

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Ofsted Inspection of Children's Centres
Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
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ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL policy

ATL believes that it is vital that we, as an education union, respond to this consultation. ATL members work in children's centres, as teachers, support staff and leaders. ATL members also work in schools which have close links with children's centres. We recognise that support for children in their earliest years, and for their families, can make a positive difference to those children's learning and their aspirations, and that this in turn can enhance their lives and their inclusion and participation within their communities.

ATL welcomes the growth of Sure Start Children's Centres. Research from the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project shows that the quality of provision is higher overall in early years settings that integrate early education and care. We believe that co-locating services for young children and their parents means that those services are more likely to be accessed by parents, to the benefit of themselves and their children. And we welcome the focus on the youngest children and their families in order to combat disadvantage.

ATL believes that professionals within education and other services must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, both at the level of the individual and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: with increasing emphasis on collaboration and supporting well-being across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance between accountability to national government and to the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

Ofsted is part of a complex accountability system which has a profound impact on the lives of our members and on the education system as a whole, with individual institutions repeatedly being held accountable for outcomes outside their control, and with pressure put to bear on institutions to focus on that which is measurable at the expense of that which is important.

Currently, there is too much duplication of mechanisms to hold centres to account. Instead, we need an accountability system that enhances the position of parents and of the community, as represented by the local authority. This system should rationalise the position of central government, and put into practice the government's strategy for devolving responsibility in the delivery of public services.

ATL response

The vital question which is not considered within these proposals is that of the *purpose* of inspection of Children's Centres. Ofsted currently has a duty to inspect early education and care, social care and well-being; and in inspecting other providers, Ofsted may also make inspection visits that consider Adult and Community Learning or government-funded work-based learning within Children's Centres. Much of the core provision offered by Children's Centres is then already inspected.

The framework

Ofsted proposes a single framework for inspection of all Children's Centres regardless of the services they offer, where they are based or how they are organised. This is intended to enable *local authorities and the Government to make comparisons between centres more easily*. This is, in effect, to increase the centralisation of power. It also offers ample opportunity for simplistic ordering of data (in the same way that school league tables do) which denies the complexity and variation in children's centre provision.

Setting out an inspection framework to be suitable for all Children's Centres assumes that a Children's Centre is (or should be) a defined entity, set up and managed in the same way across the country. It would appear to assume that a Children's Centre manager is (or should be) responsible for staffing, practice and outcomes in a similar way to a headteacher's responsibilities with regard to a school. It does not acknowledge the role of local authorities, Advisory Bodies or Children's Trust in identifying and meeting local need, defining targets, and assigning budgets, nor that multiple lines of management and multiple working practices occur in children's centres. And it does not appreciate the real need to ensure that Children's Centres operate in a joined up way with other services in the locality.

It is extremely difficult to judge whether the questions asked as part of the framework are sufficient to allow inspectors to capture the work of every children's centre. The framework does not offer sufficient detail about what would constitute 'good' outcomes – how for example would a centre show that it effectively ensured children's economic well-being? More detailed questions on leadership and management do not appear to reflect the complexity of leadership and management arrangements, and in particular the role of the local authority. Because Children's Centres work with some of the most deprived communities, as well as with those

with complex social, psychological and physical problems, outcomes may take different forms or only become apparent years later. And there is no explanation here of who is 'served' by the centre – is effectiveness measured in terms of those who access services, those to whom the centre offers 'outreach', or the wider community? If inspection becomes high stakes then children's centres may resort to reaching the easiest to help rather than those with the most complex needs.

We suspect that those who may access services within the centre may wish to understand how effective those services are, so for example may wish to view a report concerning the early years provision alongside reports of other early years provision in the neighbourhood in order to support their choice of providers. It is not clear whether this inspection framework is intended to offer this.

One self-evaluation form

In terms of accountability, it is impossible to divorce the role of the local authority from the development and use of the self-evaluation form. Self-evaluation is a key tool for driving improvement and should be used for self-improvement first and foremost. By making it the key document for Ofsted inspections, the government encourages a calculated approach to its completion rather than a frank or reflective one.

If self-evaluation is to be used primarily for self-improvement, then it is obvious that a centre should complete one form. Question 6, which suggests that the SEF is for different recipients, shows a complete disregard by Ofsted of this primary purpose. For local authorities to play a proper role in support and improvement, then it is vital that the SEF that is completed is the one that will be used by the centre and the local authority in evaluating provision. Rather than expecting children's centres to fill in a form for Ofsted purposes, Ofsted should base their inspection questions on the current SEF. Discussion with centres and local authorities should identify whether there are issues which are currently not covered by the local authority SEF which it would be useful for centres and local authorities to consider in their self-evaluation.

Local Authority Involvement

ATL believes that Children's Centres should be accountable to the local community, through the local authority. The local authority should be accountable to national government for providing the services its community needs. This inspection framework does not acknowledge or include the vital role of the local authority.

It is absolutely vital that local authority personnel are involved in self-evaluation of children's centres, and that validation of that SEF should be the local accountability tool. As we have proposed in relation to school accountability, local authorities must be able to deploy staff who can evaluate the SEF and validate it against their own continuous knowledge of the children's centre.

ATL believes that both support and challenge can be combined in a single role, similar to the role of School Improvement Partner, and that this role should convey the accountability of the children's centre to the local authority. ATL proposes that it should be the duty of a local inspector/advisor to report to the local authority their evaluation of the SEF, which Ofsted could moderate. Ofsted should also continue to play its

existing role, through Comprehensive Area Assessments, in inspecting the effectiveness of the local authority role with regard to children's centres in its area and in collating local authority evaluations of schools in order to enhance its understanding of the national picture.

The Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Bill must reflect the diversity of management and staffing arrangements in children's centres, and the vital and continuing role that local authorities play in the development, managing and monitoring of Children's Centres. If proposals for Ofsted inspection of children's centres are accepted as part of the Bill, then the role of local authorities must be strengthened within the Ofsted inspection framework. In particular, ATL has concerns about the role of schools in 'directly managing' children's centres on a day-to-day basis, particularly where the services provided are outside the core business of schools which, we would argue, is teaching and learning for children and young people. We would question the purpose of an 'additional section' in the school SEF, beyond the practical issue of having all the paperwork in one place, particularly as the SEF will be completed and stored electronically.

Integration of inspections

In order to reduce bureaucracy and lessen the pressure on staff including managers, it is vital that Ofsted attempts to integrate inspections of children's centres with the inspection of specific aspects of provision which are already subject to inspection. However, the fact that this question needs to be asked highlights the question at the heart of this process about the purpose of inspection of children's centres over and above inspection of its separate components and the Comprehensive Area Assessment, and shows that this framework is driven more by political imperatives.

Conclusion

We assume that this framework for inspection of Children's Centres is about more than inspection of its core components, and is instead about inspecting whether the Children's Centre is meeting the needs of the community, managing effective partnerships and multi-agency working. However, ATL argues that the proposed inspection framework, by focussing on individual Children's Centres, misses the broader picture. It misses the role and responsibility of local authorities in setting up Children's Centres. It misses their statutory duty to reduce inequalities and improve outcomes for all young children, and their responsibility through Children's Trusts to discover and meet local need and to develop appropriate partnerships. It misses the role of other services in providing outreach and training for adults. And in so doing, it holds Children's Centres to account for other, individually accountable, services and for the effectiveness of services responding to issues that are outside the control of a single organisation.

ATL questions therefore whether the inspection focus is at the highest appropriate level, or whether in fact the evaluation of whether individual children's centres are contributing to combating disadvantage would be better placed as part of the Comprehensive Area Inspection framework of Local Authority services.