

Schools' responses to the Education select committee's report on Ofsted Inspections Jan 2024



schoolzone

Findings

Schoolzone surveyed its teacher panel from state schools in England to ask for their feedback on The Education select committee's report on its inquiry into Ofsted's work with schools. The inquiry aimed to assess how well Ofsted is fulfilling its role in inspecting schools and whether or how it could be improved. We put some of its suggestions and recommendations to our panel on the same day the report was published (29 Jan 2024), so it was likely to have been schools' first encounter with the findings.

We received over 1200 responses overnight. The spread of school types and Ofsted ratings was broadly in line with national representation, though we relied on the make-up of the panel to achieve this, rather than setting quotas, as we wanted everyone to be able to give their own opinions on what has become a very emotive subject since the death of Ruth Perry. A breakdown of respondent profiles is appended.

Extracts from the report are highlighted, though bold text is our emphasis to focus respondents towards the relevant question.

All data was analysed to 95% confidence (chi-squared) and where there is statistically significant variance this has been charted or commented on.

Headlines

- Teachers were unconvinced by Ofsted's announced changes following Ruth Perry's death a year ago.
- They do not want more in-depth inspections, especially primary teachers.
- Less frequent inspections of 'good' and 'outstanding' schools are to be welcomed – it would mean an overall decrease.
- Extending the notice period would improve the fairness of inspections, though impact on workload is less clear.
- Staff need better opportunities to contribute their views to Ofsted as part of the inspection process.
- Lack of relevant expertise among inspectors is an issue for most schools, especially (as the Committee notes) for primary.
- Reports are not very good at identifying areas that need to be addressed and are even worse at supporting schools in addressing them.
- The current single-word grade very clearly needs to be replaced.

In response to the initial inquest findings on Ruth Perry's death, Ofsted announced some changes that would be made immediately, including:

- **Developing training** for all inspectors on recognising and responding to visible signs of anxiety.
- **Delaying inspections for one day** to bring lead inspectors together to discuss the issue of anxiety and what to do when inspections need to be paused.
- **Clarifying in the inspection handbook** that school leaders can be accompanied by colleagues in meetings with inspectors, and that they can share inspection outcomes with colleagues, family, medical advisers and their wider support group, before they are shared with parents.
- **Providing all schools with a number to call** if they have concerns about their inspection.

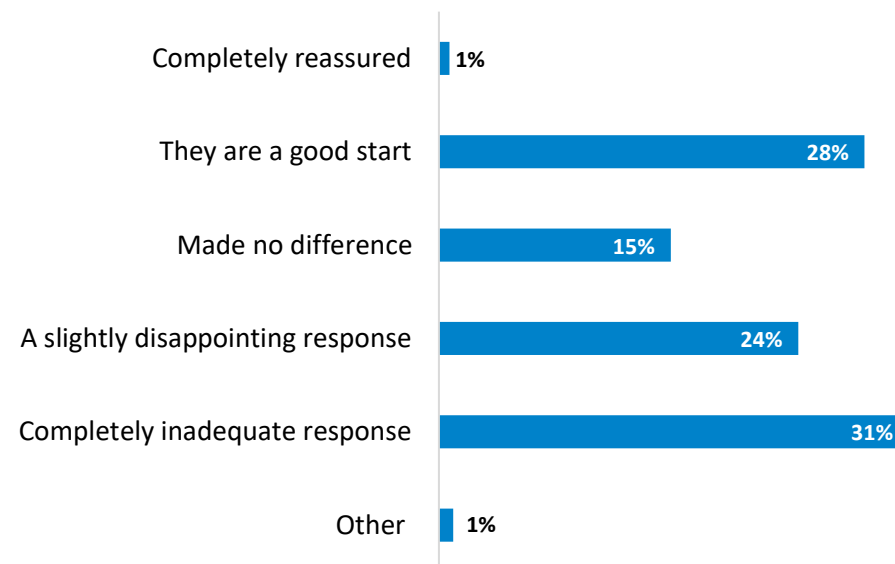
How far did these go in allaying any concerns you might have had about the inspection process, following Ruth Perry's death?

Less than 1% of teachers felt completely reassured by these changes, though a little over a quarter thought they were a good start. However, over half were disappointed with them and almost a third thought they were completely inadequate.

These changes were announced at the height of schools' anxiety about the inspection process and it's clear that they did

little to reassure teachers that Ofsted understood the climate in schools. In the intervening year, there has been a new His Majesty's Chief Inspector and it's clear from this data that Ofsted will have to do more, if it is to win the confidence of teachers. The Education Committee have picked up on this theme during their inquiry and teachers reflect on their suggestions too, in the following sections.

How far did these go in allaying any concerns you might have had about the inspection process following Ruth Perry's death? (n=1161)



There is a widespread view that school inspections are not currently carried out in sufficient length or depth to cover the full range of areas of a school's work... Ofsted should be funded to carry out **more in-depth** inspections. In the shorter term, this could be achieved without the need for additional funding by **reducing the frequency of inspections for some schools**.

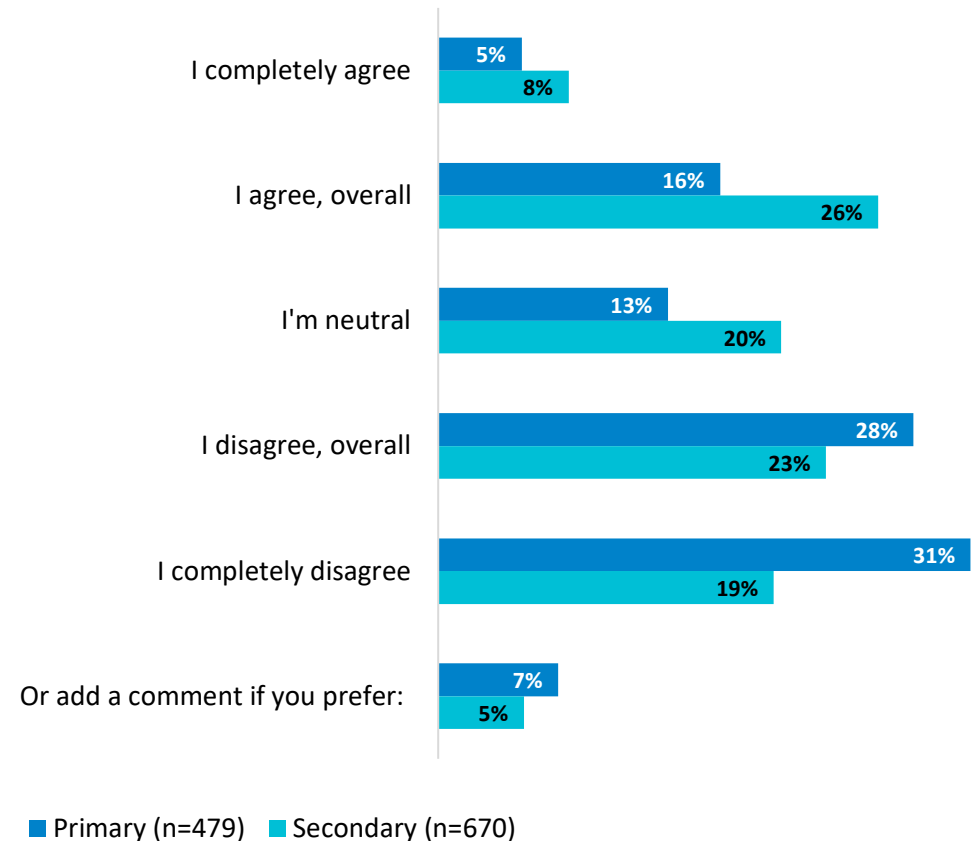
Do you agree that inspections need to be of greater depth?

Teachers don't much care for the idea of more in-depth inspections – around a half disagreed with the idea or made negative comments about it. Over a quarter completely disagreed with the idea.

This level of disagreement is perhaps unsurprising given the demand that the inspections currently place on school staff. The response to the suggestions of reduced frequency was much more positive, presumably for similar reasons – see next question.

Primary teachers seem to be much more strongly opposed to the idea of more in-depth inspections.

Do you agree that inspections need to be of greater depth?



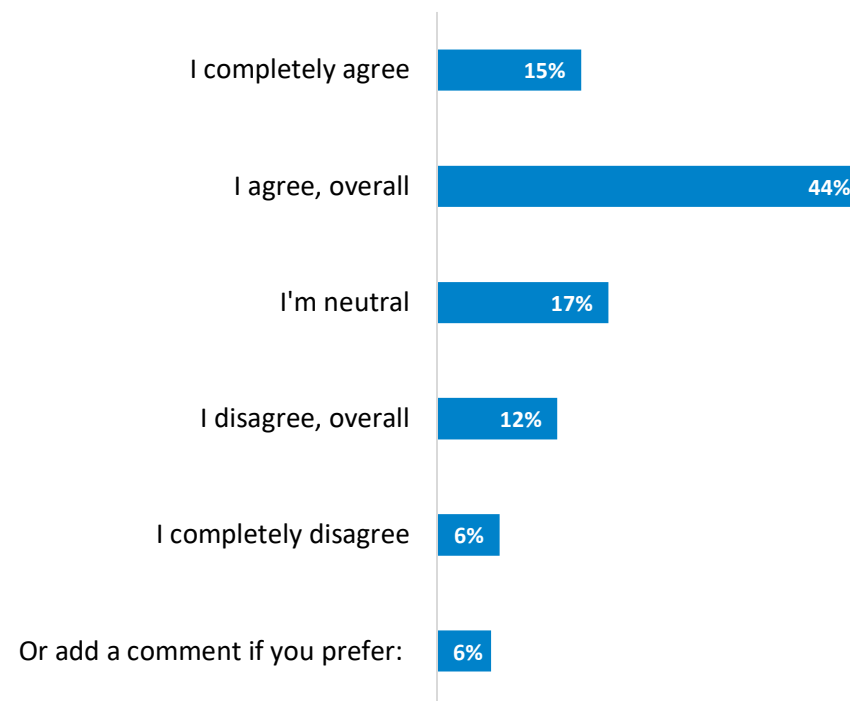
The committee's recommendation is to *reduce the frequency of inspections to approximately five to six years for 'good' and 'outstanding' schools and three to four years for schools judged 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'*.

Do you agree with this frequency of inspections?

Over 60% of schools agreed with this idea, though this isn't surprising as it would mean a reduction in the frequency of inspections for most schools. Less than one in five disagreed to any extent.

Comments provided (see next page for examples) alongside or instead of these scores demonstrated a much more nuanced response, in which teachers said that the frequency wasn't so much the issue as the mechanism by which the inspection schedule was determined. Overall, schools think that the inspection service should be more supportive and collaborative, with schools being able to be more proactive in deciding when they should take place. School leaders invariably want to drive school improvement – it's not ambition they lack, but resources and support, regardless of their Ofsted rating.

Do you agree with this frequency of inspections? (n=1158)



A full list of comments received in response to this question can be found at:

<http://schoolzone.co.uk/downloads/files/1706707330.pdf>

Schools can rapidly change so I'm not sure how best to judge the time frames, I imagine having the ability to flag a school which is a concern is useful and then a rolling programme of inspections make sense but I think the key should be to work to share best practice and improve them rather than just criticising them, especially when it's so subjective and can be incredibly unfair and dependent on the individual inspector.

I would add that I think we are as outstanding as the day we were given outstanding 13 years ago. In December we were told we were good after a gruelling inspection. That we went 13 years is not my or my staff or community's problem. But if this was a problem for outstanding schools e.g. not being outstanding... then surely 6 years is too long again, and I envisage the same problems. We need an organic inspection process. Which works alongside our school improvement partner. A process not a snapshot, with goals that are worked through, extended etc. Ofsted is a poor model for organic inspection. and a direct result for staff leaving the profession.

The inspections should completely change, not at all to be conducted in this way it currently is, e.g. longitudinal- one or two inspectors here for a long time, not a team and not for

longer, a different format- go to a case study method rather than an experimental method.

If a school is inadequate, it needs to make rapid improvement and revisits should happen at least annually until it has reached the required standard. 5 to 6 years is longer than some children's 'lifetime' in a school, so is too long - more frequent, lower stakes accreditation visits will be more effective than high stakes inspections whatever the frequency,

Leaving Good and Outstanding schools is not a problem (as long as they can continue at this level). Having worked in a school requiring improvement - more frequent visits may be necessary to give the evidence that the grade needs to change and also to give an external view that things have improved.

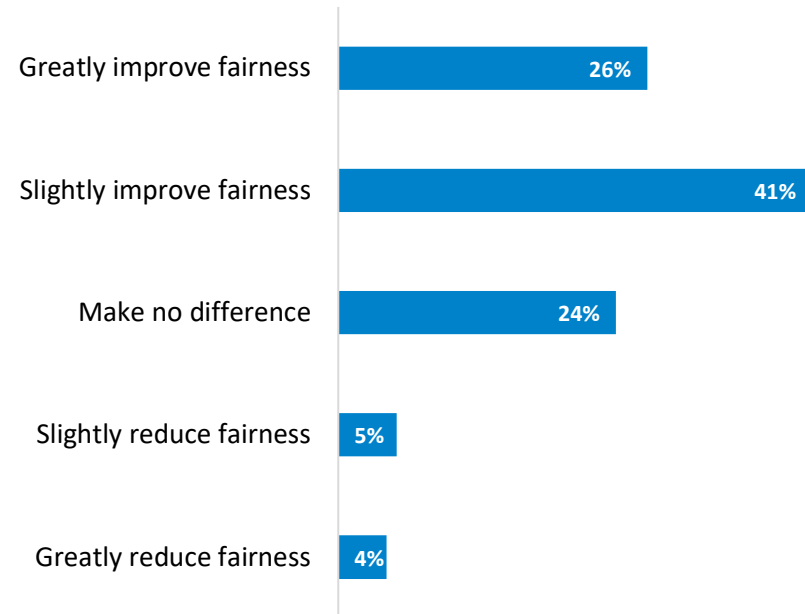
Regular visits from the same inspector so that a relationship forms and school improvement is place at the heart of the process rather than intimidation and fear. This sense is exacerbated in school that have long periods between visits.

The short notice period also appears to be causing operational difficulties for many schools, particularly small schools. While we do not believe that schools should be given several weeks to prepare for inspections, we think there is a case to be made for **extending the notice period slightly**, to reduce the pressure on school leaders, and let schools **know in which term** they might anticipate an inspection.

How would this affect the fairness of inspections?

Over two thirds of respondents thought that extending the notice period would improve the fairness of inspections. Very few thought the opposite effect would result. Given that the run-up to an inspection leads to a high-pressure work environment in most schools, it might be expected that teachers would prefer little or no notice. The Committee's suggestion seems to bring a benefit to schools with few negative consequences.

How would this affect the fairness of inspections? (n=1160)



How would it affect the pressure and workload on school staff?

Respondents took the opportunity to make some long and detailed – occasionally agonised – comments about the pressure induced by Ofsted and they reflected a wide range of opinions on this suggestion from the Committee.

A full list of comments (45 pages) can be found at <http://schoolzone.co.uk/downloads/files/1706626313.pdf>

I have been jumping every time the phone has gone at a certain time for the last 6 months - knowing which term (we have 6 terms) would at least help us to plan for staff to be around for this period.

Although the extended period might maintain high anxiety for longer, people would have more time to feel confident they are showing their best selves. Such a short window can mean people forget to show case the school's strengths alongside its flaws.

It is nonsense that Ofsted does not introduce a greater level of workload. Giving schools notice of the term (ideally half term) of their visit will help schools prepare and alleviate the

anxiety of "will they come, won't they come" for months and years.

A larger time frame would allow school staff to get things in order before an inspection as things out of the school's control could happen and with only 24 hours notice of an inspection it could mean your school is at a great disadvantage when usually the school works well.

[It would] make a massive difference, the pressure knowing that it is imminent is awful and as soon as you get the phone call everyone is then working so many hours extra, ready for the next day of them coming which causes massive stress.

I don't think it would make much difference to staff - they should be doing what they always do anyway - is that not the point! Leaders, yes - more time to prepare all the timetables / student lists / schedule of the day / allow middle leaders time to collate their documents and prevent leaders from staying up all night to make sure they're prepared!

I don't think knowing which term to expect the visit is necessary, but the current system of less than half a day's notice is not enough for schools to prepare for the logistics of the visit. We have to find cover for the teachers needed for

deep dive meetings. Meetings with parents or external services may need to be rearranged. There may be classes out on trips or workshops arranged. Timetables may need tweaking so that subjects they want to see are being taught at a time when they can see them. Many staff are part-time and for me to be available on certain days means rearranging my childcare, which may not be possible with only a few hours' notice. It just makes it incredibly stressful. A week's notice, or even 2-3 days, would give us time to work out the logistics and print off/ gather together the paperwork they want to see, without everyone working till midnight the night before they arrive.

In a small school like ours, the burden falls heavily on the headteacher and myself. As we have only an apprentice part time caretaker, then we often have to pick up environmental jobs ourselves, leaving less time for curriculum focus, safeguarding focus and operational focus. Previously we have a 6 month caretaker vacancy and this took its toll on both of us. Multi-tasking and vacancy cover of all kinds takes us away from supporting staff and gathering necessary information for the inspections when they are short notice. Our last Ofsted in June was a late phone call so the Head was not free to talk to staff until after 4pm the night before. This was stressful. We do not have a deputy and our only Assistant Head was offsite on the day before the inspection for family reasons so could not help. A day extra would be fairer.

It all depends on the whole approach Ofsted take to inspection. If it is to work with the school to improve education for the children in our care, then pressure and workload take a reduced focus with staff. Our inspection team in July very much gave the impression that they were working with us, and this engendered confidence in the process and confidence in what we were doing for the children was right and proper.

The entire process is wrong - headteachers should be left to decide if their teachers are performing to expected standards, so classroom observations shouldn't need to be done. Walking around the school and talking to children, staff and leaders, looking at books and school development plans - praising schools that identify and plan sensible timeframes to adjust to the needs of their learners. There should be no focus on SATs results, comparing schools where children's backgrounds are not fair comparisons.

It wouldn't change! I remember my school being inspected 15 years ago as an NQT and being expected to stay in school as late as it took to be ready - I was in school past midnight. More time would just increase the expectation of what can be achieved in this time. The inspection itself and grading system needs to change to improve pressure and workload.

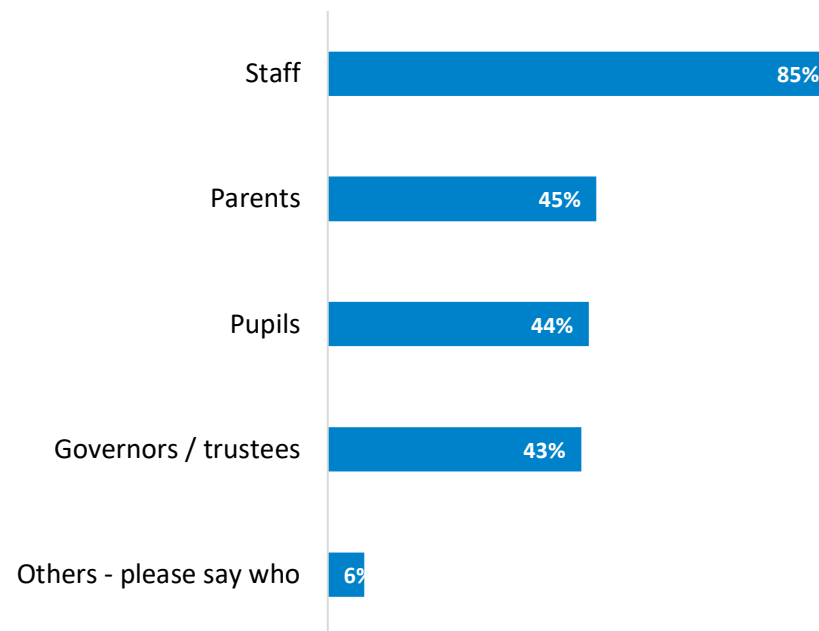
*Ofsted should also explore ways in which it can improve its **engagement with parents, pupils, governors, and trustees** before and during the inspection process, to ensure that the voices of all groups are fully heard and taken into account.*

Do you feel that any of these stakeholders need better opportunities to contribute their views to Ofsted?

Well over three quarters of respondents thought that staff needed better opportunities to contribute their views to Ofsted as part of the inspection process. Roughly half as many thought that parents, pupils or governors needed better opportunities.

Staff tend to feel 'on the receiving end' of inspections, rather than being actively engaged in it – they tend to think that inspectors see them more as part of the problem than as part of the solution, but if the school is to improve as a result of the inspection, they need to be given buy-in at the outset.

Do you feel that any of these stakeholders need better opportunities to contribute their views to Ofsted? (n=1008)

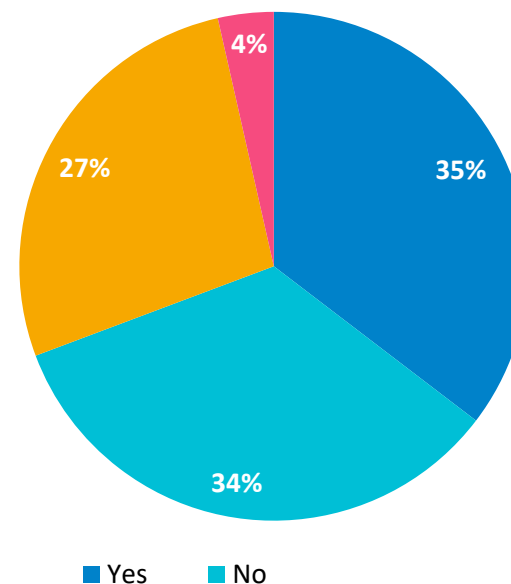


*Ofsted should introduce **regular surveys of parents, pupils and staff** outside the inspection process and use this information as part of its risk assessment to identify schools most or least in need of inspection.*

Do you think this would be an effective means of helping to identify schools in need of inspection?

Respondents were split on this question. It's a suggestion that would need a great deal more contextualisation for schools to get behind it: survey data would obviously only be a small part of the data used to monitor schools between inspections and it seems a difficult strategy to maintain levels of interest in the surveys. It could easily add to the burden on schools so they would need to be persuaded that the responses were being taken seriously.

Do you think this would be an effective means of helping to identify schools in need of inspection? (n=1159)



Secondary schools (40%) are keener on the idea than are primaries (31%).

There appears to be a particular problem with **inspectors lacking relevant experience** in primary schools and in specialist education settings. At a minimum, Ofsted must ensure that the lead inspector always has expertise in the relevant type of school and, in larger teams, that a majority of members of the team have the relevant expertise.

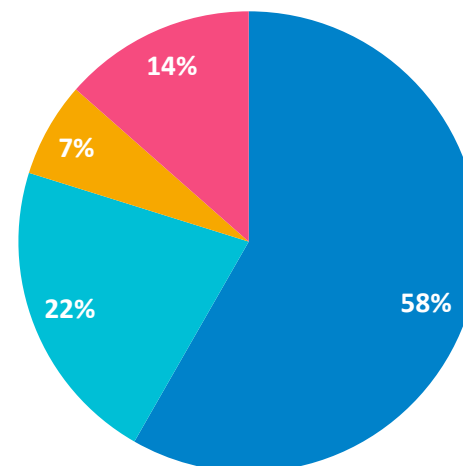
How much of an issue has a lack of relevant expertise among inspectors been in your experience?

The Committee is correct in saying that this is an issue: well over three quarters of respondents thought it was an issue to some extent, with 58% saying it was a major issue.

The Committee is also correct in saying that primary schools feel this more commonly (62%) than secondary schools (51%).

It seems likely though, that respondents would not necessarily know the expertise of the inspectors and the strength of feeling revealed in this response may be more to do with teachers feeling excluded by the process because of the institutionalised boundary between inspector and inspected.

How much of an issue has a lack of relevant expertise among inspectors been in your experience? (n=1155)



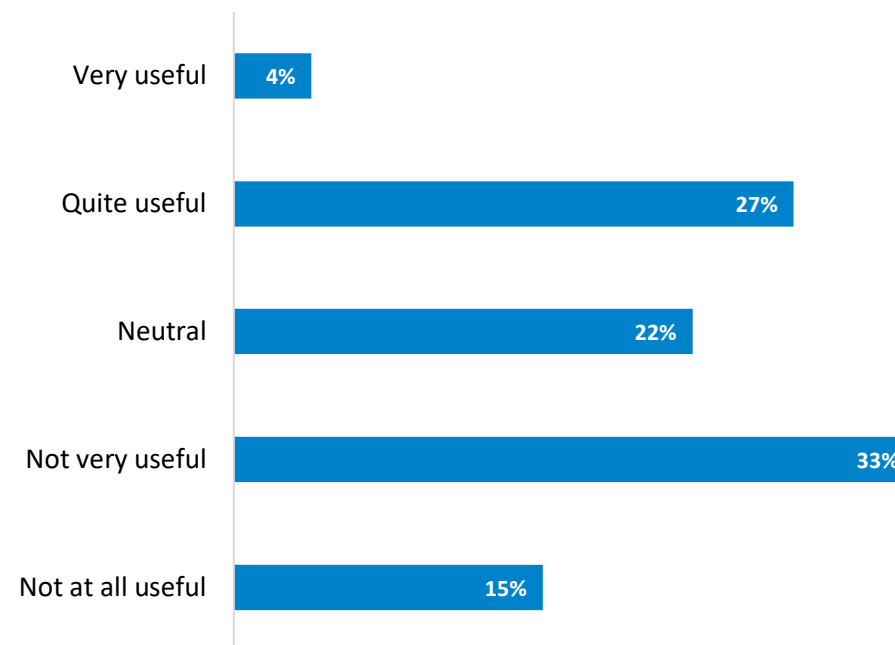
■ It's a major issue ■ It's a minor issue ■ It's no issue ■ Not sure

The **short and formulaic nature** of inspection reports is **limiting the extent to which they are useful** to schools, and there is mixed evidence that parents find the reports useful despite being their intended audience. Alongside increasing the length and depth of inspections, Ofsted should also **increase the length and depth of analysis in inspection reports** to ensure that they are a useful tool for both schools and parents.

How useful are inspection reports in identifying areas that need addressing, in your experience?

Well over half of teachers say that Ofsted reports aren't useful in identifying areas that need addressing. Only 4% say that they are very useful. This begs the question: what are they for then? The Committee suggests in its report that parents are the audience for these reports, and that is not an area we have specifically explored in this research. However, it seems a very widely missed opportunity to help schools improve to go to the huge expense of inspecting a school without actually helping it identify areas that need addressing. If Ofsted could target improving the 4% proportion in this data, that might go a long way to making schools feel there is more value in the process and the negative aspects become more bearable.

How useful are inspection reports in identifying areas that need addressing in your experience? (n=1155)



Inspection reports seem to be less useful for primary teachers than for secondary, with almost twice the proportion of primary teachers saying they are not at all useful.

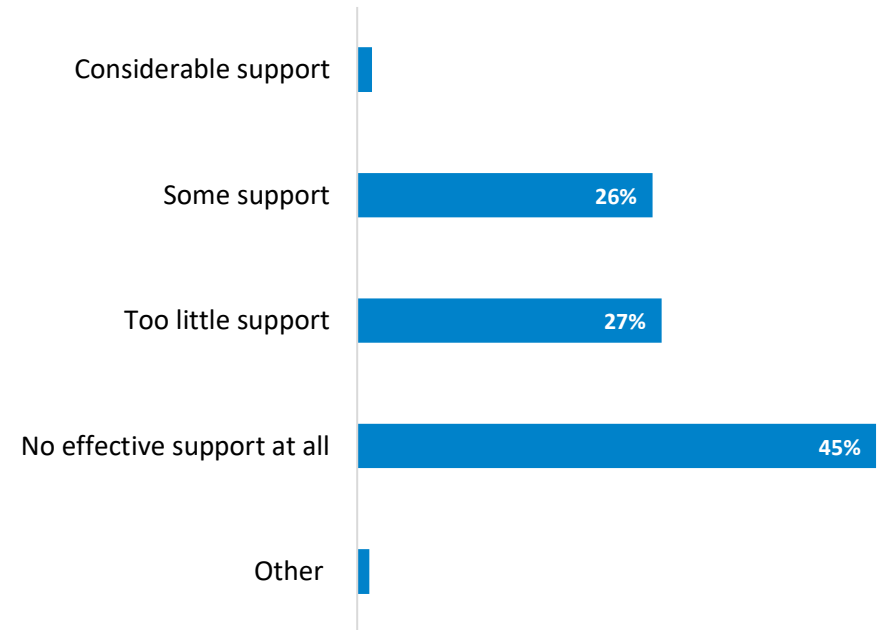
How much support and direction do they give you in making any suggested improvements?

Only a quarter of schools feel that Ofsted inspection reports give them any support and direction in making any suggested improvements. 43% say the reports give them no effective support at all.

We asked this separately to the previous question because identifying areas for improvement is generally seen as being the focus of inspection reports (though response to the previous question militates against this) whereas there is the potential for the reports to help schools begin the process of addressing any issues that have been identified. It seems that both aspects of the reports could be improved, as far as schools are concerned.

Primary teachers again find the reports less useful in giving support and direction, with 52% saying they give no effective support at all, compared to 41% of secondary teachers.

How much support and direction do they give you in making any suggested improvements? (n=1152)



How would reports need to change, if at all, to be more useful to schools and / or parents?

A full list of comments (33 pages) can be found at

<http://schoolzone.co.uk/downloads/files/1706634165.pdf>

More emphasis on what the school does well. Areas for improvement should be detailed for the school but less so for the rest of the world as improvements can be made very swiftly and if not re-inspected for several years the info is out of date but can still have influence.

Explain in more detail what it is that the inspector has found, what they want to see improved and why, and ensure there is a balance between reporting on where the school is doing well, areas for improvement, but also whether improvement needed is minor or significant... basically provide an accurate and fair account of how the school is actually doing.

There should be a collaborative approach to school improvement instead of a judgemental one. Reports need to be accurate, well informed and well written to be useful.

Inspections should be about genuine dialogue, not heads and SLT feeling they are constantly being judged and have to provide evidence to prove their worth. It is of great benefit to have an outsider visit the school and question practices and progress, and it should lead to a joint action mapping exercise. The reports should reflect positive practice and what be 'even better if...'. I believe parents can understand this concept rather than very short statements about specific areas of the school that might not give parents a real picture of what this is about.

My experience is that the reports are generally written to substantiate / back up a judgement. In this sense they often read as if not to serve the school and its pupils, but to support the process. Sometimes it is the verbal feedback that is helpful and when this is reflected in the report this makes the process feel more coherent and trusted. The reports are written for a public audience. If written to support staff and leaders to improve provision and so be supportive and collaborative this would be useful to the school.

Reports should signpost strategies and support that may be available. They should encourage reflection and action planning as part of the process which should feed into the next inspection which would be carried out as a review which

helps a path of continuous improvement rather than inspections and final judgements.

It is necessary to accept that these are two completely different audiences, with completely different needs. Single word descriptors of a whole school do not help parents make good choices. Parental choices are often extremely limited by practical issues and telling parents who only have one school that they can realistically get their child to that it is either good or in need of improvement just leads to anxiety, not choice.

It should be much less formulaic and script led and give opportunities for inspectors to really hear what is going well in the school- whilst also not giving schools chances to cover up poor areas - everyone knows some schools just play the game and hide what they can - this issue is with the whole of the education system now being so limited prescriptive and not fit for purpose to be able to be creative and flexible and meet children's needs – it's all a tick box exercise.

I believe the previous model of HMI inspections where inspectors were 'critical friends' to schools, was a far more constructive model. Inspections should be about genuine dialogue, not heads and SLT feeling they are constantly being judged and have to provide evidence to prove their worth. It is of great benefit to have an outsider visit the school and

question practices and progress, and it should lead to a joint action mapping exercise. The reports should reflect positive practice and what be 'even better if...'. I believe parents can understand this concept rather than very short statements about specific areas of the school that might not give parents a real picture of what this is about.

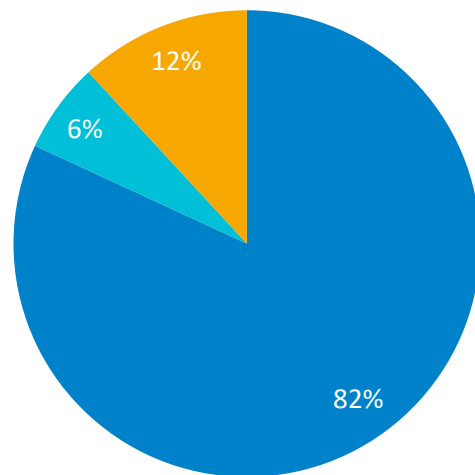
They need to outline any areas of weakness with detailed recommendations and funding to make the changes possible. More inspectors should be available for the two day inspections I've experienced, so that ALL teachers can be seen teaching. No teacher should be interviewed by questioning during teaching. Time away from lessons should be allocated for teacher interviews. Then reports can be more thorough. What is the point of an inspection if only a handful of staff are seen in their role? Children should be interviewed using child friendly language which they understand. Some inspectors use 'inspector speak' and do not get a true reflection of what a child has to say. Pupil voice is important.

Reflect the school!!! They seem very generic and like they have been taken from a word bank. There is no depth to them and insulting based on all the work we do. People are more focused on the overall judgement and this isn't always right.

Ofsted and the Department of Education should work together to develop an alternative to the current single-word grade.

This had the strongest response in this survey: 82% agreed; only 8% disagreed.

**Do you agree with need to replace the current labelling?
(n=1154)**



■ Yes ■ No ■ Not sure

What do you think might be better than the current grade labelling?

There was a rich variety of suggestions for how the current grade system might work. See <http://schoolzone.co.uk/downloads/files/1706698556.pdf>

The current grading system is very dangerous and promotes negativity in education. Two schools a mile away from each other have a different level of competition for places because of this grading. Education should help creating good citizens for the country and this grading system then creates negativity in the society. Parents don't want to send their child to grade 3 or 4 school although school could be nearer to their house. Schools in an area should work together to help the society and neighbourhood. Our pupils are increasingly going against education and learning. No one wants to come into teaching as a result, we need to work on the culture.

I think accentuating the positive before all things will help everyone. Parents are too accepting of one-word descriptions and need a fuller picture. Open Days are an example of how misleading these things can be when the school puts up new posters in readiness for example.

In order for Ofsted to make clear differences between schools, there needs to be a label, like a grade. However, perhaps that label only needs to be made clear to school staff and the report is available to openly for parents. Surely summarising a school by one word is misleading when the report could suggest that the outcome was made due to one particular aspect.

There is going to be a fault with every type of labelling - labelling is a judgement on what the inspectors have seen in a short time: is it really what they have seen, or have they been deceived? in which case labelling? and do we label children? get children to describe how good/poor fair schools should be termed.

Grading works across multiple industries but it is the wording that goes alongside it that is key. The description about the school and what it is like is so important. Acknowledgement of the support the school will receive if graded RI or inadequate. Those schools with poor budgets are unable to 'broker' support. If Ofsted has made clear suggestions, then there should be a clear plan of support in place with the school leaders before leaving. Many head colleagues who have received RI or inadequate have reflected they don't fully understand the next steps and have little support offered. This needs to change. Surely the intended outcome is that all schools are good or better. You can't put a grade on a school

and then walk away. Some inspectors should be returning to schools to re inspect in order to see improvements. We are good with return in two years. We will receive a different inspector upon return who will make a separate judgement. I think it would be useful for the same person to come back and see the changes/improvements.

I think schools need to be identified that truly need help, and it is good to congratulate others, however context is really key, attendance us going to be worse on poorer areas, it shouldn't be held against the school if they are trying everything they can.

Parents visit schools, ETHOS, ATTAINMENT, ATTENDANCE are main factors. They are not unintelligent. They can read and read between the lines. They can be part of school improvement process along with all stakeholders. What does the word mean. On that day at that time.... what we saw was... a snapshot is not the way forward.

There is nothing wrong with the grade labelling. If a narrative description was offered, the school would just pick out the nice words to highlight and report onwards. If safeguarding is not right then the school should be graded inadequate - although there should be the opportunity to put this right and have the resulting inspection grade representing the strengths of the school.

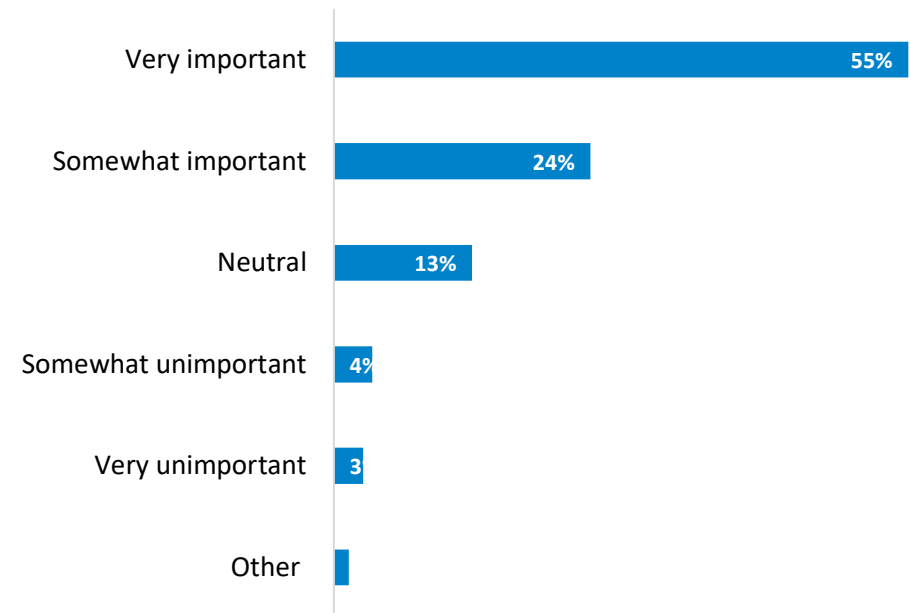
There have been repeated calls from this Committee and others for Ofsted to be able to **inspect multi-academy trusts**, which the Department has so far failed to deliver.

Given that Ofsted has a limited budget, how urgent do you think it is that they inspect MATs?

Well over three quarters of respondents think that there's an urgent need to inspect MATs. Only 7% thought it unimportant. This is a strong opinion, given that many teachers have no experience of MATs. This may be an expression of mistrust of the government's strategy of forcing academisation on less successful schools: teachers want to feel that MATs are receiving the same level of scrutiny as schools.

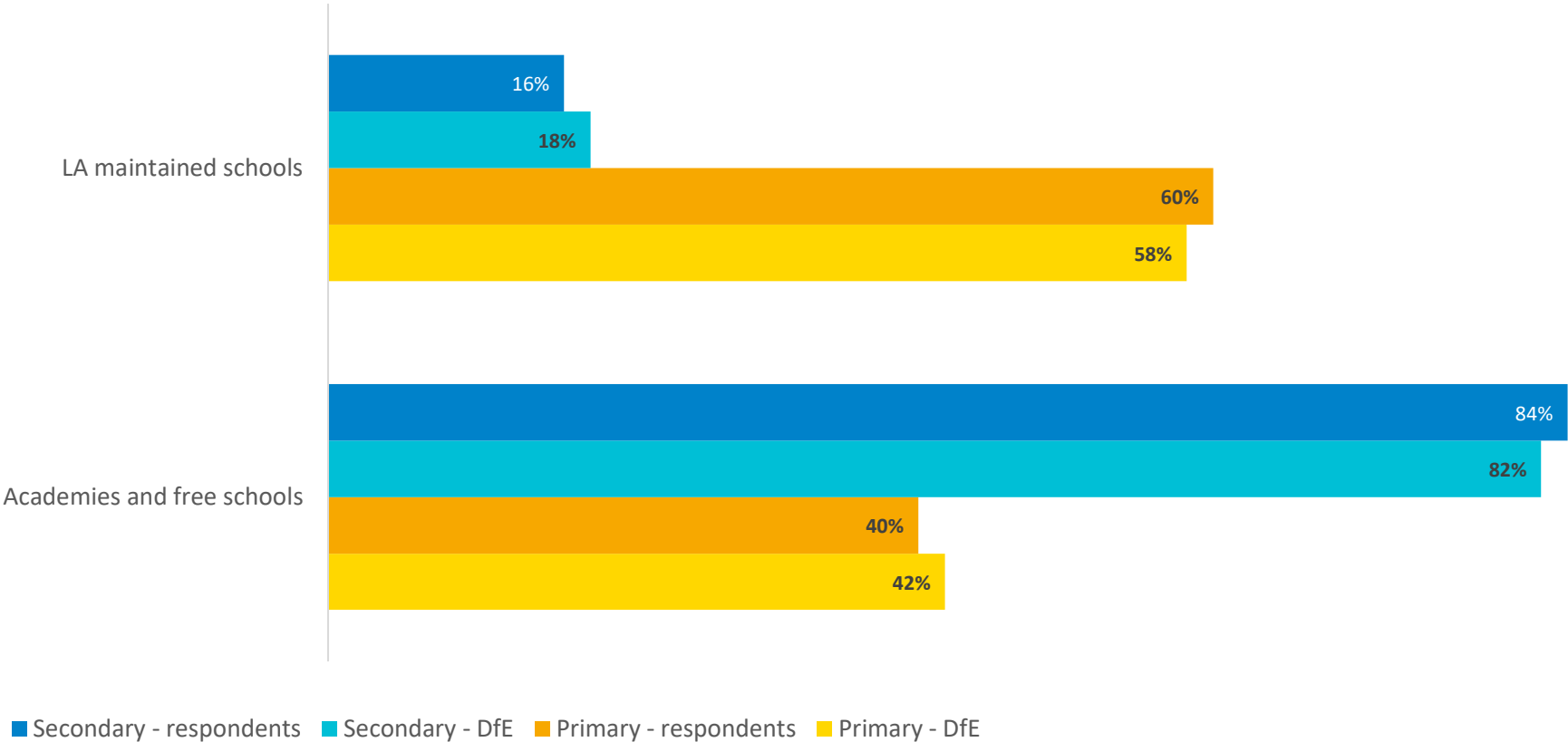
It does beg the question of who would inspect them: if teachers currently feel that there is a lack of expertise among school inspectors, it would presumably be even more difficult to find expertise at the MAT level.

Given that Ofsted has a limited budget how urgent do you think it is that they inspect MATs? (n=1148)

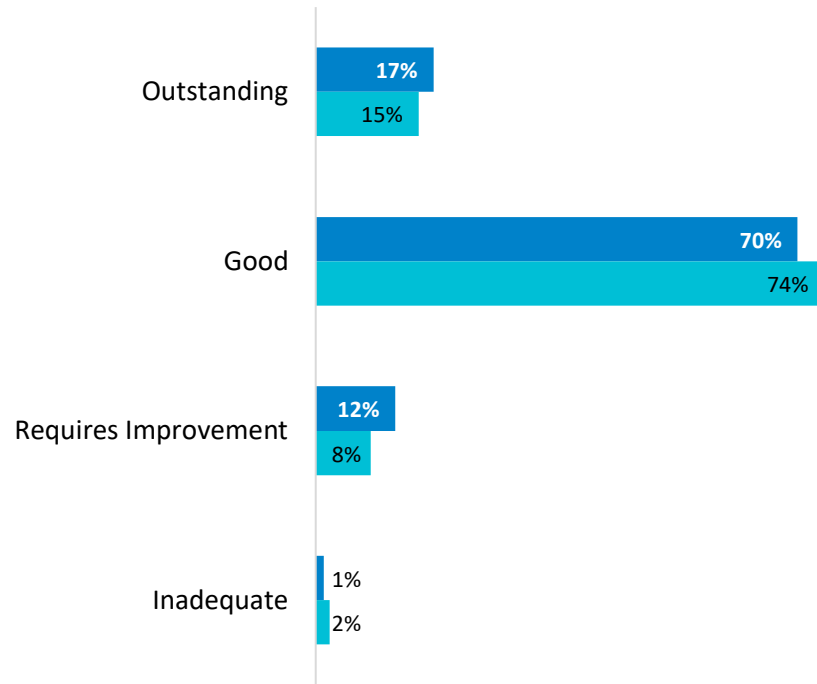


Respondent profile

Primary and secondary vs funding arrangement (n= 1002)



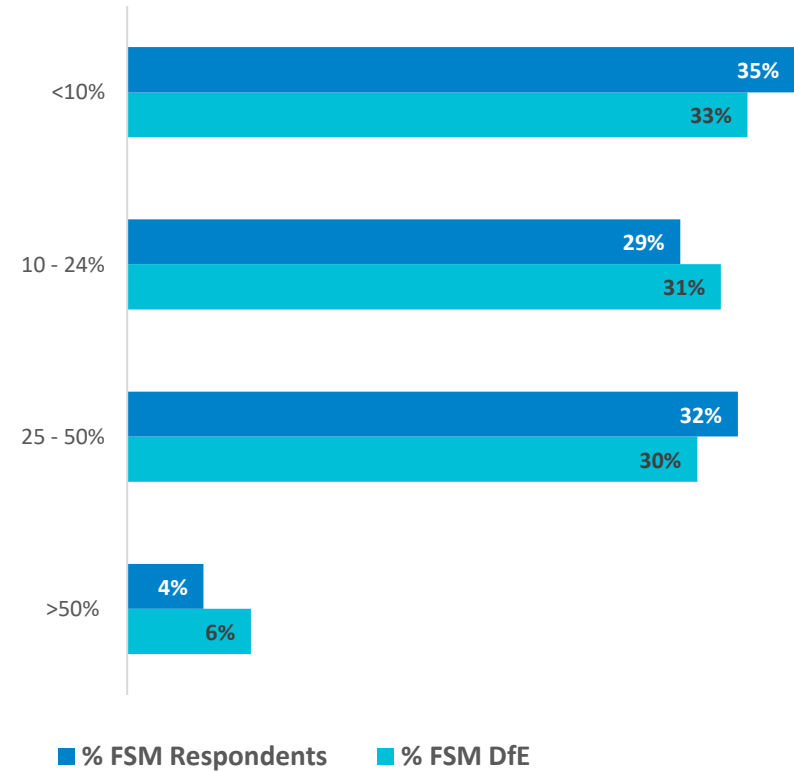
**How is your school currently rated by Ofsted?
(n=1156)**



■ Respondents ■ Ofsted national data

Source: Ofsted management data Dec 2023

Free school meals bands (n= 1086)



Source: DfE data (Edubase) Jan 2024



The logo for Schoolzone features the word "schoolzone" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The word "school" is in black, and "zone" is in yellow. The text is centered within a white rectangular area that is framed by a thick yellow border. The border consists of four horizontal and four vertical bars, creating a frame around the text.

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