he disapproved of an approach which required well-being to be quantified in order to put it on an equal footing with the core curriculum.

155. Whatever the technical problems with gathering information on parents' and pupils' perceptions, the question remains: how should emphasis in the inspection judgement be balanced between academic attainment and pupil well-being? Ofsted stated that great

244 Audit Commission response to Ofsted consultation *A focus on improvement: proposals for maintained school inspections from September 2009*

245 Nanthabalan, B (2008) in *Inspecting the Inspectorate*, de Waal (ed), Ch 6

246 Ev 181

importance will be attached to the “other” *Every Child Matters* outcomes as well as the “enjoying and achieving” outcome. Some witnesses thought that they deserved an equal emphasis on the basis that they are closely interlinked.²⁴⁷ The National Governors’ Association thought that schools should be held accountable for matters such as well-being, but only in the context of raising the standard of teaching and learning. Others were less specific, but approved an increased emphasis on well-being and thought that the current system did not reflect the importance of this aspect of school performance.²⁴⁸

156. We believe that there is a need to rebalance the emphasis of inspection judgements. Academic attainment is important for children’s life chances and schools have a clear duty to ensure that each child achieves to the best of his or her ability. However, schools do far more for their pupils and the wider community than teaching academic subjects. Schools provide other learning and development activities, such as sport, music, drama, art and community work; and they have an effect on the take-up of extra-curricular activities, attendance rates, punctuality, health, happiness, safety, and levels of deviant or criminal behaviour. Schools clearly make a contribution to well-being in the sense encompassed by the *Every Child Matters* outcomes.

157. We consider that the quality of school provision beyond the teaching of academic subjects is extremely important and that Ofsted has a duty to reflect this in a fair and balanced manner in its inspection reports.

158. We have noted the concerns expressed by a significant number of witnesses that Ofsted places more emphasis on academic attainment, evidenced through test results and contextual value added measures, than on other aspects of a school’s provision. Schools achieve much in terms of academic attainment that is not measured by test results and contextual value added measures, yet there is a perception amongst many schools that only attainment measured in this way is given significant weight in the inspection report. We have sympathy with the view, often expressed to us, that schools are not judged fairly on the full range of their performance. Given that much school activity cannot be measured in quantitative terms, it is important that inspectors spend as much time as possible observing practice in schools so that they do not rely too much on quantitative data.

159. We note that the 2009 framework emphasises that much of an inspector’s time during an inspection will be spent observing lessons, and we consider this to be a good starting point. However, there is a dilemma here: on the one hand, there is a limited amount of activity that an inspection team can observe at first hand during a two-day visit; on the other hand, we would not wish to see a return to a very lengthy and burdensome inspection regime. We believe that the school’s self-evaluation is important in directing inspectors’ investigations beyond that which is measurable and this is another reason why it is vital for Ofsted to address our concerns about the rigidity of Ofsted’s SEF (self-evaluation form) and the pressure on schools to use this standard form rather than some other form which works better for them.

247 Ev 173; Q 150

248 Ev 185; Ev 188; Q 231; Q 252

160. An increased emphasis on involving parents and pupils more fully in the inspection process and on developing better indicators of pupil well-being are a welcome step in the right direction. However, we share the concerns of witnesses who warned that those aspects of well-being measured using survey evidence and standard indicator sets are a poor proxy for the true contribution made by schools to the well-being of pupils. We believe that Ofsted should strengthen its findings in this area by emphasising the importance of inspectors seeing for themselves the contribution that schools make in this area.

161. We urge Ofsted to rebalance its inspection framework in two ways, in order to reflect better the true essence of the school. First, when evaluating academic attainment, we recommend that Ofsted gives less evidential weight given to test results and derivative measures and gives more weight to the quality of teaching and learning observed by inspectors in the classroom. Second, when evaluating a school's performance in terms of pupil well-being and other non-academic areas, we recommend that Ofsted should move beyond the search for quantitative measures of performance and that it should focus more effort on developing qualitative measures which capture a broader range of a school's activity.

4 Achievement and Attainment Tables and the School Report Card

162. Achievement and Attainment Tables, formerly known as performance tables, are compiled and published by the DCSF. The tables are a major part of the school accountability system and provide statistical information on the school cohort, test results, a CVA score,²⁴⁹ a series of comparative annual data on test scores, statistics on absence, and statistics on pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Tables of one sort or another have been the subject of controversy for many years, not least because many feel the information they provide gives only a partial view of a school's overall performance.²⁵⁰ The Government's proposal for a new school report card is an attempt at presenting more information on a wider range of performance indicators. We consider the consequences of the Achievement and Attainment Tables, how the school report card might change the accountability landscape and how useful these tools are for parents and others who are interested in a school's performance.

Achievement and Attainment Tables

163. With the introduction of the National Curriculum and National Curriculum testing following the Education Reform Act 1988 came the compilation of performance tables which permitted the ranking of schools according to their results. In 2004 these performance tables became known as Achievement and Attainment Tables and a 'Value Added' measure was included, which gave some context to a school's raw test scores. The Department expressed the general view that it was important for performance data to be publicly available in order that schools could be held accountable for their performance. It argued that the data should be accessible to everyone, presented in a comprehensible format, and suitable both for informing the general public about the quality of education provision in their area and for assisting parents in making school choices.²⁵¹ The Department believed that the current Achievement and Attainment Tables had strengthened the accountability of schools through a focus on standards and attainment; and that there was a strong positive association, demonstrated by OECD research, between public attainment data and stronger results.²⁵²

164. The Achievement and Attainment Tables do not rank schools, but the data presented, particularly the raw test scores, are processed by the press and others to produce league tables of schools.²⁵³ DCSF acknowledged that the press used this information to produce ranked league tables but argued that, if the Government did not publish the data it holds, it would be forced to do so in any event under Freedom of Information legislation.²⁵⁴

249 Contextual Value Added score. See footnote 7 for an explanation.

250 See further *Testing and Assessment*, Third Report of the Children, Schools and Families Committee, Session 2007–08, HC 169-I and HC 169-II

251 Ev 146

252 Ev 152

253 Ev 197

254 Ev 153

Nevertheless, Professor John MacBeath told us that there is precedent for governments ceasing to publish accountability data on the internet. He cited the case of Hong Kong, where the government has done just that, having recognised that the published information was having a demoralising effect on teachers.

165. The value of these tables in guiding parents in their choice of schools has been questioned, for instance on the grounds that the most recently published information on a school's performance relates to a cohort of pupils who entered the school several years previously, rather than the current cohort.²⁵⁵

166. Some witnesses have also argued that public reporting of accountability data in performance tables should cease. The NUT and the NASUWT both noted that there are no performance tables or national targets linked to test results in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; they were either not introduced at all or, after some negative experiences, subsequently abolished. The NUT believed that they should be similarly abolished in England.²⁵⁶ The Royal Statistical Society preferred a 'private accountability' system under which feedback on strengths and weaknesses would be given directly to schools with a view to supporting them towards higher performance, rather than identifying failures in public. Any subsequent publication of results should occur only at the end of the discussion process and should recognise the provisional nature of any judgements, the statistical uncertainties inherent in performance data, and relevant contextual factors which may have influenced results.²⁵⁷ The General Teaching Council for England stated that it would favour a system where schools would have more responsibility for accounting publicly for their performance via the school profile. This, it said, would be preferable to the de-contextualised and incomplete picture given in the Achievement and Attainment Tables.²⁵⁸ The National Governors' Association took a pragmatic approach:

The reporting of school performance is a vexed issue. Governors are largely against the current system of league tables and to date are not supportive of any single measure that defines a school's performance. However, there is recognition that it is not possible to return to a place where there is no reporting, and so there is support for a balanced report card - as long as it measures more than attainment.

The Government now proposes that the School Report Card should "supersede the Achievement and Attainment Tables as the central source of externally verified, objective information on the outcomes achieved by schools in England".²⁵⁹ However, the detailed performance data used to prepare the School Report Card would continue to be published.²⁶⁰

167. Performance data have been a part of the educational landscape in England for some years. Like it or not, they are a feature of the school accountability system and we

255 Leckie, G. and Goldstein, H. (2009) *The limitations of using school league tables to inform school choice*

256 Ev 17

257 Ev 178

258 Ev 4

259 *Your child, your schools, our future: 21st Century Schools White Paper*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.24. See also Explanatory Notes to the Children, Schools and Families Bill, Bill 8 of Session 2009–10, para 92.

260 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.25

recognise the manifest difficulties in retreating from that position, even if a watchful eye should be kept on the consequences of the abandonment of performance tables linked to test results in other parts of the United Kingdom. If such data is to be collected, much can be done to mitigate the more unfortunate aspects of the publication. We take a pragmatic view and believe that the focus of debate should move towards a more fruitful discussion of the types of data and information collected and the method of presentation.

The effects of Achievement and Attainment Tables on schools

168. The Association of School and College Leaders summed up concerns about the 30-year shift in accountability practices to the present day system:

In the 1970s it became accepted wisdom that schools were not accountable, and that there was too little information available about them outside their walls. This may have been true, but the subsequent tendencies for ‘naming and shaming’, for the publication of misleading ‘league tables’, for accountability systems to become more intrusive, and for them to distort educational practice, has been very damaging.²⁶¹

Professor Stephen Gorard agreed, stating that schools and teachers were routinely rewarded or punished on the basis of flawed performance evidence publicly reported in tables. In his view, teachers would focus on, for example, departmental value-added figures which would then lead them to focus their attention on particular areas or types of pupil. As a result, he believed that teachers’ professional practice was being distorted, pupils’ education was being damaged, and parents and pupils were led to judge schools on the basis of evidence which, he argued, was largely spurious. He added that these measures were “associated with only a narrow understanding of what education is for” and that the complexity of measures such as CVA scores were, in any event, largely incomprehensible to the public and even some academics involved in school effectiveness research. Even the Chief Inspector, Christine Gilbert, has agreed that parents and “people who are really quite engaged in the educational debate” cannot understand the contents of the Achievement and Attainment Tables.²⁶²

169. The desire of some schools to maintain or improve their standing in performance tables can give rise to a variety of other practices which are not necessarily beneficial for individual pupils. In our report on Testing and Assessment, we commented at length on the perverse incentives, created by performance tables and targets, for schools to teach to the test, narrow the taught curriculum, and focus on candidates on the threshold of target grades, all in an effort to achieve the best possible test results. We noted that, where they occurred, these practices were harmful because pupils were forced to focus on a very narrow syllabus, taught in a manner best calculated to get pupils through the test successfully. The chances of engaging children’s interest in learning are low with an approach which stifles creativity and focuses on assessment output. Moreover, those pupils who are achieving either well above or well below the target level set by the Government may be given relatively less attention in class compared with those children who are on the

261 Ev 10

262 Q 361

target borderline.²⁶³ As might be expected, we received much the same evidence as part of this inquiry.²⁶⁴ Even Ofsted noted that, although the best schools do not resort to such measures:

The publication of information about schools' performance through test and examination results can lead in some cases to teaching to the test and a narrowing of the curriculum in certain year groups.²⁶⁵

170. This evidence begs the question: why do some schools feel the need to maximise test and examination results in ways which involve teaching to the test and other harmful practices? Part of the answer must lie in schools' perceptions of the way in which performance data is used. The Department maintained that parents did not use performance tables in isolation and formed judgements based on a range of evidence, including inspection outcomes, the views of other parents and other local intelligence.²⁶⁶ Yet other witnesses asserted that parents and teachers used the published data without any understanding of their inherent statistical uncertainty, driving schools to take extreme measures to improve their performance data.²⁶⁷ The two views are not necessarily mutually exclusive: it is the fear of some schools that the data *might* be used without understanding which drives them to maximise their statistics. The way parents interpret performance data is significant because, if a school is unable to boost its standing in the league tables, it may face public censure and risk a reducing student population as parents seek to send their children to a different school.²⁶⁸ Parents aside, the interpretation of performance data by teachers may also have profound consequences for a school. A deteriorating reputation can present serious problems for a school in terms of recruiting and retaining the talented staff necessary to turn the school around.²⁶⁹

171. Many of the concerns registered in relation to Achievement and Attainment Tables have related to the 14–16, or Key Stage 4, phase of education. There is considerable diversity in the range of qualifications on offer in this phase, yet only certain qualifications are recognised for the purposes of the Achievement and Attainment Tables. We were told that maintained schools are less likely to offer those qualifications not recognised, even though they might be more appropriate for certain students, particularly those less engaged with academic learning. Witnesses stated that vocational qualifications recognised in the Tables have been “forced into alignment with academic qualifications”, thereby reducing their usefulness and uptake amongst those learners for which they were originally designed. At the more challenging end of the academic spectrum, IGCSE is an example of a qualification not recognised in the Achievement and Attainment Tables, and there has

263 *Testing and Assessment*, Third Report from the Committee, Session 2007–08, HC 169-I, Chapter 4

264 Ev 180; Ev 12; Ev 13; Ev 189; Ev 63; Q 153

265 Ev 119

266 Ev 153

267 Ev 180; Ev 14

268 *Mathematics in Education and Industry*

269 Ev 180

been widespread debate about their use and standing in relation to other qualifications, in particular the GCSE.²⁷⁰

172. Once qualifications have been recognised, it is not straightforward to compare standards in education across such a diverse set of provision in order that this information can be presented in a simple set of tables, so a concept of equivalence has been developed over time. In this context, Cambridge Assessment provided a technical analysis and referred to some “serious issues” in relation to the compilation and management of the Achievement and Attainment Tables.²⁷¹ The rating process for determining equivalence and locating new qualifications within the existing framework of recognised awards is detailed, complex and lacks transparency. Cambridge Assessment stated that this process “contains substantial elements of judgement [and is] not subject to coherent regulation or scrutiny”. A “very small team” in what is now the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA)²⁷² allocates ratings for qualifications based on a flow of data from schools and the advice of officers in QCDA and DCSF, “on the basis of ‘fit’ and avoidance of anomalies”. Cambridge Assessment added that the rating team was “heavily driven by the ‘internal logic’ of previous decisions and allocations” and that they did not carry out extensive empirical studies of the effect of ratings system on institutional behaviour.²⁷³ Cambridge Assessment would like to see the ratings and equivalence process allocated to Ofqual, the independent examinations regulator, rather than the Government’s QCDA. Cambridge Assessment believes that Ofqual can bring to the process a greater degree of transparency, sophistication and sensitivity than it receives at present.

173. These equivalence ratings have practical consequences. The assumption inherent in the Achievement and Attainment Tables is that the school is the correct level at which to measure performance and direct mechanisms for improvement in order to improve individual pupil learning. We were told that this, when combined with the equivalence mechanism inherent in the Tables, can give rise to perverse incentives for schools to choose ‘easier’ qualifications in which it is more likely that their students will achieve higher grades. Qualifications which, in the view of Cambridge Assessment, have “different societal status and currency for progression” are nevertheless deemed equivalent for the purposes of the Tables. Schools looking to improve their standing in the Tables can migrate towards those qualifications in which students are more likely to get a higher grade and reject qualifications deemed equivalent but which are actually academically more challenging. We note that the gap between the proportion of students getting any 5 A*–C grades at GCSE and the proportion getting 5 A*–C including English and mathematics has broadened from 10% ten years ago to around 20% last year.²⁷⁴ This is likely to be at least partly due to schools choosing easier qualifications for some students. Cambridge Assessment sees no clear evidence that Achievement and Attainment Tables impact beneficially on classroom practice and, indeed, there is evidence to suggest that “more

270 Q 162

271 Ev 64

272 Formerly the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA).

273 See also: Q 159; Q 160

274 Statistical First Release SFR 27/2009, 15 October 2009, National Statistics

superficial learning approaches have been adopted in a misguided attempt to maximise examination performance”.

Accounting for the full range of a school's work

174. Many witnesses have called for a more rounded picture of schools to be presented in place of the current Achievement and Attainment Tables.²⁷⁵ A survey of parents by the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations found that 96% of parents wanted to see a wider range of measures used. Ofsted noted that the current tables reflected only a narrow picture of a school's performance and could appear daunting to users:

Performance tables reflect a narrow although important part of schools' work. Currently, the range of public information on schools' performance can be confusing and in practice, parents may rely more on Ofsted inspection reports than the Achievement and Attainment Tables, because the reports provide a more holistic evaluation of the school.²⁷⁶

VT Education and Skills²⁷⁷ made a case for inclusion of a broader spectrum of judgements in performance tables in order to do justice to schools which were performing well but would not achieve a good rating on the basis of raw test scores or CVA measures. Despite a relatively poor showing according to the current criteria, the performance tables would not show that such schools may be improving their test results steadily as well as improving their performance in areas which were harder to evaluate, such as “inclusion, collaboration with other schools, contribution to community cohesion and quality of multi-agency working”.²⁷⁸

175. In a bid to move the Government away from a system which presents such a narrow view of school performance, our Report on Testing and Assessment recommended that the use of national testing for multiple purposes—measuring pupil attainment, school and teacher accountability, and national monitoring—should be stopped. For the purposes of national monitoring, we favoured a national sampling approach up to age 14, which would be much less burdensome on schools than the saturation testing which was, at the time of our Report, carried out at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. In line with our recommendations, in October 2008, the Secretary of State announced that Key Stage 3 testing would no longer be compulsory.²⁷⁹ Then, in its response to our report on Policy and delivery: the National Curriculum tests delivery failure in 2008, the Government stated that it would bring in sample testing for the purposes of national monitoring at the end of Key Stage 3. We welcomed these changes as a step in the right direction. The Association of School and College Leaders has also expressed its approval, noting that what had seemed a politically difficult move was not so difficult in reality:

275 Ev 180; Q 5; Q 192; Q 194

276 Ev 119

277 VT Education and Skills is a provider of school support and improvement services

278 Ev 187

279 HC Deb, 14 October 2008, col 673

It is politically difficult to move away from some of these measures. The retention of the school league tables and the overblown testing regime in particular seemed to have become a test of political machismo. Yet when the KS3 tests were abolished in 2008 there was relatively little adverse comment and a good deal of praise for the decision.²⁸⁰

176. The Achievement and Attainment Tables present a very narrow view of school performance and there are inherent methodological and statistical problems with the way they are constructed. For instance, they are likely to favour independent and selective schools, which have a lower intake of deprived children or of children with Special Educational Needs. It is unsurprising, therefore, if such schools consistently top the academic league tables. Yet most of those who may wish to use the Tables, particularly parents, remain unaware of the very serious defects associated with them and will interpret the data presented without taking account of their inherent flaws. As a result, many schools feel so constrained by the fear of failure according to the narrow criteria of the Tables that they resort to measures such as teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, an inappropriate focusing of resources on borderline candidates, and encouraging pupils towards ‘easier’ qualifications, all in an effort to maximise their performance data. There is an urgent need for the Government to move away from these damaging Achievement and Attainment Tables and towards a system which gives a full and rounded account of a school’s provision.

School Report Card

The proposals

177. The school report card, announced by the Secretary of State in October 2008, will be introduced from 2011, with a two year pilot starting in autumn 2009.²⁸¹ It is intended partly to answer criticisms of the narrow evidence base of the current Achievement and Attainment Tables, and the Department stated that it “will provide our key statement on the outcomes we expect from schools, and the balance of priorities between them, ensuring more intelligent accountability across schools’ full range of responsibilities.” The Department told us that:

The data currently available is heavily weighted towards academic attainment and while data which places pupil and student attainment and progress into context - in particular, Contextualised Value Added—is published by the Government, it is typically not reported by the press, or given much lower prominence than “raw” attainment scores. In developing School Report Cards, the Government hopes to make sure that accountability arrangements are made sharper and more comprehensive.²⁸²

178. The school report card will be published annually, with the results of more recent Ofsted inspections being incorporated when they are available. DCSF will compile and

280 Ev 11

281 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 4.20 and 4.23

282 Ev 153

publish the school report card nationally and will provide an electronic copy to schools for them to publish locally.²⁸³ The school report card will set out the key outcomes expected of schools, to include pupil attainment, progress and wellbeing; reducing the impact of disadvantage; parents' and pupils' perceptions of the school and the support they receive; and, possibly, partnership working. The progression measure will be contextualised in order to account for schools with differing intakes. In line with a recommendation by the Expert Group on Assessment, the school report card will supersede the Achievement and Attainment Tables as the main source of accountability information and the detailed performance data used to prepare the report card will be published.²⁸⁴

179. It is intended that the report card and Ofsted inspection report will be "complementary and different evaluations of the school's work".²⁸⁵ DCSF and Ofsted are working together to establish a consistent set of priorities for schools which will be reflected in the school report card, Ofsted inspection report and school self-evaluation form (SEF). The report card will present quantitative information on an annual basis; Ofsted's inspection report, normally less frequent, will present more qualitative information resulting from an inspection which is a snapshot of a school's performance.²⁸⁶

180. The Department states that the report card is aimed at:

- *Parents and carers*: to provide a clearer, balanced, comprehensive account of performance, which complements Ofsted's inspection reports; to inform parent choice and improve school accountability to parents; and to provide information in a format which is more understandable and accessible than at present.
- *Schools*: to provide a single, clear, prioritised set of outcomes against which schools will be judged with predictable consequences; to recognise the value of work across all outcomes and to hold schools to account for those they can influence; to provide a balanced account of outcomes achieved and the degree of challenge faced by a school.
- *Government*: to provide a means of supporting the vision for school reforms; to hold schools predictably and consistently to account for what is most important; and to incentivise schools in the right way and remove perverse incentives.
- *Ofsted*: to support the school inspection process.²⁸⁷

181. The precise links between the school report card and Ofsted's inspection framework are unclear. The joint DCSF-Ofsted publication *A School Report Card: Prospectus* states that a majority of respondents to the consultation on the report card agreed that a common set of indicators should be used for the school report card and for Ofsted's risk assessment (previously referred to by Ofsted as a "health check" and, more recently, as an "interim assessment").²⁸⁸ The Prospectus envisages that a common view of the relative importance

283 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, pp 47–48

284 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 4.20–4.25; *Prospectus*, p 3

285 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.27

286 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 4.26–4.27

287 DCSF/Ofsted (2008) *A School Report Card: consultation document*, p3

288 Q 361

of different outcomes should be reflected in both the school report card and the inspection framework.²⁸⁹ The document goes on to state that:

Our intention is that the indicators that underpin the School Report Card will form the core of the process of risk assessment that Ofsted will use to select schools for inspection. ... In the short term, Ofsted will use the selection process developed for the launch of the new inspection arrangements in September 2009.²⁹⁰

In both the Prospectus and the White Paper, the Government recognises that the school report card will not be the sole source of information Ofsted uses in coming to a final decision on whether to inspect a school.²⁹¹ The Minister, Vernon Coaker MP, was at pains to reassure us that the Department had worked “very closely” with Ofsted in producing the latest proposals for the school report card. He went so far as to say that, if the final version of the school report card did not work for Ofsted as the basis of its risk assessment, then he was sure that the Chief Inspector would decline to use it as such.²⁹²

182. In giving evidence to us, Ofsted has been less clear about the role of the school report card in its inspection processes, despite the fact that it has joint authorship of the Prospectus. The Chief Inspector told us that:

I do not see [the school report card] as aimed at Ofsted. I see it as primarily aimed—a number of people would use it—at parents, the public and pupils themselves.²⁹³

When we questioned Ofsted on its involvement with the development of the school report card, we were told that Ofsted’s expertise was being drawn on by the Department, but we were certainly not given the impression that Ofsted were in equal partnership with the Department, despite the claims made in the Prospectus.²⁹⁴ As part of the 2009 inspection framework, Ofsted has developed an “interim assessment” for schools previously judged ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ which will not be inspected within three years of the previous inspection (inspection for such schools will take place at up to five-year intervals). The Department clearly envisages that the school report card will be used by Ofsted for risk assessment purposes, yet the Chief Inspector told us in May 2009 that:

We had been expecting to do our own—we did initially call it a report card or a health check—but we would not be doing both. It doesn’t make sense to do both, so we felt comfortable working with what was emerging, as long as we could have some say in what was emerging.²⁹⁵

The end of this statement seems to imply that if the eventual form of the school report card does not work for Ofsted, inspectors may not use it to replace the existing interim

289 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, p 5

290 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, para 7

291 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, para 7; *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.33

292 Qq 429–431

293 Q 360

294 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, para 8

295 Q 383

assessment. In the 2009 inspection framework published in July 2009, Ofsted said only that “This interim assessment *may* be superseded by the proposed School Report Card” [emphasis added].²⁹⁶

183. There seems to be some confusion over the links between the school report card and Ofsted’s inspection framework. In principle, we see the sense in developing a common set of indicators and a common view of the relative importance of different outcomes, leading to the potential for Ofsted to use the school report card in place of its current interim assessment when deciding which schools to inspect. However, it seems that the Department is driving the development of the school report card and that Ofsted is taking an advisory role.

184. We urge the Government to work closely with Ofsted in order to produce a model of the school report card appropriate for use by the inspectorate. However, if in Ofsted’s view the school report card ultimately takes a form which is unsuitable for the purpose of risk assessment, as an independent regulator, Ofsted should not feel compelled to adopt the school report card as a replacement for its interim assessment.

Contents of the school report card

185. The Prospectus sets out the basis on which the pilot of the school report card will commence, with modifications to be made as necessary during the pilot phase. The categories to be included in the school report card are:

- Pupil progress;
- Pupil attainment;
- Pupil wellbeing;
- Pupils’ perceptions;
- Parents’ perceptions; and
- Narrowing gaps in pupil performance.

There will be both a score and a rating for each performance category (e.g. a score of A and a rating of 8/10). The intention is to provide both an overall indicator of performance and an indication of the priority attached to the different elements of performance. The scores attained in each of these categories will go towards calculating an overall score for the school’s performance. The Prospectus recognises the tension between recognising the full range of a school’s performance and keeping the number of indicators to a manageable minimum. The weighting attached to each indicator will be key in this respect.²⁹⁷

186. The annual data presented in the school report card will be contextualised in certain ways. There will be some indication of how a school’s performance in each category has

²⁹⁶ Ofsted (July 2009) *The framework for the inspection in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009*, para 17

²⁹⁷ *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, pp 20–24

changed since the previous year.²⁹⁸ There will also be some basic information about the school on the school report card, such as whether it has a special unit for SEN pupils, and information about the particular characteristics of the school, and its ethos statement.²⁹⁹ The Prospectus states that every school, regardless of its local circumstances, should have an equal chance to achieve a good score on the report card. However, it emphasises the importance of “absolute outcomes” for children. Indicators of pupil attainment will, therefore, not be contextualised. The pupil progress indicator will be the means of contextualisation in measuring a school’s academic performance and the pilot will test three types of measure: progression, value added and contextual value added.³⁰⁰ As pupils start at different levels of attainment, there is a degree of contextualisation inherent in this measure. It is noted that the weighting given to absolute and contextualised measures in the school report card will be fundamental to the fairness of the system. Later in the pilot study, contextualisation of other indicators—pupil well-being, parents’ perceptions and pupils’ perceptions—will be considered.³⁰¹

187. In searching for an appropriate well-being indicator, the intention is to capture a measure of a school’s contribution to pupil wellbeing. The framework of the five Every Child Matters outcomes is commonly used and a range of quantitative and qualitative wellbeing measures will be piloted from September 2009. The pilot will draw on work being carried out by Ofsted on well-being indicators, including the possibility of deriving pupil well-being data from parent and pupil perception surveys.³⁰² The indicators for the parents’ perceptions and pupils’ perceptions categories on the school report card will be derived from these surveys.³⁰³

188. The school report card will be used as a lever for narrowing the gap in achievement between certain under-performing groups and their peers. Factors which correlate closely with under-achievement at school include those relating to membership of some ethnic groups, levels of household income, special educational needs and being looked after by a local authority. The Prospectus states that the accountability system should be used to provide “positive incentives” to schools to identify and improve the progress of these children. In order to measure the attainment gap, indicators based on established Key Stage 2 and 4 thresholds³⁰⁴ will be designed to address under-performance correlated with poverty or ethnicity. The attainment gap to be measured will be the difference between the proportion of disadvantaged pupils reaching target thresholds compared with the proportion of their peers reaching the same target. An alternative measure of income deprivation will also be tested, which combines eligibility for free school meals with the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index, a postcode-based deprivation indicator currently used in the calculation of CVA.

298 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, p16

299 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, pp17–18

300 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, pp 25–29

301 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, pp17–18

302 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, pp 30–33; also *Indicators of a school’s contribution to well-being*, Ofsted, June 2009

303 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, p 34

304 Level 4 at Key Stage 2; 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*–C (or equivalent) including English and maths.

189. In a similar vein, the school report card will contain a measure reflecting a school's "success in securing positive outcomes for children with SEN" and reflecting the views of children with SEN and their parents. The pilot study will seek a means of identifying outcomes for SEN children without creating perverse incentives to over- or under-identify SEN as a means of influencing scores.³⁰⁵

190. Finally, the Prospectus gives a commitment to the inclusion of partnership working on the school report card and promises further consultation.³⁰⁶ In line with the increasing emphasis on this aspect of a school's activity, Ofsted's revised inspection framework for September 2009 will also give a judgement for the effectiveness of partnership working.

191. The school report card will be introduced into mainstream primary and secondary maintained schools in the first instance, including Academies. The model will be refined and developed for special schools, Pupil Referral Units and alternative provision. It will also be developed to reflect early years and sixth form provision and, in relation to the latter, how it might reflect the Framework for Excellence report card.³⁰⁷

Appraisal of the school report card

192. If witnesses to this inquiry have been largely critical of the current Achievement and Attainment Tables and their effect on schools, with some exceptions they have generally welcomed, at least in principle, the concept of the school report card.³⁰⁸ We asked Jon Coles, Director General of the Schools Directorate at DCSF, what evidence the Department had for the effectiveness of the school report card. He said that there was very good evidence from New York that the report card there had challenged and raised performance in the lowest performing schools.³⁰⁹ However, even those witnesses who welcome the school report card in principle have not shared the Department's confidence in the effectiveness of the specific report card model proposed.

193. First, there has been some concern at the prospect of the Government borrowing a policy from another jurisdiction without consideration for social, structural and cultural differences which may affect implementation of the policy and its ultimate effects. An international comparative analysis of accountability and children's outcomes in a variety of jurisdictions carried out by the School Accountability Review Group³¹⁰ concluded that:

There is widespread and increasing interest in monitoring the performance of education and children's service systems and in monitoring performance across an increasing range of outcomes. There is extensive policy borrowing. Government

305 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, p 44

306 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, p 45

307 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, p 46

308 Ev 11; Ev 9; Ev 175; Audit Commission response to DCSF/Ofsted consultation on the School Report Card; Ev 186; Ev 62; Ev 9; Q 200

309 Q 400

310 The School Accountability Review Group was set up specifically to carry out this research. The Group was supported by The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre), which is part of the Social Science Research Unit at the Institute of Education, University of London.

needs to recognise that policy structures and cultural practices are different in different systems.³¹¹

194. The NUT states that the key purpose of the school report card in the New York system is to focus resources on those schools most in need. It observed that The New York report card is published with a caveat that it does not provide information about student performance on a number of measures which are, nevertheless, valued by the community; and it added that these issues do not appear to be recognised in proposals for the English school report card.³¹² Fundamentally, the NUT believes that the English school report card proposals are set within the existing “high-stakes, punitive inspection regime which is data driven”, rather than being used as part of a revised accountability strategy. Such a revised regime should, according to the NUT, effect real change by encouraging schools to focus on their wider responsibilities to improve the life chances of pupils with the freedom to innovate.³¹³ The NUT considers that the report card proposals fail to take account of schools’ self-evaluation work and states that it will merely add to the existing accountability burden, rather than reduce or rationalise it, as the Government claims.³¹⁴

195. Second, there is a concern about the lack of evidence-based policy making. Professor Peter Tymms argued that, although we might consider the New York system and the way the report card is said to work in that jurisdiction, it was not possible to know for sure what effect the report card had had in New York because there was no way of making an evidence-based assessment. There, as here, many reforms and changes had been introduced simultaneously and, because of that, it was not possible to draw causal links between a single initiative and an outcome or set of outcomes.³¹⁵ If Professor Tymms’ views are accepted, the Department’s claims that there is good evidence for the effectiveness of the report card in New York seem hard to sustain.

196. We welcome in principle the introduction of the school report card as a rationalisation of current accountability mechanisms and an attempt at providing a broader evidence base for assessing schools’ performance. However, the Government must take care in developing its proposals that it tailors the school report card to the particular needs of the English schools system. Lessons can be learned from international practices and the case of the New York school report card will be particularly relevant; but the Government should not assume that what works elsewhere will necessarily work in the English system.

197. We set out below issues raised by witnesses under a variety of headings. The list is not necessarily exhaustive, but should be taken as an indication that the school report card requires a considerable amount of work before it is suitable for use as a fundamental part of the English school accountability system.

311 School Accountability Review Group (2008), *Accountability and children’s outcomes in high-performing education systems: Analytical maps of approaches to measuring children’s education, health and well-being outcomes in high-performing educational systems*, <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/0/PDF%20reviews%20and%20summaries/School%20accountability%20TRWEB.pdf>, p7

312 NUT response to the DCSF’s proposals for a School Report Card, paras 21–26

313 NUT response to the DCSF’s proposals for a School Report Card, para 70

314 NUT response to the DCSF’s proposals for a School Report Card, paras 1 & 4

315 Ev 70

What is the school report card for and who is it aimed at?

198. There is a question mark over what the school report card is for and who it is aimed at. The National Association of Head Teachers and the Association of School and College Leaders welcomed the school report card as having the potential to provide parents and others with a holistic view of a school not currently available to the public.³¹⁶ The National Governors' Association considered that the School Report Card was potentially a sound basis for informing parents about a range of measurable outcomes as well as describing the school's priorities. However, the Association warned that overcomplicating the school report card would defeat its purpose and make it incomprehensible to parents.³¹⁷

199. Both the General Teaching Council for England and the Local Government Association (LGA) considered unrealistic the aspiration expressed by DCSF that the school report card could be a single accountability tool for all parties, including parents, carers, schools, government and Ofsted.³¹⁸ The LGA also questioned how the current proposals for a school report card would fit in with models and processes connected with Ofsted, Framework for Excellence and the Comprehensive Area Assessment.³¹⁹ Edexcel did not necessarily approve of the form of school report card currently proposed but saw potential for it as a means of rationalising information currently available from a variety of sources, some of which may be contradictory and inaccessible to some sections of the community. It considered that a school report card should be used to draw together in one place and in a coherent form a range of indicators of well-being, progress and achievement. These would be represented by a blend of quantitative and qualitative data, including parent and pupil surveys and a professional assessment of the quality of services, adjusted to reflect local circumstances.³²⁰ The Association of School and College Leaders thought that the school report card was an attempt to:

... address some of the weaknesses of the present system by drawing different indicators together to offset one perverse incentive against another and to limit accountability measures to a single list. As such it is welcome, but ASCL is not convinced that it will not simply be added to the existing system rather than replacing it, or that it will not also grow without limit as every interest group adds its particular favoured element.³²¹

200. There were also concerns about the likely complexity of the school report card. During our visit to New York, we were told that the report card used there was considered too complex for many parents to understand. Witnesses representing the Awarding Bodies in this country also remarked on this problem with the New York report card. Both Simon Lebus, Group Chief Executive of Cambridge Assessment, and Jerry Jarvis, Managing Director of Edexcel, said that generating large quantities of data for the purposes of a report card can become highly complex and lead to difficulties in making judgements

316 Ev 11; Ev 9

317 Ev 101

318 Ev 4–5; Local Government Association; Q 100

319 Ev 40

320 Ev 62–63

321 Ev 11

about a school's performance. They both considered that much work had to be done before the English school report card would be in a position to work around these complexity issues.³²²

What should be in the school report card?

201. Although the principle of a scheme which gives a broader account of school performance was welcomed, witnesses have expressed differing views about what they want to see in the school report card. Some want it to provide plentiful, in-depth information about a school; others want it to provide just a few headline objectives ranked on a simple scale.³²³ The Centre³²⁴ suggested that both objectives could be achieved if the school report card were presented on a website with a simple front page for each report card and the ability to click on a category to access much more detailed information.³²⁵ The Centre welcomed the school report card, but it cautioned that its success would depend on the right categories being chosen and the full data on which the report is based being made available to parents should they wish to access it.³²⁶

202. The Local Government Association (LGA) considered that the proposed categories of performance for the school report card—attainment, pupil progress, wider outcomes, narrowing gaps, parents' views, pupils' views—seemed sensible. However, the LGA was awaiting further detail on how the indicators were to be constructed before passing final judgement. The Audit Commission, the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) and others were also positive about the inclusion of wider outcomes and an indicator of narrowing gaps in achievement.³²⁷ Indeed, the Audit Commission thought the school report card should go even further to include comment on out of school activities and other services, such as use of the school nurse and therapist.³²⁸ However, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) did not believe that the proposal to collect data on wider outcomes and narrowing gaps would be any more valid or reliable than the more traditional, and in the ATL's view flawed, indicators of pupil attainment and progress.³²⁹

203. The Prospectus makes clear the Government's commitment to the view that raw test scores, regardless of a school's context, are extremely important indicators of a school's performance. Contextualisation is introduced in only one measure on the school report card, 'pupil progress'. The GTCE wished to see all indicators on the school report card contextualised, on the basis that the focus on raw scores could negatively impact on schools working in challenging circumstances and fail to give them credit for good work.³³⁰ The National Association of Head Teachers argued that the school report card should be

322 Q 176; Q 171

323 Q 224; Ev 187; Q 192

324 A charity which advises parents and others on education law and practice in the state sector for children of compulsory school age

325 Q 253

326 Advisory Centre for Education

327 Audit Commission response to DCSF/Ofsted consultation on the School Report Card; Ev 1; Ev 184

328 Audit Commission response to DCSF/Ofsted consultation on the School Report Card

329 Ev 14

330 GTCE response to DCSF/Ofsted consultation on the School Report Card

viewed alongside the school's self-evaluation form and development plan in order to provide context.³³¹

204. The Prospectus gives a commitment to the inclusion of partnership working on the school report card and promises further consultation.³³² The Youth Justice Board welcomed this as a means of promoting partnership working.³³³ The LGA also approved. The GTCE, however, saw a contradiction between, on the one hand, the vision set out in the 21st Century Schools consultation document of the school as a community hub, involved in a variety of networks and partnerships connected with the wider outcomes for children and young people; and, on the other hand, the notion of a *school* report card which may or may not include a description of the partnerships in which the school is involved.³³⁴ According to the GTCE, further work was needed to explore how partnership working should be reported.³³⁵ The ATL was concerned about the school report card making schools accountable for matters beyond their control, particularly in terms of well-being. The ATL saw responsibility for children's well-being as shared between schools and other local services and worried that the shared nature of the responsibility would not adequately be reflected in the measure of partnership working included in the school report card.

205. It is proposed that the school report card will use a 'credit system' in relation to work with disadvantaged children. Schools with sufficient numbers of disadvantaged pupils would gain credit to the extent that they achieve continuous improvement for all pupils whilst at the same time narrowing the gap between disadvantaged groups and others. The GTCE supported this focus on a school's contribution to narrowing achievement gaps.³³⁶ The Government is considering penalties for increasing gaps, but it is acknowledged that this may result in unfair penalties for schools due to a change of intake rather than performance.³³⁷ James Liebman, Chief Accountability Officer at the Department of Education in New York, told us that the New York authorities considered it important to give credit to schools which make progress with under-performing groups of pupils and to ensure that there was no disincentive in the system which would motivate schools to avoid taking on challenging pupils. Reflecting this concern, the Youth Justice Board of England and Wales urged the Government not to include in the school report card any measure which might have the effect of discouraging schools from taking their "fair share" of pupils with challenging behaviour and from disadvantaged backgrounds.³³⁸

206. Schools should be strongly incentivised by the accountability system to take on challenging pupils and work hard to raise their levels of attainment. To this end, we support the proposals to introduce credits on the school report card for narrowing the gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. However, we

331 Ev 9

332 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, p 45

333 Ev 184

334 Ev 4-5

335 GTCE response to DCSF/Ofsted consultation on the School Report Card

336 Ev 9

337 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, pp 35-43

338 Ev 184

strongly caution the Government against the introduction of any penalties for increasing gaps in achievement. If the Government were to attach such penalties, it is likely that schools would seek to deny school places to challenging pupils in order to avoid the risk of a lower school report card score. They might also create incentives for schools not to push gifted and talented students to reach really high levels of achievement.

The overall score

207. The Government remains committed to the inclusion of an overall rating on the school report card. It recognised in the White Paper that how the score was constructed would be crucial to the way it was received.³³⁹ The Prospectus states that a summary score on the school report card is an important mechanism for ensuring clarity and transparency in priorities for school performance and it must be underpinned by a balanced method of representing a school's performance; but it is recognised that developing a scoring model that is robust, credible and accepted will be challenging.³⁴⁰

208. The debate about the inclusion of an overall score in the school report card is essentially an argument about complexity. If it is thought that parents and others can understand complexity in school performance reporting, then there is no need for a summative school report card which provides an overall grade. On the other hand there is the view that complexity is not normally grasped by lay users of performance data and it is better to take control centrally by presenting one, privileged view of school performance—one which focuses on a number of measures judged to be the most important and weighted according to defined criteria. According to this view, there will always be other ways of judging a school, but one formula is chosen over all others for policy reasons and an overall grade is awarded on the basis of a single view of what should be prioritised. A possible middle way would be to grade performance in the chosen categories, say on a scale of 1–10, and leave it at that, so that no overall grade is awarded and parents and others can choose the measurements that are most important to them. Individuals do this routinely in other areas. For example, when buying a car consumers have a range of information on which to base their choice. They prioritise what is important to them—price, NCAP rating,³⁴¹ engine size, fuel type and consumption—and make their choice without recourse to an overall rating.

209. John Bangs, representing the NUT, expressed another view of the complexity issue. He thought that the overall score was more about providing simplicity to government than to parents:

We have to understand where the single grade comes from. It comes from the Government's approach to public sector reform. It is a flight from complexity. It is about giving Ministers simple solutions to complex problems, but ... those are often wrong solutions. A single grade does not drive up motivation for institutional improvement. What it does is tell the best people in the institution to leave, especially

339 Para 4.28

340 *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, pp 6–10

341 A safety rating. See <http://www.euroncap.com>

if it is a really bad grade, because it can't differentiate between those who are effective in the institution and those who are not. It is a crude blunderbuss approach that can lead to the best people leaving the institution. Perhaps [a balanced school report card] is a holy grail, but it is achievable: the key issue is to have a simple summary of the effectiveness of the institution, looking at the key concerns and issues, without having a single grade bracketed into four separate tiers that actually has the effect of demoralising individual people who are really making a difference in the institution.³⁴²

210. There was little support in the evidence for an overall score on the school report card. A survey of parents by the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations found that 56% favoured the inclusion of both an overall score and individual scores for each measure used to assess performance.³⁴³ However, many witnesses thought that an overall score would be misleading or risk an over-simplification of a complex set of data.³⁴⁴ The Audit Commission stated that the school report card should include only measures which gave a balanced view of school performance. Parents could then prioritise for themselves which indicators they thought were most important for their child and focus on the relevant part of the report card. Both the General Teaching Council for England and the National Association of Head Teachers strongly opposed the overall rating and were concerned that it may undermine the legitimacy and usefulness of the school report card.³⁴⁵ Edexcel expressed concern that, without an appropriate explanatory narrative underpinning the report card, there was a danger that over-simplification “could easily provoke public and media over-reaction to a single summative grade, as has been the case in the US”.³⁴⁶ The LGA was against the inclusion of an overall score on the basis that it risks gross over-simplification of a complex set of indicators. The Advisory Centre for Education was also opposed, arguing that the overall score could be misleading. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers focused on problems inherent in the data on which the overall score would be based, stating that the school report card would “replicate the problems of the current accountability system. Individual grades will be allocated based on an accumulation of flawed data, but will be reported as if they offer meaningful information and comparison”.³⁴⁷

211. We have been struck by the weight of evidence we have received which argues against an overall score on the school report card. It is true that Ofsted comes to an overall judgement on a four point scale, but this judgement is meant to be the result of a very extensive analysis of a school's provision across the board, relying on quantitative and qualitative evidence and first-hand experience of the school at work. A school report card is not, and in our view never can be, a full account of a school's performance, yet the inclusion of an overall score suggests that it is.

342 Q 63

343 Ev 91

344 Ev 181; Ev 4–5; Q 1; Q 57; Q 62; Q 63

345 GTCE response to DCSF/Ofsted consultation on the School Report Card; Ev 9

346 Ev 63–64

347 Ev 13

212. The range of discrete measures proposed for inclusion in the school report card certainly present a broader picture of a school than the current Achievement and Attainment Tables; but they cannot be the basis for a definitive judgement of overall performance in the same way as we are entitled to expect an Ofsted judgement to be. On balance, we think that parents and others should be able to decide for themselves those measures of performance most important to them. We approve of the proposal both to grade and rate performance in each category on the school report card, but we are not persuaded of the appropriateness of and need for an overall score.

Consistency

213. There are at least two types of consistency which are relevant to the school report card. First, in order to allow for a meaningful analysis of a school's year-on-year progress, it should be an instrument which is consistent over time, so far as possible. The White Paper certainly presents the school report card as a means of providing a consistent picture of schools' performance. However, we heard from the Office of Accountability in the New York Department of Education that the reporting mechanisms for the New York report card were constantly being modified and refined as a result of challenges from schools who considered them unfair. James Liebman, Chief Accountability Officer, admitted that the system was not perfect, but he maintained that it could be constantly improved and he considered the report card was still fundamentally useful in that it concentrated the minds of school leaders on improving performance. Nevertheless, serial changes to reporting criteria present a barrier to tracking year-on-year performance of schools on the basis of a consistent set of indicators.

214. Second, the school report card should be consistent with wider elements of the accountability system so that conflicting judgements and priorities are not perpetuated from the existing system into the reformed system. The overall score on the school report card is intended to be complementary to the Ofsted judgement.³⁴⁸ Although the Prospectus envisages that a common view of the relative importance of different outcomes should be reflected in both the school report card and the inspection framework,³⁴⁹ the NUT had some objections to this. The alignment of the school report card with Ofsted inspection criteria suggested, according to the NUT, that Ofsted would be following Government policy on 'standards' and school intervention which, in turn, suggested an erosion of Ofsted's independence from Government.³⁵⁰

215. The Government accepts that there will be times when the school report card score and Ofsted inspection judgement do not give the same message about a school's performance.³⁵¹ Ofsted also accepts this will happen, explained by the fact that the school report card will present backwards-looking data, whereas an Ofsted inspection judgement

348 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, para 4.27

349 Prospectus, p 5

350 NUT response to the DCSF's proposals for a School Report Card

351 Prospectus, pp 6–10

represents a real-time snapshot of the performance of a school which takes into account a different set of performance indicators.³⁵²

216. We recommend that the Government guards against serial changes to reporting criteria for the school report card once it is introduced nationally. The ability to track school performance on a range of issues over time is potentially a valuable feature of the reformed system, but this will not be possible if the reporting criteria are in a constant state of flux.

217. There is potential for substantial confusion to be introduced if the reasons for differences between scores on the school report card and Ofsted judgements are not clear, leading to a perception of incoherence in the accountability system. This would be unfortunate, as the success of any accountability system depends on the extent to which users have confidence in it. We recommend that DCSF and Ofsted work together to find a way to eradicate, or at least minimise the impact of, this problem. If the Government accepts our recommendation not to include an overall score in the school report card, the potential for conflicting accounts of school performance would be greatly reduced.

Suitability of proposed indicators as a proxy for underlying performance

218. According to the White Paper and Prospectus, three of the measures proposed for the school report card—pupil wellbeing, parents’ perceptions and pupils’ perceptions—may be based wholly or largely on responses to ‘perception surveys’ and, in the case of well-being indicators, nationally collected data on attendance, exclusions, post-16 progression, the amount of sport provided and the uptake of school lunches.³⁵³

219. There is no indication of what thought has been given to the possibility that response rates for some schools, particularly from parents, might be quite low and we have noted in Chapter 3 some serious methodological concerns with survey evidence.³⁵⁴ Witnesses such as Aspect have certainly expressed concern about the validity of conclusions drawn from unrepresentative samples.³⁵⁵

220. We are also concerned about the well-being indicators and the extent to which they can really be accurate, based as they are on a limited set of loosely-related quantitative data and problematic survey evidence. Beyond the recent Ofsted consultation on well-being indicators, there is very little evidence to indicate just how accurately such indicators can represent a school’s true performance in relation to pupil well-being. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers did not believe that the proposal to collect well-being indicators was sound.³⁵⁶ The Independent Schools Inspectorate found the proposals for including “qualitative judgements in numeric form” alarming. It thought that the evidence may be thin, it was not clear how the views of pupils and parents would be reported appropriately,

352 Q 362; Q 381

353 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, CM 7588, Chapter 4; *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, pp30–33; Ofsted (June 2009) *Indicators of a school’s contribution to well-being*, p8

354 Nanthabalan, B (2008) in *Inspecting the Inspectorate*, de Waal (ed), Ch 6

355 Ev 175

356 Ev 12

and yet such evidence could have a significant negative impact on a school.³⁵⁷ The NASUWT pointed to the possibility that views of pupils and parents on the quality of school provision may differ significantly depending on their individual circumstances and urged caution over the use of survey evidence.

221. Professor Stephen Gorard of the University of Birmingham has considered the current model of school effectiveness, dominant in research, policy and practice in England, which is based on assessment results. He has noted that there is a need for more research on school effectiveness in terms of wider outcomes for children:

Schools are mini-societies in which pupils may learn how to interact, what to expect from wider society, and how to judge fairness (Gorard and Smith 2009). Schools seem to be a key influence on pupils' desire to take part in future learning opportunities, and on their occupational aspirations (Gorard and Rees 2002). All of these outcomes have been largely ignored in three decades of school effectiveness research. It is time to move on.³⁵⁸

222. The Government must address the methodological problems inherent in basing important indicators on survey evidence. It is unacceptable that schools with the most challenging intakes might suffer skewed performance scores because of a low response rate to surveys for the purposes of the school report card.

223. Academic research in the field of school effectiveness is lacking in the field of pupil well-being and wider outcomes beyond assessment results. In the absence of robust, independent research evidence, the Government should exercise great caution in pursuing its otherwise laudable aim of widening the accountability system beyond simple test scores.

224. We do not believe that the indicators based on parent and pupil surveys, together with data on attendance, exclusions, the amount of sport provided and the uptake of school lunches, provide a balanced picture of a school's performance. In the absence of a set of performance indicators which are able to provide a fully rounded and accurate picture of how well a school is supporting and enhancing the well-being and outcomes of its pupils, the school report card should not purport to give a balanced view of a school's overall performance in this or any other area. The Government should make clear on the face of the school report card that its contents should only be considered as a partial picture of the work of a school. This is not to say that we do not consider the inclusion of well-being indicators to be a welcome development: we are merely concerned that parents and others should understand the limits of the information which is presented to them on the school report card.

357 Ev 189

358 Gorard, S. and Smith, E. (2009) The impact of school experiences on students' sense of justice: an international study of student voice, *Orbis Scholae*, 2, 2, 87–105; and Gorard, S. and Rees, G. (2002) *Creating a learning society*, Bristol: Policy Press

Summary conclusions on the School Report Card

225. We are pleased that the Government is now moving away from the Achievement and Attainment Tables based on a narrow set of measures of academic achievement derived from test results. We believe that the move towards the broader evidence base proposed for the school report card is a step in the right direction. However, we reiterate our warning to the Government that it should not make claims for the school report card which do not stand up to scrutiny. It will never constitute a definitive view of a school's performance but it might, if properly constructed, be a useful tool in assessing a broader range of aspects of a school's performance than is possible at present.

226. At the start of the pilot study of the school report card, it is too early for us to make detailed recommendations about its precise contents. At this stage, we simply urge the Government to take account of the concerns raised by witnesses to this inquiry. There is still much work to be done in developing the school report card into a workable format.

5 Conclusion: complexity, consistency and coercion

227. Having considered the major elements of the accountability system, a number of inter-related messages have emerged. First, complexity: the school accountability and improvement system has become extremely complex, with layer upon layer of new initiatives being imposed on schools. Second, consistency: linked to the complexity issue is the impression that some major elements of the accountability system are giving conflicting messages. This leads schools, parents and others to worry about the consistency of the various mechanisms which are supposed to hold schools to account and support them towards better performance. Third, coercion: the Government and Ofsted are giving mixed messages about whether schools themselves are driving school improvement or whether they must simply submit to improvement programmes imposed on them by others. We examine these issues in further detail below.

Complexity

228. The New Relationship with Schools was intended to simplify and make more coherent the school accountability and improvement process.³⁵⁹ The Government acknowledged that schools complained of a ‘bidding culture’, in which there were too many programmes and initiatives which distracted them from the task of school improvement. The ‘single conversation’ with schools was, therefore, meant to remove from schools the need to take account of multiple initiatives from a variety of different sources and have a single conversation with a School Improvement Partner (SIP) about development priorities, targets and support needs.³⁶⁰

229. However, witnesses have complained that the vision of the ‘single conversation’ is not a reality for schools. The Association of Schools and College Leaders stated that “the single conversation has suffered from the top-down target setting culture of the DCSF and its agency the National Strategies”.³⁶¹ Local authorities, School Improvement Partners and headteachers have said that one of the biggest problems facing schools is the number and frequency of new initiatives emanating from central government. They have also expressed concerns about a lack of understanding by the Government of how new programmes would work in practice and the possibility of adverse, unintended consequences.³⁶² VT Education and Skills³⁶³ pointed to a need for simplification, agreeing with others that there were too many initiatives and adding that information for parents was either too widely spread or not presented in a comprehensible format.³⁶⁴

359 *New Relationship with Schools*, p3

360 *New Relationship with Schools*, p8

361 Ev 10

362 Research commissioned by LGA from National Foundation for Education Research on the local authority role in school improvement

363 A provider of school support and improvement services

364 Ev 186

230. Councillor Les Lawrence, representing the Local Government Authority (LGA), gave as a reason for the frequency of policy initiatives the Government's "unfortunate misunderstanding" of the length of time between a policy being set by Government, implemented in a school or across a local authority and the manifestation of an outcome from that policy. He thought that Government had a tendency to rush and, in doing so, did not allow sufficient time for policies to run their course from inception, through implementation to outcomes. He thought that, over the last 20 or 30 years, governments had tended to pursue goals which were not always compatible with the requirements of sound policy delivery.³⁶⁵ Councillor Lawrence emphasised the need for a period of stability so that schools and local authorities could focus on improvement, free from the pressure of constant change:

... we have had this constant change, dare I say it, ever since the Baker curriculum reforms. ... A period of stability would be very helpful to enable us to bring about the type of improvements that we are beginning to achieve now, simply because we have the data to hand and the powers to intervene.³⁶⁶

231. Anastasia de Waal, Director of Family and Education at Civitas, a thinktank, found the frequent succession of new ideas frustrating. The net result was that educationalists were never in a position to consolidate and use the knowledge gained from experience because a policy was dropped or changed before its true effects could be discerned. New policies simply brought new problems, not solutions to the problems which already existed.³⁶⁷ Professor Peter Tymms has also stated that, with so many national initiatives being rolled out simultaneously, it is impossible to establish which ones are leading to better accountability and school improvement and which ones are not.³⁶⁸ Professor Tymms said that he would like to see the Government testing policies systematically in order to generate solid evidence about the effectiveness of policies. He argued that the Government should formulate policy with the explicit aim that it would be updated in the light of the evidence which emerges.³⁶⁹

232. Jon Coles, Director General of the Schools Directorate at DCSF, told us that, through the policy-making process, the Government was trying to understand the factors that affect children's educational success and to identify policies that would be effective in bringing about that success. He said that the White Paper proposals were an attempt "to reduce the pressure of centrally driven reform programmes" and to move towards a system more tailored to the needs of individual schools.³⁷⁰ He did not, however, explain why the pace of change in Government policy needed to be so relentless and so centrally directed.

233. As the strategic commissioning authority for schools in the maintained sector, local authorities are at the heart of the school accountability and improvement system and are, therefore, acutely aware of the complexities of that system. An excellent example of this

365 Q 78

366 Q 87

367 Q 204

368 Professor Peter Tymms, Durham University

369 Ev 170

370 Q 476

complexity is provided by the arrangements for supporting school improvement at the 16–19 phase of education. For all education providers, the LGA states that the “key agency for driving improvement is the institution or provider itself, supported as appropriate by other providers working in local delivery consortia”.³⁷¹ Support and challenge is provided by the sponsoring agency and, where this is ineffective, the sponsoring agency has duties to secure improvement. The sponsoring agency for schools and sixth form colleges is the local authority; but for academies it will soon be the Young People’s Learning Agency (YPLA); and, for general further education colleges, the Skills Funding Agency, with the local authority and YPLA identifying underperformance and commissioning the Learning and Skills Improvement Service as necessary. This is clearly a very complex network of agencies operating at the 16–19 level of education.³⁷² Councillor Les Lawrence said that the LGA had some concerns about this “plethora of bodies” and worried that it was a “mechanism for exercising greater centralised control than is necessary to exercise the new powers for the commissioning of 16–19 provision”.³⁷³

234. Furthermore, there are a variety of existing and proposed measures for performance management, including the school report card pilot study to record schools’ performance in relation to children up to age 16, Achievement and Attainment Tables, the Data Dashboard for school sixth forms, Framework for Excellence for the further education sector, the new Ofsted inspection framework, Comprehensive Area Assessments, and self-regulation. The LGA stated that “unless these are brought together into a single integrated system there is likely to be both public and professional confusion and inefficient use of resources”.³⁷⁴

235. Once local authorities have strategic commissioning responsibility for all education and training for children and young people up to the age of 18, there may be a stronger argument for placing greater emphasis on performance across 14–19 provision within a more coherent and integrated framework. The LGA, in its response to the Department’s consultation on 21st Century Schools and A School Report Card, questioned why the focus was exclusively on schools and not on other types of provider who are engaged in the education and training of young people up to the age of 19. The LGA noted that the Education and Skills Act 2008 and the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill (which has since passed into law) both require collaboration between local authorities and providers of all types of education and training up to 19 and considered that a harmonised accountability framework would promote such collaboration.

236. Instead, there remains some confusion about the status of partnership working and how account should be taken of the work schools do with other partners. The Government has strongly emphasised schools working in partnership with others, both in the White Paper and in the proposals for the school report card.³⁷⁵ Ofsted also makes a judgement on partnership working under the new inspection framework and states that it is working with

371 Ev 43

372 The Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee remarked on the complexity of the new decision-making structure in its Seventh Report of Session 2008–09, HC 530, para 152

373 Q 83

374 Ev 43

375 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, Chapter 3; *A School Report Card: Prospectus*, DCSF and Ofsted, June 2009, p 45

the Department “To refine ways of evaluating partnerships more securely within the accountability framework. ... Common principles are being developed which will enable inspectors to evaluate the impact of collaborative working in schools, early years’ settings and colleges”.³⁷⁶ The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), however, argued that “The accountability system is predicated on, and encourages, competition between schools at a destructive level, since it is wholly predicated on the performance of the individual school”.³⁷⁷ The Association of Teachers and Lecturers saw more benefit in a community-based approach to accountability, with increased focus on partnerships and collaborations between schools, other education providers (early years and 14–19) and other children’s services.³⁷⁸

237. Another manifestation of the complexities raised by the evaluation of partnership working has been in connection with the Diploma. The Diploma has the potential to transform the way schools operate at the 14–19 level. Not only is it meant to combine the academic with the vocational, but schools are generally required to collaborate with each other and with other education providers in order to provide Diplomas. This means that the achievements of pupils in a school at Diploma level may be due, not only to the efforts of that school, but also to the efforts of other education providers involved.

238. Edexcel, one of the Awarding Bodies providing the Diploma, states that open competition between schools has been encouraged over many years, impeding trust and collaboration at local level. It considers that “Collaboration in provision is yet to be translated into collaboration over outcomes, not least because colleges are central to such partnerships for learners aged 16 and under, but are not included in the current proposals.” Edexcel does not consider that the Department has yet produced a workable model for accountability demonstrating collaboration between various providers.³⁷⁹

239. The complexity of the school accountability and improvement system in England is creating a barrier to genuine school improvement based on the needs of individual schools and their pupils. We support the message in the 21st Century Schools White Paper, that schools should be empowered to take charge of their own improvement processes. However, the Government’s continuing tendency to impose serial policy initiatives on schools belies this message and the relentless pace of reform has taken its toll on schools and their capacity to deliver a balanced education to their pupils. We urge the Government to refrain from introducing frequent reforms and allow schools a period of consolidation.

Consistency

240. The Government stands by the current accountability system as a coherent and effective approach to holding schools to account and driving improvement. The Department stated that “the current school accountability system plays an effective role in raising standards, enabling schools to drive their own improvement, identifying excellent

376 Ev 115

377 Ev 10

378 Ev 12–14

379 Ev 63

performance and underperformance, keeping parents informed and ensuring resources are directed to where they are most needed.”³⁸⁰ However, the NUT believed that the current accountability system was muddled and that, contrary to the Government’s claim, there was no evidence that tests, targets and performance tables had improved standards over the past decade.³⁸¹ Moreover, teacher initiative and creativity was undermined by uncertainties created by multiple and often conflicting lines of accountability.³⁸² The NUT stated that:

“The Government in England has failed consistently to adopt a coherent approach to school accountability. Current systems for evaluation, from individual pupils to the education service at national level, are extraordinarily muddled. There is no clear rationale of why various systems of summative evaluation and accountability exist. Consequently, schools experience over-lapping forms of high stakes evaluation systems ... which are often in contradiction with each other. These over-lapping systems of accountability are made worse by Government national targets for test results and examination results and by the publication on an annual basis of school performance tables.”³⁸³

241. The ASCL made a similar point, claiming that the present system had evolved haphazardly over generations, placed progressively less trust in schools and teachers, and was no longer fit for purpose.³⁸⁴ The ASCL stated that reducing levels of trust in schools and teachers has led to an expanding accountability system which has become over-burdensome because schools are held accountable in too many ways to too many different individuals and bodies. These include children and parents as individuals, those groups collectively, the governing body, the local authority, members and officers of the local authority, school improvement partners (SIPs), advisers appointed by National Strategies or the National Challenge, Ofsted, the Children’s Commissioner, Children’s Trusts, the Learning and Skills Council, the press, and partnerships set up to address behaviour, diplomas or other locally agreed issues. The ASCL stated that these accountabilities often conflict, looking for different priorities and demanding incompatible behaviours. For example, different plans and different targets have to be agreed with different bodies.³⁸⁵ The ASCL would like to see a new system designed with a limited number of elements which are not burdensome and which accurately reflect the performance of schools.³⁸⁶

242. Edexcel described the current accountability system as “fragmented” and, like the ASCL, referred to the multiple bodies to which schools were accountable. According to Edexcel, inconsistency was a feature of the system at a number of levels. It argued that Ofsted reports used CVA data inconsistently so that account was not necessarily taken of school context. It added that light-touch inspection for high-performing schools could reinforce funding advantage and encourage ‘coasting’; yet close scrutiny of low-achieving schools could reinforce funding disadvantage, undermine professional confidence and lead

380 Ev 145

381 Ev 14

382 Ev 15

383 Ev 14

384 Ev 15

385 Ev 9

386 Ev 15

to problems with recruitment and retention of skilled and experienced teachers. Furthermore, Edexcel argued that league tables based on raw test and examination scores also failed to account for a school's context, particularly in terms of a challenging intake. It said that such measures tended to increase the demand for places at schools perceived as 'high-performing' and reduce demand for places at 'low-performing' schools, with damaging consequences for the local community.³⁸⁷ According to this view, there is an inconsistent approach to accountability and outcomes for schools, depending on a judgement of their performance based on raw test and examination scores.

243. An often-quoted example of inconsistency in the school accountability system stems from the National Challenge, administered through the Government's National Strategies agency. The Government set a target for secondary schools of 30% of pupils achieving 5 A*-C grades at GCSE, including English and maths. The target for primary schools is 65% of pupils achieving level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 English and maths.³⁸⁸ The Government launched the National Challenge in June 2008 to provide increased resources and assistance to schools failing to meet the threshold targets. Various interventions are possible, including school closure; replacing the school with an academy; teaming the school with a high-performing school as part of a federation; encouraging the school to acquire a trust in order to secure external involvement in its governance; or replacing the governing body with an interim executive board.

244. Although the additional resources for school improvement associated with National Challenge were welcomed, there was concern about a number of aspects of the programme. The emphasis on examination results did not take account of the wider activities and context of the school, including the characteristics of the intake. National Challenge schools expressed anxiety that they would be perceived as failing, leading to a spiral of decline as some parents moved their children to other schools. It was argued that the list of National Challenge schools was misleading as some had received favourable Ofsted judgements and, indeed, some were mentoring other schools to help them improve. Witnesses including Edexcel and the Independent Schools Inspectorate noted the apparent conflict between some National Challenge outcomes and Ofsted judgements and Edexcel considered that this raised questions as to whether there existed, in fact, a coherent accountability 'system'.³⁸⁹ National Challenge also seemed incongruous next to CVA scoring as some National Challenge schools actually scored very highly in CVA terms.³⁹⁰

245. We put the problem of inconsistency between Ofsted judgements and schools judged as failing under the National Challenge programme to HM Chief Inspector. She responded that the Government was considering only raw examination results under National

387 Ev 63

388 DCSF performance data quoted in Library Research Paper 09/15, pp108-109

389 Ev 189; Ev 63

390 CVA, or Contextual Value Added, is a performance score adjusted to take account of a school's context; "Outstanding but challenged", *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, 31 October 2008, p6; "National Challenge or national disgrace", *Managing Schools Today*, September/October 2008, pp14 and 15; "Threatened schools to mentor academies", *TES*, 3 October 2008, p3; "real challenge will be to avoid past mistakes", and "Tough targets alone will not be enough", *TES*, 4 July 2008, p14; "When success means failure", *Managing Schools Today*, June/July 2008, pp 8 and 9; "'Failing' tag slashes intakes", *TES*, 25 July 2008, p1; Threatened schools are doing well", *TES*, 20 June 2008, p1; "Congratulations! But we may now close you", *TES*, 20 June 2008, p10; "Unfairness of being tagged a failure", 13 June 2008, *TES*, 13 June p7; "Failing schools threatened with being taken over", *Financial Times*, 9 June 2008, p2

Challenge, whereas inspection judgements were based on a much wider range of performance measures. The Chief Inspector said that, when she reviewed the reports of schools judged outstanding or good by Ofsted which had failed to meet the National Challenge threshold target, she found that inspectors had felt sure that those schools were improving and their capacity to improve was apparent.³⁹¹

246. In other areas, the Department appeared to agree that a range of performance measures was preferable to an undue focus on raw scores and this principle underpinned proposals for the new school report card. Nevertheless, as we have already noted, even the school report card will continue to place great reliance on test and examination results. Moreover, the potential for the overall score on the school report card to appear to conflict with Ofsted's judgement of the school's performance has been admitted by both the Government and Ofsted. A further problem will arise if Ofsted decides that the school report card is not suitable as a replacement for the interim assessment for schools who are judged 'good' or 'outstanding' under the new inspection framework. Not only will this be an additional burden on schools, but it would also introduce another area in which the potential for inconsistency, this time between the interim assessment and the school report card, is clear.

247. There is a broader debate on accountability which considers whether accountability should be to the centre or to local communities. This is connected with the evidence from the NFER study on local authority use of statutory powers which highlighted differences in approach to accountability and improvement between central and local government, with the former putting increasing emphasis on the use of statutory powers to change radically the structure of a school judged to be failing, and the latter often relying on non-statutory, collaborative means of supporting schools and promoting improvement. The LGA confirmed that the collaborative approach to school improvement was a deliberate strategy on the part of local authorities.³⁹²

248. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) considered that "the current system gives undue weight to central government, particularly through national test data and Ofsted inspection", leading to the undesirable consequences of narrowing the curriculum and stifling innovation and creativity. The ATL and the GTCE argued in favour of a rebalancing of accountability in favour of parents, governing bodies and the local community.³⁹³ The proposals for a school report card and continuation of individual accountability, the ATL said, would perpetuate an insular approach by schools as each does what it can to climb the league tables. The ATL saw more benefit in a community-based approach to accountability, with increased focus on partnerships and collaborations between schools, other education providers (early years and 14–19) and other children's services. This evidence underscores a generalised view of an inconsistent approach between levels of government, with central government perceived as coercive and local government as collaborative (as we explore in greater detail in the next section).

391 Q 296

392 Q 91

393 Ev 1; Ev 12

249. Inconsistencies in the approach to school accountability and improvement and inconsistencies in the judgments which are made in different parts of the accountability system are both confusing and damaging. Confusion undermines the credibility of the accountability system and schools which find themselves pulled in different directions are unlikely to be able to give their full attention to the fundamental task of providing their pupils with a broad and balanced education.

Coercion: are schools really free to drive their own improvement?

250. The language of self-evaluation and schools taking charge of their own improvement processes permeates the Ofsted inspection framework and many recent publications by the Government, including the White Paper. Yet the reality is that schools in need of improvement are still subject to programmes devised and applied by central government through its agencies.

251. Once again, National Challenge is a good example of how schools, who may be performing at a high level according to Ofsted, find themselves constrained by the structure of a national programme imposed by the Government. The ASCL and others pointed to the use of statistical indicators and targets throughout the system as a major reason for schools bending to perverse incentives rather than necessarily doing what was best for their pupils.³⁹⁴ It argued that “There may be a place for such approaches, but there is at present little room for anything else.” The ASCL gave the example of the National Challenge target of 30% of pupils gaining five or more GCSEs, including English and maths, at grades A*–C. This led to schools focusing their attention on pupils who were close to the threshold, to the detriment of those performing either well above or well below the threshold.³⁹⁵ This is not necessarily how a school would choose to operate in the absence of a programme such as National Challenge.

252. Recent research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) detected tension between local and central government when the National Challenge programme was introduced. Local authorities did not necessarily oppose the programme as such—indeed, many welcomed the additional resources being made available for school improvement—but many were dismayed at what they saw as a political gesture with harmful consequences for schools. The overwhelming perception of those taking part in the NFER research was that the “naming and shaming” approach to school improvement, based on raw test scores, was unfair, demoralising for staff and potentially damaging to the school and its pupils. The approach taken by central government appeared unilateral in nature and was not approved of at local level.

253. We have also noted above our concern about the Government’s proposal to enable the Secretary of State to direct local authorities to use their statutory powers in relation to schools which are struggling.³⁹⁶ This would give the Secretary of State power to intervene in schools causing concern and to circumvent some of the good practice developed by local authorities which are successfully using non-statutory strategies to support school

394 Ev 10–11

395 Ev 10–11

396 Ev 150

improvement. It is also further evidence of the Government's centralising tendencies when it comes to school improvement and it runs directly contrary to the message in the White Paper that schools are responsible for their own improvement.³⁹⁷

254. Throughout this series of inquiries, we have encountered concern about the effect of targets and thresholds on schools and their pupils. In schools which are struggling to meet targets based on tests in the core subjects, many will feel powerless to put appropriate time and resources into meeting the genuine needs of pupils whose greatest potential lies elsewhere than in academic attainment. The LGA provides a further example of how targets and thresholds can have a distorting effect on school practice. In its response to Ofsted's consultation about the proposal to impose minimum standards for pupils' attainment, the LGA expressed concern that such requirements could have serious implications for schools and their pupils. It stated that:

Defining minimum standards for learners' outcomes may be attractive, but also raises highly complex questions of realism, reasonableness and equity. ... There are quite profound philosophical problems about the extent to which people, who are all different, can all reasonably be expected at all times and in all circumstances to achieve a particular standard. Equally, clearly everyone wishes to be ambitious in seeing each child achieve his or her educational potential, but these are not by any means necessarily the same thing. We must be careful that in any setting of minimum standards, of whatever variety, we do not create perverse incentives which adversely impact on institutions or on individual children and young people.

255. Ofsted categorisation of schools as 'causing concern' has also been described as damaging to schools. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) argued that the current mechanisms for identifying 'under-performing' schools, based on targets and thresholds of attainment in tests and examinations, were inadequate in recognising the broader achievements of a school. The process of categorisation used by Ofsted did nothing to support school improvement and may hinder progress by reducing the reputation of a school. The NAHT wished to see the additional support which is offered to schools as a result of being placed in a category of concern by Ofsted being made available without the stigma which attaches to that categorisation.³⁹⁸

256. School self-evaluation was meant to epitomise the New Relationship with Schools concept of schools taking responsibility for their own improvement.³⁹⁹ Yet the ASCL told us that self-evaluation has been undermined by the current accountability system:

... the self evaluation form has been imposed on schools and has been increasing[ly] subverted to provide extra accountability. Self-improvement has been obstructed by a fixation on categorising schools as failing in various ways, leading to a culture of fear which stifles creativity and leads instead to mere compliance. ...

Too little account is taken of progress, improvement or performance over time; so that teachers and their leaders can find that they are only as good as their most recent

397 *Your child, your schools, our future*, DCSF, Cm 7588, paras 4.1 & 4.8

398 Ev 8

399 DfES and Ofsted (2004) *A New Relationship with Schools*

results. This has led to an increasing number of school leaders being dismissed, often in ways more redolent of the football club than the classroom, contributing to the sense of threat and compliance culture mentioned ... above.⁴⁰⁰

The NUT was also concerned about what it saw as a distortion of the self-evaluation process by Ofsted. It thought that, whilst appearing to adopt self-evaluation, Ofsted was actually using it in a negative and punitive way. The NUT argued that the approach embodied in Ofsted's Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) was far removed from the model propounded by Professor John MacBeath which had met with the enthusiasm of many teachers and local authorities. The NUT compared the SEF approach unfavourably with 'true' self-evaluation by which a school "takes time to think through its own priorities and values and ... tests the fulfilment of these in practice" becoming, as a consequence, a better school.

257. Consistent with a coercive view of the accountability system, many witnesses have stated that performance reporting and inspection in England are used as punitive mechanisms.⁴⁰¹ The stigmatisation of individual schools, leading to a spiral of decline as morale is compromised, recruitment and retention of good teachers becomes increasingly problematic and parents move children to other schools, could be avoided with a less punitive approach based on support and challenge.⁴⁰² School Improvement Partners told us that the top-down pressures on headteachers by means of cumulating initiatives, including threshold targets, were discouraging teachers from applying for headships. Existing headteachers felt unable to do their job as they wished because they were increasingly occupied with the "volume of initiatives that fall on their desk". Some headteachers felt distanced from the business of teaching and learning because of the breadth of their management responsibilities, particularly in relation to the extended schools agenda.⁴⁰³ Anna Fazackerley, representing The Policy Exchange, thought that the Government should move towards a model more like that in Ontario or Alberta in Canada, where the punitive approach was avoided and more emphasis was placed on supporting school improvement and maintaining a dialogue with schools about the best means of achieving that end.⁴⁰⁴

258. Dr John Dunford, General Secretary of the ASCL, summed up the way schools and their leaders feel about the accountability and improvement mechanisms to which they are subject. He accepted that schools should be accountable and that accountability should feed into the processes of school improvement. However, an effective school accountability system was one where schools owned the processes of accountability and improvement. Schools had difficulty with the current system because they did not have ownership of it and it was being "done to them". This chimes with a concern expressed by Professor John MacBeath, who stated that, at a European level, the UK was peculiar because of the lack of reciprocity between schools, the Government and local authorities. The pressures on

400 Ev 10

401 Ev 13; Ev 15; Ev 16; NUT response to the DCSF/Ofsted consultation on the School Report Card; Q 13; Q 38; Q 196; Q 261

402 Mathematics in Education and Industry; Ev 180; Ev 10; Ev 62; Ev 63; Ev 15

403 Q 144

404 Q 196

schools were very much top down, but there was no mechanism by which schools could evaluate the work done by, for example, Ofsted or the Government. He thought that the “pressure-down, accountability-up” structure of the school accountability and improvement system was wrong and needed to be addressed.⁴⁰⁵

259. The NUT urged the Government to review current accountability measures—inspection, national targets and school performance tables—with the aim of achieving public accountability of schools without the “warping and distorting effects” of the current system.⁴⁰⁶ It states that performance tables and targets should be abolished and that the need for an account of the performance of the education system at national level should be met by sample testing.⁴⁰⁷ The ATL agreed and added that reporting of school-level data, encouraging “crude parent choice” and triggering major interventions such as National Challenge, were the major reasons for narrowing of the curriculum taught in schools. Only those schools already doing well felt secure enough to innovate and teach creatively.⁴⁰⁸

260. We recommend that the Government revisits the proposals for reform of the school accountability and improvement system set out in the 21st Century Schools White Paper with a view to giving more substance to its claims that schools are responsible for their own improvement. We have received strong evidence that schools feel coerced and constrained by the outcomes of Ofsted inspection and programmes set up by central government, such as National Challenge. We have consistently noted the adverse effects that targets have had on the education of children and young people. The Government should seek means of delivering support and challenge to schools without what many witnesses perceived as a harmful ‘naming and shaming’ approach endemic in the current system.

Conclusion

261. The Government told us that:

The principles of school self-evaluation, light-touch Ofsted inspection and the School Improvement Partner, established through the New Relationship with Schools, have been widely welcomed and have supported schools in taking ownership of their own improvement. The accountability system is flexible in allowing central Government to shift priorities and respond both to individual school needs and to emerging national policy, for example through the introduction of progression targets and deprivation targets. The current accountability framework does not only take account of hard data, but also of valuable qualitative information through self-evaluation and Ofsted inspection.⁴⁰⁹

262. The problem with the Government’s assessment of the accountability system is that it implies that schools welcome the opportunity to take “ownership of their own

405 Q 190

406 Ev 15

407 Ev 17; see also Ev 11

408 Ev 12

409 Ev 147

improvement” but then provides the perfect example of how they have been prevented from doing just that. The “flexibility” of the system, allowing a constant shift in priorities by central government, is precisely the reason why schools are struggling to engage with the accountability regime and myriad school improvement mechanisms. The Government refers to the flexibility of the accountability system as if this is an inherent benefit. The opposite is true. Schools and, indeed, local authorities are in sore need of a period of stability so that they can regroup, take the necessary time to identify where their priorities lie and then work, with appropriate support, to secure the necessary improvements.

263. Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools told us that “I have ... said [in my Annual Report] for two years that the number of children going from primary to secondary school who can’t read is far too high, and that we are letting down generations of children”.⁴¹⁰ This is a damning judgement of a system of education in England which is failing some pupils at a fundamental level.

264. Our series of three inquiries, of which this is the last, has sought to uncover the reasons why some children are not receiving a rounded education which is appropriate to their needs. In our report on Testing and Assessment, we found that the testing and assessment system and targets culture disseminated from central government had the effect of distorting the education of many children. There was too much emphasis on high-stakes testing in the core subjects and too little on the needs of individual children. Our National Curriculum inquiry found that teachers were constrained by an over-specified curriculum which takes up almost all of the school week, leaving little room for innovation and an individualised approach. This, final, report in the series has identified deep flaws in an accountability system which is intended to provide the gateway to school improvement but whose complexity and inconsistency provides a real barrier to that improvement. Schools cannot be coerced into improving: it is a process which they must own for themselves if it is to be successful.

265. It is time for the Government to allow schools to refocus their efforts on what matters: children. For too long, schools have struggled to cope with changing priorities, constant waves of new initiatives from central government, and the stresses and distortions caused by performance tables and targets.

266. The Government should place more faith in the professionalism of teachers and should support them with a simplified accountability and improvement system which challenges and encourages good practice rather than stigmatising and undermining those who are struggling. In doing so, it is vital for effective accountability that the independence of HM Inspectorate be safeguarded and maintained at all times. We believe that the Government should revisit the plans set out in its 21st Century Schools White Paper and simplify considerably the accountability framework and improvement strategies it proposes.

Formal minutes

Monday 30 November 2009

Members present:

Mr Barry Sheerman, in the Chair

Annette Brooke
Karen Buck

Mr Douglas Carswell
Mr Edward Timpson

Draft Report (*School Accountability*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 266 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report, together with written evidence reported and ordered to be published on 16 March 2009.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for placing in the Library and Parliamentary Archives.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 2 December at 9.15am

Witnesses

	<i>Page</i>
Monday 16 March 2009	
Keith Bartley , Chief Executive, GTCE; Mick Brookes , General Secretary, NAHT; Dr John Dunford , General Secretary, ASCL; Martin Johnson , Deputy General Secretary, ATL; Christine Blower , Acting General Secretary, NUT, and John Bangs , Assistant Secretary, Education, Equality and Professional Development, NUT	Ev 19
Wednesday 1 April 2009	
Councillor Les Lawrence , Chair of the Children and Young People's Board, Local Government Association	Ev 43
Councillor Les Lawrence , Chair of the Children and Young People's Board, Local Government Association; and School Improvement Partners: Lorraine Cooper , Acting Head, School Performance for Primary Schools, Warwickshire County Council, Declan McCauley , Head Teacher, St Thomas More Catholic Primary School, Great Wyrley, Staffordshire, and Lynda Jones , Adviser, Warwickshire County Council	Ev 51
Wednesday 22 April 2009	
Jerry Jarvis , Managing Director, Edexcel, Simon Lebus , Group Chief Executive, Cambridge Assessment, and Dr Vikki Smith , Director of Assessment and Quality, City and Guilds	Ev 69
Wednesday 29 April 2009	
Anna Fazackerley , Policy Exchange, Professor John MacBeath , Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, and Anastasia de Waal , Civitas	Ev 79
David Butler , Chief Executive, National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations, Clare Collins , National Governors Association, and Deborah Ishihara , Advisory Centre for Education	Ev 105
Wednesday 6 May 2009	
Christine Gilbert CBE , Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, and Miriam Rosen , Director, Education, Ofsted	Ev 120
Wednesday 8 July 2009	
Mr Vernon Coaker MP , Minister of State for Schools and Learners, and Jon Coles , Director General, Schools Directorate, Department for Children, Schools and Families	Ev 155

List of written evidence

1	General Teaching Council for England (GTCE)	Ev 1
2	National Association of Head Teachers	Ev 7
3	Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)	Ev 9
4	Association of Teachers and Lecturers	Ev 12
5	National Union of Teachers (NUT)	Ev 14
6	Local Government Association	Ev 40
7	Edexcel Ltd	Ev 62
8	Cambridge Assessment	Ev 64
9	City and Guilds	Ev 66
10	National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations	Ev 91
11	National Governors' Association	Ev 98
12	Advisory Centre for Education	Ev 101
13	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)	Ev 113: Ev 138
14	Supplementary memorandum submitted by Ofsted to Derek Twigg MP	Ev 139
15	Supplementary memorandum submitted by Ofsted to Fiona Mactaggart MP	Ev 141
16	Supplementary memorandum submitted by Ofsted to Graham Stuart MP	Ev 142
17	Supplementary memorandum submitted by Ofsted to John Heppell MP	Ev 143
18	Department for Children, Schools and Families	Ev 145
19	Professor Peter Tymms, Durham University	Ev 170
20	Aspect	Ev 171
21	Audit Commission	Ev 175
22	Royal Statistical Society (RSS)	Ev 178
23	Youth Justice Board for England and Wales	Ev 181
24	VT Education and Skills	Ev 184
25	Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI)	Ev 187
26	Campaign for State Education (CASE)	Ev 189
27	National Foundation for Educational Research	Ev 193
28	NASUWT	Ev 199: Ev 203
29	Mary Wallis-Jones	Ev 206
30	National College for School Leadership	Ev 208
31	National Deaf Children's Society	Ev 211
32	Vernon Coaker MP, Minister of State for Schools and Learners, Department for Children, Schools and Families	Ev 213

List of unprinted written evidence

The following memoranda have been reported to the House, but to save printing costs they have not been printed and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library, where they may be inspected by Members. Other copies are in the Parliamentary Archives, and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to The Parliamentary Archives, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0PW (tel. 020 7219 3074). Opening hours are from 9.30 am to 5.00 pm on Mondays to Fridays.

Christopher Jolly, Jolly Learning Ltd

Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI)

Alan Quinn

Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)

New Visions for Education Group

Professor Stephen Gorard, University of Birmingham

Letters from Pete Crockett to Christine Gilbert, HMCI

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2009–10

First Report	School Accountability	HC 88-I and -II
Second Report	The Review of Elective Home Education	HC 39-I and -II

Session 2008–09

First Report	Public Expenditure	HC 46 (<i>HC 405</i>)
Second Report	The Work of the Committee in 2007–08	HC 47
Third Report	Looked-after Children	HC 111-I and II (<i>HC 787</i>)
Fourth Report	National Curriculum	HC 344-I and II (<i>HC 645</i>)
Fifth Report	Allegations Against School Staff	HC 695 (<i>HC 1000</i>)
Sixth Report	Policy and delivery: the National Curriculum tests delivery failure in 2008	HC 205 (<i>HC 1037</i>)
Seventh Report	Training of Children and Families Social Workers	HC 527-I and II
Eighth Report	Appointment of the Children's Commissioner for England	HC 998-I and II

Session 2007–08

First Special Report	Creative Partnerships and the Curriculum: Government Response to the Eleventh Report from the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 266
Second Special Report	Special Educational Needs: Assessment and Funding: Government Response to the Tenth Report from the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 298
First Report	Children and Young Persons Bill [Lords]	HC 359 (<i>HC 711</i>)
Second Report	The Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Children's Plan	HC 213 (<i>HC 888</i>)
Third Report	Testing and Assessment	HC 169-I and II (<i>HC 1003</i>)
Fourth Report	The Draft Apprenticeships Bill	HC 1082 (<i>HC 259 of Session 2008–09</i>)