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Research and analysis

Schools commentary: Deep dives in school inspections

Updated 18 July 2023

Applies to England

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In September 2019, Ofsted introduced the [education inspection framework](#), which places greater emphasis on the curriculum. When inspectors evaluate the quality of education during an inspection, they carry out ‘deep dives’ in order to understand the school’s curriculum. This involves gathering evidence on the curriculum intent, implementation and impact over a sample of national curriculum subjects.

Background

We carry out deep dives on all graded and ungraded inspections of state-funded schools. Deep dives encompass a range of activities. They usually include inspectors:

- talking to leaders about the curriculum
- doing joint visits to lessons (with the headteacher, subject leaders and/or other leaders)
- looking at pupils’ work
- talking to and observing pupils
- having discussions with teachers.

Number of deep dives

How many deep dives inspectors do varies depending on whether the inspection is a graded or ungraded inspection, the size of the school and the number of inspectors on the team.

This commentary focuses on the deep dives in nearly 4,200 graded and ungraded inspections in 2022/23. [\[footnote 1\]](#) In these inspections, we carried out an average of 4

deep dives per graded inspection and 3 deep dives per ungraded inspection. The average varies slightly between primary and secondary schools, with secondary school inspections featuring slightly more deep dives on average.

Table 1: Average number of deep dives per inspection in 2022/23, by phase and inspection type

Phase	Graded (2,313)	Ungraded (1,884)	Graded and ungraded (4,197)
Primary (3,417)	4	3	4
Secondary (780)	5	4	5
Primary and secondary (4,197)	4	3	4

Note: Number of inspections in brackets

Deep dives by subject

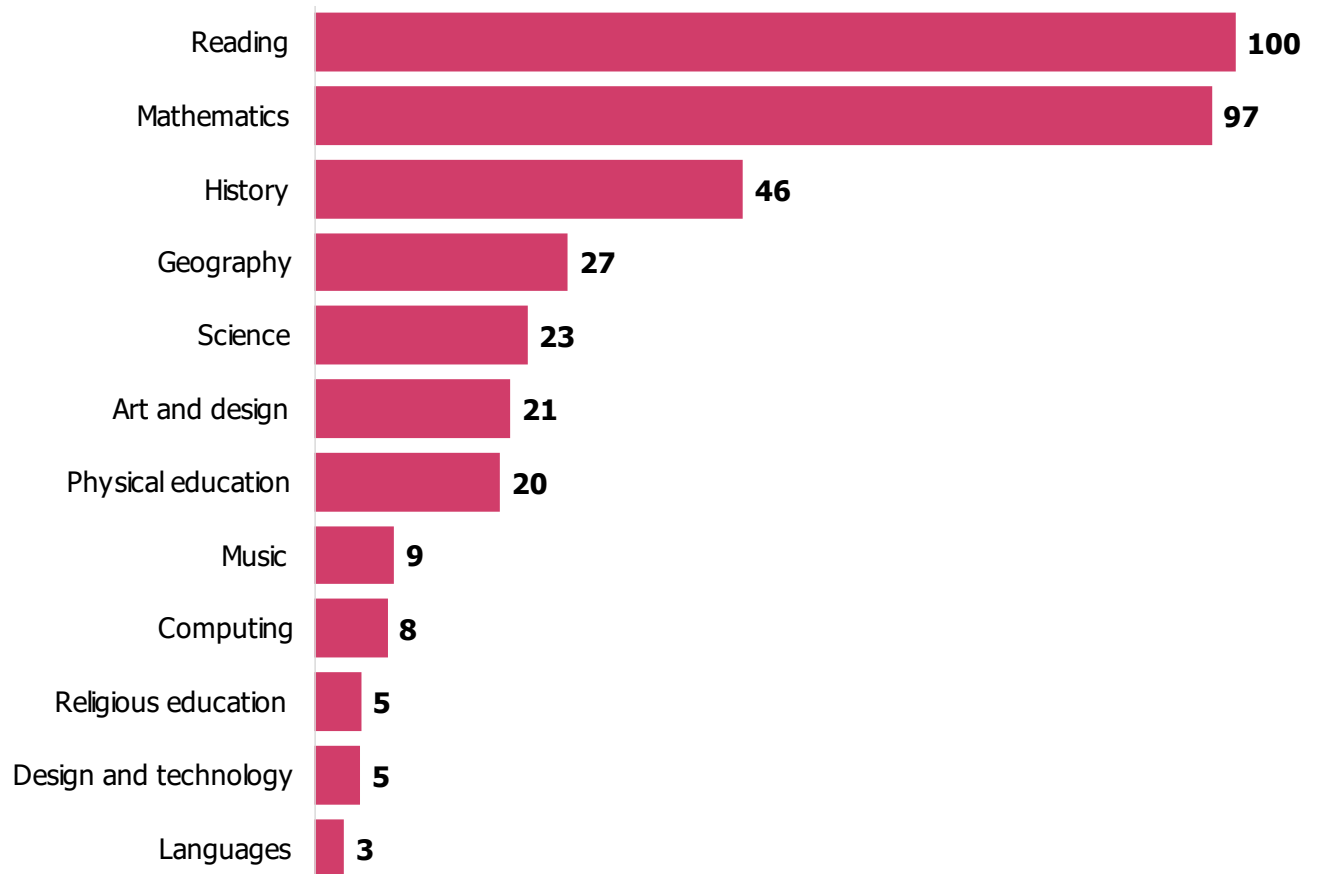
Inspectors choose deep dive subjects in consultation with school leaders, based on what is being taught during the inspection. Schools might suggest specific areas of strength or weakness for inspectors to consider. There are few limitations or requirements on which subjects inspectors can select for a deep dive, so it will be largely based on the individual school. There are a few requirements, however, and inspectors must look at reading in all primary school inspections. [\[footnote 2\]](#)

For the purposes of this analysis, we have grouped deep dives by subjects within the national curriculum, for example grouping deep dives in physics/chemistry/biology under 'science', and French/Spanish/German under 'languages'.

Besides reading, the most common subjects for deep dives in primary schools are:

- mathematics (in 97% of inspections)
- history (46%)
- geography (27%)
- science (23%)

**Figure 1: Deep dive subjects in primary school inspections 2022/23
(percentages of inspections)**

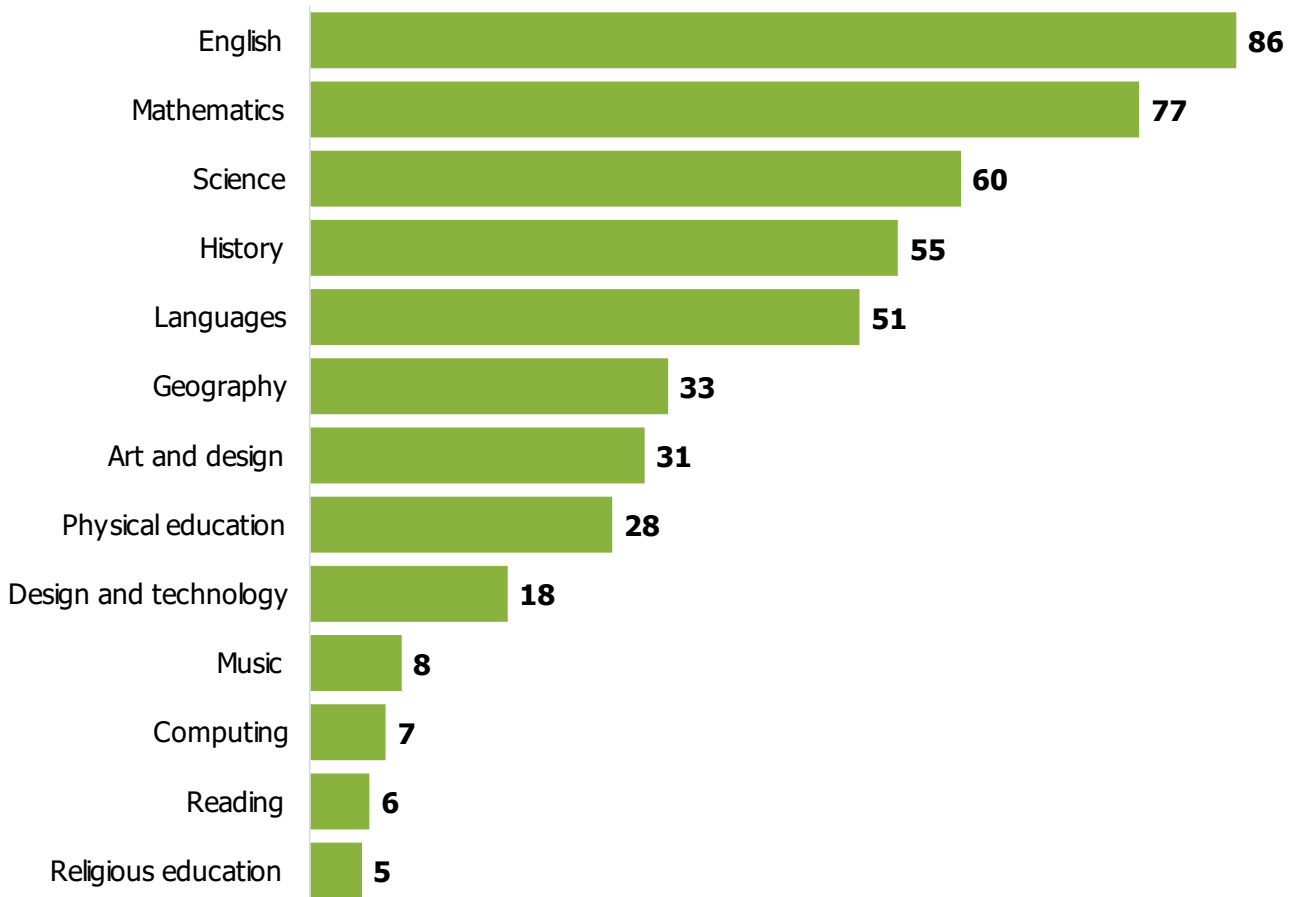


See [data in an accessible format](#)

The most common subjects for deep dives in secondary school inspections are:

- English (in 86% of inspections)
- mathematics (77%)
- science (60%)
- history (55%)
- languages (51%)

**Figure 2: Deep dive subjects in secondary school inspections 2022/23
(percentages of inspections)**



See [data in an accessible format](#)

Technical note

This data is based on an automated text retrieval process to extract subject names from published inspection reports. This relies on interpreting inspectors' text and making some assumptions about what constitutes a formal/full deep dive and what national curriculum area the subject they looked at comes under. The data is therefore an estimate.

Special schools, alternative provision and nursery schools are not included in this analysis.

Data is based on published inspection reports only. Not all of the inspections carried out by 31 May 2023 were published by 31 May.

Subject	% of primary inspections
Reading	100

Mathematics	97
History	46
Geography	27
Science	23
Art and design	21
Physical education	20
Music	9
Computing	8
Religious education	5
Design and technology	5
Languages	3

See [Figure 1](#).

Subject	% of secondary inspections
English	86
Mathematics	77
Science	60
History	55
Languages	51
Geography	33
Art and design	31
Physical education	28
Design and technology	18

Music	8
Computing	7
Reading	6
Religious education	5

See [Figure 2](#).

1. All data for 2022/23 in this commentary covers inspections carried out where the report was published between 1 September 2022 and 31 May 2023. Data for 2019 to 2022 is also available: [Data tables for the deep dives in school inspections commentary](#). ↩
2. While all state-funded schools must teach religious education, under section 48 of the Education Act 2005 Ofsted is not able to inspect religious education in voluntary aided local authority schools with a religious character, or academies that were formerly voluntary aided schools with a religious character. ↩

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