

Improving Ofsted inspections

Results of a survey conducted by the Association of School and College Leaders

The survey was conducted in February 2020 by sending a survey link via email to about 11,000 leaders in state-funded schools and colleges in England. The number of responses was 793, with the majority from leaders in mainstream state-funded secondary and all-through schools (87%). The remainder came from a mix of providers including primary schools, special schools, and colleges. Forty nine per cent of respondents were headteachers/ principals, 12% executive heads/ CEOs; 21% deputy heads/ deputy principals; and 18% assistant heads/ assistant principals, and other senior post holders. All respondents verified that they worked in a school or college subject to Ofsted inspections.

Satisfaction with Ofsted inspections

We asked:

Are you satisfied that the current inspection system consistently, fairly and accurately judges the performance of schools and colleges?

All respondents

Yes	11.48%	91
No	88.52%	702
TOTAL		793

We were interested in seeing how this question was answered by respondents whose school or college has been inspected under Ofsted's new Education Inspection Framework introduced in September 2019. The framework focuses more on the quality of the curriculum and less on data generated from exam and test results. Although satisfaction with the inspection system was still predominately negative, the proportion of positive responses was higher than it was for all respondents. The response from the 170 respondents in this subset was:

Respondents whose schools/ colleges have been inspected under the new framework

Yes	21.18%	36
No	78.82%	134
TOTAL		170

We asked all respondents to give reasons for their responses.

Those who answered yes to this question (i.e. Are you satisfied that the current inspection system consistently, fairly and accurately judges the performance of schools and colleges?) generally referenced the new framework as the reason for their answer. Several were pleased that there was less emphasis on data and more on the overall quality of education through the focus on curriculum and teaching. Respondents felt it was clearer and fairer.

Some respondents said that inspectors were well trained, well informed and willing to listen, and more consistent.

Comments included:

- Current inspection framework is based on secure research, and emphasis on curriculum and systems is welcomed.
- Greater focus on quality of curriculum and the development of the child as a whole. No data-driven nonsense.
- The focus on curriculum rather than attainment or even progress scores is a more suitable measure of what students are learning and their overall experience in school.
- I have been headteacher for two inspections and involved as a senior leader for three others. In each case I have agreed with the findings - even when they were not great!

Among those who answered 'no' to this question, the most commonly cited reason – by far – was the view that inspections were inconsistent. Respondents felt that the inspection framework could be interpreted in different ways depending on the inspectors, and that judgements were subjective and erratic. There were specific concerns that inspections under the new framework continued to be driven by exam data in apparent contradiction to the stated aim to focus on the overall quality of education. Some respondents also expressed the view that inspectors favoured a specific curriculum structure, i.e. a two-year rather than three-year Key Stage 4, despite the fact that many schools run an effective three-year Key Stage 4.

Several respondents also said that inspections did not sufficiently take into account the context of schools in areas of economic and social deprivation, and with highly inclusive intakes. They pointed to the impact of damaging judgements. Others cast doubt on whether it was possible to gain an accurate picture of a school during an inspection visit and called for a more supportive approach.

Comments included:

- Too much not taken into account, i.e. areas of economic and social deprivation ranked in the same way schools in leafy suburbs are.
- Inspections should be more developmental and less judgemental. Subjective judgements are not always a true reflection and can damage a school's reputation giving them less chance to develop in future.
- New framework provides a much better basis for inspections but there is still a lottery in terms of which inspector you get. Messages from Ofsted leadership and HMIs are clear but inconsistency is still a major issue.
- It appears to be heavily weighted towards schools with a preferred curriculum structure and model. For example, schools running a three-year Key Stage 4 seem to be disadvantaged – a shame as these are often schools with disadvantaged cohorts themselves.
- The system is weighted against schools that serve disadvantaged students. Ofsted inspection is a blunt tool that lacks precision and sophistication.
- We were inspected in January 2020. Despite a very clear context, and a well-supported improvement journey from perspective of our LA the school was placed in special

measures. This was entirely unwarranted and unfair, and the report reads like a standard template rather than any reflection of our school. It has been a devastating blow to a school that has been on an upward journey.

- A two-day inspection cannot possibly provide an accurate and reliable picture of a school to give it a judgement. It can provide some thoughts and ideas on where a school can make improvements, but not a judgement.
- Am the principal of a school that has recently been inspected under the new framework. There is too little time to look at any depth into the school and its operation. As a result, judgements are made on very little data and sometimes from random comments from either parents or students without any recourse to defend. Our inspection grade showed an improvement.
- I personally believe that the 'judgements' should be removed and we should be told positive areas and areas for improvement.

The new inspection framework

We asked:

Do you think that the new inspection framework with its emphasis on quality of curriculum is an improvement on previous frameworks?

All respondents

Yes	75.54%	599
No	24.46%	194
TOTAL		793

Once again, we were interested to see how the 170 respondents in schools and colleges inspected under the new framework answered this question. The results were very similar, with, in fact, a slightly higher proportion of respondents giving a favourable response in this subset.

Respondents whose schools/ colleges have been inspected under the new framework

Yes	77.06%	131
No	22.94%	39
TOTAL		170

We asked all respondents to give their reasons for their answers.

Those answering 'yes' to the question (i.e. Do you think that the new inspection framework with its emphasis on quality of curriculum is an improvement on previous frameworks?) were positive about the shift away from reliance on data generated by exams and tests, and felt that the emphasis on the quality of the curriculum gave a more complete picture of school performance. Several commented that this approach brought back a focus on pedagogy and what is taught in the classroom.

However, there were some reservations, most commonly over the perception that Ofsted favoured a specific curriculum model of a two-year Key Stage 4. Other concerns included that the stakes of inspections remained too high, and over the stress placed on middle leaders by the way in which inspectors conduct so-called 'deep dives' into curriculum planning in subject areas.

Comments included:

- This allows schools to demonstrate that they have considered and created a journey of learning rather than the outcome of learning. Not every student can access the grades available at the end of secondary school but can still have an amazing journey, particularly students with SEND or other external difficulties such as family circumstances.
- A sound curriculum is the basis of a good school, get that right and outcomes will follow but can take time.
- More emphasis placed on experience of students in classroom as an end in itself rather than only as a means to the end of results.
- I welcome the nudge for schools to focus on curriculum design and content which I think has taken a back seat in recent years with the drive for progress/attainment taking precedence. It presents an opportunity for us as a profession to take better control of our curriculum content proactively, rather than the impact of the turbulent, multiple changes in recent years that have been imposed on us by changing exam board specifications being what drives our curriculum change in schools.
- Despite the subjectivity, despite the flaws, it remains a better framework because it is looking more at the substance of education and trying to look beyond headline data.
- A move away from outcomes being the main measure of accountability is welcome. However, any structure that derives a grade from subjective assessment leaves itself open to question and requires greater scrutiny.
- I think the focus on the curriculum is a change for the better and the intent is clearer. However, I believe Ofsted's implementation lacks consistency.
- It moves away from schools as exam factories. However, with DfE [Department for Education] accountabilities, I feel that in many ways Ofsted and DfE are pulling in different directions.

Those answering 'no' to this question felt, variously, that the new approach did not do enough to take into account the context of the school; that it merely swapped one idea of what was best for pupils (outcomes) with a different idea (curriculum); that it put staff under significant additional pressure; and that judging what makes a high-quality curriculum was too subjective. There were also several mentions, again, of the issue of the length of Key Stage 4, with respondents saying they felt Ofsted had put too much emphasis on a two-year model.

- It continues to be far too draconian and has simply shifted the emphasis from one area to another; further to this it has created significant amounts of additional work and stress due to everyone having to 'prepare' for a new set of hoops to jump through.
- I did think it was until I was inspected this week. I now feel that this is just extra workload for staff, as they had rigorous scrutiny of the new implementation plans only to find it made absolutely no difference and it still all came down to last summer's data anyway.
- While I believe the direction is positive, the draconian interpretation of 'curriculum' and the clear (although denied) expectation that schools will follow a preferred model/structure is unreasonable and fails to take context into consideration.

- I do not believe that Ofsted is the correct body to determine what constitutes a good curriculum and have no confidence that this can be done in a day and a half.
- Not really a no – more a maybe. We fit a curriculum to a child not the other way round so potentially we have 150+ curricula operating in our setting.
- Whichever framework you use, the fact that the inspection regime is too punitive and judgemental rather than supportive and developmental means that it will continue to be a barrier to school improvement rather than a conduit for it.
- It may be well intentioned, but it leaves far too much to the subjective judgements of individual inspectors. Placing a little less emphasis on data is reasonable, but subjective judgements about quality of curriculum ought not to be over-riding evidence that outcomes are very strong.

Key Stage 4

As answers to previous questions have indicated, the issue of the length of key stage 4 is highly charged. Many schools run a three-year Key Stage 4 – during which pupils study GCSE options –rather than the more traditional model of a two-year Key Stage 4. This means that Key Stage 3 is shorter in these schools. In its inspection handbook, Ofsted says:

“Inspectors will be particularly alert to signs of narrowing in the Key Stage 2 and 3 curriculums. If a school has shortened Key Stage 3, inspectors will look to see that the school has made provision to ensure that pupils still have the opportunity to study a broad range of subjects, commensurate with the national curriculum, in Years 7 to 9.”

Ofsted insists this is a starting point for a conversation, but many school leaders believe the inspectorate favours a model in which Key Stage 3 is run over three years, and Key Stage 4 over two. They are concerned that schools which run a three-year Key Stage 4 will be downgraded, even though this model has worked successfully in their school and in the best interests of their students.

Forty six per cent of respondents (363) indicated that they worked in schools which ran a three-year Key Stage 4. We asked them whether they were considering switching to a two-year Key Stage 4 as a result of the new inspection framework.

Yes	124
No	159
Under consideration but not decided	72
Don't know	8
TOTAL	363

We asked respondents to give their reasons for their response.

Those who answered ‘yes’ to this question (i.e. that they were considering switching to a two-year Key Stage 4) most commonly said that it was clearly expected by Ofsted and that they would be penalised if they did not do so. Several said it was just not worth the risk of an adverse judgement.

Those who answered ‘no’ said they still believed that a three-year Key Stage 4 was the best way of securing strong outcomes for their students, and that their students needed three years to fully absorb GCSE content and valued this approach. Several made the point that the model they operated was beneficial in the context of being in an area of high disadvantage with a large number of struggling learners. Respondents also said they

implemented it in such a way as to preserve curriculum breadth, for example, by running additional enrichment options. Some indicated that the programmes they operated were not strictly delineated as Key Stage 3 and 4 but reflected a more continuous or hybrid approach.

Graded judgements

We wanted to see how the inspection system might be improved. We asked respondents whether the existing system of graded judgements and descriptors used in Ofsted inspections (i.e. 1 outstanding, 2 good, 3 requires improvement, 4 inadequate) should be scrapped and replaced with narrative judgements; reformed in some other way; or retained in their current form.

Scrapped and replaced with narrative judgements	61.29%	486
Reformed in some other way	28.75%	228
Retained in their current form	9.96%	79
TOTAL		793

We asked respondents to give reasons for their answers

Scrapped and replaced with narrative judgements

Respondents said that the existing grades were too crude a way of capturing the strengths and weaknesses of a school, and damaged schools which received a 3 or 4. Several pointed out that negative grades made it harder to recruit staff and secure improvement, and that schools in deprived areas facing the greatest challenges were more likely to receive these grades. Others pointed out that many people didn't look beyond the grade at the top of an Ofsted report to read the details behind the judgement. They felt that narrative judgements would be more supportive, constructive and helpful.

Comments included:

- The four-point scale is too crude and too simplistic to adequately express the strengths and weaknesses of a school. It leads parents and the community to judge a school in overly simplistic ways.
- Getting 3 or 4 is devastating for a school and makes it ever harder for the school to return to good as it leads students and staff abandoning and parental rejection. The sad fact is this is most likely to happen to schools in disadvantaged areas so it widens existing social divides.
- It's not always black and white. Schools operate in many different contexts. Judgements should reflect this.
- Gradings do not accurately represent many schools and the good work they do, particularly those working in challenging circumstances/contexts.
- A single judgement is far too blunt an instrument to measure the quality of something as complex as a school. Fear of downgrading puts talented people off pursuing headship.
- A judgement of 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' makes the job of school improvement harder as it affects staff recruitment and retention, impacts on student numbers and therefore impacts upon the funding available.

Reformed in some other way

Some respondents felt that the rating of 'inadequate' was damaging to schools and should be removed, while others commented that the 'outstanding' rating was subjective, divisive and drove unnecessary stress and workload. A recurrent theme was the idea that there should be just two outcomes, either 'good' or 'not yet good' or similar wording, with a number saying that the latter should trigger support. A number of respondents saw this as being different from a graded judgement in the current sense, and more of a system for allocating support than a label.

Comments included:

- The idea that all of the schools in the country can be assigned one of four categories with any level of accuracy and consistency is fanciful. It should be possible to establish a system which records whether schools are either 'effective' or 'not effective' and this would help Ofsted and other agencies to focus on improving the less effective schools.
- I definitely think the inadequate judgement should be scrapped. This is so damaging to a school and does nothing to support school improvement.
- The outstanding/good boundary leads to unnecessary stress and workload for a largely illusory difference in quality of schooling.
- I think 'inadequate' has to remain as it's not acceptable for children to receive an inadequate education. Other graded judgements should be removed and replaced with a narrative judgement which takes into account the school's performance in a range of areas, e.g. safeguarding, progress, extra-curricular, wellbeing, workload, careers.

Retained in their current form

These respondents felt the current system of graded judgements should be retained because it was clear and universally understood. Others commented that they did not want to see more change in a sector which has already undergone substantial changes.

Comments included:

- Parents and the wider public need some way of easily differentiating between the quality of schools. A system of narrative judgements would be a weak decision. It would in essence make it more difficult for parents and others to quickly and clearly see a school's quality. What is vital is that judgements are based on sound criteria and consistently applied – neither of these things are happening at present.
- Whilst they may be rather crude and simplistic, the numerical grading system at least gives a broad sense of the effectiveness of a school. There is potentially far too much subjectivity in a narrative structure.

How else might inspections and the inspection system be improved?

Our final question provided respondents with the opportunity to provide further suggestions and was answered by 695 people.

A recurring theme was that inspections should take more account of the context of schools in areas of high disadvantage and the challenges they face. Several other respondents

favoured more frequent but lighter-touch inspections or monitoring visits, although others suggested that inspections should be longer to enable inspectors to gain a fuller understanding of the school. Others said they would like to see the involvement of more serving leaders on inspection teams or the replacement of Ofsted with a more collaborative peer review system. Other recurring comments were around ensuring that inspectors have varied experience and more training. Several respondents felt that inspections should be more supportive, discursive and less confrontational.

Comments included:

- Much more training for inspectors, serious and deep understanding of what makes good choices in different contexts rather than a simplification which is clearly leading to a 'preferred curriculum style'.
- I think more regular supportive monitoring visits not just relying on one visit every four years. The visits could ensure that schools move forward positively rather than being pressurised to perform for two days.
- I think school improvement would be better supported by a system that was "lighter touch" but more frequent. For example, a system where (school-size dependent), one inspector or two visited a school for just a day, but annually. This model might focus on different areas of the curriculum or personal development for different visits.
- Use far more peer inspection from within a sector, using practising senior leaders as part of every team.
- It has to primarily be about school improvement, and less about school judgement (and condemnation), e.g. schools that are not meeting a threshold get support and guidance and resources from Ofsted or HMI or similar and start a guided journey of school improvement. This is more likely to improve the system, than labelling schools, chopping off their legs and expecting them to run forward.
- In general, the stakes need lowering so that schools do not distort or contort themselves with anxiety or rushed new initiatives in anticipation of inspection. Good practice can be encouraged without the constant background apprehension – which can become debilitating when you are overdue for inspection by several months, as we are.
- Make it genuinely collaborative and use the school's self-evaluation as the basis to explore the school. Take the context of the school into account.
- Either put more money in and have higher quality inspections with feedback which helps schools focus on improvement or continue to reduce the funding and make them straightforward desktop driven with short sharp on the ground checks.
- Less big brother is watching you, more big brother wants to help you.

Conclusion

It is clear that the majority of respondents – about three-quarters – support the objectives of the new inspection framework introduced in September 2019 to focus more on the quality of the curriculum, and less on data derived from exam and test results. However, it is equally clear that the majority of respondents remain dissatisfied with the inspection system in general and feel that further improvement is needed.

It is also apparent that there is significant concern over Ofsted's perceived approach to the issue of the length of Key Stage 4 under the new inspection framework. In summary, there is a perception that Ofsted is favouring a two-year model, and in particular, that this approach fails to take into consideration the context of schools which face significant challenges, and whose pupils may need a longer GCSE programme to help them achieve the best possible results. Ofsted denies it is favouring a two-year model and insists that it is right to ask schools which shorten Key Stage 3 how they are preserving the curriculum entitlement of their pupils. However, it is unfortunate that this issue has, to a certain extent, overshadowed the implementation of the new framework, and Ofsted should consider how it will provide more clarity and assurance over this issue.

When we looked at how inspections might be improved, we found that the majority of respondents, just over 60%, favoured scrapping the current system of graded inspection judgements, and that nearly 30% felt they should be reformed in some other way. A key argument for reforming the system is that the current approach is crude and damaging. The application of labels does not capture the more complex picture of a school's strengths and weaknesses. In particular, schools in deprived areas of the country, which face the greatest challenges, are stigmatised by negative judgements, and then find it even more difficult to secure sustained improvement. The counter argument is that the current system is well understood by parents and other stakeholders. However, it must at the very least be worth considering alternative models which would be less damaging and more supportive to schools which face the greatest challenges.

Beyond the question of graded judgements, there are further recurring themes which are apparent in our survey in how Ofsted might improve inspections. In short, these are consistency, context and tone. Many respondents expressed the view that Ofsted inspections are inconsistent, that the context of a school or college is not sufficiently taken into account, and that the tone of inspections should be more supportive and less combative. The perception of Ofsted's new inspection framework does seem to be largely positive, notwithstanding the issue over Key Stage 4, but if the inspectorate is to improve inspections further it must clearly do more to give school and college leaders a greater sense of assurance in these key areas. This is certainly about improving fairness but it is also, crucially, about the need for an inspection system in which there is less collateral damage to schools which most need support.

Richard Bettsworth
Director of Public Affairs
Association of School and College Leaders

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