Expect the inspectors by Gareth D Morewood

Some advice on how best to prepare for that Ofsted team visit

In June 2011 Priestnall School in Stockport, a large comprehensive secondary school in the north west of England, was awarded an ‘outstanding’ judgement by Ofsted. Throughout the nine years I have been SENCO at the school we have always been judged as outstanding for the provision for vulnerable learners, but we are extremely proud of our recent whole-school judgement, and here I hope to pass on some thoughts about how we, as a community, have developed provision as part of a whole-school model and subsequently enjoyed a very positive inspection experience.

Don’t wait until you get ‘the call’

My advice is to do as much ‘as you go’ – when you do something, write about it/produce a report/get it documented. When you develop the habit of documenting things as you go, you’ll soon build up a surprising amount of ‘evidence’. Publishers are always really keen to receive articles written by practitioners: what better evidence is there for an inspection than something that has been published?

Whatever you do, whether it’s an intervention or establishing a new provision such as a nurture group, or changing the structure of your department or faculty, always try to evidence outcomes in your report/document. Show how students have improved. As you get into a routine of evidencing interventions and so on, this will strengthen your ability to demonstrate (without any debate) why it is worthwhile.

So my first advice point is – don’t just ‘do it’, ‘do it and evidence it’.

Have your ‘evidence’ in order

Always file your reports or documents as you go, then there is less to do when you get ‘the call’. Be prepared. It is very simple to build up evidence folders as you go, but very stressful trying to get everything sorted within a few days!

My inspection folders (I had three copies: one for the inspection team, one for our headteacher and one for me. The head gave the inspection team her copy so that they had two copies to refer to) had the following sections:

> Faculty structure, information and policy.
> Training and development – a selection of the training we offered to staff and a selection of materials.
> Data analysis and tracking – reports of this and the training I had delivered on how to do this, including the most recent analysis and intervention documentation.
> Selection of published articles – anything that I have written about went in this section, allowing for ease of reference in my meeting and enabling the inspectors to take away the information and read it in...
more detail, if they wished.
> Two detailed reports on our nurture
group and our therapeutic provision.
> Case study 1.
> Case study 2.
> Case study 3.
> Case study 4.
> Summary sheets – basically what
was ‘the register’, showing all students
with whom we work and their primary
needs.

Case studies

The inspection team will ask for case
studies showing the ‘story’ of a student –
this is often widely misinterpreted, so this
is what we did.

We prepared four well-documented
case studies – I chose students
with special educational needs
and disabilities at risk of permanent
exclusion. As our fixed-term exclusion
figures are quite high and the head
knew that this was part of the focus
from her pre-Inspection briefing, these
case studies showed our proactive,
inclusive methodology. It also allowed
me to demonstrate how we had
worked hard at keeping these students
in education, often against some
staggering odds!

‘The outstanding care, guidance
and support for students, delivered
through the college system, play
a pivotal role in the outstanding
education provided for its students.’
(Priestnall’s Ofsted report, 2011)

I got copies of all documents –
consultant letters, meeting minutes,
individual education plans, letters to
parents/carers, basically everything we
do, be it a phone call or meeting – and I
just printed it all off, put it in chronological
order and provided a ‘summary’ cover
sheet to lead the inspector through the
information. We started getting these
ready weeks before, adding additional
information as we went along. It’s a good
idea to do this as it saves any last-minute
rush and allows staff to concentrate
on other things in the days before the
inspection.

In my inspection meeting I was able to
talk about these case studies, discussing
the strategies and simply flicking to the
page that evidenced them in seconds – a powerful argument if ever there was
one!

To support these ‘challenging’ case
studies, I also sent emails to some
parents/carers with whom we have
extremely positive relationships. These
parents and carers then sent in some
testimonies that extolled our virtues. This
allowed me to point out in my meeting
with the inspector that we could have
included these as case studies but
as our fixed-term exclusions had risen
slightly, I chose to include the more
challenging cases – a powerful and
‘open’ argument. Providing a handful of
really positive printouts also helped to
showcase the excellent work we do –
you need to sell yourself while providing
documents and evidence!

Pre-inspection information

It is vital to make sure that you have
the ‘pre-inspection’ information from
the headteacher; the lead inspector
will send through some questions he
or she wishes to ‘explore’ – make sure
you know what they are; especially
those relating to your areas of work. I
had a meeting with our head and she
informed me that there was a focus on
lower attainment last year for students
with statements of SEN. That evening
I prepared a short paper highlighting
reasons for this; out of the nine students,
one was in hospital for most of the year
having a transplant; one was at real risk
of permanent exclusion (supported by
our case studies) and another was a
non-attender (lots of evidence available
here, such as involvement of education
welfare officers). As it happens, in my
meeting with the inspector this was not
followed up, but if you are prepared for
such questions you are in a very strong
position.

Having and understanding data and
being able to evidence trends and
progress are key parts of modern
schooling, so it is vital to be able
to produce data regarding exam
performance. Have a ‘story’ prepared,
including reasons why results were low
or poorer than expected. Do this as
a matter of course to inform provision,
but write it up as a report, then put it in
your evidence file and it is ready for the
inspectors.

‘Strong inter-agency partnerships
extend the scope of help available
and enable the school to develop
its own in-house expertise, for
example in supporting students on
the autistic spectrum.’
(Priestnall’s Ofsted report, 2011)

Also evidence/reference what you have
done as a result of this analysis, as it adds
further depth to your work as SENCO
supporting students’ achievements and
outcomes. I was always cynical about
this, but, basically, if you want to ensure
that your evidence base is solid and
you can demonstrate how individual
students and vulnerable groups do
at your school, you need to do some
analysis; so why not ensure that it is as
thorough as possible in preparation for
any inspection?

The days before

It is important to ensure that staff meet
with teaching assistants (TAs) and include
them in their planning. To have an
‘outstanding’ observation, TAs and other
support staff must be working effectively
in partnership with teachers. For lesson
observations, being able to show
progress for each child is essential.

We all know that ‘joint planning’ isn’t
always possible as a matter of routine:
It is important that your SENCO work dovetails with whole-school policy and practice.

However, for an inspection it is essential. If you are selling your house you tidy it up and put some fresh coffee on; similarly for an inspection you need to showcase yourself as best you can. Careful planning and ensuring that everyone understands their roles are key teaching outcomes. It is important that support staff know this and work with teaching staff effectively, so why not create some time for staff to meet in the days prior to the inspection itself?

**During the inspection**

It is vital to ensure that staff are well briefed on key points - but remember, don't overwhelm them. I printed off postcards with a motivational quote and key message.

Make sure everyone arrives early for lessons, knows when and where they are on duty and supporting individual students with personal care and support over lunchbreak and so on. Make time to write everything down and give all the details to each member of your team to refer to during the inspection; it did take some time to provide a ‘who does what’ for everyone, but it was worth it – there was absolutely no uncertainty and my staff were amazing.

**Meeting with the inspector**

In your meeting with the inspector, bring your files (with a copy for them to retain). Make sure it shows everything you have done, and has evidence for everything you need, so when a question is asked you can simply refer to it in your file. Then let the inspector take it away afterwards to peruse further.

It is important that your SENCO work dovetails with whole-school policy and practice. Try to avoid anything but 'towing the party line': showing a division publically will only provide evidence for a judgement that isn't good or outstanding - remember the advice about selling your house! Most of all, however, be yourself, remember you cannot do everything and ensure that for things you can’t do or any issues you have, you have provided evidence and a 'story' as to why this is the case.

As I mentioned previously, data is important for current inspections, so have some idea of how you track students with SEND and what you do to narrow the gap between their attainment and expected progress.

Also, it helps to have some positive stories to show off - for example, students who are going on to great things, those with Paralympics’ aspirations or significant achievements in and out of the classroom. Collect information on ex-students and their recent successes.

The nurture group, with its personalised approach to the needs of students in Years 7 and 8 whose circumstances make them vulnerable, is very effective in raising their confidence and integrating them into mainstream lessons.’  
(Priestnall’s Ofsted report, 2011)

There was also a focus for our inspection on those who leave and are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Our figures for this were very low and were really useful in showing post-16 transition; however, until the inspection I didn’t know these precise figures, and simply asking the relevant person in school, then having the details to hand allowed me to show a real depth of knowledge - a little preparation can go a long way!

Above all, I stressed our inclusive philosophy and evidenced how we did things clearly. I left nothing to chance, and had files of evidence 90% ready to go, as we felt an inspection was imminent. If you know that you may be inspected soon, start building up your evidence now – don’t leave it until you know they are coming!

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Further reading


‘Restructuring in light of budget restraints: optimise teaching assistants to maximise resources’ by G D Morewood, Assessment and Development Matters, BPS Psychological Testing Centre, Vol 3, No 1, Spring 2011

The Role of the SENCo: an insider’s guide, with practical tips and tools for inclusion by Gareth D Morewood (foreword by Professor Klaus Wedell CBE), Optimus Education eBooks (2010)