Campaign for State Education (CASE) Conference October 4th, 2025

ALTERNATIVES TO OFSTED: THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL INSPECTION

held on Saturday, October 4th, 2025 online and at 32, Woolwich Road, London SE10 0JU, by kind pernission of Greenwich and Woolwich Labour Party, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

In the Chair: **Melian Mansfield MBE,** joint Chair of CASE

The day was structured into four sessions, each led by speakers and followed by discussion.

Session 1 was concerned with Ofsted's creation as an instrument of neo-liberal ideology: the belief that the consumer market automatically promotes improvement in the supply of goods and services.

Michael Pyke, CASE Press Officer, introduced the day with a short history of Ofsted since its inception in 1992. In spite of regular changes of Chief Inspector and of its Inspection Framework, Ofsted had changed very little in 33 years. The complaints being made about it by education professionals in 2025 were essentially the same as those being made in 1994. This was because Ofsted's inspection model was based upon two false premises: (i) that schoolteaching is essentially a performative activity designed to transmit information and skills to pupils who are regarded as "empty vessels*"* and whose learning can therefore be assessed by reference to a standardised check list and (ii) that improvement can be achieved through the public praise or humiliation of head teachers and their staff, which will cause some schools to become more attractive to parents than others, with the latter being forced to "raise their game" in order to survive. Michael illustrated this through two examples of Ofsted's work, one drawn from 1993 and the other from 2023.

In November, 1993, Northicote School in Wolverhampton became the first secondary school in England to "fail" an Ofsted inspection. Five years later its headteacher, Geoff Hampton, was knighted for having "turned the school around" but, following a further inspection in 1999, the improvement could not be sustained and the school was eventually demolished and replaced by a housing estate. This last inspection had praised the school for its greatly improved outcomes, its good community links and its very good financial management, and had observed that the pupils were "making good progress" but had also been very critical of the standard of teaching! Ofsted had apparently not thought to ask why the children were doing well while being poorly taught. This Ofsted report led to a decline in pupil numbers to the point where the school was unsustainable and it was then merged with another school, to whose buildings the pupils were eventually all transferred.

Michael's second example was that of Caversham Primary School, Reading, whose much loved and very highly regarded head teacher, Ruth Perry, committed suicide in 2023 following a two day Ofsted inspection which had downgraded the school from "outstanding" to "inadequate" because some paperwork relating to safeguarding was missing and because the lead inspector had observed during a rainy lunch hour two boys scuffling and another copying a dance from a video game and had, without further investigation, recorded these as evidence of "child on child abuse" and of the school's having allowed a "sexualised culture" to develop among the children. Parents are led to believe that Ofsted reports are objective but the example of Caversham Primary School shows that this is not necessarily the case. Not much later, the school was re-inspected and found to be "good." Ruth Perry was the tenth schoolteacher since the turn of the century whose death was linked in a coroner's report to an Ofsted inspection. The coroner was scathing in her comments on the way the inspection had been carried out. Ofsted's response to this tragedy was described in a subsequent review, carried out by a former Chief Inspector, as "defensive and complacent".

Michael concluded with a reference to Ofsted's motto - “Raising standards; improving lives” - and suggested that in 33 years it had fulfilled neither of these claims and that something better was urgently needed.

The first invited speaker, the distinguished educationist, **Gus John,** was ill but sent in a brief statement from his hospital bed, which was read out by Dr Tom Mann, a member of CASE NEC. Gus began by characterising the education system, including Ofsted, as an expression of the neo-liberal philosophy adopted by British governments from 1979 onwards. This can be seen both in the structure of the education system, which has become market-driven, and in the content of the school curriculum, which is heavily standardised and whose content is driven by examination boards. This approach to education promotes competitive individualism and hides structural inequalities which Ofsted ignores in its judgements. Gus quoted the appalling waste involved in compulsory post-16 GCSE re-sits in English and Maths, in which 80% of the young people obliged to take them, the great majority of them from deprived backgrounds, repeatedly fail. Rather than being seen as a consequence of a failed government policy which should be reformed, the high failure rate is judged by Ofsted to be a result of poor teaching. Gus was also critical of the way the “one size fits all” school system too often fails to deal with the needs of children from ethnic minorities, who do not see themselves sufficiently reflected in either the school curriculum or in the daily life of their school.

It was time that, as a nation, we reminded ourselves of some of the fundamental principles that neo-liberalism ignores:

1. Education is a fundamental right, access to which should not be governed by children's socio-economic status.
2. Education is not simply about becoming qualified for paid work but is an important means of enabling us to live a fulfilled life. As such it should be available to people throughout their lives.
3. Education systems should address and provide for the needs of the disadvantaged.
4. The school curriculum needs to be rebalanced away from its current emphasis upon examinations.

Finally, Gus stated that Ofsted does not put into practice its own slogan: “Raising standards; improving lives”. Its inspections completely ignore the question of whether children attending a given school are in fact having their lives improved. It simply assumes that schools which tick the boxes of its own narrow inspection framework are automatically promoting the well-being of their pupils.

Gus John was followed by **Carl Parsons**, Emeritus Professor at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Carl followed the previous speakers by reminding the conference that Ofsted was created as a tool of “market forces” in which parents are seen as “customers” and he then set out to expose the disjunction between the claims which Ofsted makes and the actual reality. Ofsted claims to be a caring organisation but is in practice punitive, repressive, intimidating and disrespectful to the professionals upon whose work it sits in judgement. Ofsted is also solipsistic in ignoring the different socio-economic conditions in which children live and which affect their motivation and, even, their ability to learn well. Carl produced a table of research findings that there is a clear correlation between the socio-economic status of the children in a given school and the Ofsted grade the school is most likely to receive: the more deprived the children, the greater the likelihood

of the school's being declared “requires improvement” or “inadequate” and vice versa. In secondary schools the difference is especially striking: 69% of schools serving the most well-off children are currently graded as “outstanding” or “good”, while these grades are only awarded to 25% of schools serving the least well-off and yet Ofsted pretends that schools can be assessed without regard to the children who attend them. The great majority of school teachers wish to do well in what is a very difficult job but Ofsted offers no help. A better model of inspection would start from the point of being sympathetic to the desire of teachers to succeed, which in turn would require input from education professionals. Instead the government is simply tweaking the model yet again. Carl concluded with an example of how lacking in objectivity Ofsted can be: a member of a team inspecting a primary school, himself a primary head, took aside the head of the inspected school on the first day of the inspection. He congratulated his fellow head on running such an excellent school and asked if he could bring along some of his own staff on a visit. The next day the lead inspector announced that the grade resulting from the inspection was to be “requires improvement”. This entirely true story speaks for itself.

The discussion which followed was impressively well-informed. Among the points put forward were (i) that the previous model of inspection developed by local education authorities had been much better as an instrument of improvement, allowing for the kind of collaboration and support that we still see in many other European countries; (ii) the “box ticking” approach adopted by Ofsted results in schools being judged by the wrong criteria; (iii) the public has been misled into the belief that Ofsted is objective and that it leads to schools improving through the working of market forces but this public belief makes reform a difficult task; (iv) Ofsted's task should be to advise government, rather than sit in judgement on schools (the first Chief Inspector, Stewart Sutherland, had suggested that Ofsted should inspect government education policy as well as schools but this idea had been instantly squashed); a possible chink of light was the growing political momentum for greater devolution away from central government and this might include control of education; the present model of inspection is a threat to the mental health of schoolteachers and especially to that of primary heads (this point was the first one made in the discussion but is listed last here as it leads into the theme of the next session).

Responding to the discussion, Carl queried the validity of the notion of “accountability” where those working in public services are concerned. He felt it was just another word for “blame”.

Session 2 was concerned with the effect of Ofsted's methods upon headteachers and their staff and was led by **Dr Kenny Frederick**, a former headteacher who now (among many other things) works with the charity “Headrest”, which she described as “a sort of Samaritans for heads”.

Dr Frederick explained that the purpose of Headrest was to provide a listening service for head teachers, who, in the current system, often feel lonely and isolated and under severe stress. Among the general worries discussed by heads with Headrest, some of the most common were: school finances, staffing, the effects of the cost of living crisis upon pupils, the lack of external services for children – especially mental health support – the increasing pressure of parental expectations – often caused by the fact that schools are increasingly the last public service still working - the loss of teaching assistants (whose work was having to be replaced by senior leaders), the lack of capital funding to repair and replace worn out parts of school buildings but above all of these were anxiety and stress caused by Ofsted.

General Ofsted anxieties included or were caused by: lack of support from the LA or MAT; crassness on the part of the governing body, whose attitude can vary from apathy to attempts to micromanage the head; in small schools, the fact that all responsibilities fall back upon the head teacher, leading to a feeling of being overwhelmed; loss of self-confidence leading in some cases to mental breakdown.

Causes of further stress for heads included: the period of waiting before an inspection; the inconsistency of inspectors themselves; the inappropriate nature of the inspection framework, especially the failure of the latter to take into account factors outside the control of the school; the knowledge that two successive grades of "requires improvement" may lead to forced academisation, putting the head at severe risk of losing his/her job; the inability of the head to share concerns and anxieties with colleagues; the knowledge that oral feedback from inspectors during the inspection is frequently not replicated in the final report.

Further causes of anxiety were: inspectors who were ill-mannered and downright rude; in a small school especially, a hostile community response to a poor grade; lack of or poor support from governors and/or representatives from the LA or MAT.

The new Inspection Framework and reporting system – a response to the scandalous inspection of Caversham Primary School – is not seen as at all helpful but as a cause of further anxiety, with the National Union of Headteachers now advising members facing an inspection to ask their governors to carry out a formal assessment of the risks of the inspection to the head's health and well-being.

Dr Frederick concluded by saying that Headrest feels that the loss of trust in Ofsted is now irreversible as far as head teachers are concerned. The system needs wholesale reform that focuses upon support and development.

The second speaker in this session was **James Lane**, who has been a primary school headteacher in London for 20 years. James had had a mixed experience of Ofsted inspections, acquiring in succession (not always in the same school) the following grades: "Satisfactory"/ "Requires Improvement"/ "Good"/ "Good"/ "Outstanding"/ "Requires Improvement"/ "Good"/ "Good" One of the two poor grades had been awarded to a school that had previously been rated "Outstanding" but had not been inspected for 10 years. James had only recently been appointed to this school but was blamed by parents for the decline in the school's grade. This illustrates the lack of public understanding of the way Ofsted works. James did not believe that Ofsted judgements were anything but ephemeral snapshots of a moment in time – they did not and do not give anything like a true picture of a school in all its complexity and they do not allow for the circumstances of a moment, such as unfortunately timed staff resignations or the effects of external forces, such as the recent pandemic. Ofsted claims that one of its major aims is school improvement but this is in conflict with its notion of "accountability". In practice, Ofsted does not contribute to school improvement at all because school are not improved by external criticism but by staff working together towards agreed aims. So far from generating a spirit of collaboration among staff, Ofsted generates stress, anxiety and loss of trust. It also undermines leadership.

James does not believe that the new framework and reporting system will improve anything, in spite of Ofsted's current use of conciliatory language. For example it states that the new framework will be "values driven" but fails to say what these values will be. It states that it will concern itself henceforth with the well-being of staff, apparently unaware that its methods make a major contribution to the loss of such well-being. Well-being at work depends on being governed by a sense of purpose but teachers become disconnected from their sense of purpose by having to prepare for Ofsted.

A sinister development was that some parents now see Ofsted as a body to which they can complain when unreasonable expectations are not met by the school – another and worrying result of schools being the last sources of care and welfare still working. This adds to the stress placed on teachers and to the probability of stress being transferred to the children, as has long been happening with SATS. Another sinister development is Ofsted's increasing willingness to pronounce on curricular

matters, which has led to a narrowing of content. James shared the general anxiety among head teachers about the new Ofsted framework, which simply increases the complexity of inspections. To become effective, Ofsted needs to stop promoting a climate of fear by becoming supportive, rather than merely desciptive. It needs to stop misleading parents by pretending that its judgements are objective and based upon a thorough understanding of a school, rather than an impression which may not be accurate after spending only two days there. If it is really going to inspect "well-being," it needs to define what this is and develop some understanding of how it is promoted and developed within a school.

The discussion that followed was again extremely well-informed but very wide ranging. The chief themes to emerge were, firstly, the enormous stress of preparing for inspection, especially within multi-academy trusts. During the 18 months prior to an inspection, one head teacher whose previously autonomous RC school had been forced by its diocese to join a MAT had received no fewer than 43 visits from various managers of the trust. This had created more stress than the actual inspection. There was general agreement that MATs were a bad thing, depriving heads of autonomy, demanding conformity among their teaching staff and constraining heads and staff from speaking out.

A second theme was the role of governors in supporting or not supporting heads and teachers under pressure from Ofsted. Governors are often more ready to hold heads and staff to account than they are to support them but supporting staff under stress is an important part of their job.

A third theme was the question of how decent people can bring themselves to become Ofsted inspectors. It was agreed that the problem is the rigid framework that does not allow for the exercise of judgement and gives no room for empathy.

A fourth theme was the narrowing of the curriculum that had occurred since 2010. Schools had become increasingly joyless places, too driven by external results and creating increasingly unhappy children.

Asked how they had survived as head teachers, both Kenny and James agreed that key factors had been a strong sense of values, an ability to transmit these to staff through teamwork, rather than hierarchy, and a willingness to take risks.

The 3rd session was concerned with how school inspection (commonly referred to abroad as "evaluation") is managed in other countries and was presented by John Bangs who, among many distinguished appointments, holds the post of consultant to Education International. John has also worked with the OECD and is an expert in this field. The OECD is the source of by far the best research on international comparisons of school systems and their effectiveness and regularly evaluates educational effectiveness under five headings: effective learning by pupils/effective teaching/effective leadership/effective institutions/effective systems. A common feature of education within OECD countries in the current century has been an increased emphasis by governments upon its importance. This has been true whether or not education policy has been centralised or devolved and where it has been devolved there has been regular communication between the various bodies involved – except in the UK, where education ministers in the devolved governments apparently do not talk to one another. The widely held view in the OECD is that school evaluation must take a holistic approach and must consider not only classroom practice and measurable outcomes but also such matters as pupil well-being, the development of critical thinking and social competence. This has not been the approach taken in England and it has been unfortunate that in the lifetime of Ofsted only one Education Secretary, David Blunkett, has recognised the importance of learning from what other countries do. Half of OECD countries have

no requirement for a national system of evaluation, such as Ofsted, but this does not correlate at all with outcomes. Also the great majority of OECD countries see the primary purpose of school evaluation to be school improvement through the practice of self-evaluation and professional development, rather than seeing it as an instrument of "accountability". The function of external bodies is to examine how well schools are practising self-evaluation. Indeed, the enforcement of "accountability", as practised by Ofsted, is incompatible with the idea of school improvement based upon self-evaluation because the fear and anxiety generated by the process replace what should be encouragement with blame. In this regard, John referred briefly to Crook Primary School, the first primary school to "fail" an Ofsted inspection. This had, among other things, generated so much intrusive media attention - at one point TV cameras had been trained upon the playground – that some children had come to fear that they were going to be removed from their families.

In school systems where self-evaluation is practised to a high level there is also a corresponding emphasis upon the importance of the selection and professional training of teachers. In those countries with the most successful outcomes, careful selection of potential teachers is followed by lengthy post-graduate study to masters level. This contrasts enormously with England, where teacher recruitments targets are regularly missed, postgraduate professional training is minimal and, not infrequently, reduced to "learning on the job."

There followed a Q&A session in which John was asked to enlarge upon some of the points he had made. The most important point, one that was extensively reiterated, was that the ability of schools to self-evaluate and to plan their own future development was hugely dependent upon the quality of initial teacher recruitment and professional training. The overwhelming consensus within the conference was that, in England, this process was in a complete mess. John also took the opportunity to distinguish further between countries where evaluation is seen as a means of increasing teachers' professionalism and ones which use it as a method of achieving "accountability". The latter approach simply fails to bring about improvement. The point was raised about how politicians develop their notions of what schooling should be and it was agreed that they tend to base it upon their own experience of school, Michael Gove being an obvious case in point. John agreed and felt that education campaign groups, such as CASE, should work hard to establish contact with the current Secretary of State, Bridget Phillipson, who has in many ways got off to a good start, and impress upon her the need for the UK to learn from other countries, something which Labour has been reluctant to do. An opportunity to do this might arise from the forthcoming report of TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey) a body set up by the OECD. Schools (and therefore teachers) are the last moral centres that we have in our society so their selection, training and professional development are absolutely vital for future social coherence.

The final session of the conference was led by Alan Evans, Peter Tymms and Alison Peacock.

Alan Evans OBE, who has played a distinguished role in the development of the education service in Wales, gave an account of how the system of inspection in Wales has adapted and evolved since 1992 from being largely summative to being mainly formative.

The system introduced in 1992 drew upon a long history of school inspectors being highly regarded in Wales. ESTYN, the body responsible for school inspection, came into being in 1992, before the establishment of the Senedd, but has remained independent of government since devolution. It established an approach to inspection that, while largely summative and quantitative, contained elements of the formative and qualititative. Schools were to be inspected every six years and would be given ten days of advance notice. Following the on-site inspection, a report would be published on the ESTYN website. Inspections would assess pupil learning/pupil wellbeing/teaching/care, guidance and support for pupils/leadership and approaches to improvement. By 2009 a grading

system of 1-5 (1 being the best) had been established and gardes were awarded under seven headings: pupil achievement/the quality of teaching and assessment/the extent to which the needs of pupils and of the wider community are met by what they learn in school/how well pupils are guided and supported/the effectiveness of leadership and management/the effectiveness of a school's own evaluation process/the efficiency with which resources are used. ESTYN aimed to have an inspection system that was fair, supportive, reflective and transparent. Additionally, the Chief Inspector produced an annual report to the Senedd, which was made widely available to all interested parties, of the state of the education service in Wales. ESTYN could also be called upon by the Senedd to investigate and report on any educational issues that were of interest to it.

Alan gave an example of how this system had worked well for a Cardiff school of which he was Chair of Governors. The school had obtained Grade 1 under every heading and this had given it the opportunity to strengthen ties with its very pleased parents – mostly of Bengali origin – and gain their co-operation in improving attendance by not visiting Bangladesh during term time.

However, in spite of the attempt to combine quantitive with qualitative assessment, the inspection system was seen by heads and teachers as essentially the former and to be much more about accountability than about improvement and development. An initial response to this criticism – simplifying the grading system into four overall grades from "excellent" to "unsatisfactory" was met unenthusiastically and the Senedd decided that from 2024 onwards the system would be radically reformed, away from summative accountability based upon data to a more formative approach based upon qualitative insights. For parents and other stakeholders, a summary report would be produced which highlighted the school's strengths and identified the main areas requiring improvement, for which the inspectorate would make recommendations. There would be no grading of the kind practised by Ofsted but schools not considered to be meeting minimal standards would be placed in one of three categories: special measures, requiring improvement or requiring an ESTYN review. Schools in any of these categories would receive extra support from the inspectorate. Further developments since 2024 have been the introduction of an Action Plan, developed by the school during the year following an inspection and based upon the recommendations in the inspection report. Progress in the implementation of the Action Plan is overseen by an inspector. There is also now the practice of an interim visit, usually two or three years after an inspection, in which an inspector visits the school, by arrangement, and looks at an area of school practice chosen by the head teacher.

This shift away from the summative to the formative has been greatly welcomed by heads and their staff.

Peter Tymms, Emeritus Professor of Education at Durham University, began by reminding the conference of the work in the early 1990s of another Durham academic: the late Carol Fitzgibbon. Carol had invented OFSTIN, an accountability vehicle for Ofsted teams, and had exposed their inconsistency, unreliability and complete lack of accountability. In this regard nothing has changed: Ofsted remains inconsistent, unreliable and unaccountable.

Neither, in spite of Ofsted's motto of "Raising standards, improving lives", has there been any evidence of educational improvement during Ofsted's 33 year tenure. Evidence from the OECD is that in both literacy and numeracy English children have made no discernible improvement.

With his colleague, Frank Coffield, Peter has established a website https://inspect4good.uk and both Peter and Frank are actively involved in campaigning for the wholesale reform of school inspection in England. This should be done through experimental reform. The Education Secretary could set up an alternative approach to inspection within a swathe of schools carefully chosen to be representative and pursue a five year experiment, with the rest of the schools acting as a control

group. One experimental model that Peter favours is that of "peer to peer" inspection, where a group of (for example) headteachers visits a school, acting as "critical friends". If they identify any issues for further investigation, a different team is sent but is given no information in advance. If they also identify the same issue, an agreed report is written, with arbitration being used if no agreement is possible. Care is taken to ensure that teams of inspectors are not known to the school being inspected and the whole process is overseen by an advisory board, preferably with international experience. The basis of the inspection is formative and not summative. After 5 years a comparison can be made of the effectiveness of the two systems and appropriate action taken.

Finally, Peter felt that politicians and Ofsted itself are impervious to criticism, however cogent, and that action is required. He and Frank Coffield are developing an online system that allows heads of inspected schools to grade their inspections on a sliding scale from "completely unfair" to "completely fair". This is technically possible and the anonymity and privacy of heads and staff can be guaranteed. Eventually a large data base will be developed and inspectors, especially chief inspectors, will know that their work is being scrutinised and publicly graded. However it requires funding as costs are estimated to fall somewhere between £10k and £30k.

The final speaker of the day was **Dame Alison Peacock**, Chief Executive of the Chartered College of Teachers and hersef a former head teacher. Alison is on record as having referred to Ofsted as "a reign of terror". Alison liked Peter's idea of "direct action". She was clear that no improvement to Ofsted can be made without removing the rigid ideas of "accountability" that drive it. Whatever good changes are proposed to the present structure are not compatible with "accountability".
The Chartered College has had many interractions with Ofsted since it was announced that a new inspection framework was to be introduced and has specifically asked Ofsted to address the following concerns: clarity needs to be improved; bias needs to be addressed; there needs to be a focus upon the context in which a school operates; inspectors should expect to find an evidence-informed culture; Ofsted must recognise the pressure upon heads and staff that its inspections generate. The Chartered College has also suggested that safeguarding should be removed from Ofsted's remit. Generally, the response of Ofsted has been disappointing: apart from a few minor tweaks, nothing will really change. Most of Ofsted's responses have been couched in vaguely aspirational language (they "aim"; they "hope" etc) and there is little to give confidence that anything essential will change (although "deep dives" will be dropped). When the new Chief Inspector said at a conference that "Ofsted does not require any provider to be doing any more than they would normally be doing just for Ofsted" the whole audience burst into disbelieving laughter but the Chief Inspector was angry and treated his audience of adult professionals as if they were naughty children. Surveys of heads and staff by groups such as Teacher Tapp indicate that already there is no confidence that Ofsted is willing to consider meaningful change.

The first question to the final three speakers - why Wales has been able to adapt and develop its inspection system while England has made no progress in the last 33 years - led to a short but wide ranging discussion. The immediate answer was that our politicians are afraid of being thought to be "soft on standards" and Ofsted is seen by the public as a good thing because in English culture teachers are not held in the same esteem as in the devolved nations. Perhaps the existence of a powerful, privately educated clique which has in effect run the country for over a century is a contributory cause of this culture, which regards publicly provided services as essentially second best? There were some reasons for optimism: the cracks in Ofsted are beginning to show and resistance is growing.

Finally, Melian remarked that, unusually for conferences of this type, everyone who had arrived in the morning was still here! She asked each participant to speak briefly about how they see the way forward. The responses, ranging from cautiously optimistic to touching on the desperate, were too many to list here but there was no doubt about the general consensus: the present system cannot

continue as it is, if only because England is going to run out of teachers.