

Sir Martyn Oliver's speech at the Early Years Alliance Connect Roadshow

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Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Martyn Oliver, spoke at the Early Years Alliance's Connect Roadshow in London.

Hello everyone, thank you so much for having me here today. It's really good to be in London with you. And it's particularly exciting because this is my first time speaking at one of the Early Years Alliance roadshows! Thank you for getting me involved.

I would also like to personally thank Neil Leitch for the challenge and support he has given Ofsted, and me personally, over the last couple of years. He really is a champion of early years and advocates very effectively for you. Thank you.

I want to use our time today to talk about 3 things that I believe are intrinsically linked, especially in the early years, and they are standards, safety and inclusion.

Pushing for high standards creates a safer environment for all children. I firmly believe that.

When we talk about making things safer and better for all children, that naturally brings inclusion into the fold.

And being inclusive then feeds back into high standards, and it creates this cycle where all 3 things connect to one another.

To put it another way, ensuring that all children belong creates the conditions for them to achieve. Together, achieving and belonging are the core of what it means to thrive.

The changes so far

Before we get into that, it's worth just recapping some of the changes we've made to inspection.

I want Ofsted to work with you on 2 levels. Firstly, in our more formal role, as the regulator and the inspectorate of early years provision.

And secondly, I want you to see us as a trusted partner, working together to improve early years education and care - and I'd like to acknowledge that your advice and constructive challenge have been so important in guiding the changes to our renewed inspection framework.

Your input is the reason we have been able to make changes that we know suit you.

We've been able to craft a bespoke early years toolkit, built on the EYFS, so you can feel more confident about what inspectors will be looking for.

I hope you've found all the material we've published helpful. Not just the toolkits, but also the blogs and frequently asked questions. And do please keep coming to us with your questions, and if there's anything we still need to tell you, please tell us! Your feedback is so important - what you need to know, what you'd like to see, and also what's working well for you.

You also told us that having the planning call is working better than a learning walk. We've heard that you feel more empathy from inspectors – that welfare checks aren't just for leaders, they're for all staff.

And you told us you're very happy to see the back of the overall effectiveness grade!

We've heard that the language in the report cards has more of a focus on how you meet children's needs. And we're starting to see nurseries using the report cards to promote their good work. But now you're using full sentences and phrases from the report cards rather than just having to rely on one overall grade. One word that couldn't possibly sum everything up that you do.

We've also heard some discussions around the difference in inspection between nurseries in the private, voluntary and independent sector and school-based nurseries.

I know for nurseries like yours, it can feel like you have the pressures of a full inspection, whereas school-based nurseries are part of a bigger inspection of a school.

I get that. I used to run 13 primaries with 11 nurseries in them.

But I want to reassure you that, from what we are seeing so far, there is parity between the two.

There's not an automatic advantage to being a nursery based in a school. I can absolutely assure you of that.

And it also means that every word on your report card applies to you and your work. Not to 6 different year groups plus a nursery.

Every word on your report card is a word you can use to promote your achievements and give parents the detail they really want to see.

So I would urge you to keep taking that opportunity and keep using the different grades and phrases to tell the story of your nursery!

We've got QR codes that you can download from your page on our inspection report website – so, once you've had a new-look inspection, your QR code will point directly to your report card.

If you put the QR code on your banners and marketing material, you are free to quote from the report card how you wish. Maybe that's the grades you want to highlight, or maybe that's a line you think truly captures the experience of the babies and children you look after. It's much better than being restricted to one word on a banner.

We are giving you, I hope, what you need to promote yourselves effectively as businesses. To show where the children you look after are happy and content. Where your practice is good and your standards are high.

Ever-higher standards

Because we are all determined to keep raising standards in the early years sector.

Under the old system, 98% of over 60,000 settings were graded as 'good' or 'outstanding'. Ninety-eight per cent without any apparent need to improve – without anything to reach for.

When almost every nursery in the country can't do anything better, those grades start to lose their

meaning. I'm sure we all want to guard against this sector, which does so much great work, reaching a plateau.

So yes, we've changed the grading scale - and we've made sure there isn't a read-across from the old 4 judgements to the new 5 grades, despite how people try to do that.

And yes, this does mean we may see fewer settings getting the very top grade of 'exceptional'.

But that's because we can differentiate better now - and our evaluation areas are more tightly defined. 'Exceptional' is only awarded to the very best practice in the country, the work that others can and should learn from.

And 'exceptional' is just one of the 3 very positive grades we can award.

We also have 'expected standard' and 'strong standard'. Both are real achievements. Both are in green on the report card, and one shows where you're doing everything you should be doing for children and the other where you're doing things very, very well indeed.

And to quickly dispel a myth about our new grades: it is absolutely possible for any type of early years provider, including childminders, to receive an exceptional grade. Every type.

It's definitely not a grade we award regularly, but we absolutely have awarded it to early years providers.

You all strive for the highest standards and we want to recognise that. We are using our report cards to give a fuller, fairer picture. And we will point to where professionals should be paying more attention to do even better.

High standards help create safety

Because those high standards, applied consistently, are completely intertwined with safety, through the safeguarding and welfare requirements set out in the EYFS.

I'm sure safeguarding is something that is on all of your minds. It's been on my mind too.

Let me start by saying that the vast majority of you working across the 60,000 registered settings are doing a great job, with the best of intentions, taking good and proper care of babies and children. I know that, you know that, our inspectors see that.

But we all read the news.

We have all seen the recent terrible cases where children have come to harm.

I'm sure we all read those stories with the same mixture of sorrow and anger.

I am sure you feel exactly the same when you see the practices that are pillars of your professionalism - safe sleeping, safe eating, safeguarding procedures - not being followed, not being taken seriously enough, or being ignored.

Let me focus on safe sleep for a moment - I know that every one of you knows and believes this is an aspect of practice that really matters.

All our inspectors receive training on safer sleeping, and they see every day the professionalism that

goes into this aspect of care, from the overwhelming majority of you.

I've seen it myself when I've visited your settings. Last summer I was at Busy Bees nursery in York and most recently in March I spent time at some of Childbase's nurseries in Milton Keynes. I saw the thought and the care and the training that goes into safe sleeping and into every moment of your work.

But we also know from a tragic number of cases, that when safe sleep practices are not followed, the consequences can be devastating – truly, deeply devastating.

The Department for Education have been working closely with Lullaby Trust and the Campaign for Gigi to make the expectations around safe sleeping in early years settings stronger and clearer.

And clearer updated wording is also being prepared for the Early Years Foundation Stage, so we can build on the guidance that you follow and are familiar with already.

I want to be clear that this isn't about introducing something new.

It's just setting out exactly what safe sleep looks like, reinforcing best practice and helping the whole sector to be confident and consistent in their practice, so that babies are looked after as they deserve.

Nobody wants to see more headlines questioning the safety of nurseries.

And nobody, nobody, nobody, wants to see any more children come to harm.

So it's really important that we work together to make sure that all nurseries are safe places for babies and children.

That we recognise where the vast majority do it right.

That we lean into inspection, and lean into being part of a profession, with high standards, ready to shout about this great work.

We take our role in regulation and safety incredibly seriously. As you might have seen, from this month we've introduced a more frequent inspection window, where we'll visit your settings every 4 years rather than every 6 years.

All settings will be inspected at least once by March 2030 as we roll out this change.

And we'll inspect newly registered settings within 18 months, rather than 30 months.

These are tighter timeframes that give us more opportunities to spot where things aren't right. To assure parents. To keep standards high and, in doing so, keep children safe.

Safety and inclusion for all children

Being and feeling safe and secure is the foundation from which babies and children can flourish. The seed from which every other aspect of life grows. It's essential for all babies and children.

That is why inclusion is now a major part of the toolkit – and why we recognise the unique and vital role that early years settings have in inclusion.

Because you are the beginning of the inclusion story.

I've talked long and hard about childcare oases and deserts and the importance of early years provision, how important you all are in getting children ready for school and for everything that comes afterwards.

For instance, I spoke last month about oracy and the links between speaking, listening and reading.

Skills that are truly foundational in life. Skills that you lay the foundations for by reading to babies and children and having those back-and-forth interactions that are the first lines in a lifelong conversation. If these skills are not nurtured and given the chance to develop, it can lead to real and lasting barriers as children grow.

So inclusion in that context might mean seeing early SEND needs and helping to close gaps before they develop and become compounding issues. Early intervention and early identification that makes a difference early on.

But it's much, much more than that.

There are other ways to be vulnerable. There are other ways that early years settings can and do make sure inclusion is at the very core of every part of your practice.

It might be knowing how to care for a child who is going through changes in the family home. Supporting a child who's new to the nursery and isn't confident around the other children yet or hasn't had enough to eat.

And who is more vulnerable, in any circumstances, than a baby? Babies can't speak up for themselves. They are the most vulnerable children in the early years space and it's why we specifically focus on them in the toolkit.

It is incumbent on all of us to be vigilant for those who cannot advocate for themselves. That is inclusion in this context.

Parents have a role in this system too. They drop off and pick up their children every day - it's a scary thing, whether it's the first time dropping them off at nursery or the hundredth time! That's natural.

And it's why being able to give them even more information through the report cards is really important.

Being able to differentiate between what is great and what is truly exceptional - and, of course, being able to say that safeguarding here, at this setting, is being met.

The vast, vast majority of early years settings are great and safe places. We recognise that. And just as we recognise great practice, we will also call out where things are not good enough. Where leadership and governance isn't where it needs to be. Where safeguarding is not in place.

We make no apologies for that. As I said at the beginning of this speech, Ofsted does not just inspect early years settings, we regulate them too.

That means we have a responsibility to babies and children - a responsibility to act when things, including safeguarding, are not right.

This balance of recognising excellence and identifying where things need to improve is what we exist to do. But I hope we will do both in the spirit of trust and partnership that I spoke about at the start of my speech.

A story about what matters

Before I wrap up, I want to share a quick story.

One leader recently took the time to write to us about their most recent inspection experience. And in that letter, there was a line that jumped out at me.

They described the inspection as ‘a genuine joining of forces grounded in a shared passion for children, early learning, and high-quality practice’.

I’ll repeat that line because it does such an excellent job of summing up what we want to try and achieve: ‘a genuine joining of forces grounded in a shared passion for children, early learning, and high-quality practice’.

I am always delighted when we hear from professionals about their positive inspection experience. And I am proud of the direction we are going in and the changes we’ve made that you told us matter to you.

More discussion and reflection with the help of that planning call.

Inspectors who respect the work you put in, who affirm what’s going well and point out areas for professional development.

More nuance and narrative to draw on from the report cards, to tell your full story and promote your work.

It’s all in service of one thing – and I’m going to quote that same leader again, whose words really struck me. They said there was ‘a clear focus on what truly matters: the child’.

What truly matters. I know every single one of us here agrees on that.

Thank you so much for being here – it shows your commitment – and thank you so much for the effort you put in, the difference you all make.

You keep the children in your care safe. You write the beginning of the inclusion story. You continue to raise standards.

You give children the best start in life. Thank you.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/sir-martyn-olivers-speech-at-the-early-years-alliance-connect-roadshow>