

Ofsted strategy 2017–22

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Published: September 2017

Reference no: 170039



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Introduction

From childminders to prisons, schools to children's homes, there are thousands of organisations providing education, training and care services in England. Ofsted's role is to make sure that these institutions deliver for children and learners, creating the conditions that allow the next generation to realise its full potential.

Ofsted carries out that role through independent inspection and regulation. Inspection provides an independent assessment of the quality of provision. Regulation determines whether providers are fit to provide services, and we take enforcement action against those that are not.

In the 25 years since it was established, Ofsted's model is one that has been adopted as a blue print for public service inspection and regulation, both domestically and abroad. Our work has exposed areas of chronic underperformance, spurred improvement and acted as a trigger for government action. The impact of our findings goes well beyond the individual institutions we inspect, providing evidence from which others can learn and leading to changes in policy and practice in areas as diverse as extremism, care provision and early reading.

Our reporting in education also allows parents to make informed decisions about where to educate their children. Across education, training and care, we enable the public to hold responsible bodies accountable for local service provision. Ofsted has become a trusted public brand, providing valuable information about quality and giving assurance that children will be kept safe.

Most fundamentally, Ofsted exists to act as an advocate for children, young people and adult learners. That is why, in recent years, we have chosen to highlight the outcomes for those young people most at risk of being left behind, including children in care, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special educational needs. Ofsted should act as their champion, ensuring that they receive the standard of education and care to which they are entitled.

Evolution and improvement

Regulators exist to improve the quality of services. Done badly, regulation can encourage a tick box or compliance culture, stifling innovation, increasing workload and detracting from the delivery of a quality service. All regulators should challenge themselves to ensure that their activities are, on balance, adding value for the public.

In Ofsted's case, that means that our desire to hold providers to account for the quality of their provision through rigorous inspection should be matched by an awareness of the unintended consequences, in particular workload burdens for professionals and the stress that inspection can cause. To that end, the 2015 common inspection framework for all stages of education and skills and the soon to be introduced inspections of local authority children's services (ILACS) significantly reduce the burden caused by previous inspection frameworks.

It is unlikely, and perhaps undesirable, that any regulator be loved by the sectors it regulates, but its judgements and decisions need to be credible and respected. That is why Ofsted is an outward-facing organisation and puts real effort into myth-busting and stakeholder engagement. We have also increased the number of people who are current headteachers or leaders on our inspection teams, supporting our commitment to make sure that what we do is informed by current provider experience.

Inspection and regulation also face the challenge of keeping pace with a changing policy landscape. Ofsted has so far proven itself to be nimble in adapting to change. We have taken seriously the requirements of the 2006 Education and Inspections Act, which we use efficiently and effectively. In recent years, we have moved to a leaner inspection model that allows us to do more inspections at lower cost to the tax payer. We have adopted a regional model, headed by a team of regional directors.

All are experienced former practitioners. This has allowed us to build a deep, professional dialogue at the local level, to share intelligence and to focus more sharply on areas of underperformance. We have also brought the inspection of schools, further education and early years providers back in house, giving us better control of the quality of our inspections, especially through inspector training.

In recent years, the pace of change in education, skills and care has been dramatic. The growth of multi-academy trusts, the creation of children's services trusts, the expansion in government-funded childcare and the introduction of the apprenticeship levy are just a few examples. This pace of change is unlikely to slow. New demands and challenges, such as the impact of Brexit on the skills sector, are continuing to emerge. If Ofsted is to function effectively as a regulator, we must continue to ensure that our regulatory and inspection frameworks keep pace.

A further tension exists in our work between the number and variety of audiences we serve. Informing parents is one purpose of our inspection reports. However, we also exist to provide performance information for government and responsible bodies to use in deciding whether and what intervention might be necessary, and to give feedback directly to providers about where they can improve. This tension requires Ofsted to make careful choices about where, when and how to inspect and how to report on our findings.

For all of these reasons, we have thoroughly reviewed Ofsted's strategic priorities, taking account of emerging evidence, recognising sector changes and building on previous work to reduce inspection burdens.

This new strategy is built on the principle that our inspection and regulatory activity should lead to improved outcomes for children, young people and learners. Inspection and regulation must be more than the sum of its parts.

Ofsted's mantra since 2007 has been 'Raising standards, improving lives'. That mission remains just as central 10 years later. Our strategy builds on our work towards achieving those twin goals.

2017 strategy

To direct the next phase of 'Raising standards, improving lives', we have developed a new strategic guiding principle: that Ofsted exists to be:

'A force for improvement through intelligent, responsible and focused inspection and regulation.'

The principle will be underpinned by three core values:

- Children and students first
- Independence
- Accountability and transparency

A force for improvement

This first part of our guiding principle affirms our role as a force for improvement: a force that leads to better outcomes for children and young people.

We have deliberately chosen 'a force' to recognise that Ofsted is just one of many actors in education, training and care. Ofsted is not, nor seeks to be, an 'improvement agency'. We believe that direct improvement work is best done by teachers, leaders, social workers and others who work on the ground.

However, inspection is not a generic activity: the purposes of inspection should determine the types of inspection we use, the frequency of inspections, how judgements are decided and the shape of our reports. It is our considered view, underpinned by legislation in the Education and Inspections Act 2006, that the primary purpose of Ofsted inspections should be to lead to improvement.

'Through...inspection' means coming to judgements of performance. Our judgements focus on key strengths, from which other providers can learn intelligently, and areas of weakness, from which providers should improve their performance. Ofsted inspections act as a trigger to others to take action. That action can be responsible bodies taking action to improve practice in a local authority or nursery, parents and older students being able to vote with their feet, or government being able to take action to support or, in the cases of inadequacy, convert or rebroker a failing school. Ofsted can choose when and how often to inspect. Through this timing, Ofsted should catch providers before they fall, making the improvement easier and quicker.

'Through...regulation' means ensuring that providers meet minimum standards and in particular provide a safe environment for children. Those that do not are either given notice to improve or, if they fail to do so, will be closed, by Ofsted directly or, in the case of independent schools, the Department for Education.

However, our role as a force for improvement extends beyond day-to-day inspection and regulation of individual institutions. Just as important is Ofsted's role in system-wide improvement, both through helping to create the conditions that enable social mobility and allow young people to reach their potential and also in reducing regulatory burdens across the system.

As Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) has said, we are the only organisation with a bird's eye view of education, training and care provision. Through our work, we look at the full range and breadth of young people's experiences, giving us a first-hand, unvarnished view about what works and what doesn't improve outcomes. Central to Ofsted's role will be greater aggregation of these insights to inform the national policy debate and local provider practice.

How we achieve this

The second half of Ofsted's guiding principle specifies the ways in which we will act as that force for improvement: through 'Intelligent', 'Focused' and 'Responsible' inspection and regulation. Under each of these themes will sit a series of priority work streams.

Intelligent

Intelligent inspection and regulation reflect our determination that our work should be evidence-led and that our evaluation tools and frameworks should be as precise, valid and reliable as possible. Ofsted can only act as an effective force for improvement if we know what works to improve outcomes for children and young people and can evaluate it sufficiently well.

Inspection is by its nature 'an art done scientifically'. A move towards more intelligent inspection is not an attempt to remove the human element of inspection. The area where we most add diagnostic value is through the expertise and experience of our inspectors. If Ofsted were simply to replicate existing accountability data, it would be fair to question our value for money. Instead, while data will always be an important starting point, our inspections should look beyond published data, explore how results have been achieved and in some cases act as a counterbalance to any unintended incentives in the broader accountability system. Under the heading of 'intelligent inspection and regulation' there are four priority work streams:

a. Valid measures: Our inspections must provide a fair measure of the quality of education, training and care. Judgements about that quality should be generalisable beyond the time of inspection; that is to say they should reflect the overall quality of a provider and its capacity to continue to improve. As a regulator, our responsibility is to ensure not only that we are measuring the right things, but that, in totality, these measures add up to a meaningful overall judgement. As we work towards developing our 2019 education common inspection framework, we will assess and improve the validity of our inspections. Human judgement will always be to some degree imperfect.

However, in line with the pan-civil service drive, we will work to reduce unconscious bias in inspection judgements, particularly as it affects providers in disadvantaged areas. We will also take the same approach to our risk assessment process, working with data science experts in order to make sure we are targeting providers most at risk of failure. This will also help us in deciding when and how to inspect through the ILACS framework.

b. A skilled workforce: Ofsted's workforce brings significant expertise, from our team of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), regulatory inspectors (RIs) and Ofsted Inspectors (OIs), who are mainly drawn from good or outstanding providers. Nonetheless, as we develop the strategy, it is right that we consider the balance and skills of our workforce. As part of this, we will review and aim to slim down our reporting process so that HMI and RIs have more opportunities to use their professional experience in providing challenge and support rather than writing lengthy reports. All the evidence shows that people perform best when they can be themselves. Ofsted will continue to create an environment that recognises the diversity of our workforce as one of our greatest strengths. We will also ensure that our inspectors have access to the latest research and thinking, and that our serving practitioners have more opportunities to take learning from inspection back into their own organisations.

c. Informative grading: Alongside measuring the right areas, we must ensure that our grading system encourages improvement and does not create undesirable incentives. We will work with the Department for Education to conduct research into the impact of the inspection grading structure. We will give greater prominence to underlying judgements and look to how they are used by different audiences for different purposes. Replacing the 'satisfactory' grade with 'requires improvement' sent out the deliberate signal that only good is good enough. However, more work now needs to be done to understand the impact of this change and that message.

d. Aggregation of insights: Ofsted does not, and should not, have preferred styles of teaching or care provision. We will, however, comment on the practice we see in the system and the outcomes that that practice is leading to. We will publish more aggregation of the insights from inspections, identify negative trends before bad practice becomes embedded and show what good providers are doing to lead to positive outcomes for young people. Again, we will make clear that there is no single way to achieve excellence. We will create more opportunities for highlighting local and regional insights alongside national trends. All our conclusions will be based on evidence, not personal or organisational prejudice. To that end, we will create better avenues for Ofsted to absorb expertise from think tanks, academics and other stakeholders.

Responsible

Ofsted has a great deal of influence over the education, training and care sectors. Many providers believe that 'what Ofsted says goes' and it is undoubtedly the case that what Ofsted has said and done has shaped the sectors we inspect. This has not always been for the good. We are also a prime trigger for intervention and leadership change within organisations. This influence means that Ofsted must use its inspection and regulatory powers responsibly and ensure that its frameworks are fair if it is to be a force for improvement.

Ofsted has made great strides in minimising the burdens of regulation. A high-profile myth busting campaign has been clear about exactly what Ofsted does and does not want to see. The introduction of short inspections for schools and colleges has allowed us to take a more proportionate approach to settings judged to be good. At the same time, we have increasingly recognised the scale of the task faced by leaders and school teachers in more challenging areas through the leadership and management judgement. We will build on this work through four priority work streams under the 'responsible' heading:

a. Responsive and engaged: We will continue to explain what our inspections do and do not look at. Our complaints process has been bolstered in recent years to include greater independent scrutiny. We are now seeking to build on that system to give providers more opportunity to provide feedback and challenge. As an outward-facing organisation, we will be willing to address criticisms and use feedback not just from providers, but from parents and other users of our reports. We will constantly seek to reduce regulatory burdens, streamlining our processes and tackling the workload side effects of inspection. We will continue to build on the strengths of our regional model, deepening local relationships and gaining a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of provision across the country.

b. Understanding the consequences: Ofsted should always be aware that inspections are career-defining moments for the professionals who operate in providers. For private businesses, they also determine the future of their operation. While many of the consequences of inspection are beyond our control, we can take steps to mitigate against perverse incentives. We should ensure that our judgements and grade profiles are fair and not barriers that deter talented professionals from working in areas where young people are most in need of support. Just as important is that we should not allow leaders to misrepresent Ofsted policy as a way to justify bad practice – particularly where it relates to the real quality of education or unnecessary workload for staff. We will also make sure that our research work and highlighting effective practice does not lead to the impression of 'Ofsted preferred styles'.

c. Responsible intervention: Ofsted's voice has a major impact. If Ofsted, HMCI or regional directors misuse that voice or are seen to intervene too readily, it blunts our ability to use it as a force for improvement. Conversely, if we remain silent in the face of policy concerns for fear of challenging

government or other vested interests, we are failing in our improvement function. This applies equally at the institutional level. While it must be the case that new providers are given a chance to improve when they take over a previously underperforming institution, we must not allow providers to evade any form of scrutiny for long periods of time as this poses a risk to young people's education. Institutional intervention must also be proportionate and we continue to look at how to reduce regulatory burdens particularly on small providers.

d. Addressing our audience: Ofsted faces the challenge of having to serve a number of different audiences through our reports. This stream of work will ensure that our reporting delivers what each kind of user needs. This includes giving feedback to a provider with which they can make real improvements in their provision. A further priority will be making our education reports more accessible to parents. This could include making them shorter and better focused on the issues that parents care about when choosing or seeking assurance about a school, college or childcare provider. We will take a similar approach to support employers in choosing apprenticeship providers. We will also explore other ways of making sure that parents, learners and employers can make their own views heard. We will use our growing digital expertise to build on the success of Parent View, learning from other areas of the public sector, such as NHS Choices or commercial entities.

Focused

Like all public sector organisations, Ofsted faces the challenge of doing more with less. This challenge can be met, in part, through greater efficiency. However, it also demands choices in terms of our focus; about 'doing better with less'. If Ofsted exists to be a force for improvement, we must focus those limited resources where they have the most improvement impact. That extends not only to which providers we prioritise through inspection, but also which structures, which groups and what we look at and when. Under the 'focused inspection and regulation' heading there are five priority work streams:

a. Prioritising inspection: In targeting resources, all good regulators should seek to identify underperforming providers. Effective regulators also catch institutions before they decline. At the level of individual inspection, Ofsted will continue to prioritise providers for inspection based on risk assessment, through data and the local intelligence of our regional teams. This will allow us to inspect before problems become entrenched and will enable improvement to be swifter. However, at the national level, Ofsted should play a role in improving outcomes for young people and other learners across the education, training and care systems. We will achieve this through our national survey reports and research, which highlight what is and isn't working to improve outcomes for young people. That reporting is only possible if our inspectors are exposed to the full range of practice that they can then inform others about. For that reason, we will make more use of the flexibility allowed in legislation to survey and inspect a greater proportion of outstanding schools

and colleges. In order to allow us to visit more outstanding provision while maintaining a focus on poor provision, we may, within legislative limits, lengthen the interval between inspection visits of good providers.

b. Keeping children safe: Even more important than ensuring young people are learning well is ensuring that they are safe. Ofsted should not attempt to duplicate the job of the police or the Health and Safety Executive. Instead, as with all of our work, we will focus on those areas that are genuinely best explored through our inspections. That includes ensuring that providers have the policies and procedures in place to deal with safeguarding effectively. We will play our part in tackling institutions where we believe young people are at risk of radicalisation and extremism. We will also continue to work with the Department for Education to explore better avenues to scrutinise institutions that evade inspection, such as those that provide intensive religious education to young people.

c. Keeping pace: The education, training and care landscapes have changed dramatically in recent years. The growth of children's services trusts, regional adoption agencies, apprenticeship providers and multi-academy trusts was not envisaged under current inspection legislation. That has meant our inspection practice has not always kept pace with the education landscape. Inspection should be targeted at the right level within a provider, the level at which decisions are made. In the coming months, we will work with the Department for Education to develop new approaches and expertise to allow us to better scrutinise education, training and care structures, including at the multi-academy trust level, as well as individual schools.

d. Groups: Ofsted has a strong focus on outcomes for disadvantaged children. We will continue to report on outcomes for disadvantaged pupils at the national level and through our survey inspection work. We will also make sure that inspectors are properly trained on identifying what can be inferred from the performance of small sub-groups within a provider. We recognise the importance of making effective use of whole-school, targeted and individual interventions tailored to specific circumstances. The existence of a gap does not always indicate that an intervention at sub-group level is the right approach. Very often, identifying and correcting institutional shortcomings (for example in curriculum, teaching or behaviour management) will, as evidence from organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) shows, improve outcomes, with disproportionate benefits for lower attaining and disadvantaged students. In some cases, improving whole institution provision will be necessary but not sufficient. In such cases, more targeted approaches to supporting disadvantaged groups and individuals will be required.

a. Right framework: In an autonomous and self-improving system of education, training and care, Ofsted is one of the few organisations capable of triggering a nationwide change in practice. As a result, there is the temptation to use the framework to do too many different things. This

can encourage a compliance culture, rather than one based on improvement. In developing our 2019 education common inspection framework, we will avoid focusing on those areas that do not provide a measure of quality of education and look to report separately on areas which could skew overall judgements. The introduction of new ILACS framework from January 2018 will allow us to focus in detail on specific areas of a provider where we have concerns or want to know more. In the longer term, we will explore whether it is possible to separate the compliance aspects of our framework from those that focus on quality of education and care.

Underpinning values

Our strategic priorities will be underpinned by three Ofsted values that will inform everything that we do:

Children and students first

Children should be able to expect us to champion them. Our focus must be on improving outcomes for young people and we should have high expectations for every single child. While we will at all times consider the views of professionals and policy makers, the defining test for Ofsted will be whether our work helps children and young people reach their full potential and keeps them safe. We will take the same focused approach to the quality of education and training received by adults too, in particular in apprenticeships and technical education.

Independence

Ofsted's independence is essential to act as a force for improvement for children and young people. At the provider level, we will report our findings on quality without fear or favour. At the national, level we will continue to offer impartial advice, grounded in inspection evidence, on the quality of education and care, on how that provision could be improved through national and local government action, and on the impact of current policies and other initiatives.

Accountability and transparency

An organisation that holds others to account must be prepared to be accountable itself. We publish metrics that demonstrate how well we are performing in our inspection and regulatory functions and how we spend taxpayers' money. At the same time, we operate with maximum transparency, ensuring that the development and process of inspection are available for scrutiny.

Evaluation

Ofsted will publish new evaluation and accountability metrics in order to measure the success of the strategy in improving outcomes for children and young people.

In measuring rates of improvement in education and care, we will use published data from the Department for Education, alongside our own state of the nation inspection data, to look at inputs, outputs and outcomes. We will explore the feasibility of combining these measures to create a composite indicator of improvement across each of the sectors we inspect.

It is not possible to disaggregate Ofsted's specific role in improving (or hindering) the system. A number of other factors influence this, such as funding, workforce supply. Recognising this, we will also publish annual accountability metrics that more specifically measure Ofsted's progress in achieving our strategic goals.



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 children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

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