**Working in partnership with Ofsted**

We all know we are going to have to ‘go through’ an Ofsted inspection at least once in our career if not a lot more so it’s important to feel prepared. Many can worry about the upcoming visit for months or even years before it happens and lose sleep! If you don’t want to fall in to that category just remember two vital things: they are our partners and want us to succeed; and you can prepare for the visit ensuring you tell them all that you want them to know.

Well I am an Executive Headteacher for 4 schools in Somerset and my first Ofsted was looming….after the event, I have learned a lot and use this article to share my learning with you.

Here is a guide to support you (purely based on my own experience), but also some ideas when things just don’t go to plan.

**Prepare well ahead of time – know the rules of play!**

Believe it or not, there are strict rules around how an Ofsted inspection is carried out and the inspectors have very strong guidance to follow. So if you know all of this you should know what they are going to ask you, right?! What can you read to find out?

* School inspection handbook – this is the ultimate rule book
* Code of conduct – also don’t forget your code of conduct as you both must abide by that too.
* Ofsted updates – has anything changed since you last looked?
* Ofsted myth busters – these are helpful as they address the ‘rumours’ floating around.
* Ofsted training materials – these are often available if you ask!

Once you have read the ‘rules of the game’ you can begin to plan your day/s. You will now have a clear understanding of what they want to find out, how they judge it, how they will behave, how they expect you to behave and put some myths to bed. Now it’s time to plan your evidence collecting file. You will have many areas of school life you want to bring to life with video, pictures, quotes, action plans, policies etc. so it’s time to create your file which can be hard copy or virtual. Remember everything you say you must prove with evidence. So go through your SEF and find everything to evidence.

**Delegate tasks**

You are not alone. This is an inspection on your school, therefore your teachers, support staff, admin and even your children. Everyone needs to get involved. Set out tasks that need to be evidenced and delegate them. Ask the children to review policies, how walls are used, resources labelled, ask admin to carry out H&S walks and update files. Put something to someone. Now you will have everyone involved in updating the evidence file on where your school is at currently and what it needs to do to improve. Review the SEF with staff, children and parents – is it true? What’s missing? This is a great opportunity for you as a school to celebrate the wonderful things you are finding and compile an exciting action plan for the coming year. If you are due an OFSTED in the next 4 years, start this exercise now!

**Set out the day**

Plan a timetable for the day. When the call comes you will get in a flap, so why not set out the day now whilst you have lots of time to think. Who will do what? Play on people’s strengths. Who will make tea all day and fuss over everyone? Who will ensure all the paperwork is ready and waiting? Who will organise lunch? Who can prep groups of children to talk to the inspectors so they feel part of the day? Who are the subject leaders and when can they come out of class to be interviewed? The Ofsted inspector does not want to throw the school in to chaos so appreciates if you can start the timetable for them and they will work around it.

The call comes! You are ready, calm and prepared. The staff and children feel excited to finally get to share their amazing school with someone who really wants to listen. You have waited for this chance to show the huge improvements you have made to the school and have a vision of your judgement rising.

**What if things are not going to plan?**

Sometimes it feels like you are pushing water uphill. But why? What’s gone wrong?

* Take some time out to review the guidance/rules: Read it all again!
* Is the inspector following the guidance?
* Is the inspector following the agreed format?
* Is the inspector following the code of conduct?
* Sit down and write down all the reasons you feel it is not going well….is it you? Is it them?
* Sit with your trusted colleague (have them at the ready) and ask them to review this with you
* What needs to change? Set out clearly what must change for the day to improve.

**It’s not me, it’s them!** With your colleague you have read the guidance and highlighted where things are not happening as they should. So it seems the inspector is not following the guidance and has their own agenda! Don’t get upset, everyone can have an off day….

But what can I do?

* Stop the inspection! Be explicit in what you are doing.
* Share with them the guidance and remind them of their duty to work with you
* Share yours and their code of conduct
* Give them a ‘polite warning’ and a clear idea of what needs to change before the inspection can continue – agree this!
* Thank them for reviewing their conduct!
* Ensure your Governor has noted everything.

This is key because if you find later on that you need to make a complaint, Ofsted will have expected you to have highlighted to the inspector on the day what had gone wrong and you had given them a fair chance to put it right. It is useful here to have a witness to ensure you were polite, reasonable and fair.

So the day continues, but you find the inspection is still not going well and you are panicking. It’s all gone pear shaped!!!! Now what can I do?

* Stop the inspection! (again)
* **Have a reason** (guidance/code of conduct) You must be able to show them in the guidance what they are not doing correctly and as is deeming your inspection not credit worthy. You have done this once already today but it continues so you will be able to show them why you have had to stop the inspection AGAIN. Facts are the key here, not feelings.
* **You have a choice at this point:**
1. You ask them to wait while you phone the Head office to seek advice as well as from your County Lead; or
2. At this point tell them you are stopping the inspection entirely. You ask them to leave. You may be told you cannot do this….that is not the case, of course you can. You are the Safeguarding Lead and if your staff or children feel emotionally and/or professionally unsafe (feeling bullied) you must protect them and ask the inspector to leave.
* Remind them of the polite warning and be clear of the expectations, for example, ‘I would like you to go back to the Head office and ask for another inspector to come and carry out an inspection where the guidance is followed..’
* Begin to collect evidence of the inspection being flawed in readiness to make a full and comprehensive complaint.

It’s time to write the complaint, but where do I start?

**What does a good complaint look like?**

* **The complaint is about a person, not the organisation.** It is to improve working partnerships with schools. Remember, Ofsted want you to do well, it is the inspector who did not follow the organisation’s rules.
* List the facts – what happened? Clear reference to the statements in the Code of Conduct and/or guidance.
* Do not use emotion unless factual. ‘The girl was crying and frightened to talk to the inspector which made us all very uncomfortable as it is our ethos that all children feel comfortable and emotionally safe.’ This became a safeguarding issue for me as DSL.
* Interview all staff and use their words to back up your complaint. Make sure this is not your perception but that of the whole school.
* Offer a resolve. (ask for another inspection based on the fact that the inspector did not follow legal guidance). This shows you are not avoiding being made accountable but actually want to work in partnership with Ofsted.
* Use the evidence you have collected to refer to:- quotes from staff, children and Governors, data which contradicts the inspectors key priorities or reflection etc.

This can be a long drawn out task, so make sure you do it with others. Build a team around you such as governors, SLT and your family. It is hard not to get emotional, however this will not help. It is most important to set out the key areas you are complaining about. Offer the facts of the inspector’s evidence collecting, conversations they had, behaviours which contradict the code of conducts (both of them) and the reactions to these by staff or children.

Make sure you have colleagues in education you can discuss this with such as other Headteachers, your Union Representative as they have experience in this and can help you to stay focussed and unemotional during the writing of the complaint or your SLT. Your complaint is to someone who does not want this to happen in a school as much as you, so they are on your side! Do not get aggressive, threatening, angry or rude about the organisation. They are your partner.

**Key points to remember:**

* You are never alone;
* You know the rules of the game;
* You are the DSL;
* You know your school – they do not until you tell them what they need to know;
* You have all the evidence they are looking for;
* Your staff and children expect you to keep them safe;
* You have worked hard… show them;
* You have every reason to work with Ofsted not against them;
* You are in control! Take regular breaks to eat, drink and think…
* You can complain – not whinge!

I remember talking to Senior HMI after I asked the Inspector to leave the premises, and he said he was proud of what I had done. He said if more Headteachers insisted on the guidance being followed there would be a better relationship between Ofsted and Schools. I agree. He was happy to receive a complaint from me but warned it not be a ‘whinging email’ as they cannot be addressed, it must be a full complaint. I was happy to oblige.

I evidenced 8 areas of complaint which 7 were upheld, a new inspector came out (SHMI) and carried out a full inspection and wrote the report with me. We agreed everything. That’s when I learned Ofsted want to work with us and they need our help to stop ‘rogue’ inspectors veering off task.

I have since set up an online SEF for Heads (along with managing my 4 schools) which offers you and your SLT/Governors a way to evidence your school for inspection online, uploading videos, pictures, files, excel sheets and much more. Then it writes all your reports for you and you can even give Ofsted your login so they can look at whatever they want. If you think this is the best way to prepare yourself and your Governors then go to [www.schoolomegasolutions.co.uk](http://www.schoolomegasolutions.co.uk) for a free trial and I will be very happy to help you. Contact me if you want a face to face demo and advice.

Happy evidencing folks!