

Annual School and Trust Governance Survey Report 2026

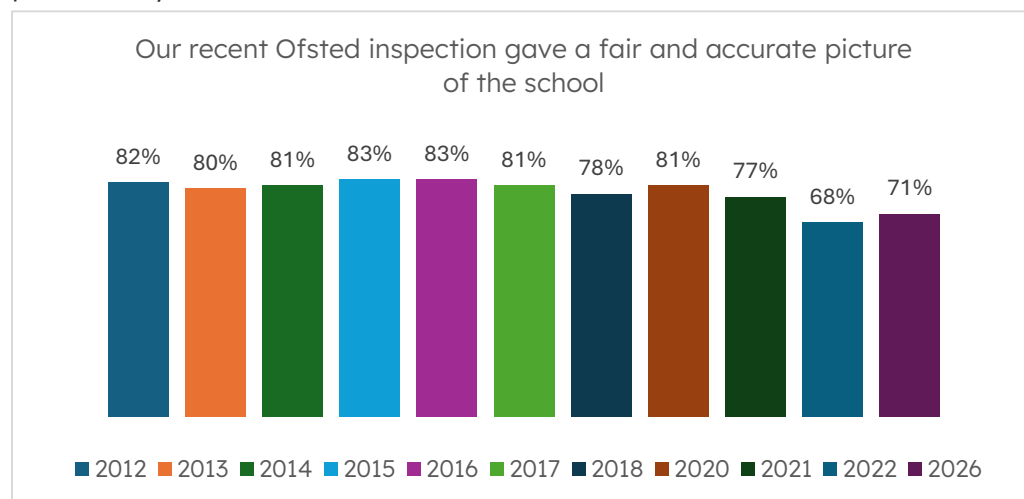
Chapter 5: Ofsted inspection

Over the years, Ofsted has been subject to sustained scrutiny, not least because of concerns around a growing high-stakes accountability culture in the education system. This debate intensified following the tragic death of Ruth Perry, prompting both the inspectorate and the wider sector to reconsider the toll inspection can take on the individuals at the heart of the process.

NGA has shared these concerns over the years. As the body discharging employer responsibilities for school staff, with direct line-management responsibilities for the senior leader, governing boards see first-hand the pressures associated with inspection. Previous attempts at reform demonstrate why continued attention is needed.

In 2022, despite efforts through the then Education Inspection Framework (EIF) to reduce the stress and workload associated with inspection, only 18% of governors and trustees believed this had been reflected in practice. The lesson from this historic finding remains pertinent as changes in policy and intent do not necessarily translate into changes in experience.

At the same time, the governance community recognises the need for external scrutiny. Governing boards provide front-line accountability day in, day out, and there is a consensus that independent checks and balances have an important, complementary role alongside this. However, our longitudinal data demonstrates that confidence in Ofsted's ability to provide a fair and accurate picture of schools has weakened over time, particularly since the latter half of the 2010s.



This year's response (71%) shows only a marginal gain on the record low of 68% in 2022, and sits alongside previous NGA surveys, which also found mixed views about the value and impact of routine inspection. The findings point to the important distinction that despite governors and trustees recognising a need for external accountability, there are mixed views about how effectively inspection delivers it in practice.

A new inspection framework

Ofsted's new framework took effect in November 2025. It removed the previous single-word judgement and introduced a five-point grading system across six to eight judgement areas, alongside narrative in a more substantial report card. There were also the additions of a new 'inclusion' evaluation area and a refined 'leadership and governance' category which gave greater prominence to governance – something NGA has long advocated for.

27 per cent of respondents reported that their school had been inspected under the new framework. Behind MAT trustees, those governing on local governing boards were the most likely to have been inspected (35% compared to 20% of LA maintained schools and 17% of SATs). This provides an important, albeit still developing, picture of how inspection is being experienced and respondents' comments provide an early indication of what is working well and where familiar concerns remain.

For those who felt that inspection had given a fair and accurate picture of their school, there was a strong sense that inspectors had reached conclusions which reflected what the school has already identified. Respondents frequently pointed to alignment with their self-evaluation and improvement priorities.

"The areas which were found to be needing attention had already been identified by us – we told them what they are."

That being said, respondents also questioned whether the framework always captured the full picture of a school. Context was a particular concern for those governing schools with high levels of disadvantage, SEND or pupils eligible for pupil premium. There is an inevitable challenge in applying a national framework across very different schools, but these responses underline the importance of inspectors understanding what sits behind outcomes.

"You can't compare a school with high deprivation with a leafy lane one."

There were similar concerns about how consistently the framework and its criteria are applied. Some felt the move away from a best fit (under the new framework, all features of the expected standard grade must be met before a higher one may be considered) approach had introduced too much rigidity. Others also pointed to differences in inspectors' expertise and judgement. A national framework clearly requires consistency, but confidence in it also depends on inspectors having the expertise and flexibility to understand the school in front of them.

“Much appears to depend on the individual inspector involved.”

Finally, respondents returned to a concern which has featured in our findings over a number of years – the impact of inspection on the people involved. Importantly, some distinguished between the eventual judgement and their experience of reaching it. This is particularly relevant given the longstanding concerns around workload and wellbeing discussed earlier. A fair outcome matters, but it cannot on its own tell us whether an inspection has worked as it should.

“The outcome was fair, but the process was brutal.”

These are early experiences of a framework which has only recently been introduced, and it would be premature to draw firm conclusions. Nevertheless, they show why attention must remain on how Ofsted’s changes are experienced in practice. Clearly some of the concerns are familiar – context, consistency, inspector expertise and staff wellbeing – and the coming years will provide a clearer indication of whether the new framework is able to adequately address them.