

Accountability - LSE and EPI Roundtable

26 February 2025, London

Summary Note

As part of a series of roundtables centred around the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, the Education Policy Institute and London School of Economics and Political Science held a roundtable discussing the Government’s plans to strengthen the current accountability system and improve school performance measures.

EPI and LSE were joined by expert representatives from the House of Lords, Ofsted, the Department for Education, academia, children’s charities and think tanks, and the education sector representing schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs) across the UK.

The roundtable was organised around a discussion of Ofsted’s proposals for fairer education inspections and the introduction of report cards, and the DfE’s developing proposals for accountability, both of which are currently under consultation. Participants also considered the Bill’s implications for accountability, including measures related to admissions and the national curriculum in MATs.

Guiding Questions

Participants were invited to consider the following questions:

- Ofsted are now consulting on the new report card and Ofsted framework. To what extent do participants believe that what is proposed is the right approach, including Ofsted’s approach to identifying schools causing concern?
- What is the likely impact of the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill on the operation of multi-academy trusts including on: pay; curriculum offer; role of the local authority on admissions.
- To what extent should the accountability system be reflecting the role of multi-academy trusts in school systems, including:
 - The inspection of MATs and how these should operate.
 - Reporting to parents through the report card and the school profile.

Ofsted: new report card and inspection framework

- Ofsted and DfE representatives provided an update on the progress of their respective consultations into school accountability. An Ofsted representative confirmed that, following their “Big Listen” last year, they are preparing proposals to the Government that aim to clarify the purpose of inspection and regain the trust of professionals and other stakeholders, including parents.
- One participant raised concern about the multiple consultations happening at once, with reviews into post-16, SEND and curriculum also underway alongside DfE’s work

on the report card, and Ofsted's work on the inspection framework. This changeability could make life difficult for school leaders, who are under pressure to chase ever-evolving guidance. However, a DfE representative clarified that timing them together enhances strategic alignment and intelligence-sharing between Ofsted and DfE in relation to the report card and inspection framework. Participants noted that it will be challenging to marshal so many moving parts into a timely and coherent outcome.

- It was noted that the sector has been disproportionately focused on Ofsted's consultation, yet the DfE's proposals are arguably more consequential for regulation.
- It was also suggested that the length of Ofsted's consultation window may not be long enough to gather sufficient perspectives and evidence base.

New Report Card

Participants generally welcomed the scrapping of single-word Ofsted judgements which they felt did not accurately reflect schools' performance across inspection areas. The new report cards indicate a more nuanced approach to inspections, and as such were welcomed by some, however participants raised the following reservations and suggestions regarding their introduction:

- Proposals to inspect over nine areas, without changing the length of inspections or the number of inspectors, could impact the reliability of judgements. It was pointed out that introducing more complexity leaves more room for error and a greater role for inspectors' personal judgement.
- More needs to be done to protect the wellbeing of teachers and leaders. Inspection provides a moment of amplification of pressure on teachers (including the use of the word "judgement"), on the consequences of inspection for teachers, leaders and trusts, and of personal attacks on staff in social media. One sector leader said that inspections continue to cause great distress among teachers, despite reassurances that wellbeing is being prioritised.
- Given the consequences of inspection, it is important that within this new framework, inspectors are confident in the reliability of their metrics and judgements.
- Accountability measures must support and acknowledge their varied audiences. A representative from a parents' network noted that the new framework should aim to improve parental engagement with inspection, treating schools and parents as partners in education. A DfE representative highlighted that new "school profiles" may help parents in this regard.
- While Ofsted's new focus on inclusion is welcome, there has been emphasis on inclusive mainstream education for pupils with SEND. There is a lack of policy detail defining inclusive mainstream and outlining how inclusion will be measured in, and outside of, mainstream schools.
- It was noted that accountability can create perverse incentives around measures such as inclusion, with the possibility of school leaders "gaming" the system to achieve better scores.
- A new framework should recognise that schools are part of a web of interdependent services, including local health and social care. Inspectors rarely look beyond the

school walls when making judgements, and there was concern that scorecards could result in schools being judged for things happening outside of a school, including the impact of local area deprivation in the communities that it serves.

The Bill and accountability

Participants generally welcomed the energy of the new Government and its resolve to push forward the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. A House of Lords representative noted that the scale of Government's ambition for policy change is still to be determined. Participants also welcomed the effort to bring together what is currently a very divided sector, and it was noted that policy appears to be more "school-led". It was agreed that the Bill had improved since its first iteration, although participants had the following concerns:

- One MAT leader felt that there is currently a gap between the Bill's intent and implementation. Greater clarity on why MATs require more oversight on admissions and curriculum is needed, as well as a stronger rationale for standardisation at national level.
- MAT leaders were concerned by provisions which broaden the intervention powers of the Secretary of State, beyond those extended in maintained schools, with the possibility that a future Secretary of State could use this heavy-handedly.
- It was noted by a few, including a leader of a maintained school, that the Bill and surrounding policy discussion is focused on MATs, over maintained schools. Maintained schools have not been properly represented or used as examples in debates on curriculum and other freedoms benefitting MATs, despite the innovation taking place in these schools. They welcomed the Bill's attempts to improve parity of esteem in the system.
- Participants also discussed what was missing from the Bill including, most notably, SEND, and inequalities including the north-south divide and ethnic disparities in attainment.
- One participant commented that the Bill was silent on some areas that matter most to schools, such as the quality of the school estate, and was concerned that more responsibilities were being placed on schools, and nothing relieved.

National Curriculum

- Some participants remarked that it was fairer to oblige all state-funded schools, whether MATs or maintained schools, to follow the national curriculum. A MAT leader highlighted that the vast majority of MATs already align with maintained schools on curriculum; some smaller, voluntary-aided, and often religious schools, an academic noted, may follow an adapted curriculum. However, given curriculum's inclusion in Ofsted's inspection regime, it is unusual for schools *not* to follow the national curriculum.
- Nevertheless, the freedom to adjust the national curriculum to suit context-specific learning environments was highlighted by MAT leaders (for instance when a failing school joins a MAT and students need a particular academic diet for a short period to make up for past failings); losing this freedom, and indeed denying maintained schools the same freedom, would be regrettable.

- Government must also consider carefully how mandatory curriculum changes will impact teaching supply. Although schools would like to expand art and music study, for instance, this requires more staff, at a time when these staff are already in short supply, and more budget, where these subjects have faced de-prioritisation from the curriculum for budget reasons. The Bill mentions computing teaching, for instance, yet the education system lacks the latent supply to meet this.

Admissions

- The Bill's requirement for schools and Local Authorities to collaborate on admissions was met with concern by participants. One MAT leader said that he knew of Local Authorities who were influenced by a perceived hierarchy in schools which could impact decision-making.
- A potential conflict of interest could also arise if councils are allowed to open their own schools and determine admissions. More transparency would be needed here.
- An academic noted that parents currently navigate a complex admissions system with varying approaches to admissions criteria such as banding. A common format would be more helpful for parents

MAT inspection

- School and MAT leaders noted that proposals to bring MATs into the inspection system appear to add another level of bureaucracy without clear rationale.
- It was noted that MATs are already accountable to Local Governing Bodies, Trust Boards, external auditors, the DfE for both educational quality and financial performance and, even, to the Charity Commission. Trusts are expected to complete governance reviews as part of their compliance with the Academies Handbook. It was also noted that Trusts are rarely inspected as part of, and named within, Ofsted inspections. It was felt that this reality is at odds with some unfair portrayals of MATs as unaccountable public bodies. Proposals must, therefore, be mindful of adding pressure to the system and profession.
- A DfE representative clarified that the new model of inspection is not yet fixed and is being developed in the coming months. DfE very much welcome input into this.