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## Pocket Watch – Ofsted raises a glass in its latest Annual Report

### Introduction

Bumped for a week by the Chancellor's Autumn Statement, Ofsted's latest **Annual Report** published today comes as fall-out continues following the recent PISA results. Certainly this latest Report adds further grit to some of the concerns raised in PISA such as the attainment gap facing the most disadvantaged, weak performance in English and maths and the importance generally of good teaching and learning but by and large the Chief Inspector's glass is more half full than half empty this year. *"Nearly eight in ten schools in England are good or better...in primary schools particularly there has been a marked gain...the FE sector has also raised its game."* The headline message therefore is *"grounds for optimism"* but as ever this is balanced against the need to do more particularly in parts of the country where performance is low and where for the first time Ofsted has published a series of accompanying regional reports.

### Four headline messages for Schools

- **Teaching and learning.** This is *"good or outstanding in 71% of primary lessons and 69% of secondary lessons"* but considerable variability remains both within schools where lower ability pupils in Yr 9 seem to get the rawest deal, and within parts of the England where in an echo of the recent Social Mobility Report, deprived areas seem to suffer most. Ofsted remains concerned that too many schools seem to believe that lessons have to be prepared and taught in a formulaic way and this is *"stifling innovation and flair."* Among its checklist of don'ts are: trying to do too much too quickly, *'some teachers believe the more activities they can cram in the better;'* trying to review things before pupils have taken it all in; and one that will make a number of ears prick up, *"an inflexible approach to lesson planning."* One other point to note and raised by the Chief Inspector, is the importance of creating the right conditions for learning, orderly and positive as Ofsted suggest, a point raised very strongly incidentally by learners in Pearson's recent My Education Report
- **English and maths.** *"What is particularly worrying is that there were more English and maths lessons judged less than good than in many other parts of the curriculum."* In Ofsted speak this means that concerns about these core essential qualifications remain, heightened of course by recent performance surveys and now the focus of considerable qualification reform under the National Curriculum, GCSE and post-16 changes. The Government will claim that its changes such as raising the entry bar for new teachers and creating numeracy and literacy centres of excellence to name but two will take time to take effect but as it stands we're a long way off from world-class in these two critical areas. For maths, Ofsted argues that *"too many teachers still do not communicate key mathematical concepts or provide the opportunity to develop reasoning and problem-solving skills"* while for English, poor literacy skills need tackling, standard English supported and reading for pleasure encouraged
- **Closing the gap.** This has been a major part of Ofsted's focus this year leading to a landmark Report in the summer and a series of other Reports throughout the autumn from the Social Mobility Commission, Barnardos, the Prince's Trust and the OECD amongst others. Ofsted's blunt conclusion that *"the story of our schools and colleges today is a tale of two nations"* means that the haves and the have-nots often end up with very different educational experiences. This is being tackled in a number of ways. The Education Committee for instance is currently hosting an Inquiry into 'white working class kids' performance and the Sutton Trust is leading on raising access and performance across the range while Ofsted is adding its weight with the publication of eight regional reports and Data View 'maps' highlighting the issues by region. As the OECD argued in its PISA Report last week, *"high average performance and equity are not mutually exclusive,"* just ask Estonia, Liechtenstein and above all Viet Nam

- **A few other snippets.** On academies, Ofsted point to the fact that sponsor-led academies are now raising attainment, noteworthy because it has taken some time for this to materialise although some multi-academy trusts are underperforming. Academy converters are outperforming non-academy schools although concerns remain about how well pupil premium pupils are doing compared with pupils in all schools. As for Free Schools, it's too early to report a full picture here although a separate Report from the National Audit Office out today does part of the job. As for school leadership and governance, 18% of schools still have poor leadership and 400 schools had very poor governing bodies last year and if, as we are constantly being told, we have the best generation of teachers, then Ofsted argue more needs to be done to nurture their talent and in some cases encourage them to move around to other schools that could do with their expertise

### And three for FE and skills

- **Good news to start with.** 71% of providers were reported as good or outstanding this year and, pause for effect, two FE colleges even judged outstanding for teaching and learning and that hasn't happened for three years. But, and there's always another side, the number of inadequate providers has risen from 34 to 41 and English and maths provision remains a real concern with success rates in GCSE English noticeably low at 33% at least for 16-19 year olds. In many cases, FE providers are working with learners who have already struggled and trying to turn things round is no easy task but it remains very much a key focus not just for Ofsted and Government under its Rigour and Responsiveness agenda but now potentially for the FE Commissioner as well
- **Apprenticeships.** Apprenticeships are not just coming off the back of a series of Reviews, the most recent of which has been on funding, they remain critical components of the skills strategy for all major political Parties but to take the four-word headline in this Report, apprenticeships are *"still not good enough."* This isn't, it should be said, all the fault of providers for one of the issues, the lack of growth amongst 16-19 year olds is probably as much due to the lack of good careers advice as anything else. However Ofsted support the current approach being adopted in the reform of apprenticeships in two regards. First in the importance of employer engagement, *"the active involvement of employers is the most significant factor that differentiates strong from weak provision."* And secondly in the need to simplify assessment so that it focuses on essential skill development, *"too often, those with responsibility for overseeing the apprenticeship concentrated on assessment planning at the expense of structured high-quality training and development activities"*
- **Responsive provision.** This was an area that Ofsted highlighted last year both in its Annual Report and subsequent sector Report. The context is the post-Wolf scenario of ensuring that provision better matches employer and learner need; Wolf had famously argued that too much provision especially for young people had left them with little to show for it. Ofsted remains concerned that there is still no clear measure of the impact of provision on meeting local needs and interestingly remains unconvinced that LEPs are ready to step up to the mark on this. *"Most of the LEPs interviewed for the local accountability and autonomy survey were not sufficiently well informed about the FE and skills provision in their area or the role of local providers."* Ofsted is developing a Data Dashboard for this for next year but for the present is highlighting three issues: lack of staff with appropriate expertise in working with employers; lack of access to good labour market intelligence; and lack of consistent destination data. It's an area, as we heard this week from Liam Byrne the Shadow HE/FE Minister, that all Parties are looking into at present



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