

The Future of Inspection

Introduction and background

In 2019 Ofsted introduced a new Education Inspection Framework (EIF), with a greater focus on the curriculum. This is reflected in the Quality of Education judgement. Between February 2020 and September 2021, there were no inspections because of the pandemic. Inspections restarted in summer 2021, with an accelerated timeline which would mean all schools and colleges receiving an inspection by summer 2025. Since 2019, Ofsted has also 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.

Currently, the process of appointing a new HMCI is currently underway, and recently the government's white paper *Opportunity for All* proposed substantial changes to the school system, which would have implications for both inspection and regulation. There is therefore a window of opportunity during which future changes to inspection can be considered.

This paper from the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is intended to support discussion about the future of inspection. It is drawn from the views of the ASCL Council – ASCL's policymaking body. However, the ASCL is keen to point out that the views expressed in this discussion do not yet represent formal policy.

Key points

Principles of future inspection

- The proposals in this paper are underpinned by 5 key principles. 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.

Suggestions for immediate improvements

- ASCL strongly advocates the immediate removal of overall graded judgements under the current EIF. There is precedence for this: Ofsted operates in the Bailiwick of Guernsey, where it uses the EIF but does not give an overall grade.
- School and college leaders have reported to ASCL 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.
- ASCL believes 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 significantly reduce the current burden on school and college leaders who currently feel that they are

constantly 'in the window' for inspection. ASCL does not believe that this would reduce the efficacy of inspection. It would be wrong and insulting to suggest that school improvement would not continue in years where schools knew they were not going to be inspected.

- Ofsted should also undertake a review into the cycle of inspections and consider how frequently it is appropriate to inspect schools and colleges. In circumstances where urgent inspections (previously known as NFD inspections) are triggered, these should continue.
- 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. ASCL does not believe it is right to hold schools and colleges accountable against a 'meta' or unpublished framework, which these aide-memoires can be considered to be.
- 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 immediately, along with recordings of the OI training from which they were distilled.
- Publishing recordings of HMI and OI training would help to dispel myths about what Ofsted wants, and reduce the unhelpful cottage industry which has grown up around preparing for inspection.



- The ASCL does not dispute the importance of pupil voice. 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 therefore undertake an internal review into how pupil voice is used during inspection, and how claims are triangulated. Findings should be presented as an update in the Inspection Handbook.
- in the short term, we think that current Ofsted reports should better reflect the impact a trust has on school improvement in academies.

Proposals for the future of inspection

- The report outlines several areas to which Ofsted should give consideration in the longer term.
- 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.
- As stated above, the ASCL believes that graded judgements should be removed. They could be replaced by a narrative description of the school or college's strengths and weaknesses in each area. This would give parents and other stakeholders a more nuanced understanding of the school or college's effectiveness. 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. 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.
- Following on from the above proposal, Ofsted should publish a set of holistic standards for each area of the framework upon which inspection reporting would focus.
- In an earlier report, [Blueprint for a Fairer Education System](#), the ASCL proposed the introduction of an 'accountability dashboard' or 'balanced scorecard' as the key accountability mechanism for all schools or groups of schools. This would include some nationally determined measures, based on the curriculum, but also others which are considered important. These may 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. The accountability dashboard would then form the core of the inspection process, replacing the IDSR, the ASP and the school performance website. As of now, the dashboard would only be the start of a conversation – it should not pre-determine an inspection outcome.
- 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.
- Ofsted needs to improve the language and detail of reports to better reflect a school or college's culture and ethos, and to provide more useful feedback to leaders, governors, and trustees. Although this may mean more subjectivity, any potential negative impact would be mitigated by the removal of grades.
- 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.
- The current EIF does not work equally well for all schools (especially small primary schools – as evidenced in inspection outcomes since 2019). ASCL argues for separate handbooks for different phases, albeit within a core set of standards. It also proposes that the lead inspector should have relevant leadership experience of the phase of the setting being inspected. ASCL believe it is inappropriate, for example, for a post-16 specialist to lead an early years inspection – and vice versa.
- ASCL proposes that Ofsted inspections should not inspect safeguarding, health and safety, or financial and risk management. Instead, schools and colleges should have annual light-touch safeguarding and health and safety audits, apart from the inspection cycle. This would both better protect children and young people and allow Ofsted inspections to focus on the substance of education. If Ofsted had concerns over safeguarding or pupils' safety, they could refer these to the relevant body.
- ASCL argues that Ofsted should have a formal role in inspecting school trusts and groups, particularly in the light of the government's ambition for all schools to be in a strong trust. Inspection should both enable stakeholders to glean key information about an individual school or college, and also to see where key decisions are made. The above mentioned principle that lead inspectors have relevant leadership experience of the setting being inspected should extend to trust inspection. The lead inspector of any trust inspection should themselves have experience of having led a trust.
- ASCL recognises that such a system will take time to embed. It therefore proposes DfE funding for Ofsted to thoroughly pilot trust inspections, with a view to balancing the need for local accountability with trust accountability and ensuring there is sufficient capacity in the system for trust inspections to be led by inspectors with experience of leading trusts.

The full documents can be downloaded from:

[The-future-of-inspection-an-ASCL-discussion-paper.pdf](#)