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28 March 2024

Paul Whiteman
General Secretary
NAHT

Sir Martyn Oliver
His Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Paul

Thank you very much for your letter. I appreciate the constructive feedback on the Big Listen, as well as the opportunity to respond to concerns directly. I welcome this dialogue as a continuation of our joint commitment to work closely together.

I have addressed each of the concerns raised in your letter in turn below. I hope this helps provide reassurance about our approach.

Our primary concern is that many of the aspects of the current approach to inspection that our members are most concerned about are not addressed through the sections of the survey that will produce quantitative data. The most obvious example of this is the lack of any direct or clear question about the use of single-word/phrase judgements to describe a school's performance.

There are two – related – concerns expressed here. I want to reassure on both.

Firstly, some context for how we arrived at the questions in the consultation: In designing the questions, we had to provide means for responding to the consultation for a wide audience. I know that your members will think about Ofsted far more frequently than parents, for example. These 'closed' questions are designed to provide all audiences with an opportunity to comment on areas of our work.

I want to address the general concern about how the data produced by these questions will be used first. I interpret from your challenge that there is a concern that data from the consultation, for example general support for giving a clear judgement on the quality of education, will be interpreted by Ofsted as a mandate to avoid change.

I want to categorically dispel that view. The consultation, alongside the independent research and the wider engagement we are conducting as part of the Big Listen, is a starting point for real action and improvement at Ofsted. We will use the full range of feedback and research to inform how we improve, which we will set out in our response to the Big Listen.

And that approach stands for the specific challenge on single-word judgements, which I want to address head on. We have received significant challenge on whether

we were right or not to have a question on single-word judgements. So I want to be clear that we welcome feedback from your members on all areas of our approach to reporting. We invite your members to use the text boxes provided. As I have said before about the Big Listen: nothing is off the table.

The absence of a specific question in the consultation does not mean we are not listening to feedback from your members – and others – on the issue of single-word judgements. One respondent is so determined to use the available text boxes to ensure we hear the message that they have included 'GET RID OF THE ONE WORD JUDGEMENTS' as their gender, sexuality and religion, for example.

This applies equally to your challenge around notice periods. I appreciate that you would have liked a more specific question here too. We would invite members to provide written feedback in the text boxes provided.

The Big Listen is first and foremost a listening exercise. I don't want to give the impression that we are conducting a referendum instead of a consultation. We are not naïve about the likely sample of respondents to our consultation. We know any 'vote' would not be representative of the views of all those we want to hear from. That said, we genuinely want to gather views on all matters relating to our work, from a broad church of respondents, which is why having an open consultation is so important – alongside independent research. This suite of opportunities to hear feedback gives us the best possible basis to draw conclusions and work towards changes that balance the views of professionals and parents alike.

We also have significant concerns about the way some questions have been designed and framed. For example, the initial set of questions invite respondents to indicate 'how important' they rate different aspects of the current approach to inspection. There are major problems with this from a survey-design perspective. By framing the questions in such a leading way, respondents are being encouraged to confirm the importance of core aspects of the existing inspection model. More importantly, respondents are not being asked how effective the current approach to inspection is at measuring these things, or about the very different forms a 'clear judgement' could take.

I want to reiterate a point from above. The consultation, alongside the independent research and the wider engagement we are conducting as part of the Big Listen, is a starting point for real action and improvement at Ofsted. We will use the full range of feedback and research to inform how we improve, which we will set out in our response to the Big Listen.

I disagree that the questions are leading. But I appreciate that there is concern that responses ranking 'keeping children safe and protected from harm' as 'very important' might be seen as an endorsement of current practice.

I return to my commitment that the Big Listen will be followed by real action. We are

conducting a consultation about everything we do, alongside independent research, to help inform future improvements we can make as an organisation.

I hope your members will make use of the text box following the questions on inspection practice. We ask: 'Do you have any comments on Ofsted's current inspection practices and whether they should change?' and we would welcome feedback on what is effective and what could improve about how we inspect currently.

We are also concerned that, due to the way many of the questions have been phrased, it will be very difficult to draw accurate conclusions about what respondents are trying to communicate. For example, a question on notice periods asks: "How important is it to you that the time between notifying an early years setting about a forthcoming inspection and carrying out the inspection is short but appropriate." Given that there is no definition of either 'short' or 'appropriate', it will be very difficult to know what respondents are trying to communicate in their response to this question.

This is a really good challenge and one that we challenged ourselves on internally as we constructed the consultation. This challenge goes to the heart of the difficulty of asking questions of a wide audience with differing levels of knowledge of our work.

Throughout the consultation, we considered the level of detail in each question; the overall length of the consultation; how much context to provide without leading respondents; and how to maintain engagement. Necessarily, this means reaching a compromise between precision and not overloading questions with detail. I hope, however, there is reassurance in my commitment to you that we will use the full range of feedback and research we receive to inform how we improve.

I hope these responses are reassuring. And can I take the opportunity to thank you again for the constructive and collegiate challenge offered.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sir Martyn Oliver". The script is fluid and cursive.

Sir Martyn Oliver
His Majesty's Chief Inspector