



Chartered College  
of Teaching

 **National Society  
for Education**  
Church of England & Church in Wales

## **Great Big Small Schools Network session 18.3.25**

### **A conversation with Ofsted**

We have collated the questions from the first Great Big Small Schools Network session in which we hosted the conversation with Ofsted around the proposals for the new inspection framework. These will be fed back to Lee and Mike to contribute to the consultation. We have also collated some of the comments and insights from participants at the network.

**Please note these are the notes from the network meeting rather than an official Ofsted communication.**

#### **Questions**

**Q1. Some subjects are easier to teach in a mixed age class than others. Does Ofsted take this into account and what is the view of TAs delivering some aspects of the curriculum in order to balance this and ensure children are learning at an age appropriate level. This is particularly difficult when there are 4 year groups in one class.**

**Q2. I am the HT of a large, diverse inner city school of 480 pupils and a tiny, monocultural village school of 36 pupils. I'm finding it really difficult to see how the Ofsted inspecting process can be fair to both of them without there being quite significant differences in the approach of the inspectors. Is this going to happen?**

**Q3. How are Ofsted going to work with the limited capacity in a smaller school. Finding staff to do all the different areas such as PP strategy, sustainability, sports premium etc. In tiny schools there simply aren't the people to do everything and no money to buy them in. Is the same depth going to be expected as for bigger schools with the capacity of staff to really get their teeth into these areas that are additional to the taught curriculum?**

**Q4. The new framework suggests a nominated point of contact during inspection - in small schools this is simply not going to be anyone other than the Head (who is likely teaching). How does Ofsted suggest small schools address this?**

**Q5. The Framework talks about attainment at NA. In cohorts of less than 30, then attainment can be massively skewed - what are Ofsted doing to ensure this is written into the framework, so it's not left to heads to argue the toss during inspections?**

**Q6. Recent local small school inspections have been two days instead of one and led by the CEO of a large secondary MAT supported by a small school head, who was not present on the second day... they spent a great deal of their time explaining small schools to the lead ... but the lead made the final decision on the final day ... surely this is not good practice?**

**Q7. Will the length of inspection remain the same?**

**Q8. How do they sign up for this [*becoming an Ofsted inspector*], as we have some interested in secondment?**

**How do you go about joining the OFSTED team?**

*(These two questions were in response to Mike and Lee explaining that they would wish to see more leaders from small schools with an understanding of Context - within the inspection teams)*

**Q9. How do the report cards set schools up to succeed, if the report cards create alarm with red and amber headlines? How do these processes set school leaders to be set up to succeed? Why does there appear to be a naming and shaming approach to information provided to parents? Is this helpful?**

**Q10. How do you enable small school leaders access the OFSTED inspection route 'simply' to ensure that the process is not additional workload? Personally, would be keen to train but there is a barrier to navigating the application process. I applied previously, was accepted then informed that the processes have changed and requested to apply again. How do support school leaders' capacity to step into this role if people who are willing face barriers to achieving this?**

### **Insights**

- Context - Conversations about context with the HT will be key – to discuss and understand
- Curriculum – will be different in small schools and understanding and explaining the why will be important.
- Collaborators – recognition that small schools thrive together. A recognition also that there will need to be the right people in mtgs and this may be beyond school
- Classes across KS – how is the curriculum organised as a result
- Checking on Impact

## Defining principles

- High qual inclusive educationn for every child, pupil and learner
- Great outcomes for everyone
- Better Infor for parents
- Collaborative and transparent approach to inspection
- Clearer criteria to support leaders on their continuous improvement journey.
- So leaders are clearer what should improve whilst recognising context.

They have removed the structure of the deep dive from small schools which gets them into too much of the specifics to early. They want to engage in a conversation about what leaders are working through.

Inspectors will make suggestions about what areas might need to be developed next.

Which will be presented in a report card format.

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## Proposed changes that impact all remits

- **New Report Cards:** We want to give parents and stakeholders better information about a provider's **strengths and areas for improvement**
- Inspectors will evaluate more areas of a provider's work, using a **five-point grading scale**
- Introduction of **toolkits**
- Inspectors will apply **the toolkit evaluation areas, themes and standards**, tailoring evaluations to each provider's context.
- Inspectors will evaluate whether **safeguarding** is met or unmet at the whole provider level.
- Inspectors will no longer carry out deep dives in schools and FE&S.



## Different sections

They will be moving to different tool kits for leaders to help them understand the criteria, which will give enough difference that can be applied in different contexts.



## Proposed evaluation areas for all schools we inspect

- leadership and governance
- curriculum
- developing teaching
- achievement
- behaviour and attitudes
- attendance
- personal development and well-being
- inclusion
- safeguarding
- early years in schools (where applicable)
- sixth form in schools (where applicable)

Starts with leadership and ends with inclusion.

The evaluation area are called standards.

Considering if there are too many and will continue to evaluate that.

## Our toolkits will be a key tool on inspection and for school improvement

Leadership and governance		Evaluation areas			
Causing concern		Attention needed	Secure	Strong	Exemplary
Leadership and governance are likely to be 'causing concern' if one or more of the following applies:  Leaders do not identify and/or prioritise the right issues or take suitable or timely action to deal with them.  Leaders do not have a track record of improvement or, since being appointed, have not done everything they could reasonably do to secure improvements.  Governors/trustees do not carry out their statutory core functions. Their contribution to the school's strategic aims is weak. Any breaches of legal responsibilities		Leaders' analysis of the school's strengths or weaknesses lacks precision and/or does not consistently identify the root causes of weakness.  Actions to bring about improvement, while focused on the right areas, are imprecise. This makes it difficult for leaders to know how successful their work has been and what further action is needed.	Leaders and those responsible for governance have an accurate understanding of the school's context, strengths and weaknesses. This informs the actions they take.  Leaders' actions are well judged and consistently effective. They improve or sustain standards. Decisions are always in pupils' best interests.  Leaders make sure that the school's aims, priorities, vision and values are firmly established.  The positive impact of leaders' actions has been sustained over time.	Leaders' astute understanding of the school's context, strengths and weaknesses informs and underpins their evolving response to priorities. They adjust and adapt actions as part of a responsive and continuous improvement culture.  Highly effective leadership leads to consistently high standards, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). These standards are sustained over time.  Improvements in any areas of weakness are rapid and sustained.	Where a school is secure in all evaluation areas, and consistently strong in leadership and governance, inspectors may recommend a feature of leaders' work to be considered exemplary.  Where this is the case, leaders will be invited by the Ofsted Academy to submit a short case study of their work. Case studies will be reviewed and moderated nationally each term. Successful submissions will be published as part of a series of best practice reporting.
		Strategic leadership and capacity to improve (track record of improvement or of sustaining high standards)			
		Responsible bodies, including employers, trustees and governance (strategic oversight)			

**Grades (across a 5-point scale)**  
Each evaluation area will be graded against this scale: causing concern, attention needed, secure, strong and exemplary.

For safeguarding, there will be a binary 'met/not met' grade.

**Themes**  
Each evaluation area is broken down into a number of themes.

Within each evaluation area (with the exception of achievement), the first theme is always leadership and the final theme is always inclusion.

**Standards**  
Each theme is broken down into a series of standards. These are based, where relevant and available, on the statutory guidance and professional guidelines that are set by government.

NB: Please don't equate 'attention needed' to 'requires improvement' or 'exemplary' to 'outstanding'. They are not the same and not intended to be used in the same way.

Inclusion in 3 parts

- SEND
- Disadvantage
- Vulnerability

### **Individual reflections from school leaders on the network session**

Some subjects are easier to teach in a mixed age class than others. Does Ofsted take this into account and what is the view of TAs delivering some aspects of the curriculum in order to balance this and ensure children are learning at an age appropriate level. This is particularly difficult when there are 4 year groups in one class.

There are 10 proposed areas there to look at in a primary school, many of these linked to the Head or SLT. This could lead to the same person having to speak on all or many of these areas leading to increased stress and workload

Sounds very promising and well thought out - thank you!

Yes, small school leaders do deserve to access opportunities but there is lack of recognition of how limited our capacity and how stretched we are.

Another issue is that judgements place some schools on a 'want to be in list' and others get a poor reputation. This may be unfair. I have supported brilliant schools who have been designated as RI, who may end up with a raft of Red grades. These judgements do not set the school up to succeed. This does not mean I don't think we should have accountability but I don't think reporting needs to be a shaming process and unfortunately, the report card does little to change the situation.

I think there are solutions and I'm not anti OFSTED, I just think as a leader I want to be set up to succeed and part of that is understanding my areas of development. That is okay but think OFSTED maybe forgets the impact of their reporting on the human beings who they are reporting on. It can break them and I have seen colleagues breaking following OFSTED inspections, mostly due to the shame they have felt following the report being published.

I have worked as a moderator and SEND improvement lead and taken people through capability. In my experience, supporting improvements comes much quicker if you take away elements of shaming.

The intent is honourable but there is not a lot of difference between RI and a highlighted in Red causing concern. Not a lot of difference in terms of the response from parents and alarm this would trigger.

With my parent hat on I hear and consider the perspective of parents seeing this. Parents in the main want secure, strong, exemplary. The categories that would report would all present a parent to worry whether that school was suitable for their child. Rightly so, parents want the very best for their child.

It would be interesting to know what the impact would be if there were no colours and how accessible the reports would be to parents if colours were removed.