



# **THE ALTERNATIVE BIG LISTEN**

## **A summary report on school inspection**

**OFSTED IS NOT FIT FOR PURPOSE**

**ONE- OR TWO-WORD JUDGMENTS SHOULD NOT BE USED**

**A MORATORIUM ON ROUTINE INSPECTIONS IS NEEDED**

**COMPILED BY COLIN RICHARDS AND FRANK NORRIS**

**12 July 2024**

# INTRODUCTION

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. Following the tragic death of Ruth Perry, the headteacher at Caversham Primary School, and the publication of the Coroner's Report. Ofsted launched the Big Listen (BL) to gather views on its inspection activity.

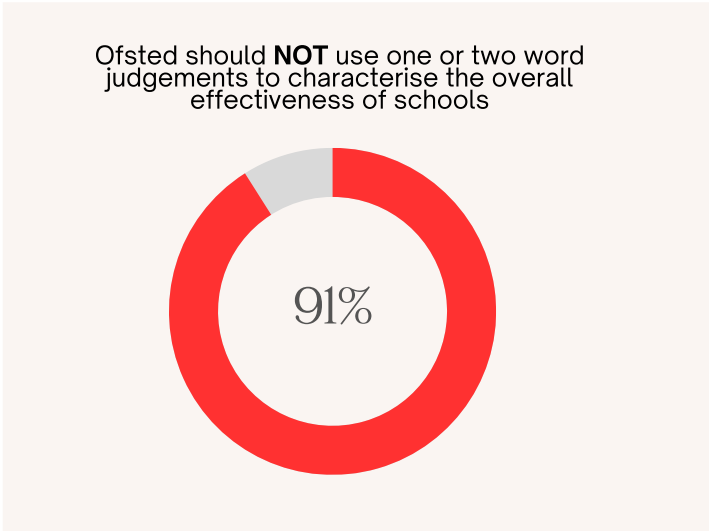
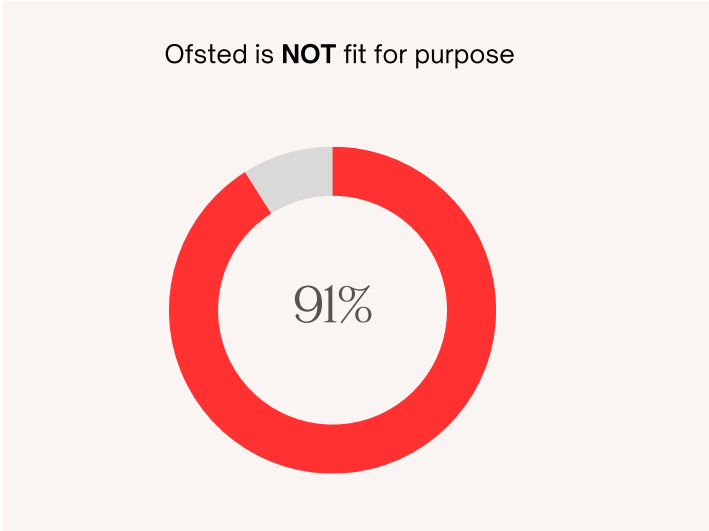
'The 'Alternative Big Listen' (ABL) offers an opportunity to remedy the major deficiencies in Ofsted's BL survey by asking respondents to review the inspectorate's current and past performance. It includes many of the key statements used by Ofsted but asks very different questions. In order to make the most effective use of limited resources it focusses on schools and post-16 settings. **It raises serious issues for the new Secretary of State who has committed to the reform of school inspection in England.**

The Alternative Big Listen is self-funded and has been supported by many leading commentators and practitioners, including Professor Julia Waters, sister of Ruth Perry. Over 13,000 have visited the ABL website and 1,368 have completed the survey.

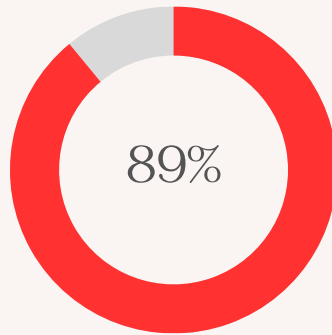
# MAIN FINDINGS

The findings from the ABL reveal Ofsted has lost very significant levels of trust and confidence from the school sector and strongly suggest that fundamental, not piecemeal, change, is required to craft an inspection system fit for purpose in the second quarter of the twenty-first century. This is urgent given the parlous state of relations, indicated by the ABL survey, between Ofsted and those who work in schools.

## Very high percentages of respondents are dissatisfied with Ofsted



Ofsted does **NOT** sufficiently consider the context of school's local area in the judgements they make



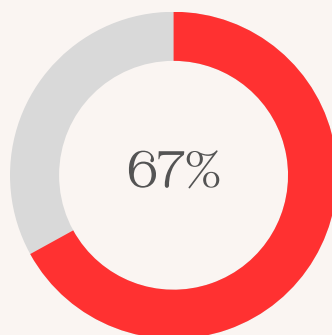
**Very significantly too, 90% believe inspections are not carried out in a way that is consistent from place to place.**

**Also significantly, 85% disagree that the number of schools graded Good or Outstanding give a strong indication of the overall quality of the schools' system.**

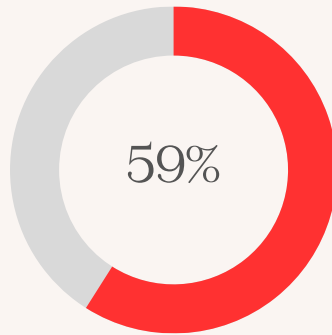
**83% believe that there should be a moratorium on routine inspections (but not all) until a fundamental review has taken place.**

## **Ofsted's reporting of other key aspects is also heavily criticised by the majority of respondents**

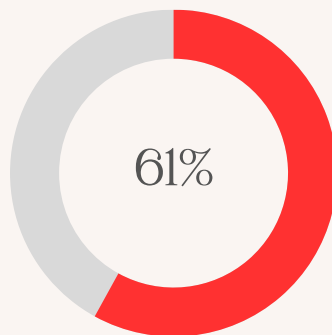
Ofsted does **NOT** hold schools properly to account for the quality of education they provide.



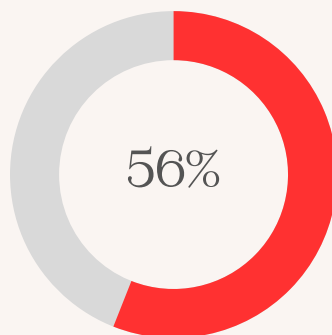
Ofsted does **NOT** give a clear judgement on the quality of education at the school



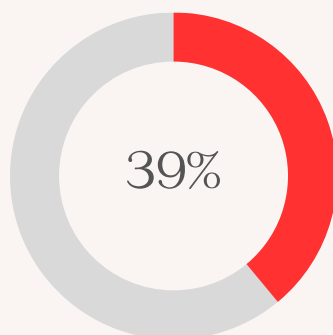
Ofsted does **NOT** give a clear judgement on the quality of leadership and management and how it impacts children or learners



Ofsted does **NOT** make clear what the school does to support children with special educational needs and/or disabilities.



Ofsted does **NOT** hold schools properly to account for keeping children safe



39% of respondents do not believe Ofsted holds schools properly to account for keeping children safe; around 20% don't know. This response reinforces the critical comments made within the Coroner's Report following the death of Ruth Perry.

A more detailed breakdown of our findings can be found later in the report.

## The survey respondents and methodology

The table below shows the number of those who completed the survey. They represent a wide cross-section of professional and personal opinion about the effectiveness or otherwise of the current English system of school inspection. We decided to reduce the number of categories respondents could identify with and this explains why the ‘Other’ category is high. This was a decision we made to ensure we could analyse the responses quickly. We also hope to undertake a more extensive analysis to determine whether any particular sub- group responds differently from that of the group as a whole.

Category of respondent	%	Number
Primary Headteacher/Principal	18.42	252
Primary Teacher	34.21	468
Secondary Headteacher/Principal	5.26	72
Secondary Teacher	13.01	178
Special School Headteacher/Principal	1.75	24
Special School Teacher	3.07	42
Governor/Trustee	7.82	107
Lecturer	1.46	20
Parent/Carer	10.16	139
Other	21.56	295

Total Number of respondents: 1,368

No survey is problem-free, and it is worth noting that both Ofsted’s Big Listen and the Alternative Big Listen have inevitable shortcomings.

Neither is statistically representative of the whole population they are surveying, whether they are respondents in the school sector and post-16 settings on which the ABL focusses or those in the far wider education, children’s and social services surveyed in the BL. However, the ABL sample is large enough for reasonably valid observations and conclusions about school inspection to be made from the survey findings.

In both surveys, rather than being chosen at random, those replying are self-selecting with a range of unknowable motivations apart from an interest in education strong enough to have elicited responses to a wide range of questions.

In both surveys, the statements used to elicit responses are only a sample of those that could have been used. Except for the questions referring to fitness for purpose, the use of one-or two-word judgements, the view on a moratorium and those related to the quality of school inspection reports, the ABL survey deliberately uses the same statements as the BL but crucially poses different questions about them.



## THE DETAILED FINDINGS

In this section each question is reported on in turn. Further analysis may reveal if there is a significant variation between responses from individual groups of respondents. We intend undertaking this at a later date.

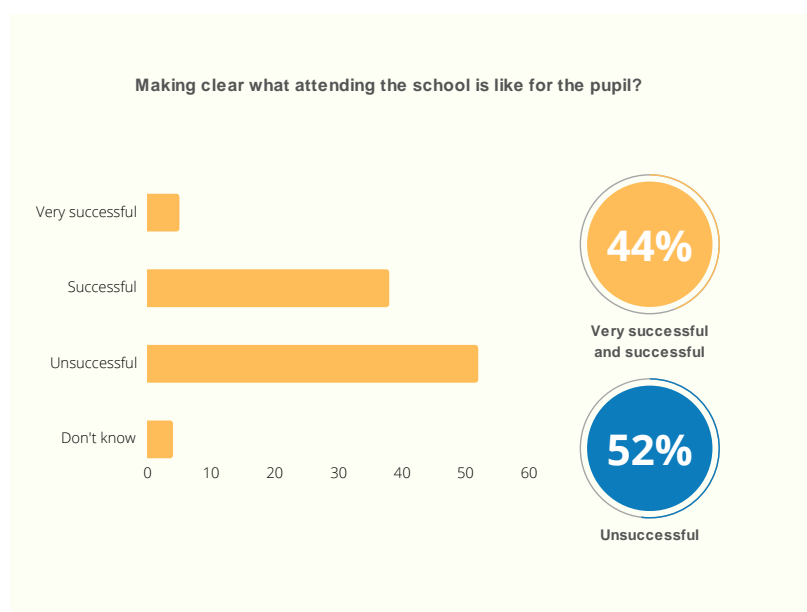
### A. The clarity of Ofsted's judgments and findings

The ABL invites respondents to gauge how successful Ofsted inspections are in making its judgments and findings clear using the four-point scale; very successful/successful/unsuccessful/don't know. In this way, the questions invite an evaluation of aspects of Ofsted's actual performance based on respondents' actual experience of inspection. In addition to the graphs some findings are briefly referred to in the text.

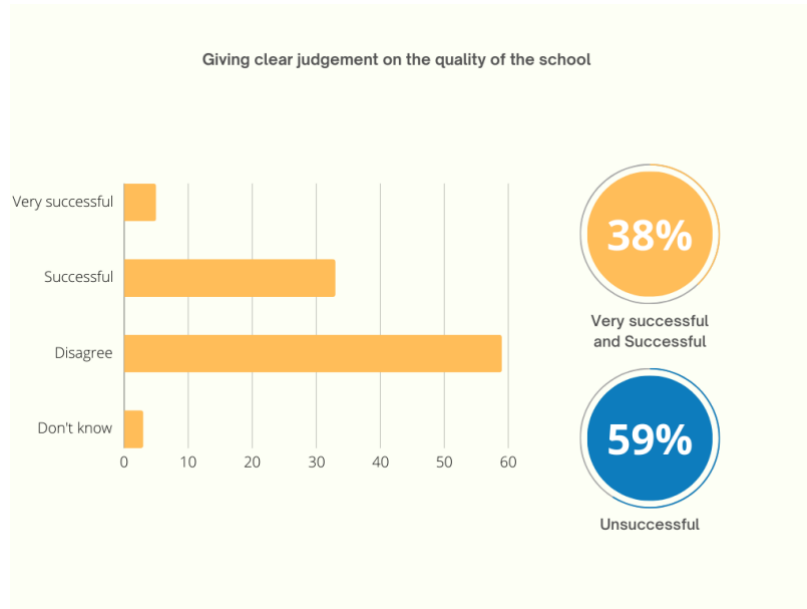
The Ofsted survey adopts a very different perspective. It asks how important each of the statements are using a five-point scale: very important /important/not important/neutral/not very important/not all important. We believe the phrasing invites a positive response. It is also unlikely that respondents who think the survey important enough to devote time are going to view any of the statements as unimportant. By its very nature the BL is likely to produce a more optimistic evaluation than the ABL.

#### How successful is Ofsted in....

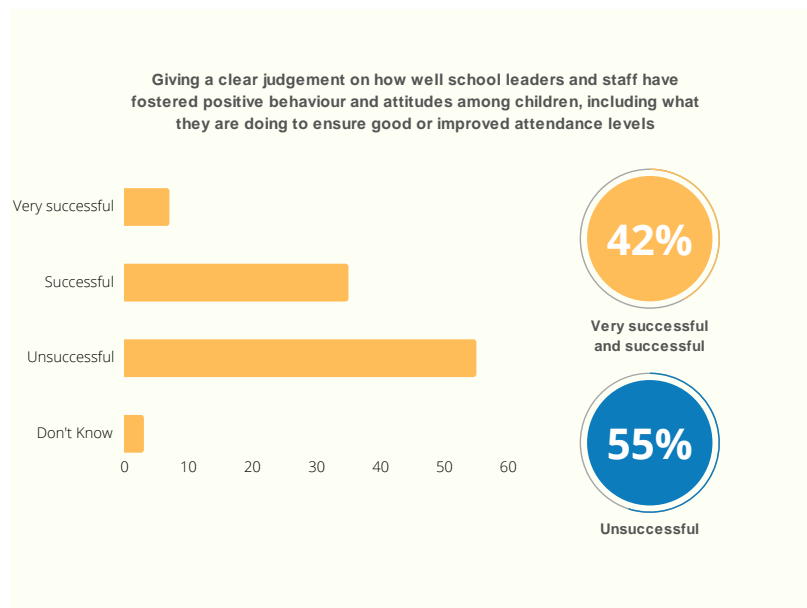
##### 1. Making clear what attending the school is like for the pupil?



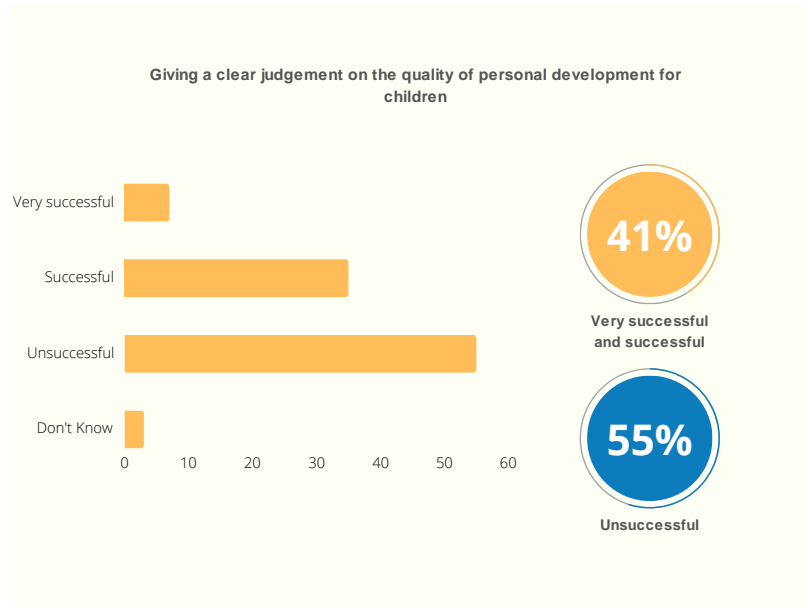
## 2. Giving a clear judgement on the quality of the school?



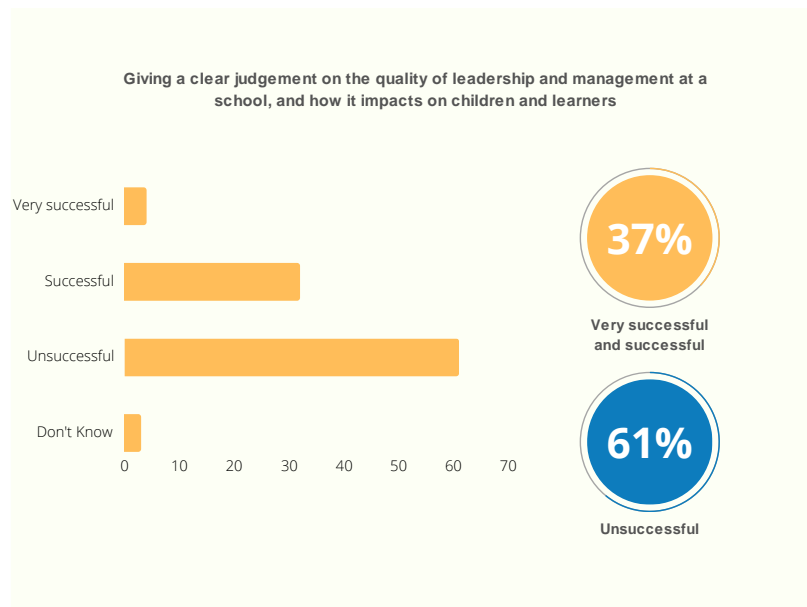
## 3. Giving a clear judgement on how well school leaders and staff have fostered positive behaviour and attitudes among children, including what they are doing to ensure good or improved attendance levels?



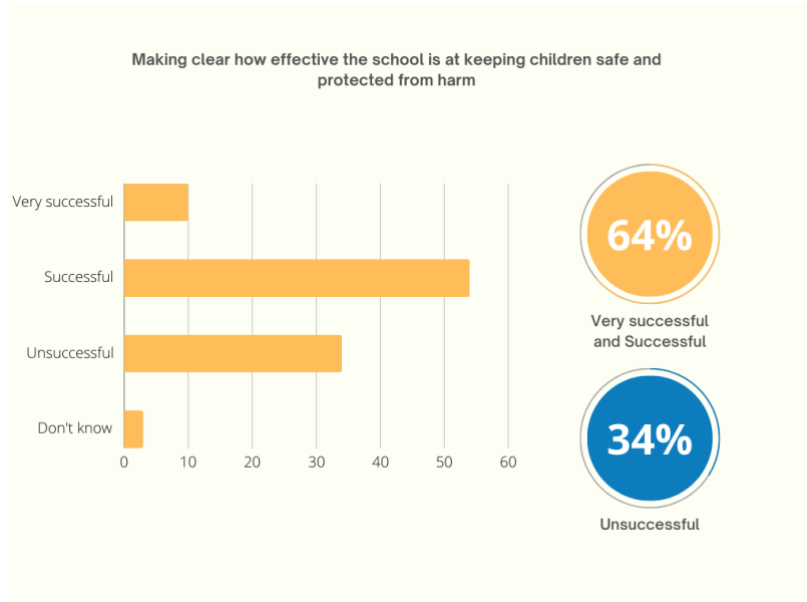
#### 4. Giving a clear judgement on the quality of personal development for children?



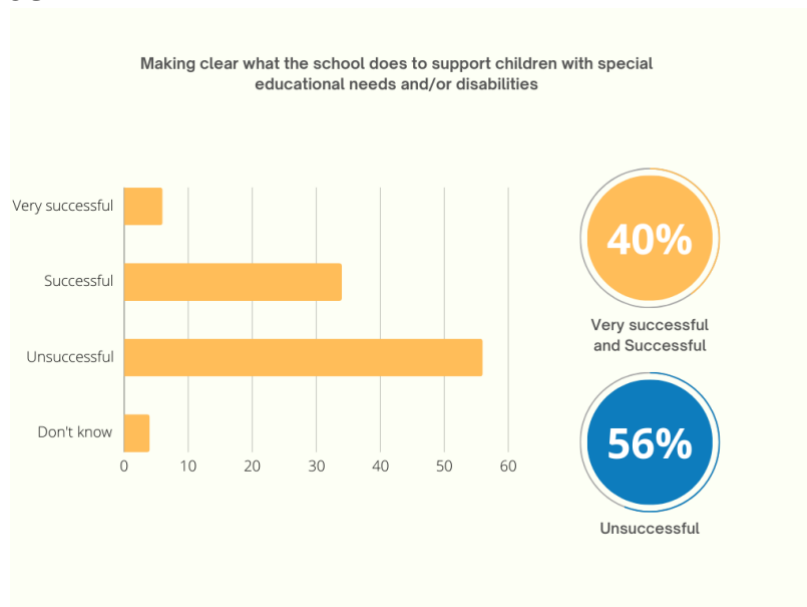
#### 5. Giving a clear judgement on the quality of leadership and management at a school, and how it impacts on children and learners?



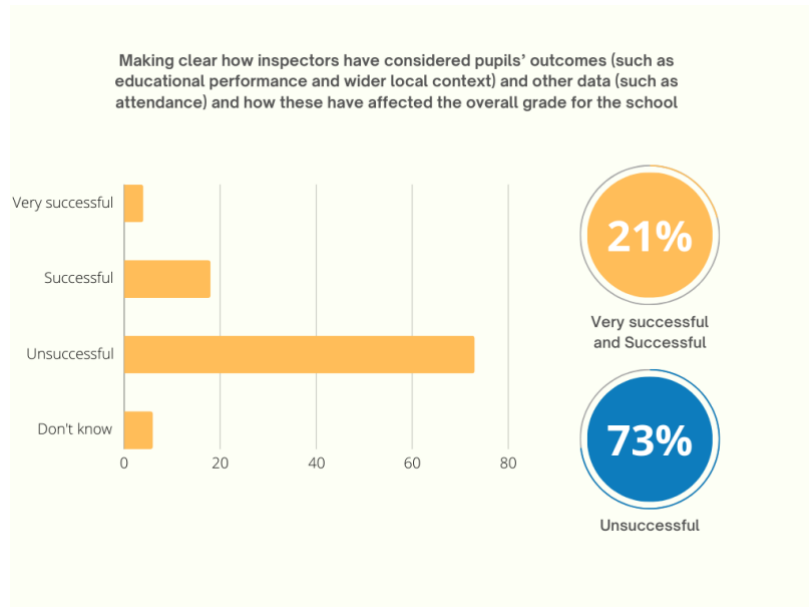
## 6. Making clear how effective the school is at keeping children safe and protected from harm?



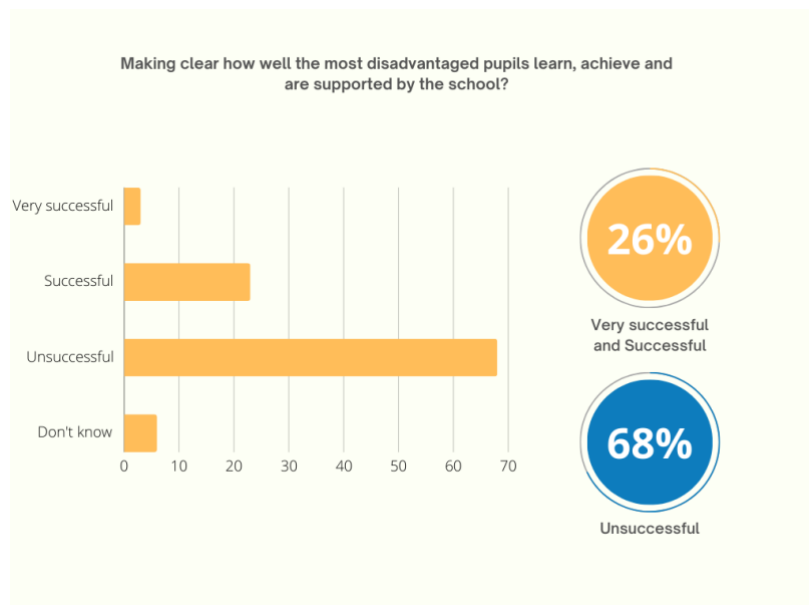
## 7. Making clear what the school does to support children with special educational needs and/or disabilities?



**8. Making clear how inspectors have considered pupils' outcomes (such as educational performance and wider local context) and other data (such as attendance) and how these have affected the overall grade for the school?**



**9. Making clear how well the most disadvantaged pupils learn, achieve and are supported by the school?**



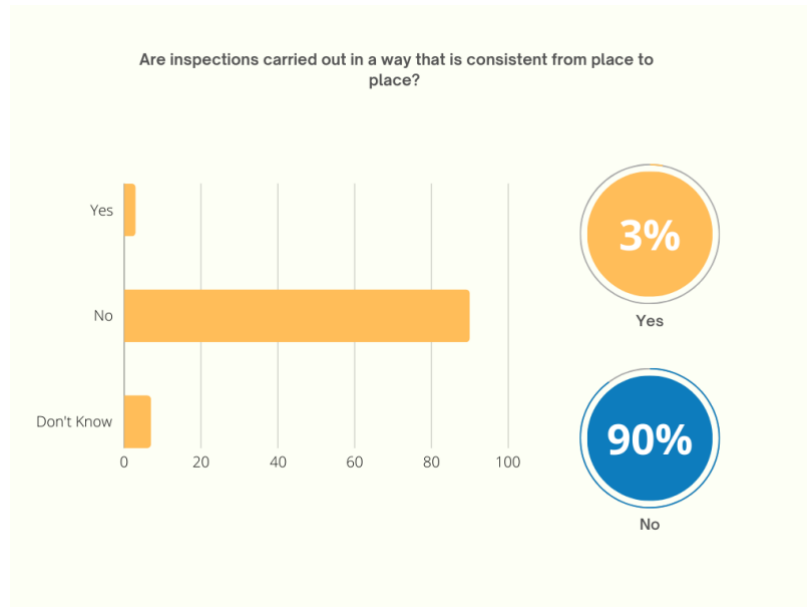
68% of responses are critical of Ofsted's reporting of how well the most disadvantaged pupils learn, achieve and are supported. That percentage rises to 73% critical of how inspectors fail to make clear how they have considered pupils' outcomes such as educational performance and the wider social context.

Just over four out of ten agree that Ofsted makes it clear what the school does to support children with special educational needs and/or disabilities – a percentage which drops to 26% for making it clear how the most disadvantaged pupils, learn, achieve and are supported in the school.

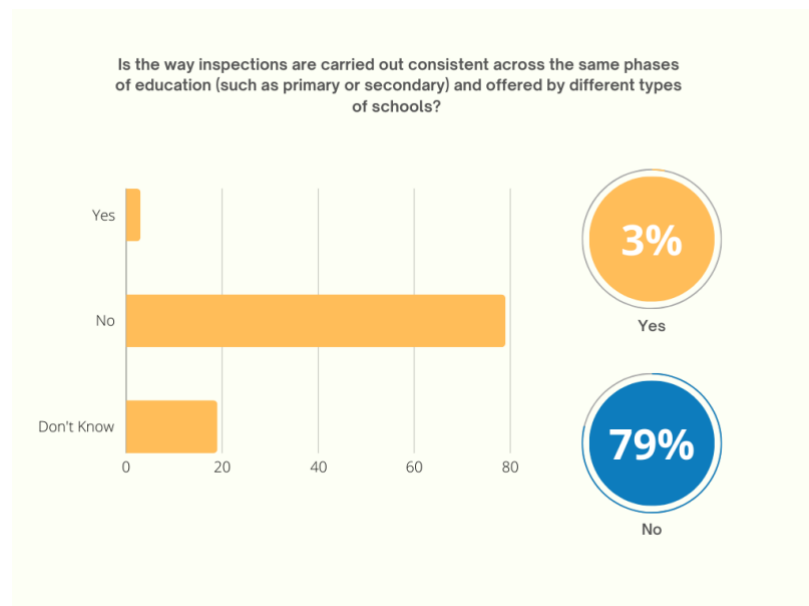
**It is clear that respondents believe Ofsted has only limited success in conveying its judgments and findings clearly.**

## B. Aspects of Ofsted's inspection practice

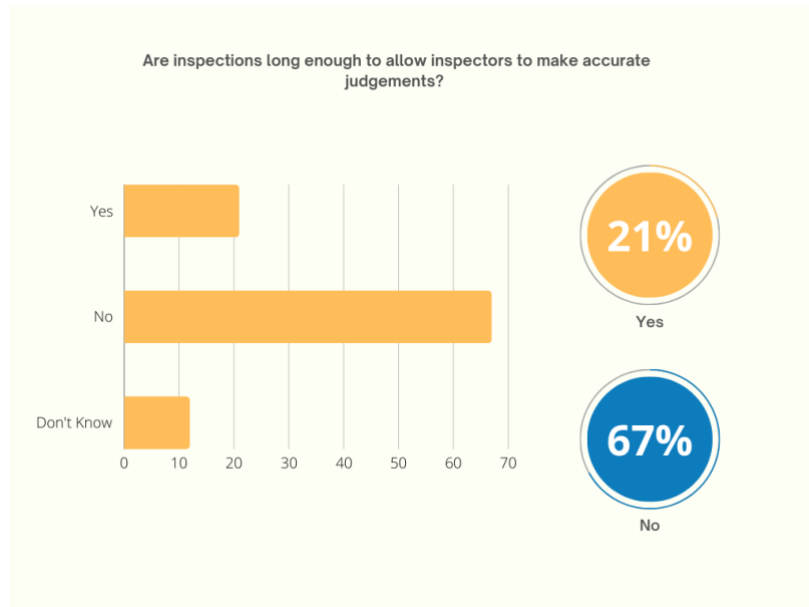
10. Are inspections carried out in a way that is consistent from place to place?



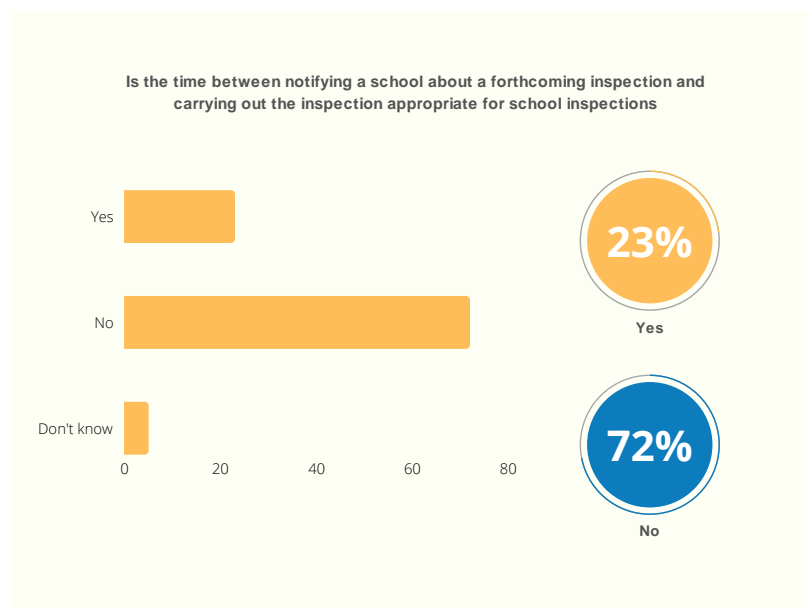
11. Is the way inspections are carried out consistent across the same phases of education (such as primary or secondary) and offered by different types of schools?



**12. Are inspections long enough to allow inspectors to make accurate judgements?**

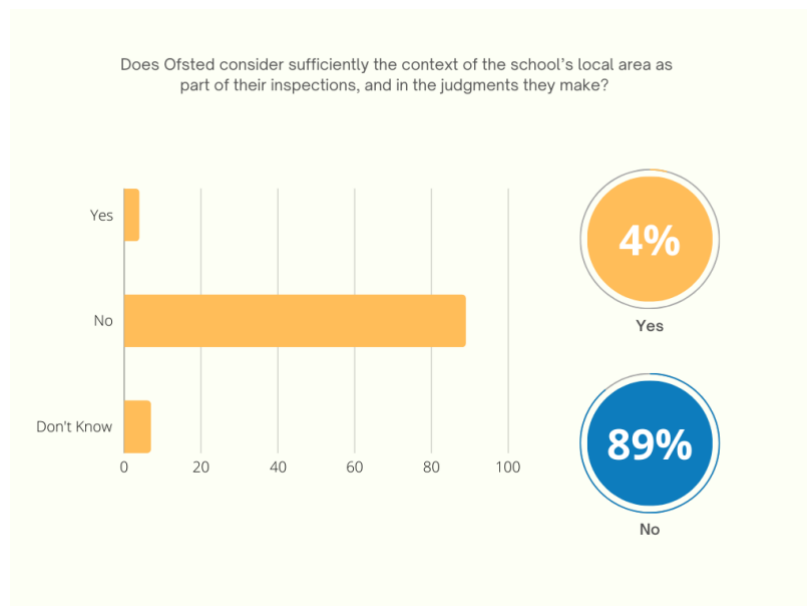


**13. Is the time between notifying a school about a forthcoming inspection and carrying out the inspection appropriate for school inspections?**

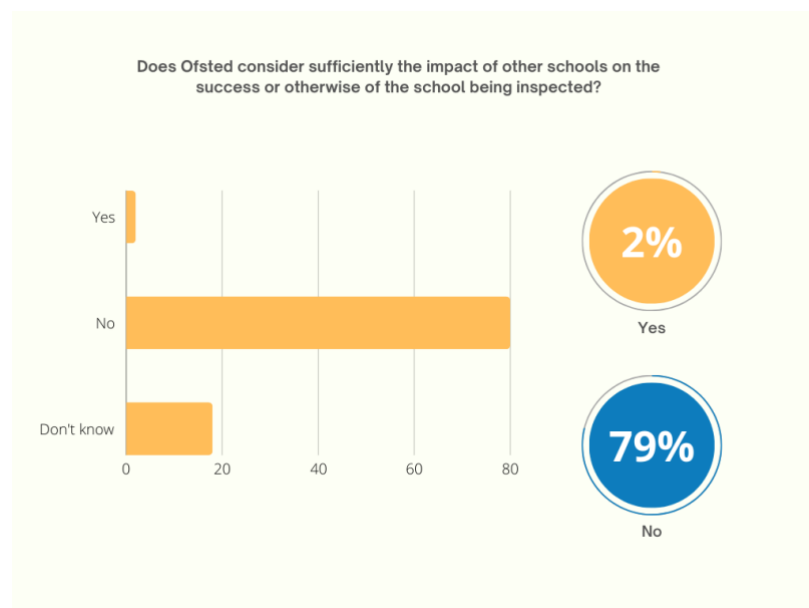


**14. Does Ofsted consider sufficiently the context of the school's local area as part of their inspections, and in the judgments they make?**





**15. Does Ofsted consider sufficiently the impact of other schools on the success or otherwise of the school being inspected?**



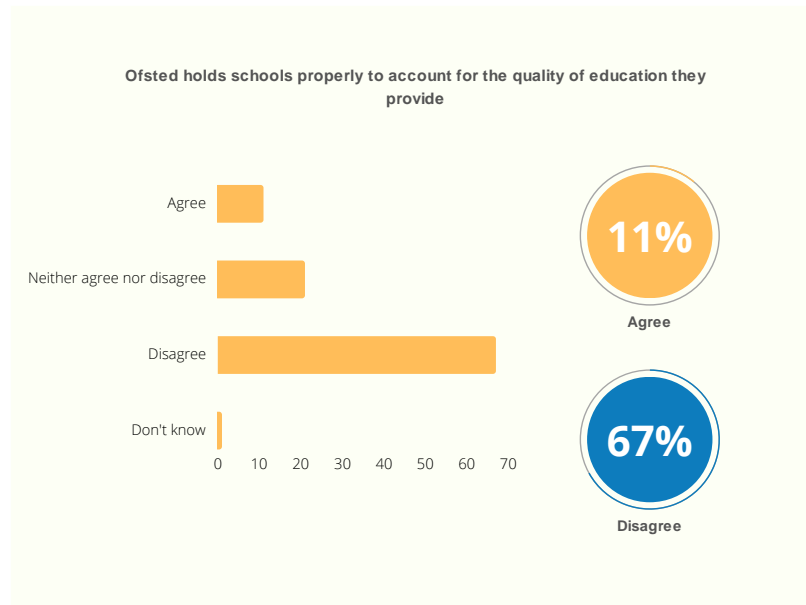
Nine out of ten respondents do not believe that inspections are carried out consistently from place to place. A similarly high proportion (89%) do not accept that Ofsted teams sufficiently consider schools' contexts in the judgements they make and report. 72% are dissatisfied with the current arrangements for notifying schools about forthcoming inspections and 67% do not believe that current inspections are long enough to allow accurate judgments to be made.

**It is clear that important aspects of Ofsted's current inspection arrangements require considerable improvement.**

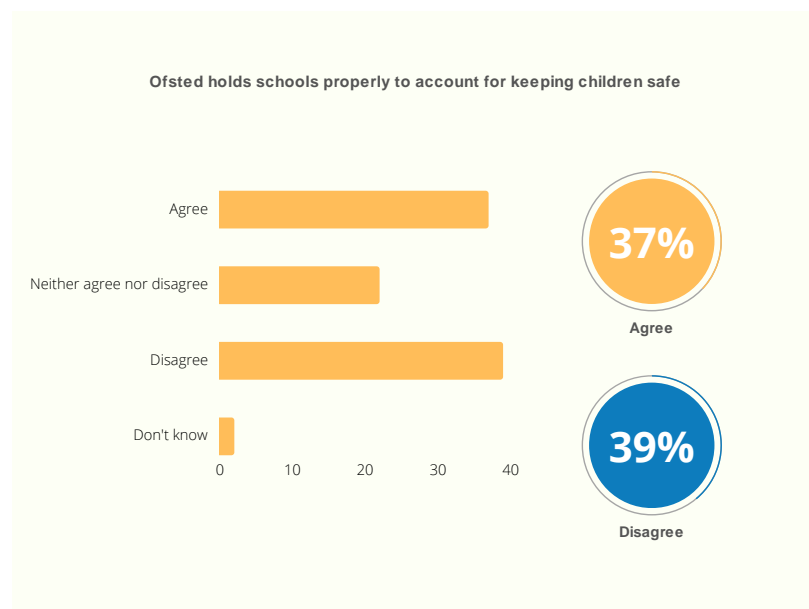
## C. Ofsted's impact

This part of the ABL survey uses exactly the same format as Ofsted when considering its “impact”. This is the only section where direct comparisons can be made between the findings of the respective surveys. The graphs below provide data on:

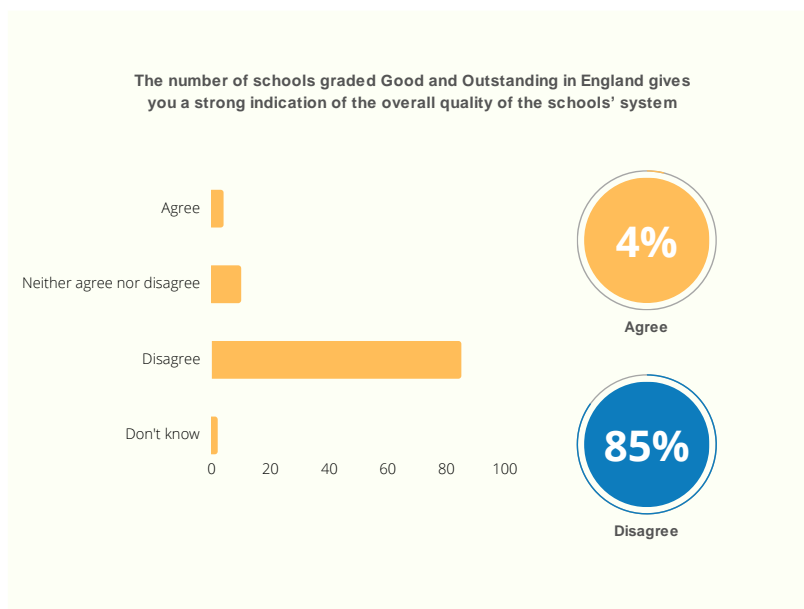
### 16. Does Ofsted hold schools properly to account for the quality of education they provide?



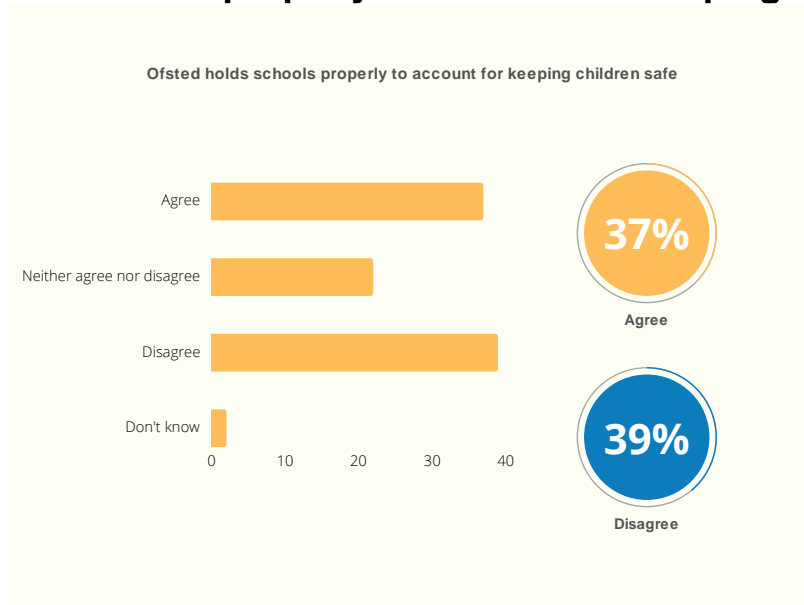
### 17. Does Ofsted hold schools properly to account for keeping children safe?



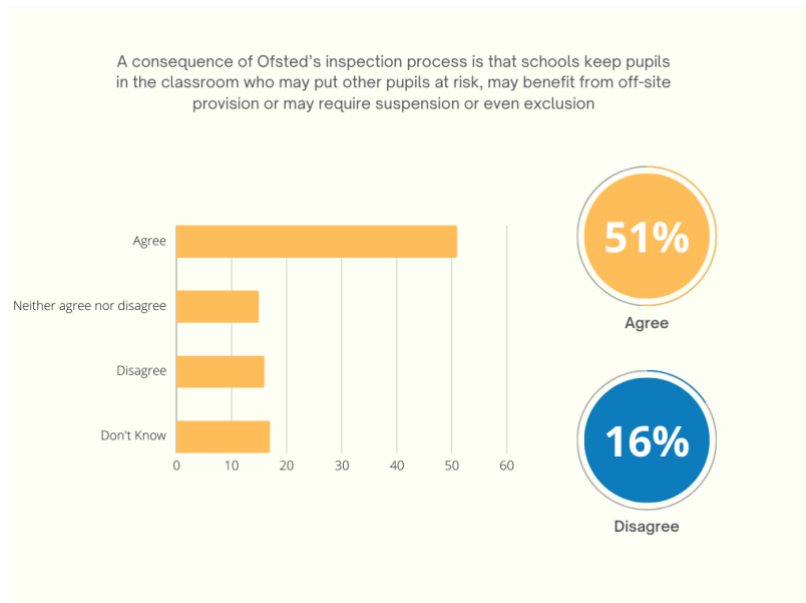
**18. Does the number of schools graded Good and Outstanding in England give you a strong indication of the overall quality of the schools' system?**



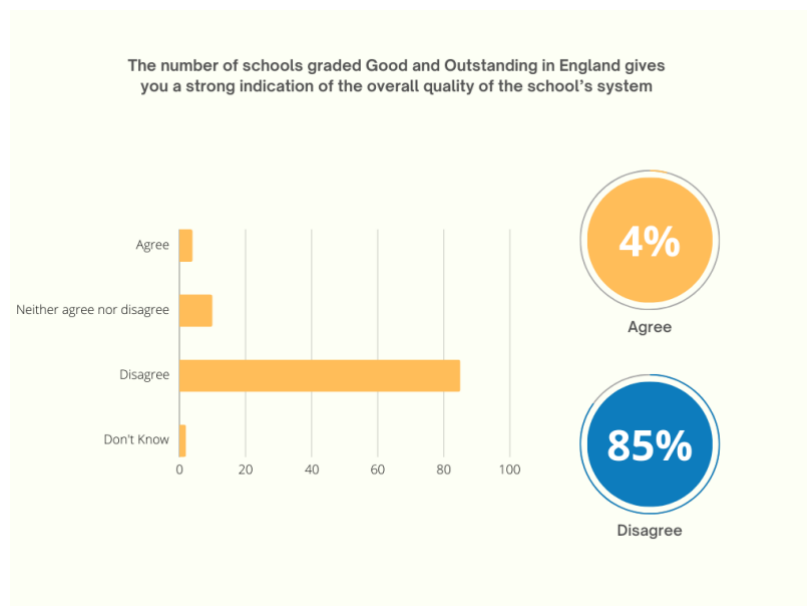
**19. Does Ofsted hold schools properly to account for keeping children safe?**



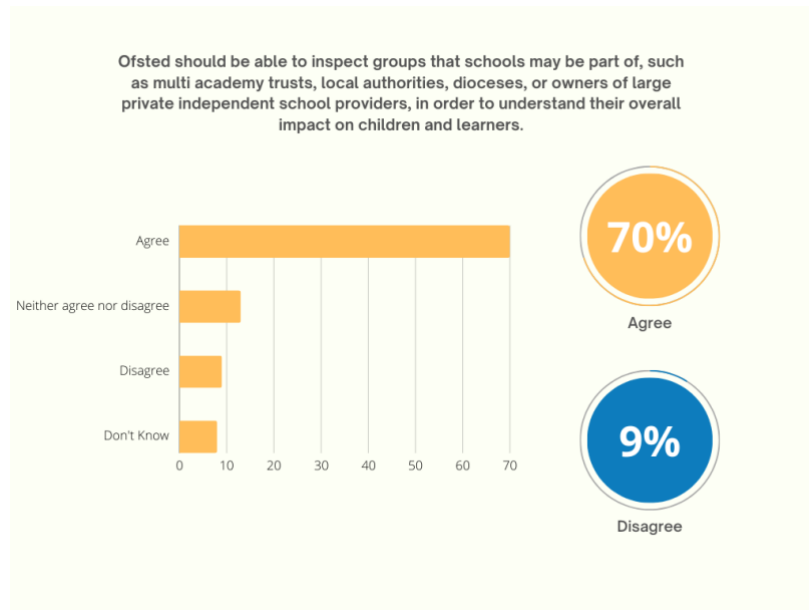
**20. A consequence of Ofsted's inspection process is that schools keep pupils in the classroom who may put other pupils at risk, may benefit from off-site provision or may require suspension or even exclusion**



**21. Does the number of schools graded good and outstanding in England give you a strong indication of the overall quality of the school's system**



**22. Should Ofsted be able to inspect groups that schools may be part of, such as multi academy trusts, local authorities, dioceses, or owners of large private independent school providers, in order to understand their overall impact on children and learners?**

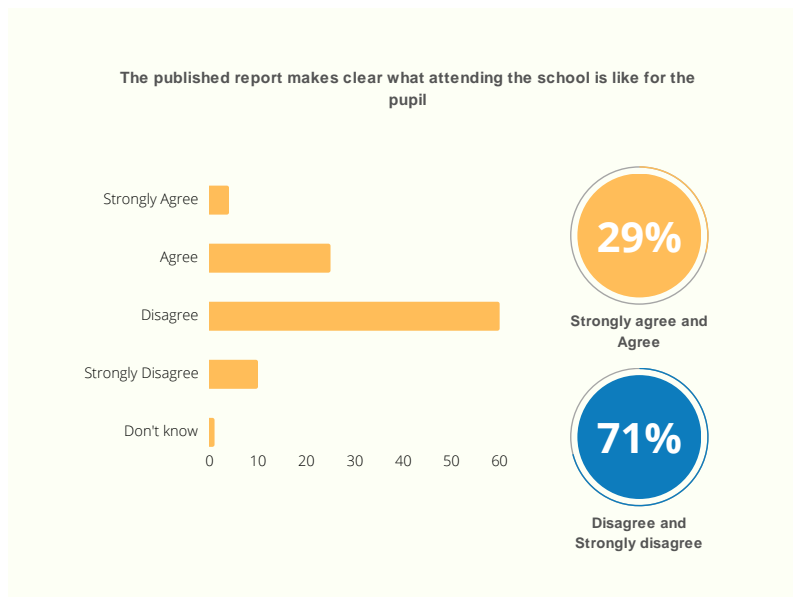


Only 11% of responses agree that Ofsted holds schools properly to account for the quality of education they provide, with 67% expressing disagreement. Only 37% accept that Ofsted holds schools properly to account for keeping children safe with 39% dissenting from that positive assessment. A large majority (85%) agree that the number of schools graded good and outstanding in England do not give a strong indication of the overall quality of England’s schools’ system; only 4% agree that they do.

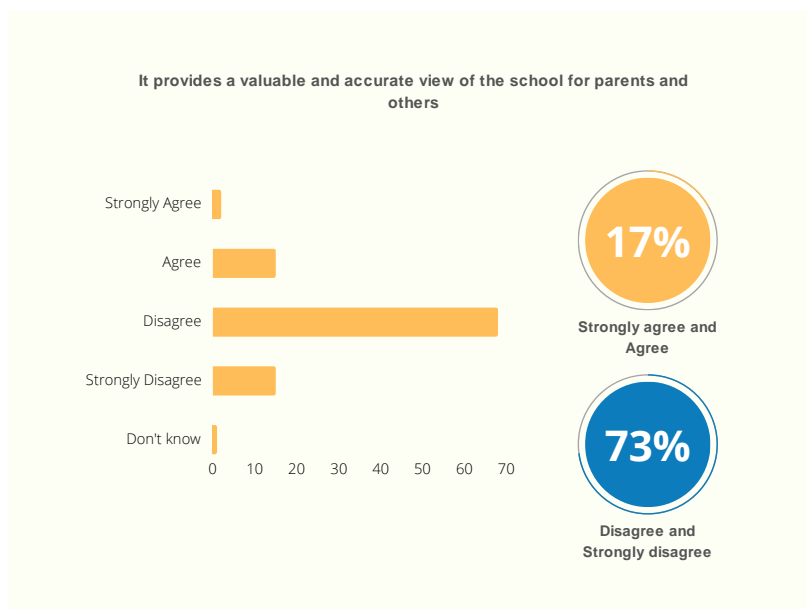
**The findings provide strong evidence that there is widespread loss of confidence in the robustness of Ofsted’s judgments.**

Our survey also posed additional questions on the impact of school inspection reports using a four-point scale.

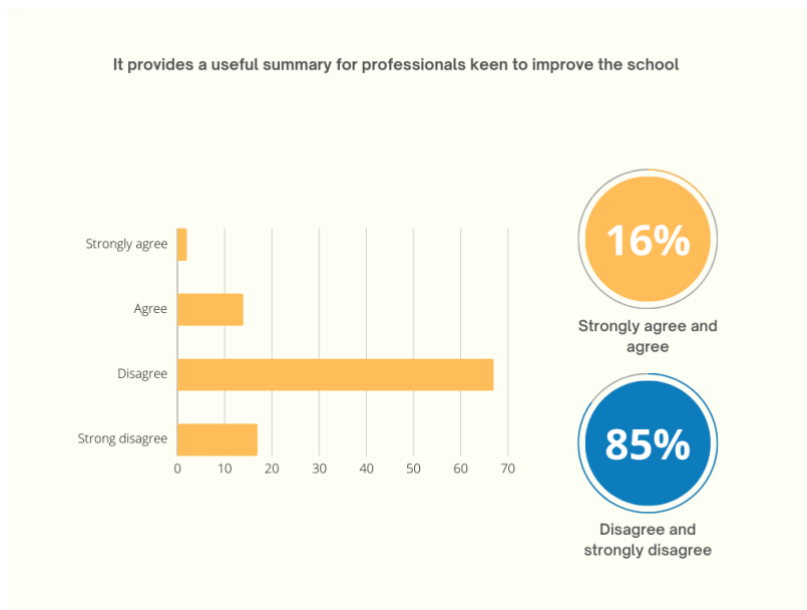
**23. Does the published report make clear what attending the school is like for the pupil?**



**24. Does the report provide a valuable and accurate view of the school for parents and others?**



**25. Does the report provide a useful summary for professionals keen to improve the school?**



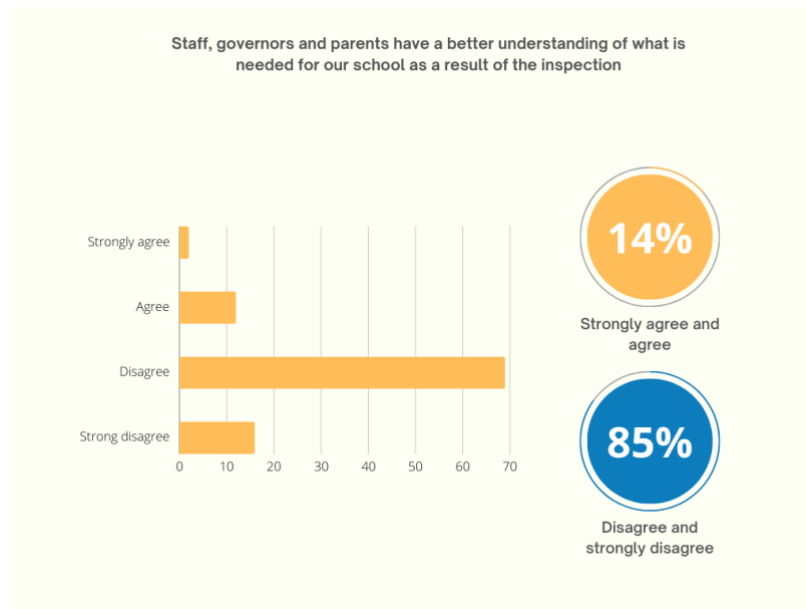
Only 29% of responses agree that current school inspection reports make clear what attending the schools is like for pupils. Only 17% of respondents believe that reports provide a valuable and accurate view of the school for parents and others. Only 16% agree they provide a useful summary for professionals, keen to improve their schools.

## D. Asking other questions Ofsted's Big Listen survey didn't ask

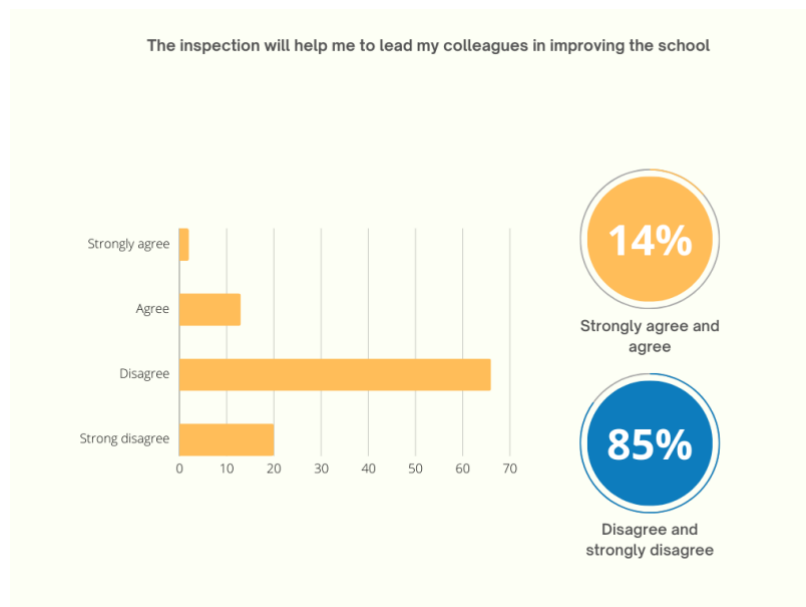
The ABL posed three questions about the Ofsted school inspection experience and how it influences improvement beyond the inspection – questions not asked in Ofsted's Big Listen.

**Do respondents agree that:**

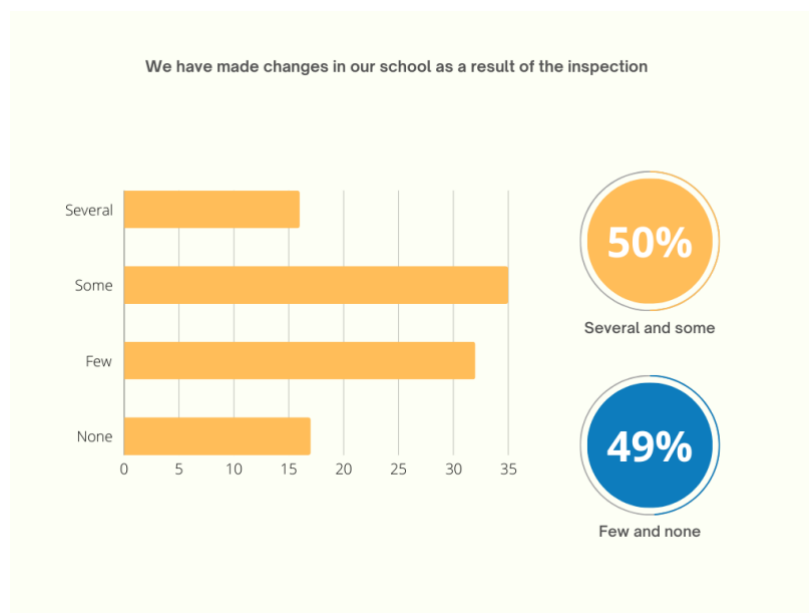
**26. Staff, governors and parents have a better understanding of what is needed for our school as a result of the inspection?**



**27. The inspection will help me to lead colleagues in improving the school?**



## 28. We have made changes in our school as a result of the inspection?



The overall results suggest that inspection is seen as a single event and not one that is used as a springboard for change and further improvement. Ofsted has previously tried to connect its work with school improvement, but these findings make it clear that many of those receiving the judgements and using the recommendations do not find the process useful or effective in securing sustained improvement in their schools.



## E. Three key findings

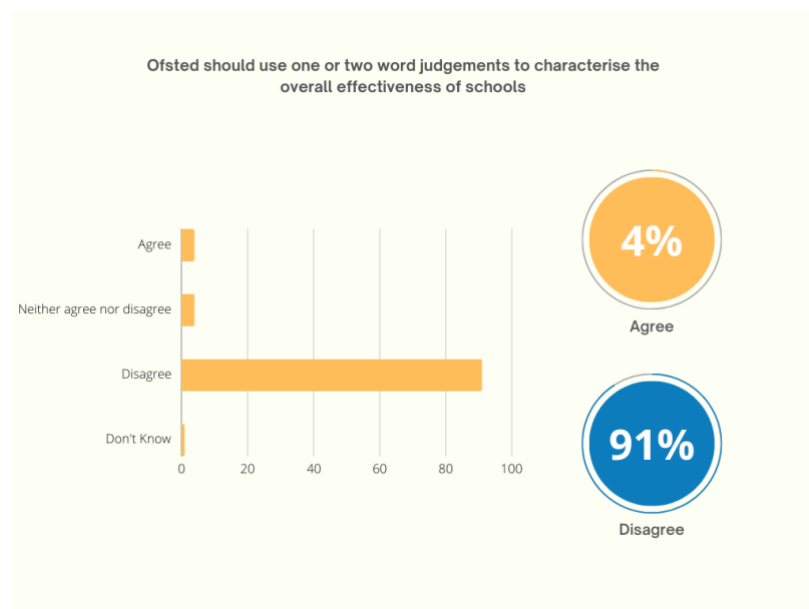
Finally, The Alternative Big Listen asks three fundamental questions, none of which are asked by Ofsted in its survey:

- **Should Ofsted use one-or-two-word judgments to characterise the overall effectiveness of schools?**
- **Should there be a moratorium on routine (not all) inspections until a fundamental review has taken place?**

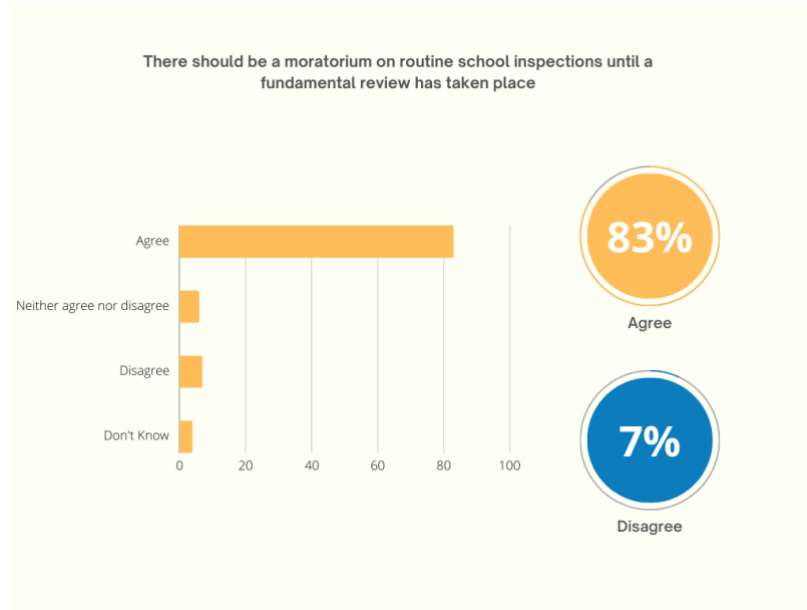
And most significantly of all

- **Overall, is Ofsted fit for purpose?**

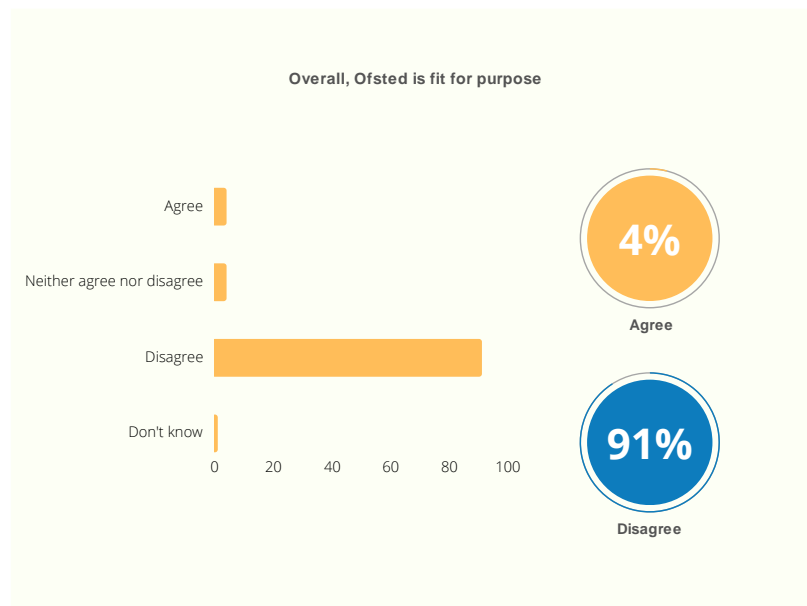
### 29. Ofsted should use one or two word judgements to characterise the overall effectiveness of schools



### 30. Should there be a moratorium on routine school inspections until a fundamental review has taken place?



### 31. Is Ofsted fit for purpose overall?



**91% of respondents disagree with the use of one-or-two-word judgements to characterise the overall effectiveness of schools. Only 4% support their use.**

**83% believe there should be a moratorium on routine (but not all) inspections while a fundamental review of Ofsted’s operation takes place.**

**As an overall verdict on Ofsted’s performance, 91% agree that it is not fit for purpose; only 4% believe it is.**

## Individual comments made in text boxes

Many of the 1368 respondents to the ABL made many unscripted responses in the “open” boxes provided. They provide rich insights. In the interests of complete transparency the ABL has placed every one of the many hundreds of responses on its website, anonymising where necessary. We have decided not to provide an analysis of individual comments in this summary report to maintain a high level of objectivity.

## IN CONCLUSION

**Readers of this report will draw their own conclusions from the findings of the ABL. It is clear that Ofsted is facing an existential crisis – whether to engage in piecemeal change, to be fundamentally reformed or to be replaced altogether. Our findings imply that the first of these is no longer a viable option.**

**Bridget Phillipson, the new Secretary of State for Education, and Sir Martyn Oliver, Ofsted’s Chief Inspector, need to take note of our findings and to take urgent principled action to reform the current school inspection regime.**

**Colin Richards and Frank Norris**

12 July 2024

