

# Speaking up for the sector

Since it began last September, the Ofsted Big Conversation has been gaining momentum in its quest to improve the inspection process. *Karen Faux* charts its progress

**T**he Ofsted Big Conversation (OBC) has achieved a considerable amount since it began its life six months ago.

What started as a debate on *Nursery World's* LinkedIn group has grown to become a dynamic movement with its own website, a regional structure and clearly defined agenda.

None of this would have been possible without the power of social media, which the sector has shown itself to be very adept at harnessing.

OBC was born out of the frustration and anger felt about the increasing number of downgrades and complaint-driven inspections, which reached a peak last year. Clearly, something had to be done and the sector decided to unite.

The scale of the first momentous meetings in September was testimony to the sector's strength of feeling and achieved its aim – namely to get a commitment from Ofsted to maintain a dialogue going forward.

This now seems to be bearing fruit, and there have been gains. Most notable was Ofsted's recent announcement that it will no longer automatically carry out a full inspection following a compliance investigation. This has been hailed as a victory for the OBC campaigners.

June O'Sullivan, chief executive of London Early Years Foundation (LEYF), chair of the OBC London group and lead organiser says, 'This is great news, as it means we are having our voice heard, even if it is a little at a time. We need to continue to have a big conversation with Ofsted



inspection and regulation can be improved in pursuit of the shared goal of delivering outstanding early years education and childcare for all children and families.

'We look forward to sharing these views with Ofsted's Nick Hudson at our first steering group meeting on 1 May. Minutes and actions will be shared with our regional mailing list and through social media.'

Meanwhile, childcare providers in Sussex recently joined a debate chaired by The Co-operative

Childcare. This brought together practitioners from across the South East and South East Ofsted director Matthew Coffey.

Sarah Rotundo, head of nurseries at The Co-operative Childcare in the South East, says, 'It is really important that providers feel confident that Ofsted is doing all it can to provide fair and informed reports on their nurseries.'

'This will give them the encouragement they need to take Ofsted's comments on board and build towards making positive changes.' ■

#### More information

Register with Ofsted Big Conversation to stay in touch at [www.thebigofstedconversation.co.uk/category/join-the-ofsted-big-conversation](http://www.thebigofstedconversation.co.uk/category/join-the-ofsted-big-conversation)

to constantly reflect the implications of its policies on the sector and help it to make policies that are realistic and will drive improvement.'

#### MOVING FORWARD

Since the first OBC meetings in September last year, groups have consolidated and firmed up meetings with Ofsted regional heads to take the discussion further.

Jo Verrill, chair of the North East group, says, 'Two open meetings have been held in the region to date. Meetings have identified a number of key goals, which include improving the consistency and objectivity of inspection judgements, creating a transparent and accountable quality assurance process within Ofsted, and creating a transparent and accountable policy for managing complaints made by the public to Ofsted.'

'Many constructive views and ideas have been put forward on how Ofsted

**The dialogue between the sector and Ofsted is beginning to bear fruit**

**'We are having our voice heard, even if it is a little at a time'**

## OBC TIMELINE

### 2013

#### September

- The first Ofsted Big Conversation took place on Friday 13 and Saturday 14, involving more than 300 individuals. The regional groups included London, Reading, Leeds, Durham, the Midlands and Manchester.

#### Key points addressed at the meetings:

- Ofsted's dual roles of regulation and improvement.
- Ofsted's rationale for complaint-initiated inspections, going back more than ten years.
- Ofsted's quality assurance process, inspector training and support.
- Inspector decision making and feedback.
- Significant incidents.
- New inspection regime to be introduced in November 2013.

Andrew Clifford, managing director of First Class Child Care, who co-chaired the Manchester meeting, said, 'There was a lot of concern about standards and rigour of inspection, inspectors and conflicts of interest between freelance inspectors and local providers. There has to be a better way to achieve our goals than having a sector that no longer trusts or believes in its regulator. Something is going to break soon if changes aren't made.'

#### October

- Ofsted responds to the OBC. Director

of early childhood Sue Gregory explains the rationale of the new framework and responds to each point raised at the OBC weekend.

- London region group firms up further meeting dates for 2014; other groups follow suit.

#### November

- Revised Ofsted framework goes live. This sees the Ofsted rating of satisfactory replaced with the requires improvement rating, bringing early years providers in line with schools. Settings judged as requires improvement are subject to monitoring within six months and re-inspected within a year. They will have two years to achieve an Ofsted grade of good or risk being judged inadequate. Settings deemed inadequate will be re-inspected within six months rather than the current 12 months.

#### December

- Ofsted director of early childhood, Sue Gregory, announces retirement. Nick Hudson becomes the new national director for early years and Lorna Fitzjohn becomes the national director for childminding.

### 2014

#### January

- OBC groups prepare to meet the regional heads, including Nick Hudson (North East, Yorkshire and Humber), Lorna Fitzjohn (East of England), Louise Soden (East Midlands), Debbie

Jones (London) and Matthew Coffey (South East).

- Ofsted publishes revised guidance on how it decides if inspections are 'flawed' and the subsequent action. The document, *Flawed inspections: Ofsted-related protocol*, explains how Ofsted determines whether an inspection is 'flawed' and needs to be deemed 'incomplete', and if so what steps are taken.

Ms Nason said, 'The revised guidance gives those in the sector some hope that their voices are being heard.'

- The Old Station Nursery successfully appeals against a satisfactory grading of its Innsworth setting. Managing director Sarah Steel receives an apology and reinstatement of a good grading.

Ms Steel said, 'This is a huge victory, not just for us but for nurseries everywhere. That said, I am disappointed that it has taken this long for Ofsted to listen to our concerns and fully review the report. It was frustrating for me and the staff at the setting to be listed as satisfactory for seven months.'

- Christie + Co publishes its *Business Outlook 2014* and reports that complaint-driven inspections have stymied providers' plans to sell their businesses or acquire new ones.

- The OBC website is launched. It is created

by Catriona Nason, the founder of Daycare Doctor.

#### February

- Ofsted confirms that complaints made against early years providers that result in compliance investigations will no longer automatically trigger full inspections.

- It is announced that Ofsted chair Baroness Sally Morgan will stand down when her contract ends in October.

#### March

- An Ofsted report, *Official Statistics: early years and childcare registered providers, inspections and outcomes*, reveals that half of outstanding providers have been downgraded at their re-inspection. Statistics for early years inspections carried out between September 2012 and October 2013 show that eight per cent of providers were judged inadequate, compared to two per cent of providers at their most recent inspection. Sixty-seven per cent of childminders and early years settings were graded outstanding or good between September 2012 and October 2013, a drop of 11 percentage points on statistics for the most recent inspections, when the proportion of early years providers rated good or outstanding was 78 per cent.

#### April

- Ofsted to host a London group meeting on 11 April at LEYF's head office.