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Guidance

School inspection operating guide for inspectors: for use from November 2025

Updated 5 November 2025

Applies to England

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For use on inspections from 10 November 2025.

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About this page

This guidance sets out how lead inspectors ('you') and team inspectors should carry out routine school inspections.

Inspectors should use the guidance in this document and [the toolkit](#), along with their professional curiosity and compassion, to gather evidence to reach fair and accurate grades. They should also draw on their experience and expertise.

Information for inspectors on how to carry out monitoring and focused inspections is in our separate operating guide for monitoring and urgent inspections. We will publish this later in autumn 2025.

Further information for schools on the process is in our [inspection information for state-funded schools](#).

Conduct

Throughout the inspection, you must act in line with our [code of conduct](#), and show professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect at all times. At the earliest opportunity, and as necessary throughout the inspection, remind both the provider and the inspection team of the importance of following the [code of conduct](#).

Key principles

Principle 1

- Throughout the inspection, the toolkit will help you gather evidence to celebrate the school's strengths, validate leaders' priorities and progress and highlight where improvement is needed. In doing so, you will consider the extent to which pupils:
 - achieve – academically and personally
 - belong – feel that they belong to and are valued as part of the school community, so that they attend, behave and contribute positively to what the school offers
 - thrive – benefit from the right systems, processes and levels of oversight, so that they are kept safe and are able to flourish, whatever their background or individual needs

The toolkit will give you assurance that you are building a clear and typical picture of all aspects of the school's work.

Principle 2

- Leadership, inclusion and whether there is an open and positive safeguarding culture are key areas of focus when gathering evidence.

Principle 3

- The 'expected standard' in the evaluation areas in the toolkit is the starting point for planning your inspection activities.

What to do before arriving on site

Preparing for inspection

Preparation is a vital part of ensuring that the inspection is a positive experience. Being focused and proportionate is key. You may wish to review some information briefly before your first phone call with leaders to notify the inspection and return to this later in the day in order to review the information in more detail before the planning call.

When preparing, consider the [3 key principles](#).

Review the following, and record brief, relevant, evaluative information:

- the school's previous inspection report (including the section 48 report for schools with a designated religious character) and, where relevant, the trust's summary evaluation outcome letter
- our inspection data summary report (IDSR)
- relevant complaints made about the school to Ofsted
- information on our 'Find information about a provider' system, such as [warning notices](#)
- the school and/or federation/trust website(s), specifically checking:
 - the governance arrangements for the school (including establishing whether the school is part of a federation)
 - for an academy, the trust's scheme of delegation
 - whether an interim executive board (IEB) is in place

Review briefly the following publicly available information (and

where relevant, record brief and evaluative points):

- the main findings from the relevant [area special educational needs and/or disabilities \(SEND\) inspection](#), including (where relevant) arrangements for identifying, assessing and meeting the needs of young children with SEND
- the most recent [inspection report on the relevant local authority's children's services](#)
- responses to [Ofsted's Parent View survey](#)
- any further relevant information on the school's website
- recent information reported in the press or online
- information published by local authorities, the Department for Education (DfE) and the police

If the school is a new academy, consider whether the data and information from your preparation suggests it may have improved or declined from any predecessor school's performance. While you may look at this performance data, you must not take account of previous key judgements or areas for improvement when grading the new school.

If the school is a junior school, a middle school, a studio school or a university technical college (UTC), you must take this into account when reviewing the school's data. These schools have different age intakes, and so achievement data might need careful consideration. For example, UTCs and studio schools generally start educating pupils at age 14, so their progress data may not wholly represent the education pupils receive in those schools. More information can be found in the [inspection information for state-funded schools](#).

Use your preparation to identify what to explore with leaders in the planning call.

Checking for complaints about schools

When preparing for an inspection, review and consider any qualifying complaints made to us about the school.

Do not:

- investigate or follow up the specific circumstances of a complaint received before and/or during the inspection or come to any conclusions about the complaint itself
- use complaints (qualifying or other), or information about complaints, as evidence to support grading, or reach any grades based on complaints (qualifying or other); however, you may take account of wider issues and information raised by complaints when planning inspection activities and you can use the evidence that you find through those activities to support your decision-making about grades

Notification

Constructive, professional dialogue

At the heart of our inspections is a professional dialogue between inspectors, leaders and [the nominee](#). This dialogue must follow our [code of conduct](#) and always be carried out with professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect.

The notification call should set the tone for the inspection. From the outset, you should build positive relationships and rapport with leaders. Consider the well-being of both staff and leaders throughout.

Timing of the call

Contact the school by telephone, usually between 9.30 and 10am on the designated day.

If you are carrying out a full inspection without notice, you should normally telephone the school about 15 minutes before you arrive on site at the start of the inspection.

Speaking with senior leaders

Ask to speak with the headteacher. If the headteacher is unavailable, ask to speak with the most senior member of school staff who is available.

Notifying leaders of the inspection

Follow the script to notify the school of the inspection. This will ensure that the information is accurately recorded.

Inform the school that an inspection is taking place, and explain the type and length of the inspection.

Confirm details of the inspection team and check whether there are any conflicts of interest or concerns. Note any conflicts or concerns and your response in the evidence base.

Scheduling the planning call

Agree with the headteacher, or the next most senior member of staff, the time for a second, longer call (the [planning call](#)).

Explain that this is normally a video conference call, unless technology does not allow this. Agree with the headteacher the arrangements for this.

Explain what you are going to discuss on the call, that it may take up to 90 minutes, and why it needs to happen reasonably early on the same day (although after you have completed some [preparation](#)).

Emphasise to leaders that they can take breaks as needed.

Agree who should attend that call. Encourage the headteacher to have at least one other senior leader present to assist and support them in all calls. [The nominee](#) is advised to attend all calls.

Nominee

Explain the [role of the nominee](#). Ask leaders if they would like to select a nominee to work closely with inspectors throughout the inspection. If they do, ask if the proposed nominee has accessed any of our optional training for nominees – though stress that it will not hinder the inspection if they have not. Reassure leaders that, if they decide they do not need a nominee, the inspection will still proceed as planned without any adverse impact.

Confirm that the nominee is suitably placed to support inspection activity. They should be a senior member of staff with a thorough knowledge of how the school operates on a day-to-day basis. Record in the evidence base the role of the person selected to be the nominee.

Ask that the nominee, if one has been selected, joins the planning call(s) alongside the headteacher and any other senior leaders. If the nominee joins the planning call(s) you must check that any information that you discuss is appropriate to share with them.

You must not share confidential notes or complaint-related information with the nominee. Only relevant logistical and

contextual information may be shared.

Reasonable adjustments and adaptations

Ask whether anyone who will be joining the planning call requires any reasonable adjustments due to a disability and, if so, what arrangements are already in place.

Consider any requests, following the guidance in the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) section, and contact the duty desk. Advise the headteacher of your decision. If they have any questions or unresolved concerns following this discussion, refer them to the provider contact helpline.

Consider making other adaptations to the inspection process where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage.

Confirming key school information

Ask leaders to confirm the relevant school information, as listed in the [inspection information for state-funded schools](#).

Advise leaders that they will receive formal notification of the inspection in a letter, which will be sent by an inspection support administrator as an email attachment. This will include information about the surveys to be completed by staff, pupils and parents and carers (who we will refer to as 'parents' throughout, for ease of reading), and a list of documents that the school will need to provide at the start of the inspection (see the [Documents that schools must provide](#) section in the inspection information for state-funded schools). We will also provide

information about the portal and how leaders can upload documents.

Complete and upload the notification form and inform the inspection support team that you have made the notification call.

Requests for deferral

Familiarise yourself with our guidance on [deferring, pausing and gathering additional evidence](#).

You must contact the duty desk if you receive a request for a deferral.

Planning call

Call the school at the time agreed in the notification call. This is normally a video conference call, unless technology does not allow this. Ask the school not to record this call or any further calls. In exceptional circumstances, you may permit the school to record the call where this is required to respond to a request for reasonable adjustments. Similarly, tell school leaders we do not normally record the call, unless we have agreed this beforehand with them. Let leaders know that they are welcome to take notes.

Remember that the aim of this call is to have a meaningful and professional conversation about the school, its context, and leaders' views about its strengths and priorities for improvement. It is an important discussion that will help you to form a top-level view of the school.

Explain that the call will be in 3 parts:

- introduction and discussing practicalities

- understanding the school's context
- planning the timetable for the first inspection day

Part 1: introduction and discussing practicalities

Record the roles of all school leaders who are on the call.

Remind leaders that:

- we have a [code of conduct](#) that sets out our expectations for leaders and staff at the school
- these expectations include asking the school to be open, transparent and honest with inspectors so that the inspection can be carried out with integrity

You should cover the following points.

Leaders' well-being

Check on the headteacher's and any other leaders' well-being.

Establish who is responsible for the headteacher's well-being on a day-to-day basis (usually the local authority or the trust).

Record how to contact them.

Make sure leaders are aware that support for their own, and their staff's, well-being is available through the charity [Education Support](#).

Reasonable adjustments and adaptations

Check that any reasonable adjustments agreed during the notification call have been put in place. Make sure you have considered any other requested adaptations to the inspection process where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage.

Remind leaders that they can ask for any further reasonable

adjustments or adaptations during the rest of the inspection process. See the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) section for further information.

Record any requests and their outcome in the evidence base, along with any other adaptations that have been requested.

Ensuring that leaders have what they need

Establish whether leaders have the practical information they need, including links to surveys, the provider contact helpline number, and instructions on how to upload documents to the portal.

Make sure leaders are aware of their statutory duty to let parents know about the inspection. Encourage them to use the school's electronic systems (such as text messages) to do this, if these are available. Remind them that we have provided a letter they can send to parents to notify them formally of the inspection, either as an electronic copy, including a link to Ofsted's Parent View survey, or as a paper copy for pupils to take home.

Ask leaders if they have any requests that are specific to the school's context. For example, in specialist settings, you may be asked to provide photographs of the inspection team to help prepare pupils for who they will see.

Make sure leaders understand the process of inspection and the toolkit that you will use to guide evaluation and grading – let them know where they can access the inspection documents.

Ask leaders if they have any issues or concerns that they would like to raise or if there is anything they want to clarify before the inspection. Explain that they will also be able to raise any emerging matters during the inspection itself.

If any complaints have been made about the school, explain that the inspection will focus on the wider issues raised by the complaints. Inspectors will not investigate individual complaints.

If the school is a specialist provision for deaf pupils, establish

whether it uses British Sign Language. If so, confirm whether you need your regional support team to book a British Sign Language interpreter to support some or all of the inspection or whether the school will provide one.

Additional information about the school

You will also need to confirm:

- where the school is an academy, any clarifications to the scheme of delegation
- where applicable, the school's religious character (see [The school has a religious character](#) section for further steps to take)
- where applicable, any nursery provision (see [Provision for 2- and 3-year-olds](#) in the inspection information for state-funded schools)
- where applicable, any before- and/or after-school care and holiday clubs led and managed directly by the school, particularly if these take 2- to 8-year-olds (if the school offers before and/or after-school care for its own pupils, you must consider that provision as part of the school inspection)
- if the school is an academy, which decisions are made centrally by trust leaders, and which are delegated to the headteacher and/or other school leaders, to ensure that you can have the appropriate discussions with the right leaders

You may also want to follow up on any further clarifications needed following your pre-inspection preparation.

Part 2: understanding the school's context and leaders' priorities for improvement

It is crucial that, as part of the planning call, you develop an accurate understanding of the school's context, including the

demographics of the pupils and their needs. This will help you to reflect on the impact of leaders' actions on its pupils, particularly on disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND, those who are known (or were previously known) to children's social care, and those who face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being.

Remember to apply the [3 key principles](#) throughout the planning call.

Contextual information, leaders' successes and leadership priorities

To deepen your understanding of the school, and in collaboration with leaders, use this part of the call to discuss:

- the school's context, including any changes since the previous inspection and details of (and responses to) any recent tensions in, or pressures from, the community
- leaders' recent and ongoing priorities and challenges, the actions they have taken to maintain or improve standards, and how they have assessed the impact of their actions
- leaders' evaluation of the school's strengths and successes, and their priorities for improvement, including where they believe they currently sit in terms of the 5-point grading scale for each evaluation area
- any relevant safeguarding matters, as identified by leaders, including any safeguarding concerns, or allegations made about adults

Leaders' approach to inclusion

Explore:

- leaders' approach to ensuring that staff are able to identify disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND, those known (or previously known) to social care, and those who face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being, for example young carers; you need to consider this even if leaders have not identified any pupils on roll who fall into these groups – this is to ensure that leaders are identifying and addressing pupils'

needs effectively

- how the school supports these pupils
- the impact of the support given to pupils, and if and how that impact is monitored and reviewed
- steps the school has taken to meet the duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils
- the school's timetable, how the curriculum is organised, and how leaders work with external professionals to meet children's and pupils' needs – this is particularly important when inspecting specialist settings
- any current use of [part-time timetables](#)
- where applicable, the school's resourced provision or special educational needs (SEN) unit, delegated to it by the local authority – this must be inspected as part of the school inspection, and you must consider evidence about the resource base when [grading the school](#)
- whether the school is currently making any use of [alternative provision \(AP\)](#)

If leaders have not identified any pupils on roll who are disadvantaged, have SEND, or are known (or were previously known) to children's social care, reflect on why this may be the case. Take into account any contextual information about the school.

Part 3: planning the timetable for the first day

The purpose of this part of the call is to shape the plan for the first day of inspection. Make sure leaders understand the plan and know what practical arrangements they need to make to support it.

Consider and plan with leaders what inspection activities you and

the team need to carry out to gather the necessary evidence to:

- celebrate what leaders have identified as strengths
- validate the priorities leaders have identified for improvement, and whether they have an effective plan to bring about the desired impact
- highlight where there is more to do to ensure that all pupils achieve, belong and thrive

Leaders may invite you to meet all available staff at the start of the on-site inspection. You should agree to this wherever possible to help develop positive relationships and a professional rapport with all staff involved in the inspection.

An inspector must look at the single central record (SCR) as soon as possible at the start of the inspection. This is to assure leaders early on about the quality of their safer recruitment procedures, in case they need extra time to address any minor administrative omissions. Explain that you will be looking at the culture of safeguarding across the school throughout the inspection.

Throughout the inspection, you (as the lead inspector) are responsible for assuring the quality of the evidence gathered, managing the conduct of the inspection team, and ensuring the smooth running of the inspection with school leaders, including the nominee (if there is one). You will focus on building and managing relationships with leaders, having the oversight on safeguarding, and quality assuring the work of your team.

Check with leaders on their well-being and the well-being of other staff before inspection activities begin each day. For day 1, you (as the lead inspector) must schedule time to meet the designated safeguarding lead.

Find a suitable time on either day 1 or day 2 to meet with those responsible for governance.

While planning the timetable, briefly explain [case sampling](#) to

leaders. Ask them to provide a list of pupils who:

- are disadvantaged
- have SEND
- are known (or were previously known) to children's social care
- face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being

Explain that you will use this list to select approximately 6 pupils for case sampling.

Make sure you select a representative sample, always including (where relevant):

- a child with an education, health and care (EHC) plan and, where possible, a disabled child
- a looked-after child
- a child known, or previously known, to social care
- a child who receives pupils premium funding
- a child from any other group that leaders have identified as significant to the context in which they work

Tell leaders that you will agree on the pupils for case sampling at the beginning of day 1.

Inspection activities on day 1

Inspection activities on day 1 follow a clear structure, organised into 2 parts. Explain the following structure to leaders on this planning call.

The first part

After meeting available staff, completing the SCR check and agreeing pupils for case sampling with leaders, the team will focus on gathering first-hand evidence of pupils' experiences through:

- learning walks with leaders
- discussions with pupils at the start of the day and social times

- considering, in detail, the experiences of pupils identified for case sampling

You will spend some time with the headteacher seeing the start of the school day, understanding leaders' priorities and sampling the team's inspection activities.

You will also plan in time for you to meet with the designated safeguarding lead, and for an inspector to meet with the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) and/or the leader for inclusion. You should aim to be present for at least some of this inclusion meeting.

Inspectors will accompany relevant leaders on learning walks, so that inspectors can connect the top-level view with the first-hand evidence they gather about pupils' experiences. These learning walks will allow leaders the opportunity to show inspectors their school, discuss the context in which they work and exemplify the impact of their actions. Explain that as part of learning walks, inspectors will look at pupils' work and discuss their learning with them.

Ensure that time is set aside for inspectors to spend time with pupils during social times, such as break and lunch.

Next, around late morning/lunchtime, you will meet with the inspection team, school leaders and the nominee (if one has been appointed) to reflect on the evidence gathered so far.

Tell leaders that during this discussion you will check the emerging evidence, referencing the toolkit evaluation areas with a focus on whether the 'expected standard' is being met.

You will also discuss with leaders how the emerging evidence aligns with their self-evaluation.

The second part

Explain that inspection activities for the second part of day 1 usually begin with focused leadership meetings, then explore further what it is like 'on the ground' for pupils. Typical afternoon activities are:

- focused leadership meetings with those responsible for particular areas, scheduled in advance
- further lesson visits or other learning walk activities
- further informal or planned discussions with pupils
- meetings with staff
- further activities relating to case sampling, such as discussions with parents or carers, or with leaders of any AP that pupils attend

Focused leadership meetings and learning walks

Focused leadership meetings and learning walks on day 1 might include, for instance, the leaders responsible for curriculum and teaching, or the leaders responsible for behaviour.

When planning the second part of day 1, discuss with leaders which evaluation areas you are likely to want to explore in more detail through focused leadership meetings and learning walks. This will help them to plan and organise these meetings at a suitable time during the afternoon of day 1. Bear in mind that in smaller schools, one leader may be responsible for many different areas. Discuss with leaders who would be the most appropriate person for an inspector to talk with, and their availability.

It is important that time is scheduled to talk with these leaders, so that you can understand their rationale for the strengths and areas of focus they have identified, and their actions to date. Together, you and the leader may carry out further inspection activities, including learning walks, to see the impact on the

ground. This will help to validate the leaders' self-evaluation. Explain to leaders that learning walks are an important opportunity for them to show you their school's context.

Other points to discuss with leaders on the call

Nominee

If leaders have chosen to have a nominee, agree with leaders how the nominee will support the inspection, including facilitating logistics, gathering contextual information, and coordinating inspection activities and access to evidence.

Explain to leaders that the nominee can accompany you (as the lead inspector) throughout each day of the inspection, except when their presence could limit evidence-gathering or discourage open communication. For example, the nominee should not attend confidential meetings with staff, pupils or parents. Be clear about this, and agree which activities it applies to.

Write-up time

Make sure leaders understand that the inspection team will require short amounts of time between inspection activities to write up their evaluations.

Reflection meetings: an overview

Inform leaders that there will be regular reflection meetings with leaders and the inspection team throughout the 2 days of the inspection. These will be:

- an ongoing reflection meeting around lunchtime on day 1
- an end-of-day reflection meeting at the end of day 1
- an ongoing reflection meeting at the start of day 2
- an ongoing reflection meeting around lunchtime on day 2

- a grading meeting at the end of day 2
- ongoing reflective conversations with leaders, through learning walks and other joint activity (where applicable)

Where meetings are held around lunchtime, these should be planned so that they do not prevent inspectors from speaking with pupils at social times.

Ongoing reflection meetings

Inform leaders that there will be regular reflection meetings with leaders and the inspection team throughout the 2 days of the inspection. Explain that we can be flexible about who attends. Agree with leaders who will attend these meetings.

These meetings are an opportunity to review the evidence in relation to the toolkit evaluation areas covered so far. It is important leaders understand that sharing the team's thinking enables open, professional and transparent dialogue with them. You can also discuss whether any inspection activity needs to be adapted in light of emerging evidence.

The meetings also allow leaders to identify any evidence they feel is pertinent in reaching a well-rounded understanding of how the school normally operates.

These reflection meetings will be rooted in an ongoing review of the toolkit evaluation areas covered in the inspection activities so far.

End-of-day reflection meetings: days 1 and 2

These meetings will include leaders, the nominee (if there is one) and the inspection team.

These meetings will review all toolkit evaluation areas.

Agree which leaders will attend the end-of-day reflection and grading meetings and the expectations for these. Explain that it

is flexible who attends, as long as they agree with you who is attending before the meeting takes place.

Make sure on this call that leaders understand the purpose and content of the 2 end-of-day reflection meetings.

Day 1

Review the evidence gathered by the inspection team so far. Use the grading standards in the toolkit to consider the emerging picture, starting with the 'expected standard' for each evaluation area. The toolkit focuses on the quality and impact of leaders' choices and actions on pupils, rather than compliance alone.

By this point, you may have gathered reliable evidence indicating a 'secure fit' around an evaluation area. If this is the case, and leaders agree, you may decide not to gather any further evidence in this evaluation area. This is likely to be the case where the emerging evidence gathered aligns with the leaders' self-evaluation against the grading standards.

Explain that in this meeting you will also work with leaders to finalise the plan for day 2 of the inspection. It is important that leaders are clear about meetings they need to organise for day 2.

Day 2

This meeting is the formal grading meeting. This is when you evaluate the evidence gathered, including that already shared and discussed at the reflection meetings. Provisional, final grades will be determined based on a 'secure fit'.

Final feedback meeting

Ask the school to invite the appropriate people to the final feedback meeting at the end of day 2 (see the inspection information for state-funded schools for [who may attend](#)).

Agree a time when you will be able to upload the revised timetable to the portal.

End the call and upload the revised timetable to the portal by the

agreed time.

After the call(s)

Inform team members of any relevant information, especially the relevant context of the school. Record this information in the evidence base. Inform the team of the planned activities.

Make sure all team members are aware of the outcome of any requested reasonable adjustments, and any other adaptations to the inspection process that are to be made where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage.

If an Ofsted-booked British Sign Language interpreter will be supporting the visit, contact them now.

Core requirements throughout the inspection

On each day of the inspection, arrive at the time arranged with leaders. This should not be before 8am. The inspection team should leave by 5pm other than in exceptional circumstances.

Throughout the inspection, you (as the lead inspector) are responsible for assuring the quality of the evidence gathered, managing the conduct of the inspection team, and ensuring the smooth running of the inspection with school leaders, including the nominee (if there is one).

Check with leaders on their well-being and the well-being of other staff before inspection activities begin each day.

With the nominee (if there is one), review the planned timetable

and adjust inspection activities, as needed, to accommodate the school's working day.

Remember to plan regular time to reflect on and record the evidence, and to share any emerging evaluation with leaders.

If the school is a new academy, do not take account of the predecessor school's grades or priorities for improvement.

Limit the number of attendees at each reflection meeting (including the grading meeting) to allow for a productive conversation in the time available. Always invite headteachers, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust or their delegate (where applicable), and the nominee (if there is one). Additional members of staff (including trust staff or a local authority representative) may attend at your discretion.

At each reflection meeting, discuss with the headteacher and nominee the well-being of staff and how effective any reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations have been. Ask whether they want to change the arrangements/adaptations or make any additional requests. (Refer to the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) section for further information.) Continue to anticipate and consider any further reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations you may need to put in place.

Evaluating safeguarding in practice

When determining whether safeguarding is 'met', it is important to go beyond reviewing documents and ensuring that the school meets statutory requirements.

You must connect all the evidence gathered during the

inspection to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's safeguarding culture over time. This includes speaking with staff and pupils (where appropriate), reviewing policies and casework, and observing how the school models and maintains safe practice.

To evaluate safeguarding culture, you must:

- probe further than simply the information a school presents to you
- take account of a range of evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements over time
- through sampling, review decisions made by the school, any incidents that have occurred since the previous inspection, and whether the school has taken appropriate action to deal with safeguarding concerns and to safeguard the pupils affected; consider the effectiveness of the school's referral systems and its work with relevant professional agencies
- review, with the headteacher, any allegations or concerns about adults, and the steps the school has taken in response to them
- discuss with the chair of governors or, if an academy, a trustee how they manage processes in relation to safeguarding concerns or allegations about the headteacher
- consider proportionately the views of pupils, parents and staff, using surveys, complaints or local intelligence
- look for evidence of effective safeguarding training and practice and the impact of this on pupils
- examine how the school teaches pupils to keep themselves safe, and talk with them about whether they feel safe and know who to turn to if they have concerns
- examine how effectively the school is implementing its safeguarding policies and processes, and how it keeps them under review

Throughout the inspection, adapt activities to the school's

context and agree this with leaders where possible.

In all inspections, you (as the lead inspector) must:

- review the SCR early on day 1
- meet the designated safeguarding lead and review a sample of casework on day 1 (typically, you should do this personally rather than delegating to a member of the inspection team)

You or another inspector must also:

- meet the SENCo
- meet those responsible for governance (for more information see [Engaging with those responsible for governance](#)); where a school is part of a federation, if any governors are located at a different site, discuss the practicalities of meeting as many as possible
- evaluate any resourced provision and/or SEN unit delegated to the school
- speak with the designated teacher for looked-after children
- evaluate the school's use of AP, part-time timetables, remote education and flexi-schooling (see the [Pupils not in full-time on-site education](#) section)
- meet members of staff and review the responses of staff to the online survey
- consider the views of parents, including their responses to the Parent View survey
- gather evidence about what pupil premium (including early years pupil premium) and catch-up funding the school has received and consider leaders' rationale for how it has been spent
- where applicable, talk with a representative from the diocese

During inspections you may also meet or telephone a representative of the local authority, if this is necessary. This should include a discussion about the school's provision for

pupils with SEND, safeguarding and any use of AP. Similarly, you may also speak with any virtual school head(s) who are responsible for current or previous looked-after children, those with a child in need or child protection plan, or those living under kinship care arrangements.

In an academy, you must also:

- meet the CEO and anyone else from the trust as agreed between you, the headteacher and the CEO (see the [Engaging with those responsible for governance](#) section)
- have at least one meeting with the chair of the board of trustees (or their delegate) and as many trustees as are available, to cover governance oversight and arrangements for areas such as safeguarding, behaviour and curriculum

Recording evidence

You must make sure that the evidence base:

- is a clear and accurate evaluative record of relevant evidence (rather than a verbatim record of discussion or inspection activities)
- explains how you arrived at your decisions and findings, including how you weighed the evidence in reaching these – this includes findings relating to provisional grades, but also other relevant decisions, such as the focus of inspection activities or responses to requests by leaders and the nominee (if there is one)
- complies with any relevant legal requirements, thresholds and Ofsted policies (justifying any departures from policies) and reflects our guidelines (including this operating guide for school inspections and the toolkit)

If leaders have accompanied you on activities, briefly review your findings with them. Record and evaluate evidence in a

proportionate way, with enough detail to clearly explain the gradings you made. Recorded evidence should be more detailed in cases where decisions are more complex, or potentially have greater consequences. This is so that you can record accurately and clearly how the gradings were reached and how you took account of relevant policies and guidance in doing so.

There will be times during the inspection when not using a laptop may be helpful – for example, in conversations with pupils or during a learning walk. Avoid making handwritten notes to upload to your laptop later; instead block out time following inspection activities to add your reflections to the evidence base at the earliest opportunity.

Meeting standards and determining grades

Evaluating against the toolkit evaluation areas and grading standards

When you agree provisional grades for each evaluation area, they should include a grade for the early years and/or post-16 provision, where this applies. In rare instances, for example if the provision has 5 children/students or fewer, you may decide not to report on it separately or give a grade. You should agree this with the national duty desk.

When you have collected reliable evidence in an evaluation area to support an indicative grade, as set out in the ‘gathering evidence about’ sections of the toolkit, consider whether all the expected standards are reached

(a secure fit). If this is the case, consider whether all the strong standards have also been reached securely. At this point, you might have enough evidence to consider the 'exceptional' grade. This is summarised in the following table. You should call the duty desk when an 'exceptional' grade is likely.

When grading, consider the following steps.

Step	Question	Resulting grade
1. Expected standard	Does the school reach all the expected grading standards for this evaluation area?	If no, go to 'Where the evaluation standards are not reached' section.
		If yes, go to Step 2.
2. Strong standard	Does the school also reach all the strong grading standards?	If no, grade as 'expected standard'.
		If yes, go to Step 3.
3. Exceptional	Is there clear evidence of the additional standards that define exceptional practice?	If yes, grade as 'exceptional'.
		If no, grade as 'strong standard'.

Some minor inconsistencies may lead to priorities for improvement but do not lower the grade. Where one or more standards have not been met for a particular grade, then that grade cannot be given and you should refer to the guidance below.

Where the evaluation standards are not reached

Needs attention

An evaluation area is likely to be graded as ‘needs attention’ when:

- the ‘expected standard’ grade has not been reached, and
- no ‘urgent improvement’ indicators apply

Use the indicators for ‘needs attention’ to explain the grading and outline the next steps. These should be based on the expected standards that have not been evidenced during the inspection, and the associated prompts in the ‘gathering evidence’ section of the relevant evaluation area.

Urgent improvement

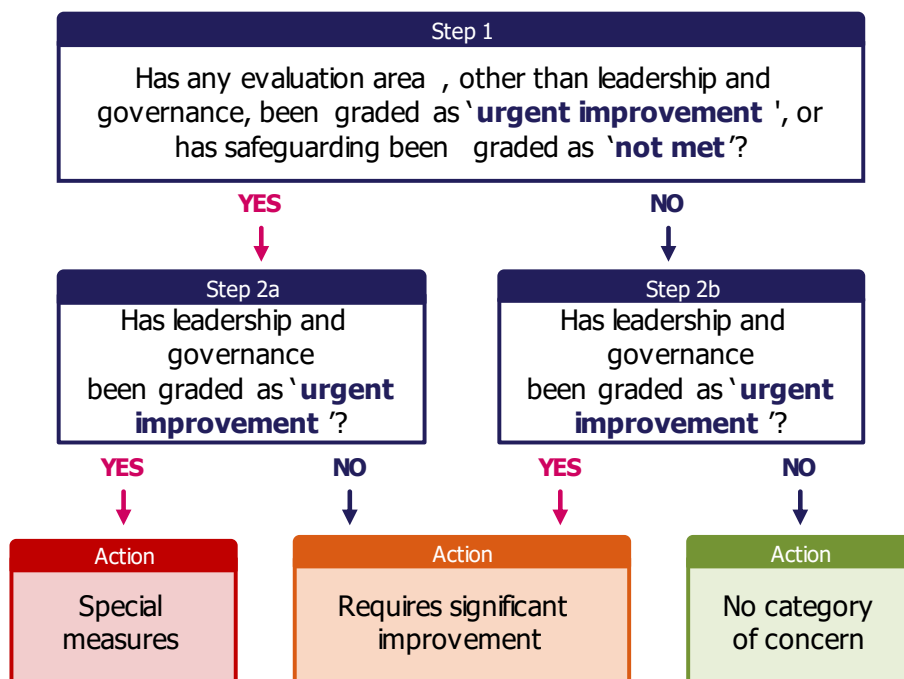
If any of the ‘urgent improvement’ indicators apply, the evaluation area is likely to be graded as ‘urgent improvement’. You should call the duty desk when an ‘urgent improvement’ grade is likely.

Use the relevant expected standards to help craft the school’s next steps, including the associated prompts in the ‘gathering evidence’ section of the relevant evaluation area.

Placing a school in a category of concern

We are required by law to identify schools that meet the statutory definitions of categories of concern.^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)} The process for placing a school into a category of concern is as follows:

Figure 1: Placing a school into a category of concern



[View this flowchart in an accessible format.](#)

This is the same 'twin test' that you will have applied previously, with step 1 deciding on whether a school is delivering an acceptable standard of education, and step 2 deciding whether leaders demonstrate the capacity to improve the school.

If, during days 1 or 2, you think it is possible that the school might require urgent improvement and therefore either requires significant improvement or special measures, you must make leaders aware of this and call the national duty desk to talk through the evidence. During the call, you must discuss the evidence you have used in reaching these emerging findings. The grades are not confirmed at this point. Record the main points of the conversation with the duty desk in the evidence base.

If, on day 2, you have provisionally graded one or more evaluation areas as 'urgent improvement' and/or you think that safeguarding is 'not met', you must call the duty desk again before the final feedback meeting.

If you provisionally place a school into a category of concern, explain to the school that this is subject to moderation by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and, in the case of special measures, agreement by His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI). Use the following words during the final feedback meeting:

If the school requires significant improvement: 'In accordance with section 44 of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is likely to be of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement because it is performing significantly less well than it might in all the circumstances be reasonably expected to perform.'

If the school requires special measures: 'In accordance with section 44 of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is likely to be of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.'

If a maintained school or pupil referral unit (PRU) requires special measures, you must explain to leaders whether the school may appoint early career teachers (ECTs) and include the relevant wording in the report.

If an academy requires special measures, explain to leaders and include in the report whether you will recommend that the school may appoint ECTs. Explain that we will reconsider the position during any future monitoring inspection. Also explain that the school can write to HMCI to ask him to reconsider Ofsted's position at any other time. In these circumstances, the

school could receive permission to appoint ECTs in a letter.

Monitoring arrangements, including timelines, for schools in a category of concern are set out in the monitoring operational guide for inspectors.

Taking a school out of a category of concern

When inspecting a school in a category of concern, if no areas are provisionally graded as 'urgent improvement' and safeguarding is 'met', then the school will no longer be in a category of concern.

You must use the relevant wording below during the final feedback meeting.

If a school no longer requires special measures:

- 'In accordance with section 13(4) of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures.'

If a school no longer requires significant improvement:

- 'In accordance with section 13(5) of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement.'

If safeguarding is graded as 'met'

Safeguarding will be graded as 'met' if all the individual safeguarding standards are met and none of the 'not met' standards apply.

If safeguarding needs minor improvements

During the inspection, you may identify minor improvements that the school needs to make to its safeguarding practices, such as correcting small administrative errors in paperwork or updating policies. If leaders can make these minor improvements easily before the end of the on-site inspection, give them every chance to do so by discussing this constructively with them.

Sometimes, leaders cannot finish making the required minor improvements before the end of the on-site inspection. When this is the case, you can still complete the inspection and grade safeguarding as 'met' if they have taken the necessary steps to resolve the issues – for example, where training has been booked but will not take place for a number of weeks.

In these cases, the minor improvements should be such that, if they were not made straight away, leaving them undone would not have an immediate and/or significant impact on pupils' safety.

Suspending an inspection

In some cases, more significant improvements are needed, and leaders cannot make them before the end of the on-site inspection, nor take necessary steps to resolve them in that time.

Where this is the case, but all other evaluations are at least at the expected standard, consider suspending the inspection. Inspections can be suspended if, based on the information you have at that time, you believe leaders are capable of resolving the safeguarding issues within 3 months, and there are no significant risks to children.

When assessing whether leaders are capable of resolving the issues within 3 months, consider whether governors/trustees and (where relevant) the local authority have agreed to help the school to make the necessary improvements.

If you are considering suspending the inspection, call the duty desk to discuss whether it is appropriate.

If it is agreed that suspending the inspection is appropriate, make sure that:

- all other parts of the inspection are complete, and the evidence base is secure
- leaders, governors/trustees and (where relevant) the local authority are clear on the proposed deadline by which they are expected to have made the necessary changes; this should be a maximum of 3 months but can be less if the school would like us to return quicker and/or if we consider that there is a reason to do so
- leaders, governors/trustees and (where relevant) the local authority agree to help the school to make the necessary improvements
- leaders understand that the letter they will receive about the suspension will also be copied to the Secretary of State for Education
- leaders agree to publish that letter on their school website and to send it to parents

If you suspend the inspection, do not place the school in a category of concern at this stage, since the inspection will not have finished. Explain that inspectors will return to the school within 3 months, as set out in our [gathering additional evidence protocol](#), to complete the inspection.

If you decide not to suspend the inspection, conclude it as normal and determine the school to require significant improvement. You must make your rationale for not suspending the inspection clear and record it in the evidence base.

Where the evidence indicates a particular grade is likely to be reached

During a reflection meeting, if you have reliable evidence indicating a particular grade for any evaluation areas, let leaders know. If the evidence supports a provisional grading decision, discuss and agree this with leaders. Record the provisional grade and leaders' comments in the evidence base.

Remember – you need to be very clear with leaders that any indicative grading throughout the inspection is provisional. The final grading process will be carried out at the end of the inspection and will be subject to Ofsted's quality assurance and consistency checking process.

What to do on site during the inspection: day 1

When you arrive on site, you should:

- check on the well-being of the school leaders and staff and find out whether any issues have arisen since the planning call
- confirm that the team inspectors understand the school's context and leaders' priorities and actions
- meet with the headteacher and nominee (if there is one) to confirm the inspection timetable

- check you have all the documents detailed in the [inspection information for state-funded schools](#)
- check you have the list of pupils to select for case sampling as discussed in the planning call
- check whether anyone involved in the inspection requires or has requested any reasonable adjustments because of a disability
- consider whether you need to make any other adaptations to the inspection process where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage (refer to the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#))
- if there have been any requests for adaptations, record them in the evidence base along with their outcome, and any other adaptations that have been requested

Follow the timetable and organisation for day 1 discussed in the [planning phone call](#) section.

Structure for day 1

Remember to apply the [3 key principles](#) throughout the inspection.

Typical inspection activities should include the following.

In the morning:

- Check the SCR as a priority.
- At the start of the day, agree pupils for case sampling with leaders.
- Carry out inspection activities – for instance, learning walks, discussions with pupils and case sampling – keeping your focus on pupils' experiences and the extent to which leaders' actions are effective in supporting pupils to achieve, belong

and thrive.

- Meet with the designated safeguarding lead (or as early as possible in the afternoon).

Following the first ongoing reflection meeting:

- Continue to focus on inclusion; this should include a meeting with the SENCo, which you (as the lead inspector) should attend for at least part of the time.
- Carry out focused meetings, further learning walks, case sampling and/or any other appropriate follow-up inspection activities that you have agreed with leaders.
- Meet briefly with a group of staff selected at random to discuss safeguarding and any other relevant matters.

Be flexible and responsive – if new issues emerge, discuss them with school leaders and adjust the inspection activities as necessary. Use the toolkit to adapt what you focus on as you go. Leaders will be aware of the need for this from the planning call.

Inspection activities

Learning walks

Learning walks should be carried out with leaders. Remember, this is an important opportunity for leaders to show you their context. Each learning walk has an agreed specific focus on one of the following areas:

A learning walk with a focus on inclusion helps you gather evidence about the outcomes and experiences of disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND, those known (or

previously known) to children's social care, and those who face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being. This kind of learning walk typically includes a leader, such as the SENCo and/or the inclusion leader.

A learning walk with a focus on curriculum, teaching and achievement provides the opportunity to evaluate how well pupils are learning the intended curriculum.

A learning walk with a focus on leadership gives leaders the opportunity to demonstrate how their priorities and actions are being realised. The headteacher or a relevant leader will usually accompany you on this kind of learning walk. It should involve visits to a broad sample of lessons to discuss and understand the impact of leaders' work. This will provide important evidence for leadership and governance in particular, as well as other evaluation areas.

Despite their specific focus, learning walks are also an opportunity to gather a range of evidence across all toolkit evaluation areas, including behaviour, personal development and well-being.

In schools with early years and primary-age pupils, learning walks in early years and key stage 1 classes focus initially on how well the strong foundations are secured. These walks should usually include a senior leader or relevant leader, such as a leader with responsibility for reading.

In secondary age/specialist provision schools, the curriculum, teaching and achievement learning walks focus on these 3 aspects across an agreed group of subjects. Select these

during the planning call, taking into account leaders' views and what they have told you about areas that are strong and those where there is more to do. These walks should usually include a senior leader or relevant subject leaders, who may accompany inspectors for specific parts of the learning walk that relate to an area which they lead.

During learning walks, or soon after as part of ongoing reflection meetings, share a summary of your evaluations so that leaders have the opportunity to reflect on whether the emerging picture of the school is typical and one that they recognise. Where leaders do not feel this is the case, explore with them what other inspection activities may be useful and practicable.

Case sampling

The initial sample should include pupils who have specific needs or face particular barriers to learning. This may include disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND (especially those with an EHC plan), those known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being.

During learning walks, visit pupils in class or group times, review their work and speak with them where possible. Carry out any additional activities that help you to understand these pupils' experiences, the support they receive and the progress they are making from their starting points. This may include speaking with members of staff who know the pupils well, considering any relevant documentation and the work that takes place with multi-agency partners.

Further pupils may be identified for case sampling during the course of the inspection.

Sometimes, leaders may not have identified any pupils on roll who are disadvantaged, have SEND, or are known (or were previously known) to children's social care. In these instances, consider how well staff are supported and trained to be able to accurately identify these pupils' needs and to help them, should

there ever be any on roll in future.

Reviewing pupils' work

Where possible, review pupils' work as part of learning walks and use this to support discussions with pupils about their learning.

Reviewing pupils' work provides further evidence about the curriculum pupils have been taught, how this has been taught, and the knowledge and skills they have developed. Pupils' work is an important part of how we inspect the curriculum and teaching, and of our evaluation of pupils' knowledge and skills. However, it must always be considered in the light of wider evidence.

Make sure you review the work of disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND, those known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being.

Pupils' work takes different forms. In early years, work is less likely to be in books. To understand how well children are learning the knowledge they need, you will have to spend more time talking with staff and observing high-quality interactions between children and adults. The same may be true for pupils who are working at an earlier stage of the curriculum than would be expected for their age; in these circumstances you should apply the same principle.

Ongoing reflection meetings

These meetings bring together the inspection team, leaders and the nominee (if there is one) to reflect on the emerging evidence. You should:

- check on leaders' and staff well-being, and allow leaders and/or the nominee to raise any issues or concerns or seek clarification, including about the conduct of the inspection or of individual inspectors
- ensure you have applied the [3 key principles](#) when evaluating

the first-hand evidence you have gathered

- evaluate to what extent the evidence supports a 'secure fit' in any of the evaluation areas, starting with the 'expected standard' for each evaluation area in the toolkit
- consider which areas are emerging as strengths, and areas where the school may have more to do – this will support you in having a transparent dialogue with leaders about the emerging evidence, give leaders and the nominee an opportunity to suggest further evidence, and help you to identify further areas to explore
- identify the most appropriate inspection activities to gather further evidence required
- alert leaders if the evidence suggests that any area may be likely to be graded as 'urgent improvement' or if safeguarding may be likely to be 'not met'

It may sometimes be necessary to change the planned afternoon activities to make sure that they enable you to form a clear picture across the toolkit evaluation areas by the grading meeting at the end of day 2. You should have explained the flexible, responsive nature of the inspection process to leaders in the planning call; keep them informed in a timely way of any changes that are required.

End of day 1: reflection meeting with leaders and the nominee

At the end of day 1:

- check on the well-being of leaders and staff, and the process and conduct of the inspection; resolve any issues
- share headline evidence from day 1
- record leaders' comments in the evidence base
- identify and agree the inspection activities required for day 2

and make appropriate plans

- discuss the practical arrangements for all the agreed inspection activities

Use the toolkit to:

- consider how the emerging evidence relates to the grading standards for a particular evaluation area
- consider whether the evidence reliably supports an indicative grade for a particular evaluation area
- consider the most appropriate focus for later inspection activities, using the evidence-gathering prompts

Let leaders and the nominee (if there is one) know if you have emerging evidence that any evaluation area is likely to be graded as 'needs attention' or 'urgent improvement', or if safeguarding is likely to be graded as 'not met' (including in cases where the inspection could be suspended in line with the criteria set out in [Suspending an inspection](#)).

If the decision is to suspend the inspection, consider it to be incomplete. We will not place the school in a category of concern at this point.

What to do on site during the inspection: day 2

Typical inspection activities

Begin day 2 with a reflection meeting with leaders and the nominee (where relevant). Confirm everyone's well-being, record any overnight reflections or unexpected events, and

agree whether the timetable needs fine-tuning. Adjust plans only as much as necessary.

Continue to carry out the agreed inspection activities. Allow the leaders to share additional evidence. Use the reflection meetings to reflect on the emerging evidence.

Like day 1, at the reflection meetings, consider whether you have enough evidence to indicate a provisional grade for any evaluation areas. Follow the guidance in the [Where the evidence indicates a particular grade is likely to be reached](#) section.

Continue to adapt inspection activity accordingly, explaining to leaders as an ongoing process during the inspection.

Grading meeting

Once you have finished collecting evidence, the inspection team will hold the grading meeting. Leaders and the nominee (where relevant) should be invited to attend this meeting.

At the beginning of the meeting:

- check on leaders' and staff well-being, and allow leaders and/or the nominee to raise any issues or concerns, or to seek clarification, including about the conduct of the inspection or of individual inspectors
- reflect with leaders and the nominee on how effective any reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations were; ask them whether they want to change the existing arrangements or make any additional requests for the final feedback meeting

Following this, for each evaluation area:

- consider the additional evidence gathered on day 2
- evaluate how this evidence builds on that gathered on day 1

- agree as a team the provisional grades, following the grading process set out in the section [Meeting standards and determining grades](#), in the following order (as the lead inspector, you are responsible for detailed oversight of leadership, governance and safeguarding):
 - safeguarding
 - inclusion
 - curriculum and teaching
 - achievement
 - behaviour and attendance
 - personal development and well-being
 - early years/post-16 provision (as appropriate)
 - leadership and governance
- where required, identify priorities for improvement

Final feedback meeting

Record the main points for feedback to the school in the evidence base during the inspection.

Your feedback must be clear, respectful and grounded in the evidence gathered. It should cover the points that will appear in the written report card.

Thank everyone for their contributions, engagement and involvement in the inspection. Then explain clearly to all those attending:

- that attendance at the final feedback meeting is voluntary and any attendee may leave at any time
- the key findings from the inspection and the provisional grades for each evaluation area – explain that these may change as a result of quality assurance and consistency

checking procedures or moderation

- the rationale for each provisional grade and the key evidence supporting it, using the language of the toolkit
- celebrate the key strengths and validate the successes/evaluation of the school's work
- highlight any priorities for improvement (including safeguarding, if relevant) and what the school needs to do to improve, giving sufficient detail so that those attending understand their part in improving it, especially governors/trustees
- that schools with evaluation areas graded as 'needs attention' may receive a monitoring visit
- that [schools placed in a category of concern](#) will be monitored, setting out when they can expect their first monitoring inspection, and that they may also be subject to an academy order by the DfE or moved to a new trust
- when a maintained school requires special measures, whether the school may appoint ECTs before the next focused monitoring inspection
- when an academy requires special measures, whether HMCI is of the opinion that the school may appoint ECTs or strongly recommends that it does not
- that leaders should share the inspection findings with all governors/trustees, and whoever else they consider appropriate, which may include colleagues, family members, and/or their wider support group; however, the information should not be made public or shared with parents
- that the draft report card they receive must not be published; they must wait for the copy of the final report card
- that when they receive their draft report card and complete their factual accuracy check they do not need to check data from other published sources but may want to review any data that was gathered on inspection or commented upon in the report card

- that the headteacher should, ideally, complete the post-inspection survey
- that if we have decided to suspend the inspection, we will consider it to be incomplete, and that we will not place the school in a category of concern at this point
- that the school has an opportunity to raise any issues or concerns or to seek clarification about the inspection, and can also contact us after the end of the inspection if necessary (see the [Concerns or complaints about an inspection](#) section in the inspection information for state-funded schools)
- that leaders can make a formal complaint and that information on how to do this is available in our [complaints procedure](#)

Reflect the school's context and frame your feedback through professional dialogue, with the aim of supporting improvement. Make sure that the meeting is practical and constructive when managing attendees and the conduct of everyone who attends.

What to do after the inspection

After the end of the inspection, write the report card, following our internal writing guidance.

The text in the report card must:

- reflect the evidence gathered
- be clear, concise and focused on what matters most, as informed by the school's context, leaders' evaluation of their school, and the toolkit
- explain the grade given for each evaluation area
- make clear what the school should improve
- be consistent with the verbal feedback given to the school at the end of the inspection

If you have graded a mainstream school as less than the 'expected standard' for curriculum and teaching, or achievement, and pupils currently spend less than 32.5 hours a week in school, consider whether this grade could be improved by increasing the time to at least 32.5 hours. If it could, state this in the report card.

If the school submits comments after reviewing the report card, you are responsible, as the lead inspector, for reviewing and responding to the comments and making any necessary amendments.

Quality assurance and consistency checking

You are responsible for the quality of your own work and that of your team, where applicable. You must ensure that the inspection is carried out in accordance with the [renewed education inspection framework](#) and the [code of conduct](#).

As the lead inspector, you are responsible for giving team inspectors timely feedback about the quality of their work and their conduct.

Additional guidance to support inspection

As explained earlier, you must check whether anyone involved in the inspection requires (and/or has requested) any reasonable adjustments because of a disability. It is also important to continue to consider making other adaptations where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a

disadvantage. Refer to the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) section for further information. Record any requests and their outcome in the evidence base, along with any other adaptations that have been requested.

Additional guidance to support evidence-gathering

[The toolkit](#) provides guidance on gathering evidence within each evaluation area through inspection activities, as well as the standards you will use to determine grades.



The toolkit is not a checklist.

Connect evidence across a range of activities determined by you (as the lead inspector), to gather reliable evidence and determine the grades.

Use the toolkit to guide conversations, consider evidence and ensure that grades reflect the evidence gathered during the inspection. Always discuss with leaders the typicality of the evidence you are gathering and the emerging evaluations. Where leaders do not believe the evidence is typical or reflective of their provision, try to gather additional evidence where appropriate within the time you have. This may be through visiting more lessons, speaking with other leaders, staff or pupils, or reviewing more of the school's work.

Engaging with pupils

Use a range of activities to understand pupils' typical

experiences, including through:

- analysing pupils' anonymous responses to the questionnaire and identifying any themes
- engaging with pupils and observing them at social times, and at the start and end of the day
- conversations with them during learning walks
- planned discussions with individuals or groups, including, where relevant, single sex groups, taking account of individual pupils' communication needs
- listening to pupils read

Remind leaders that they must provide opportunities for inspectors to speak with pupils with no other adults present. In exceptional circumstances, pupils may ask for an adult to be present or may require this as a reasonable adjustment (for example, because of a specific communication need).

When speaking with pupils (whether individually or in groups), follow these principles:

- Make sure you have let leaders know that you will speak with pupils as part of the inspection.
- Work closely with leaders on how best to talk with pupils who have learning needs, particularly in specialist settings. You may need to use assistive technology to communicate with pupils who are non-verbal. Some pupils may need another pupil or a member of staff to be their advocate, or a supporting adult may need to be present to provide reassurance and/or support with communication.
- In the early years, you might play alongside children or join them in an activity that encourages them to talk with you informally.
- When asking pupils questions about safeguarding, do this without another adult present. Having an adult present, especially someone whom pupils regard as connected to the

school, such as a senior leader or governor, can affect their willingness to share any concerns and/or could cause difficulties with confidentiality.

- If any other pupil (or pupils) would like to speak with you or another member of the inspection team, make sure they have an opportunity to do so, even if the school or parents have refused to allow this without an adult present. In these circumstances, the conversation should be with you and at least one other inspector. You should speak to the duty desk as soon as possible, and if practical before speaking with the pupil(s). Record details of the conversation and the circumstances surrounding it in the evidence base.
- Neither the school nor inspectors can compel a pupil to give their views to inspectors if they or their parents refuse permission.
- Try to speak with some single-sex pupil groups to give them the opportunity to speak more freely about issues such as sexual harassment, online sexual abuse and sexual violence. This is particularly important in the secondary phase, especially where we have reason to believe there have been incidents of sexual violence or abuse.
- Approach all conversations with pupils appropriately, considering their age and their needs. Do not ask them questions about a particular topic if leaders have asked you not to and you have agreed that it is reasonable to consider the topic sensitive for their pupils. However, in secondary schools, pupils must be taught awareness of and respect for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, as part of the expectations of the DfE's [statutory guidance on relationships and sex education and health education](#). If the leaders of a secondary school do not allow you to speak with pupils about these topics, you may not be able to gather evidence that the school is meeting its obligations under the guidance.
- If a primary school does not teach pupils about LGBT people, you must not ask them questions about this, unless the pupils

themselves raise it. However, you can ask them questions to determine their understanding of positive and healthy relationships, friendships and family relationships, and about how the school encourages respect for all people, in line with the DfE's [statutory guidance on relationships and sex education and health education](#).

- If pupils have completed an online survey, identify any emerging themes, taking account of those pupils' ages. In the primary phase, particularly in the early years and key stage 1, give priority to having conversations with pupils. Be proportionate in considering their views and connect any evidence to the wider evidence base.

If school leaders prevent inspectors from talking with pupils:

- try to find out the reasons for this
- call the duty desk

Explain that, if you are entirely prevented from speaking with pupils, you may not be able to gather the necessary robust evidence about many aspects of provision, including positive evidence from pupils about what the school is doing well, which would enable it to evidence its strengths. It is also likely that safeguarding would be graded as 'not met', as you would be unlikely to be able to gather the reliable evidence needed about the school's safeguarding culture to provide an indicative grade.

Without including information that might identify any pupils, record in your evidence base and inspection report if, during an inspection:

- it was not possible to speak with pupils
- inspectors were asked not to ask pupils certain questions
- an adult was present when inspectors spoke with pupils (including when this was due to a specific communication need)

Record the impact of any of these on the evidence and the

inspection outcome.

Engaging with those responsible for governance

Meet those responsible for governance, on a call if necessary. Consider the school's context and, where applicable, the scheme of delegation when deciding who to speak with.

Explore how governors/trustees carry out their functions – particularly in shaping and supporting the school's vision, ethos, and strategic direction – and the impact this has on day-to-day decisions.

Consider whether the way they support and challenge leaders helps the school to provide a high-quality education for pupils.

Consider how effective processes and policies are. Explore how governors/trustees assure themselves that these are understood and effectively implemented across the school.

In a maintained school, it will be the school's board of governors. If the school is part of a federation, evaluate how this affects the individual school. If an IEB is in place, establish how its members are taking responsibility for all governance.

In an academy, the board of trustees is responsible for governance. Where a trust has employed a governance professional, you must also meet them. These meetings should usually take place without the school and trust leaders present, unless there are exceptional circumstances that have been discussed with you. If the CEO is also a trustee, you need to decide whether the meeting with trustees should take place without the CEO being present. When making this decision, you should consider the context of the trust, its structure and the responsibilities trustees hold. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate for the CEO to be present.

Where multi-academy trusts have local governing bodies (LGBs), also known as academy committees, you must:

- establish who has overall responsibility for governance and make sure that inspection activities and the report card accurately reflect who is responsible for what
- establish whether the trust has delegated any specific responsibilities or whether the LGBs are purely advisory bodies
- be aware that the powers of an LGB are sometimes delegated from trust leaders; this makes the LGB part of the school's management, not its governance

If the LGB does not hold responsibility for any areas relevant to inspectors' evidence collection under the evaluation areas of the toolkit, then it is not necessary to speak with them.

Engaging with the trust executive

Refer to the Scheme of Delegation and speak with leaders to identify the correct individuals to meet in the academy and the trust.

During the inspection, central trust staff may be present in the school. This may be, for example, to release school staff to meet inspectors, to join learning walks or as part of their usual work in school. It is important that you establish why they are present, if they are known to pupils, and if they understand the school's day-to-day business.

Where possible, always meet the CEO or their delegate. CEOs may want other senior trust leaders to be present to provide support in these meetings, especially in large trusts.

Where trust-wide policies are in place, you should focus only on their impact on the academy you are inspecting.

The trust leaders you need to speak with may be those who have delegated responsibility. Where trusts are large, this may be more than one person.

Establish how all leaders make sure delegated responsibilities are carried out effectively, including how leaders assure themselves that systems are working as intended.

Engaging with staff and leaders

Analyse the anonymous responses from the staff questionnaires and identify any themes that emerge.

Arrange to meet with the staff who are best placed to discuss the emerging themes. Discuss:

- their experience of working at the school
- how they ensure the best possible outcomes for pupils
- the impact of leaders' actions
- the culture of safeguarding

Remind staff that you do not expect them to bring documents with them, but they may do so if they wish.

If you are meeting individual members of staff and/or leaders, give them the opportunity to be accompanied by a colleague. However, it is important that staff can express their views freely to inspectors.

Adjust arrangements when necessary. For example, staff may need a break, or a later opportunity to follow up the discussion, so that they can carry out their usual routines and responsibilities.

Be proportionate in considering the views of staff. Connect evidence from their views to the wider evidence base.

You should take careful account of the well-being of leaders and staff. If you see or suspect that a leader or staff member is upset or distressed at any point, you should respond sensitively. Where appropriate, consider suitable adjustments to enable the leader or staff member to continue. If you have serious concerns, you must inform those responsible for the person's well-being, other than in exceptional circumstances, and you must contact the national duty desk.

In exceptional circumstances, you may need to consider [pausing the inspection](#).

In early years provision, including maintained nursery schools, you need to agree with leaders when it would be best to talk with staff so that the correct adult-to-child ratios can be maintained.

Engaging with early career teachers

When reviewing the list of current staff, you must check whether it includes early career teachers (ECTs) and/or any trainees on placement. This includes those on graduate employment-based routes and undergraduate or postgraduate teaching apprenticeships.

If the school has ECTs, arrange a meeting with them to gather their views on how the school is supporting their development. This includes their views on the quality of mentoring and how the school makes sure that they have access to training under the early career framework.

Offer ECTs the opportunity to be accompanied by a suitable colleague when they meet you. However, it is important that they are able to express their views freely. You may also wish to visit ECTs' lessons and meet with mentors and/or the induction tutor.

You can meet any trainees employed by the school on the graduate employment-based route or on the undergraduate or

postgraduate teaching apprenticeships routes to evaluate their support, mentoring and induction. However, you must not visit lessons taught by trainees.

Engaging with parents

You have a specific [statutory duty](#) to have regard to the views of parents and the views of other relevant persons on a full inspection. Ofsted's Parent View survey remains open until midday on the final day of the inspection. Make sure you review the evidence from it throughout the inspection to take account of all online responses.

If the response rate to Parent View is low, where possible look for further evidence of parents' views, for example through informal discussions at the start and/or end of the day. In the primary phase, this may include being outside when parents drop off and collect their children.

Discussions with parents should take place without leaders or staff being present, other than in exceptional circumstances.

If parents raise serious concerns, follow these up with school leaders and record their response. If the complainant has requested confidentiality, take all practicable steps to ensure that their identity is not disclosed to the school.

Be proportionate in considering parents' views. Connect evidence from their views to the wider evidence base.

Reviewing key records

Key records you review should include safeguarding records, attendance data, behaviour logs and complaints records. They may also include training records.

Avoid auditing paperwork. Instead, evaluate what leaders understand from their own analysis and the actions they have taken as a result.

Specific contexts to consider

The school has a religious character

In the first conversation with school leaders, you must determine whether the school has been designated as having a religious character, and the type of school it is (for example, voluntary aided or voluntary controlled, and whether it is a maintained school, foundation school or an academy). You should include this in the report card. If you are unsure, these details are recorded on the DfE's [Get Information about Schools \(GIAS\)](#) service.

Its designation will affect what you can inspect. For example:

- If the school is a maintained voluntary-aided or foundation school with a religious character, you must not inspect its religious (denominational) education or collective worship.
- If the school is an academy but was previously a maintained voluntary-aided or foundation school, this will be noted in their funding agreement. You must not inspect its religious (denominational) education or collective worship.
- If the school is a maintained voluntary-controlled school, you may inspect its religious (denominational) education, but not collective worship.
- If the school is an academy, but was previously a maintained voluntary-controlled school, its funding agreement will note this. You may inspect its religious (denominational) education, but not collective worship.

However, this should not stop you from gathering evidence from any aspect of the school's work to evaluate personal development and well-being and/or attendance and behaviour, including religious education (RE) lessons and assemblies.

When inspecting any school with a religious character, you must check the section 48 arrangements:

- Check the date of the previous section 48 inspection and when the next inspection is due; include this in the report card.
- Familiarise yourself with any issues raised in the most recent section 48 inspection report, but do not use evidence from that inspection in your inspection.
- Where a school has a [prescribed section 48 inspectorate](#), but has decided to engage a different body to carry out the section 48 inspection, you must make sure the required consultation has taken place with the prescribed section 48 inspectorate.
- Where a different body has been used, but the section 48 inspection is now overdue, you must record this fact in the report card and that, therefore, the school is failing in its statutory duty.
- Where a school uses one of the prescribed section 48 inspectorates, that inspectorate will decide the timings of the section 48 inspection and so you do not need to report on the arrangements.

The school has specially resourced provision for pupils with SEND and/or a SEN unit or any other pupil support unit

If the school has specially resourced provision for pupils with SEND and/or a SEN unit or any other pupil support unit, inspect that provision as part of your inspection. Consider evidence about it in a proportionate way when you evaluate the school.

Explore the rationale for the provision/unit, including entry and exit criteria; how pupils, their parents and other professionals are involved in decisions about the support pupils receive; and the extent to which it is used in their best interests and is improving outcomes.

If other schools place pupils in the provision/unit, consider the arrangements for accountability and responsibility for their oversight and safeguarding, including the safety of pupils from other schools travelling to/from this unit/provision.

If no pupils from the school you are inspecting are in the provision/unit, contact the duty desk for advice.

Pupils not in full-time on-site education

Off-site alternative provision

Review the commissioning agreements for a selection of pupils who are attending AP. This includes part-time provision for 14- to 16-year-old pupils in a college or FE provider. You should explore the nature of the intervention, its objectives, the timeline to achieve the objectives, and the plans for reintegrating pupils.

Establish the registration status of all pupils attending the AP.

Include discussion about the AP in other inspection activities, for example in meetings with the designated safeguarding lead, attendance and behaviour leader(s), the SENCo and governors/trustees.

Plan time to visit a sample of the AP the school uses. In order of priority, you should aim to visit:

- all unregistered AP providers or, where this is not practicable (because of the number and/or location), as many as is practicable, prioritising them according to the number and needs of their pupils
- all registered AP providers – that is, AP academies and PRUs – that have not yet received an Ofsted inspection, or as many as is practicable
- where practicable, any registered AP providers that Ofsted has not inspected within the last 2 years (your region will provide this information)
- where practicable, any registered AP providers that received a poor outcome in their most recent Ofsted inspection

The record for each AP visited should include:

- name, address and, if registered, unique reference number (URN)
- time of your arrival and departure
- role of the staff member who showed you around
- details of the pupils from the inspected school who attend, the total number attending, the sex of pupils attending, attendance that day, and action the AP has taken about any absent pupils

Remotely or in person, meet a sample of the pupils the school has placed at the AP. Discuss their views on:

- the placement's suitability and effectiveness
- their transition plans
- contact with their home school during the placement

Record any concerns accurately. Follow our safeguarding guidance and pass on your concerns to the national duty desk.

If it is not possible to visit the AP during the inspection, you must gain assurance that the AP is appropriate, for example by calling the local authority, speaking with professionals (including those

who work at the AP), or speaking with parents. This may be completed remotely.

Through these activities, seek to understand the impact of the AP on pupils' outcomes.

When considering placement decisions, evaluate:

- the reasons why leaders considered off-site provision (either temporary or permanent) to be in each pupil's best interests (remember that if a pupil has been moved into AP when this was not in their best interests, this could be considered off-rolling – see [Evidence of off-rolling](#) section)
- leaders' arrangements for commissioning the placement and reviewing its impact
- the extent to which pupils, their parents, and the local authority and other education, health and care professionals (where appropriate) have been included in decisions about placements and planning
- the suitability of the placement, including how it addresses gaps in pupils' learning and supports pupils where improvements in behaviour are required
- whether any pupils are attending multiple providers, and how much they attend their home school – explore the rationale for this, whether decisions are in pupils' best interests, and how leaders ensure that pupils are kept safe

When considering quality assurance and consistency checking, evaluate:

- the quality of the due diligence checks leaders carried out before the placement, and continue to perform, to

ensure that the AP is safe, offers high-quality education and meets each pupil's academic, vocational, pastoral and (if appropriate) SEND needs [\[footnote 2\]](#)

- safeguarding arrangements for pupils when they are travelling between the school and other providers

When considering placement monitoring, evaluate:

- evidence of regular contact with the AP, review dates (at least half-termly), and any necessary follow-up action to make sure the placement is successful
- leaders' awareness of where pupils are during school hours, including records of the address of the commissioned AP and any subcontracted provision or satellite sites the pupils may attend
- pupils' progress against the objectives set out in the intervention plans
- the attendance and behaviour of the pupils who attend the AP
- induction, transition and destination planning – plans for assessing when pupils are ready to reintegrate into their home school or move to specialist or post-16 provision

If the school uses unregistered AP

If you have any reason to believe that a school is using AP that may be operating as an unregistered independent school, call the duty desk.

Assure yourself that the decision to use unregistered AP has been made in the best interests of pupils and that the AP is safe and suitable.

Evidence of off-rolling

During the inspection, you must be alert to any evidence that decisions made by the school amount to off-rolling. This could include:

- putting pressure on a parent to home-school a pupil
- moving a pupil to off-site AP where that is not in the best interests of that pupil
- encouraging a post-16 student not to continue with their course of study when this is against the best interests of that pupil
- sending a pupil home without a formal suspension
- placing a pupil on a part-time timetable for behavioural reasons
- intentionally removing a pupil from the school roll without correctly following regulations

The context will always be important, and you must consult the [off-rolling definition](#) in our inspection information for state-funded schools when considering evidence of potential off-rolling.

If there are high numbers of pupils moving on and off roll, you should consider this, although it does not in itself mean that off-rolling is taking place. Always ask the school about the reasons for permanent exclusion and/or unusual patterns of suspension. You must also challenge leaders about unusual patterns in the way that the school records attendance, including the use of inaccurate register codes or changes to when the register is taken – for example, if you reasonably believe that a school is inaccurately recording attendance, has changed the timing of session registration to game attendance rates, or is using part-time timetables inappropriately.

If you find evidence of off-rolling, address this in the report card.

You do not need to decide whether an action is lawful. Instead, you should consider whether it meets Ofsted's definition of off-rolling. Take into account the context of the decision(s) and the integrity of leaders' actions.

Be clear about what impact off-rolling has had on the pupils involved, and on the school.

If you determine that the school has been off-rolling, the leadership and governance evaluation area will likely be graded 'urgent improvement'.

Part-time timetables

If the school uses part-time timetables, check that it is doing so in line with the [DfE's attendance guidance](#) and [guidance on mental health and attendance](#).

Ask leaders why a pupil has a part-time timetable and check that there have been plans from the beginning for the pupil to return to a full-time timetable. In each case, evaluate leaders' decisions and whether the use of a part-time timetable is in the pupil's best interests. A part-time timetable must not be treated as a long-term solution or used to manage behaviour.

If a part-time timetable is justified, but the school has no clear plans for the pupil to return to full-time education, you should take this into account when deciding on your grading for the leadership and governance evaluation area.

Check that the school has informed the local authority of any pupils on a part-time timetable who are looked after and/or have an EHC plan.

If the school is using part-time timetables inappropriately, this may be an unlawful suspension of a pupil (see next paragraph).

An unlawful suspension is when a school sends a pupil home or

tells them not to come into school, often because of their behaviour, but does not use a formal suspension. If the school has suspended a pupil unlawfully, consider a grade of 'urgent improvement' for the attendance and behaviour evaluation area.

Pupils who are not in school during the inspection

You must gather evidence about the typical behaviour of all pupils who attend the school, including those who are not present on the day(s) of the inspection.

If you have evidence that leaders have deliberately removed pupils from the site on the day of inspection or have arranged for them to be absent, and you reasonably believe they did this because of the inspection, you are likely to grade both attendance and behaviour, and leadership and governance as 'urgent improvement'.

Remote education

If the school uses remote education, evaluate whether it is:

- well integrated into the school's course(s) of study
- well designed as part of implementing the school's curriculum
- recorded correctly in the attendance register
- not used as a justification for sending pupils home due to misbehaviour

If the school uses tutors to support education recovery from the pandemic, consider how this helps it to achieve the aims of the curriculum, rather than evaluating the quality of the tutoring itself.

Other matters

Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations

On all inspections, you must ask whether anyone requires any reasonable adjustments due to a disability. Contact the duty desk for all requests. Those on the duty desk may consult with relevant policy and legal teams as needed.

What is considered reasonable is an objective test that depends on all of the circumstances of the particular case. This includes the needs of the individual concerned, how effective the change will be in avoiding the disadvantage the disabled person would otherwise experience, what impact providing the adjustment will have on the inspection, and the circumstances in respect of the relevant inspection or visit.

To understand the request, you must enter into an open dialogue with the individual about their request. Ask what steps the individual thinks Ofsted should take to address the anticipated disadvantage. In the light of this, consider what adjustments might be reasonable in the circumstances of the inspection or visit. You can consider adjustments not proposed by the individual.

When considering whether the request is reasonable, take into account:

- how effective the reasonable adjustment would be in overcoming the disadvantage
- how practicable it is for Ofsted to make the adjustment
- the costs of making the adjustment

- the disruption that making the adjustment would cause
- the resources available to the inspector and to Ofsted
- the amount of resources already spent on making adjustments
- any health and safety risks, including the effect the arrangements will have on others

There is a 'positive' duty to make adjustments if they are considered to be reasonable, as set out here. A failure to comply with the duty to make reasonable adjustments is a form of discrimination under the [Equality Act 2010](#) and is an 'anticipatory' duty. You can treat disabled people better or 'more favourably' than non-disabled people and sometimes this may be an appropriate response to a request for reasonable adjustments.

It may also be appropriate to consider other adaptations that are requested where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage. Where you are being asked to make such an adaptation to avoid potential discrimination, consider the reason for the policy, criterion or practice that you are being asked to adapt (the objective justification), and what the impact would be of both making and not making the adaptation.

The [Equality Act 2010](#) protects people from unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation on the ground of a protected characteristic. This may include taking steps to avoid indirectly discriminating against someone on the ground of a protected characteristic. However, you should also consider the effect the proposed adaptation would have on others. Ensure that in making the adaptation, you are not directly discriminating against anyone else on the grounds of a protected characteristic. If you agree to the request(s), agree a plan for reasonable adjustments or adaptations with the individual and leaders as appropriate. You must discuss and agree the plan with the inspection team.

You must record in the evidence base that you have asked leaders if they need to request any reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations. You must also record the outcome of any decisions. It is essential that this information is recorded factually and accurately and the anonymity of the individual is maintained.

If the school has concerns/complaints

Record any concerns raised, and actions taken, in the inspection evidence. Try to resolve any issues with leaders during the inspection. If this is not possible, the school can follow the steps set out in the [complaints procedure](#).

If you need to consider pausing the inspection

There may be exceptional occasions when you need to consider pausing an inspection, including in response to concerns raised by the nominee. Contact the duty desk for advice. We will consider requests on a case-by-case basis, according to our published [guidance on pausing inspections](#).

If you identify evidence or allegations of abuse on inspection

You must familiarise yourself with our [guidance on safeguarding concerns](#).

If you come across evidence or allegations of child abuse, stop all other activity immediately and focus on ensuring that the child receives the help they need. Do not attempt to investigate this

yourself, but make sure the appropriate authority is informed, in line with the school's safeguarding policy. You must be satisfied that the correct referral has been made and record this in the evidence base.

If the school uses artificial intelligence

You do not need to ask if artificial intelligence (AI) is used or actively search for it. If you come across instances where a school uses AI, or has an explicit policy on pupils using AI, record how leaders have chosen to implement it, its impact (for example, on tackling absence), how it is monitored, and the school's checks and balances to make sure it is accurate, safe and used in the best interests of pupils. If you have any concerns about the school's use of AI, contact the duty desk.

If the school uses external support

If the school has received support from an external body, you must not evaluate or report on the quality of this or its impact on improvement. Instead, you must comment on the action that the school has taken and the impact those actions have had on the quality of its work.

Annex for figure

Data for Figure 1: Placing a school into a category of concern

Steps	Description
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Step 1 Has any evaluation area, other than leadership, been graded as 'urgent improvement', or has safeguarding been graded as 'not met'?

Answer Go to step 2a
to step
1: yes

Answer Go to step 2b
to step
1: no

Step 2a Has leadership and governance been graded as 'urgent improvement'?

Step Has leadership and governance been graded as
2b 'urgent improvement'?

Answer Action: Special measures
to step
2a: yes

Answer Action: Requires significant improvement
to step
2a: no

Answer Action: Requires significant improvement
to step
2b: yes

Answer Action: No category of concern
to step
2b: no

See [Figure 1](#).

1. There are 2 categories of concern defined in legislation: special measures and requires significant improvement. The

legislative test for special measures is that a school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education, and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement. A school requires significant improvement if it does not fall within this category, but is performing significantly less well than it might in all the circumstances reasonably be expected to perform. 'Requires significant improvement' was referred to as 'serious weaknesses' before November 2025. [↩](#)

2. This includes whether leaders have made the appropriate checks on the registration status of the provision and how those checks have influenced their decision to use that provider. [↩](#)

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