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Research and analysis

Findings from the children and young people strand of the Big Listen

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Applies to England

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Acknowledgement

We would like to thank everyone who responded to the Big Listen online consultation aimed at children. We are also grateful for the support from our research partners Coram Voice, Career Matters and Catch 22, who organised focus group discussions for us, and the children in care and care leavers who participated in these. Your views on what is important will help us improve and shape Ofsted's future direction.

Context

Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. We inspect services that provide education and skills for learners of all ages in England. We also inspect and regulate services that care for children and learners.

In January 2024, His Majesty's Chief Inspector, announced his intention to carry out the Big Listen, a comprehensive consultation that asked for people's views on how to improve our approach to inspection and regulation. The Big Listen was launched in early March. It gave professionals, children and learners, parents, carers, and the public an opportunity to give their feedback on our work.

In September 2024, we published our [response to the Big Listen](#), setting out the actions we will take to address what we heard.

This report sets out the findings from our Big Listen public consultation.

Alongside the response, we also published evidence from other activities that formed part of the [Big Listen](#). This report is what we heard from children and learners. The other reports are:

- [Report detailing results of the public consultation](#)
- [Independent report, written by IFF Research, into the views of the professionals we work with](#)
- [Independent report, written by NatCen, into the views of the parents and carers we work for](#)
- [The internal Big Listen: responding to our people](#)
- [Independent learning review led by Dame Christine Gilbert](#)
- [Ofsted's response to Dame Christine Gilbert's independent learning review](#)

Find all [supporting documents](#) for the Ofsted Big Listen response.

Executive summary

This strand reports the findings from our consultation survey responses and focus-group discussions with children and young people. The purpose of this strand was to hear what children and young people think about the 4 overarching areas of the Big Listen:

1. **Inspection practice:** what we should look at and ask about during inspections
2. **Culture:** the conduct of Ofsted's education and social care inspectors and how they should talk to children
3. **Reporting:** how Ofsted reports on education and social care inspections
4. **Impact:** the impact of Ofsted's education and social care inspections on children, leaders, providers, professionals, and parents and carers

The findings showed that, during inspection, children want us to ask whether they are happy and whether they feel safe. These were the 2 most important things for both school and social care inspections.

When we visit schools, children want inspectors to ask what the environment is like in their school and whether the school meets their needs, emotionally and academically. They want inspectors to know whether they are thriving at school and what this looks like. Children in care want inspectors to ask about the support

they get from their school and how well the school understands their experiences and needs as a child in care.

Children told us they want inspectors to ask about their relationships with teachers and how their school manages behaviour, particularly bullying. Children also said that inspectors should speak to a wide range of pupils and not just those that the school chooses.

Children want us to ask their opinions on the things that matter to them at school, as well as where they live if they are in the care of the local authority (LA). To do this openly and honestly, children need to feel comfortable talking to inspectors. At present, this is not always the case. Children say they may have to meet inspectors in an unfamiliar room. They may also have to talk in a group of children they might not get on with or know very well.

Children also emphasised the importance of social care inspectors building trust with them and making sure they could speak confidentially, away from adults.

It is important that children do not feel like they are being interrogated when they meet with inspectors, either at school or in their home.

Methodology

Our consultation with children collected evidence from an online survey, open to all children, and focus-group discussions with children in care and care leavers.

The survey questionnaire was available online between 21 March and 31 May 2024. Any child (aged under 18) could complete it, or an adult on their behalf. The survey asked children what they thought were the most important things Ofsted should ask about during inspections and how inspectors should gather information. It included questions for all children to answer, followed by a section about social care inspections for children who said they were having support from a social worker.

We received 4,325 completed questionnaires. The majority of respondents (77%) were secondary school pupils aged 11 to 18; 17% were under 11.^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)} Six per cent of questionnaires were completed by an adult on behalf of a child. We also had a high number of responses from children with experience of social services. Thirteen per cent of all respondents (514 children) reported that they had received support from a social worker.

We commissioned external organisations to carry out focus-group discussions with children in care and care leavers up to the age of 26. These were about their views on school and social care inspections. We worked with 3 organisations:

- Coram Voice
- Career Matters

Catch 22

In these focus groups, we heard from 37 primary- and secondary-aged children in care. We also spoke to 22 care leavers, including a group of 10 in a young offender institution (YOI).[\[footnote 2\]](#)

How to read this report

The views expressed in this report are those of the children and young people who responded to the public consultation or joined the focus groups (or the adults who responded to the consultation on behalf of their children).

The language used, especially the quotes, reflect the choice of words and unfiltered views from them.

In some cases, responses and quotes reflected a lack of knowledge about Ofsted's policies and practices, and we have included these in the report without any caveats or corrections.

In this report, we have not commented on or responded to any of the views shared. We have done that in our [Big Listen response](#).

Survey results

Children were remarkably consistent in what they said inspectors should look at during school inspections, whatever their age. The top 3 things children want inspectors to ask about are:[\[footnote 3\]](#)

1) How happy pupils are at your school

2) How your school keeps you safe and well

3) How well teachers teach at your school

The least important things for children were: how well pupils do in tests and exams; extra-curricular activities and clubs outside lessons, and support with

attendance.

Figure 1: What are the most important things you think Ofsted inspectors should look at when they inspect your school? (By age of respondents)



View the [data in an accessible format](#).

Children were of the same view in regard to children's homes, residential special schools and fostering services. They most commonly selected happiness and safety as areas they wanted inspectors to focus on.

Figure 2: What are the most important things you think Ofsted inspectors should look at when they visit children's homes and residential special schools or inspect fostering services? (By age of respondents)



View the [data in an accessible format](#).

We also asked whether children would want to read an inspection report. Nearly half (47%) of all children who responded said they would. A quarter (25%) did not know whether they would.

What children told us about school inspections



Inspection practice: what children want inspectors to ask about

We asked children to give detail in a free-text response about what they thought inspectors should ask about when they visit schools. [\[footnote 4\]](#)

The majority of children who responded reiterated that inspectors should ask about their happiness, well-being and safety, and whether they felt schools were supportive in ensuring this.

Most important was whether school is a happy place. Children want to talk to inspectors about how happy they are, whether they like coming to school and what they like about it. As one child said during a focus group: 'I'd want to see that the school has been good for that child and to see them thrive.'

Children also want inspectors to ask them about their mental health and how well schools identify and support mental-health struggles. This was more important for children over the age of 11 compared with younger children.

Children also said that inspectors should ask about the support they get in school. Around 15% of children who answered this question referred specifically to inspectors asking how schools meet the needs of distinct groups of pupils, such as young carers, children in care and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Children want inspectors to ask not just how well schools support pupils with SEND, but how well they understand how children's

experiences and lives outside of school affect their learning in school. However, children with different needs and circumstances were clear that they did not want to feel 'singled out' or 'segregated' in how they are included in inspections or inspection reports.

Children in care said that, during school inspections, they want inspectors to ask about the support they get from school as a child in care and whether staff understand what it is like to be in care. This includes the challenges in their home life and how this may affect their behaviour at school. Many suggested that teachers should 'have an understanding of the young person's home life... how they have been supported'. One or 2 children talked about the positive impact of teachers who checked in on them or supported them when they were having difficulties in their home life.

The group of young people in a YOI said inspectors should ask what schools do to help prevent looked-after children becoming involved in the criminal justice system. They all agreed that career guidance would have helped them to plan for further education, employment or training. They also said inspectors should ask what schools do to keep them in mainstream school rather than excluding them and/or sending them to a pupil referral unit (PRU).[\[footnote 5\]](#) Everyone in this group had attended a PRU. They felt schools could have done more to prevent this.

'Ofsted should inspect standards of education, regulate punishment and PRU referrals [and] inspect the available support.'

Children's experience of school is closely linked to their relationships with teachers. The children we heard from talked about inspectors asking whether they feel they are treated 'kindly and fairly' and whether there is a mutual respect between teachers and pupils. They said that inspectors should ask how pupils feel teachers treat them. This included how kind teachers are.

Children told us inspectors should ask about teaching. This included asking about how well teachers teach, the subjects on offer for GCSE, the progress children make and the number of supply teachers. One or 2 children said it was important to ask how happy teachers are.

Children want to talk to inspectors about behaviour in schools. They said inspectors should ask how schools manage poor behaviour and how they respond to the behaviour of children with SEND. The issue mentioned most often was how schools deal with bullying.

Children also want inspectors to ask about the physical environment at school. A small proportion of children referred directly to how clean schools are, specifically the toilets. Lunches are also important. Other than toilets, lunch was the only specific thing children said they want inspectors to ask about.

Inspection culture: how inspectors should talk to children

The questionnaire included a free-text response asking how inspectors should find out what children think when they inspect schools.[\[footnote 6\]](#)

Children who filled in the free-text response unanimously said that inspectors should get children's views directly from them. Of those who answered on this, most suggested using a survey rather than speaking to children in a group or individually. School inspections do include a survey for pupils. However, children's responses here suggest that they do not know this and/or they have not been asked to fill it in as part of an inspection. Children who said they would prefer to talk individually stressed the importance of confidentiality and being able to talk freely and honestly.

They also told us that speaking to inspectors in front of a group of children they may not know can make it harder to say what they feel. One or 2 suggested talking to children through email or phone/text:

'Phone calls or texting a lot of people would [be] better considering a lot of people are anxious when speaking to new people and will likely say nice things rather than the truth sometimes.'

They also want to feel comfortable talking to inspectors, given that they are strangers. Children suggested that inspectors need to think more about what will make children feel comfortable and create a more informal environment wherever they can.

'Don't take us into a small room we don't normally go into. When we spoke to the inspector, I went in a room with children I didn't know well and the room was claustrophobic, I didn't know what to say.'

Children also want opportunities to speak to inspectors in less formal situations. For example, they could meet during breaktime or lunchtime without the presence of adults. These are more likely to be 'safe spaces' as they are less controlled by adults. Children can then choose who to speak to, as well as how and when to talk to them.

Children said they want to feel that they can trust inspectors. It is important for inspectors to build trust quickly within the short timeframe of a 1- or 2-day inspection so that children feel safe talking honestly. This will help children give inspectors a true picture of what being a pupil in their school is like day to day.

Children want inspectors to ask their opinions about the things at school that are important to them as pupils and not make the meeting feel like an interview. For example, they should ask what it is like to be a pupil at their school and what children think could be improved or changed for the better.

'Ensure conversations are less of a guessing game/interrogation with vague questions trying to reinforce an agenda. Instead, declare what you're trying to find out. So, instead of asking "do you get bullied?", say[ing] "We think bullying may be a problem; what do you think?" will make young people feel more involved and

less like a guinea pig.’

Children had several other suggestions for ways that inspectors could talk to them and find out what they think. Children of all ages wanted inspectors to use drawings and more interactive methods of gathering their opinions. They talked about using non-verbal forms of communication such as Makaton and Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), drawing pictures and using interactive methods to find out what they think.[\[footnote 7\]](#) A few children suggested that it would be good if they had more time to respond to questions, such as by having the questions in advance.

Children suggested that inspectors should have drop-in sessions so that children could decide whether they want to talk to inspectors. Children said they were unsure whether they could refuse to talk to inspectors if they were asked by the school.

Children said that teachers can behave differently during an inspection. Some mentioned pupils being coached and pupils who were not in class or absent from school. Care-experienced young people in the YOI told us:

‘You were not allowed in school if you were in trouble when inspection was taking place.’

‘If you are a bad student, you are asked to take the day off when inspectors are coming.’

One aspect of inspection that many children mentioned was how schools decided which children inspectors should speak to. Children said they felt that schools select pupils who will give the ‘right answers’. They told us that inspectors need to talk to a wide range of children to capture as many different experiences and views as possible, not just those of the children chosen by school.

‘Ask random children not just children the school pick because they always make sure people say good things. And ask them what makes school more difficult for them.’

Children wanted inspectors to talk to children in detention, children with different behaviour reports and test scores, as well as children attending different clubs and extra-curricular activities.

‘Inspectors should talk to a larger array of students, particularly those who

fall on the extreme ends of the scale for behaviour, attendance and performance (positive and negative). They should also talk to anyone who has, at any point, attended any out-of-mainstream education provision.'

What children told us about social care inspections



Inspection practice: what children want inspectors to ask about

During our focus-group discussions with looked-after children and care leavers, we asked about social care inspections. We wanted to know what they thought were the most important things for inspectors to ask about when they visited children's homes or inspected their foster carer's agency.

What they told us was broadly similar to what children who responded to the survey told us they want inspectors to focus on during school inspections. They want inspectors to ask whether they are happy, and whether they feel safe. The main difference was the emphasis children put on social care inspectors building trust with them and making sure they could speak confidentially, away from adults.

Just as children said we should ask about their relationships with teachers, care-

experienced young people said inspectors should ask about the relationships they have with their foster families and social care professionals, as well as school staff. They specifically mentioned inspectors asking about the relationship with their social worker. They want inspectors to understand how this affects them and the negative impact this relationship can have on their care and well-being:

‘Not having that support, you know, having a social worker that’s constantly changing and switching, you’re never going to build a bond. I always thought there was some form of barrier, you know, because there’s never that opportunity. If you’re constantly getting a new one and it’s just, you know... it’s not good for the child.’

Many care leavers said they had received limited support from care professionals, who they felt were not doing what was expected of them. They said that inspectors should not just ask about the support they get from different professionals. They should ask whether children know what professionals’ responsibilities are and what support and advice children can expect from them.

We also spoke to the care leavers in the YOI about the support they had received from social care professionals. They talked about having a non-existent relationship with social workers, to the point of not knowing how social workers were meant to help them. Several had had very little contact with their LA or social worker since going into the YOI. They knew very little about the support they were entitled to.[\[footnote 8\]](#) They said Ofsted should ask about the help they get from carers to keep them in school and prevent them from being excluded.

‘In a care home, there is less care. When they care less, you care less. The feeling of being cared for [and] relationship with the carer is important.’

Inspection culture: how inspectors should talk to children

We also asked how inspectors should find out what children think. Children with a social worker who responded to the survey thought inspectors should observe them in a familiar environment or talk to them in an informal situation, such as while they were having tea. A few children mentioned the importance of biscuits and fidget toys as ways to create a less formal environment.

Children in the focus groups also said that inspectors should get to know them and understand how their experiences might have an impact on their happiness and well-being. They said they want inspectors to show that they value what they have to say about home and school life, and understand the issues that affect them.

‘That schools and Ofsted really understand trauma and attachment. I missed lots of school before I was adopted but I didn’t get any extra support when I started school. I’m always playing catch up. Some teachers just don’t get it that I’m constantly in freeze or flight and I’m overwhelmed in school.’

A few said that inspectors should be aware of their body language and how some questions might make them feel uncomfortable. They said inspectors should have training to understand the experiences of looked-after children and trauma-informed approaches to care. This would help inspectors establish a trusting relationship because children would feel that they understood their educational and emotional needs.

Children described their experience of inspectors visiting their home during a social care inspection. They emphasised how important it was that inspectors created an informal environment. One child said during a focus group:

‘Remember, you’re coming in the young people’s home and not your work... They’re stepping in our homes, so they should be making us feel at ease.’

Children also talked about the way inspectors dress and how formal it can feel when they are coming into where children live:

‘It’s not like they’re going into just a school or something like that. They are coming into our homes. I do think, yeah, keeping a level [of] professionalism about them is good. But if they’re speaking to like a young person... a young person might feel more comfortable if they ... [are in] more human clothes.’

Children who had been part of social care inspections gave examples of how staff had made the experience less formal for them. One care leaver said that LA staff:

‘...set up kind of like a few snacks and stuff because food and bribery [work] very, very well for children. Got a few games set up and stuff and we kinda just got the Ofsted workers to talk to them like that.’

Another compared their experience of inspectors visiting a children’s home to a school inspection, and what made the process more informal and comfortable:

‘It was much less formal and it was just more like I could kind of relax and

they were on the bean bags and, like, they were on the couch and just it was like a general chat. It didn't feel like I was getting, like, judged or scrutinised or anything.'

However, this was not the case for other children. Some talked about the overly formal nature of meetings with inspectors and the presence of LA workers, which 'strangled' honest conversation. One care leaver who took part in an inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) described a group discussion with the inspector where the Deputy Director of Children's Services was in the room. This made them feel intimidated and unable to share the negative experiences they had of LA services.

Reporting: telling children what we find out

As well as gathering children's views about inspection practice and culture through the survey, we asked children in focus groups how they wanted to know what we found out during inspection.

Children said they wanted to read inspection reports and learn about suggested improvements. Many felt it was important for young people to know the feedback given by Ofsted after an inspection. As one care leaver said: 'If you are involved in something as important as this, you are gonna wanna have some sort of outcome.'

They also wanted reports to be more accessible for children. Inspectors do write child-friendly inspection reports for standard and short ILACS and children's home inspections. These are sent to the LA or direct to the children's home. The children we spoke to did not always see, or know about, these. We do not publish them online as they are personalised. It is up to the LA or children's home to decide how best to share the summary with children in care.

Children suggested that Ofsted should publish a shorter, summarised version of ILACS and school inspection reports, with children as the target audience. Many stressed the importance of simple, child-friendly language. They also suggested different formats to make reports more accessible, such as videos or visuals to better illustrate findings. Some suggested receiving emails with the outcomes of inspections.

Children also explained why it was important for them know about the outcome of school inspections:

'I feel like young people want to improve the school as well because they're obviously going there. So, I feel like that... if they were told a bit more, bit like what... teachers were told.'

'I feel like young people should be involved a lot more with the feedback... if they don't know about it, then they can't really help or anything.'

Care-experienced children and young people said there were advantages and disadvantages to having a section in school inspection reports devoted to looked-after children. They said inspectors should talk to looked-after children to understand their needs and how schools support them. This will help hold schools to account for the support they give. It would also draw the school leadership's attention to the experiences of looked-after children specifically, rather than as part of vulnerable children as a wider group.

'It's sort of like you're not identified as a group, so ... maybe they can sort of wiggle [their] way out of actually like having a look at support for care leavers or sort of care-experienced support'.

However, they felt it could single out children in care and stigmatise them if this was not done carefully.

'...Getting that like sort of voice heard, but not writing about them separately, because that's just gonna cause further like kind of distance'

'I think it's important for inspectors to know what it's like in school for care-experienced young people but I don't think that the inspectors should write about care leavers separately due to bullying'.

Impact: what children say about the role of inspection

Those in focus groups described inspections as 'important' because they check that schools and LAs are providing good care. One said that inspection 'encourages growth and development and makes schools better'. Another care leaver said: 'I think everyone needs an Ofsted inspection to make sure provision standards are maintained in the face of challenges'.

However, some children and young people were sceptical about the impact of inspections as they felt findings were 'fake' and 'untrusted'. This was mainly spoken about in reference to school and LA staff 'scrambling' to present the best

picture of their provision.

‘Either Ofsted isn’t doing what they’re supposed to, or they don’t get truth and correct data from providers.’

‘I think in secure units and also children’s homes in general, you do notice that they do kind of scramble to try and make the place not look like a dungeon.’

‘When Ofsted was there, we got a bowling trip and we got taken out of the house and it was almost like they didn’t want Ofsted to speak to us because they knew they were going to get shut down if Ofsted did.’

Children did not always believe that inspections captured the reality of being a child in their school or LA.

‘If Ofsted made a difference, why would I still experience the issues that I’m having at school at present?’

‘They don’t actually spend enough time in school; they need to dig deeper.’

‘Their findings don’t match what we think about our school.’

Children in focus groups also criticised the ‘strict’ and ‘harsh’ Ofsted judgement system. Some said that single-word judgements could unfairly label schools and damage communities. One secondary-aged pupil explained that an inadequate judgement could lead to bad behaviour and disengagement among pupils. Another said the single-word judgements were:

‘...not just about the school, it’s about the community as well. Because then if that school in that community, it’s got a bad reputation just for the school, no one’s going to want to visit and no one’s gonna want to move there.’

Conclusion

There is a clear message from the children and young people who took part in this consultation. They want inspections to focus on their well-being and what schools and social care services do to make sure that they are happy and feel safe.

They also want to give inspectors a true picture of what it is like to be child in their school or home. For this to happen, inspectors need to create an informal environment where children are comfortable to talk openly and honestly.

Children want to talk to inspectors about their relationships with the adults in their lives and how they support them, whatever their needs or circumstances. This includes the academic and emotional support schools give and/or the relationships with carers and social care professionals.

Children have told us what matters most to them at school and where they live. This includes the things that make them feel happy and safe, as well as the support they get from teachers, carers and social care professionals to make sure this is the case. Children have also told us how we should do this. What we need to do now is show we are listening and make sure we are doing these things. We also need to find appropriate ways to tell children what we are doing and explain why.

Appendix A: breakdown of questionnaire respondent ages

Ages of pupils represented in the survey % responding

Under 11 years	17
11–13 years	27
14–15 years	17

16–18 years	34
Age unknown	6

Note: numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Ages of respondents completing the questionnaire	% responding
Under 11 years	15
11–13 years	27
14–15 years	17
16–18 years	35
Adults answering on behalf of a school-age child	6

Note: numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Appendix B: breakdown of focus-group participants

Age of participants

11–12 years	13–14 years	15–17 years	18–26 years
7	10	20	22

Children or young people identifying as:

Male	Female	Other/Undisclosed
37	21	1

Ethnicity

Asian	Black	Mixed	White	Other
1	11	4	42	1

Length of time in care

Less than one year	1–2 years	3 or more years	Not disclosed/don't know
0	1	20	38

Participants with a long-term disability or health problem that limits day-to-day activities (long term being more than 12 months)

Yes	No	Not disclosed/don't know
10	39	10

Appendix C: data tables for figures

Data for figure 1: What are the most important things you think Ofsted inspectors should look at when they inspect your school? (age of respondents in years)

Answer choice	All	Under 11s	11 or over
How happy pupils are at your school	53%	54%	53%
How your school keeps you safe and well	50%	57%	49%
How well teachers teach at your school	48%	39%	50%
How pupils behave at your school	37%	40%	36%
How well pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported at your school	32%	32%	32%
What you learn at your school	19%	24%	18%
How well the pupils at your school do in tests and exams (for example, SATs, GCSEs)	15%	7%	17%
What you can do outside of lessons at your school (for example, after-school clubs, sport, school trips)	10%	13%	9%
How well your school makes sure pupils come to school	7%	5%	7%

every day

I don't know	4%	4%	4%
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See [Figure 1](#)

Data for figure 2: What are the most important things you think Ofsted inspectors should look at when we visit children's homes or residential special schools or inspect fostering services? (age of respondents in years)

Answer choice	All	Under 11s	11 or over
How safe I feel	69%	79%	67%
How happy I am	64%	64%	64%
How I am being supported in my education	47%	52%	46%
How I am involved in decisions about things that affect me	42%	31%	44%
What it is like to live here	26%	23%	27%
How I am being supported to find a job	15%	5%	17%
I don't know	8%	7%	10%

See [Figure 2](#)

1. See appendix A for full breakdown of questionnaire respondents' ages. [↩](#)
2. See appendix B for full breakdown of focus-group participants. [↩](#)
3. Children were asked to choose 3 answers from 10 options followed by a free-text response option. [↩](#)
4. We received 525 text responses to this question about school inspection, and fewer than 20 from children who reported having a social worker. [↩](#)
5. Pupil referral units (PRUs) teach children who are not able to attend mainstream school and may not otherwise receive suitable education. This could be because they have a short- or long-term illness, have been excluded or are a new starter waiting for a mainstream school place. There is a full definition of a PRU in the [Education Act 1996](#). [↩](#)
6. Nearly all children who completed the questionnaire (95%) answered this question. This included 84% of those who have a social worker. [↩](#)
7. Makaton uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate;

PECS is a way for people to communicate without relying on speech. PECS involves using cards with pictures, symbols, words or photographs. [↩](#)

8. Local authorities have to provide information about the services and support available to care leavers, including their statutory entitlements and additional support from the LA. [↩](#)

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