

'Soul-destroying' Ofsted inspections raise serious questions over fairness, NGA warns

Wednesday 14 October, 2026

Governors describe inspections as “**brutal**”, raising concerns about their impact on school staff, rigid assessment criteria, and whether inspectors adequately account for disadvantage and SEND, in the latest National Governance Association (NGA) annual survey.

School inspection must be rigorous without being destructive, the National Governance Association (NGA) warns, after its latest survey revealed troubling accounts of how Ofsted inspections affect school staff

Despite commitments made after Ofsted’s 2024 Big Listen to rebuild trust, improve consistency, and make inspections more supportive and context sensitive. NGA’s survey reveals confidence in inspection remains fragile.

While 71% of respondents felt their most recent inspection gave a fair and accurate picture of their school, up only 3% from a record low in 2022, written responses revealed a stark contrast between accepting an outcome and the experience of reaching it.

One respondent described watching their leadership team “**break down routinely throughout the 2 days**”. Another summed up the experience: “**The outcome was fair, but the process was brutal.**” One summed up their experience by saying: “**I think it was fair, but the process itself was awful. They were not nice at all.**”

The findings also raise concerns about whether inspection sufficiently accounts for the circumstances in which schools operate, particularly those serving disadvantaged communities and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

One said: “**You can’t compare a school with high deprivation with a leafy lane one.**” Another said: “**It is frustrating that our above average levels of disadvantage made it feel almost impossible to reach the expected standard in achievement.**” A third argued: “**The new framework is unfair on schools in deprived areas in terms of attainment.**”

NGA Chief Executive Emma Balchin said:

“Our findings expose a fundamental problem with school inspection: reaching a judgement that is considered fair does not mean the process itself is not flawed. Governors and trustees describe inspections as ‘brutal’ and ‘soul destroying’, while others believe schools serving disadvantaged communities are being judged without sufficient regard for the challenges their pupils face. This is not what a credible, improvement-focused accountability system should look like.

The tragic death of Ruth Perry should have marked a moment of enduring change for the welfare and morale of school leaders and the wider workforce, and for how inspections are carried out. Her case showed the devastating consequences inspection can have and we cannot ignore the fact that governors and trustees continue to describe experiences that raise serious questions about the system’s impact on school leaders and staff.

Ofsted must uphold high standards, but high standards are no excuse for unfairness. Schools should be held to account, not penalised for the communities they serve. Inspection must drive improvement for children, not cause avoidable harm to the people working to deliver it.”

-Ends-

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The NGA Annual Governance Survey is the largest and most comprehensive survey of its kind, providing unparalleled insights into the state of governance in English state-funded schools and trusts. NGA has conducted this annual self-selecting online survey for Sixteen consecutive years.

This year, the survey was open from 2 June to 30 June 2026, and over 3,000 people took part. NGA released the full survey and will release it at a launch event in Westminster on 20 October 2026.

NGA's Annual Governance Survey offers an extensive overview of the views, experiences, and challenges facing one of England's largest and most crucial volunteer forces.

About NGA

The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and governance professionals of state schools in England. NGA is an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve educational standards and young people's well-being by strengthening governing boards and promoting high standards. The expert leader in school and trust governance, it provides information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning. NGA represents the views of governors, trustees and governance professionals at a national level and works closely with and lobbies the UK government and educational bodies. www.nga.org.uk

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