

What Heads Really Think About Ofsted: Urgent improvement needed



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Introduction

How is the new Ofsted framework working out in schools? Is it an improvement on the previous one? Are the strong criticisms that led to the new inspection framework improving the inspection experience for those being inspected?

We simply don't know as yet. Ofsted is commissioning research into its own processes and their impact — but on its own terms, controlling the questions asked and deciding which findings to make public. The results won't be published until 2027.

In her learning review following the death of Ruth Perry, Dame Christine Gilbert strongly recommended that rather than being managed by Ofsted itself, the administration of post-inspection school surveys should be commissioned from, and published by, a third-party independent organisation. Ofsted acknowledged the spirit of the recommendation but wanted 'to spend longer considering how to respond to it, including reviewing the budgetary implications'. So far it has not taken up that recommendation. We, however, have acted upon it by launching this independent enquiry.

As academics and former senior HMI we have joined forces to send post-inspection questionnaires to all leaders of schools, colleges and settings which have recently had their Ofsted reports.

The aim was to capture Heads' perceptions of the process and impact of the inspection on their institutions. The first section of the questionnaire, which is described in the Appendix, was a series of statements with Likert-type responses and the second asked for open-ended commentaries. The first gave leaders the opportunity to respond on a range of key issues, such as whether they felt that the inspection was fair, whether the advice they were given was valuable, and how their wellbeing was affected by the inspection. The second gave them the chance to share more detailed, personal reflections on the inspection process while it was still fresh in their minds.

This report, the first of its kind, provides an independent analysis of the responses received from the first hundred school leaders following their inspection under the new framework.

All comments and responses have been anonymised. Because our research is fully independent these are likely to be more genuine and forthright than any responses made to Ofsted's own post-inspection research. It will be very salutary for Ofsted in particular, to compare the responses from our independent findings to those "official" ones it eventually decides to publish.

Our report makes for challenging reading and provides an evidenced case for immediate, radical action by the inspectorate.

Executive Summary

We have received more than 100 responses from Heads with the vast majority offering negative comments about their inspection. These included:

“I’m determined to retire before the next inspection.”

“It’s the rigid, new system that’s the problem.”

Of the Heads in the survey:

- Nearly 70% of heads expressed negative views of the impact of inspection on their wellbeing.
- Two-thirds did not see the new framework as an improvement on the previous one.
- Only half thought that “The ratings given in the report were fair”.
- Less than half found the advice they received valuable.
- Just 42% agreed that the inspection process was supportive.
- 82% disagreed that “I spent just a little time preparing for the inspection”.
- Only 30% agreed that the inspection had positively impacted their institution.
- Just a quarter thought that their career had been positively impacted.

Heads comments on the new framework were overwhelmingly negative. The language used to describe inspections – *“harsh”, “brutal”* and *“relentless and gruelling”* - reflected the strength of their feelings. There was also a widespread perception that *“conclusions were formed early and evidence was then used selectively to support those conclusions.”* Heads also complained that the final report didn’t adequately reflect discussions with inspectors. Ofsted’s advice that no preparation is necessary was seen as *“a nonsense”*.

At least a quarter of the Heads commented that the context of their school hadn’t been sufficiently taken into account, with many serving the poorest communities feeling undervalued and professionally isolated. High levels of stress both on Heads and senior teams were reported. Many thought that inspectors had insufficient time to make fair judgements and three primary Heads objected to their primary school being evaluated by inspectors with no experience of that phase.

There were strong criticisms of the Toolkit and the implementation of the ‘secure fit’ approach. Heads, particularly those serving some of the most disadvantaged communities, felt that this approach left inspectors with little flexibility to take account of the particular circumstances of the school. They were highly critical of the combining

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of attendance and behaviour into a single grade and that the achievement judgement was in fact an attainment grade.

There were, however, positive comments about inspections and inspectors from 14 Heads out of 100, including *“The inspection team were very fair, understanding, and conducted the inspection sensitively.”*

The quantitative and qualitative data from this survey combine to show that urgent action is needed in the following areas;

1. The wellbeing of Heads and their staff remains at risk and requires urgent attention
2. The inspection framework is deficient in a number of respects and is not considered an improvement on its criticised predecessor
3. A fully independent complaints system needs to be introduced as a matter of urgency
4. The quality of inspection is not always good enough
5. The quality of advice offered is too variable
6. Independent evidence is required on the impact of the framework

We note Ofsted’s recent announcement about changes to inspection arrangements later in 2026 and **intend to publish a further independent report to ascertain any progress** in the implementation and impact of the framework on schools and their staff as informed by those who have been inspected, the Heads.

The new framework is not delivering what was promised. A fundamentally different system is now required.

Thanks

Many thanks to the hardworking Heads, principals and senior leaders who took the time to complete the questionnaires that form the basis of this report. We also express our gratitude to those who kindly contributed to the Crowdfunding appeal which helped start the survey on which this report is based.

Part A: The Ratings Given By Heads

We asked Heads to rate their experiences against ten statements about their recent Ofsted inspection. The full results are shown in the Appendix, along with an analysis of how representative our sample is.

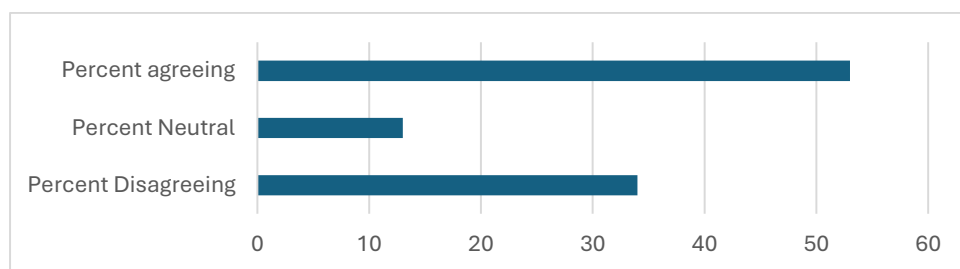
Overall, the sample reflects the types of institutions that have received inspection reports under the new framework up to the end of May 2026. We checked this against their deprivation index, the primary/secondary divide, their average Ofsted grades and whether they were Trust or Local Authority (LA) schools. We found that when we sent letters as opposed to emails we got a higher response rate and there was a noticeable difference in response rates between Trust schools and LA schools, with the latter four times more likely to respond.

We cannot be certain why Trust/LA differences exist, although it seems likely that the greater complexity of organisational structure in Trusts may be responsible. Whatever the reason it is important to keep it in mind when interpreting the findings, particularly if we see contrasting response patterns between the two groups.

Questionnaire responses one by one

The respondents could choose one of 5 options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly Agree for each statement. For presentation purposes we show the percentage on three categories; Disagreeing, Neutral and Agreeing, although the statistical analysis behind the text used the full scale.

Statement 1: The ratings given in the report were fair



Just over half of respondents felt that their Ofsted ratings were fair **but a significant number highlighted a sense of unfairness in a number of the judgements.**

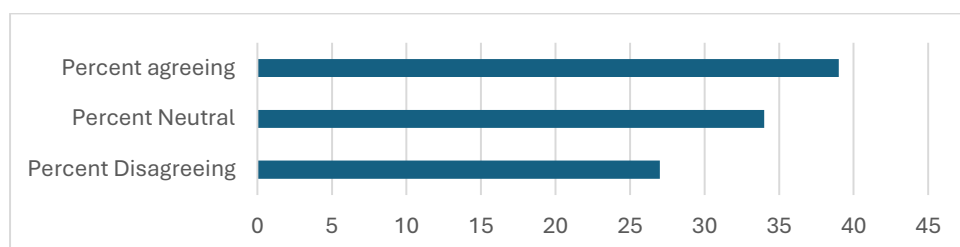
Interestingly, this view did **not** depend on the ratings they received. It was also consistent across primary and secondary schools, Trusts and LAs, schools with different proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals and whether the questionnaire was delivered by email or letter.

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One important point, raised by a Head, is that the word “fair” can be interpreted in two different ways. It might mean that the rating was a fair reflection of the school itself. Alternatively, it could mean that the rating was fair given the rules and guidance inspectors were required to follow. These two interpretations do not always align. When considering the responses, we should also remember that inspectors did not have access to some key quantitative data - such as prior attainment - because of changes to primary baseline assessment arrangements and Key Stage 2 results being unavailable due to COVID.

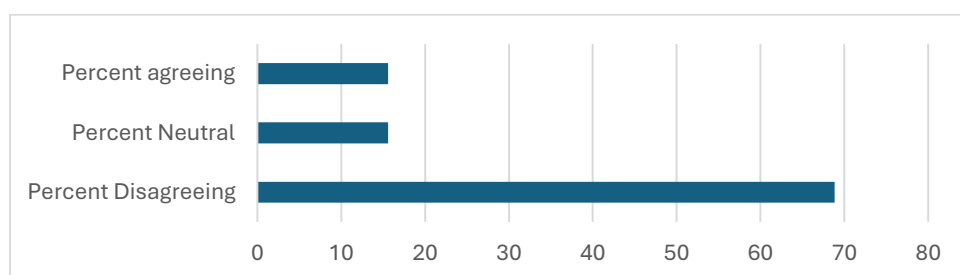
With around a third of Heads believing their ratings were not fair it raises serious questions about what options or routes for redress are realistically available to them. Those that pursued a complaint found the process confusing and some felt it wasn't worth the effort as they wanted to just move on.

Statement 2: The advice given by the inspectors was valuable



We know that the advice given by inspectors is seen by Ofsted as a key mechanism for the improvement of education. In the Heads' responses **only about 40% said they thought the advice was valuable; a low figure** which was unrelated to any of the factors that we have available to us. A number of Heads felt that the advice they were receiving from some inspectors was impaired by their little understanding of the phase of education they were inspecting.

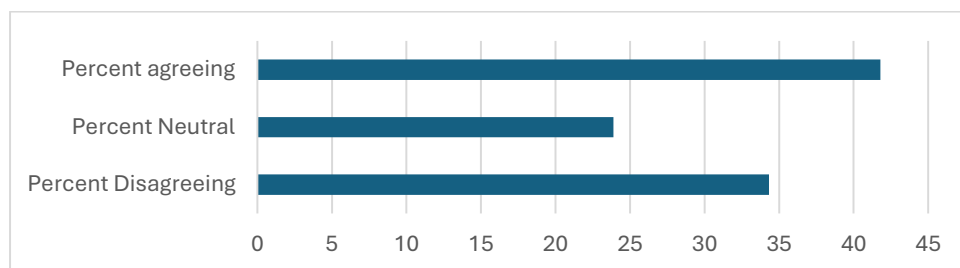
Statement 3: The inspection improved my well-being



Nearly 70% of heads expressed negative views of the impact of inspection on their well being. This is deeply worrying bearing in mind the origins of the new Framework arose because of a Coroner's Report critical of Ofsted following a Head teacher taking her own life after an inspection in 2023. This important issue is picked up in the next the section on Comments by Heads.

As before these ratings were not linked to any other specific factors.

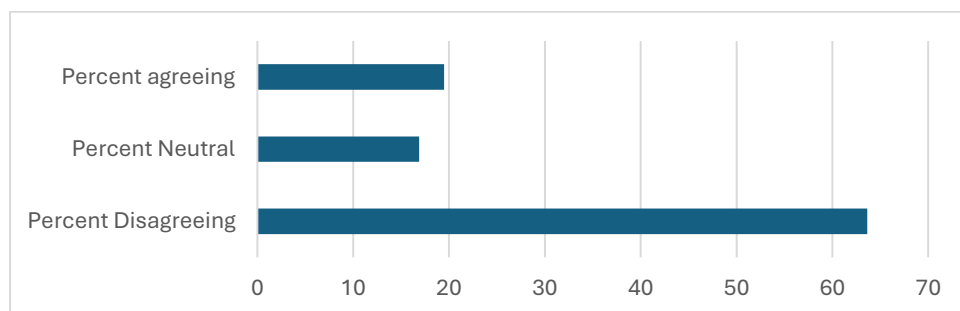
Statement 4: The inspection process was supportive



The statement aimed at assessing the extent to which inspections felt more supportive under this new framework. Whilst we don't have before and after data and whilst there is plenty of qualitative evidence that Heads were repeatedly asked "Are you feeling alright?", **a full third felt that the process was not supportive.** It is clear that some senior leaders found the constant asking by inspectors whether they were alright was performative and lacked sincerity in some cases.

These ratings were not linked to any other specific factors.

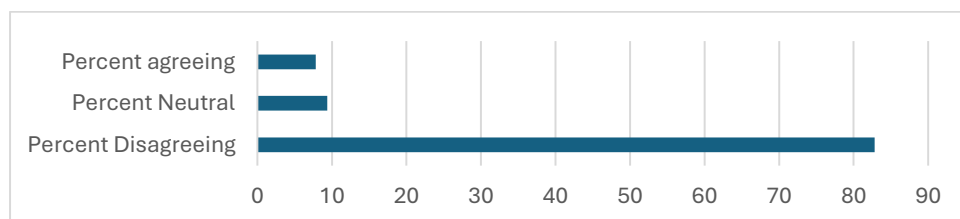
Statement 5: The new inspection framework is an improvement



These responses are clear: **overwhelmingly Heads did not think the new framework was an improvement.** Only one in five respondents thought that it was. This is such an important point that a whole section in the following chapter is devoted to this issue.

As before these ratings were not linked to any other specific factors.

Statement 6: I spent just a little time preparing for the inspection



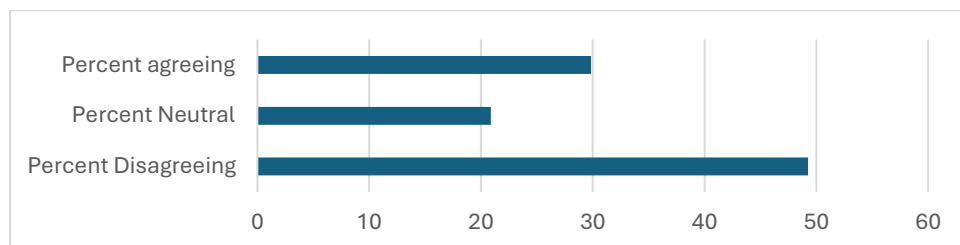
The responses to the statement were the most decisive of any of the 10 statements. **Heads clearly spent considerable time on preparation** and many made clear that this spilled over to other senior leaders and the entire staff, including non-teaching colleagues. Some Heads felt that the inspection outcomes carried significant weight in

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the accountability framework and it was naïve of Ofsted to suggest that no preparation was realistic. We did not ask “how much time?”, but it is a relevant question and is picked up at the end of this report

These rating were not linked to any other specific factors.

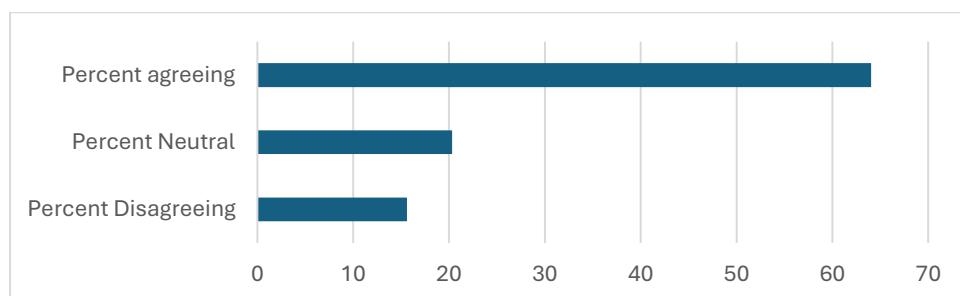
Statement 7: The inspection has had a positive impact on the institution



This is a very broad and vital statement and unlike most of the other sets of responses did vary by Ofsted rating – those with higher ratings were more significantly inclined to say that the inspection had a positive impact. Those who agreed with the statement were given at least an average of “Expected standard”.

Overall, **about a third felt that the inspection had a positive impact but half said that it did not.** One would expect that inspection would be seen as having a positive impact, especially if the institution was judged as requiring further support. However, this did not hold in the opinions of Heads especially those with less positive grades.

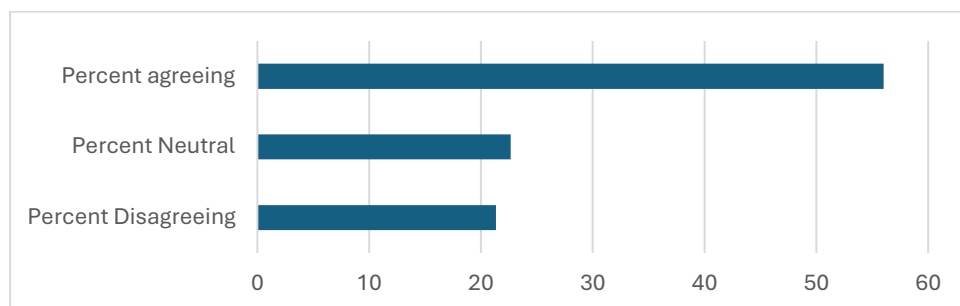
Statement 8 My Trust/Local Authority were very helpful in helping us prepare for the inspection



A clear majority of schools (two thirds) were helped by their LA and/or Trust. This links back to the issue of time spent on preparation for inspection and how much is being devoted to this.

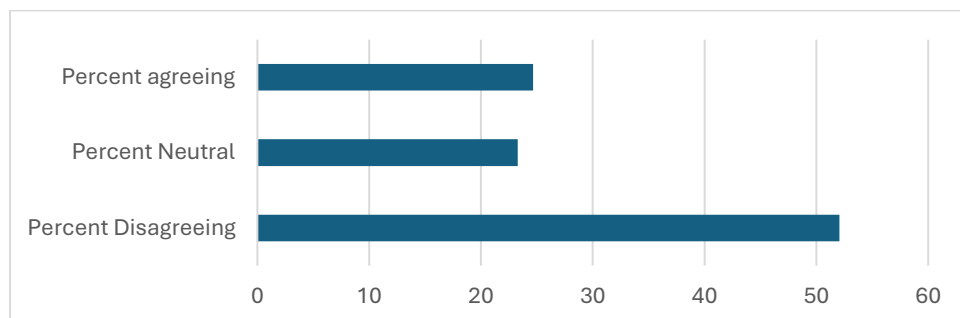
These rating were not linked to any other specific factors.

Statement 9: We effectively challenged Ofsted during the inspection



Although almost **two thirds of respondents said they had successfully challenged Ofsted** during their inspection, this significantly correlated with the Ofsted ratings they received. Schools with higher grades were more likely to report that their challenge had been successful. This may simply reflect the fact that stronger schools are better placed to challenge inspectors. However, it could also suggest that some schools were disadvantaged by the particular inspection team they encountered or did not have access to the informal channels into Ofsted that appear to be available to some trust and school leaders. It also suggests that there may be a lack of consistency in the way Ofsted manages challenges and complaints. Again, these issues are picked up later.

Statement 10: My career has been positively impacted by the inspection



The reason for this question is that the retention of Heads is important, as is their recruitment. The Heads had much to say on this issue as noted in the next section.

Against expectations perhaps, the responses were not linked to the Ofsted grades nor to other factors and **only a quarter agreed that the inspection had a positive impact on their career.**

Some had a good Ofsted

After reviewing the responses to each individual question, it was helpful to look specifically at the statements that related directly to Ofsted's work. This excluded issues concerning preparation time and support from Trusts or LAs. Eight statements remained, and we calculated the overall average responses for these.

Most responses fell between *strongly disagree* and *neutral* on the scale i.e. on the negative side. However, there was notable variation: around 11.9% of respondents

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averaged *agree* or above across all eight statements, while 27.7% averaged *disagree* or lower. This suggests that while **some leaders experienced a positive Ofsted inspection**—as we would hope to be the norm— **more than double that number had significantly less favourable experiences**. This contrast is explored further in the next section.

Part B: The Heads' Comments

This section summarises, analyses and then adds a brief commentary on the responses we received from Heads, which they made after completing the quantitative rankings that are analysed above. In total we received 58 responses which varied in length from a couple of sentences to more than four pages. On a few occasions respondents wanted to discuss their comments over the phone and this led to a deeper understanding of what they had written. Again, some began an exchange of emails with us which extended our grasp of their concerns.

After immersion in the detail of the responses the main themes became clear because they kept cropping up in submission after submission. Wherever possible, the original words of our respondents are used, which helps to enliven and ground this analysis in the experiences of our participants. It needs stressing that care has been taken throughout to anonymise all those who wrote to, or spoke with us, to ensure that they are not identifiable. This has led at times to some important criticisms being omitted. Computer-generated names have replaced the original names.

The order in which the main themes are presented is a reflection of the frequency with which each is referred to, with those mentioned most often coming first. After the themes have been explored, some final comments are made to emphasise the most significant issues to emerge from this analysis.

This analysis took place on two separate occasions. The first set of replies were analysed at the end of April, 2026, and the next set at the end of May, 2026. The second batch presented exactly the same main themes, the same criticisms and praise, as the first and often expressed in similar terms. Only one new theme emerged: secondary inspectors evaluating primary schools. So, the second set adds weight to the findings from the first set and increases the confidence that can be placed on these findings.

The Main Themes

(i) The New Framework

The new framework came into effect in November 2025 and sets out how Ofsted inspects a wide range of settings from early years to teacher education. It describes both the principles of inspection and the standards used to judge providers, with the standards laid out in great detail in the toolkits, which are in effect grade descriptors. It is worth noting that a grade can only be awarded if every statement in the relevant toolkit is met. This approach has been described by Ofsted as a 'secure fit' approach. This is different to the 'best fit' model which had been the mainstay of inspection for many years. Many respondents felt that this issue was at the heart of some of their difficulties during their inspection.

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The reactions of respondents to the new framework ranged from the general to the highly specific. There are, however, some themes (like context and the impact of inspection) that attracted so much comment they deserve to be treated separately.

There were some positive comments, as we would expect, which are included later, but Heads' evaluation of the new framework was overwhelmingly negative:

"...the problem is with the new system, not with the inspectors who were respectful... It's the rigid, new system that's the problem." (Onyx, Primary).

"... the framework has now become so binary that ... it doesn't give a true reflection of our school and that is surely what Ofsted should be doing... the new framework is far too granular, leading to a massively increased workload for the Headship Team ... it's so inflexible." (Kai, 16-19 Academy)

"... Inspectors listen but the Toolkit is unforgiving." (Jules, Primary)

Finley (Secondary) wrote: *"In one instance a slight departure from the idea meant that the whole category could not be judged 'Strong'."*

One Head, Jackie (Primary), offered this assessment: *"I'm not writing to dispute the right of an inspectorate to identify improvement areas. I'm writing because the process, conduct and nature of professional dialogue was experienced by Heads, staff and governors as inconsistent with an open minded, evidence-led approach, and, because the emotional and professional impact was significant."*

Alan (Primary) summed up thus: *"We were told that this framework considers the context of the school and supports the wellbeing of Head teachers... It is my experience that it does neither."*

Riley (Secondary) thought that failing to achieve the expected grade for personal development because *"extracurricular clubs were not targeted at Pupil Premium children ... seems very hard and unjust."* He explained to inspectors that Years 10 and 11 were *"two of the most challenging years we had come through the school in a long time, both from academic starting points and attitude."* Inspectors, however, *"saw this as a barrier and we would not get Strong Standard for attendance and behaviour or personal development and well-being."*

The new toolkit was also thought to have made inspection much more demanding, and less flexible to particular circumstances. For instance, *"...the one-word judgement is now replaced by eight judgements."* (Maya, Primary) *"Before there was one overall judgement, now there are nine."* (Onyx, Primary)

Strong concerns were expressed about the framework's treatment of behaviour and attendance:

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Parker (Primary Head in an inner-city area which makes attendance harder): *“I very much disagree with behaviour and attendance being grouped together.”*

“Putting attendance (lots of responsibility on parents) alongside a judgement of behaviour (responsibility on schools) seems unfair - they are two distinctly different aspects of school life.” (Kai, 16-19 Academy)

“Attendance and behaviour being together is a farce! ...They are two separate things and should be treated as such.” (Jules, Primary)

“...a minor weakness in one area brings down the overall grade for both. We can influence attendance, but we can't control it. We received no advice from the inspectors about how we could do better on attendance.” (Onyx, Primary whose school had attendance of over 96%.)

The five-point grading system (Exceptional – Strong Standard – Expected Standard – Needs Attention – Urgent Improvement) also came in for very significant criticism:

“The Exceptional grade is a fantasy, aspirational grade and will be quite rare to achieve... it has a knock-on effect on the other grades. The new ‘Expected’ grade (3 out of 5 grades) makes you feel very average... it's deflating, disheartening and personally embarrassing” when awarded for Headship. *“It really negatively impacted my own wellbeing for many weeks and with some bitterness about this still lingering even now.”* (Ainsley, Primary)

Fleur (Primary): *“The lead inspector told us that, although our Leadership and Governance was Strong, we could only be graded Expected as to obtain Strong all other evaluation areas also had to be graded Strong.”*

The language used by Heads to describe their experiences of the framework reflected the strength of their feelings.

Logan (Primary), despite getting “Expected” across the board, still felt the report was *“harsh”* and the process *“ridiculous”*, while for Avery (Primary) *“The two days were relentless and gruelling.”*

The learning walk was *“chaotic”* and overall, the inspection was *“brutal”* (Ainsley, Primary). *“Comparing schools to national data”, without context being considered, “is quite simply ludicrous.”* (Jean, Secondary)

Jean added: *“...the methodology of inspection is completely flawed. Inspectors don't have the time to properly inspect, and school Heads don't have the time to adequately convey all the things about their school. The fixation on the Inspection Data Summary Report (IDSR) is also unhelpful.”* Indigo, (Secondary), agreed: *“Inspectors seemed overly attached to the IDSR, and were extremely unwilling to look at any evidence that might point to a higher grade.”*

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Milan (Secondary) commented: *“Although much of the report’s wording was fair, the framework appears very rigid and data driven by the IDSR”*. More seriously, there was a *“sense of predetermined conclusions and limited openness to evidence.”*

There was a widespread perception by Heads and governors that “conclusions were formed early and evidence was then used selectively to support those conclusions.”

(Cassidy, Primary). Noel (Primary) agreed: *“... decisions are made based on the IDSR before inspectors even walked into the building.”*

Skyler (Primary) wrote *“... the archaic data-driven, attainment-focussed approach for ‘achievement’ is destructive towards any thought of inclusive, personalised learning. To ignore progress measures is completely unprofessional.”*

Sawyer (Primary) agreed: *“The IDSR..... , and in particular the achievement data, was the driver for what the inspectors focused on.”*

Quinn (Primary) thought *“it is unfair to expect all schools to have ‘data in line with national’ as we can’t all be average.”*

This approach led Darren to think *“inspectors are still coming in with predetermined ideas of the final grading of the school.”*

There was concern over arrangements for small-group discussion with inspectors:

Jackie (Primary) argued that choosing SEND or other vulnerable children *“without familiar adults present ...didn’t provide a fair or reliable picture of pupils’ experiences.”* She added: *“Classroom visits were very brief”* so that the context and complexity of need *“were not engaged with in a way that staff felt was appropriate.”*

Alan (Primary) was concerned about the sampling of pupils by inspectors: *“There was an **overemphasis on pupil premium pupils**, meaning many of the overall judgements were based on 10% of children”* (original emphasis). Sawyer (Primary) made the same point, with an inspector spotting one child *“not on task and said they couldn’t see what they had seen.”*

Fleur (Primary) *“was very concerned that conclusions were being drawn on the basis of a small number of interactions with a very small number of children and extrapolated to the entire school.”* She reported that inspectors had chosen six children, but had concentrated on only two of them.

There were complaints about the “inconsistent application of the toolkit.”

(River, 16-19 Academy). Palmer (Primary) thought that other schools with similar reports were getting higher grades. *“A neighbouring school which volunteered for an early*

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inspection has very poor attendance, but was still rated Strong in that area.” (Onyx, Primary)

There were also repeated complaints that the final report did not reflect the discussions with inspectors.

“Our report is riddled with contradictions.” (Kai, 16-19 Academy)

“The language of the report fails to match the judgements.” (River, 16-19 Academy)

Drew (Primary) thought that nothing in the report replicated the comments of the inspector at the final feedback meeting: *“he wished his children could have a school as supportive and he’d always remember our school for being the most supportive he’d visited in relation to vulnerable families.”* None of these favourable remarks appeared in the report.

Jules (Primary) resented *“the way the report is put together, focussing on negatives first, which does little to build trust in schools and Headship – it provides ammunition for parents. My staff said the report didn’t read as if the inspectors had been in the school for two days.”*

Alan (Primary) concurred: *“The final report includes 12 tables of data; 8 of these are reporting disadvantaged pupil data... **This does not present a proportionate view of the school.**”* (original emphasis)

So how did those Heads who felt aggrieved get on when they complained?

Fifty-five per cent indicated that they had *“effectively challenged Ofsted during the inspection”* in the first part of the questionnaire and five Heads reinforced the issue in their comments. Far more were of the view that challenging the report carried risks:

“...if we argued strongly for expected, the lead inspector would likely move to urgent improvement.” (Jackie, Primary)

Some schools did, however, complain:

“The conduct of three inspectors became a cause for an official complaint. A verbal apology was received from a senior HMI, but nothing in writing.” (Indigo, Secondary)

Jackie, (Primary) who felt a *“crushing impact”* from inspection complained to a high level within Ofsted: *“That resulted in a small number of favourable changes to wording for greater accuracy, but little else changed. As I have taken that route, it closes off the option of a formal complaint.”* Joules (Primary) commented: *“You’re given the chance to comment or complain, but if you comment, you lose the right to complain – this is laughable.”*

Parker (Primary) said: *“We did challenge, but ultimately the challenge didn’t get us very far.”*

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Avery (Primary) was told that she could return to the inspectors with more evidence: “However, on almost every occasion that we did this, the inspector would point to her watch after a few minutes and say that she was just going to move us on as there was a lot to do.” What happened frequently when schools protested is that a few minor factual errors were corrected but the substantial complaints were not upheld.

Another contentious issue was the amount of preparation required before inspection.

Luca (Secondary) reported: “Workload associated with preparing for inspection seemed to increase massively” and Rowan (Primary) agreed: “I spent a vast amount of time preparing.” Noel (Primary) wrote: “The preparation for the inspection really did impact on my emotional well-being and mental health.” Another Primary Head, (Maya) commented “we spent months preparing our evidence.” Jules, a third Primary Head said “Our self-assessment was 10,000 words long as we wanted to cover everything.” A fourth (Onyx) summed up as follows: “I worked seven days a week from the start of the term in September to get ready. We did a huge amount of preparation. Ofsted’s advice that no preparation is necessary is a nonsense. You have to be perfect to do really well.”

Evelyn (Primary), with more than 30 years’ experience as class teacher, deputy Head and Head, summed up: **“All in all, the experience was the worst I have had, and it has not contributed to our wellbeing or school improvement and I’m not surprised that there is a recruitment crisis for school leadership.”**

(ii) Context

There was strong concern that the context of the school was not sufficiently recognised.

One Head of a pupil referral unit remarked that “The recognition of the school context was refreshing” but twenty-four Heads thought the opposite, including Jules (Primary, with 44% free school meals): **“If you are in a school in an area of disadvantage, you are on the back foot. I wouldn’t recommend any aspiring Leader to take over a school like mine under this Framework. Achievement is not judging achievement, it is attainment... They want to kill creativity and passion under the guise of managing workload. Why would you choose to work in an area of deprivation under this approach? Challenging schools need passionate people and this Toolkit doesn’t encourage that.”**

Others commented that “... the black and white Framework doesn’t allow for context to be considered when it counts” (Ainsley, Primary).

Jean (Secondary with 46% free school meals) asked, “How can a school in the bottom fifth for deprivation be compared to schools in the top fifth across attendance, literacy and achievement?”

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Kendall and Sam, both primary Heads, agreed and Lennon added: **“The framework doesn’t allow inspectors to consider context in a way it was ‘sold’ to school Heads.”**

Drew, another Primary Head, expressed his views thus: *“Context wasn’t taken into consideration **AT ALL!**”* His school has *“55% of pupils on Free School Meals and is a transient school.”*

Jackie (Primary) *“provided numerous SEND case study evidence. We demonstrated adaptations used in school, including assistive technology ... to increase access and independence ... the school’s intent and universal provision were not explored with sufficient depth...”* Consideration of context was *“limited”* as was the *“follow up to clarify what had been seen.”*

Riley (Secondary) also felt that the context of his school had not been taken sufficiently into consideration: *“Lots of judgements were based on looking at the reading evidence of one teacher who had been off ill for four weeks before Christmas and had her class covered by supply. This is not a fair judgement of a teacher and the inspector would not look at records in other classes.”*

Sawyer described his small Primary school as having high mobility of pupils, with above national percentages for disadvantaged and SEND pupils with high needs. The inspectors, however, *“were unable to consider [these facts] due to the new framework using a secure fit model.”*

(iii) Impact of the Framework

On Heads

Stress and distress featured prominently in the responses.

“The toll on Heads is high. My team are resilient and committed but my Deputy who has been teaching for over 20 years returned on the second morning and said ‘I can see why Ruth Perry did what she did.’” (Jules, Primary)

He was not alone: *“The inspection caused both mental and physical distress to the entire senior team. People were very ill during the Christmas break, a month after the inspection.”* (Jordan, Primary)

Frankie (Primary) thought similarly: *“Ofsted remains a massive source of stress to Heads. A poor Ofsted inspection, or the anticipation of one, still ends careers. Plus ça change...”*

Eight Heads out of a total of 100 decided to quit in response to inspection:

“...after 28 years as a teacher and head teacher I will be leaving the profession this summer.” (Jackie, Primary)

A secondary Head, Indigo, said: *“I’m determined to retire before the next inspection!”*

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Kai, Head of a 16-19 Academy, promised: *“I will not be here for the next one.”*

Ellis (Primary): *“The inspection process will definitely bring forward my decision to retire.”*

A fifth, Jules (Primary) asked rhetorically: *“Why would I stay in this challenging school long-term when the Framework is stacked so heavily against me?”* His school has 42% Free School Meals.

Jackie (Primary) reported that *“the lead inspector’s manner was experienced as cold and transactional, with limited professional curiosity. Meetings frequently felt adversarial rather than evaluative. Governors reported feeling placed on the defensive and not given meaningful opportunity to present monitoring evidence... Wellbeing checks felt procedural rather than responsive given the tone and finality of some of the statements made in meetings. This contributed to the sense that wellbeing was acknowledged superficially rather than actively safeguarded.”*

Jules (Primary) said to the lead Inspector: *“If I had £1 for every time you asked about my well-being, I’d be a rich man”*. He then added: *“What kind of a system is it, where you have to ask me if I have someone at home to talk to about my wellbeing, in case it’s affected by your inspection?”*

Remy (Primary) also commented on the frequency of checks by inspectors on his wellbeing: *“They would regularly ask ‘Are you OK? When I said ‘no’, they didn’t know what to do.”*

Gray (Primary) considered *“the whole process causes a huge amount of stress”*, while Jesse (Primary) who was judged ‘Strong’ in Headship was *“deeply concerned about Head teacher wellbeing in relation to any Ofsted inspection, but particularly the new inspection Framework.”* For Cary (Primary) it was *“a hugely intense inspection especially for the Headship Team and SENCO and Early Years Head.”*

Even for those who achieved the Expected standard on all areas, the impact was still powerfully felt: *“The grade helped some of our staff to get over the dread of Ofsted, but it took me some time to recover from it ... the emotional stress, the nerves, the roller coaster of emotions. When they left we felt we should have fought more ... we felt deflated. We need the monkeys off our back.”* (Onyx, Primary)

Devlin (Primary) whose school was rated as Expected Standard, felt *“... the process was fair and anticipation of the event was worse than the actual event.”* But waiting for the call from Ofsted had made every Sunday evening stressful as was waiting over three weeks to get the draft report: *“If school have to work to strict deadlines, then Ofsted should too.”*

On inspectors

There were concerns that inspectors did not have sufficient time to make judgements which would do justice to the school.

Some Heads reported on the new Framework's impact on the inspectors.

Ainsley (Primary) commented: *"There are too many grading areas ... the inspectors were spread too thin to get the information they need ... to start making and then sharing judgements. They didn't have time to scrutinise the large amount of evidence we had gathered to support our grading of two areas as 'Strong'. We feel very strongly that this really handicapped the school."*

In the same vein, Nico (Primary) thought: *"There is still far too much for inspectors to do justice to a school in two days. We needed another day's inspection."*

Jules (Primary) reported that the *"stresses on inspectors was so relentless ... that Key Stage Two staff say none of them were seen in two days."*

On schools

Negative impact was frequently mentioned

"The inspection will have negligible impact on the school. We won't do anything different as a result, nor did we learn anything we didn't know already." (Onyx, Primary).

Indigo, a Secondary Head, concurred: *"We learned nothing from our inspection."*

Jackie (Primary) pointed out that *"inspection influences organisational behaviour and can prompt reactive change that risks unintended consequences."* She then gave a long example (too identifiable to be mentioned here) of how inspection was *"shaping programme choices."*

Jordan's (Primary) view was that *"the inspection was managed very poorly and staff and children had a very poor experience."*

Parker (Primary) claimed that the inspection *"exhausted everyone and made the spring term very challenging to get through. Ironically it also impacted pupil attendance!"*

(iv) Secondary Inspectors Evaluating Primary Schools

Three Heads objected to being inspected by inspectors who had never worked in that phase of education. Logan, the Head of a primary school with above average rates of multiple disadvantage, researched the teaching experience of the inspection team and discovered *"they have only ever worked in church schools in affluent areas. No idea of what we battle daily."*

Another primary Head, Alan, found that both inspectors were secondary – with no primary experience: they *"demonstrated a lack of understanding of Early Years practice and expectations."*

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A third Head, Fleur, was even more outspoken: “... *the provision for children who are 2 years old ... was being judged on exactly the same criteria as 15 year olds in a secondary school ... the inspector did not have a clear understanding of the needs and behaviours of young 2 year olds ... We were inspected under the Schools Framework, which seems utterly bizarre when there is another Framework specifically designed for children at this developmental level.*”

(v) Positive Comments

Comments on inspection were not always negative. Indeed 14 Heads out of a total of 100 spoke highly of their experience of inspection.

One respondent strongly agreed with the statement that the ratings were fair and agreed that the process was supportive “*due to the team being nice.*” He also felt that they had effectively challenged Ofsted during the inspection (Anand, Primary).

Casey (Primary) simply exclaimed “*Overall a very positive experience!*”; whereas Bellamy, whose school achieved a Strong standard (in Headship and Governance), was pleased: “*The outcome for us was super and I am thrilled that the inspection team recognised the hard work of staff, pupils and the support from parents and the wider community. The process was thorough but was supportive.*”

Murphy (Primary) commented, “*Our inspectors were professional, kind and realistic*”, and Val (Primary) agreed: “*The process and inspectors were fine – inspectors were well matched to our setting and understood the context.*” But she added that the toolkit “*made it impossible for a small school to do better than Strong or Expected in attendance.*”

Another respondent felt that “*the reflective meetings were better – much more professional dialogue ... we still had to fight for the grading even though the evidence was there.*”

Blake reported that “*the inspection team were very fair, understanding and conducted the inspection sensitively.*” Gray (Primary) thought the “*inspectors were thoughtful, listened and gave good advice throughout the process.*”

Taylor (Primary) appreciated the advice he was given “*on how to collate and interpret data ... as well as next steps to move to Strong in certain categories.*”

Morgan, Head of a small school with 45% level of deprivation, remarked that the two inspectors “*were both very personable and professional and the process felt collaborative throughout... It feels like inspections are carried out with you now rather than on you.*”

Part C: Issues Requiring Urgent Attention

Our report is the first independent investigation into Heads' experiences of Ofsted's new inspection arrangements. We believe it is a valuable, though not definitive, study based on testimony from one hundred schools but we recognise it needs to be complemented by further studies, both independent and Ofsted-sponsored, as the new inspection arrangements are rolled out.

The report offers a wealth of detail, some of it graphic, of Heads' perspectives following their very recent experience of inspection and from this detail we have distilled six major areas requiring attention. It is clear that in practice the new arrangements fall well short of Ofsted's stated intentions and that Ofsted's processes including its much vaunted framework requires urgent improvement.

Six areas require urgent attention:

1. The wellbeing of Heads and their staff remains at risk and requires urgent attention.

Ofsted's efforts to reduce the stress, anxiety and distress of inspections are only having a limited impact thus far. Enquiries about Heads' and staff wellbeing during the course of an inspection may be well-intentioned but are not sufficient to address the high levels of stress currently being experienced. Given the evidence of severe distress reported as a result of negligent inspection practice, much more needs to be done to minimise the negative effects of what is almost bound to be a stressful experience for all concerned. Ofsted's recent announcement about changes to inspection arrangements later in 2026 will do nothing to relieve the stress on both schools and inspectors. Ofsted still remains in denial over the effects of its practices.

Ofsted needs to continue to review current policies and practice to do all it can to protect Heads and staff from undue distress. The opportunity to suspend an inspection is not reducing stress for those Heads who have to decide whether to ask for it. The pause is usually short and just extends the stress felt for a longer period of time. An effective inspection should leave staff feeling that their work is appreciated and their professionalism respected, and that their school's strengths have been recognised, even where changes in some aspects of their work are recommended.

2. The inspection framework is deficient in a number of respects and is not considered an improvement on its criticised predecessor.

The feedback from Heads' ratings and detailed comments show clearly that the framework is not delivering what has been promised after the recent consultations by Ofsted. In particular too many respondents do not have confidence that their schools' context is being fully taken into account, especially, but not only, in relation to judgments about achievement. There is particular concern and a deep sense of unfairness identified by those leading schools in the most challenging of circumstances. Heads of schools serving deprived areas commented bitterly that the promised focus on a school's context had not been delivered. Many believe that the very significant shift to a secure fit approach when evaluating evidence unduly constrains inspectors' flexibility to use their professional judgment.

Ofsted's decision to introduce a single grade combining attendance and behaviour is also seen as misguided and can lead to schools being unfairly downgraded over areas where they have limited, or very limited, control.

Heads' comments reveal many other specific aspects of the framework that require attention, as the national rollout continues.

3. A fully independent complaints system needs to be introduced as a matter of urgency.

Heads do not have confidence in Ofsted's recent efforts to improve its complaints procedure. **What is needed is a fully independent and impartial appeals mechanism that acts quickly and decisively with complaints.** The current approach is severely limiting confidence in Ofsted's work leaving Heads feeling that it is too defensive, too partial and not receptive enough to evidence-based criticism. Improvements are also required on the handling of complaints raised during inspections to lead inspectors and online to Ofsted officers.

4. The quality of inspection is not always good enough

While a few Heads are satisfied with the way their inspections have been carried out, a majority of the comments showed that they were not only dissatisfied but many were angry at their treatment by some inspectors. Given the great variety of schools, the nature of the inspection process and the role within it of professional judgment, the inspection experience cannot be a completely uniform one. **What can be expected is reasonable consistency in good practice from school to school.** This "reliability" remains an issue.

5. The quality of the advice offered is too variable

Schools should be able to rely on Ofsted providing well-informed advice. Most would surely welcome a constructive external perspective. Ofsted employs a large number of highly capable HMI, which makes it all the more **concerning that so many Heads report that the advice they received did not feel valuable or relevant.**

Why is this? It could relate to the nature or quality of the advice. But could it also be that grading is masking the developmental intent of inspectors' feedback? It seems likely that the simultaneous delivery of advice and grades undermines the efficacy of the advice. This issue requires attention.

6. Independent evidence is required on the impact of the framework

It is worrying that two thirds of Heads reported that their most recent inspection did not have a positive impact. Ofsted's impact, positive or negative needs to be evaluated based on firm evidence gathered, not only from its own sources but also from independent ones such as this post-inspection survey. This is all the more necessary given Ofsted's net expenditure in 2024–25 was **£208,721,000**

These six areas taken together suggest that radical change is urgently required. We will be tracking the impact of any change in future independent post inspection survey reports.

To conclude

Our findings are at variance with statements made by some senior figures at Ofsted. They have recently expressed confidence in the new framework, claiming that it is performing well without any significant problems and is a major improvement on their previous models. We disagree.

The question now becomes: Is Ofsted willing and capable of fundamental change?

We end with three comments about our research:

“Apologies for the length of this email, but this was quite cathartic” (Avery, Primary);

“Thank you for asking the questions. Our useless unions should be doing this work!” (Evan, Primary); and

Fleur ended her email with *“Best wishes from all of us.”*

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Appendix

Purpose of the study

Our aim was to understand how Heads experienced their most recent Ofsted inspection under the new framework. In particular, we wanted to capture their perceptions, views and feelings.

To do this effectively, we needed feedback that was:

- Honest and unprompted
- Detailed enough to be meaningful
- Quick and straightforward for busy Heads to complete

Designing the questionnaire

We began by reviewing earlier work, including the Big Listen, the Alternative Big Listen and relevant union publications. From this, we identified key areas that repeatedly mattered to Heads. We then wrote a set of neutral statements, taking care not to lead respondents in any particular direction.

We also decided to use Likert responses on a five-point scale running from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. We also gave Heads space to add any comments they wished, without prompts. This was important to allow Heads to raise issues that mattered most to them.

The full set of statements is shown in the email version of the questionnaire below:

Please use the following possible responses to assess the impact of your latest Ofsted inspection and report.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Neutral 4 Agree 5 Strongly Agree

Simply return this email putting your chosen number at the end of each sentence

The ratings given in the report were fair

The advice given by the inspectors was valuable

The inspection improved my well-being

The inspection process was supportive

The new inspection framework is an improvement

I spent just a little time preparing for the inspection

The inspection has had a positive impact on the institution

My Trust/Local Authority were very helpful in helping us prepare for the inspection

We effectively challenged Ofsted during the inspection

My career has been positively impacted by the inspection

Any additional thoughts that you have will be very welcome.

How we collected responses

We knew from previous experience (both from Ofsted and unions) that questionnaires often receive low response rates, sometimes well below what is desirable for research. Because of this, we used two different approaches.

Phase 1: Postcard survey

Initially, we posted a survey, sending Heads a small postcard with:

- Five short statements
- Space on the back for written comments

All Heads were asked the same two core questions, while the remaining questions were randomly selected from the full list. This approach is widely used in educational research and allows broad coverage without overloading respondents.

Each postcard:

- Was easy to complete
- Included a stamped addressed envelope
- Was accompanied by a personalised letter, hand-signed and addressed

This personal approach is strongly supported by research as a way to improve response rates.

To fund this, we used crowdfunding, raising £1,280. This covered:

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- Postage (first-class outgoing mail and return; second-class reminders)
- Stationery
- One hour per week of administrative support

A computer programme randomly selected 20 newly inspected institutions each week, generated unique codes, and identified school and Head details.

This approach ran for 11 weeks and achieved a **24% response rate**, which is high for this type of research and much higher than similar projects conducted by others.

Phase 2: Email survey

Once funding ran out, we switched to an **email-only survey**.

Each week:

- Around 100 institutions received Ofsted reports.
- We were able to find email addresses for approximately 70% of those institutions

Where there were differences between the emails derived from DfE sites and school websites, we used the address that seemed most likely to reach the Head teacher.

The questionnaire was sent from Peter Tymms' university email address, as this was more likely to pass school safeguarding and security filters than a generic email account.

Some emails were undeliverable and eventually emails successfully reached Heads in around a half of cases. A polite reminder was sent after 10 days if no response had been received.

Response rate was:

- Around **10% of those Heads who received the email**

The Data

The Likert responses from the questionnaires, as of 25/5/26 are shown below:

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The ratings given in the report were fair	12	22	13	40	13
The advice given by the inspectors was valuable	12	15	34	28	11
The inspection improved my well-being	39	14	12	6	6
The inspection process was supportive	11	12	16	17	11
The new inspection framework is an improvement	29	20	13	10	5
I spent just a little time preparing for the inspection	42	11	6	3	2
The inspection has had a positive impact on the institution	18	15	14	12	8
My Trust/Local Authority were very helpful in helping us prepare for the inspection	6	4	13	23	18
We effectively challenged Ofsted during the inspection	5	11	17	30	12
My career has been positively impacted by the inspection	28	10	17	11	7

Representativeness of the sample of questionnaires that we have

We compared those institutions that returned questionnaires with those that either did not return them or were never approached on the following variables: the percentage of Free School Meals (deprivation), the Primary/Secondary divide, Ofsted ratings, Trust/LA membership and whether the questionnaire was sent by letter to email. Statistical tests with p set at 0.01 showed that our results did not differ on any of these factors except for Trust/LA and letter/email. The response rate for Trusts was 7.9% but for LAs was 24.5%. Emails had lower response rates than letters (4.5% compared with 19.5% when net numbers are compared, but when only those that were delivered are compared the figures are 10.2% compared to 25%).

The data refers to institutions whose reports were released on 25th May or earlier.

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T-tests¹ for differences

	Questionnaire return	N	Mean	P value
Percentage of children eligible for free school meals	No	1095	28.679	0.41
	Yes	97	27.171	
Post 16 provision	No	154	3.0974	0.85
	Yes	7	3.1429	
Inclusion	No	1013	3.2122	0.46
	Yes	95	3.2632	
Personal development and wellbeing	No	1025	3.2839	0.02
	Yes	94	3.4362	
Curriculum and Teaching	No	1008	2.9157	0.26
	Yes	96	2.9896	
Attendance and behaviour	No	1019	3.1354	0.16
	Yes	94	3.2340	
Achievement	No	1002	2.8533	0.19
	Yes	94	2.9468	
Leadership and Governance	No	1002	3.0729	0.63
	Yes	96	3.1042	
Early Years	No	647	3.1221	0.60
	Yes	72	3.0833	

Cross tabulations

Primary versus secondary

Type * Questionnaires_return Crosstabulation

		Questionnaire return		Total	
		No	Yes		
Line 2	Primary	Count	841	76	917
		% within Line 2	91.7%	8.3%	100.0%
	Secondary	Count	261	15	276
		% within Line 2	94.6%	5.4%	100.0%
Total		Count	1102	91	1193
		% within Line 2	92.4%	7.6%	100.0%

¹ It might be thought that non-parametric tests are more suitable than t-tests but it has been shown that the t-test is robust against the violation of assumptions (references available on request)

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P=0.12

Trust versus LA

Academy Trust * Questionnaire_return Crosstabulation

		Questionnaire_return		
		No	Yes	Total
Academy Trust	Count	39	14	53
	% within Academy Trust	73.6%	26.4%	100.0%
No	Count	474	65	539
	% within Academy Trust	87.9%	12.1%	100.0%
Yes	Count	589	12	601
	% within Academy Trust	98.0%	2.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	1102	91	1193
	% within Academy Trust	92.4%	7.6%	100.0%

P<.001

Letter versus email

Letter_email * Questionnaire_return Crosstabulation

		Questionnaire_return		
		No	Yes	Total
Letter_email Letter	Count	202	49	251
	% within Letter_email	80.5%	19.5%	100.0%
email	Count	900	42	942
	% within Letter_email	95.5%	4.5%	100.0%
Total	Count	1102	91	1193
	% within Letter_email	92.4%	7.6%	100.0%

P<.001