School inspections

A guide for parents

This document applies to all maintained schools, including special schools and pupil referral units. It also covers academies, city technology colleges, city colleges for the technology of the arts and some non-maintained special schools in England.

Published: September 2022

Reference no: 160054

Corporate member of Plain English Campaign 361
Committed to clearer communication

Why does Ofsted inspect schools?

We inspect schools to provide information to parents, to promote improvement and to hold schools to account for the public money they receive. School inspections are required by law. We provide an independent assessment of the quality and standards of education in schools, and check whether pupils are achieving as much as they can.

Who inspects schools?

His Majesty's Inspectors and Ofsted Inspectors (who in most cases are serving school leaders who inspect for Ofsted for an agreed number of days each year) carry out the inspections. All inspectors have been trained to, and assessed against, Ofsted's standards.

When do inspections happen?

When Ofsted has judged a school to be good or outstanding after a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good or outstanding and that safeguarding is effective. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Act. Ofsted does not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection, but if we find some evidence that the school would now receive a higher or lower grade, we will carry out a graded inspection. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection, but if we have serious concerns about a school, for example in relation to safeguarding, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

Although most good or outstanding schools will be inspected as outlined above, some good or outstanding schools will automatically receive a graded inspection instead of an ungraded inspection if our risk assessment process indicates that the quality of provision in the school may have deteriorated significantly, or if a school has undergone significant change, such as in its age range.

A school judged as requires improvement at its last inspection is a school that is not yet good but overall provides an acceptable standard of education. The school is inspected again within a period of 30 months. If a school has been judged as requires improvement at two successive inspections, it will be subject to monitoring from inspectors to check its progress and is inspected again within a period of 30 months.

Outstanding schools that were formerly exempt from routine inspections

Between 15 May 2012 and 13 November 2020, maintained primary and secondary schools and academies judged to be outstanding in their overall effectiveness at their most recent graded inspection were exempt from routine inspections. These schools

are now once again subject to routine inspections. This also applies to academy converter schools that were formerly exempt because the overall effectiveness of their predecessor school was outstanding at its most recent graded inspection.[1]

All formerly exempt schools will receive an initial graded or ungraded inspection before 1 August 2025. Those schools that received their last graded inspection before September 2015 will receive an initial graded inspection. Those that received their last graded inspection after this date will receive an initial ungraded inspection. If that ungraded inspection indicates that outstanding performance may not have been maintained, we will normally carry out a graded inspection within the next 12 months or as soon as possible thereafter and, in any event, before 1 August 2026. Beyond these initial inspections, future inspections for these schools will take place as set out in the section above.

How long do inspections last?

A graded inspection usually lasts two days. However, ungraded inspections of good or outstanding primary schools and good or outstanding maintained nursery schools with fewer than 150 pupils normally last for one day. The number of inspectors on the inspection team will vary according to the size and nature of the school.

What judgements do inspectors make on a graded inspection?

Inspectors will make graded judgements on overall effectiveness and the four key judgements:

- the quality of education
- behaviour and attitudes
- personal development
- leadership and management.

Where applicable, inspectors will also make a graded judgement on the effectiveness of the early years or sixth-form provision in the school.

Inspectors use the following four-point scale to make all judgements:

- grade 1 (outstanding)
- grade 2 (good)
- grade 3 (requires improvement)
- grade 4 (inadequate).

[1] Academy converter schools are schools that have been approved by the Secretary of State to convert to become an academy.

The school must take all reasonable steps to make sure that parents of pupils at the school receive a copy of the inspection report.

What happens if Ofsted judges a school to be inadequate?

If inspectors judge a school to be inadequate, it will be placed in one of the following two categories of concern.

- **special measures** – this means the school is both:
  - failing to provide its pupils with an acceptable standard of education
  - not showing the capacity to make the improvements needed.
- **serious weaknesses** – this means that the school's performance requires significant improvement but meets only one, or neither, of the conditions for special measures. A school with serious weaknesses will have one or more of the key judgements graded inadequate (grade 4) and/or have important weaknesses in the provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

A maintained school judged as inadequate and placed in a category of concern will be issued with an academy order by the Secretary of State for Education, to require it to become a new sponsored academy.[2] Inspectors will not normally monitor the school unless there are concerns or there is a delay in the school becoming a sponsored academy.

For academies, maintained nursery schools and non-maintained special schools that have been judged as inadequate and placed in a category of concern, inspectors will visit these schools to check on their progress until they can be removed from the category (unless, for academies, they are re-brokered with a new sponsor to become a new sponsored academy). Ofsted will normally re-inspect these schools within 30 months of the publication of the inspection report that placed them in a category of concern.

How much notice do you give to a school before you inspect?

Most schools receive notice of their inspection between 10:30am and 2pm on the morning of the school day before the inspection begins.

However, Ofsted can inspect any school without notice where this is judged to be appropriate.

[2] Pupil referral units judged as inadequate will also be issued with an academy order and will be required to become an alternative provision sponsored academy. Maintained nursery schools and non-maintained special schools judged as inadequate are not subject to academy orders.

What happens during an inspection?

Inspectors talk to the headteacher, governors, staff and pupils, and consider your views as a parent. They spend most of their time observing a wide range of lessons and looking at the quality of education in the school, and the impact of the curriculum. Inspectors give specific attention to the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills in lessons.

They also look at the personal development, behaviour, attitudes and welfare of pupils at the school, the promotion of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; and how well the school is led and managed.

For information about the inspection of boarding or residential provision in schools, please refer to the guidance for schools on being inspected as a boarding or residential school.

Inspection and the COVID-19 pandemic

Our approach to inspection will take into account the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption it has caused to schools. Inspectors will discuss the impact of the pandemic with the school, including how the school leadership responded to the situation, and will take that into account in their assessment of the school.

Schools that were last inspected before the start of the pandemic may receive their first routine inspection up to six terms later than they would have previously. This is due to the suspension of routine inspection activity as a result of COVID-19.

How can I make my views known?

If you are the registered parent of a child at the school, the school will send you a letter notifying you of the dates of the inspection. This letter provides you with details and options for providing your views. Our survey site, Ofsted Parent View, is the main source we use to gather parents' views about a school. Inspectors will use the views expressed on Ofsted Parent View when inspecting your child's school.

Can I speak to the inspectors?

You may have the chance to speak to the inspectors during the inspection, for example at the start of the school day. The inspection administrators will be happy to pass on messages to the inspectors and may be able to arrange telephone conversations if you are unable to speak to them in person. Their contact details will be in the letter that tells you about the inspection. Please remember that inspectors cannot deal with complaints concerning individual pupils or settle disputes between you and the school.

What happens after the inspection?

The lead inspector reports their judgement to the headteacher and governors. The inspection findings are published in a report for the school, parents and the wider community. Inspection reports provide information about the effectiveness of the school's work and contain recommendations about what the school should do to improve further. Reports are published on our reports website.

Where can further details be found about school inspections?

The education inspection framework sets out the principles that apply to inspection and the main judgements that inspectors make when carrying out inspections.

The school inspection handbook and school monitoring handbook set out the statutory basis for inspections, what schools can expect at inspections and provide guidance for inspectors on making their judgements.

What happens if I have concerns about the inspection?

Complaints are rare, but we treat them very seriously. You can find out more about our complaints procedure on our website or by calling our helpline on 0300 123 4666.

If you need any more information about our work, please visit our website or call our helpline.

What happens if I have concerns about my child's school?

If you are concerned about your child's school, you should start by talking directly to the teachers or headteacher or, if necessary, the governing body or the local authority. If you are not satisfied with the responses you receive, Ofsted may be able to help.

You can find out more on our website or by calling our helpline on 0300 123 4666.

Gathering personal information on inspection

Inspectors will gather any personal information necessary to assist them in inspecting a school. Our privacy policy (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-privacy-notices/schools-ofsted-privacy-notice) sets out what personal information we collect, what we do with it, how long we keep it and individuals' rights under data protection legislation.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: http://eepurl.com/iTrDn.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted
No. 160054
© Crown copyright 2022