

THE FUTURE OF INSPECTION

An ASCL policy paper

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SECTION 1

Context and introduction

In 2019 Ofsted introduced a new Education Inspection Framework (EIF), which placed a greater focus on the ‘substance of education’: the curriculum. This is reflected in the Quality of Education judgement. Inspections were suspended between February 2020 and September 2021 due to the pandemic. During that time Ofsted published its [report into sexual abuse and harassment](#), and carried out additional visits to understand the impact of the pandemic on schools and colleges.

Inspections resumed in summer 2021, with the timeline expedited so that all schools and colleges will receive an inspection by summer 2025. Since 2019, Ofsted has begun carrying out MAT Summary Evaluations, to understand the effectiveness of multi-academy trusts, although these are not graded and MATs do not have to engage with them.

There will be a new HMCI, Sir Martyn Oliver in January 2024. The government’s white paper [Opportunity for All](#) proposed substantial changes to the school system, which would have implications for both inspection and regulation. This provides an opportunity to think differently about inspection in the future.

The case for change

Any policy change in education should be approached cautiously; incremental change is often more effective and less disruptive than radical overhauls to the system. In this paper, we acknowledge that there is an ongoing need for an independent inspectorate, and that many aspects of the EIF are very positive.

However, the implementation of the EIF has been flawed. Too many school and college leaders feel that the framework allows for overly subjective judgements to be made, that the quality of inspection teams is too variable, and that inspection activity sometimes goes beyond that set out in the handbook.

ASCL is concerned that Ofsted is losing the trust of the profession. Moreover, Ofsted’s public response to these challenges has not always been as helpful or constructive as it could have been.

We think that implementing the immediate actions proposed below could help rebuild trust in the short term. This could then be carefully followed up with some more substantive longer-term changes, also set out below.

About this paper and these recommendations

This paper is intended to support discussion about the future of inspection, and is drawn from the views of ASCL Council – ASCL’s policymaking body. We hope it will be a useful contribution to the dialogue for policymaking now and in the future.

The recommendations in this policy paper are formal ASCL policy, having been agreed by ASCL’s elected Council. We hope that school and college leaders, policy makers, the inspectorate and other stakeholders will engage proactively with the ideas set out here.



SECTION 2

Principles of future inspection

The recommendations in this paper are underpinned by certain principles, which we think any framework should reflect:

- Inspection should be constructive, not punitive.
- Inspection activity should be based on professional dialogue.
- Inspection outcomes must be reliable and valid in order to carry the trust of the profession and other stakeholders.
- Inspection frameworks, and their implementation, must be transparent.
- Significant changes to inspection should only be introduced following a thorough pilot, and a detailed impact analysis.

SECTION 3

Suggestions for immediate improvements

ASCL would like to see immediate changes made in the following areas:

1 | Removal of overall graded judgements

ASCL strongly advocates the immediate removal of overall graded judgements under the current EIF. School and college leaders tell us that these overall judgements are too reductionist, and significantly contribute to the high-stakes nature of inspection.

Under the current EIF, judgements about each of the four areas of the framework could still be made, but without an overall 'defining' grade. It is wrong and misleading to attempt to distil all the work and school improvement a school or college does into a single phrase.

There is precedence for this: Ofsted operates in the Bailiwick of Guernsey, where it uses the EIF but does not give an overall grade. We propose a similar model being applied in England.

2 | Notice of inspection

We believe that schools and colleges should be told in which academic year they will be inspected (from now until 2025, and in the future). Schools and colleges would still have the same notice of an inspection (i.e. the day before). This would drastically reduce the current burden on school and college leaders who currently feel that they are constantly 'in the window' for inspection.

We do not believe that this would reduce the efficacy of inspection, and it would be wrong and insulting to suggest that school improvement would not continue in years where schools were not due an inspection.

Ofsted should also undertake a review into the cycle of inspections, and how frequently it is appropriate to inspect schools and colleges.

In circumstances where urgent inspections (previously known as NFD inspections) would be triggered, these should continue.

3 | Transparency over inspection activity

In October 2022, 'aide-memoires', or crib-sheets, which distil Ofsted inspector training onto a single page for each area of the framework and deep dive subject, were circulated widely on social media.

Much of the content of these documents goes beyond the published EIF and handbooks. It is not right to hold schools and colleges accountable against a 'meta' or unpublished framework, as we believe these aide-memoires constitute.

Furthermore, school leaders who are Ofsted inspectors (OIs) have access to these documents, whereas other school leaders do not. Other leaders may have accessed the documents via social media, meaning documents may be in circulation that are out of date, and may be read without important context.

Therefore, Ofsted should publish its latest aide-memoires on its website with immediate effect, alongside recordings of the OI training from which they were distilled. Publishing recordings of HMI and OI training in the future would be welcome. This would help dispel myths about what Ofsted wants and reduce the unhelpful cottage industry which has grown up around preparing for inspection.

4 | A review into how pupil voice is considered during inspection

ASCL strongly welcomed Ofsted's review into sexual abuse and harassment in schools and colleges, and shares the inspectorate's concerns about the scale and impact of this issue. One of the most striking findings from the review was that teachers and leaders were often unaware of the scale of the problem in their own communities. It is therefore important and right to seek the views of pupils on all aspects of their experience, particularly those linked to safeguarding and personal development.

However, since summer 2021, school and college leaders have reported that comments made by a small minority of pupils have sometimes been used disproportionately to reach judgements. In many cases, these comments do not appear to have been triangulated by other evidence.

Ofsted should undertake an internal review into how pupil voice is used during inspection, and how claims are triangulated. Any findings should be reflected in an update to the handbook.

5 | Reflecting the impact of trust leadership

The future of trust inspection is discussed in Section 4 of this paper. However, in the short term, we think that current Ofsted reports should better reflect the impact a trust has on school improvement in academies.

Currently, reports give little consideration to the role of the trust, despite the fact that some curriculum choices and improvement may have been driven centrally. The inspection process, and reporting, should be updated to allow greater involvement of the trust, to ensure that inspectors are talking to the right people.

SECTION 4

Recommendations for the future of inspection

ASCL would like consideration to be given to longer-term changes in the following areas:

1 | A continued focus on curriculum

ASCL broadly welcomed the EIF in 2019, with its emphasis on the quality of education, as opposed to historical data. We believe that future frameworks should continue to have a strong focus on the experience of pupils in the school, and the substance of their learning, with information about the curriculum forming part of a broader 'dashboard' of measures (see below for more on this 'dashboard').

Ofsted has repeatedly said that it does not have a preferred curriculum or assessment model. However, there are some clear preferences that impact judgements (e.g. two-year Key Stage 3s, Ebacc entry rates).

Any new framework should be the basis for a discussion about curriculum choices and challenges, and not pre-suppose a curriculum model, beyond that set out in the national curriculum.

A continued focus on the curriculum is welcome, and will continue to make inspection distinct from performance measures. However, our view is that the government's expectations on the curriculum should be set out, in their entirety, in the national curriculum. The national curriculum, in a slimmed down form, should be mandatory for all state schools. Neither the government nor Ofsted should attempt to impose additional curriculum requirements or expectations on schools through non-statutory guidance.

Inspections should include discussion of the way in which a school is implementing the national curriculum, and of the school's broader curriculum.

2 | Removal of all graded judgements

As set out in Section 3 above, we would like to see the immediate removal of the overall graded judgement.

In the next framework, ASCL proposes that all graded judgements are removed. We strongly believe that these are reductionist, misleading, and significantly contribute to the stress and workload associated with inspection.

Instead, a narrative description of the school or college's strengths and weaknesses in each area would give parents and other stakeholders a more nuanced understanding of the school or college's effectiveness.

This would build resilience and flexibility into the inspection process, as it would remove the need to define 'outstanding' and 'good' practice, and instead focus on what the school or college does well, and where it could improve.

When the criteria and methodology for 'good' and 'outstanding' change between frameworks (as they did significantly in 2019), then a school or college may be perceived as having deteriorated, when in fact any change in overall judgement could be a result of the different expectations under which they are now being assessed. Removing graded judgements would mitigate for this, and allow Ofsted to refine a set of standards, as described below.

Removing graded judgements would also enable all schools and colleges to play a greater role in supporting other institutions and in overall system leadership. Currently, only schools with certain grades can apply for some funding streams, lead certain training, apply to sit on regional advisory boards, etc. Removing graded judgements would recognise that all schools and colleges have something to offer the wider system, and get rid of these artificial barriers to them doing so.

3 | New Ofsted 'standards'

To this end, we propose that, rather than graded criteria, Ofsted should publish a set of holistic standards for each area of the framework. Inspection reporting would then focus on the extent to which schools and colleges are working towards those standards, though not in such a way that encourages a tick-box approach to inspections.

The standards should be set in consultation with an independent working group and reviewed on a semi-regular basis. Overall oversight would sit with parliament, not government.

These standards should be published. How these standards are inspected should be made fully transparent, including through the publication of Ofsted inspector training materials and recordings.

The way in which these standards would sit alongside, or potentially mirror, the academy standards currently being created as part of the DfE's regulatory and commissioning review would need to be carefully considered.

4 | A new accountability dashboard

In ASCL's *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System* we call for the introduction of an 'accountability dashboard' or 'balanced scorecard' as the key accountability mechanism for all schools or groups of schools. This should include some nationally determined measures, based on the core curriculum, but also other measures that are nationally or locally considered important. Measures could include information on pupil outcomes (e.g. progress measures, destination data), on curriculum provision (e.g. subjects available, time allocations for different subjects), on staff development (e.g. teacher retention, time allocation for professional development), on inclusion (e.g. attendance rates, exclusion rates), and on the school or college's impact on and engagement with the broader education landscape.

Evaluation of a school or college's performance against the measures in this dashboard should form the core of the inspection process. This would replace the IDSR, ASP and school performance website, and be the sole dashboard for accountability. However, as now, this information should form the basis of a conversation and not pre-determine an inspection outcome.

5 | Serious concerns

We recognise that in some cases inspectors may come across major safeguarding risks, breakdowns in leadership and management, or an unacceptable quality of education. In such cases, it is right that Ofsted highlights these and that immediate action is taken.

Where this occurs, Ofsted should notify DfE regional directors immediately about their concerns.

Regional directors should provide appropriate support for the school or college on a case-by-case basis. This may include re-brokering a school into a different trust, but this should not be an automatic outcome. In some cases, for example where a trust has just taken over a school at the time of inspection, it may be counterintuitive to re-broker it.

6 | Commissioning of support

There needs to be a much tighter and clearer commissioning process to ensure schools receive support when they need it.

Currently, if a school is judged less than good then it does not always receive the support it needs.

Ofsted should work more closely with regional DfE teams to match the weaknesses identified during inspection with the support the school will receive. This should be a clear process, involving all stakeholders at all stages.

7 | Reporting an inspection outcome

While, as we make clear above, ASCL welcomed the EIF in 2019, the way in which inspection reports are written is too often reductionist and over-simplified.

The language and detail of reports should be improved to better reflect a school or college's culture and ethos, and to provide more useful feedback to leaders, governors and trustees. While this might mean greater subjectivity in some ways, the lack of graded judgements would mitigate any negative impact of this.

There should be a clearer process for challenging an inspection report. Where a school, college, trust, local authority or diocese disagrees with an inspection outcome, there should be a better process by which more evidence can be gathered.

8 | Inspecting different phases

ASCL believes that, within a common set of core standards, there should be separate handbooks for early years, primary, secondary, sixth form, FE, and special providers. The current EIF does not work equally well for all schools (especially small primary schools – as reflected in inspection outcomes since 2019).

In addition, we suggest that the lead inspector should have relevant leadership experience of the phase of the setting being inspected. Despite the high quality of many HMI and OIs, and the training they receive, we believe it is inappropriate, for example, for a post-16 specialist to lead an early years inspection – and vice versa.

9 | Inspecting safeguarding

As above, we believe that the future of inspection should continue to focus on the curriculum and on other measures in our proposed 'accountability dashboard'.

Safeguarding is also too important to be left for independent scrutiny every four years, or more in some cases.

We therefore advocate the introduction of a light-touch annual audit, that will flag any changes schools and colleges need to make to their processes and systems.

Ofsted should still consider safeguarding in its narrative on leadership and management, and raise any concerns, but in most cases these should have been picked up by the annual audit.

10 | Inspection of trusts

ASCL supports an ambition for all schools and colleges to be part of strong, sustainable groups.

We also believe that, as we move towards that model, Ofsted (or any future inspectorate) should have a formal role in inspecting school trusts and groups.

The challenge will be to retain the importance of individual school or college inspection (which we recognise that parents value) while reflecting through inspection where decisions are made. This must be done in a way which does not create additional workload or burdens on schools and colleges. It is also important, as indicated in point 8 above, that lead inspectors have relevant leadership experience of the setting being inspected. We would suggest that this principle should also be extended to trust inspection: that the lead inspector of any trust inspection should themselves have experience of having led a trust.

An approach based on the above principles will take time to get right, not least because the trust system remains in its infancy. We therefore propose that the DfE funds Ofsted to pilot trust inspections, with a view to balancing the need for local accountability with trust accountability, and to ensuring there is sufficient experience and capacity in the system for trust inspections to be led by inspectors with experience of leading trusts. This pilot should consider whether a single set of standards can work equally well for trusts of varying sizes. ASCL would be pleased to work with Ofsted on a pilot framework.

SECTION 5

Summary of recommendations

Immediate proposals:

1. Remove overall graded judgements.
2. Tell schools and colleges in which academic year they will be inspected, and review the inspection cycle timeframe.
3. Publish Ofsted inspector training and associated training materials.
4. Undertake an internal review of how pupil voice is used during inspection.
5. Update the inspection handbook and reporting to better reflect the role of trusts in school effectiveness.

Future proposals:

1. Continue to focus in future frameworks on the quality of education, with the national curriculum as the only document which sets out the government's curriculum requirements or expectations.
2. Remove all graded judgements.
3. Publish new Ofsted 'standards' rather than graded criteria.
4. Introduce a new 'accountability dashboard' or 'balanced scorecard', which should form the core of the inspection process and be the sole dashboard for accountability.
5. Require inspectors to notify DfE regional directors immediately if they come across major safeguarding risks, breakdowns in leadership and management, or an unacceptable quality of education, so that the regional directors can respond quickly and appropriately.
6. Introduce tighter and more transparent commissioning of support for schools or colleges which need it.
7. Produce more nuanced inspection reports, which better reflect a school or college's ethos and culture.
8. Produce separate handbooks, frameworks and standards for different phases, and require lead inspectors to have relevant leadership experience of the phase they are inspecting.
9. Introduce an annual audit to ensure safeguarding is effective and that all processes are up to date, or can be easily rectified.
10. Enable Ofsted to formally inspect trusts and groups of schools, with approaches to inspection of trusts thoroughly piloted ahead of implementation.



SECTION 6

Conclusion

We hope this policy paper is a useful contribution to the ongoing debate around inspection and accountability.

ASCL welcomes the views of school and college leaders, policymakers, the inspectorate and other stakeholders on these proposals.

We would be delighted to work with government and the inspectorate on implementing these proposals.

To share your views on this paper, or offer an alternative perspective on inspection, please email future@ascl.org.uk We look forward to hearing from you.

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The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a leading professional body and trade union representing more than 25,000 members across the UK. Our members include trust leaders, headteachers, principals, vice-principals, deputy and assistant headteachers, and business leaders, of state-funded and independent schools and colleges. They are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90% of secondary schools and colleges, and in an increasing number of primary schools. We provide high-quality advice and support to our members, deliver first-class professional development, and we work to influence national education policy on behalf of children and young people.

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