

The new Ofsted is responsible for a wide range of services. Prior to April 2007 Ofsted was responsible for the inspection of child-care providers, maintained schools, non-association independent schools following the Education Act 2002, further education colleges, provision for children and young people in secure settings and services for children and young people. From 1 April 2007 Ofsted has been the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. This new remit covers the inspection functions previously carried out by the Adult Learning Inspectorate, inspection of Children and Family Court Advisory Service functions in England, the inspection of secure training centres and the registration of children's homes, residential family centres, fostering agencies, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies. The role of the Children's Rights Director and Local Authority inspection function have been transferred from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted.

We welcome the potential for the new Ofsted to take a more comprehensive and strategic view of the issues affecting children, young people and adult learners but we are concerned at the increasing complexity of this large bureaucracy and the ability of its new non-executive board to rapidly grasp this complexity.

A number of sectors which are now under the remit of Ofsted have expressed concern about the effect that the creation of the new Ofsted would have on them. It is clear that some of these reservations are still present. Ofsted has already expressed a desire to engage service users and providers from all of the sectors they are responsible for. This is essential if Ofsted is to fulfil its potential and we encourage Ofsted to intensify its work in this area.

The new Ofsted has been operating only since April 2007. We will be interested to see what will be achieved in the first twelve months of the new Ofsted and what value has been added by its creation. We cannot disguise our concern as to the fitness for purpose of the organisation at the present moment. We ask our successors to return to this issue in future meetings with HMCI.

'Light touch' inspections

We welcome moves that reduce the burden of inspection on service providers but changes to the inspection system must ensure that a rigorous inspection framework that can identify under-performing schools is maintained. We recognise that self-evaluative work can be beneficial for schools, highlighting areas for improvement but we urge Ofsted to ensure that self-evaluations are of sufficient quality and accuracy to be relied on as part of an inspection.

We are concerned that some schools could be eligible for reduced tariff inspections without undergoing a full Section 5 inspection. Ofsted should clarify whether schools are identified as 'high performing' on the basis of previous inspection, data such as exam results or a combination of the two. We urge Ofsted to monitor how successful **reduced-tariff inspections are at identifying falling standards in schools. It is important that previously good schools which are either coasting or no longer performing at such a high level are identified early. Ofsted needs to ensure that inspectors do have a proper opportunity to test self evaluation against what is happening in schools. We recommend that light touch inspections are properly evaluated after two years in operation, as we are not fully convinced of their effectiveness.**

Subject reports

Some outside bodies have argued that the sample of schools Ofsted uses in its thematic or subject reports is too small. We are concerned that, while thematic subject reports may identify general issues in subjects they will not provide a reliable picture of the standard of teaching in that subject. We are also concerned that the lack of subject focus in school inspections will lead some schools to neglect non-core subjects in order to improve their grading. We urge Ofsted to review the size of the sample used to produce subject reviews. We also urge Ofsted to ensure that some observation of non-core subjects is included in all inspections.

Inspection and improvement

While schools, in general, seem satisfied with Ofsted's role – assessing quality but not working with schools on the improvement process – other sectors are used to an inspection service that also does active improvement work. It is important that Ofsted clearly communicates to all service users what it does and does not do. It is also vital that Ofsted continues to pass examples of good practice to improvement agencies to ensure that they provide the best help possible for service providers. It still appears that Ofsted has no capacity to give advice when a cluster of local schools suffer from systemic underperformance. This continues to be a weakness in the inspection system.

Ofsted will only get better, by chief inspector Christine Gilbert

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We are on the verge of launching a single inspectorate for children and learners dedicated to raising standards and improving lives. The new **Ofsted** - the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills - gives us a terrific opportunity to focus more clearly on standards of child care, children's social care, education in schools and colleges, as well as adult and work-based learning.

The new **Ofsted** will drive improvements in these services through independent inspection, regulation and advice. We will be able to monitor, inspect and report in a joined-up way and have a greater impact.

What is so exciting about this is that the new body will bring together the expertise of four inspectorates, the Adult Learning Inspectorate, the Commission of Social Care Inspection, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration and the current **Ofsted**.

It is estimated that the new **Ofsted** will touch the lives of more than one in three people in England: from the youngest children in care to adult learners improving their skills and education. A young mother attending a further education college will be able to leave her children in the college's day care centre in the knowledge that they, like her, will be attending an institution inspected by **Ofsted**.

Of course, it is children and learners themselves, and those who support them directly, that bring about improvement. Inspectors play their part in this by identifying strengths and pointing out poor practice. By doing this, and engaging with children and adult learners, as well as all stakeholders, we can make a

difference.

The new **Ofsted** is committed to doing this. It's a new organisation but I hope you will recognise the best features of any of the four inspectorates which have touched your lives to date.

It will work hard to provide better inspection and regulation through a coherent and co-ordinated approach. It will improve clarity and reduce complexity, overlap and bureaucracy, freeing professionals to concentrate on improvement.

Currently, CSCI is concerned with fostered and adopted children's care, **Ofsted** assesses their educational attainment and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration focuses on any court proceedings. From 1 April, this work will all fall under the remit of the new **Ofsted**. Inspectors will work much more closely together, often in the same teams they will freely exchange inspection evidence and generally build up a much clearer picture of the needs of these vulnerable children.

User focus could be target of inspectors

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Ofsted could be required to show it is taking account of a high number of service users' views by 2010 in order to meet its performance targets, it said last week

The inspectorate, which took over inspecting children's social care this month, has proposed several targets for 2010 against which its performance could be measured.

Stakeholders, including the NSPCC, have raised concerns that **Ofsted** may not be able to adopt the Commission for Social Care Inspection's focus on service users.

Other proposed targets include an increase in the proportion of services **Ofsted** inspects that were adequate but have improved to good, improved stability in the placements of looked-after children and reduced turnover among care staff.

The targets are proposed in [Ofsted's strategic plan for 2007-10](#). The plan also sets out six priorities for **Ofsted** including better outcomes, improved inspection and regulation and better value.

Ofsted also said it will reduce its overall costs to Â£186m in 2008-9, 30 per cent lower than the Â£266m spent in 2003-4 by the inspectorates whose work **Ofsted** now carries out, in line with government savings targets.

Is Ofsted's expansion unwieldy?

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When plans to turn **Ofsted** into a super-inspectorate for children's services were announced two years ago, many in the social care sector quickly expressed concerns.

For them, the merger of the schools' inspectorate with parts of the [Commission for Social Care Inspection](#), the Adult Learning Inspectorate, and inspectors of the family courts service Cafcass might

see social care slip down the agenda.

But the government has gone ahead as planned and, from 1 April, the new inspectorate, staffed with 1,380 inspectors, will have the task of overseeing the safety of the 11 million children engaged with children's services, and the quality of the services they receive.

The new regime will build on **Ofsted**'s current remit to register and inspect schools and early years settings. Children's homes, residential special schools, boarding schools, secure training centres and secure children's homes, fostering and adoption services, residential family centres and learning providers for over-16s will all now come within the new **Ofsted**'s remit.



The move, announced by Gordon Brown in his March 2005 budget speech, is generally perceived to be cost-driven. A product of the Treasury's so-called bonfire of the quangos, it is one of several mergers designed to move away from an over-regulatory approach towards "lighter touch" inspections. The theory is that those services performing well will have fewer inspections, allowing more resources to be directed at the poorly performing ones.

Soon after the announcement, CSCI and some children's charities warned that the new inspectorate would be stretching itself too thinly across children's services. **Ofsted**'s workforce would almost double, they pointed out, and it would be responsible for inspecting more than half an average council's services.

CSCI chair Dame Denise Platt called the plan to merge inspectorates - announced just 11 months after the CSCI's inception - "a farce" and said she feared social care would be marginalised.

Response to consultation

The NSPCC, in its response to the consultation on the merger, said it was concerned that **Ofsted**, with its "prescriptive" approach to inspection, was unlikely to be able to adopt CSCI's "user focus outcomes".

But the government was not about to change course. In December 2005 it confirmed the formation of the body: the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills - still to be known as **Ofsted**. The details deviated little from the original plans. And last year, legislation scrapping the existing inspectorates was passed in the form of the [Education and Inspections Act](#).

"They didn't listen and our concerns remain," says Emily Arkell, the NSPCC's lead on safeguarding. "It is being heralded as a single inspectorate for children's services, but there are key services, such as health and most of the youth justice system, that fall beyond it."

Opponents to the plan did secure one victory: to retain a children's rights director. "We needed to ensure that CSCI's focus on children's views remained," Arkell says. In one of its last surveys of children's views, CSCI found 80 per cent of children questioned believed it should be compulsory for inspectors to ask them about the quality of services before passing judgement. One thing they did not ask for was "lighter touch" inspections.

But not everyone in the sector is pessimistic about the merger. Some major players - the [Association of Directors of Children's Services \(ADCS\)](#), [Cafcass](#), [Baaf Adoption and Fostering](#), and the [Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trusts \(Aspect\)](#) - approve of the plan, citing the logic of creating an integrated inspectorate for integrated children's services.

However, they are aware of the challenge ahead. As Aspect's chief executive John Chowcatt admits, there is no escaping the fact that **Ofsted**'s new chief inspector, Christine Gilbert, has a "mammoth management task". Alongside her duty to ensure a smooth transfer of staff and functions, **Ofsted**'s

strategic plan for 2006-7 also sets out its goal of reducing its expenditure by 20 per cent by 2008.

Can she do it? According to Baaf chief executive David Holmes, the signs so far are good. "The indication that we have had from both the CSCI and **Ofsted** is that the two agencies are working very closely together," he says, describing criticisms that the government rushed through the transfer date as ill-judged. "Once such an announcement is made, it is really important to get on and do it."

Unresolved issues remain, however, for the hundreds of inspectors affected by the merger. According to Unison, which represents more than 900 - or over two-thirds - of inspectors, uncertainties over pay are having a profound impact on the workforce. National officer for local government Helga Pile explains that, although all inspectors were guaranteed jobs in the new regime, pay inequalities between different inspectors could bring friction and affect morale (see [Levelling out](#)).

But ADCS inspection lead David Hawker remains convinced there is a good chance that once these issues are ironed out we will see improvements under the new **Ofsted**. Another senior social care figure, who did not want to be named, agrees, pointing out that there has been criticism of the quality of CSCI's inspections.