

# OFSTED IN THE DOCK

**W**hat happens when Ofsted get it wrong? Who is accountable then? Christine Gilbert is having an uncomfortable time and with good cause. It's time for those used to making judgments to hear the music and to convince us that things might change

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It was an amazing feeling to see Christine Gilbert ‘in the dock’ for the failing of Ofsted in relation to Baby P. There she was, representing the body most experienced in holding people to account and challenging performance. This time, Ofsted was charged with something far more serious. I hope she was shaking in her boots.

So did it come as a surprise that Haringey’s children’s department had been rated ‘good’ by Ofsted last year? Not to those familiar with the process, who know how flimsy the use of data can be in providing an accurate picture of anything of value—let alone schools and children’s services. Ofsted claim that they were fed inaccurate information. Surely an inspection system as vast and expensive as we have should be rigorous enough to see through deceptions by looking at practice?

### And there lies the problem.

A recent report on Ofsted’s inspections of schools highlights this point exactly. The report by the independent think tank Civitas condemns short, sharp Ofsted inspections, claiming that Ofsted do not have enough time to effectively judge the performance of a school.

The book ‘Inspecting the Inspectorate’ is a collection of ten views from a varied group of contributors on the short inspection framework. It includes the views of the head teacher of an ‘outstanding’ school as well as of a struggling school, views of a parent who led an action group to protest against an Ofsted judgement, and other professionals, including an Ofsted inspector.

What surfaced was an awareness by those participating of the superficial nature of what was possible with the time and manpower available. The process had degenerated into a tick box system which did not accurately reflect the schools being inspected. The data was not telling the whole story. A conclusion tragically verified by the Baby P case.

Anastasia de Waal, social policy analyst at Civitas, points out that there might be mistrust about their findings within the profession but for parents and society generally, there is a belief that Ofsted judgments are thoroughly evidenced:

“Parents believe that Ofsted get it right. They trust them to make judgements about schools. There is a misunderstanding about how in-depth the inspections are.”

Although there are advantages in having short inspections, such as less disruption to schools, overall the book’s contributors are critical:

“Their reliance upon data is too heavy and provides a very scant view of the work that schools actually do.” De Waal explains Even where a school was judged as outstanding the headteacher felt that little account had really been taken of the work of the school. There just wasn’t time.”

Successful schools have more to demonstrate than SATs results and can themselves feel short-changed by Ofsted’s ‘lack of interest’ in other aspects of school life. In response to these criticisms Ofsted quite patronisingly indicated that they felt Civitas ‘did not really understand what Ofsted was about’ and that ‘only one judgement relates directly to exam or test results’.

### Anastasia de Waal refutes this:

“Ofsted’s response to the report has been feeble. To say that there is only one judgment linked to tests is just not true. We know how test results underpin the vast majority of judgements and schools are well aware of this too. There is an over emphasis on outcomes at the expense of how schools are actually working.”

What we have seen in Haringey raises another issue. We all know the effect that a poor Ofsted inspection can have upon a school and its community. But what about the effect which branding a school as ‘good’ when it is not, might have? Perhaps not life threatening in the same way, but critical for the life chances of the children these schools cater for. Certainly a poignant reminder that mistakes can be made at both ends of the scale. ‘Poor’ schools may be misjudged but so might ‘good’ ones.

Christine Gilbert is in the dock and maybe for some time to come. Already questioned about Civitas’ findings this further thorn in the Ofsted crown might be enough to make the current review more than just a token tweak.

What do you think?  
Let us know at [pl@imaginativeminds.co.uk](mailto:pl@imaginativeminds.co.uk)