

Ofsted — The need for change in the English inspection system for schools

Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and education staff working in schools, colleges and universities. We believe that better mental health leads to better education.

This position paper provides an overview of our views on much needed changes to the Ofsted inspection process in England. These changes will protect the mental health and wellbeing of teachers, leaders and school staff. It draws on the findings of our research about inspections conducted as part of the most recent [Teacher Wellbeing Index](#)¹ (2023) and follow-up focus groups held with senior leaders and teaching staff in March 2024. We also draw from our submission to the [Education Select Committee's Ofsted inquiry](#)² and the report of our [Commission on Teacher Retention](#)³.

WHY GETTING THIS RIGHT IS IMPORTANT

Ofsted is a key actor within the English education system. Very few teachers or leaders believe that they shouldn't be held accountable. However, we often hear through our work with schools across the country that Ofsted is experienced as punitive and divorced from the reality that schools face on the ground.

Many staff and leaders fear inspections. As well as the direct impact on their mental health and wellbeing, inspections also directly affect teachers' professional identity, namely their beliefs and values about themselves and the value of their role as professionals. Headteachers tell us that Ofsted judgements are "*public judgements, which is why they are such a pressure.*"

Ofsted has not historically concerned itself with the relationship between professional identity, workplace stress, burnout, mental health and wellbeing. High-stakes, public judgements carry disproportionate consequences for the lives and careers of school leaders and their staff⁴. The judgements affect the careers of teachers, the standing of the school in the community it serves, pupil enrolment, local house prices and the lives of the staff working in that school. With so much riding on the outcome of an inspection, it is unsurprising that three-quarters of staff (73%) report that inspections have a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing⁵.

The extra workload which staff experience before, during and after an inspection is also a matter for concern. From our research with school staff, we understand that this work often arises from over-preparation and over-documentation of practice so that inspectors can easily be shown anything they might request. This appears to be driven by a fear of securing a judgement that is below local expectations. Such 'empty work' pulls staff away from their primary purpose to deliver good teaching and effective learning for their pupils. It reduces their job quality⁶ and

leaves them frustrated and demoralised with the demands of bureaucracy and compliance activities. This ultimately has an impact on overall staff wellbeing, and a desire to remain in their career.

We understand that not all reform currently called for is within Ofsted's gift. Political decisions are required to fully engage with much of the feedback from the profession. It is clear, however, that a culture shift is required within Ofsted in order to make improvements to rebuild trust from the ground up. The change of tone and sector engagement since the arrival of the new HMCI is encouraging in this regard. School teachers and leaders need and deserve an inspection process that supports them and their settings to improve and grow, without fear of their careers ending — or worse.

Below we have outlined our recommendations for improvements that will help to improve trust between the inspectorate and the profession and to promote a positive culture across the system. These improvements will go a long way to protecting the wellbeing and resilience of the workforce.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Only 9% of staff working in English schools currently consider Ofsted inspections to be fit for purpose⁷. Our eight recommendations for improvement are:

- 1 Publicise widely and clearly (again) all the things that are not required by Ofsted. Create a mechanism for school leaders and teachers to flag any instance where one of these items is requested by an inspection team, with a guarantee that raising the flag will not affect the inspection outcome.
- 2 Ensure that inspectors have the right expertise to understand what they are inspecting. Phase, setting and recent-enough classroom experience are all important factors for establishing trust in the reliability of judgements delivered.
- 3 Beyond the Mental Health First Aid training delivered to inspectors, further work is required to raise the relational skill level of inspectors to support consistently safe practice across all inspections. The creation of psychologically-safe interactions is an essential part of mitigating mental health risk during the inspection process.
- 4 Much of the fear expressed by school leaders is about finding themselves 'unlucky' and drawing a lead inspector who is considered to be either punitive in their approach, or who has a particular 'hobby horse' which may be marginal to the overall work of a school. Ofsted's ability to drive through culture change and embed a consistent and reliably supportive collegiate approach to inspection will be critical to rebuilding trust across schools.
- 5 Rebuilding trust also requires a transparent and credible complaint process. Whilst the inspectorate has worked to make improvement in its complaints process, further work is required to ensure that the perception of fairness is strongly established. This will require clear boundaries and separation between teams, but also recourse to some kind of independent review in circumstances where complaints cannot be resolved through internal channels.

- 6 Reducing the high stakes associated with inspection will require a whole system response. Ofsted ought to convene a representative group of stakeholders to systematically examine how this can be achieved. This will depend on political will, but the opportunity to do this in collaboration with others will offer Ofsted another route to rebuilding trust with the profession.
- 7 The context and cohorts of school communities need to be considered as part of the inspection process. Without this, school staff will continue to feel aggrieved, misrepresented and badly served by inspection.
- 8 Work with the sector to develop an alternative to single-word judgements that provides more useful and nuanced information, while protecting the mental health and wellbeing of school leaders and staff.

REDUCE THE EMPTY WORK

One of the main reasons teachers choose their career path is for the opportunity to make a difference to people's lives (selected by 59% of respondents to a survey for our Commission on Teacher Retention⁸). 79% of senior leaders and 76% of teachers also told us in 2021 that they have a clear sense of purpose that drives their desire to work in education⁹. In contrast, in 2023 73% told us they think inspections do not improve learner achievements¹⁰.

Accountability-driven workload — which can be very 'tedious' and bureaucratic¹¹ — is a significant factor when we talk to teachers and leaders about why they consider leaving teaching. Much of this additional workload may not be mandated by Ofsted, but is driven by the culture created by the inspection process.

"It's definitely, for me, the admin tasks that take up a lot of my time above and beyond the school hours..... A lot of being Head of Department is a lot of data gathering, a lot of data analysis, a lot of writing of class profiles and intervention strategies. A lot of it is already in other documents. So I do find it very frustrating that I'm picking data out from one document and kind of transferring it somewhere else and then a little bit later on in the year I have to do the same thing again."¹²

Due to the high stakes of the accountability system, many leaders feel they must create a visible audit trail for every decision taken in the school. The driver for this is fear that the lack of a sufficient audit trail will contribute to a negative Ofsted judgement. This anxiety and bureaucratic workload trickles down throughout the staff team.

Recommendation:

Publicise widely and clearly (again) all the things that are not required by Ofsted. Create a mechanism for school leaders and teachers to flag any instance where one of these items is requested by an inspection team, with a guarantee that raising the flag will not affect the inspection outcome.

RE-BUILD TRUST

Staff often tell us that they are met with inspectors who lack knowledge of their phase, subject area or recent enough experience in the classroom. This immediately erodes trust, as staff feel misunderstood or that they waste precious time explaining the basics of their decisions to inspectors who lack foundational knowledge. Such expertise is needed in order for staff to trust inspectors' judgements. When we asked in 2023, only 12% of staff agreed that inspections deliver reliable judgements¹³.

“And if you have inspector coming to your school and [s/he] doesn't understand what you're doing I think that's another layer of stress. Because even if you try to explain to them, try to educate them, they don't understand because they have the concept of a mainstream school, which is totally different to special needs”.

(Acting Assistant Headteacher, Special School, London)

“When we had our first Ofsted, it was a bit of a shock to system because the Department of Education monitoring visits were very supportive. Ofsted came in and didn't understand our context. We were an atypical entry point [school] for ages 14 to 19. They didn't understand that we had disaffected students that had negative experiences in their previous schools. We were marginalized in the sense that we were still measured against Progress 8 and EBacc [English Baccalaureate] which didn't work for us because we didn't have a key stage 3”.

(Assistant Principal, Secondary School, West Midlands)

“The inspector, almost wasn't knowledgeable, had no clue about my subject specialism, which was maths her specialism was SEND. She was a SEND school leader, so everything I was telling her she had no clue. All the acronyms, all the schemes of work. She said to me, what would the lesson look like at your school?”

(Teacher, Primary School, London)

“I think the general consensus from teachers that I've worked with is that quite often Ofsted inspectors perhaps have been out of the classroom for quite a while. They are probably former or current senior leaders who might not have actually been a class teacher for a significant amount of time, and that they are working towards an agenda that doesn't actually marry up with what a classroom teacher actually does”

(Teacher, Primary School, East Midlands)

The way in which inspectors interact with staff in schools must also be examined and improved. We have heard many reports of inspectors treating an inspection like a battle, where they aggressively interrogate senior leaders and their staff. Some teachers report inspectors are rude and insulting to staff, leaving them upset, angry and distrustful of the whole process.

One teacher described this as a “*game of chess, where inspectors want to catch you out, rather than have a dialogue*”. Others described the attitude of inspectors as that of an “*investigative journalist*”, as if there is an untold story or a weakness to uncover. They also described how some can be confrontational, akin to “*testing a hypothesis*”, and challenging senior leaders to be confident and argue their case.

Staff tell us that the best inspections happen when inspectors show empathy, interest and understanding. These inspectors are described as having good relational skills, and so can easily interact with others and can build effective and constructive relationships. When staff are treated fairly, but challenged, and the outcome accurately represents what is happening in the school, this builds self-efficacy amongst staff and leads to better job satisfaction. Done consistently, and without the more abrasive versions of inspection colouring the picture, this approach has the potential to significantly support the self-efficacy of school staff as well as identifying development and improvement opportunities for individual schools.

Recommendations:

To re-build trust between Ofsted and school staff, ensure that inspectors have the right expertise to understand what they are inspecting. Phase, setting and recent-enough classroom experience are all important factors for establishing trust in the reliability of judgements delivered.

Good quality relational skills are essential. Beyond the Mental Health First Aid training delivered to inspectors, further work is required to raise the relational skill level of inspectors to support consistently safe practice across all inspections. The creation of psychologically-safe interactions is an essential part of mitigating mental health risk during the inspection process.

Much of the fear expressed by school leaders is about finding themselves ‘unlucky’ and drawing a lead inspector who is considered to be either punitive in their approach, or who has a particular ‘hobby horse’ which may be marginal to the overall work of a school. Ofsted’s ability to drive through culture change and embed a consistent and reliably supportive collegiate approach to inspection will be critical to rebuilding trust across schools.

Rebuilding trust also requires a transparent and credible complaint process. Whilst the inspectorate has worked to make improvement in its complaints process, further work is required to ensure that the perception of fairness is strongly established. This will require clear boundaries and separation between teams, but also recourse to some kind of independent review in circumstances where complaints cannot be resolved through internal channels.

LOWER THE STAKES AND REDUCE FEAR

High stakes inspections deprive school leaders of the chance to change and grow. Fear distorts the operational priorities of the school and contributes to much of the negativity currently evident in the sector. 55% of education staff feel their institution’s organisational culture has a negative effect on their wellbeing¹⁴.

A single bad judgement shouldn’t be career ending, apart from in the most extreme circumstances. The current system weighs far too heavily on individual headteachers and is not comparable to other regulated sectors.

Perhaps paradoxically, when reflecting on the high-stakes nature of inspections, many staff describe a desire for more frequent, smaller inspections, carried out by local inspectors whom they know, and understand their setting and its context. There is a clear preference to develop constructive relationships with inspectors so they can collaborate on plans for improvement in a supportive way. Only 27% of education staff agree that inspections accurately identify key areas

for improvement¹⁵. They want an inspection to be more “*show and tell*” rather than “*hide and seek*”.

“I would actually rather an Ofsted inspector came to my school once a term for a full day, and I saw them 3 times a year, every year, and they got to know the school. They would then have a real, genuine picture of what was happening”.

(Headteacher, Primary School, North West England)

I think more of that human side needs to come through whereby schools don't feel like 'it's hide and seek', it's 'show and tell', as the Lead Inspector said. Her words were “we're here to see what you do well”.

(Assistant Headteacher, Primary School, London)

Once a school enters the inspection window, staff describe themselves as ‘waiting for the call’. Teachers talk about being on “*high alert*” for being told their school is going to be inspected, and the need to be “*consistently perfect*.” Senior leaders describe this period as “*a thing that's hanging around, lurking over the top of you, tiring and taking your energy*.” They describe not arranging after-school activities in the first half of the week in case they get ‘the call’; not arranging hospital appointments, and going into the weekend with relief that they’re not “*going to wake up [again] on Monday morning with that sick dread of is it going to come this week?*” Throughout this period, senior leaders also have to manage the anticipation and anxiety of their staff.

A combination of high-stakes and lack of clarity over the inspection window create high levels of pressure and anxiety which affect the entire staff team, and has an impact on workload and overall wellbeing. This view is supported by the school leader’s union NAHT, which states, “*Ultimately, what is needed is a higher-trust, lower-stakes inspection system, where a single inspection event does not have the potential for career-defining consequences, thus reducing the significance of the window, or the timing of the inspection.*”¹⁶

Recommendation:

Reducing the high stakes associated with inspection will require a whole system response. Ofsted ought to convene a representative group of stakeholders to systematically examine how this can be achieved. This will depend on political will, but the opportunity to do this in collaboration with others will offer Ofsted another route to rebuilding trust with the profession.

ENSURE LEGITIMACY AND FAIRNESS

There is a pervasive view across the education sector that Ofsted inspections are not fair and that they penalise the least well-resourced communities. This is supported by EPI’s finding that, “*There is a systematic negative correlation between school intakes with more disadvantaged children, or more children with low prior attainment, and with favourable Ofsted judgements.*”¹⁷

Some teachers feel that the inspectors have made their decisions about their schools before they even set foot in the door, especially those working in deprived areas with pupils with low starting points relating to their development or attainment at entry to a school.

Only 12% of staff agree that inspections view teachers positively and only 18% agree that inspections provide a comprehensive picture of the strengths and weaknesses of a school or college¹⁸.

School staff tell us that understanding the specific local setting and its particular challenges are vital for building a legitimate and fair process of inspection which acknowledges the reality that communities face. Staff also tell us that allowing school leaders to outline the specific context of the school to the inspector, including a tour of the school, improves the process, builds trust, and allows leaders to feel that their setting is acknowledged and understood.

This is important because so many teachers and leaders report feeling like the inspector had already ‘made up their mind’ based on the school’s data sets. This can lead to feelings of powerlessness and futility, which is demoralising in the face of the hours, anxiety and (non-teaching) preparation that leads up to an inspection.

“I’ve had negative experiences when it feels like they’ve got preconceived ideas. So it’s almost like they’ve made their mind up before they arrive, and they just look for what they need to reinforce what they think”.

(Headteacher, Primary School, North West England)

“I felt that I was completely powerless, and that actually it didn’t really matter what I said or didfor example, where they ask you “How do you think things are going, do you have any concerns?” And I did raise the concern, or raised several different concerns throughout the process, and the inspector would just look at me and go “Thank you, thank you for sharing” and then carry on”.

(Headteacher, Primary School, South East England)

Recommendation:

The context and cohorts of school communities need to be considered as part of the inspection process. Without this, school staff will continue to feel aggrieved, misrepresented and badly served by inspection.

IMPROVE THE FEEDBACK AND REMOVE SINGLE WORD JUDGEMENTS

It goes beyond our expertise as a mental health and wellbeing charity to detail what an improved final report should look like. It is, however, clear that the single word judgement must be reformed. Only 23% of staff agree that inspections provide useful information for parents and the wider community¹⁹. The single word judgement is experienced as reductive and demeaning to those who work so hard for our children and young people. Removing single word judgements will not reduce the stakes of accountability, but it will acknowledge that the considerable nuance of school performance cannot be distilled into a single word, even when that word is a good one. Rightly or wrongly, single word judgements contribute significantly to the culture of fear created by the Ofsted inspection process, and poses a risk to the mental health and wellbeing of school leaders.

“The single word grading. I think that you know it's a very blunt tool. Schools are complex organisations with lots of change over time. You might have many years between inspections. You've got context. You've got lots of stuff going on, staff turnover, and so on ... [it] weighs really heavily on the people at the top”.

(Deputy Headteacher, Secondary School, South West England)

The process of receiving feedback is sometimes described by staff as feeling like they are “on a rollercoaster”. In line with the earlier recommendation on relational skills, inspectors must be skilled in delivering fair and constructive verbal feedback in a respectful manner. Many staff express the wish for feedback to contain helpful action points to help direct school improvement.

Recommendation:

Work with the sector to develop an alternative to single-word judgements that provides more useful and nuanced information, while protecting the mental health and wellbeing of school leaders and staff.

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