

Speech

Sir Michael Wilshaw launches Ofsted's Social Care Annual Report 2016

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)
Delivered on: 28 June 2016 (Transcript of the speech, exactly as it was delivered)
First published: 28 June 2016

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector launched Ofsted's third Social Care Annual Report 2016, at the QEII Centre, Westminster.



Good morning everyone. Let me start by thanking you all for making time in your busy schedules to join us here today for this, our [third annual social care report](#).

As many of you will know, I am approaching the final few months of my five-year term of office as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector. With some notable exceptions, it has been the things I've had to say about standards in schools that have generated most of the headlines. That is perhaps inevitable given where the media's interests lie most of the time.

And yet, as I have often remarked, it is our inspection of children's social care services that in many ways represents the

most important and challenging aspect of Ofsted's work.

After all, I can think of no more important powers that the state exercises on behalf of its citizens than those designed to protect and care for the most vulnerable and damaged children in our society.

That is why I took the decision early on in my tenure to produce a standalone social care report, entirely separate from Ofsted's state of the nation commentary on its other remits, including schools. I did this because the story we wanted to tell about the state of children's services was being missed. I was determined to raise the profile of the sector and of this vital area of our inspection and regulatory work.

Let me say at the outset that I have absolute admiration for the work that social care professionals do each day. I appreciate that you are operating in extremely difficult circumstances. I am all too aware that you are expected to make agonising decisions on a daily basis about whether to remove children from their families – families who so often have layer upon layer of complex problems.

I am also willing to acknowledge that Ofsted inspections can often increase the pressure on children's social care professionals. But I believe it is right that they do, because the decisions and actions you take will very likely determine a child's prospects for the rest of his or her life.

Occasionally, as we know all too well, it can determine more than that. We are all haunted by the litany of harrowing cases where children have paid the ultimate price for the failure by care agencies to get close enough to them, to ask the right questions, to properly talk to one another and pass on their concerns.

As Ofsted's Chief Inspector, it's fair to say that I have gained a reputation for being outspoken about the services that we inspect. And it is certainly true that I have made it something of an article of faith to be noisy about poor provision and low standards wherever we encounter them. In my view, only by publicly challenging complacency and shining a spotlight on

underperformance can you really galvanise the collective will for things to improve.

If this matters for schools and for colleges, then it matters even more for children's services. You are the ones who shoulder the responsibility for improving the lives of children already damaged by those they should be able to count on for love and care but who, for whatever reason, are unable to provide it.

That is why I have no regrets about raising the bar and bringing in a tough, forensic inspection regime focusing resolutely on the journey of children from the moment they first come into contact with social services through to identification, intervention and, where necessary, being taken into care.

I am well aware that my insistence that good should be the minimum standard we accept on behalf of these children has been met with some fierce resistance within the social care sector.

However, I remain absolutely in no doubt that children who rely on the service you provide deserve no less than a good standard of care, help and protection. I don't think that's an unreasonable ambition and my colleague, Eleanor Schooling will shortly take you through the detailed findings of this year's annual report so I won't steal her thunder. However, if you'll allow me, I'd like to share my own thoughts on where I think we currently stand as a nation when it comes to protecting and caring for our most vulnerable children.

Today's report finds that 3 out of 4 local authorities inspected under the SIF – the single inspection framework – are rated less than good for their overall effectiveness. One in 4 authorities, 21 in total, is judged as inadequate.

This is simply unacceptable.

Yes, there have been some areas of improvement since our last report which I will come onto in a moment. But these cannot mask the widespread levels of mediocre provision that still permeate the system.

The unvarnished truth is that far too many children and young people are still not receiving the services that they deserve and in the most serious cases, they are being completely failed. As a result, they are at clear and present risk of harm.

As we carry out more inspections under the SIF programme, a clearer picture and pattern is emerging of where the problems and weaknesses lie.

Contrary to what many outside the professional sector might imagine, these problems generally aren't connected with the fortunes of those children taken into care. Across the country, provision for the estimated 70,000 children categorised as 'looked after' tends to be at least acceptable.

The feedback inspectors receive from children placed with foster families is overwhelmingly positive – 94% say they are well cared for all of the time.

The quality of adoption services is also generally strong across the board. Increasingly, we see local authorities making strenuous efforts to ensure children are being placed with the right families – including siblings being kept together – and without unnecessary delay.

At the same time, nearly 8 out of 10 children's homes are now judged good or outstanding based on the progress and experience of the children resident in them. Indeed, this is probably the part of the system that has seen the most significant improvement since my first standalone report 3 years ago. Many of the unacceptably poor providers we reported on in 2013 are no longer operating. Those providers who remain in business are making sure their homes are run well by qualified managers, committed to staying in their posts for the long term and building strong relationships with the young residents under their charge.

The improving situation for most children in the care system is reflected in how well they are doing at school, with an increasing proportion achieving the benchmark 5 A* to C grades, including English and maths, at GCSE. This is in part down to the work of

virtual headteachers, who are closely monitoring the educational progress of looked after children and making sure schools have high ambitions for what they can achieve.

All this is welcome news. However, as today's report shows, we need to do far more to support this group of young people once they leave care. All the good work by foster families and children's homes can be very quickly undone if little thought is given to their destination once they leave the care system.

It is well documented that an increasing number of young adults are staying in the family home until well into their 20s. So why should we expect young people who have had a much tougher time of it to fend for themselves with little if any meaningful help to draw on to help them navigate this difficult transition? At the moment, there is too much reliance on the goodwill of individuals, including former foster parents, and an absence of any formal support structures.

One of the most pressing concerns highlighted in my [last annual report](#) was the fact that many local authorities were struggling to get to grips with the threat of child sexual exploitation in the wake of the terrible abuse uncovered in Rotherham and elsewhere.

The evidence from our inspections over the past year suggests that there has been a discernible improvement in the response of children's services departments to this issue. This is now being given a much greater priority and we have observed some good examples of effective multi-agency work at both an operational and strategic level.

However, we should not be complacent. While there has been a change for the better overall, the pace of progress in responding to this type of abuse still remains variable. In some local authority areas, we find that children at risk are still not being identified early enough.

The problems really besetting the sector, however, are to be found in the quality of provision for those categorised as being 'children in need'. At any one time, there are around 320,000

such children across England. Children on the margins, whose miserable young lives are so often blighted as a result of domestic violence and the abuse of drugs or alcohol by adults in the home: they are the ones we should worry about most.

Our inspections have uncovered serious weaknesses when it comes to identifying these children, properly assessing their needs at an early stage and taking timely action to provide them with the appropriate help.

In the worst local authorities, we have seen systemic failure on a shocking scale. In places like Sunderland – where there were well over a hundred potentially serious cases unattended and unallocated – hardened inspection teams have been reduced literally to tears by the catastrophically chaotic state of the provision they have found.

No-one is under-estimating how challenging this type of high-pressure, high-stakes and high-volume work can be. It is emotionally and psychologically draining. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is often the area which has the highest turnover and the least experienced staff working on the frontline.

And yet, if the help and protection available to these children were better, then we'd have a better chance of resolving problems within dysfunctional families and have fewer avoidable cases of children being taken into care. For cash-strapped councils, it surely makes sense in financial terms to focus on getting this right. The money saved on placing a child in care could pay for 2 social workers.

I don't believe we are asking for the impossible here.

If you break down the national total, a mid-sized local authority will have around 2,000 children in need of help and protection at any one time. When you consider that many council children's departments now have a much smaller role to play in overseeing school improvement, they should be able to focus nearly all their attention on this one important, circumscribed area.

Surely it shouldn't be beyond the capacity of leaders to get this

one right. Indeed, I would argue it ought to be relatively straightforward for any leader with a decent understanding of how to run good management systems and organise people effectively to do this right.

For those who would say that Ofsted is just too tough on local authorities and doesn't appreciate the pressures they are under, my response would be this:

- How difficult is it to find out how many cases each of your teams are dealing with to prevent them being overwhelmed by unmanageable workloads?
- How difficult is it to notice that a higher proportion of children in your area are coming into care?
- How difficult is it to make sure that vulnerable families are given continuity of support and don't have a different social worker turning up on their doorsteps every time?
- How difficult is it to insist children are always seen by your staff when they carry out a family visit, no matter what the circumstances?
- How difficult is it to make sure professional training and development are at the heart of good practice social work in your department?
- How difficult is it to install a decent IT system to enable professionals to understand what is going on around the sector?

I pose these questions because we know that some children's services are increasingly expert at reducing risk, helping families to look after their children and enabling children in need to make good progress.

If it can be done well in some authorities, then why isn't it being done in all of them?

Ofsted has seen effective leadership transform the quality of work with children: leaders with a firm grip on practice at every level, who make sure vulnerable children don't have to wait for help and that frontline professionals have enough time to work with every family on their caseload.

Indeed, this year we have come across outstanding leadership. Many were sceptical as to whether any local authority could ever achieve that label – so high had we set the bar. Let me tell you, there was genuine elation when the Ofsted teams returned from their inspections of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster. One HMI was ebullient about witnessing ‘the best social care we have ever seen’.

The tri-borough partnership, also including Hammersmith and Fulham, has shown what can be achieved with strong political will and an ambition that only the best services will do for vulnerable children and young people.

And for those who dismissively suggest it is much easier to achieve excellent results when your patch covers the most exclusive postcodes of West London, it is worth reminding them that these boroughs aren't just the preserve of oligarchs. Westminster has 18 neighbourhoods among the 10% most deprived wards in the whole country, while Kensington and Chelsea has 11. Just a stone's throw away from the billionaire mansions can be found some of England's poorest and toughest estates.

In any case, we have found no significant correlation between levels of deprivation and the performance of children's services. Nor can it be put down to funding levels – some of the authorities judged inadequate are among the highest spenders. Nor, when it comes to quality of provision, is size a factor. People will know my views on the track record of our biggest local authority, Birmingham, and I will have more to say on that matter in the days ahead. But for every Birmingham, there is a Leeds or an Essex. For every Slough and Sandwell, there is a Kingston-upon-Thames or a Hartlepool.

What does make an enormous difference, as I have already suggested, is the quality of the people leading the service. The areas that came out with the highest inspection scores were invariably those which had the essential leadership ingredients in place:

- strong political leadership prepared to prioritise children's

services and take difficult decisions to ensure this happens

- a supportive chief executive
- a single-mindedly determined director or children's services

If leadership is so critical, how do we resolve the current leadership deficit in children's services? It is perhaps worth asking the same question I have asked in respect of schools: Are we doing enough as a nation to nurture the next generation of leadership talent in social care? Who if anyone is tasked with identifying and harnessing the potential of those individuals with the skills, the capacity and the vision to transform those places that have so far resisted change and improvement?

And just as we need more successful schools to take on the responsibility of supporting others to improve, I'd like to see more high-performing local authorities give their struggling neighbours a helping hand. We have seen some very encouraging work by councils like Essex in this regard. But is every local authority that is in a position to make a difference stepping up to the plate?

Finally, I want to assure you that Ofsted remains absolutely committed to using the power of inspection to improve the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people.

Today, we are publishing a [consultation setting out proposals for the future of social care inspection](#). We want to ensure our inspections are increasingly focused on where they're making the most difference. That would mean shorter, more proportionate inspections for good and outstanding authorities, while those rated inadequate would be challenged to improve through regular monitoring inspections.

We want your help in shaping these new arrangements and I look forward to receiving your input in the weeks ahead.

As Chief Inspector, it has been my lot to deliver often challenging messages and to focus on the things that need to improve. I make no apology for doing so. Social work, like teaching, is a noble calling. But we do the profession no favours if we ignore its failings or try to pretend that provision is better than it actually is.

However, as I said at the outset of this speech, there is much to be optimistic about. I know from my contact with many of you over the past few years just how passionate you are about improving the life chances of the young people entrusted to your care.

As long as the right backing is there from national and also local politicians and from your own executive leaders, I believe you are well placed to overcome the challenges that I have set out today.

So I'd like to end by wishing you well for the year ahead.

Thank you for listening.

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Published:

28 June 2016

From:

Ofsted

Sir Michael Wilshaw

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