

Inspection of children's centres

A report on the responses to the consultation

This is a report on the outcomes of the consultation about the new arrangements for the inspection of children's centres to be introduced in April 2013.

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Introduction

1. This report summarises the responses to Ofsted's consultation on the proposals for the inspection of children's centres from April 2013. Under the Childcare Act 2006 (as amended by the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009), Ofsted has responsibility for inspecting children's centres at intervals prescribed by Regulations or where required by the Secretary of State. It may also inspect at the discretion of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector where he considers this to be appropriate.
2. Since introducing the current inspection framework in April 2010, there have been changes in the government's 'vision' for children's centres and the way in which local authorities have chosen to commission and deliver services from children's centres. In addition to this, Ofsted intends to drive up the quality of children's centres and carry out inspections that are sharply focused on the impact a centre has on young children and families. These are the main reasons for consulting on a new inspection framework for children's centres.
3. Ofsted has consulted widely on seven key questions that will underpin the new framework. These questions asked consultees about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following:
 - Ofsted should develop a flexible framework that allows inspection of groups of centres that share leadership and management, and separate inspections of those that work collaboratively or alone
 - Ofsted should carry out a number of inspections of children's centres that share services simultaneously, to reduce duplication of inspection meetings and activities
 - Ofsted should reduce the number of key judgements made during inspection from 20 to three
 - Ofsted should revise the criteria for inspection
 - Ofsted should replace the 'satisfactory' judgement with 'requires improvement'
 - Ofsted should target re-inspection of centres judged as 'requires improvement' in those local authorities that have the highest proportion of centres at this grade and focus those inspections on the effectiveness and impact of the centre's action plan and work to improve its services
 - Ofsted should continue to make a self-evaluation form available.
4. The results of the consultation help Ofsted to develop and implement a new framework from April 2013. Ofsted aims to publish the new framework and accompanying guidance in the spring of 2013.

The consultation method

5. The consultation period ran from 29 October 2012 to 11 January 2013. Ofsted used a range of methods to consult with people. These included: an online questionnaire available through Ofsted's website; a survey of parents on the Ofsted Parents' Panel; and a range of face-to-face events including conferences, meetings and focus groups with key audiences.
6. Ofsted received 393 responses to the online questionnaire. These came from children's centre leaders/managers and individual practitioners, local authorities, parents of children who attend children's centres, organisations working in partnership with children's centres and representatives of national organisations including those providing commissioned services for children's centres.
7. The Parents' Panel consultation attracted 243 responses from parents. During the consultation period, Ofsted attended over 10 conferences, meetings and focus groups to talk about the consultation proposals and to seek views. The views of key external stakeholders were also sought through an external stakeholder conference held on 10 December 2012.
8. This report reflects the results of the feedback we have received.

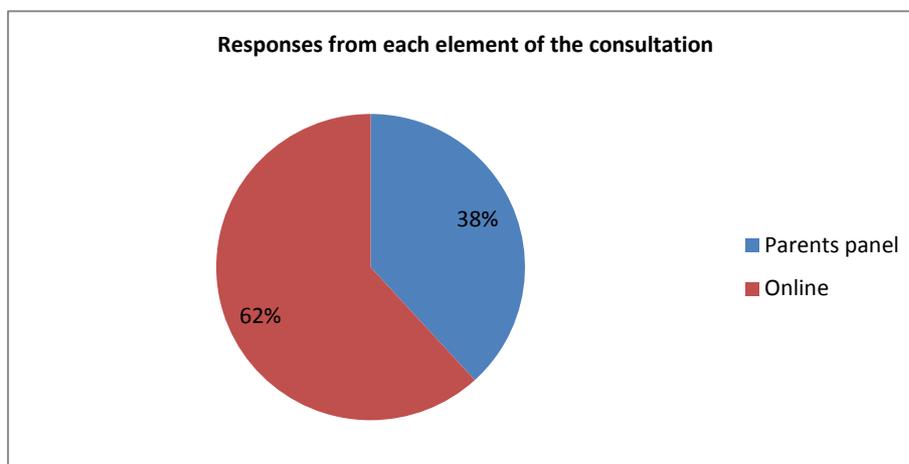
Summary of findings

9. Overall, the responses to the consultation from parents, children's centre staff, commissioned service providers, local authorities and others were strongly in favour of almost all Ofsted's proposals. The following are the key findings:
 - Most respondents agreed that Ofsted should use a flexible framework that allows inspections of groups of centres, as well as of individual centres; 88% of those responding to the online consultation and 85% of parents responding through the Parents' Panel were in favour.
 - A large majority of those responding to the online consultation agreed that inspections of children's centres with shared services should be carried out simultaneously across a geographical area wherever possible, while 88% of parents responding to the Parents' Panel agreed or strongly agreed with this proposal.
 - A large majority of respondents to the online consultation agreed with a reduction in the number of inspection judgements from 20 to three, with another judgement for overall effectiveness; parents on the Parents' Panel were less certain about this and 46% agreed with this proposal.
 - A large majority of respondents agreed that Ofsted's proposed criteria covered the right areas; for example, 79% of those responding to the online consultation agreed or strongly agreed.

- A large majority of respondents to the online consultation (74%) agreed with the four grades proposed, including replacing the 'satisfactory' grade with 'requires improvement'; support was even stronger amongst parents, with 84% of Parents' Panel respondents agreeing.
- Most respondents (81%) to the online consultation agreed with Ofsted's proposals to re-inspect centres judged as 'requires improvement'; respondents to the Parents' Panel were less certain about the methods being proposed; 67% agreed while 17% disagreed for a variety of reasons.
- A large majority of respondents agreed with the proposals to produce one report for a group of centres that shares leadership and management; for example 66% of those responding to the online consultation were in favour.
- Most respondents (89%) to the online consultation agreed that Ofsted should continue to make a self-evaluation form available; 77% of respondents to the Parents' Panel agreed, while 15% neither agreed nor disagreed.

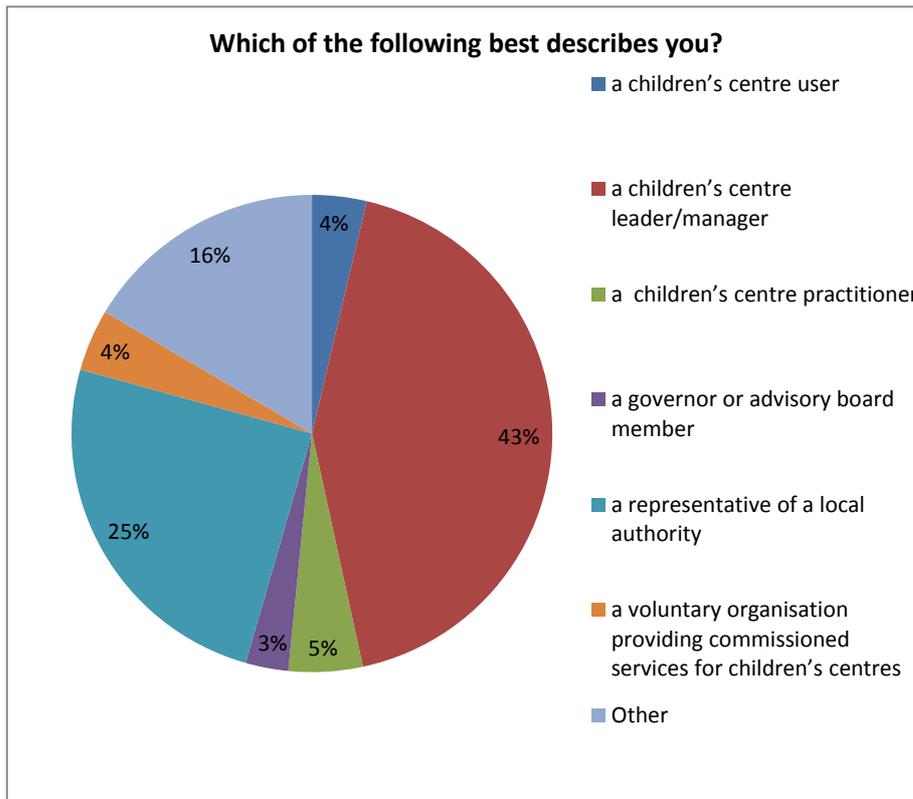
Findings in full

10. The following chart sets out the responses we received from the online consultation and the Parents' Panel. The Ofsted Parents' Panel was targeted at parents only.



Number of respondents: 636

11. Respondents to the online consultation identified themselves as representing a range of roles. The largest group to respond (43%) were children's centre leaders/managers.

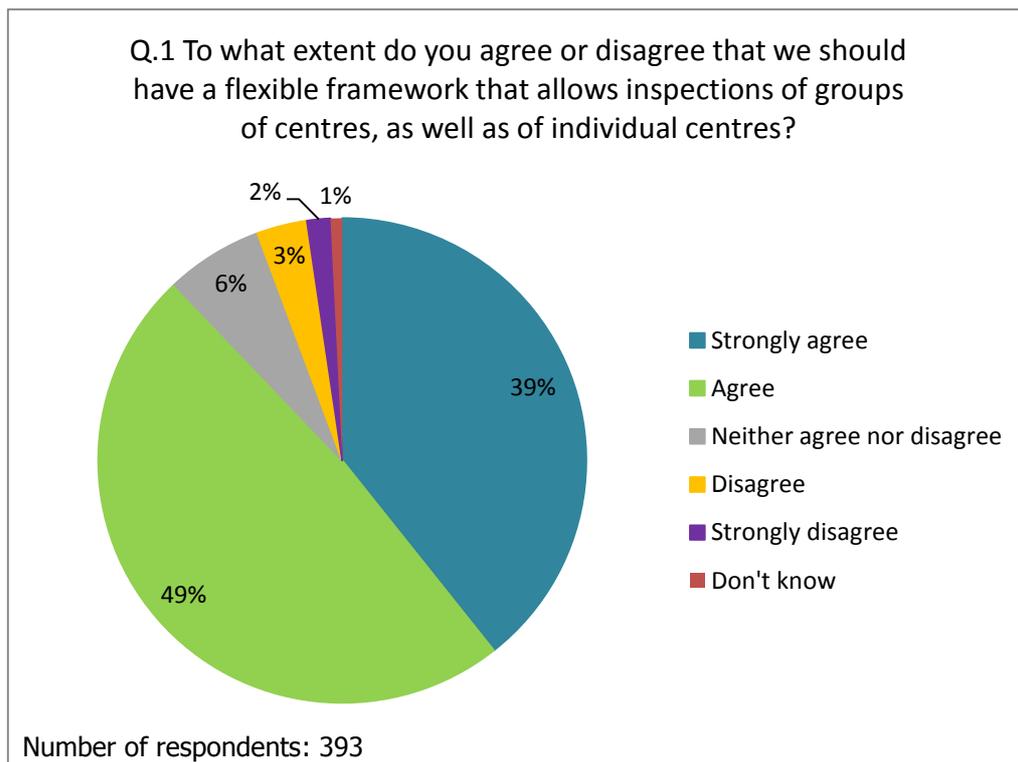


Number of respondents: 393

Detailed responses to each consultation question

Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should have a flexible framework that allows inspections of groups of centres, as well as individual centres?

- There was strong support overall for this proposal with a very large majority agreeing or strongly agreeing.



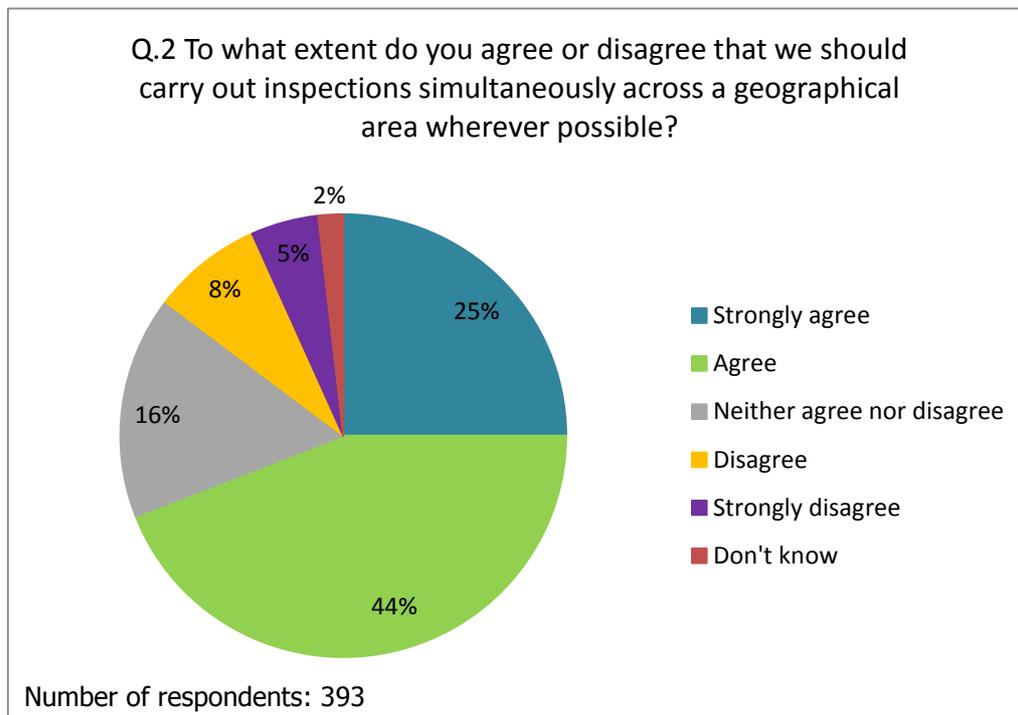
13. A large majority (88%) of those who responded to the online consultation agreed or strongly agreed with this question. Support was consistent across different types of people and organisations responding to the consultation, including children’s centre leaders/managers and practitioners, local authorities, parents, children’s centre partner organisations and provider representatives.
14. A similar level of support was evident from the Parents’ Panel (85%). A typical comment was:

‘As long as each individual centre will be inspected and accountable for results, this is a good proposition. It may help to raise standards in a larger area.’
15. Five of the six main representative bodies who responded to this question agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal. The main benefits were perceived to be a less burdensome framework for centre staff and partners and less intrusion for parents.

Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should carry out inspections simultaneously across a geographical area wherever possible?

16. A large majority of respondents to the online consultation (69%) agreed or strongly agreed that Ofsted should carry out inspections simultaneously across a geographical area wherever possible. Support for this proposal received the highest level of agreement (88%) from those responding through the Parents’ Panel.

17. All of the six main representative bodies who responded to this question agreed with the proposal.

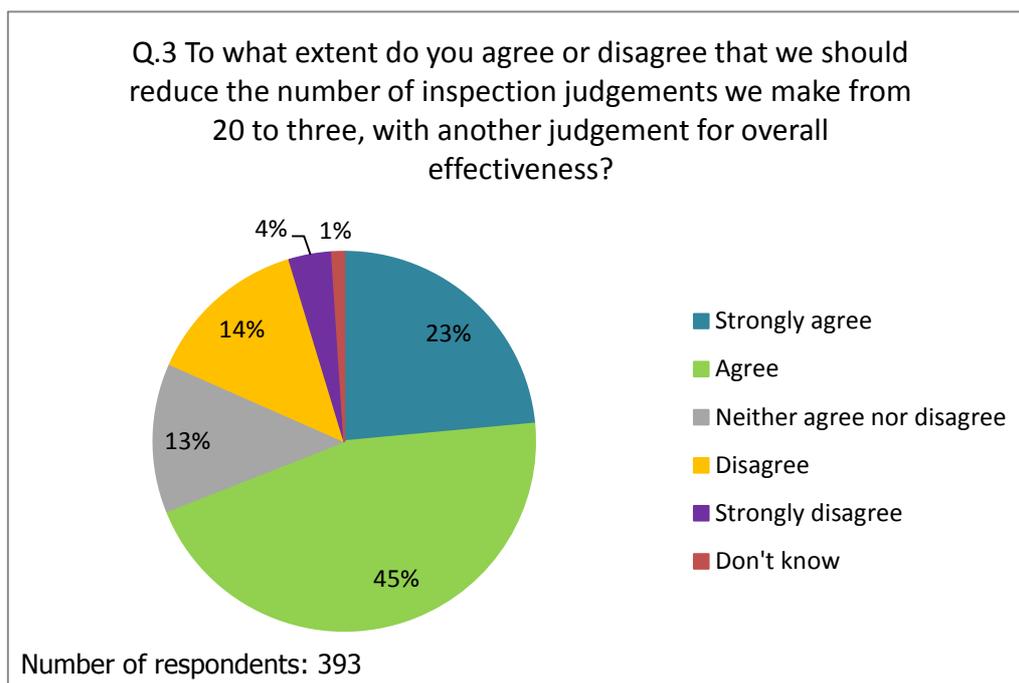


18. Across all of the respondents, many felt that simultaneous inspections would result in a more accurate picture of what services and provision families could access in their area and whether the provision is accessible and sufficient to meet their needs.

19. Common areas covered by the comments were: the importance of making the expectations and requirements of inspection and the different type of arrangements very clear for centre staff; and giving due consideration to the length of time centres had been working together collaboratively or have had shared leadership, governance and management arrangements in place.

Q3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should reduce the number of inspection judgements we make from 20 to three, with another judgement for overall effectiveness?

20. A large majority (68%) of respondents to the online consultation supported this proposal.

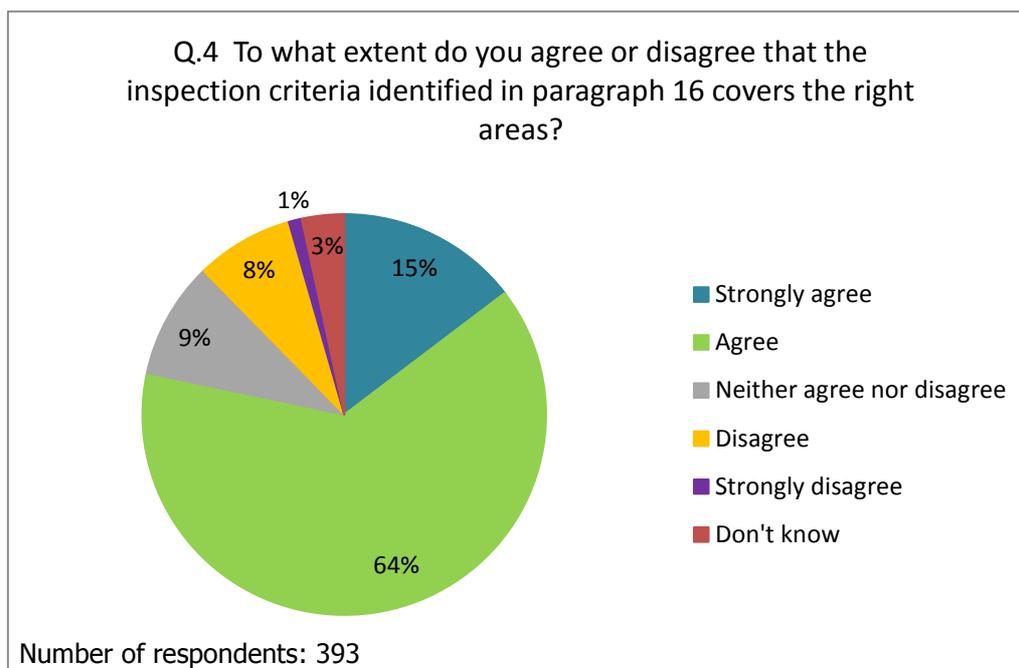


21. This proposal received the lowest overall level of support from parents responding through the Parents' Panel, with a minority (46%) of parents saying they agreed. A quarter of parents said they neither agreed nor disagreed with the proposal and 44% disagreed. Several of the parents' comments made through the Parents' Panel indicated that their uncertainty arose because they did not have a clear view about the impact of this proposal.
22. All of the six main representative bodies who responded to this question agreed or strongly agreed with the proposal. The Association of Directors of Children's Services felt this would make the framework more transparent and accountable and bring children's centre inspections in line with those of schools.
23. Several respondents to the online consultation felt that this proposal would enable a much clearer focus on the right judgements. A typical comment was as follows:

'The number of judgements should be reduced. This makes it easier and clearer to understand the criteria for inspection for staff and parents.'
24. Several respondents cautioned against over-simplification and questioned whether a reduction in the number of judgements might compromise the quality and depth of information contained in the inspection report.
25. The comments suggest that Ofsted needs to provide clear guidance about how inspectors reach judgements.

Q4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the inspection criteria identified in paragraph 16¹ covers the right areas?

26. A large majority of respondents (79%) to the online consultation supported this proposal.



27. Four out of five parents (80%) responding through the Parents' Panel agreed that the inspection criteria cover the right areas. Typical comments were as follows:

'This sounds as if it is child focused, transparent, and also family focused. This will consider the centre as a resource and whether it is meeting the needs of the community.'

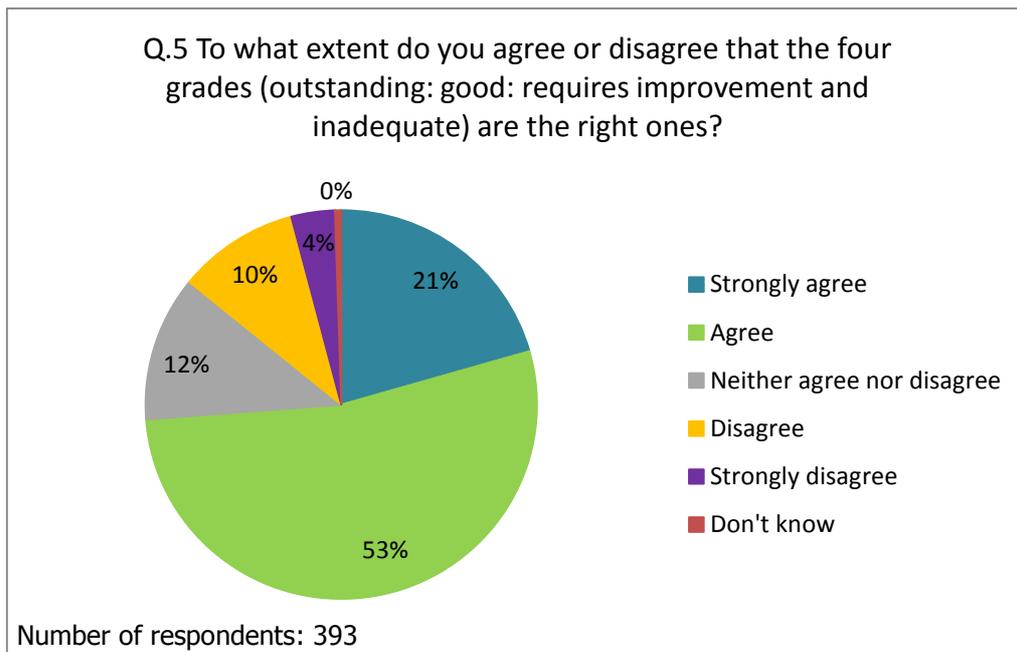
'As long as the reduction does not reduce the quality of the inspection then this makes sense. The key areas highlighted should give a good overall measure of the effectiveness of the centre.'

28. Five of the six main representative bodies who responded to this question agreed with the proposal. One organisation representing providers urged that the focus on targeted services should not result in the quality and importance of universal services being overlooked; another referred to the importance of commenting on the appropriateness of local performance indicators.
29. Some comments made by centre managers and staff in particular suggest a more detailed explanation of the criteria and how inspectors will use them to reach their judgements will be helpful.

¹ See paragraph 16 of the *Inspection of Sure Start Children's Centres Consultation document* (120326), Ofsted, 2013; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/inspection-of-sure-start-childrens-centres

Q5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that these grades (outstanding; good; requires improvement and inadequate) are the right ones?

30. A large majority (74%) of respondents to the online consultation agreed or strongly agreed that these grades are right, with 84% of the Parents' Panel also agreeing.



31. Four of the six main representative bodies who responded to this question agreed with the proposal. A typical comment was as follows:

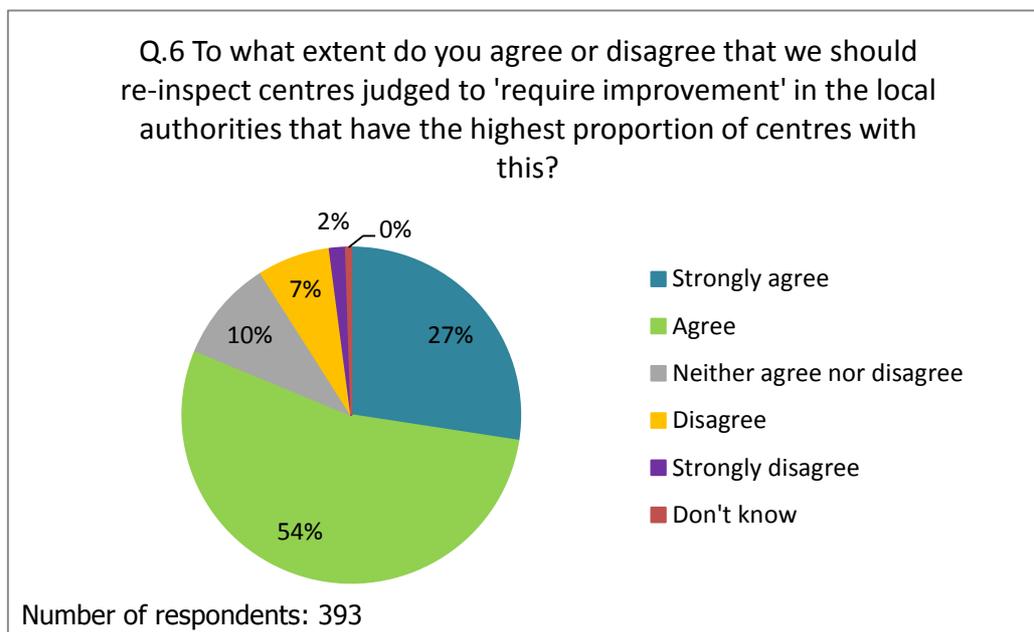
'We think changing "satisfactory" to "requires improvement" will be better as anything which is not "good" does require improvement in order to meet the needs of families.'

32. Some respondents commented that the phrase 'requires improvement' could be unhelpful in terms of the message it gives to parents, staff and the public. Several of those responding also commented that they would like Ofsted to provide detailed information about what makes 'good' provision and a 'good centre'.

Q6. We intend to target re-inspection of centres judged to 'require improvement' in those local authorities that have the highest proportion of centres at this grade and to focus those inspections on the effectiveness of the centre's action plan.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that this approach is the right one?

33. Most respondents to the online consultation (81%) agreed that Ofsted should re-inspect those centres judged to require improvement.



34. Five of the six main representative bodies who responded to this question agreed with the method being proposed. The Association of Directors of Children's Services responded that it:

'... agreed in principle with this approach. However, consideration needs to be given to the cost and resource implication of improving services. Local Authorities must be given the right support and attention to be able to improve their services – not just constant re-inspection as a way of encouraging them to improve.'

35. Some comments suggest that there needs to be a focus both on the local authority (LA) and at the individual centre level because the method being proposed may enable some 'poorer quality' centres to 'coast' in some local authorities and does not take account of the diversity of providers in some areas. However:

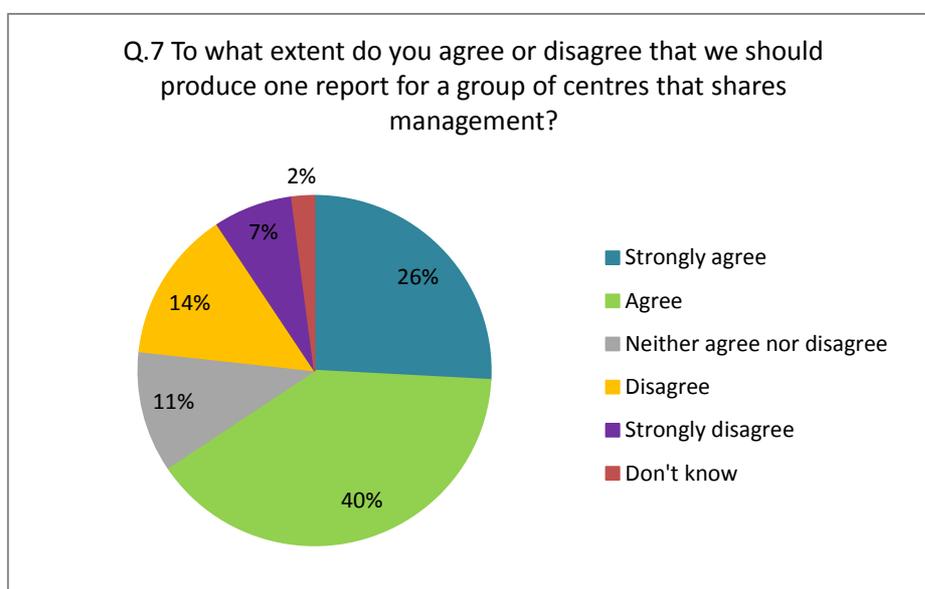
'... it is recognised that if a significant number of centres in a local authority are failing their children and families, there must be some focus on the commissioning and support features of the LA that is allowing this failure to go unchallenged.'

36. Just over two thirds of parents (67%) responding through the Parents' Panel agreed that re-inspection of centres judged to require improvement was right; although in line with many of the responses to this question made through the online consultation, parents' comments suggest that there is less support for the timescale and method being proposed. A typical comment was as follows:

'all centres should be re-inspected ... and re-inspection should be sooner ... 12 months is a long time for a young child to have to stay in a centre where the services aren't adequate.'

Q7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should produce one report for a group of centres that share management?

37. This proposal received the lowest overall level of support from those responding through the online consultation; even so, a large majority (66%) indicated they agreed and similarly 67% of parents responding through the Parents' Panel also agreed. A fifth of parents disagreed with this approach for a number of reasons.



Number of respondents: 393

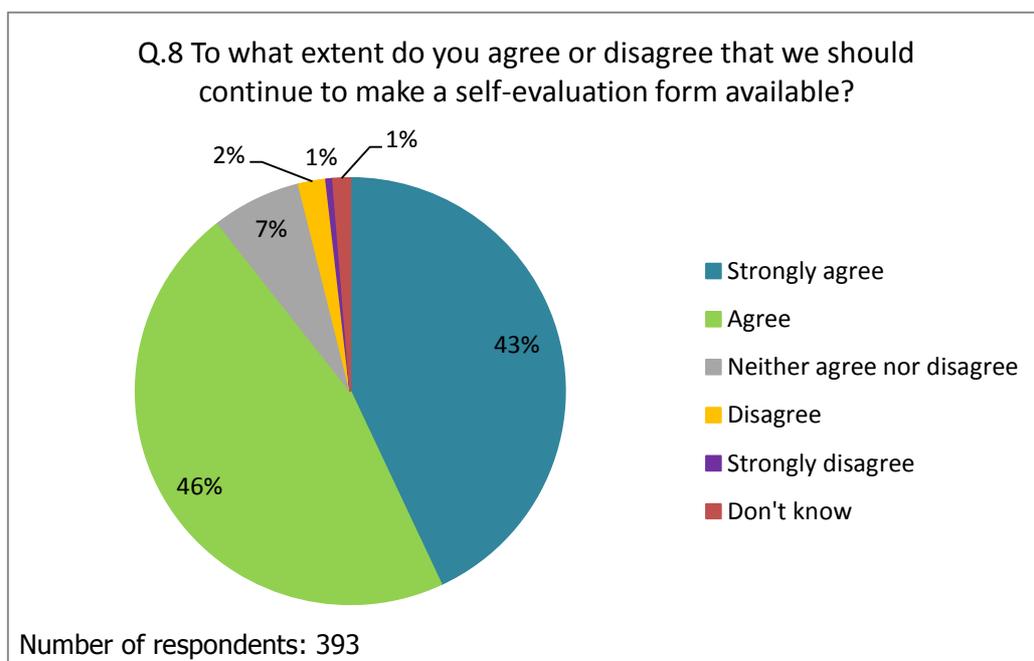
38. Half of the main representative bodies who responded to this question agreed with the method being proposed while the other half neither agreed nor disagreed.
39. Many respondents liked the idea of a parent-friendly summary. Several felt that a single report and action plan for a group of centres that shares leadership, governance and management would reinforce shared accountability. Some expressed the view that a group that is generally performing well should not receive an overly negative report due to the shortcomings of one centre in the group.
40. Comments from several providers related to uncertainty about what the proposal might mean in practice and focused on issues such as: how a single report might take account of differences in performance within the centre group; how inspectors will ensure that centres do not lose their individual

identity; how Ofsted will know what type of inspection to conduct; and when information about inspection will be available for centre staff.

We expect to see some form of self-evaluation by centres and propose to continue to make a self-evaluation form available for children’s centres to complete individually or as a group of centres if they wish.

Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should continue to make a self-evaluation form available?

41. This proposal received the highest level of support (89%) from those responding through the online consultation. All six of the main representative bodies who responded to this question agreed while around three quarters of parents responding through the Parents’ Panel believed that the optional self-evaluation form (SEF) should continue to be made available.



42. Several respondents expressed their belief that SEFs are an effective improvement tool and a key to reflecting standards; some emphasised the importance of not making the process a ‘box ticking exercise’.
43. Several respondents stated that they welcomed the proposed option of being able to provide one SEF for a group of centres. Respondents suggested ways that Ofsted could improve upon the current version of the SEF and these include linking it to the ‘core purpose for children’s centres’ and to produce an optional action plan.
44. The most commonly occurring suggestions related to Ofsted providing more explicit guidance for centre staff on how to complete an effective SEF; setting clear expectations around performance data and benchmarks and how these

might be presented; and providing clear definitions for terms such as 'engagement' and 'contact' for example.

The way forward

45. We are grateful to all those who responded to the consultation, as the views expressed have highlighted many areas where respondents are content with the proposals, but also some important aspects that we have considered carefully. We aim to publish our revised inspection framework in March, and as a result of the comments raised, we will proceed with our plans as set out below.

A flexible framework

- Given the positive comments we believe it is right to implement a flexible framework. We intend to carry out one inspection and publish one report for a group of centres that have shared leadership and management and integrated services. Centres that operate alone or collaboratively without common leadership and management and/or formal arrangements for sharing services will continue to receive individual inspection and reports. However we will normally inspect more than one centre at the same time with a larger inspection team covering up to five centres across a locality.² As respondents commented that they want to be clearer about our definitions for the different types of centres we have outlined, and what to expect when we inspect them, we will invite all local authorities to attend a dissemination event where we will explain how we intend to inspect centres. We will publish guidance for local authorities and centres on our website and we will work with the Department for Education to include new fields on the SureStart_On database to allow centres to show whether or not they are part of a group.

Key judgements and revised inspection criteria

- We welcome the support from providers and the main representative bodies for a reduced number of key judgements and the revised inspection criteria. We will publish our inspection criteria and provide clear guidance about how they are used by inspectors to reach the three judgements, and the judgement for overall effectiveness. From the comments made by parents through the Parents' Panel, it is clear that parents are less certain about the number of judgements and inspection criteria than they are about other aspects of inspection. As a result, we will ensure that we include a short explanation of these in our guidance leaflet for centre users.

² A locality is a geographical area that is usually a smaller unit than the local authority as a whole (unless the local authority is a very small unitary authority).

Inspection reports

- We welcome the support for a parent-friendly summary at the beginning of every inspection report. We will ensure every report includes a short summary of the centre or group's main strengths and weaknesses. We recognise the concerns raised by some about the possibility of losing an individual centre's identity and that of the local community it serves within a group report and so we intend to make explicit in each group report the centres that it covers by listing them. In addition, the main body of the report will include detail about any particular differences in the services offered by centres within the group.

Introducing a 'requires improvement' grade

- Given the positive comments, we intend to implement the 'requires improvement' grade and re-inspect these centres more frequently. We intend to continue to reinspect centres that are judged as 'inadequate' within 12 months and centres that are judged to 'require improvement' within 24 months. Following the same approach that we have taken with other providers such as schools, this new designation is a signal that these centres must improve to a 'good' standard within a reasonable period of time. That's why we are also saying that we think four years is long enough to become 'good'. If a centre is found to 'require improvement' at two consecutive inspections and it still isn't 'good' at a third, it is highly likely to be judged inadequate. We intend to pilot monitoring procedures for centres judged as requiring improvement alongside workshops and seminars to help them understand how to become 'good'. We will publish more information about these arrangements, including our plans to reinspect all centres judged as requires improvement within two years of their last inspection, following the introduction of the revised inspection framework.

An optional self-evaluation form

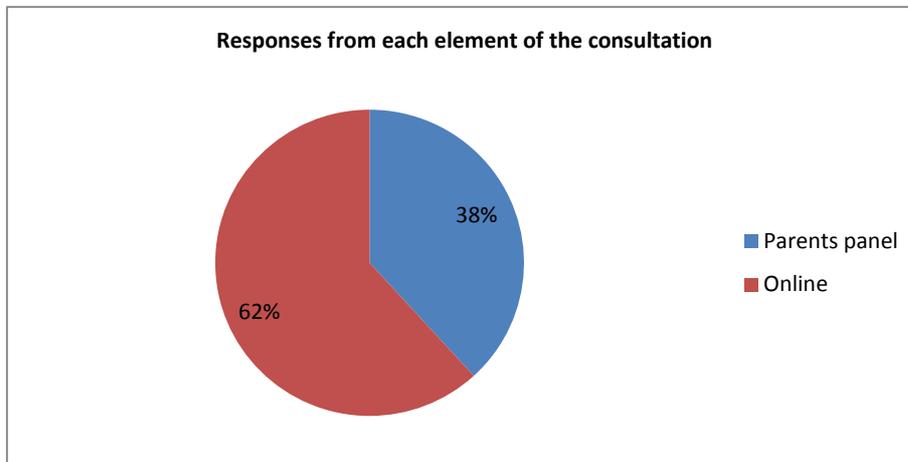
- Respondents were keen for Ofsted to retain an optional self-evaluation form (SEF) and some made suggestions about improvements. We will review and revise the optional SEF, taking account of the comments made.

Other matters

- We will consider carefully the suggestions and ideas that some respondents helpfully proposed. These included a request for regular opportunities for centre staff to hear about improvement strategies and the provision of guidance materials about, for example, ways of presenting a centre's performance data effectively.

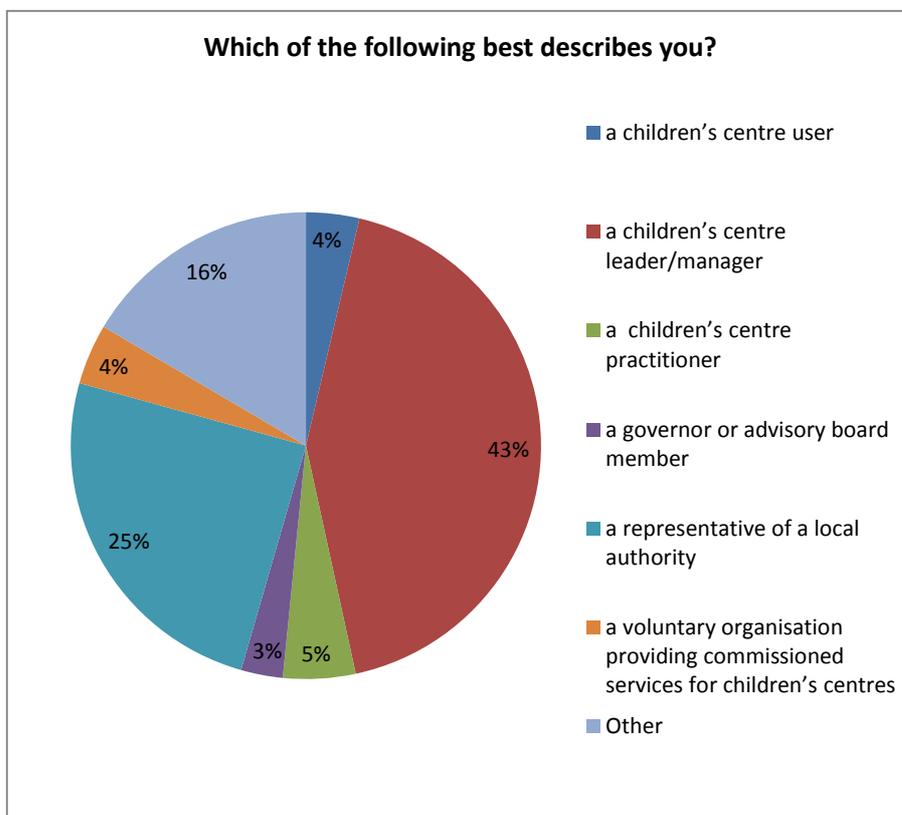
Annex A: data from the online consultation

The following chart sets out the responses we received from each element of the consultation.



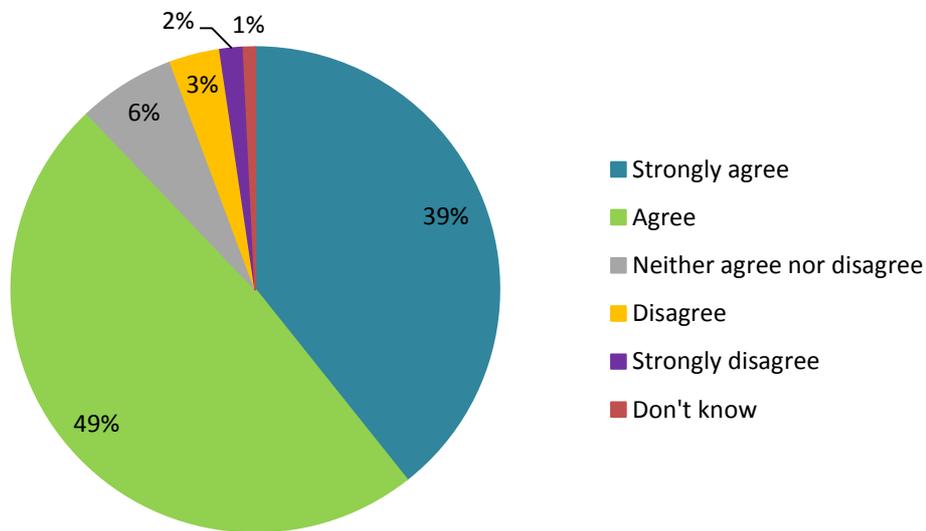
Number of respondents: 636

Consultation questions and responses



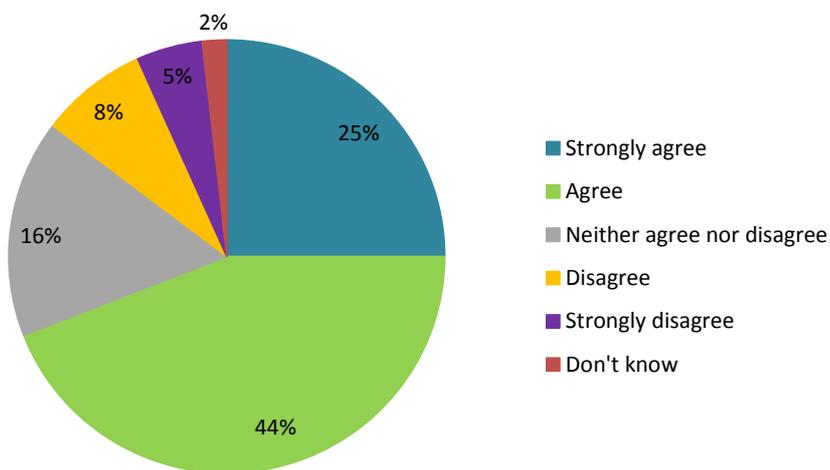
Number of respondents: 393

Q.1 To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should have a flexible framework that allows inspections of groups of centres, as well as of individual centres?



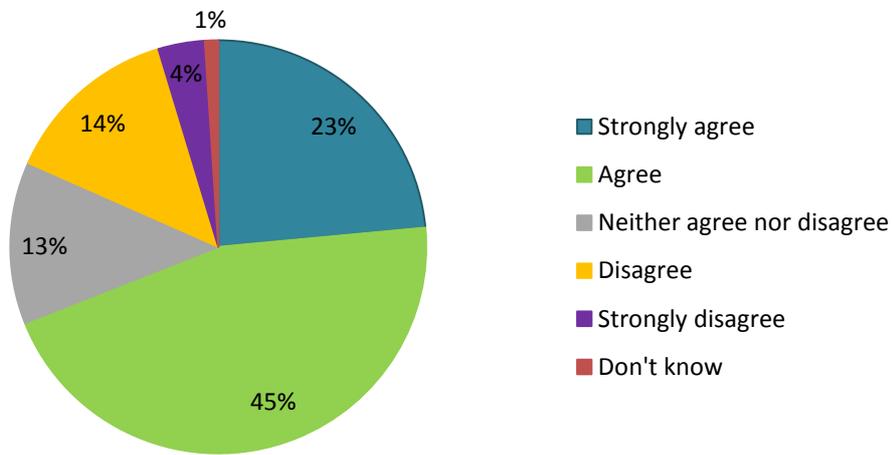
Number of respondents: 393

Q.2 To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should carry out inspections simultaneously across a geographical area wherever possible?



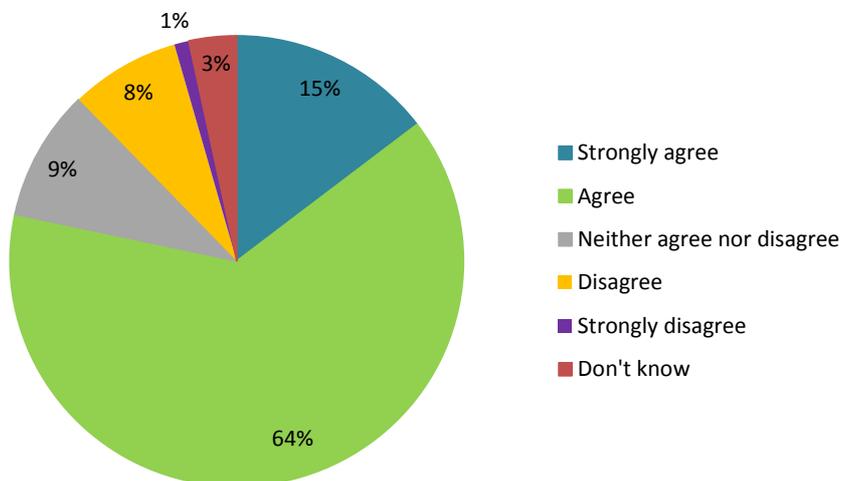
Number of respondents: 393

Q.3 To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should reduce the number of inspection judgements we make from 20 to three, with another judgement for overall effectiveness?



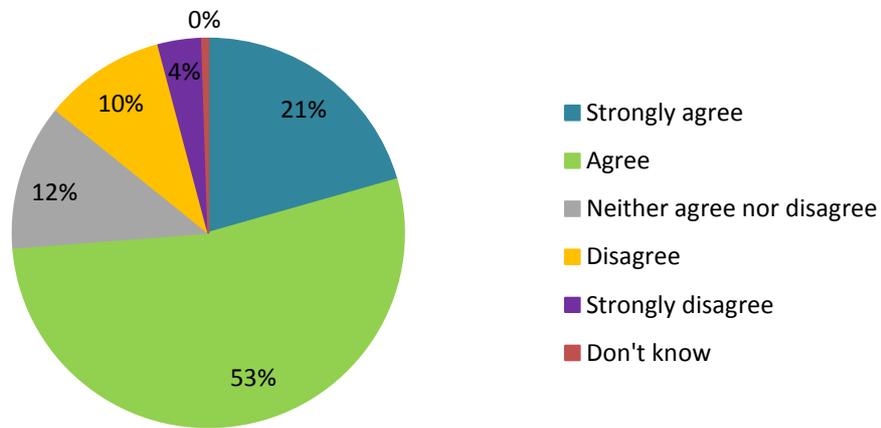
Number of respondents: 393

Q.4 To what extent do you agree or disagree that the inspection criteria identified in paragraph 16 cover the right areas?



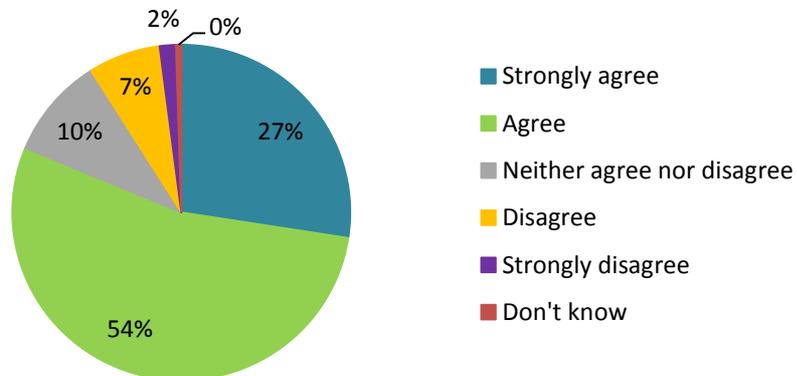
Number of respondents: 393

Q.5 To what extent do you agree or disagree that the four grades (outstanding: good: requires improvement and inadequate) are the right ones?

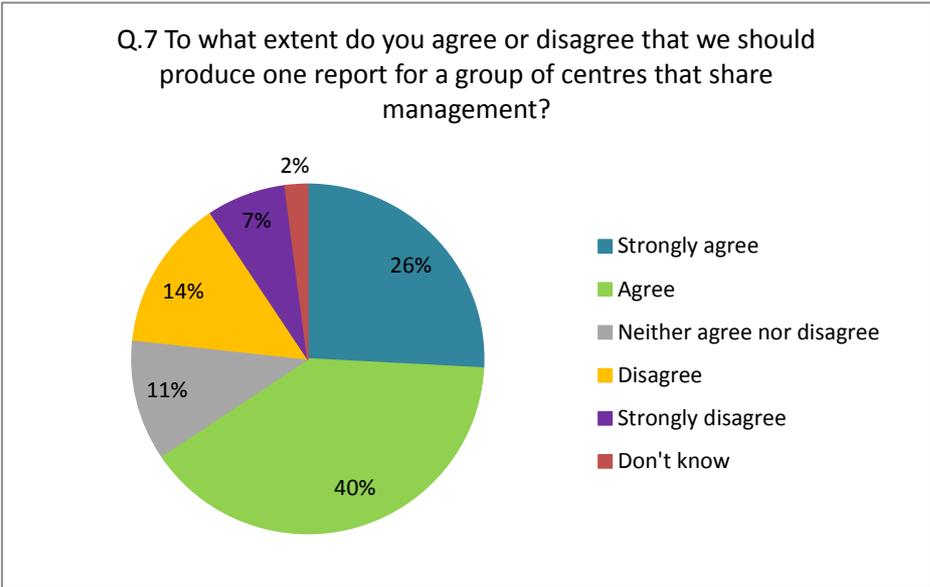


Number of respondents: 393

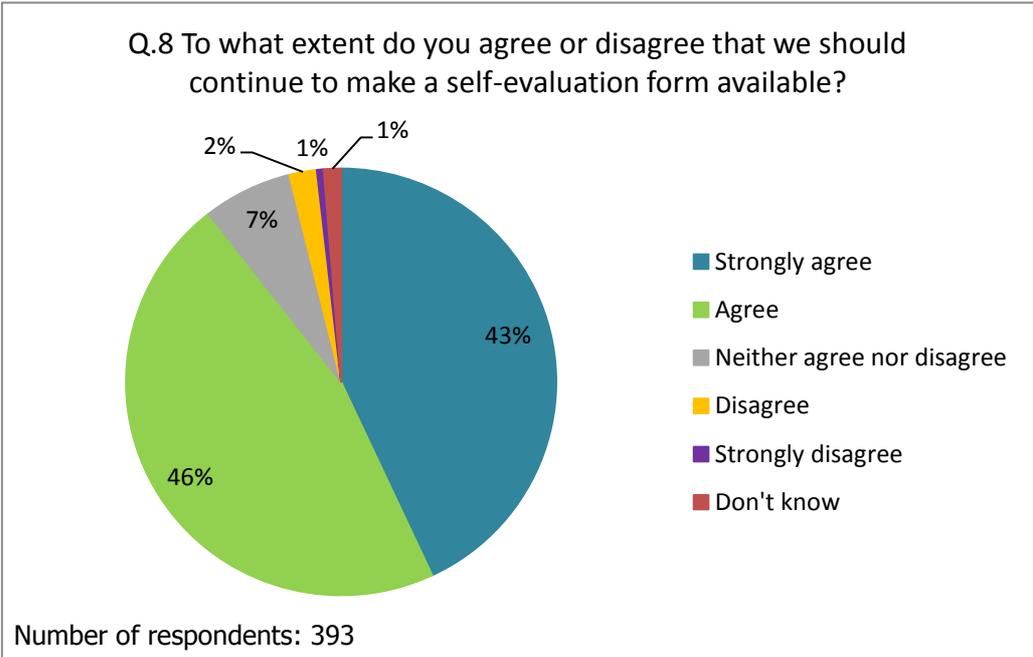
Q.6 To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should re-inspect centres judged to 'require improvement' in the local authorities that have the highest proportion of centres with this?



Number of respondents: 393

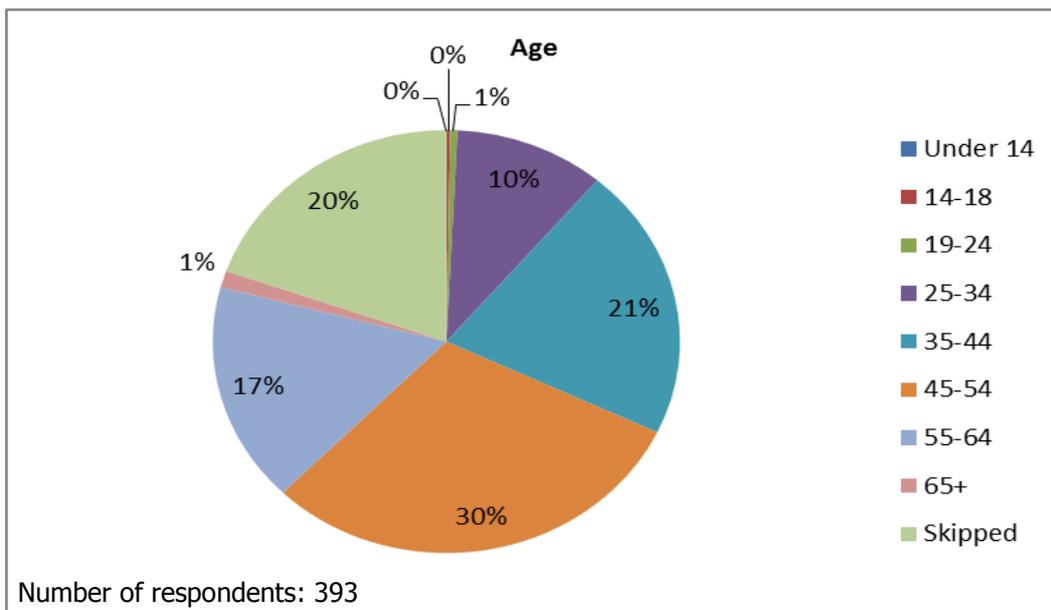
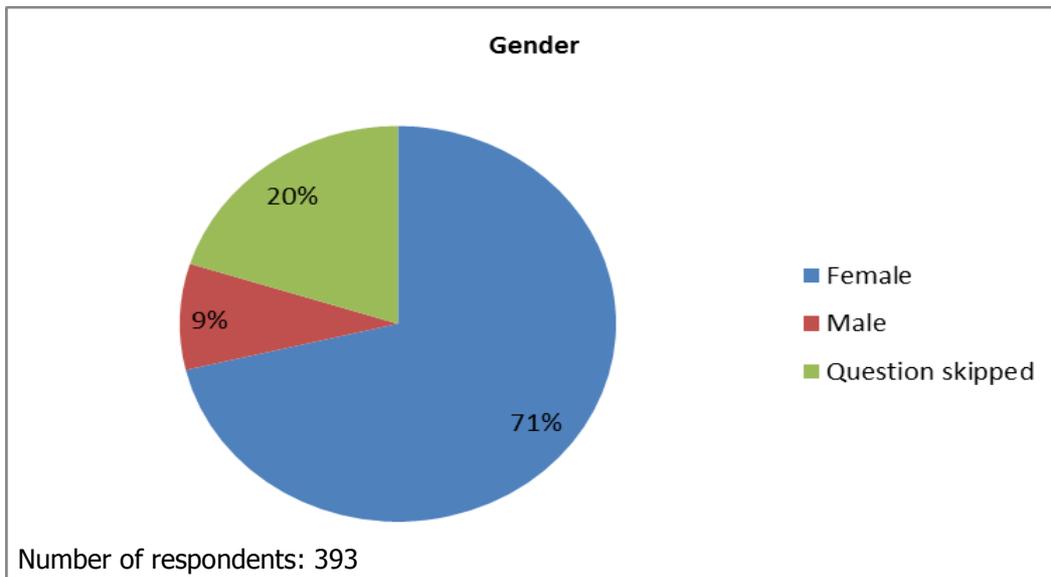


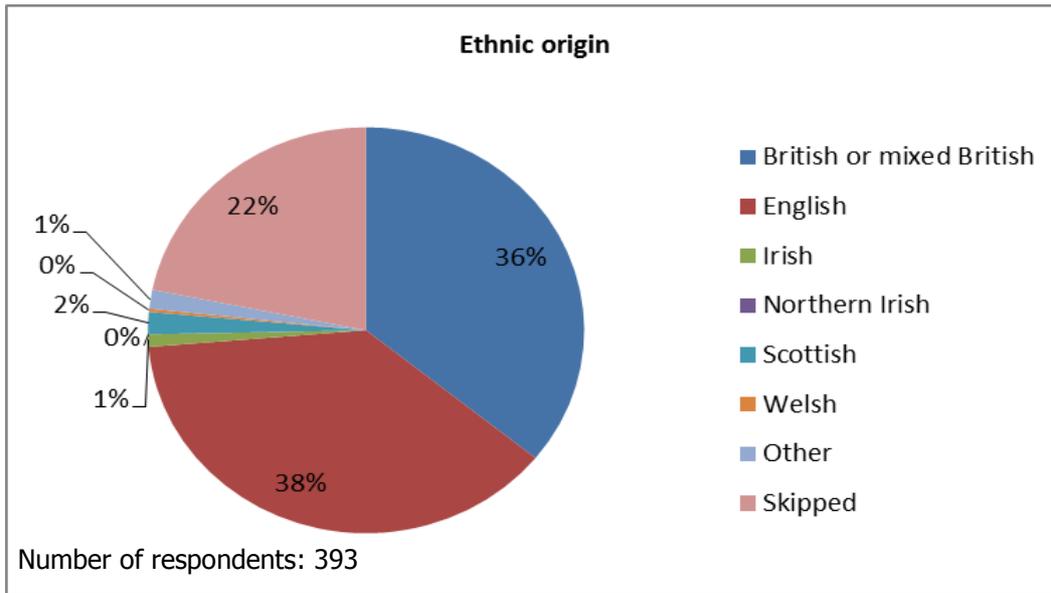
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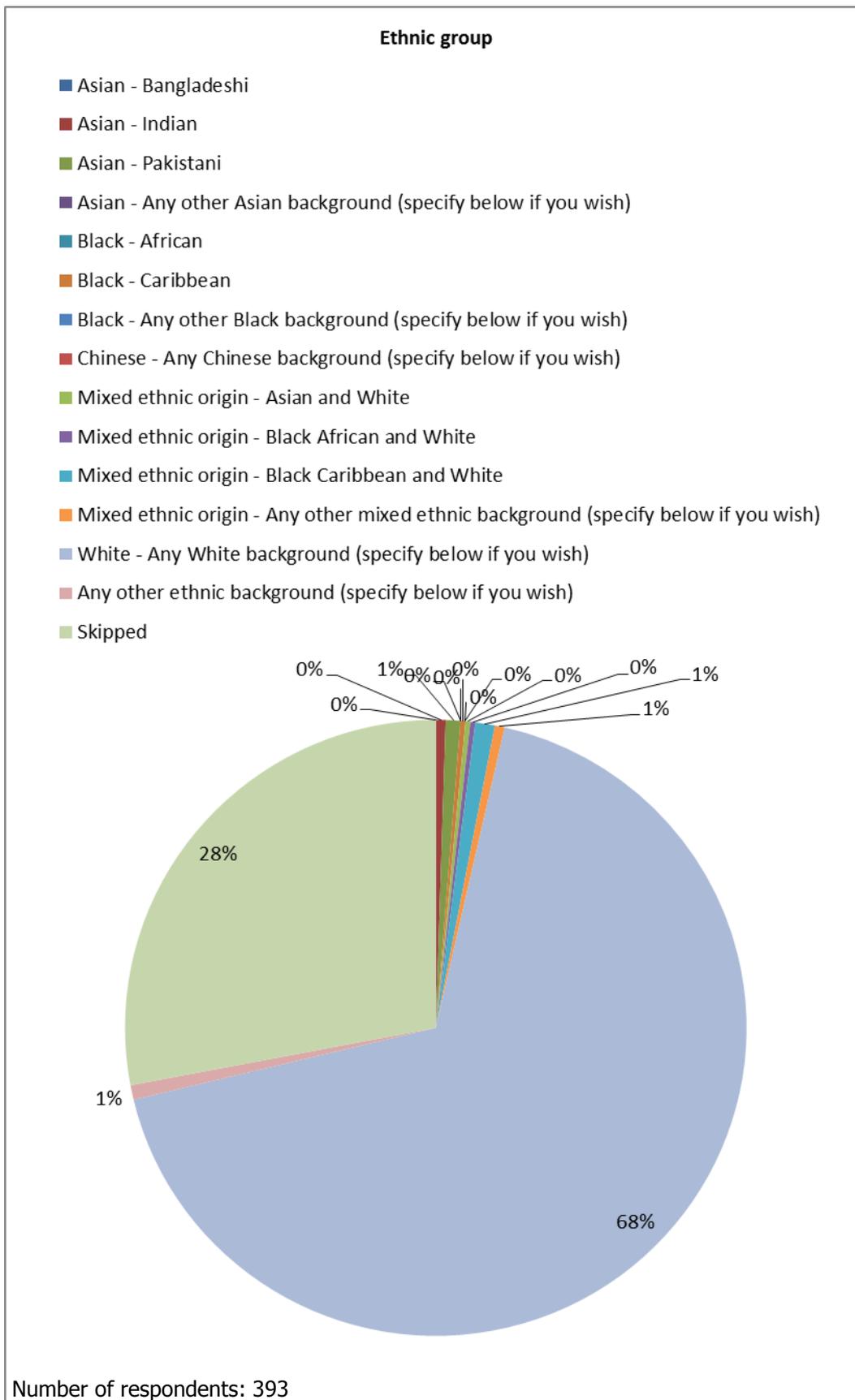


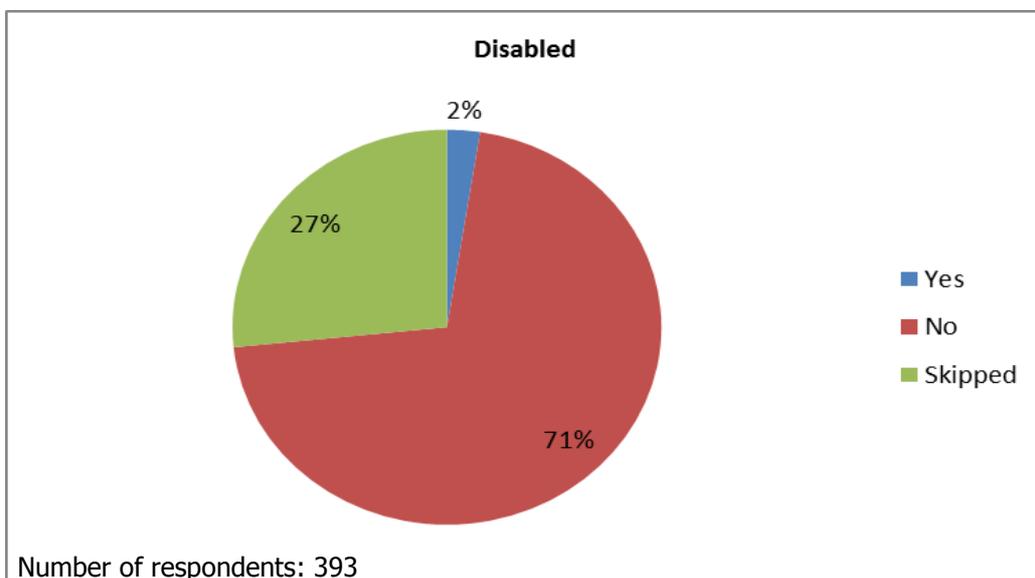
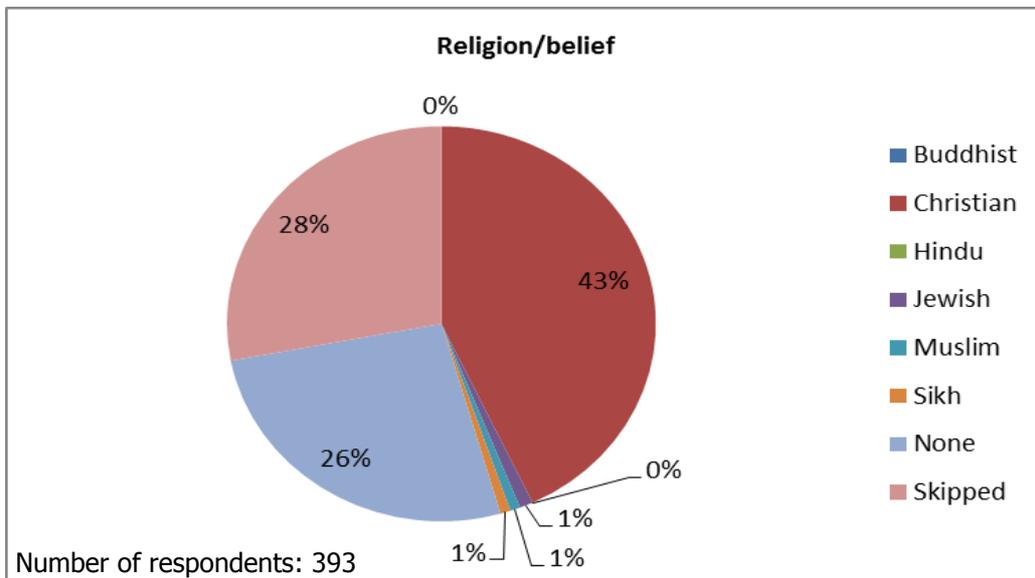
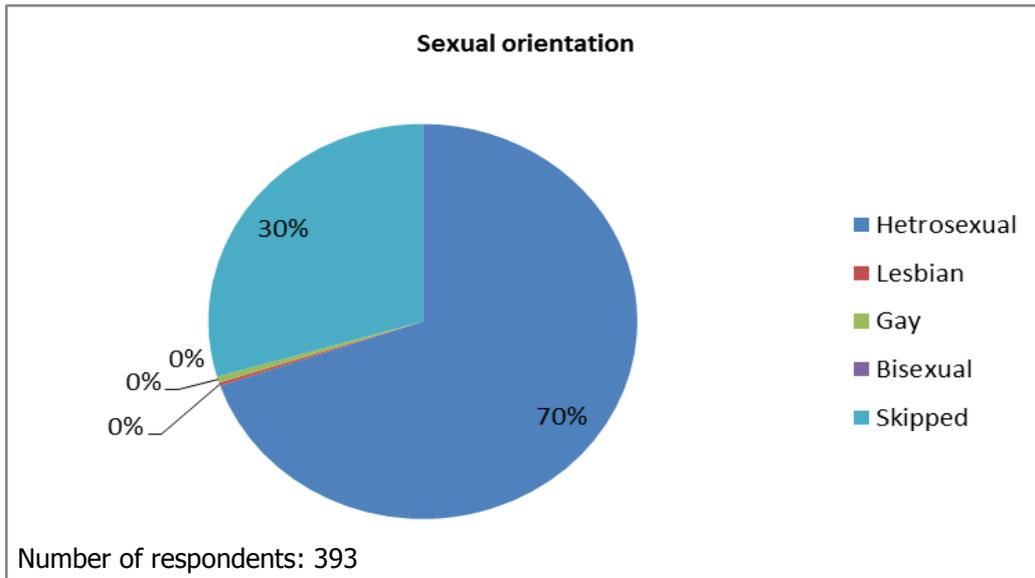
Number of respondents: 393

Information about respondents









Annex B. Data³ from the Ofsted Parents' Panel consultation

The Ofsted Parents' Panel is made up of parents in England who agreed to fill out a series of online surveys for Ofsted throughout the course of a year. Every member of the panel has at least one child in a maintained school or in registered childcare.

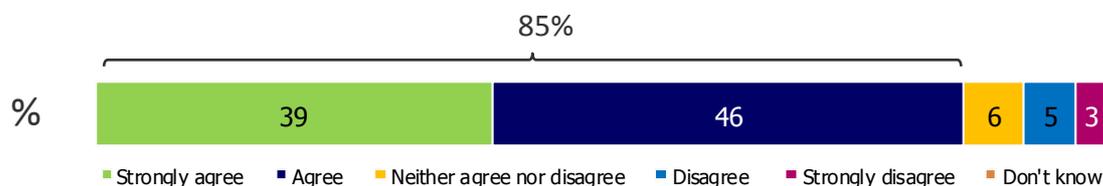
The survey was carried out between 12 November and 9 December 2012. Parents were consulted via an online questionnaire sent to all members of the Ofsted Parents' Panel (1,678). The response rate to this consultation was 15% (243 parents). After reading each proposal and saying whether they agreed or disagreed, parents were encouraged to offer any thoughts or comments they may have had regarding what they had read.

Results were weighted to be representative of parents in England by sex, age, social grade and region. All survey figures are based on weighted data.

The following sets out the responses we received from each element of the consultation.

Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Ofsted should introduce a flexible framework that allows for the inspection of a group of centres as well as individual centres?

Number of respondents: 243

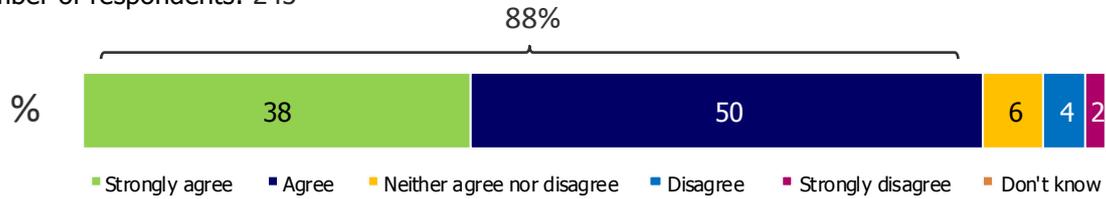


85% of parents agreed that Ofsted should introduce a flexible framework which allows inspections of groups of centres, as well as centres that operate individually. Only 8% disagreed with this.

³ Due to weighting, answer counts (i.e. the number of people who gave an answer) are rounded and therefore percentages may not always match the count divided by the base size.

Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Ofsted should carry out inspections simultaneously across a geographical area wherever possible?

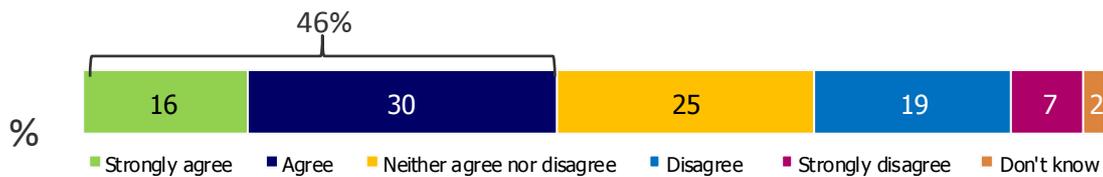
Number of respondents: 243



88% of parents agreed that Ofsted should carry out simultaneous inspections, where possible, within a geographical area. This was the highest level of agreement with any of the consultation proposals. Only 6% disagreed.

Q3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Ofsted should reduce the number of inspection judgements?

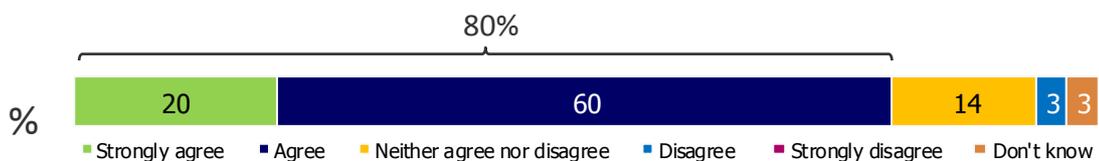
Number of respondents: 243



This proposal received the lowest overall level of support with 46% of parents saying they agreed whilst 44% disagreed. A quarter of parents said they neither agreed nor disagreed with the proposal.

Q4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that these inspection criteria cover the right areas?

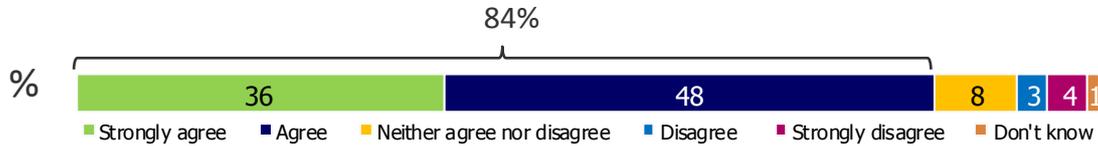
Number of respondents: 243



Four in five parents (80%) agreed that the inspection criteria covered the right areas. Only 3% disagreed.

Q5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that these inspection grades are the right ones?

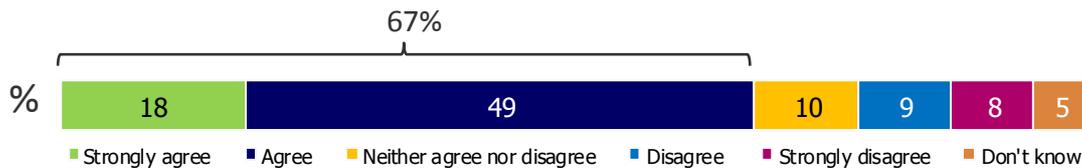
Number of respondents: 243



Over four in five parents agreed that the inspection grades were appropriate, with a further 8% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This suggests a significant amount of support from parents for the inspection grades proposed.

Q6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that this re-inspection approach is the right one?

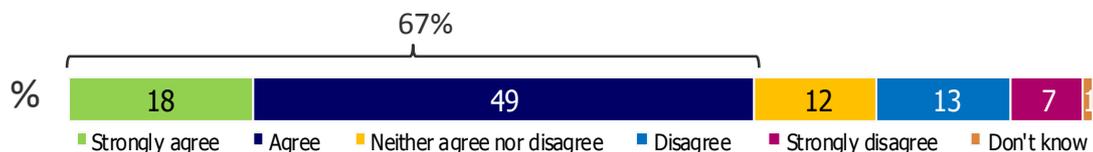
Number of respondents: 243



Just over two thirds of parents agreed that the re-inspection approach was correct. This was a lower level of agreement than for other proposals. One in ten (10%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 17% disagreed.

Q7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Ofsted should produce one report for a group of centres that share management?

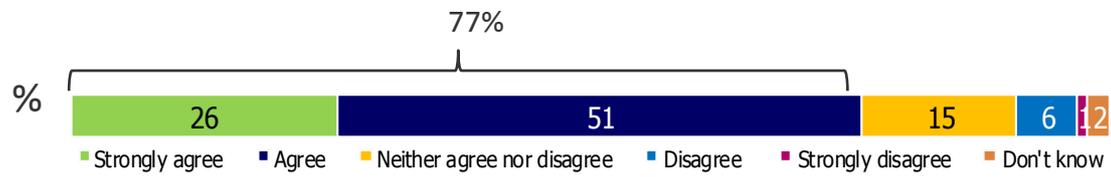
Number of respondents: 243



Agreement levels were similar to those for the proposed re-inspection approach (Q6) with 67% agreeing that Ofsted should produce one report for a group of centres that share the same management. A fifth (20%) disagreed with this approach.

Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Ofsted should continue to make a self-evaluation form available?

Number of respondents: 243



Annex C. Responses from national children’s centre representative bodies

	Q1 (flexible frame-work)	Q2 (simultaneous inspections)	Q3 (reduce judgments)	Q4 (right criteria)	Q5 (grades)	Q6 (re-inspect requires improvement)	Q7 (one report for centre group)	Q8 (retain SEF)
Children’s Society	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree
Action for Children	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
Barnardos	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree
The National Children’s Bureau (NCB)	Agree	Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS)	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Strongly Agree
Spurgeons	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Agree	Strongly agree