

EDITORIAL

A Checklist Society

CLYDE CHITTY

We are all victims of a 'checklist culture', where the ticking of boxes has become a cheap substitute for really understanding and evaluating organizations in the public sector. Haringey's Children Department has been rightly criticised for failing to prevent the torture and murder of the little child known as 'Baby P'; but it now seems clear that Ofsted must also bear some of the blame for the tragedy that occurred. As a result, we can surely have little confidence in official judgements as to what constitutes a 'good' public service.

A report of a Joint Area Review (JAR), carried out by an Ofsted-led team of inspectors and published in October 2006, boldly proclaimed that Haringey had a well-led children's services department which deserved a 'good' rating and which showed every sign of getting even better in years to come. It was said of Sharon Shoesmith, the Borough's Director of Children's Services, that 'she provides strong and dynamic leadership' and that this verdict is 'supported by many examples of good leadership and management at all levels'. It expressed a few mild reservations about some of Haringey's child protection systems, but felt that these 'problems' could be easily remedied.

A follow-up report published by Ofsted in November 2007, and again based on a desk-based exercise relying mainly on Haringey's ticked boxes, confirmed the 'good' rating of the previous year and argued that there had been real improvements in 'all aspects of social care provision for children'. In the words of the Report: 'the Council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people and its management of these services is good.' By this time, Baby P had already died, despite 60 visits from Haringey social workers, as well as police intervention at various key points and a number of crucial visits to the local hospital.

It surely beggars belief that these earlier reports could have been based on any sort of sound understanding of the real situation in Haringey when, just over a year later, the same Ofsted could find that Haringey's children

department was 'riddled with managerial defects' and that Sharon Shoesmith was 'not fit for office'. This new, two-week review was, of course, carried out in an atmosphere of heightened public anxiety after disclosure of the true circumstances surrounding Baby P's death.

On the day of the Report's publication (1 December 2008), Christine Gilbert, Ofsted's Chief Inspector, tried to allay public disquiet by confidently asserting that Haringey's failings were 'exceptional'. Yet, as Patrick Butler pointed out in *Society Guardian* (10 December 2008), it was impossible to see how she could know. And in a *Guardian* interview published on the 6 December, she was, in fact, forced to admit that Haringey-type problems might well exist in other local authorities. Local councils could, in fact, be 'systematically failing children' because the assessment methods used by Ofsted were 'open to manipulation'. If Ofsted did not check the data it was given, it could easily give an authority a 'good' rating which it did not deserve.

This journal has never been among Ofsted's supporters, and we have always claimed that its remit and performance are deeply flawed. With regard to the inspection of schools, it has never displayed the professional competence and expertise that were associated with HMI, which it replaced in 1992. We live in a world of targets, league tables and meaningless jargon. And there has always been the suspicion among teachers that Ofsted is there to provide evidence for the carrying out of the Government's political agenda. If the Government needs 'failing schools' to turn into Academies or Trust Schools, Ofsted can be relied upon to find them. But, in the light of the public furore over Baby P, can we seriously believe that the checklist culture to which Ofsted often subscribes has anything meaningful to say about schools, children's services or the welfare of young people?