



THE ALTERNATIVE BIG CONSULTATION

FULL REPORT

**FEW BELIEVE OFSTED'S CURRENT PROPOSALS REPRESENT AN
IMPROVEMENT**

**THE PROPOSED REPORT CARDS ARE UNFIT, OR LARGELY UNFIT, FOR
PURPOSE**

**THE PROPOSED FIVE-POINT GRADING SCALE IS UNFIT, OR LARGELY UNFIT,
FOR PURPOSE**

**OFSTED HAS NOT REGAINED THE TRUST AND CONFIDENCE OF THE
SECTOR**

22 April 2025

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO THE ALTERNATIVE BIG CONSULTATION (ABC)

Since 1992 Ofsted has been tasked with inspecting all state-funded educational settings in England. Over thirty years on it has now become the centre of intense and often critical professional and media scrutiny.

This has been intensified recently by the implementation since 2018 of a flawed inspection framework under Amanda Spielman's leadership and her insensitive mishandling of the aftermath of the tragic death of Ruth Perry, headteacher of Caversham Primary School, in January 2023.

Sir Martyn Oliver took up his post as Chief Inspector in January 2024 following Amanda Spielman stepping down and launched the Big Listen survey to gather views on Ofsted's inspection activity. He also asked former Chief Inspector, Dame Christine Gilbert, to undertake a Learning Review to ascertain how effectively Ofsted managed events following the death of Ruth Perry and what needed to change to improve the inspectorate's culture and work.

As former senior HMIs very supportive of the principle of inspection we believed that Ofsted's Big Listen had major deficiencies and failed to ask key questions. So, we launched the 'Alternative Big Listen' (ABL) to offer those working in schools an opportunity to review Ofsted's current and past performance.

ABL's findings were damning. 90% of respondents regarded Ofsted as not fit for purpose. It was clear that Ofsted had lost very significant levels of trust and confidence from those working in schools and colleges. This was also clear in the findings from Ofsted's own Big Listen published July 2024. Published at the same time, Christine Gilbert's Learning Review found that there were very serious problems with the culture at Ofsted.

In response to the Big Listen and ignoring entirely the severe criticisms made by nearly 1400 respondents to the ABL, Ofsted is now consulting on its inspection proposals to be introduced in the Autumn - a timescale which implies that no fundamental changes are envisaged, and that Ofsted sees itself as fit for purpose once its revisions to policy and practice have been put in place. It is important to note that in its consultation Ofsted is not asking respondents to make a judgement on whether each of their main proposals is fit for purpose. Instead, it asks for an unstructured comment on each proposal. This approach replicates the weaknesses of the Big Listen and allows Ofsted to focus on the aspects they choose to highlight.

In contrast to Ofsted's survey, we set up the Alternative Big Consultation (ABC) in February 2025 to establish the extent to which Ofsted is now seen as fit for purpose on a range of issues and how far, if at all, its proposals are an improvement on current inspection policy and practice. We also asked respondents to consider some aspects that might be worth considering for inclusion in any radically revised inspection model.

We are grateful to the 708 respondents who completed the survey and to the 237 who offered comments to the various questions. They represented a wide cross-section of opinion, professional and personal, about the effectiveness or otherwise of the current system of school inspection. All anonymised written comments will be available to read at www.thealternativebiglisten.co.uk

We have been dismayed with the approach taken on social media by some senior managers at Ofsted who have worked hard to demean our independent efforts and have shared prematurely some of the key responses to their own, yet to be concluded, work. Unlike Ofsted we have remained silent on the emerging findings from our survey until now. We believe Ofsted should have followed a similar approach.

We have urged the respondents to the ABC to also express their views forthrightly in Ofsted's consultation and we await with interest that response due to be published in the summer.

We urge Ofsted to take very seriously the findings of the ABC and to take due account of any forthright responses to its own survey. It is clear from our findings that very fundamental changes are needed to the current inspection model to satisfy the legitimate expectations of parents, carers, guardians and those working at every level within the teaching profession for the benefit of those they serve, the children, pupils and students.

THE MAIN FINDINGS

The findings of the ABC make it very clear that Ofsted's attempt at an inspection relaunch following the findings from its Big Listen survey, undertaken in 2024, is failing. Only 11% of respondents to the ABC thought Ofsted's proposals represented an improvement on current inspection arrangements. Nearly two thirds actually thought the current proposals were worse than the current arrangements. This is a damning judgement on the current set of proposals.

The first part of the ABC largely replicated the current Ofsted consultation and in all but three areas at least 80% of respondents felt the proposed Ofsted changes were either largely unfit for purpose or unfit for purpose.

- 88% of respondents felt the proposed Report Cards were either largely unfit or unfit for purpose
- 90% felt the proposed five-point grading system was either largely unfit or unfit for purpose
- 92% felt the approach to 'exemplary practice' was either largely unfit or unfit for practice

The 'Toolkits' (grade descriptors) were especially poorly regarded with 85% of respondents stating they were either largely unfit or unfit for purpose and 88% feeling they were not fit for purpose for different educational phases and settings.

89% of respondents felt the proposed changes to the way inspections are to be conducted were also largely unfit or unfit for purpose. Many respondents made clear in their comments that Ofsted was tinkering with, rather than radically changing its policies and practices.

In the second part of the ABC respondents were asked to consider different approaches to the way inspection could be conducted, and these revealed a strong desire for a far more radical approach. 97% of those expressing a view supported the proposal that all early years' settings, schools and colleges should have access to a fully independent complaints process outside of Ofsted itself. Similarly, 89% of respondents supported an annual safeguarding review process undertaken by an agency other than Ofsted. It is telling that these two proposals were not part of the current Ofsted consultation.

- 82% believed a system of peer-group review to promote quality assurance within an agreed national framework should be given consideration
- 75% felt Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) should play a role in moderating the peer review process
- 82% felt there was value in the self-evaluation statement being published annually on the settings' website

It is worth reflecting on the backdrop to Ofsted's proposals. The tragic death of Ruth Perry, the headteacher at Caversham Primary School, in January 2023 resulted in the subsequent Coroner's 'Prevention of future deaths report' which was highly

critical of Ofsted. It reached a verdict of 'suicide, contributed to by an Ofsted inspection carried out in November 2022'. This led to Dame Christine Gilbert's Learning Review that was highly critical of Ofsted's response to the suicide as well as highlighting serious weaknesses in its culture.

Ofsted's Big Listen and its current consultation are vain attempts to reach out to those who engage and rely on Ofsted's work. It is clear from our report that very many respondents reject Ofsted's current proposals. For them, the changes do not go far enough. They do not appear to address the significant concerns that led to Ruth Perry taking her own life. Respondents believe what is being proposed will make things worse!

THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

708 respondents completed the survey with 237 offering written comments. They represented a wide cross-section of opinion, professional and personal, about the effectiveness or otherwise of the current system of school inspection. All anonymised written comments are available to read at www.thealternativebiglisten.co.uk.

It is important to stress the limitations of both the ABC survey and Ofsted's own consultation. Neither can claim to be statistically representative, either of the schools and other educational settings surveyed in the ABC or those Ofsted is trying to reach. All those responding to both consultations were self-selecting; they had not been chosen at random.

We are also conscious that an understandable degree of "consultation fatigue" has set in, partly because of disillusionment that so little of substance has changed as a result of the first round of consultations. However, we believe that our ABC sample is large enough, and internally consistent enough, for reasonably valid observations and tentative conclusions to be drawn.

THE DETAILED FINDINGS

PART 1

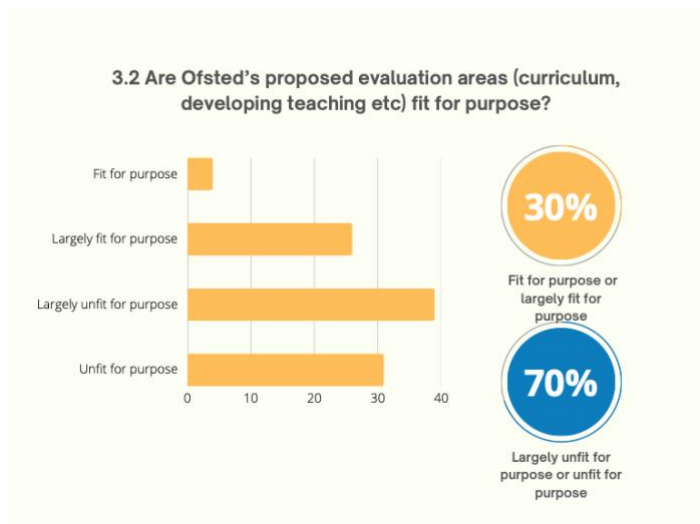
In Part 1 of its survey the ABC focussed largely on the same issues as in the Ofsted survey, but, unlike in the latter, respondents were invited to provide a clear view on whether they felt the proposals were fit for purpose. We believe that the current Ofsted survey allows too much flexibility in the way the responses can be interpreted.



Ofsted has been charged with developing a Report Card system by the DfE. As part of this it is proposing using a 5-point scale to grade different areas of a provider's work, such as 'curriculum' and 'leadership'. Alongside grades, there will be short descriptions summarising inspection findings on the Report Card. It believes that the approach brings together the most popular preferences of parents and professionals.

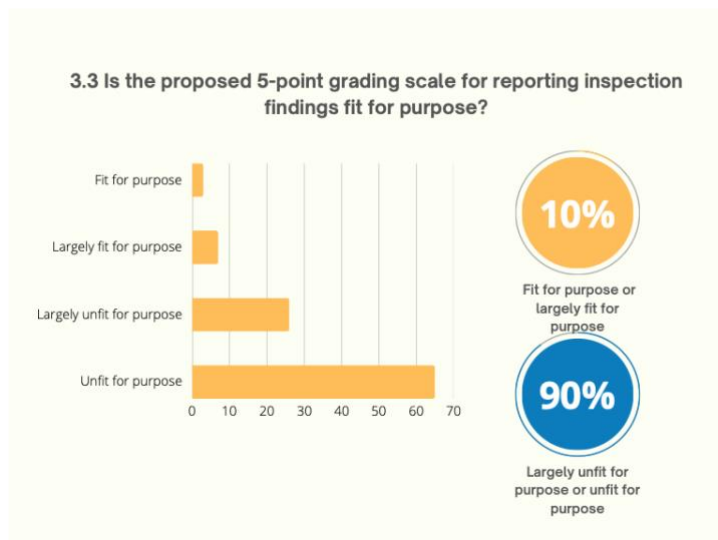
The ABC makes clear that 88% of its respondents felt that Ofsted's proposals for the Report Card were either largely unfit for purpose or unfit for purpose. In fact, nearly half of all respondents indicated that the proposals were unfit for purpose. This is in stark contrast to the Chief Inspector's comments that parents appeared to prefer the approach it was proposing.

Some headteachers/principals expressed concern that the Ofsted grades would continue to appear on the report card many years after the inspection that created them. This could mislead parents/carers/guardians about the current quality of provision within the school.



Ofsted is proposing a range of areas for evaluation such as ‘leadership and governance’, ‘curriculum’ and ‘inclusion’ across the full range of providers it inspects. It believes the new arrangements will increase the focus on disadvantaged children and learners, those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and those who school leaders have identified as being particularly vulnerable.

Seven out of ten respondents indicated that Ofsted’s proposals were either largely unfit for purpose or unfit for purpose. This is a strong rejection of Ofsted’s proposals. Some respondents expressed concern that Ofsted was, in effect ‘repackaging what they have always done’ and others expressed dismay that inspection was not already focusing on the most vulnerable pupils and learners.

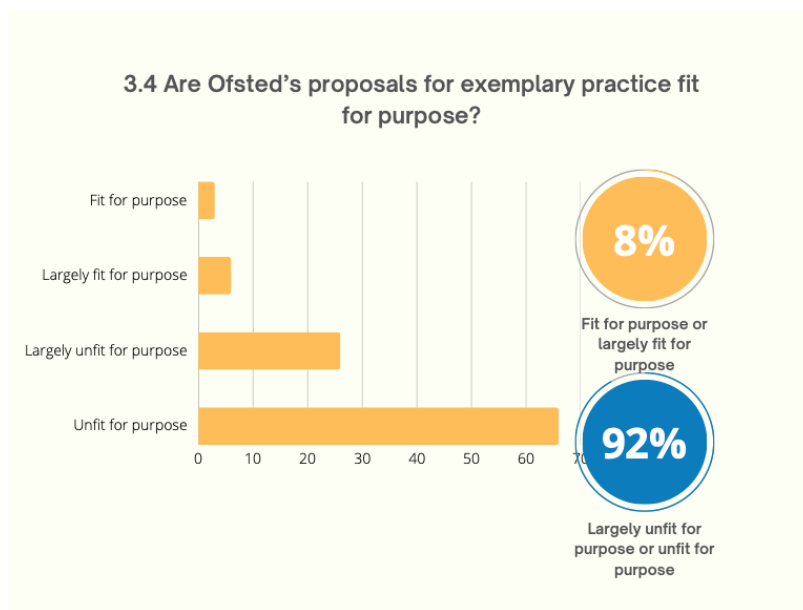


Ofsted is proposing introducing a five-point grading system to replace the four grades currently being used.

The five-point scale will include:

- Exemplary
- Strong
- Secure
- Attention needed
- Causing concern (lowest quality provision)

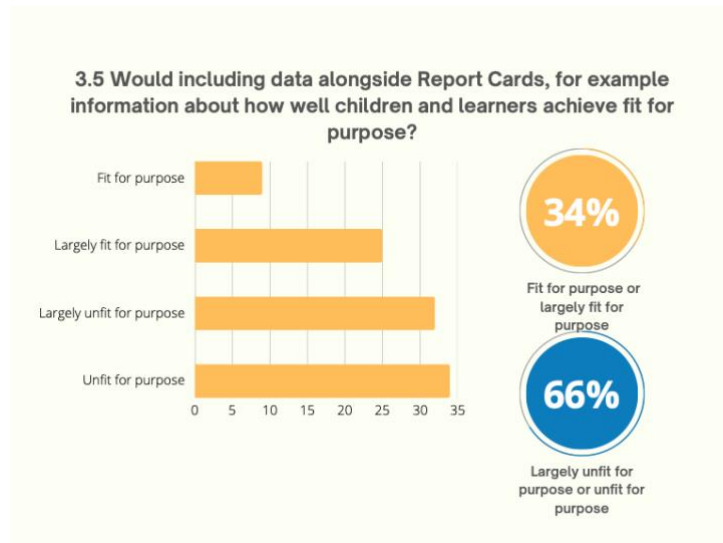
The vast majority of respondents (90%) rejected the five-point grading proposal with nearly two thirds judging it to be ‘unfit for purpose’. Many offered comments to explain their judgements. Some expressed a preference for a binary approach where the school is judged to have met an expected standard or not. Others were concerned as to how inspectors could come to a judgement on all 11 aspects of a school’s work using the five-point scale within a two-day inspection. Some felt that the drive for achieving the higher grades would lead to more tension within the inspection and more complaints afterwards.



Ofsted is proposing the introduction of an ‘exemplary’ grade. Inspectors can recommend a specific feature of leaders’ work to be considered as ‘exemplary’ when the provider has been graded as consistently strong in all aspects of that particular evaluation area and is at least secure across all other evaluation areas. Once the report card is published on Ofsted’s website it is proposed that inspectors will then invite leaders to submit a short case study of their work to the Ofsted Academy which will use a panel of experts to review these case studies nationally and duly publish them.

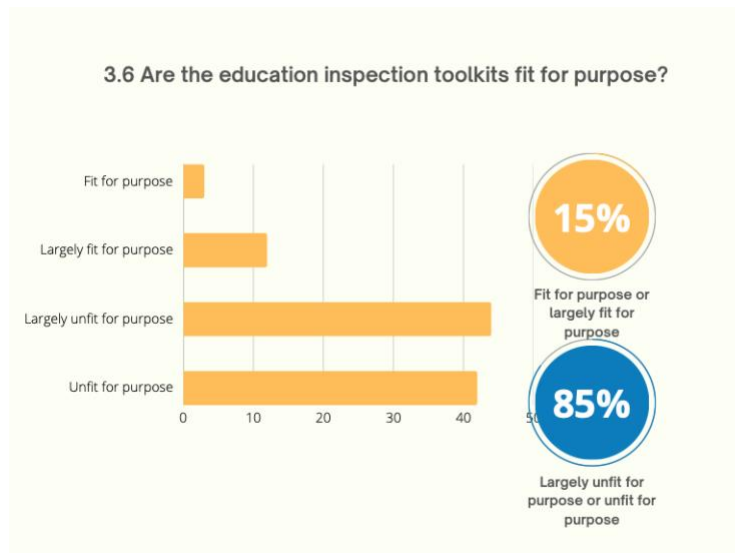
92% of respondents were critical or very critical of this proposal. This was the highest level of dissatisfaction recorded within the survey. Respondents commented on the likelihood of inconsistency in the way Ofsted would apply the exemplary grade

and felt that it could lead to further tension during the inspection. Some admitted that they would feel disappointed if the exemplary grade did not apply to them.



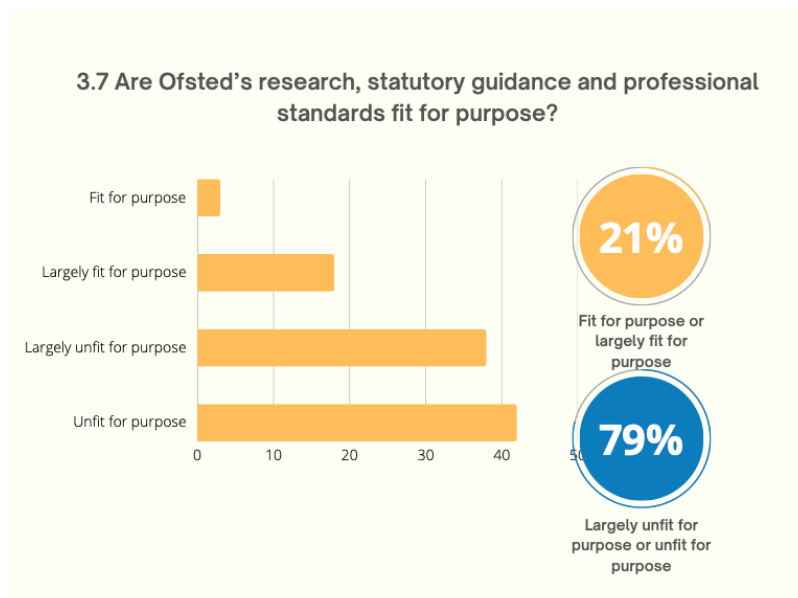
Ofsted is proposing using more contextual data in inspections and within the reporting process. It provides some examples but indicates more needs to be done to improve the range of data available. This would include characteristics of the children/learners, their outcomes and trends, absence and attendance as well as local area data.

The outcomes of the Alternative Big Listen had indicated that 89% of respondents did not feel Ofsted gave sufficient consideration to the context of the school when making judgements. Two thirds of respondents to the ABC felt the current proposals were either largely unfit or unfit for purpose. This represents an improvement on past practice but still leaves two thirds concerned about the type and nature of the contextual information to be used and whether it will be applied in a consistent manner. Ofsted is not clear what will be included in the proposed published data or the methodology used to create the data. Some respondents commented that they felt this left the door wide open for data to be used in an unhelpful and inappropriate way and to be used to highlight potential or perceived weakness rather than to share contextual information.



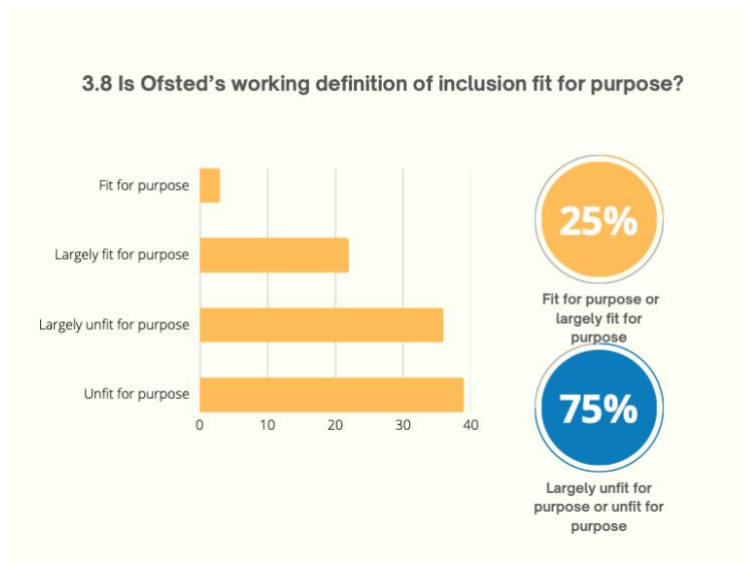
Ofsted is proposing introducing ‘toolkits’, or in other words ‘grade descriptors’, to demonstrate the standards expected to be met for each grade to be awarded. They are proposing using different ‘toolkits’ for each type of setting.

This proposal is largely rejected by respondents with 85% either judging it to be largely unfit for purpose or unfit for purpose. Concerns expressed suggest that the differences between each grade are often too narrow and/or poorly expressed. There is also concern that there is a lack of specific detail in the toolkits which could lead to inspectors interpreting them differently and leading to increasing inconsistency from one inspection to another.

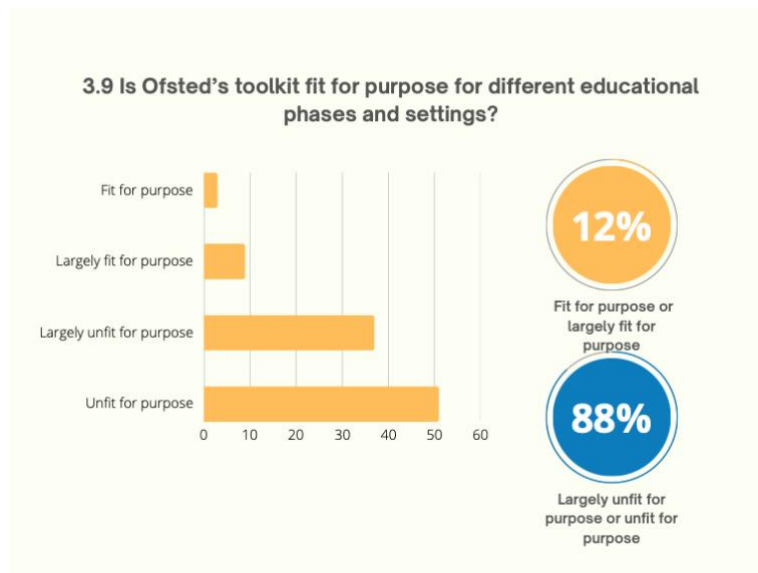


Ofsted’s survey asks respondents to comment on Ofsted’s research, the statutory guidance they use, and the professional standards expected of them and their inspectors. But it offers little in the way of guidance for respondents on what is proposed to change with the new inspection framework. Respondents were largely

unimpressed with almost eight out of 10 respondents indicating they are largely unfit for purpose or unfit for purpose.



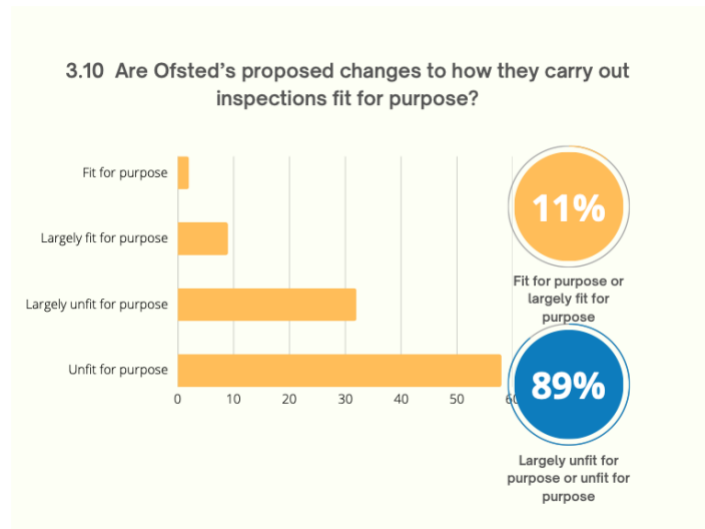
Ofsted explains that it has engaged with the sector and its inclusion external reference group to agree a working definition and its proposed approach to inspecting inclusion. Three quarters of respondents believe the definition is largely unfit or unfit for purpose. Comments included the lack of transparency in the creation of Ofsted's inclusion group, a lack of engagement with the various sectors it inspects and a lack of clarity in the inclusion definition.



Ofsted has produced different toolkits for the various settings it inspects. They adopt a similar approach in terms of aspects of provision, but they are worded slightly differently to meet the needs of different types of provision.

The results of the Alternative Big Listen had highlighted that 90% of respondents felt that inspections were not carried out in a way that was consistent from place to place. The response to the ABC makes clear that the toolkits have not addressed

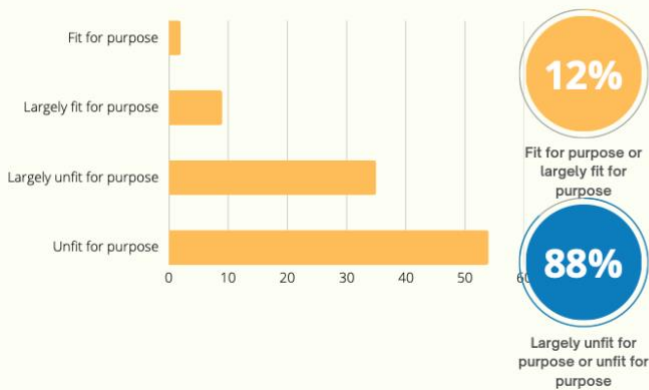
this fundamental weakness with 88% judging them to be either largely unfit for purpose or unfit for purpose. This suggests that Ofsted has failed to gain the confidence of the sector and is unable to reassure those it is inspecting that the judgements it reaches are fair and consistent across different phases and settings.



Ofsted makes clear that it wants to change both how inspection looks and how it feels, especially at the point of professional interaction and conversation between inspectors and leaders. To do this, they stress the core values of professionalism, courtesy, empathy, and respect. They are proposing to remove the 'deep dive' approach and using the available time for more discussion and evidence gathering.

Nearly nine out of 10 respondents to the ABC felt the proposals were either largely unfit for purpose or unfit for purpose. More than half of respondents felt the proposals were unfit for purpose. Respondents' comments indicated Ofsted was 'just moving the deckchairs around' and 'were not serious about changing things even after the death of a headteacher'. There was a sense that an opportunity for radical change had been lost. This is borne out by the responses to the second part of the ABC which gave an opportunity for respondents to consider alternative approaches to inspection not offered by Ofsted. Their views suggested a strong desire for a more radical approach.

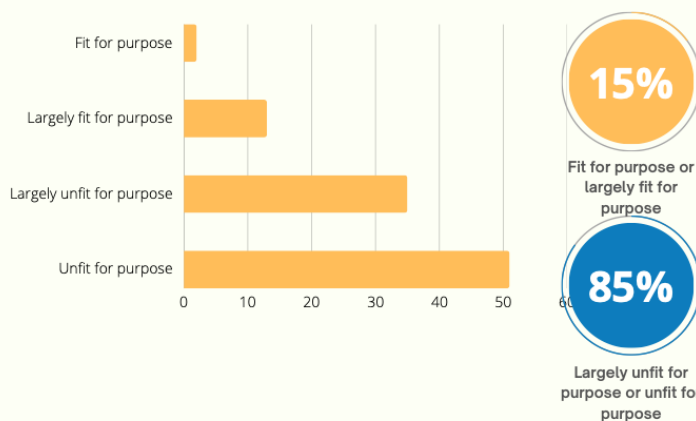
3.11 Are Ofsted's proposed changes to monitoring fit for purpose?



Ofsted is proposing that inspections will be 'full' inspections in the future with no more ungraded inspections. All schools with an identified need for improvement will receive monitoring which will continue until all areas are at least 'secure'. Ofsted will continue to be able to convert a monitoring inspection to a full inspection where the need arises. Ofsted has not provided more detailed information about monitoring inspections and what providers can expect because it intends to share these when the inspection materials are published.

Respondents made clear their dissatisfaction with Ofsted's proposals with nearly 9 out of 10 feeling they were largely unfit or unfit for purpose. Comments indicated that the proposed changes had been created to keep Ofsted in the frame as an agency for school improvement whereas many schools belonging to academy trusts had strong intervention strategies to help address concerns. The lack of detail in terms of how the DfE's regional improvement teams were also referenced.

3.12 Are Ofsted's proposals for identifying schools/settings causing concern fit for purpose?



Currently Ofsted inspections can place state-funded schools into one of two categories of concern:

- schools with widespread issues are categorised as ‘special measures’
- schools with more specific (but still serious) issues are categorised as ‘serious weaknesses’

Ofsted proposes to rename the second of these categories to ‘requires significant improvement’. A school is placed into a category of concern if it is not providing an acceptable standard of education and/or the leadership does not have the capacity to improve. An unacceptable standard of education is one in which any evaluation area, except for leadership, is causing concern.

Respondents were largely unimpressed by Ofsted’s proposals with 50% believing they were unfit for purpose and a further 35% judging them largely unfit for purpose. Some commented that the proposals were not moving with the changing nature of school improvement and others criticised Ofsted’s lack of creativity in finding new solutions to a perennial issue.

PART 2

The second part of the survey explores respondents' reactions to a number of possible changes to the current inspection model whose fundamental features have not changed radically since 1992. Respondents were asked whether these changes are worth considering in any redesigned system.

Two possible changes received near-universal support as essential or worthy of consideration. 97% of those expressing a view supported the proposal that all early years' settings, schools and colleges should have access to a fully independent complaints process outside of Ofsted itself. Similarly, 89% of respondents supported annual safeguarding annual reviews by an agency other than Ofsted.

There was very considerable support for other possible components of a modified system. 82% believed a system of peer-group review to promote quality assurance within an agreed national framework should be given consideration with 75% agreeing that HMI should play a role in moderation.

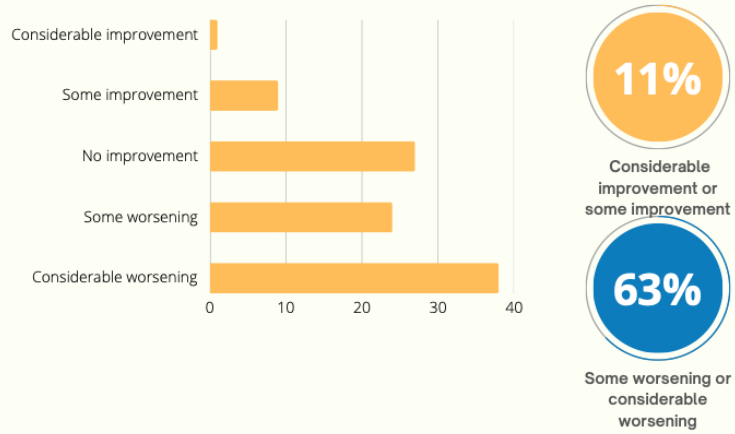
There was considerable support for a number of other possibilities to replace the current model of periodic high-stakes inspections. 64% saw four-yearly, one- or two-day visits involving light-touch inspection by HMI based on schools' self-evaluation as a possible alternative and with brief oral and written feedback provided to teachers, parents and governors. 76% accepted that follow-up full inspections needed to be considered where significant issues had been identified in such visits.

There was less agreement over the language to be used in inspection feedback or reports. 48% of respondents thought the notion of inspectors' using their own evaluative language to match what they observe should be considered. Around 40% wanted to retain a common set of qualitative terms but were not asked specifically what these should be.

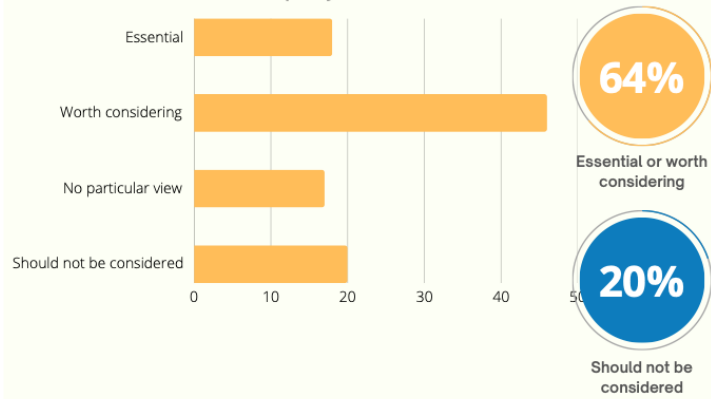
These findings were not intended to constitute a fully-fledged, comprehensive inspection model but most were well-supported proposals which are more likely to be acceptable to the teaching profession and to many parents and governors than those currently being consulted on by Ofsted.

A detailed breakdown of the responses to each of the fifteen questions in Part 2 follows.

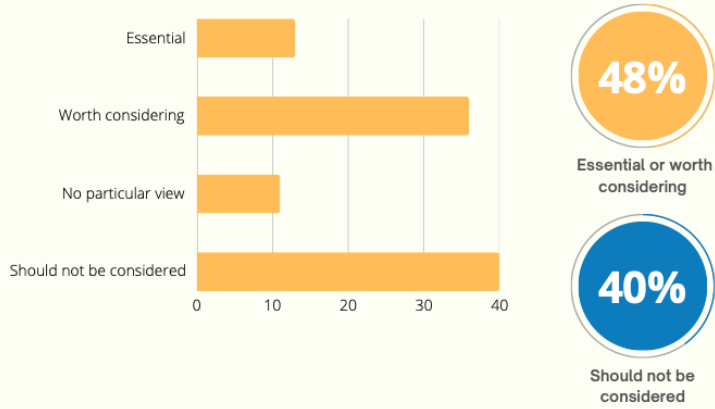
4. Are Ofsted's proposals a great improvement on current inspection practice?



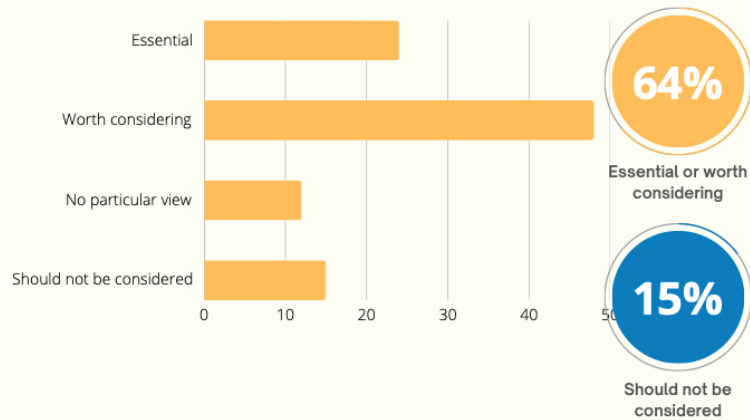
5. As the most common form of inspection, schools/settings are visited by one or two of His Majesty's Inspectors (Ofsted full time inspectors) on a one-or-two-day visit (dependent on the size of the school/setting) once every four years to provide an overall evaluation partly based on the institution's self-evaluation.



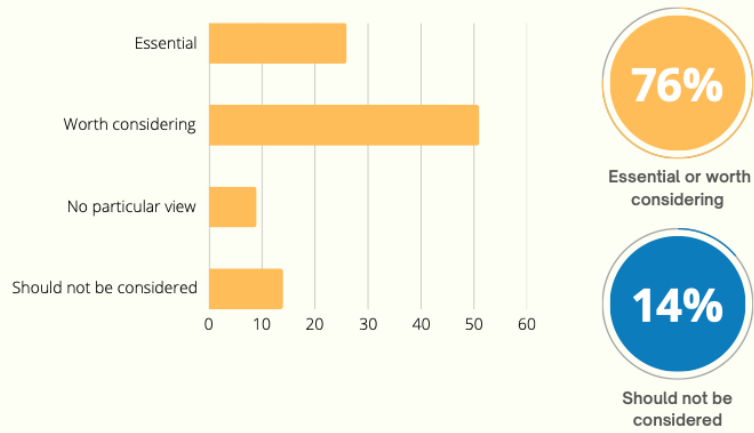
6. In all inspection reports, inspectors use their own evaluative terms ('very good', 'sound', 'exceptional' etc) to fit what they see, so that they can more accurately describe the quality and type of provision in the setting and the outcomes it achieves for children, pupils and learners



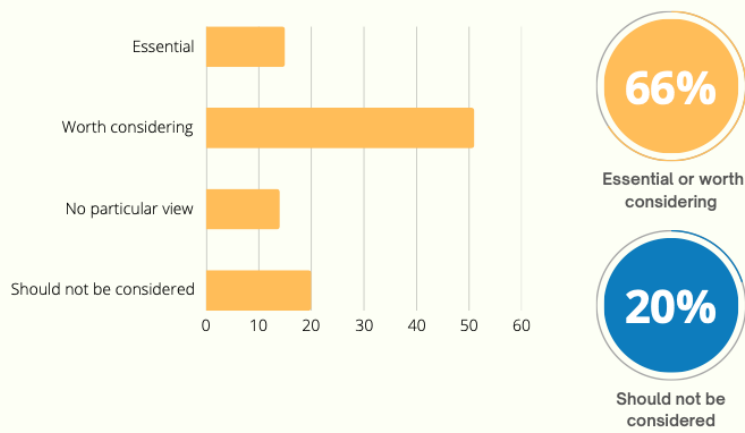
7. All inspection visits end with short meetings held with staff and governors/trustees to share impressions and these are posted by the setting on their website.



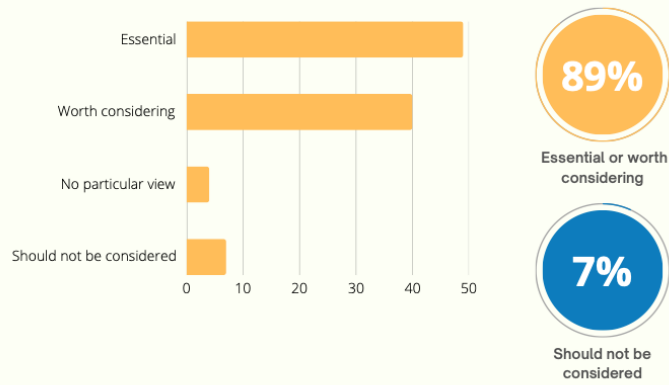
8. Full inspections are instigated where significant shortcomings are identified during the short visits or through other channels. These are conducted by inspectors not on the original visit.



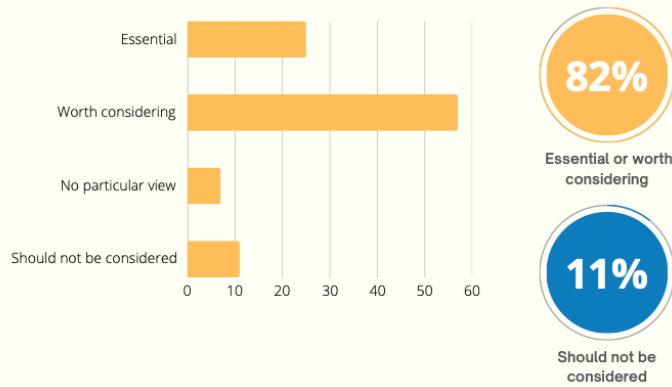
9. Full inspections are also occasionally undertaken where there is interesting practice worthy of description and dissemination to a wider audience.



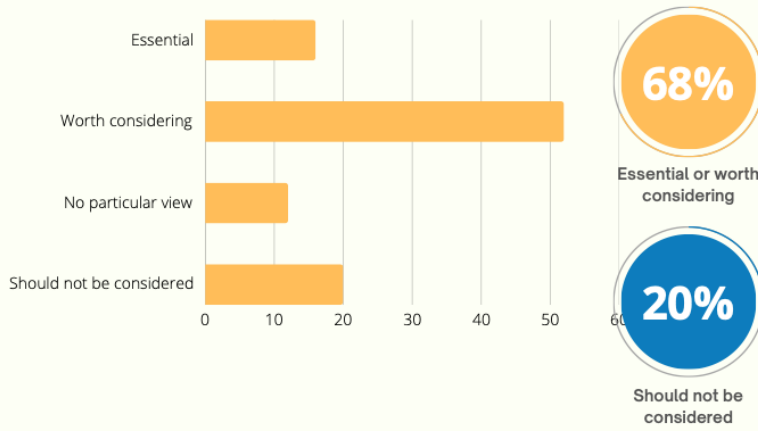
10. Safeguarding should be subject to annual reviews by an agency other than the national inspection agency (Ofsted).



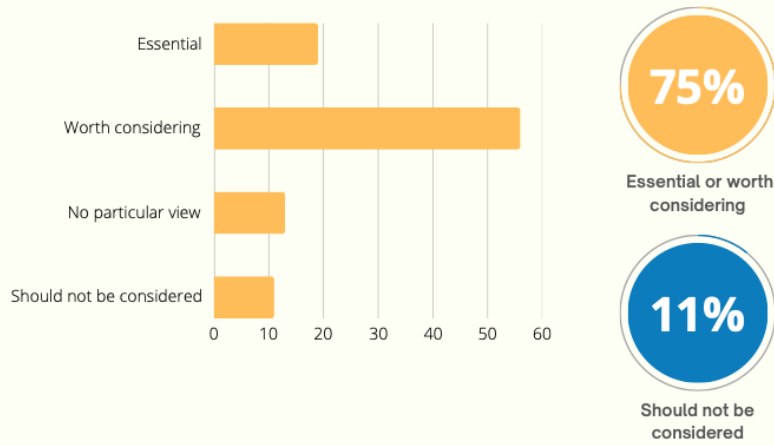
11. All institutions are expected to join peer-group arrangements, that include settings outside of any trust or group of settings, to help quality assure within a nationally agreed framework.



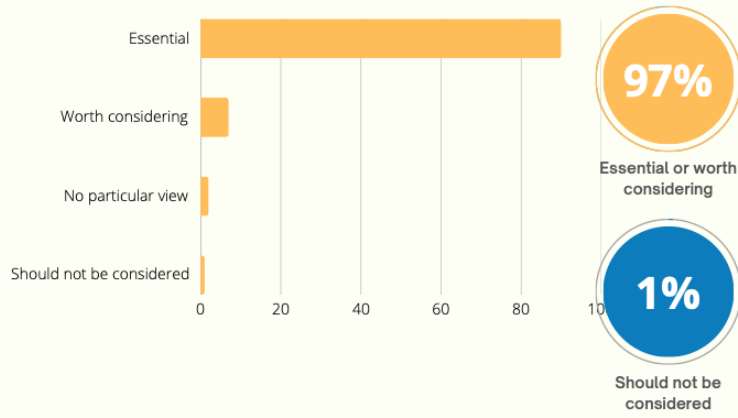
12. Schools and settings publish yearly self-evaluations based on peer-group quality assurance activity and post these on their websites.



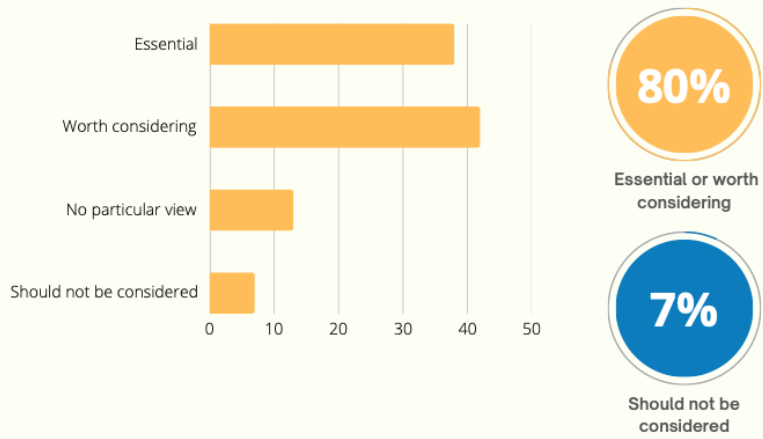
13. HMI work with seconded leaders or school improvement partners to quality assure peer-group evaluations and undertake thematic surveys leading to publications for wider dissemination.



14. All providers have access to a fully independent complaints process.



15. Ofsted makes much better use of modern technology so that staff and pupil surveys can play a role in inspection risk assessment and scheduling.



Conclusion

The ABC's findings are clear. Respondents have rejected Ofsted's current proposals and continue to lose faith and confidence in the inspection process. Its efforts to rehabilitate itself are faltering and, unless remedied, threaten a further degree of alienation from those it is meant to be supporting. There needs to be a substantial pause to Ofsted's plans so that it can begin to engage more meaningfully with the various sectors it regulates and inspects. There is a genuine appetite for change among respondents, but Ofsted's current proposals are viewed as 'tinkering at the edges'

The findings should be a wake-up call for the government, for the DfE and for the Chief Inspector. There is a major crisis looming if the current proposals are driven through. No respondent suggested that inspection should be abolished altogether, but many indicated they have little trust in Ofsted, and many were clear that the current proposals do not begin to adequately address the underlying issues that drove Ruth Perry to end her own life after an Ofsted inspection.

We believe that it is possible to have rigour and robust evaluation of public services while maintaining high levels of respect, appreciation and understanding. Many respondents had hoped to see a more collaborative and less confrontational approach being proposed to redress the balance of power/control which currently rests far too heavily with Ofsted.

There are different ways to inspect, as the ABC suggests. Instead of confrontation, respectful dialogue with the teaching profession is needed. A wide-ranging third-party commission could be the way forward – informed in part by the findings of this survey.

