

The Home Office Children's Department Inspectorate 1948-1970

John Croft CBE *who served in the Home Office 1952-1983. After 14 years as an inspector in the Children's Department he became Head of the Research and Planning Unit. He was formerly Chairman of the Scientific Criminological Council of the Council of Europe.*

Introduction

This article describes the function, organisation and method of work of the Children's Department inspectorate. It also makes an assessment of its contribution based on both published documents and documents which I retained following my secondment to the Home Office Research Unit in 1966. The Children's Department existed for 22 years (1948-1970), and had three chief inspectors, before it was absorbed into the Social Work Service of the then Department of Health and Social Security. Insofar as the inspectorate was the arm of a major Department of State, the legislative and administrative content is briefly described but no attempt is made to trace in detail the post-war political history of juvenile justice, or of social policy affecting children and their families.

Historical background

The origins of the Home Office inspectorate of this period can be traced back to two events. The first, in 1857, was the appointment of the Reverend Sydney Turner as the first inspector of reformatory schools. The second was the addition in 1860 of the industrial schools to Sydney Turner's remit. By the turn of the century the Home Office had oversight of some 30,000 children in these establishments. Other important milestones include the consolidation of various strands of child protection procedure in the Children Act 1908; the establishment of the Children's Branch in 1914; and the incorporation of the Reformatory and Industrial Schools Department in 1924. The inspection team remained small, despite the increase in both schools and inmates until the expansion of 1947/48.

Following public concern about the care of children deprived of a normal home life, the Government set up an inquiry in 1945 under the auspices of the Home Secretary, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education. This Committee, known as the Curtis Committee, reported the following

year but its recommendations were not put into statutory form until the Children Act 1948. This brought the responsibility of inspection arrangements for the majority of children maintained under the Poor Law and those currently under the care of the Ministry of Education, under the Home Office, in addition to its existing responsibilities. As well as the 1948 Act, inspectors also drew their statutory authority from the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, the Criminal Justice Act 1948 and the Adoption Act 1950.

Administrative foreground

The inspectorate was a departmental inspectorate. It was accountable only to the Secretary of State and inspectors were not appointed by the Crown, unlike — for example — inspectors of constabulary or of education who carried the prefix HM. The chief inspector's grade equated to today's Senior Civil Service (SCS), but he did not have parity of pay. The Children's Department in 1948 consisted of four divisions each headed by an assistant secretary (now SCS) with a complement of principal (now Grade 7), executive and clerical officers. The assistant secretaries, along with the chief inspector, reported to an assistant under-secretary of state who also had charge of the probation division and the probation inspectorate.

In brief, the function of the administrative divisions was to administer the Acts of Parliament; to issue advice to local authorities and other bodies by means of circular letters; to exercise oversight over expenditure; and to initiate, subject to Ministerial direction, new legislation. Home Office administration thus had a firm grip on policy, and on financial control — particularly of the approved schools. Although inspectors were described as the Department's professional advisers, their function was perceived as largely regulatory and their direct influence on policy circumscribed.

The task

Following the 1948 Children Act the Home Office

issued circulars summarising the main provisions of the Act for the benefit of local authorities and voluntary organisations together with memoranda on a variety of subjects: reception centres, residential nurseries, children neglected or ill-treated in their own homes, as well as the increase in juvenile delinquency which after the war was causing concern. Meanwhile the inspectorate, which had hitherto worked from London, was being expanded and decentralised in six territorial groups situated in Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds and Manchester, with two in London, whilst at the same time retaining a small number of senior and specialist inspectors at headquarters. A third London region was established after the London Government Act 1963.

The inspectorate's caseload thus consisted of 63 county councils and 83 county borough councils, with numbers in care varying between 40 in Radnorshire to over 8,000 in London. The total number of children in local authority care in 1949 amounted to some 55,000, 35 per cent of whom were boarded-out with foster parents. Over 28,000 children were in the care of voluntary organisations — a peak which was to decline over the next two decades. By 1959, over 64,000 children were in the care of local authorities with an annual turnover in excess of 40,000; by 1967, however, this figure had risen to almost 70,000 (of whom 50 per cent were now boarded-out) with a turnover of some 53,000.

As regards residential establishments, in 1954 there were 1,100 local authority and 600 voluntary homes, as well as 130 approved schools, most of which were run by voluntary managers. Apart from a reduction in numbers during the 1950s, the approved school population remained fairly stable at just under 10,000. The remand home population (of which there were 58 such institutions in 1966, only two of which were under voluntary management) increased from about 12,000 admissions in 1957 to almost 20,000 by 1966. At a rough estimate the Home Office had oversight through the agency of local authorities and voluntary organisations, of about 100,000 children by the late 1960s.

Organisation and function

A memorandum, dated January 1958, described the function of the inspectorate in the following terms:

- '(a) To ensure that the duties and responsibilities laid down by the relevant Acts of Parliament are complied with and that the Regulations made under those Acts are observed.
- (b) To give information, by means of reports to the Chief Inspector, on how these duties and responsibilities are being carried out in the field.
- (c) To offer advice on professional matters to Division.
- (d) To encourage suitable standards and policy in the field and to disseminate new ideas.'

The memorandum includes a rider to the effect that the inspectorate would not offer advice on financial or legal matters, questions involving interpretation of Acts of Parliament, or discuss matters of major policy without reference to administrative divisions of the Home Office. The memorandum concludes that the inspectorate acts 'to some extent as the local agent of the Secretary of State' and as 'intermediary between the central government and those responsible for the day to day care of the children.'

Personnel

From what sort of professional background were inspectors recruited? Recruitment, for which the preferred age limits were between 28 and 40 years, was handled by the Civil Service Commission although the small selection board, chaired by the assistant under secretary, consisted of the chief inspector and one or two external members. In 1951 the annual starting salary for an inspector was £700 for a man, £575 for a woman, while the chief inspector earned £2,000 (£1,850 for a woman). Salaries for those serving outside London were abated by between £15 and £80. Numerically, the balance of men and women was more or less equal. Leaving aside those medically qualified, and the very small number with a background in child development, domestic science or agriculture, inspectors were mostly recruited from the teaching and social work professions.

The majority were graduates and a small number had higher degrees. A few of the new recruits with educational backgrounds had had teaching experience in approved schools and several had previously been heads of special or other schools. Both deputy chief inspectors came from educational administration; while in the earlier years two out of the six superintending inspectors possessed a qualification or experience in social work. The preponderance of senior staff, therefore, came from the educational field and to a limited extent this determined the intellectual culture of the inspectorate.

Routine

Unlike HM inspectors of education, Home Office inspectors did not operate from their own homes but were expected to attend the office for the purpose of meetings, report writing and dealing with matters referred from administrative divisions or queries from children's officers and heads of approved schools. Additionally, one inspector in a regional office had to act as a duty inspector for the week. Since most visits to children's homes took place during the afternoon and early evening so as to ensure that the staff were available and to see the children, this often meant that two out of five and a half days — for some years after the war the civil service worked on Saturday mornings — were spent in the office. Longer periods of absence

depended on geographical circumstances and whether a 'full inspection', by a small team of inspectors supplemented from other regions and London headquarters, of an approved school, a local authority children's department or a large voluntary home was involved.

Schedules of inspection drawn up in the 1950s illustrate the range of topics, dealing with all aspects of a child's life and living conditions, to be covered. Inspections were far more practical than those of, for instance, inspectors of education, and included such duties as ensuring that all the toilets flushed properly. For an inspection of a local authority children's department, covering administration and casework, more than two dozen headings are listed; in the instance of a large authority, at least two inspectors might be occupied for several days especially if visits were made to foster children.

Pressure of work, and a shortage of inspectors, caused the visitation rate to be revised from time to time but the general aim was to inspect each residential establishment at least once a year and, in the case of approved schools and remand homes, up to three times. Junior attendance centres (the senior ones were the concern of the probation inspectorate) were inspected quarterly, on Saturdays, and probation hostels twice a year. Contact with children's officers and their staff was based on a three year cycle — four visits to children's officers, one to child care officers but rather more to voluntary organisations. Visits to institutions, except for full inspections, or where some particular matter needed to be discussed with the head, were usually made without notice.

The Home Office Culture

The Home Office prided itself on a high standard of draughtsmanship and this tradition permeated through to the inspectorate. Inspector's reports were detailed — not just notes but polished prose. There was considerable pressure on each inspector to cover his or her commitment within the allotted workload and timescale. Although over the years, some of the inspection cycles had to be relaxed, by and large commitments were adhered to despite minor fluctuations in the number of inspectors available.

The Home Office was an hierarchical institution and a considerable degree of formality was observed in reporting procedures and the minuting of official files. It may be of interest to current civil servants to consider the minuting and drafting practices of the time. Only officials of the rank of assistant secretary (Grade 7) and above could initial minutes or memoranda on files. Below that, the names of rank had to be written in full. The use of coloured inks was forbidden — green or red being reserved for the Home Secretary. In addition, bishops of the Roman Catholic Church were not addressed in official correspondence as 'My Lord Bishop' (they were not of the established

church), doctors were not addressed as 'dr' unless they had the degree of MD, and 'JP' was never added after a person's name, since serving as a justice of the peace was regarded as a duty and not an honour.

A regional inspector's report addressed to the chief inspector, was submitted through a more senior inspector to the superintending inspector who took local action (for example, a letter to a children's officer or head of an approved school) as appropriate. In turn, he forwarded the report to a deputy chief inspector, who might pass it on, if of sufficient import, to the chief inspector. The report was then sent under cover of a further minute, to the administrative division where it was considered, at first instance, by a senior executive or principal officer before being passed upwards, if the substance of the report warranted it, to an assistant secretary for 'official' action, that is a letter to the clerk of a local authority or the secretary to the board of managers of an approved school. This mandarin culture permeated the whole system and meant that rank and file regional inspectors rarely had contact with senior officers in the administrative grades, and thus led to a formality of communication which, while it did not exist within the small groups of regional inspectors, tended to dictate relations in general.

Relations between inspectors and 'the field' (as it was known) were less formal. Indeed if the confidence of children's officers, child care officers and houseparents, as well as the heads and staff of approved schools and remand homes, was to be obtained and secured, it was necessary to adopt a less formal approach while retaining something of the authority of central government, even if criticisms had to be made. Some also needed advice, as a chief officer, how to handle their relationship with the clerk to the authority, usually a lawyer in the era before the new breed of chief executives became the norm, and of whom some children's officers stood in awe.

Similar and no less delicate support was required for the heads of institutions, often of a religious order, in negotiations with the mother house or diocesan administrator. There were also a number of officers (after care agents and NSPCC inspectors) who were somewhat outside the mainstream in child care and who were encouraged by friendly discussion and advice from a Home Office inspector. Finally, it was important for an inspector to be able to get on easily with children and young people. Observation of their demeanour, response and activities, as well as attitude to staff, and what they said (or did not say), was more often than not indicative of the conduct of a children's home or school, and sometimes of the quality of a foster home placement.

Assessing performance

Given the central direction and control exercised by the Home Office, and that (for almost two decades, at least) the inspectorate's prime function was

perceived as more regulatory than advisory, it is pertinent to pose two questions. First, what contribution, if any, did the inspectorate make to the formulation of Departmental policy? Secondly, what specific impact did the inspectorate have on the development of juvenile justice and child care?

The inspectorate was the bridge between 'the field' and the Whitehall administration. Thus its influence tended to be dual although, in my opinion, it probably made a greater mark on 'the field', perhaps because of the shared professional background, than on policy makers. The academic and professional orientation of senior administrators was rarely, at that time, based in the social sciences and consequently they did not always appear entirely sympathetic to some of the ideas suggested by inspectors. In addition administrative civil servants were subject to a wide range of political, parliamentary and other pressures that did not impinge directly on the inspectorate.

The changing climate of opinion

The contribution of the inspectorate also needs to be seen not only in terms of the internal Home Office culture but in the context of the intellectual ethos of the period. Whereas the first decade following the Children Act 1948 was one of consolidation, a mood for change and development if not outright reform was more evident in the 1960s. The impetus came from a variety of sources: university departments of social administration and social work; the more progressive local authorities; voluntary organisations that were free to experiment with new methods and techniques because they were less restricted by statutory requirements; and a small number of influential individuals. These catalysts for change, external to Whitehall, were contributory to a series of inquiries, prompted by political, intellectual and practical considerations, starting in the early 1960s which were to shape the future pattern of social welfare services. The most important single review was the Ingleby Committee, which reported in 1960. It looked at juvenile jurisdiction, the treatment of juvenile offenders and the co-ordination of existing services to prevent the neglect of children in their own homes. Some of its recommendations were incorporated in the Children and Young Persons Act 1963.

Although previously the managing committee of the inspectorate did not discuss long-term developments and concentrated almost exclusively on issues of the moment, it is not unreasonable to suggest that by the later 1960s the inspectorate began to assume a more innovative role, largely through the agency of its own development group. It was to be involved in the pre-legislative planning of community homes and intermediate treatment. The impetus for much of this came from within the inspectorate, encouraged by an assistant under-secretary of state, whose approach was more attuned to forcing the pace

of policy development than some of his predecessors.

In the 1950s and 1960s social policy had largely been made by committee, with Ministers taking the decision to set up the committee and then standing back until they came to consider the report. It is not obvious that the inspectorate's contribution to committees had a significant impact but, as Ministers began to adopt a less 'hands-off' approach, senior administrators began to involve their professional advisers more in the policy making process and thus gradually brought about a change in attitude and to a limited extent of function.

Juvenile delinquency and the approved schools

Between 1947, when a master was murdered at an approved school, and the late 1960s, the image of the schools was somewhat tarnished by public inquiries which revealed defects in management and pastoral care. By contrast during the same period the child care service of only one local authority was the subject of a special published report. Nevertheless, much sustained effort had been put by the inspectorate into what one might describe as the 'humanising' of the approved schools. Most approved schools were run on lines that, despite the adverse circumstances of the boys and girls committed to them by the courts, did not differ greatly from other residential schools or the larger children's homes.

Educational and technical facilities were improved, pastoral care was emphasised, and the buildings and furnishings made less austere, while considerable attention was paid to after care upon release and closer liaison with the social services was encouraged. At the same time there was a movement, originating mainly from within the approved school service, for a more individual and less regimented approach to the treatment of juvenile offenders which was to lead ultimately to the establishment of community homes under the Children and Young Persons Act 1969.

The Home Office published between 1959 and 1968 a series of White Papers which aimed to reform the criminal justice system and which, in the longer term as far as juveniles were concerned, had the effect of transforming and integrating what hitherto had been rather separate approaches to young offenders and to deprived children. It does not seem, however, that the inspectorate played much part in the wider debate about the relative merits of the justice model against the welfare model of dealing with juveniles which preoccupied, amongst others, the Scots. Also the trend towards unified and comprehensive statutory social and family services, although the subject of discussion in professional circles, does not seem to have been reflected in any immediate policy initiatives encouraged by the English inspectorate.

Child care

Much of the inspectorate's early effort was directed towards the break-up of large children's homes (formerly known as orphanages) into smaller family group homes. These would accommodate six to eight children and a married couple as houseparents. This was a problem for voluntary organisations many of which had a heavy investment in old premises which were not easy to convert into small homes, located on housing estates, more or less indistinguishable from the accommodation of ordinary families. Local authorities were less handicapped in this regard because after 1948 many of them, especially those steered by more foresighted children's officers, had virtually made a fresh start in the provision of residential care.

While not neglecting homes and hostels run by local authorities, the inspectorate emphasised the need to board out more children with foster parents, whether short or long term. The full inspections carried out in the 1950s paid considerable attention to this aspect not only in terms of the quality of placement and supervision of the children but in strengthening the administrative structure needed to manage the expanding teams of child care officers.

It was the received wisdom, going back to the Curtis Committee, that children should where possible be kept in their own homes. But local authorities, and most voluntary organisations, were so preoccupied with the day-to-day running of the children's service that for some years little attention was paid to this aspect. Preventative work, moreover, required social workers to co-operate closely with many other services and organisations. Not only were the co-ordinating arrangements lacking, or at best uncertain, but additional field workers needed to be recruited, for which not many voluntary organisations either had the resources or were limited by the terms of their trust deeds. Despite the emphasis laid on preventive work by the Ingleby Committee, evidence is lacking that the inspectorate put much effort into encouraging this development, particularly by local authorities, before it was highlighted by the Children and Young Persons Act 1963. Thereafter it loomed larger in the inspectorate's priorities.

Conclusion

In 1970 the inspectorate, and the administrative divisions which it served, was transferred from the Home Office to the then Department of Health and Social Security and was absorbed into the Social Services Directorate which, as the title implies, had a wider remit than just children. At the same time, at local level, children's committees and their officers, were merged into all embracing social service committees of which the chief officers were designated directors of social services.

In the two decades of its existence one can

conclude that the inspectorate played a positive part in supporting the efforts of local authorities and voluntary organisations. It also guided the Home Office, without asserting dramatic innovations, in the direction of modest reforms — with consequent adjustments to the pattern of child welfare. One can only speculate whether progress would have been accelerated had major reports and thematic reviews by the inspectorate been published. It was said at the time of the transfer — not altogether fairly — that thereby the Home Office lost a human face, to which the inspectorate had, despite the occasional frown, contributed a smile.