

The UK Association for Music Education – Music Mark

Music in schools: what we must all do working together

A response to Ofsted's report "Music in schools: what hubs must do."

Ofsted's report "Music in schools: what hubs must do" published on 15 November 2013 and launched at the annual conference of The UK Association for Music Education – Music Mark was no doubt intended to provide a clarion call to the whole education sector to work together more productively and positively to improve music education for all children and young people. The report follows on from previous Ofsted reports, "Music in schools: wider still and wider" and "Music in schools: sound partnerships" the most recent survey challenges all music education hubs to be bold in implementing the National Plan for Music Education and to grasp the opportunity to lead, with schools and other partners, improvement in music education.

And in no small measure the report has already generated a significant range and level of debates and discussions amongst Music Mark members, in music education hubs, in schools and in the wider education world. The breadth and range of members' responses to the report, received by Music Mark, demonstrates the continuing passion, commitment and determination they have to be the best they can be and do the best they can do to provide and support the highest quality of music education for all.

It is vital to acknowledge a wider context in which this latest Ofsted report was compiled and written to fully appreciate many of its nuances,

The government's "The Importance of Music: A National Plan for Music Education" of late 2011 provided a new strategic framework for schools, music services and other music education organisations to direct and guide their work. The introduction and creation of music education hubs in 2012, as a central part of the plan, was seen as a way of harnessing all available local, regional and national resources to focus on improving music education for all.

It is important to re-state that the National Plan is an eight-year plan – 2012 to 2020 and that music education hubs were between 6 and 10 months into their existence at the time of the school visits that underpinned this inspection report.

A significant hallmark of the wider context is the ongoing turbulence in the education sector: the continuing fragmentation of constitutional and organisational arrangements in schools, the instability within Local Authorities as they seek meet huge budget pressures in a range of ways including in some cases wholesale divestment of services, the curriculum and qualifications turmoil (e.g. National Curriculum, GCSE EBacc), and the large pressures within music services and music organisations themselves as they rise to new challenges and new ways of working as hubs and hub leaders against a backdrop of significantly reduced finance, workforce deployment and employment

constraints and a growing expectation of music educators doing a lot more, for a lot more people, with a lot less resource – in some cases a reduction of over 33% in financial resources compared with 2010.

Ofsted's report has some strengths and strong messages. It was of particular regret that the launch of the report and its ambitious intentions to galvanise music education hubs, schools, Arts Council, music education organisations and Ofsted to work together more effectively were somewhat hijacked by Ofsted's own seemingly deliberate ploy to grab media attention with its website headline "Music hubs fail", which incidentally and despite protestations, still appears in the "Recent News" section of the Ofsted website.

Music education hubs are not failing. In fairness to HMI, the report does not actually say that either.

The report *is* critical of the leadership in schools, the quality of music education in schools and the achievements of hubs in driving and supporting standards in schools. But many music education hubs have made great progress in their first year and in the context of turbulence outlined above.

We need to do a lot more - and Music Mark does not make excuses on behalf of anyone, least of all its members; neither does it countenance mediocrity, nor would it ever put up a defence for what was indefensible. It does however seek a balanced debate and cogent argument that will support and drive reflection and engender ideas and solutions to what HMI calls "the enduring problem" with music in schools.

Music Mark welcomes a number of the report's recommendations and, as The UK Association for Music Education, will support its members to work shoulder to shoulder with each other, schools and academies and partner organisations, locally, regionally and nationally to bring about improvements to deliver a better music education for all. Music Mark takes very seriously its responsibility to both represent its members' views and to support their development through rigorous and robust debate and provision of professional services, but it is also clear that it must spell out the significant tensions between some of the Ofsted recommendations and how they might be achieved.

Music Mark strongly supports the ambition and opportunities for schools, hubs, Arts Council to work more closely together. Ofsted's recommendation that each hub should prepare a school music education plan as a means of driving this ambition is welcomed. We would strongly recommend that such plans are co-authored by schools, hubs and other organisations working together. The plans must have high aspirations but also a strong sense of local credibility and above all realism for them to be recognised and embraced as an important means of improving music education. We welcome the proposed guidance from Ofsted and Arts Council England on the development of the plans. We would recommend that the guidance is as practical and helpful and realistic as possible.

Whilst we welcome the priority that Ofsted gives to training and CPD for the workforce in music education hubs and in schools we would also recommend that this should be carefully planned and resourced to not only meet the needs of pupils and schools, but also implemented alongside and where possible within the delivery of the core roles rather than as an adjunct.

The concept of challenging conversations is supported by Music Mark. Indeed it was first espoused in the context of music education in the National Plan. However the concept may be rather less simple than the Ofsted report seems to envision. There is no doubt that confident senior leaders in schools may both welcome and act upon such challenging conversations instigated by music education hubs. Less confident leaders, or those for whom music is not currently a priority in their school improvement plan may need more persuasion or more time, or both.

The government's own *The Importance of Teaching* bestowed autonomy to headteachers, freeing them from control of local "authorities" of whatever construction or political assertion. There is no "right of entry" for music education hubs despite anyone's assertion to the contrary.

We would recommend that those music education hubs that have found the conversations with schools easier to establish and develop could share good practice with colleagues, locally and regionally

There will be a number of schools for whom a challenging conversation is neither a priority nor timely nor even welcome in the context of the Section 5 inspection regime (which rarely gives any weight to the role of music in school performance or improvement).. Music Mark therefore welcomes the recommendation that Ofsted will ensure that all school inspectors are familiar with the findings and recommendations within this report.

We welcome the recommendation that schools should evaluate their musical provision more accurately, especially teaching and the curriculum, and seek training and advice as needed. If, as Ofsted asserts in the report, that "the root of the problem lay in a lack of understanding, and low expectations in music, among the schools' senior leaders and their consequent inability to challenge their own staff, and visiting teachers, to bring about improvement" more will need to be done to support senior leaders in schools over and above the challenging conversation including the development of a systematic and far reaching programme that will provide them with the requisite training, skills and most importantly, perspective to enable them to fulfil this role.

Over the years a number of commentators including Ofsted have exhorted music educationalists to "do less better". Or put another way, less breadth, more depth. The question therefore is, what constitutes the "less"?

In the context of a new national curriculum (which academies and free schools do not have to follow) and now in this Ofsted report which, for example makes its view clear on

the need for pupils to be taught notation and to experience more classical music, how is the tension resolved between what is taught (ergo what is a “good” music curriculum), the apparent skills deficit in the workforce across the sector to teach it, the priority with which autonomous schools resource it in human, curriculum, financial and time resource terms and role and capacity of music education hubs to challenge and support this?

We welcome recommendations that hubs should support all schools in improving the music education they provide through robust evaluation, training and consultancy and promotion of high quality curriculum progression. They will not however make up for the years of low priority and chronic lack of training in music education for successive generations of Key Stage 1 and 2 teachers nor will they necessarily, of themselves, address the issues at Key Stages 3 and 4 which the report, as with its predecessors, seeks to treat the symptoms of the malaise rather than the root causes.

Music Mark welcomes the overall tenet of the report in giving close attention to the development, improvement, delivery, monitoring and reporting of quality music education. And we will play a major role in supporting our members to improve their work in supporting and working with schools to deliver the very best they can and ensure that the core and extension roles achieve the highest standards with and for the maximum number of children and young people.

If the “enduring problem” in music education identified by Ofsted is to stand any chance of achieving the seismic improvement that is envisioned, and if we think that children and young people do deserve so much better, then we need to come together as a sector, to work together with honesty, commitment, passion and humility to debate what high quality music education looks and sounds like, to share widely the great practice that is already out there, challenge mediocrity wherever it appears, seek old and new answers to old and new questions, and lobby for an increase in priority and most certainly an increase in the resources to underpin it.

In so doing we also need to lose the rhetoric and the sensationalism and be prepared to think through some altogether higher aspirations and perhaps some much more radical solutions to improve music education over the next 3-7 years in the first instance and for the next generation of children and young people and the professionals that work with them.

Nigel M Taylor, Chair,

The UK Association for Music Education – Music Mark.

NB – this response is based upon the collated responses of Music Mark Members Received between 15th November and 3rd December 2013.