

# Ofsted Big Listen research report: findings from professionals

Ofsted

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## 2 Executive summary

As part of the Big Listen, Ofsted commissioned IFF Research to conduct research with providers and professionals in the sectors ('remits') that Ofsted inspect and regulate. This report presents the key findings from surveys of 3,496 providers (who responded as provider representatives) and 3,831 professional staff (who responded as individuals)<sup>1</sup>, alongside 49 focus groups and 3 in-depth interviews. All fieldwork was conducted between April and July 2024.

### Culture (including trust)

By culture in this report, we mean the image, perception and reputation of Ofsted as expressed through its inspectors, who are the public face of Ofsted, and by the implementation of Ofsted's processes.

Views on whether Ofsted is trusted were divided. Less than a half of providers felt Ofsted achieved their ambition of being trusted (46% agreed vs. 36% who disagreed).

Providers, and especially individuals, felt Ofsted's culture created feelings of stress, anxiety and apprehension. Half (53%) of individuals said Ofsted inspections 'always' affected staff wellbeing and this view is acute in schools (72%). Inspections felt "high stakes" for most. Around half (47%) of providers thought inspectors were good at minimising this stress during inspections, but a third (31%) thought they were poor in this respect. Individuals were more likely to say inspectors were poor at minimising stress (47%). The wider impact on wellbeing is covered more in the Impact on leader and staff wellbeing section of the Impact chapter.

Most providers agreed that inspectors conduct their work in a professional (79%), courteous (75%) and respectful (70%) manner, but only half (49%) thought inspectors worked empathetically. Individual staff were less positive about how inspectors conducted their work; a third (33%) thought they were empathetic. Provider views on inspectors' qualities strongly correlated to their agreement of whether Ofsted is trusted, or that Ofsted correctly identifies strengths / improvement areas for their organisation.

Providers wanted to work collaboratively with Ofsted. Three-in-five (61%) thought Ofsted were good at building positive relationships with leaders and staff during inspections, but they still wanted to build better working partnerships, with space for a more open and honest dialogue about strength and weaknesses, and guidance on how to improve areas of weakness.

There were some early signs that providers inspected more recently were more satisfied with their experience. For example, schools inspected since September 2023 were more likely than those last inspected before this date to rate Ofsted as empathetic (56% after vs. 45% before September 2023), as were social care (70% vs. 60%) and early years providers (57% vs. 48%)<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Findings reported from "providers" indicate the result is from the provider survey, and all percentages reported are weighted. Percentages reported from "individuals" indicate the result is from the individual survey, this data is unweighted

<sup>2</sup> Due to small base size, other remits were not investigated by date on this measure.

<sup>3</sup> The question asks the extent to which providers agree that the way in which Ofsted conduct their work is empathetic.

## Inspection practice

Surveyed providers were broadly happy with the current length and frequency of inspections. Focus group discussions revealed that many leaders and staff want to broadly know the period of their next inspection. Some experienced gaps between Ofsted inspections for much longer than they were expecting, and they received no communication from Ofsted during this time. Whilst some wanted to know roughly when their next inspection was, others fear this would increase stress and workload.

Providers were also broadly satisfied with the coverage and depth of inspection. However, some in education remits felt the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) was tailored to schools and less relevant to early years or FE and Skills settings. Some providers thought the EIF could provide consistency between inspections. However, they often felt inspections were driven by factors deemed important to the individual inspector and their unique interpretation of the framework, rather than an objective application of the framework. These providers felt the choices made by inspectors on what to cover resulted in inconsistent judgements and feedback between inspections.

Many participants felt inspections did not consider local demographics and the background of their children or learners. For example, several school participants said learning progress was relative to the baseline learning and attitudinal position of pupils. Inspection outcomes did not reflect improvements in measures like attendance or behaviour in the context of learner characteristics. Leaders did not feel inspection outcomes sufficiently accounted for context to recognise success and the hard work of their staff.

Inspectors' knowledge of a setting or sector was an area of concern for some; just over a third (34%) of individuals gave a good rating to inspectors' leadership experience in their sector; 22% rated this measure as poor. More than two-thirds of individuals (68%) said the inspection process placed undue pressure on workloads always or most of the time.

## Reporting

Overall, providers and individuals felt Ofsted's reports provided clear judgements. Reports were rated as good for their clarity when judging: arrangements for keeping children, young people and learners safe (76% of providers and 69% of individuals); behaviours and attitudes of children, young people and learners (70% of providers; 57% of individuals); and quality or effectiveness of leadership (69% of providers; 61% of individuals).

Report judgements were less clear for other aspects, which also emerged as areas for improvement during the focus groups. These areas were connected by a common theme: a desire for more detail to be provided in reports. At present, reports were felt to be too short and too generic to fully serve providers' purposes and drive improvements. There was an appetite for reports to:

- Better support providers to improve the quality of their provision and safeguarding, through more detailed and constructive recommendations. Views on whether Ofsted helps provider staff improve the quality of provision correlates with perceived trust in Ofsted.
- Support parents, stakeholders and employers to make better decisions about provision, through more specific information about what that particular provider was like and its unique attributes.
- Better reflect conversations held during the inspection. Many providers said inspectors praised elements of provision, but these strengths were often absent in reports.

Support for Ofsted's single-word judgement grading system was limited, especially in the use of a single-word to summarise a provider's overall effectiveness. Only a quarter of providers (28%) and

individuals (26%) were in favour of single-word judgements, with schools and their staff least supportive of all (only 10% of schools and 15% of school staff were in favour). Social care providers were the most likely to support the single-word judgements (47% supported, compared with 34% opposing).

Providers and individuals mostly favoured a bullet list of recommendations as an alternative, similar to that used by the Irish education inspectorate<sup>4</sup>. Two thirds of providers (67%) and individuals (66%) favoured this approach. A narrative description of the provider, similar to what the Welsh education inspectorate<sup>5</sup> uses, was another alternative favoured by three in five providers (60%) and individuals (57%). Participants favoured a qualitative feedback mechanism that provides detail on the areas in which the provider excels, and areas for improvement.

## Impact

Most providers thought Ofsted effectively held providers accountable for the quality of education services they provide (64% effective<sup>6</sup>) and for keeping children and learners safe (76% effective<sup>7</sup>).

Ofsted were deemed less effective at helping staff improve the quality of provision (52% of providers rating effective; 40% of individuals). As noted above, improving quality related to trust in Ofsted. Leaders and staff also wanted a collaborative working approach with Ofsted. Education providers want reports to reflect the context of their school and explicitly state the strength of provision.

The inspection process and the potential implication of a poor judgement has an impact on the wellbeing of leaders and staff. Inspection processes reportedly placed undue pressure on workloads 'always' or 'most of the time' for three in five providers (61%) and two thirds of individuals (68%). Focus groups discussions found that an impetus to 'put on a show' for Ofsted was a common impact of inspections, particularly for schools. The day-to-day work undertaken on inspection days was not "business as usual", but instead an attempt by providers to present the provision that they thought inspectors wanted to see. This further increased the impact on workloads. More detail on the impact on workload is provided in the Impact on workloads section.

Some providers felt that negative inspection experiences exacerbated staff recruitment and retention issues, particularly among junior staff and those in senior leadership roles. Additionally, focus groups indicated that Ofsted inspections negatively impacted upon children and learners in some cases, for example the formal manner and attire of inspectors confusing, distracting, even distressing for vulnerable children. Furthermore, the provider survey found a quarter (23%) thought inspectors were poor at showing empathy to staff, children and learners.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Inspectorate publications: Evaluation reports and guidelines.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/inspectorate-publications-evaluation-reports-guidelines/>

<sup>5</sup> Inspection explained. <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/inspection-process/inspection-explained>

<sup>6</sup> Asked of all remits except Social Care and local authority children's services.

<sup>7</sup> Asked of all remits except Teacher Development.

<sup>8</sup> Social care providers, Area SEND provision and local authority children's services were only asked in the survey about inspectors showing empathy towards staff, not towards children.

## 3 Introduction

### Background

Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. It inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages in England. It also inspects and regulates services that care for children and learners.

In January 2024, His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) announced his intention to carry out a comprehensive engagement exercise – the Big Listen – to seek views on how to improve Ofsted's approach to inspection and regulation. The Big Listen consultation was launched in early March. It gave professionals, parents, carers, and the public an opportunity to give their views and feedback about Ofsted's work.

In September 2024, Ofsted published the [response to the Big Listen](#), setting out the actions it will take to address what was heard from children and learners, parents and carers, and education and care professionals:

This report covers the findings from the research carried out by IFF Research with providers and professionals to understand strengths and weaknesses of Ofsted's current approach to inspection and regulation.

Alongside these reports, Ofsted also published supporting evidence from other strands that formed part of the Big Listen:

- [Findings from our public consultation](#) that explored 4 areas: reporting, inspection practice, culture, and purpose and impact.
- [Findings from a consultation and focus groups with children and young people](#) to gather their views.
- [Findings from the public and parents/carers, commissioned through the National Centre for Social Research](#) to gather their views.

### Research objectives

The research presented in this report provides Ofsted with a deep and broad understanding of stakeholders' views, specifically in terms of how those it inspects and regulates perceive its work, and to identify what they see as the strengths and weaknesses of Ofsted's current inspection and reporting approach. The three broad research objectives were to:

- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of Ofsted's current approach, including views on its frameworks, processes, ways of working and organisational behaviours
- Collect views about the changes already made to Ofsted's approach
- Consider what more can be done to protect children and learners and raise standards.

As with the Big Listen consultation, the research was structured to explore views and opinions across four priority areas: culture and trust, inspection process, reporting and impact. Each of the research objectives are addressed, in turn, in the conclusions chapter.

## Methodology

This was a mixed-methods research project, comprising quantitative and qualitative research carried out by IFF Research. The research was conducted with professionals and providers who worked across the following Ofsted remits:

- Schools
- Early years
- Further education and skills (FE and Skills)
- Social care providers (in this report meaning those inspected under the Social Care Common Inspection Framework)
- Teacher development (including those delivering initial teacher education, the Early Career Framework and National Professional Qualifications)
- Those under the inspection of local authority children's services and those inspected under the Area SEND framework.

For more information about Ofsted's inspection frameworks and handbooks can be found [here](#).

The quantitative research strand comprised two surveys, one for providers inspected and regulated by Ofsted and one for individuals who worked for these providers.

- The provider survey was fielded as an online survey (with some telephone calling to boost response). Full details of the sampling approach (census of all in-scope providers) can be found in the technical annex. The provider survey was designed to capture organisation-level views from a senior leader answering on behalf of that organisation. The findings for providers presented in this report have been weighted by remit and date of last inspection, to be representative of all providers inspected by Ofsted.
- The individual survey was open to all leaders and staff working at the in-scope providers, with multiple completes allowed from the same provider. Individuals were asked to complete the survey from their own personal perspective.

3,496 responses were received to the provider survey, and 3,831 to the individual survey.

The qualitative research strand comprised 49 focus groups and 3 depth interviews. Participants for this strand were recruited off-the-back of the completed surveys. In total, 224 leaders and staff took part in these discussions.

Further details of the methodology for this project, including detail of responses by remit, can be found in the technical annex.

## Interpreting the findings

Where findings in this report are reported in percentages, this indicates that the finding is taken from the quantitative survey. Findings reported from "providers" indicate the result is from the provider



survey, and all percentages reported are weighted. Percentages reported from “individuals” indicate the result is from the individual survey, this data is unweighted.

Differences between sub-groups are only referenced in this report if they are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. This means we are statistically confident that the differences between sub-groups would be present nineteen times out of twenty if the surveys were repeated using the same method.

When findings from qualitative research interviews are discussed, this is clearly indicated in text (i.e. as findings from qualitative research, qualitative discussions, or focus groups) and percentages will not be used. Respondents will be referred to as leader or staff.

When a quote is from a leader or staff member from a private, voluntary or independent nursery (operating in a non-domestic premise), for length, this is referred to as “PVI Nursery”.

This is a summary report which draws out key themes and findings from the research conducted and interpreted by IFF Research. Full results from the provider and individual surveys can be found in the [data tables](#). Below each chart, the question reference number is provided (for example “E1” beneath Figure 4.1) which links directly to the table reference number.

## 4 Culture (including trust)

Perceptions of Ofsted's organisational culture are the focus of this chapter. We report on whether Ofsted achieves its ambition of being trusted, alongside high-level views on Ofsted's reporting and inspection processes. The chapter explores the wellbeing of leaders and staff in providers inspected by Ofsted, views on working collaboratively with Ofsted, and opinions about how Ofsted conduct their work. We also consider views on the recent changes Ofsted made in its approach.

When we discuss culture in this report, we mean the image, perception and reputation of Ofsted held by participants. The evidence shows culture is lived and delivered primarily through inspectors, who are the public face of Ofsted. Perceptions of culture are also influenced by the way Ofsted implements processes such as the approach to inspection, and the design and style of reports. Many participants related culture to feelings of stress, anxiety, and apprehension among leaders and staff created by Ofsted processes. However, there was also evidence of positive inspection practices where inspectors adopted an open and calming stance. Changing processes without adapting the organisational culture is unlikely to be effective.

*"It's got to be a culture change, hasn't it, across the whole thing, in that it's a bit more people-centred."*

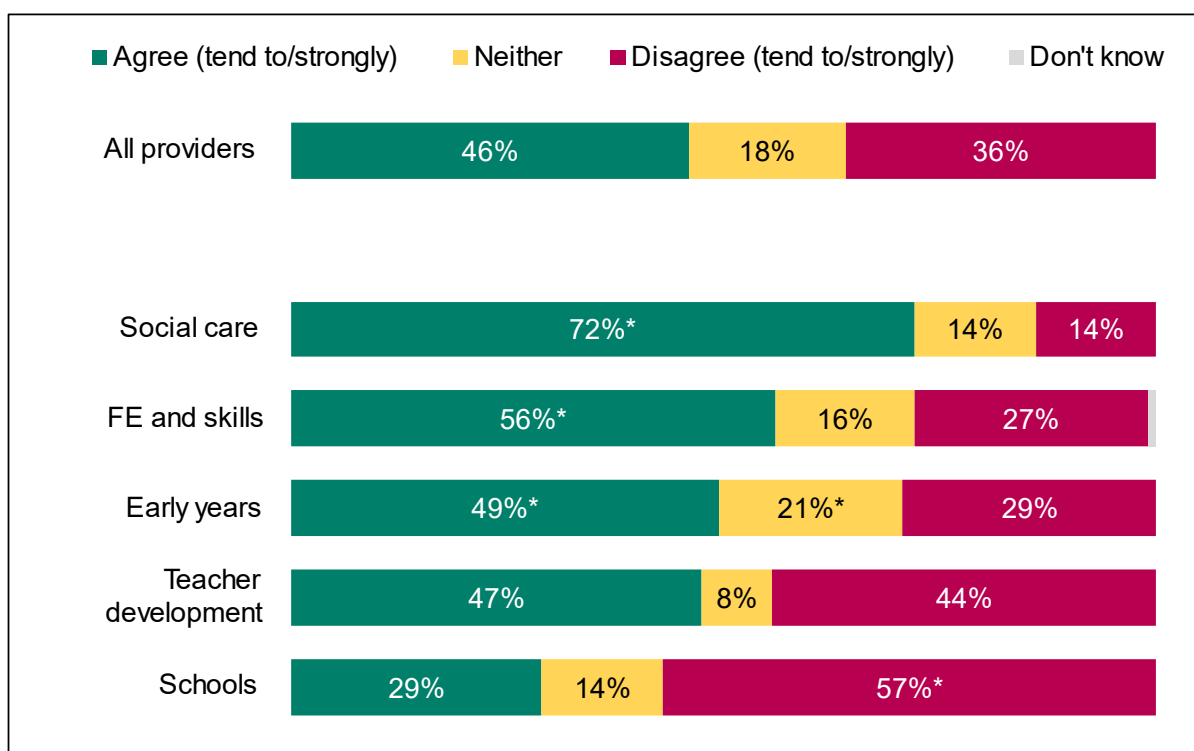
**Leader, FE and Skills**

### Trust in Ofsted

Views on whether Ofsted is trusted were divided. Less than a half of providers felt Ofsted achieved its ambition of being trusted (46% agreed vs. 36% who disagreed), and fewer individuals agreed (41% with a similar proportion, 43%, disagreeing).

Views on trust varied markedly by remits (Figure 4.1) with social care providers much more positive about Ofsted than others. Social care providers were more than twice as likely to say Ofsted achieved its ambition of being trusted compared with schools (72% vs. 29%), with primary schools holding the least positive views (only 20% felt Ofsted achieved their ambition of being trusted).

**Figure 4.1 Extent to which Ofsted have achieved its ambition of being trusted (provider)**



Big Listen Provider Survey. E1. Agree or disagree that Ofsted: are trusted. All providers (3,496). Provider breakdown: Schools (1,084), early years (1,152), FE and Skills (284), Teacher Development (58), Social Care providers (908). An \* indicates the figure is significantly higher than the overall total. Only figures over 5% are shown on this figure.

### What influences trust?

This report discusses various factors that respondents think contribute to trust (or otherwise) with Ofsted. These included aspects such as inconsistency in the inspection process, inspectors having insufficient knowledge of a provider’s context and their specific challenges, the manner of the inspector and conversations being fully reflected in reporting, and reporting not providing sufficient guidance on directional change. This is within the context of the “high stakes” associated with the single-word judgements and the impact this can have on providers and their communities.

Regression analysis<sup>9</sup> was conducted on provider and individual data to see which other variables influenced responses to the question about whether Ofsted achieves its ambition of being trusted. The purpose of such models is to provide direction when interpreting evidence. Echoing the qualitative evidence, one aspect that correlated strongly with perceived trust was Ofsted’s reported effectiveness in helping staff to improve the quality of provision.

The regression analysis of the individual survey found three attributes contributed to three-fifths of the variation<sup>10</sup> in views on trust.

<sup>9</sup> The appendix outlines the regression approach, the model design and the key relationships. Models were run on both the individual and the provider data. Detail of how we carried this are covered in the Technical Annex

<sup>10</sup> The regression’s adjusted R<sup>2</sup> value is 61%

- Views on the effectiveness of Ofsted in **helping staff improve the quality of provision** accounted for half of the variation in trust<sup>11</sup> in this model.
- Ofsted **conducting work empathically**, or Ofsted **identifying strengths and areas for improvements** each contributed 5% towards the variation in views of trust.

The analysis of provider responses found three variables accounted for half the variation<sup>12</sup> in views on trust:

- The rating given on **Ofsted's processes to respond and challenge an inspection report's findings** accounted for a third of the variation (36%) in trust (the Reporting chapter includes more detail on reporting).
- The perceived effectiveness of Ofsted's approach to **helping staff improve the quality of provision** (9%), and
- Agreement on whether the way Ofsted conduct their work is empathetic (5%) also influenced trust.

The relationships in the data between perceptions of trust, guiding improvement and empathy were explored in qualitative evidence. Discussions with leaders and staff often reflected Ofsted inspections should focus on helping providers to improve, rather than focusing just on judgement. They felt inspectors had a valuable opportunity to share best practice, which was often missed in the inspection process.

*"I can't believe that six inspectors wouldn't have had a whole load of best practice that they've observed elsewhere that they could have shared [...] we could have had some really productive discussions about that area of our offering [and] we could have implemented something more quickly."*

#### Leader, Independent Learning Provider (FE and Skills)

### Working collaboratively with Ofsted

Many providers want to work collaboratively with Ofsted, both during, and outside of, the inspection process. Whilst three-in-five (61%) providers who responded to our survey felt inspectors were good at building positive relationships with leaders and staff during inspections, the focus group evidence found the inspection process did not always feel collaborative. Many leaders and staff wanted to establish a stronger partnership with Ofsted more generally. For example, multiple leaders suggested that a more continuous collaboration between Ofsted and providers (during and between inspections), with one specific point of contact who would get to know the provision well, could lead to a more open and productive process.

Leaders and staff wanted a more open, honest dialogue with Ofsted during and between inspections, for example, more time spent on assessing the providers' own quality improvement plans and assessment of their self-perceived areas of strengths and weaknesses.

*"If the inspections were much more of a joint thing [so] the nursery and the inspector [look] together at where they can improve, rather than the inspector coming in, them just saying their bit and going,*

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<sup>11</sup> R<sup>2</sup> is 50%

<sup>12</sup> R<sup>2</sup> is 50%

*[then the nursery manager could be] much more open. [...] It should be a strength if your manager's turning around and saying [to an inspector] 'we're really struggling in the preschool room.'*

**Staff, PVI Nursery (Early Years)**

Generally, leaders and staff felt an 'us and them' relationship was established through inspection processes (e.g. observations and meetings where provider staff cannot speak) and inspector conduct, which created feeling of uneasiness.

*"It definitely is us and them. It feels like there's an enemy line drawn between us, it's very stilted, they come into your building, they sit in a room, they don't mix with you."*

**Leader, Local Authority (Area SEND inspection)**

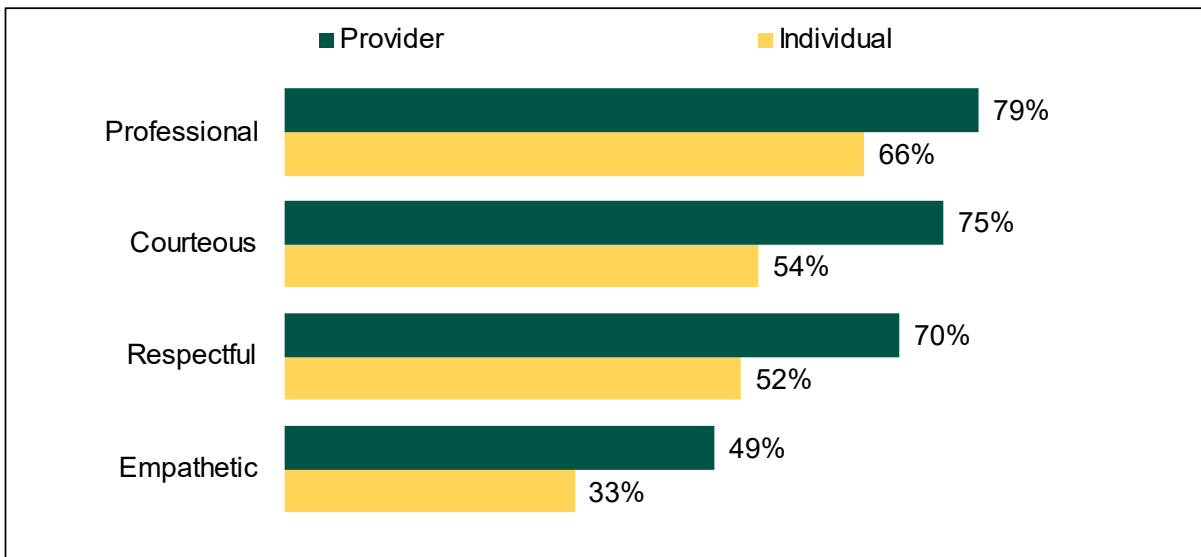
Additional information about inspector behaviour and conduct is in the Inspection Practice chapter.

### How Ofsted conduct their work

Most providers said Ofsted conducted their work in a professional (79%), courteous (75%) and respectful (70%) manner (Figure 4.2). Providers were less likely to think that Ofsted conducted their work in an empathetic manner (49%).

Individuals were less positive than providers on all measures, particularly around Ofsted being courteous and respectful (around 20 percentage points lower agreement than providers). As noted earlier, views around empathy influence ratings of Ofsted overall as a trusted inspectorate. It should be noted across these metrics in both data sets, there was a relatively high level of 'neither' or 'don't know/no experience'. This could suggest a low level of salience on this topic, and also highlights that the level of disagreement towards the statements were not particularly high.

**Figure 4.2 Views on the way in which Ofsted conduct their work (provider and individual)**



Big Listen Individual Survey. E4\_X. Big Listen Provider Survey. H4\_X. In your experience with Ofsted, the way they conduct their work is.... All individuals (3,831). All providers (3,496). The percentage show the proportion of respondents who 'strongly agree' or 'tend to agree'.

### Changes in views from September 2023

Survey metrics were generally more positive for providers who had been inspected after September 2023. Some of this was driven by social care providers who were more positive across most survey measures and a higher proportion of social care providers were last inspected after September 2023. However, differences were found within remits. For example, the proportion of schools who felt that Ofsted conducted their work with an empathetic manner rose from 45% pre-September 2023 to 56% after September 2023. For early years providers the proportion rose from 48% to 57% after September 2023, and for social care providers this rise was from 60% to 70%.

A recent improvement of the inspection experience was put down to cultural changes by participants in the focus groups. Some noted the wellbeing of leaders and staff was now considered more. Some, notably those in schools, noticed a marked difference in more recent inspections regarding inspectors' demeanour and approach. This included practices such as inspectors regularly checking in on how members of staff were feeling, and offering breaks to help relieve pressure and stress.

*"In light of recent tragic events Ofsted seem to have put in much more regular check-ins, and are much more 'are you okay?' focussed. If you are not [there is opportunity to] speak up, have those conversations. [It leaves] the door open to do that, for the wellbeing of staff. Those meetings are really, really important and are a good step forward for Ofsted."*

**Leader, Alternative Provision (Schools)**

The recent improvements in the inspection process demonstrate a positive culture shift in Ofsted. Inspectors are the public facing representatives of Ofsted and as such, are a source of perceptions about Ofsted among providers. Anecdotes of recent positive experiences related to a more empathetic and caring nature of inspectors, and this was really valued by providers and staff.

*"In the last inspection, I was absolutely blown away by all three of them. They were so personable. They were so supportive of the staff and so respectful. And if they had said one more time, 'are you OK?' 'Are your staff OK?' If I had a pound for every time that they'd said that over the two days, I would have been very rich. And it was a very stark difference to me that I thought, 'wow.'... But it didn't feel forced. So it felt very genuine. And I think that they wanted to get the best out of us."*

**Leader, Special School (Schools)**

### Wellbeing and the culture of Ofsted inspections

Ofsted inspections clearly evoked strong emotions. The inspection as a whole, the manner of the inspector and the impact of judgements influenced feelings of wellbeing among providers and individuals. Individuals felt that the pressure from Ofsted inspections affected the wellbeing of leaders and staff, with a half (52%) saying this was 'always' the case<sup>13</sup> Individuals working in schools and Teacher Development providers were much more likely to say inspections 'always' affected leaders and staff wellbeing compared to those employed by social care providers (73% and 67% respectively vs. 19%).

Around a half (47%) of all providers thought that inspectors were good at minimising stress for staff during inspection. In contrast, around a third (31%) thought inspectors were poor at doing this.

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<sup>13</sup> See Figure 12 in the Impact of Ofsted chapter.

In the qualitative research, leaders and staff talked about feeling stressed, nervous, anxious, worried and frustrated before an inspection. There was a sense of Ofsted inspections as a looming 'threat', with anxious anticipation of an inspector's arrival. Some mentioned that they experienced stress and anxiety for weeks or months, in anticipation of an inspection.

*"The level of stress and the atmosphere around the whole school was hugely different, and I spent the two days that [Ofsted] were with us just, I didn't know what planet I was on. The amount of stress that I had going through my body was huge. I didn't sleep hardly at all for those two days and I could sense that everybody else was on edge and everybody else was stressed out too [...] I really felt that during those two days, even for a couple of days after, [I had to] try and get my stress levels back down. It, it took a lot."*

#### **Staff, Primary Academy (Schools)**

After an inspection, leaders and staff commonly felt exhausted, frustrated, deflated, but also often relieved and pleased. A number of focus group participants took mental health breaks after Ofsted inspections or considered leaving the profession. They explained that the increase of negative feelings could be explained by the increase in workload before and during an inspection and the perceived high stakes nature of inspection. Some leaders and staff feared the reputational effects a negative Ofsted grade could have on the provider; the single-word judgements for overall effectiveness specifically, created a feeling of high stakes and risk attached to an inspection.

*"You feel like it's some big exam and if you fail or get the answer wrong, you're going to get sacked, the home's going to close down, everyone will lose their job, the kids will lose their homes, and it is quite a big thing really."*

#### **Staff, Children's Home (Social Care)**

The impact of Ofsted on wellbeing is more fully explored in the Impact of Ofsted chapter.

## 5 Inspection practice

This chapter investigates views on the experience and process of Ofsted inspections. The chapter considers the timings of inspections, the content of inspections (including the inspection frameworks) and the impact inspections have on staff wellbeing and workload.

### Overall satisfaction with inspections

Most providers were satisfied with the process and experience of their most recent inspection (73%). Social care providers were the most satisfied (85%), and schools the least satisfied (67%). Also reflecting patterns elsewhere, individuals were less positive about Ofsted than providers, with a half (51%) satisfied with the experience of their last inspection, and a quarter (28%) dissatisfied.

The majority (85%) of social care providers, and those inspected under the ILACS and Area SEND frameworks were satisfied with communication of findings during their most recent inspections (70% of individuals satisfied).

### Quality of information

Three quarters of providers (75%) felt Ofsted were good at describing what an inspection will cover and how judgements will be made, and at keeping settings informed of findings throughout the inspection process<sup>14</sup> (67% rated Ofsted as good). A similar proportion were positive about the information on how to raise concerns about the inspection (64%).

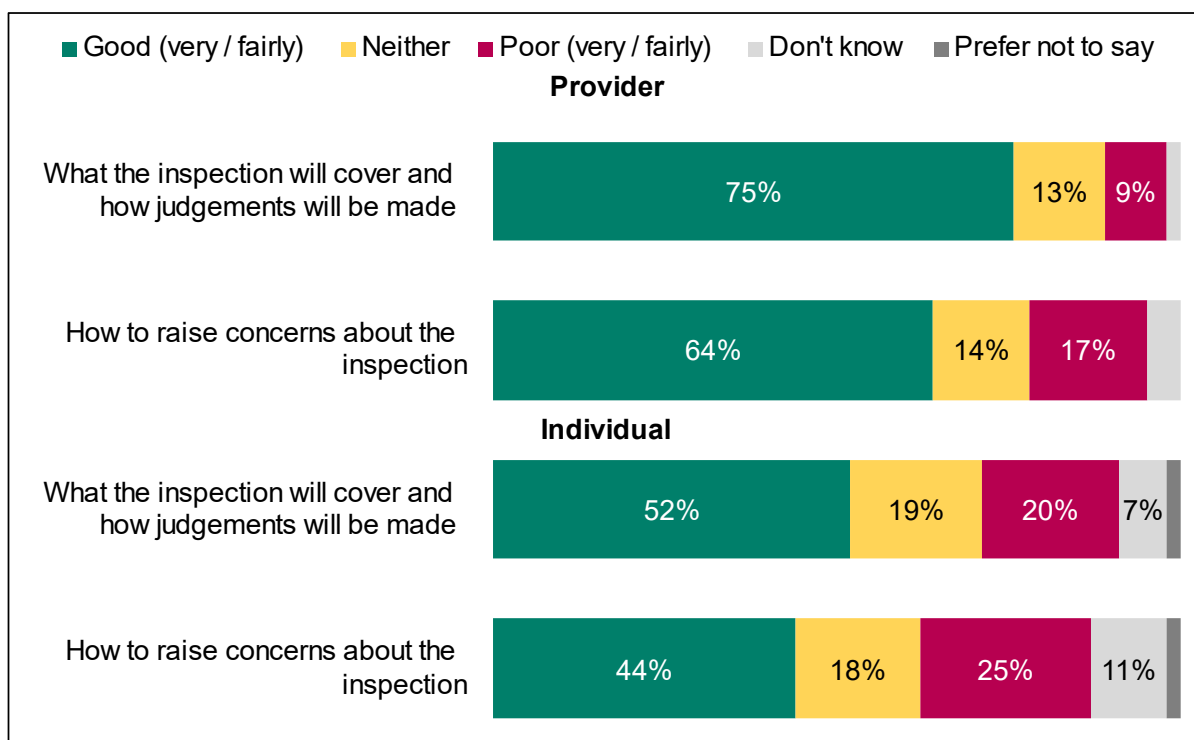
As shown in Figure 5.1, individuals gave lower ratings than providers for both measures. This includes a quarter (25%) of individuals said that information on how to raise concerns was poor. In focus groups, many leaders and staff explained they were not aware of the systems in place. Once informed of the new procedures, many were more positive about Ofsted's approach to complaints.

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<sup>14</sup> Rating Ofsted and the information provided for keeping providers informed of findings throughout the inspection process was only asked in the provider survey.



**Figure 5.1 Rating of information provided by Ofsted on various aspects of the inspection process (provider and individual)**



Big Listen Provider Survey. F1. Rating Ofsted and Information. All providers (3,496). Big Listen Individual Survey. C1. Rating information on... All individuals who have experienced an inspection (3,356). Only data labels over 5% are shown on this figure.

## Inspection timings

### Inspection notice periods

#### OFSTED NOTICE PERIOD

Notice periods vary between remits to account for different delivery characteristics. FE and Skills providers have the longest notice periods, ranging from two days (for smaller providers) to six days (for larger, complex, multisite colleges). Schools and early years providers currently receive one day's notice of inspection. Most social care providers have no notice of an inspection.

Most providers were broadly happy with the notice period given for inspections for their remit (59% of all providers rated Ofsted as good in this area), although one in five were less positive (20% rated Ofsted as poor in this area). Early years providers were the most positive, with over two-thirds (69%) rating the notice period as good. Social care providers, who have no notice period, were the least positive, 36% thought their current lack of notice period was good. As notice periods vary by remit, we discuss views separately below. However, a common finding throughout is that preferences vary a lot – there was no consensus on the ideal notice period.

**Schools<sup>15</sup>:** Less than a fifth of schools (16%) agreed that the current length of one working day was the right length of time. The majority thought a longer notice period should be given, most commonly two working days (27%) or five working days (24%).<sup>16</sup>

Focus groups also revealed there was a mix of opinions amongst school leaders and staff regarding the best length of notice period. Some leaders reacted to a short notice period by rescheduling other activities in their professional and personal lives to accommodate the inspection. These interviewees said they wanted more time to gather and compile all the relevant information. Some leaders said that they wanted to get inspections completed quickly after finding out that it was happening so that they had less time to stress about it. There was also a minority of leaders and staff who felt there should be no notice period at all and that schools should not have the opportunity to hide anything. They suggested that if they were good schools then they would not have to change anything to get a good grade.

*"I had to drop my life for it, but I really probably wouldn't have wanted [the notice period] any longer. Just get it over and done with. You know [Ofsted are] coming and if you're good enough, you're good enough and if you're not then you can't hide it anyway."*

#### **Leader, LA maintained Primary School (Schools)**

**Early Years:** A similar finding to schools emerged from early years providers, whose current notice period for an inspection and regulation activity is up to one working day. Again, views on the ideal length of notice varied. A fifth (19%) thought up to one working day notice should be given, but the most common response was two working days (suggested by a quarter, 24%). At the higher end of the notice period, 18% opted for six plus working days' notice.

Leaders and staff in early years providers were more in favour of shorter notice periods during the qualitative interviews. Having no notice period was seen as a positive by some as they would not have any time to worry. One leader pointed out that being notified on Friday for a Monday inspection was their worst experience, as the entire weekend was spent stressing about the inspection.

*"I've worked with someone who said actually she had a no notice, and at the time she panicked, but actually looking back on it, she preferred that because, as you say, there wasn't the build-up, nobody was acting differently than they would normally, everything was set up and actually they had got a really good outcome."*

#### **Leader, PVI Nursery (Early Years)**

**FE and Skills providers:** FE and Skills providers have a current notice period of two working days although some larger and more complex providers can receive up to six days' notice. Amongst this group, just under two-fifths (37%) of FE and Skills providers said that they should receive five days' notice before an inspection. This was followed by around a fifth (18%) suggesting between six and seven days' notice, and a fifth (20%) suggesting eight plus days' notice.

The qualitative research found a similar situation with FE and Skills leaders and staff favouring longer notice periods. Some leaders said that they had a lot to prepare before an inspection took place which was disruptive to their regular work. This includes a lot of paperwork but also interviews with learners and employers. An apprenticeship provider noted that because they provided

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<sup>15</sup> Schools, early years and FE and Skills providers were asked about what notice period they thought they should be given.

<sup>16</sup> For full detail of all responses, please see the [published data tables](#).

apprenticeships to people who were in work already, organising interviews with learners took a long time. This took a large amount of work from all their staff over the weekend.

*"They wanted [to interview] ten learners and ten employers per standard ... so that was 100 interviews that they expected us to set up between Friday morning when you get the phone call, and Monday morning. It was just outrageous."*

**Leader, Independent Learning Provider (FE and Skills)**

### The length of inspections

#### OFSTED INSPECTION LENGTH

Inspections vary by length depending on the provider being inspected. Inspections can vary from one day for early years providers, two days for social care providers, four days for teacher development provision, up to a week for more complex FE and Skills providers. Inspections of local authorities (under the Area SEND and ILACS frameworks) can last up to three weeks.

The current inspection length is about right for seven in ten (70%) providers. Providers who felt inspection length was not right were over twice as likely to say it was too long (18%) rather than too short (7%).

Teacher development providers were the main outlier as only half (51%) said the inspection length was right and two in five (40%) felt inspections were too long. Leaders and staff discussed the length of inspection in a couple of focus groups and several participants felt the small size of their teacher development provision did not warrant a long inspection because there was not much activity to inspect.

*"I felt that four days was an awfully long time, particularly because we are quite a small SCITT. So everything that they were asking, 'I want to speak to the person in charge of this' - that's me. 'Person in charge of that' - that's me. And that was mentally exhausting."*

**Leader, NCF/EPQ Provider (Teacher Development)**

The individual survey indicated lower levels of satisfaction with length of inspections, however three-fifths (60%) still felt the length was 'about right'. This was highest amongst individuals in social care (68%) and lowest amongst individuals in Teacher Development (51%).

Few early years providers and individuals (7% and 10% respectively) thought inspections were too short overall. However, leaders and staff noted that key elements of their working day were being missed such as drop-off in the morning and pick-up in the afternoon because inspectors were not there to observe. There was a suggestion that due to the impact Ofsted reports have on early years providers, the current timing of the one-day inspection was insufficient to capture the full picture of practice in settings. Staff pointed out that the composition of the setting might change each day with different children coming in and only seeing a one-day snapshot did not feel accurate to some.

## The frequency of inspections

### OFSTED INSPECTION FREQUENCY

Inspections happen at varying times depending on the type of provision being inspected. In social care, children's homes are inspected annually while other types of setting are usually inspected every three years. Schools are typically inspected every four years, but this may be more frequent if a school was previously judged to be poor or inadequate. Early years providers are generally inspected every six years. While the length of time can vary among FE and Skills providers, monitoring visits can also take place in between inspections.

Over half (58%) of providers rated Ofsted as good for the frequency of inspections. Most of the rest were neutral about this aspect, with 14% rating the frequency as poor. Social care providers were the most positive about the frequency of inspections (72% rating it as good), and schools were the least positive (39%, falling to 32% of primary schools).

In discussions, leaders and staff highlighted that it was currently not clear how the date of the next inspection was decided. Many leaders interviewed felt that that knowing which term (or quarter) the next Ofsted inspection would fall in would help with planning.

*"It would be helpful to [have] more routine, as in you're going to get inspected every three years, for example [...] but it seems to be so random in how it's done that it a) makes it quite difficult to plan for, and b) it just seems to be really arbitrary."*

#### Leader, Independent Learning Provider (FE and Skills)

In the focus groups, leaders and staff were asked about what factors should influence the frequency of inspections. A consistent theme that emerged was safeguarding. Most felt that ensuring that children and learners were safe was the most important element of an Ofsted inspection and that any safeguarding concern should lead to an immediate inspection.

There was unease that longer lengths of time between inspections would lead to drastic changes in report outcomes. Some leaders and staff waited more than ten years between inspections, this was mostly in schools. They noted that a lot could change in that time and that when their inspection finally came, the pressure was higher. In some cases, providers had no communication from Ofsted, which heightened anxiety around the inspection – discussed further in the Impact of Ofsted chapter. Leaders from schools also highlighted that if an Ofsted inspection was thought to be imminent, or was overdue, this impacted negatively on recruitment and retention because new staff did not want to go through the inspection process.

*"Good teachers are sadly avoiding moving schools to certain places and applying for jobs because they're looking when their last Ofsted is and don't want that pressure."*

#### Leader, LA maintained Primary School (Schools)

In the qualitative discussions, most suggested the ideal frequency of inspection would be somewhere between every three and five years. More than five years would not capture every cohort in schools or the current staff at the provider. Any less than three years was insufficient to make any required changes to provision.

*"My husband's a teacher and he's at an outstanding school. They have had three headteachers in between, since their last Ofsted inspection, and a whole different cohort of children. So, I think every four years gives you a good snapshot of the current children that you have and the current staffing."*

**Leader, Primary School (Schools)**

Some in the qualitative discussion raised that inspection length or frequency was not a key issue for them, instead they wanted the content of the inspection to be considered, with more focus placed on improving the setting and its provision. This is discussed in further detail below.

*"None of my team have an issue with how frequently [Ofsted] visit. I mean it seems about right - that's not the issue ... It's the fact that it's not a supportive process that is the issue."*

**Staff, PVI Nursery (Early Years)**

## Inspection coverage

### The focus of inspections

Providers rated many of the aspects of the inspection process as good (Figure 5.2), with at least three in five giving a good rating to gathering sufficient feedback, minimising disruption, ensuring sufficient coverage, and providing sufficient opportunity to show effective practice. That said, this was not a universal view, with around a fifth of providers rating several elements of the inspection process as poor. Of note, 45% of providers rated the extent to which inspections considered the local area or region as good, and 22% gave a poor rating. Local context is discussed more later.

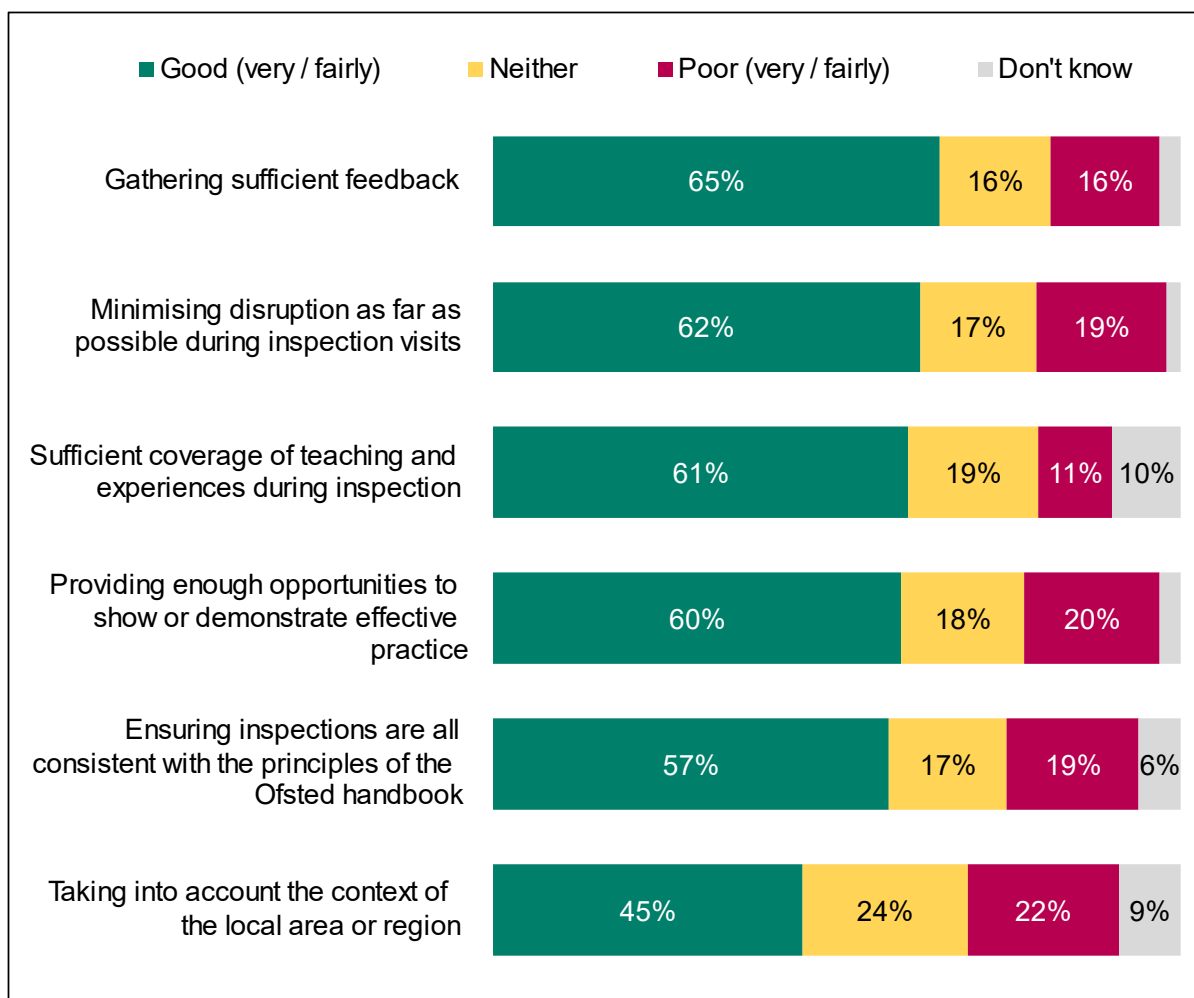
Satisfaction with elements of inspection practice and process were consistently highest amongst social care providers. This was particularly the case for frequency of inspections or visits, where there was a 33 percentage point difference in the good rating between social care providers and schools (72% vs. 39%). Schools typically rated the elements the lowest in all areas except for showing 'sufficient coverage of teaching and experiences during inspection'. This element was rated lowest by early years providers (58% compared to 61% overall).

One fifth (20%) of providers felt that opportunities to show or demonstrate effective practice was poor. This sentiment was reflected in the qualitative interviews. Leaders and staff, especially in early years provision, mentioned that there was not enough focus on the children and that too much emphasis was placed on other elements of the inspection such as reviewing paperwork and conversations with management. Schools and early years providers wanted to showcase the good work that they were doing, and receive recognition for it.

*"[Inspectors are] too absorbed in the paperwork, and paperwork is not what we should be doing. Paperwork should be the last thing we're doing. It's about being with the children and helping them develop and learn."*

**Childminder (Early Years)**

**Figure 5.2 Rating elements of Ofsted inspections (provider)**



Big Listen Provider Survey. F3\_1 - F3\_6. Rating elements of Ofsted inspections. All providers (3,496). Only figures over 5% are shown on this figure. All 'prefer not to say' responses <1% and not shown.

### Taking into account the local context

As noted above, fewer than half (45%) of providers felt that inspections considered the context of the local area or region. During focus groups, leaders and staff said they did not feel they were being compared to similar providers in their area during the inspection process. Rather, they felt that they were being compared nationally, often to other providers with completely different demographics. As another example, one school governor said their attendance was impacted by being in a rural location and was therefore heavily reliant on bus transport. This was ignored in the report findings. When an inspector had clearly 'done their homework' on the providers' profile and context before the inspection, this was appreciated by providers.

*"I think it would be more helpful for Ofsted to actually find out more about each setting that they're going to inspect [...] they're not actually asking about the area that we live in, the types of family, the deprivation, things like that, [and] it does have a massive impact."*

**Leader, PVI Nursery (Early Years)**

Leaders and staff also reported experiences of inspectors coming to their settings with preset areas of focus, or targets to find issues in certain areas. In some cases, leaders and staff thought they were already excelling in that area so were perplexed why it received so much scrutiny, or felt the area was

less relevant to the children in their provision. Leaders and staff in focus groups, notably those in early years, schools and social care providers, interpreted inspectors as having an 'agenda' and raised concerns that inspections were inconsistent, based largely on the inspector's interpretation of what to assess. For example, one inspector might focus on special education needs and disability (SEND) provision whereas the next might focus on delivery of learning.

*"I've had six or seven inspections over the years and they're all so different. Not just different areas they're looking at, but just the inspectors are looking for different things [...] one didn't like trampolines, one didn't like the dog. You know, as soon as they start on that, you're fighting a lost cause."*

#### Childminder (Early Years)

This was not a universal view however, and there were some leaders and staff who thought their latest Ofsted inspection had given them the opportunity to show off the best their setting had to offer.

*"I feel that we had a real opportunity to be able to lead our inspectors, to show them what we do and how we do things, in such a way that stays true to our values, our ethos. I didn't feel that it was a particularly onerous process."*

#### Staff, NPQ/ECF/ITE Provider (Teacher Development)

### The depth of inspections

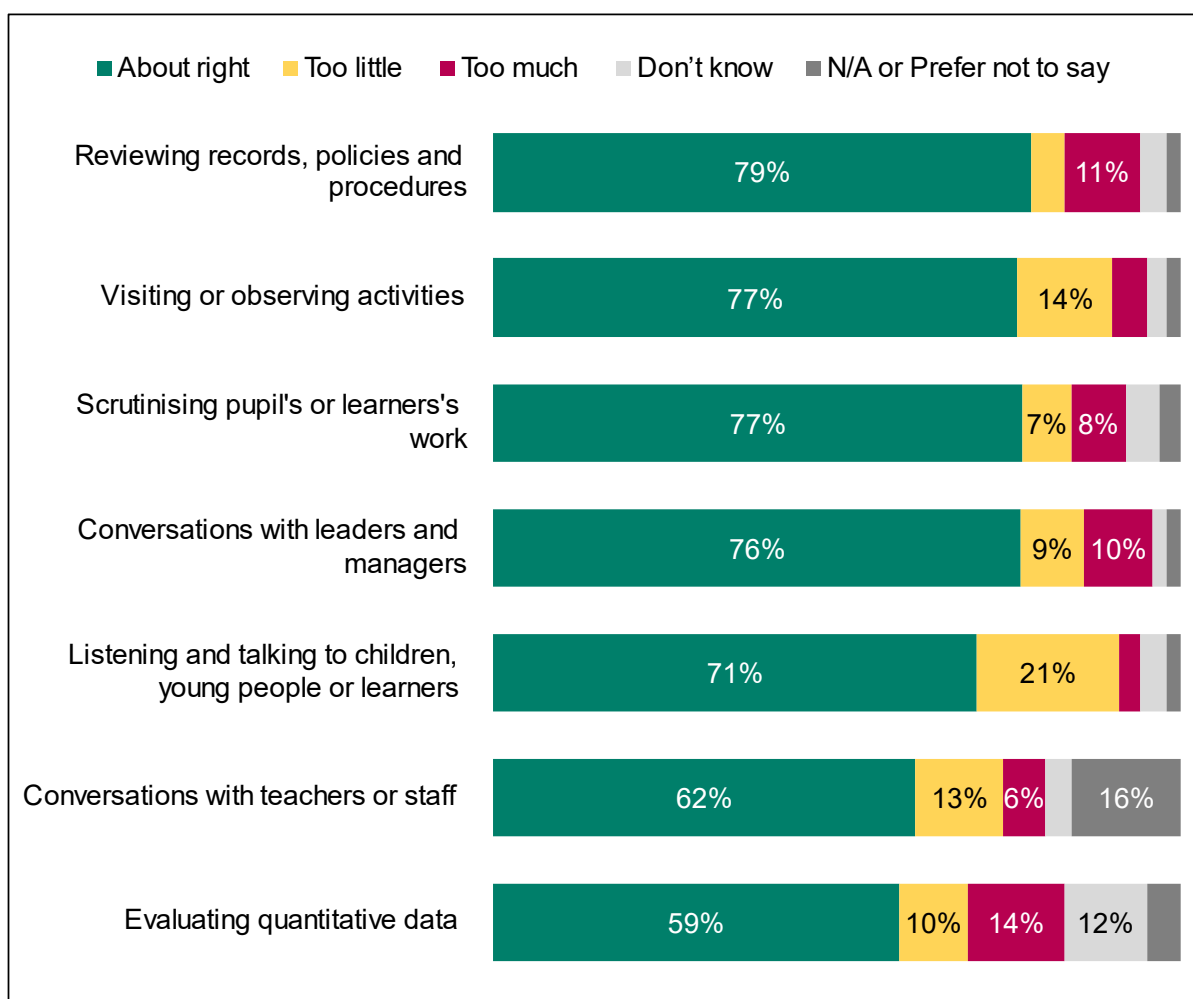
Providers generally reported that the amount of time spent on different elements of Ofsted inspections was about right. As shown in Figure 5.3 below, time spent reviewing records, policies and procedures was commonly seen as about right for roughly three quarters of providers. Providers were less likely to feel that the right amount of time was spent by inspectors having conversations with teachers or staff or evaluating quantitative data (62% and 59% respectively), though a sizeable proportion could not comment on these aspects.

### Listening to children and learners

As shown in Figure 5.3, of all the listed inspection elements, providers were most likely to feel it was 'listening to children and learners' that did not receive enough time. Almost a quarter (21%) felt too little time was spent on this and this sentiment was strongest amongst early years providers (26%). This was echoed in focus groups, leaders and staff said inspectors were not spending enough time in learning spaces, interacting with children and learners.

As noted earlier, leaders and staff in early years provision discussed that a one-day inspection did not give time for inspectors to look at all their different rooms or elements in sufficient depth. Some school leaders also suggested that a two-day inspection meant that inspectors did not have sufficient evidence to back up the report and said the inspection felt rushed. A suggestion was made for sending paperwork in advance, allowing the inspectors to spend more time interacting with staff and children.

Figure 5.3 Rating the amount of time spent on various elements of Ofsted inspections (provider)



Big Listen Provider Survey. F4\_1 – F4\_6. Rating time spent on elements of Ofsted inspections. All providers (3,496). F4\_1a. Scrutinising pupil's or learner's work. Schools and FE and Skills only (1,368). F4\_6 Evaluating quantitative data, Schools, FE and Skills and Area SEND only (1,373). Only figures over 5% are shown on this figure.

Another suggestion was for the lead inspector to come in a day earlier to review safeguarding and meet staff which might free up more time for other activities. However, others worried that having an inspector in the school for longer would increase the amount of stress and negative impacts on staff, and overall, this would be more detrimental than beneficial. They flagged it would be important to make the process more supportive, before making changes to inspection length.

*"Maybe there could be a way where some sort of paperwork could be sent to the inspector by the manager when you do your call the day before, so you get a lot of that out of the way, then they've got more quality time to spend actually interacting with staff and children, and parents."*

**Leader, Nursery class attached to school (Early Years)**



## Manner and expertise of Inspectors

Inspectors play a pivotal role in the inspection practice, and as noted in the culture chapter they are the main way in which providers and individuals interact with Ofsted. The actions and demeanour of inspectors were found to influence professional perceptions of Ofsted and underlying feelings towards inspection activities, processes and reports. The following section of the report covers providers' views on inspector knowledge and their experience of inspectors during inspections.

### Inspectors' manner

Views on inspectors from surveys were mixed, especially from individual staff members. Across the areas surveyed, school staff were more likely to rate inspectors poorly across a range of measures, and staff in social care providers were more likely to rate inspectors well.

Half of the providers surveyed (49%) agreed that the way inspectors conduct their work is empathetic; 28% disagreed. Individuals were less positive on the same measure as only a third (33%) agreed and two in five (40%) disagreed. The culture section explains that trust in Ofsted is correlated to agreement that the way Ofsted conducts their work is empathetic.

Also rated poorly was inspectors' empathy for staff, children or learners. Almost two-fifths (37%) of individuals rated inspectors' empathy as poor in this respect and this was especially the case amongst school staff (53% rating poor). In the focus groups, staff reported that there was a real mix of styles and manner when it came to inspectors. Some even said that different staff had completely opposing experiences of the same inspectors during the same inspection. This contributed to an overall feeling of inconsistency and unease when interacting with inspectors.

*"There were some inspectors that were absolutely lovely and staff were saying 'I really enjoyed speaking to them, they were really kind.' [With other inspectors], people felt like they were being tripped up."*

#### Staff, Local Authority (Social Care)

An inspector's initial impression towards staff was seen as key to setting the tone to the inspection. In one group, an example was given where staff were gathered at the start of the inspection and the inspector reassured them about the inspection process and what they were there to do. This approach was viewed positively and whilst it did not take all the stress away, it broke some of the ice. Conversely, some groups reported conversations and mannerisms that increased the anxiety levels for staff members and leaders straight off the bat.

*"My experience was that it was fear. [It was] engendering a fear in me and my team."*

#### Leader, Independent Learning Provider (FE and Skills)

*"They have to get off their high horse. They walk in with their noses in the air."*

#### Leader, Children's Home (Social Care)

Most individuals surveyed rated inspectors as very good or fairly good at 'conducting inspections with courtesy and respect' and 'using clear and straightforward language during inspections' (56% and 54% respectively).

Courtesy and respect were also mentioned in focus groups by leaders and staff. The qualitative research found that inspectors, in more recent inspections, had asked if staff members wanted to take a break or if they were okay much more frequently, which was seen as a positive improvement to the

inspection process. For leaders and staff, this made the process feel more supportive and less stressful.

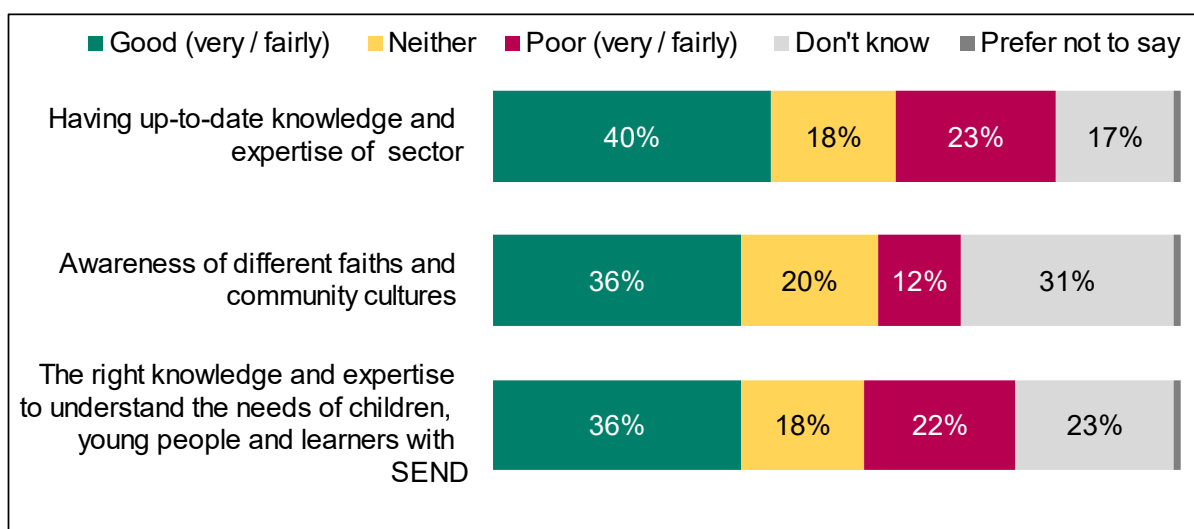
*“Our last inspection was October [2023]. We had an amazing inspector. I’ve never experienced anything like it. I wouldn’t go as far as to say it was a pleasure, but they were actually very approachable, very fair. She asked us constantly if we wanted a break, apologised if she felt she was going too quickly. She was very business-like. Knew her stuff, but was really human. And that’s all that we could have asked for. [She] really probed to get the best out of us, and kept asking things that we might have missed and prompted us.”*

**Staff, LA maintained Primary School (Schools)**

### Inspectors’ knowledge

Not all individuals said inspectors had good knowledge of the provider or children/learners that they were inspecting. As shown in Figure 5.4 two-fifths (40%) of individual staff rated inspectors’ knowledge and expertise of their sector as up-to-date. Individuals often selected “don’t know” to all questions of inspectors’ knowledge outlined in Figure 5.4.

**Figure 5.4 Inspectors’ perceived knowledge of various areas (individual)**



Big Listen Individual Survey. E1\_1 and E1\_5. Rating inspectors’ knowledge of respondents’ sector and awareness of different faiths and community cultures. All individuals (3,831). E1\_3. Inspectors’ knowledge and expertise to understand the needs of children, young people and learners with SEND. Schools, Early Years, FE and Skills, Area SEND and Social Care providers only (3,645). Only figures over 5% are shown on this figure.

This shows conversations are sometimes insufficient for staff and leaders to form an opinion on inspectors’ knowledge. In the focus groups, leaders and staff worried when they perceived their inspector had low levels of sector knowledge and expertise, and this led them to feel less trusting towards the process. A lack of specific knowledge and expertise of types of provision eroded trust in the inspections and made staff feel anxious that the context of their provision was not going to be considered.

*“One would expect the inspectors coming to be very informed about what they’re actually coming to inspect, under the different frameworks, [and to have sufficient] knowledge in order to make the recommendations and identify key improvements that any setting needs to make. They’ve got to be coming from a very knowledgeable background on all those different areas.”*

**Leader, NPQ/ECF/ITE Provider (Teacher Development)**

Just over a third (36%) of individuals said that inspectors had a good awareness of different faiths and cultures. This figure fell to 22% amongst those in Teacher Development.

There was a feeling amongst individual staff that inspectors did not have the right knowledge or expertise to understand the needs of children or learners with SEND. Just over a third (36%) of individuals said that inspectors' knowledge and expertise was very good or fairly good in this field and this fell to a-quarter (25%) amongst individuals working in Schools.

### Inspectors' expertise

Just over a third (34%) of individuals rated inspectors' leadership experience of their sector as good; 22% rated inspectors as poor in this respect, and 44%<sup>17</sup> had no opinion either way or could not comment.

Individuals in schools were asked in more detail whether they thought it was important that inspectors had previous experience as a leader in the type of school they were inspecting. Almost all individuals from primary, secondary and non-mainstream schools<sup>18</sup> (90%) agreed such experience was important. There was discussion in focus groups that it was important for an inspector to have strong prior experience in the type of school they were inspecting. Leaders and staff thought this would make sure they had the knowledge required to judge the school, as they would understand how it operates.

### Inspector consistency

The negative opinion of inspector knowledge was inter-connected with nervousness around the consistency between inspectors. Not knowing who one might get as an inspector was linked to raising the stress before an inspection began, partially because of the existing worries about inspector knowledge. It was felt that inspectors with varying levels of knowledge and expertise would not apply the framework or make judgements in the same way. This led to a feeling from some that the 'luck' of the inspector who visited for the inspection could impact on the inspection outcome. Some staff and leaders felt that particular inspectors had certain areas of interest, or things they would always look at, which was hard to predict, even with knowledge of the framework. There was also noted lack of consistency in inspector manner, some were very friendly and warm, others stern and un-friendly.

*"It's very much dependent on the actual inspector that you get, and it's perhaps not so much influenced by the process that has to be followed by the inspectors, [but more influenced by] how the inspectors actually, as humans, follow that process."*

**Leader, Primary Community School (Schools)**

*"There does tend to be a lot of disparity between the inspections of each of the homes, and something that we've been picked up on [at one home] they won't even pick it up in the other home.... we tend to be a bit sneaky before inspections [and] look at other inspections and see what the themes are."*

**Leader, Children's Home (Social Care)**

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<sup>17</sup> This comprises of 17% who rated this experience as 'neither good nor poor', 25% who answered 'don't know' and 2% who answered 'prefer not to say'.

<sup>18</sup> Such as special schools, pupil referral units or other alternative provision

*"There is no consistency. You cannot open the door to an inspector knowing how it's going to go because it's never, never, ever the same. [...] Their rules are not clear, [we don't know] what they expect [...] I've had a number of inspections and where the personality and the personal views of the inspector [are] allowed far too much licence."*

#### Childminder (Early Years)

Leaders and staff in the qualitative research also felt an inconsistent inspection process diminished their trust in Ofsted. This was supported by survey findings; providers that trusted Ofsted were more likely to report that Ofsted were good at ensuring inspections were consistent with the principles of the Ofsted handbook (79% vs. 32% of those who did not trust Ofsted).

### The relevance of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF)

#### The Education Inspection Framework (EIF)

The EIF sets out how inspections should take place and the criteria for assessment and applies to schools, early years and FE and Skills providers. The EIF is set out to ensure consistency between inspections and that providers are held to a high standard.

Across the focus groups there was consensus that a broad framework that encompassed three distinct remits was detrimental to the inspection process. FE and Skills providers especially reported that much of what was included in the EIF was not relevant to them, but rather tailored towards schools. For example, one apprenticeship provider questioned why they were assessed on a standard about British values.

*"Whilst I understand and recognise that Prevent and British values and all that sort of stuff is really important, I think it's totally detrimental to the learning experience of the learner. A learner didn't turn up to do a leadership management or careers programme or coaching course to learn about British values and Prevent, they should have been taught that at secondary school."*

#### Leader, Independent Learning Provider (FE and Skills)

Leaders in Hospital Schools, Special Schools and Alternative Provision presented mixed opinions when asked whether the EIF was relevant to their schools. Some leaders suggested that they did not want pupils who attended their schools to be treated any differently to any other pupil in a mainstream school. On the other hand, leaders also discussed that it was very hard to fit their school curriculum to the rigidity of the EIF. Hospital Schools, Special Schools and Alternative Provision found it difficult to define progress for pupils and there was a feeling that too much of the EIF was based on quantifiable progression milestones which did not reflect the reality of these schools. Progress for their pupils might be turning up to school consistently or staying in the classroom for the whole lesson and leaders did not feel they were able to reflect their successes and the hard work of their staff through the EIF.

*"We're a square peg trying to fit in a round hole...you're looking at progress over 20 weeks. A lot of my children come to school and can't sit on a chair, but that's not reflected in a maths book. That's not reflected in a literacy book."*

## Leader, Alternative Provision (Schools)

Across remits, there was still a feeling that although the EIF was there to provide consistency between inspections, it was the inspectors themselves who had the most impact on inspection process. Consistency, therefore, was still lacking despite the EIF's introduction. Additionally, there were some leaders and staff who thought that the EIF would be better if it focused on providing constructive feedback that could be actioned rather than being simply a tool used to set out what inspectors should be assessing.

## The Pause Policy and Complaints Procedure

### OFSTED PAUSE POLICY AND COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Ofsted's Pause Policy has covered all providers as of the 4<sup>th</sup> April 2024. The policy states that an inspection may be paused (for up to 15 days) in exceptional circumstances such as circumstances that prevent Ofsted from gathering sufficient evidence for valid and reliable judgements, or in the occurrence of a major incident that has a significant effect on the day-to-day running of the provider or inspection.

The Complaints Procedure outlines how to make a complaint to Ofsted about services it inspects or regulates, or about Ofsted's representatives or services; the focus of this report is on complaints against Ofsted's representatives or services. A provider may seek a review of their inspection using a formal complaint, and if they remain dissatisfied with the result, they can go directly to the Independent Complaints Adjudication Service for Ofsted.

Whilst knowledge of how to raise a concern about an inspection was generally good, there was a fair level of discomfort raising concerns during an inspection. Almost half (47%) of individuals would be uncomfortable raising a concern with an inspector during an inspection (36% would be comfortable).<sup>19</sup> A similar proportion of individuals would feel uncomfortable raising a concern with Ofsted's central office during an inspection (44%), and three-fifths (61%) said they would feel uncomfortable asking for a pause.

Providers (namely the senior leader representing the provider) were more confident raising concerns and asking for a pause than individuals, but many were still uncomfortable: 37% were uncomfortable raising a concern with an inspector during an inspection; 39% raising a concern with Ofsted's central office; and 49% asking for a pause. More positively, two-thirds (64%) of providers felt the information provided for raising concerns on inspection was good. Some leaders and staff in focus groups said they were nervous because they thought making a complaint would result in a more negative report. A few leaders also mentioned situations when they had had negative experiences of raising complaints, feeling that they were not sufficiently addressed (e.g. factual amends to inspection reports). This fear and discomfort around raising concerns or complaints led to the suggestion for all complaints and concerns to be made to an independent body.

*"Because we're all so fearful, aren't we? I found in our inspections, when they say, 'have you got anything to complain about' I think, well, I daren't, because I don't want to alienate you. So you go, 'no, no, no, everything's fine.' And that's just completely pointless."*

Leader, Secondary Academy Converter (Schools)

<sup>19</sup> Questions related to the complaints and pause policy were asked in the survey of both providers and individuals in the following remits: Schools, early years, FE and Skills, Area SEND.

## 6 Inspection reports

This chapter explores views on Ofsted's inspection reports. Evidence from the providers survey shows that satisfaction with their most recent inspection report was fairly high (72% were satisfied overall), although this was lower for individuals (56%). Most of those surveyed (84% of providers; 69% of individuals) felt their most recent inspection report reflected what it was like to be a child or learner in their setting to at least some extent. Positive views on reports strongly correlated with the Ofsted rating received in that report.

This chapter looks in more detail at views on specific aspects of inspection reports including their clarity and the judgements made on various aspects of provision. We also explore views on the level of detail in reports and their utility for providers, parents, stakeholders and employers, and the extent which their content reflect conversations had during the inspection. Finally, we consider views on single-word judgements and potential alternative ways Ofsted could evaluate providers.

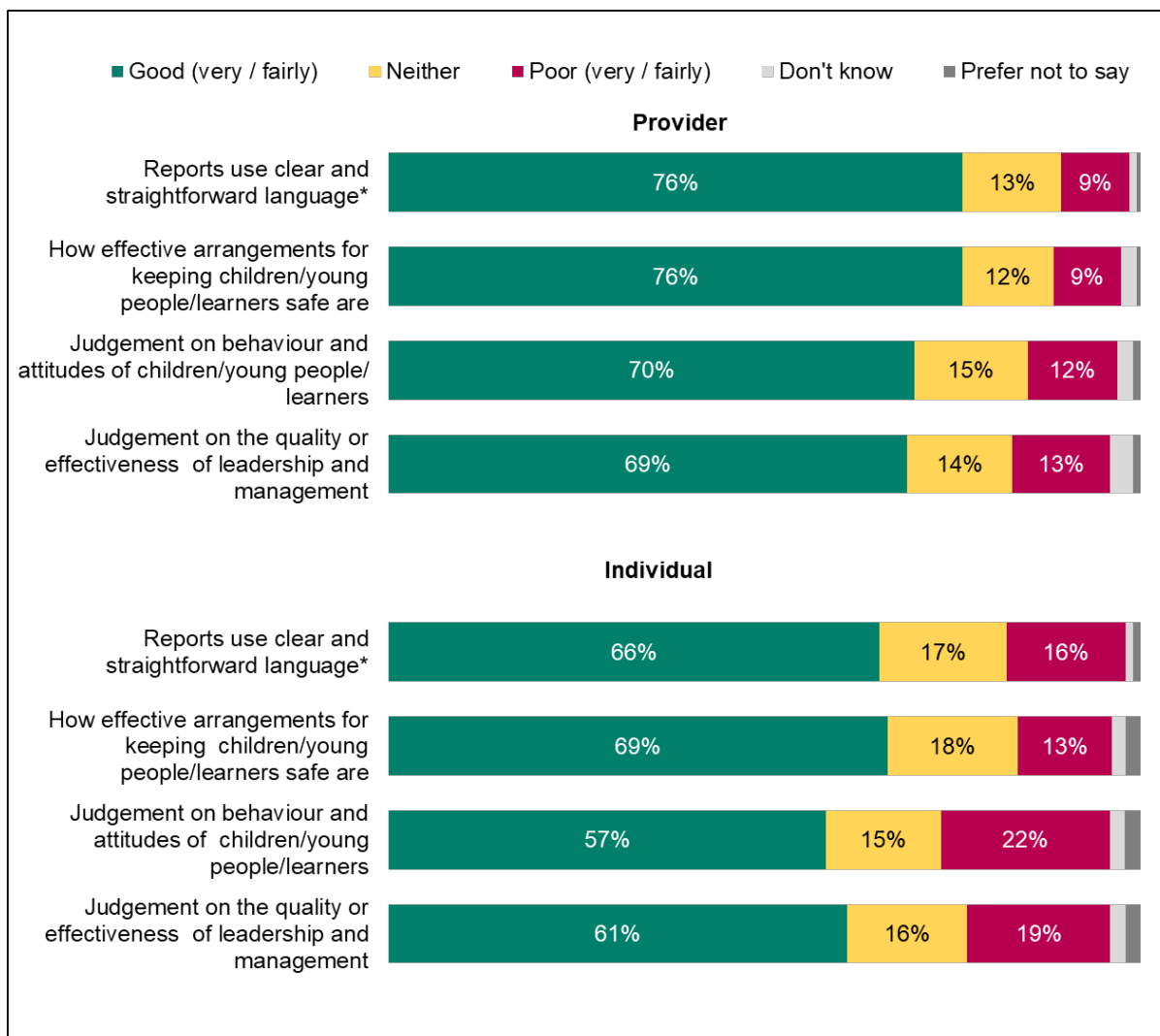
The evidence shows providers and individuals want greater detail than provided in current inspection reports, and through single-word judgements. Participants want to know how to improve the quality of provision and their safeguarding, and how reports can demonstrate providers' distinctive attributes.

### Clarity of inspection reports and judgements

Overall, providers were fairly satisfied with the clarity of information and clarity of judgements within Ofsted's inspection reporting. Although individuals were typically less positive than providers, they tended to report most favourably on similar aspects of reporting as providers. Three quarters (76%) of providers agreed inspection reports used clear and straightforward language; two thirds (66%) of individuals felt the same.

Figure 6.1 also shows how providers and individuals rated the clarity of inspection reports for other areas of judgements. Respondents thought reports give slightly clearer judgements on arrangements for keeping children, young people and learners safe compared to judgements on the behaviours and attitudes of children, young people and learners, and the quality or effectiveness of leadership. While these views on Ofsted reports tend towards the positive, they still suggest room for improvement, particularly in relation to individuals' perceptions of Ofsted reporting.

**Figure 6.1 Provider and individual views on the clarity of Ofsted’s reporting (provider and individual)**



Big Listen Provider Survey. G3\_4. Agree/disagree that reports: use clear and straightforward language. G1\_6. Report clarity: judgement on the quality or effectiveness of leadership and management. All organisations (3496). G1\_7. Rating information about aspects of Ofsted’s reporting; how effective arrangements for keeping children, young people or learners safe are. All providers in schools, early years, FE and Skills, Area SEND, local authority children’s services and social care providers (3438). G1\_4\_1. Rating information about aspects of Ofsted’s reporting; Report clarity: judgement on behaviour and attitudes of children, young people. All providers in schools, early years and FE and Skills (2520). Big Listen Individual Survey.D3\_3. Agree/disagree that reports: use clear and straightforward language. D2\_6. Report clarity: judgement on the quality or effectiveness of leadership and management All individuals (3136). D2\_7. Report clarity: how effective arrangements for keeping children, young people or learners safe are. All individuals who read their most recent Ofsted report in schools, early years and FE and Skills, Area SEND, local authority children’s services and social care providers (3056). D2\_4\_1 Rating information about aspects of Ofsted’s reporting; Report clarity: judgement on behaviour and attitudes of children, young people. All individuals who read their most recent Ofsted report in schools, early years and FE and Skills (2520). \*These statements use a different scale: strongly agree; tend to agree; neither agree nor disagree; tend to disagree; strongly disagree.

There were situations where inspection reports were viewed as less clear. At an overall level, fewer providers and individuals rated Ofsted's inspection reports as good for providing sufficiently detailed judgements on what providers did to ensure high or improved attendance levels (54% of providers; 46% of individuals) and for demonstrating how well the most disadvantaged or most in need children or learners were supported (57% of providers; 48% of individuals).

As seen elsewhere, schools and their staff were less positive about the clarity of Ofsted's inspection reporting compared to those working in other remits. Respondents from school were comparatively less positive about the clarity of Ofsted reports on arrangements for keeping children safe; only 67% of schools gave a good rating compared to 76% of all providers. Conversely, early years and social care providers were more likely than others to rate all aspects of Ofsted's reporting positively.

## Detail and length of inspection reports

### Accurately reflecting provision

The detail in inspection reports was lacking for some providers and individuals. A little over half of providers (56%) agreed that reports contain sufficient detail, and this varied by remit. Four in ten (38%) schools agreed that reports contain sufficient detail compared with seven in ten (71%) social care providers.

During focus groups with leaders and staff, the term 'generic' was frequently used to describe the content of inspection reports, often because participants felt reports lacked detail to provide an accurate assessment of their provision. Some said report content was 'cut and pasted' from other reports, or used standard paragraphs. These participants cited similarities in reports of local providers, and that their report did not reflect their unique attributes. All this meant that reports lacked utility for staff, leaders, parents and other stakeholders.

*"I've just had a quick look at my school's past Ofsted report, and it reads like fluff and guff, like word fillers. It's wishy-washy statements, like 'students study a wide range of subjects'. Yeah, every student in the country does ten or 11 GCSEs, it's absolutely meaningless."*

#### Staff, Secondary Academy (School)

*"I feel Ofsted reports are just so generic and pretty much say the same for each setting. The [Ofsted report for the] nursery I worked at [...] was pretty much the same as the home setting I work at."*

#### Staff, Children's Home (Social Care)

Participants thought more detailed inspection reports enabled leaders and staff to improve their provision, and help parents and other report users make informed decisions about a provider. Focus group participants felt inspection reports did not reflect what was positive and unique about a provider because there was no space for detail.

*"The reports can't be too personal. But schools are fiercely proud of their individuality, why can't that be reflected?"*

#### Leader, Special school (Schools)

Three in five (60% of providers and 54% of individuals) agreed that inspection reports were the right length and format. Schools were again the least positive (44% agreed in the providers survey), especially those based in primary schools (38%) and large schools (36%). Although some focus



groups participants appreciated succinct reports, it was more common that staff wanted more detail to accurately convey what the inspector had seen during the inspection.

*“I feel it's too short, so I definitely think [Ofsted] need to share more examples of the practice that [it does] see.”*

**Leader, PVI Nursery (Early Years)**

### **Other consequences of standardised inspection reporting**

There was some concern about the potential impact of short, generic inspection reports and judgements on staff morale, given the time and effort staff put into providing a positive environment for children and learners. One leader said it was demoralising to read that ‘safeguarding is effective’ in their report because the judgement said nothing about all the hard work needed to make safeguarding work well. In a similar vein, several focus group participants felt Ofsted’s inception reports and judgements took a negative tone which could damage morale and motivation to improve.

Many providers felt inspection reports did not reflect the wider context and circumstances in which their provision operated (one of the lower rated areas for the inspection process in the Inspection Practice chapter). Providers based in areas of high deprivation, or with children needing more support (for example those with SEND or English as an additional language (EAL)) felt they faced different challenges in delivering effective provision and safeguarding. These leaders and staff were frustrated that reports did not acknowledge or recognise their sensitivities. There were some suggestions for reports to provide background context on factors like local deprivation levels.

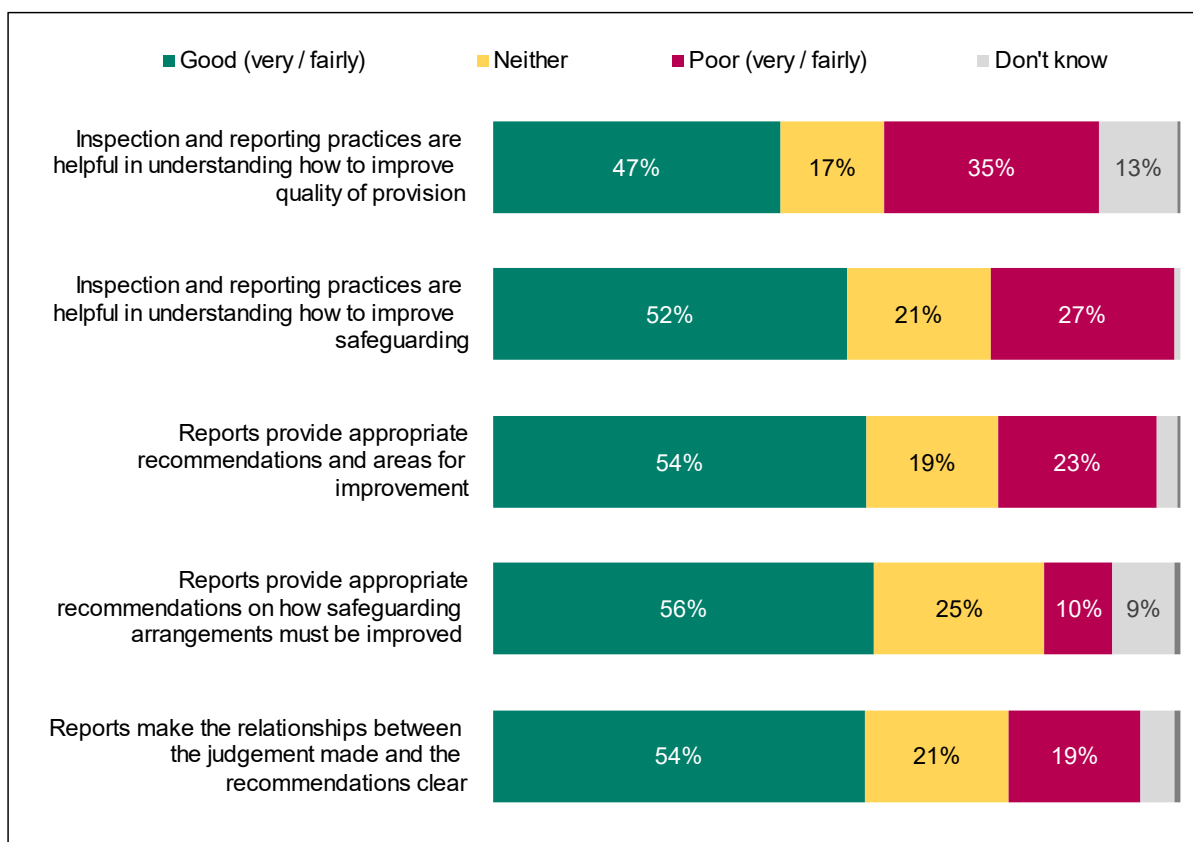
### **Ability of inspection reports to drive quality of provision**

Providers wanted to use Ofsted’s inspection reports to inform improvements to the quality of their provision. Evidence from surveys and focus groups suggest Ofsted inspection and reports could do more to achieve that. As shown in Figure 6.2 below, around half of providers agreed that Ofsted’s inspection and reporting practices helped them understand how to improve the quality of provision (47%) and safeguarding (52%).

Over half of providers agreed that inspection reports provided appropriate recommendations on areas for improvement (54%) and how safeguarding can be improved (56%). However, twice as many disagreed with the former statement (23%) compared to the latter (10%). Further, 54% agreed that inspection reports made the relationships between the judgement and recommendations clear.

Again, schools were less positive than other remits on all the measures in Figure 6.2. For example, two in five (41%) of schools rated Ofsted reports as good for offering appropriate recommendations for areas for improvement, with primary schools offering a lower rating still (34%).

**Figure 6.2 Provider views on how reports help improve the quality of provision and safeguarding (provider)**



Big Listen Provider Survey. E3. Agree/disagree that Ofsted: inspection and reporting practices are helpful in understanding how to improve quality of provision. E4. Agree/disagree that Ofsted: inspection and reporting practices are helpful in understanding how to improve safeguarding. G3. Views on Ofsted reporting. All providers (3,496).

Repeatedly, leaders and staff in the focus groups (across remits) said they wanted recommendations and action points specifically tailored to their needs. They felt additional detail would simplify how they designed and implemented appropriate responses. A few leaders felt undetailed reports contributed to the idea that Ofsted were trying to ‘catch them out’ rather than support improvements to their provision. Providers said they were best placed to decide on the best actions for their own school, but felt Ofsted held valuable intelligence from inspecting a range of schools that providers could capitalise on.

Some focus group participants expressed frustration that their inspection reports provided no recommendations for improvement at all. Providers making these comments included those with an action plan in place, or were given grades other than ‘Outstanding’. Many expressed the sentiment that ‘if we’re being told to improve, why is there no guidance on how to improve in the report?’

Some connected the utility of recommendations to their inspectors’ knowledge and proficiency. One group participant said one of their previous inspectors could not think of any recommendations, despite the provider having an action plan. Many providers felt that there should be common examples of good practice in each type of inspected provision that could support recommendations.

Some leaders and staff said they could not use inspection reports without detail to drive improvement. This meant that reports had little internal value for the provider and again contributed to a sense that Ofsted were not working collaboratively to help providers do things better.

*“There needs to be more collaboration between Ofsted and the setting, where good outcomes are shared. It needs to feel more like a partnership. Look at the strengths and the weaknesses, how you can improve.”*

**Leader, Children’s Home (Social Care)**

### Value of reports to parents and other stakeholders

Ofsted’s inspection reports also help parents, stakeholders and employers make informed decisions. Providers indicated that reports could do a better job in this respect. For example, less than half (47%) of providers rated Ofsted’s reports as good in terms of helping parents, learners and relevant stakeholders make informed choices about education or social care in the local area (a quarter (24%) rated them as poor). Additionally, around a third (31%) of FE and Skills providers felt Ofsted’s reports were good for helping employers make informed choices about apprenticeship trainers in their local area or relevant sector (23% rated them as poor).

More schools rated Ofsted inspection reports as poor for helping parents, learners and relevant stakeholders to make informed choices (41%) than rated them as good (29%). School staff returned to the generic nature of reports when explaining poor ratings. School reports are designed for parents with parents in mind which explains their design and structure. Leaders in education settings felt parents wanted to know not only what was good, but also what was special and unique about a school, which was not covered in reports. Many focus group participants acknowledged inspectors were limited by the reporting framework and rules around the language they had to use, so suggested that reports could contain a section which would allow the inspector to elaborate on specific details of the setting.

*“The inspector said, ‘we’ve just got to follow set phrases, there’s no way we can make it personalised’. So maybe Ofsted [could] give more flexibility to the inspectors, maybe just have a paragraph where they can actually write about the school.”*

**Leader, Primary School (Schools)**

Other participants felt inspection reports were either not used to inform parent’s decision making, or reports were one of several sources of information used alongside personal experience, word of mouth, or social media. Others commented that reports were of limited use anyway as parents were restricted to only being able to choose from a few providers in their local area.

Many leaders and staff acknowledged that inspectors faced restrictions when writing inspection reports, not least because parents were the main focus of education remit reports. The shorter length and high-level reporting ensured all parents and guardians could read inspection reports. Focus group discussions highlighted that inspection reports are used by a range of audiences, including providers themselves. Some participants suggested there could be two different versions of a report. An ‘internal’ report could provide detail on the changes that Ofsted advised to improve the quality of provision and safeguarding. An ‘external’ version could be designed for external users. The external version would be similar to existing Ofsted reports, although could still provide additional specific information about providers which would help to demonstrate best practice and unique attributes, but without recommendations for improvement.

## Reflection of conversations in reports

In the survey of providers, over half (56%) agreed that reports reflected the verbal feedback that leaders and staff had from inspectors. Agreement was lower from schools (46%) and Teacher Development providers (45%).

Leaders and staff in focus groups across all remits were often positive about the conversations they had with inspectors during the inspection. Discussions were described as informative and sometimes hinted at ways their setting might improve. Participants felt the tone of these meetings was positive, with the inspectors often citing examples of best practice that they had observed elsewhere.

Focus group participants were often disappointed that the constructive, positive messages from these conversations were not in the written reports. This was frustrating for leaders where the conversation with the inspector had been positive, but the tone of the report was neutral, meaning those accessing the reports were unaware of the key strengths of their provision.

*“The verbal feedback of [from both of the inspectors] was really good, but the report I got was just bland. We got our report, and it said, ‘safeguarding is effective’. It’s not effective, it’s exemplary, she said it in the meeting.”*

**Leader, Academy Converter (Schools)**

*“I felt deflated because of the judgement. It was deflated because I suppose that USP thing, he said our school was an amazing place, he said our school has this strength and that strength, and it wasn’t reflected in the report, it just sounded bland.”*

**Staff, LA maintained Primary School (Schools)**

Leaders relied on notes they had taken during the discussion, or from their memory, to identify actions for improvement. This further contributed to a feeling that Ofsted were not always working collaboratively to improve the provider’s offer. A handful of leaders and staff suggested a record of the meeting they could refer back to, for example a recording or transcript, would help.

*“What I do think is that when they do the end of their team meeting, when they give you lots of information and you’re trying to scribble down a few things, you’re still in that bit of sense of anxiety from an inspection. I think it would be really useful if they gave you a transcript of those things that they [say], because there’s more said [in the meeting] than there is in the report. I think that would be more useful.”*

**Leader, Special School (Schools)**

## Views on single-word judgements and potential alternatives

This chapter has so far focused on views on current inspection reports, and potential ways they could be improved to better serve providers, parents, employers and other stakeholders. There was also a wider question on whether single-word judgements (to sum up the provision as a whole, and to a lesser extent for specific aspects of provision via a sub-judgement) were appropriate, and the perceived impacts of such judgements on providers and individuals.

There was little support for single-word judgements across most remits and provider types, with the exception of social care. Figure 6.3 shows a quarter of providers (28%) and individuals (26%)

supported single-word judgements of a provider's overall effectiveness<sup>20</sup>. Support was lowest amongst schools, with only 10% in the provider survey and 15% in the individuals survey indicating they were supportive of single-word judgements. Those operating in social care were the most likely to support the single-word judgements for overall effectiveness (47% of providers and 46% of individuals).

### **Perceived issues with single-word judgements**

Several concerns were raised about the single-word judgements in focus groups. Overall, judgements for the organisation overall, and for specific inspection areas were perceived as overly simplistic and reductive, which meant they did not provide a balanced portrait of the providers' settings, an accurate guide to providers' strengths and weaknesses or recommendations for future improvements. While it was recognised that further information was contained in the report itself, leaders and staff felt the single-word judgements deterred parents, stakeholders or employers from reading the reports so this information was not used to make decisions.

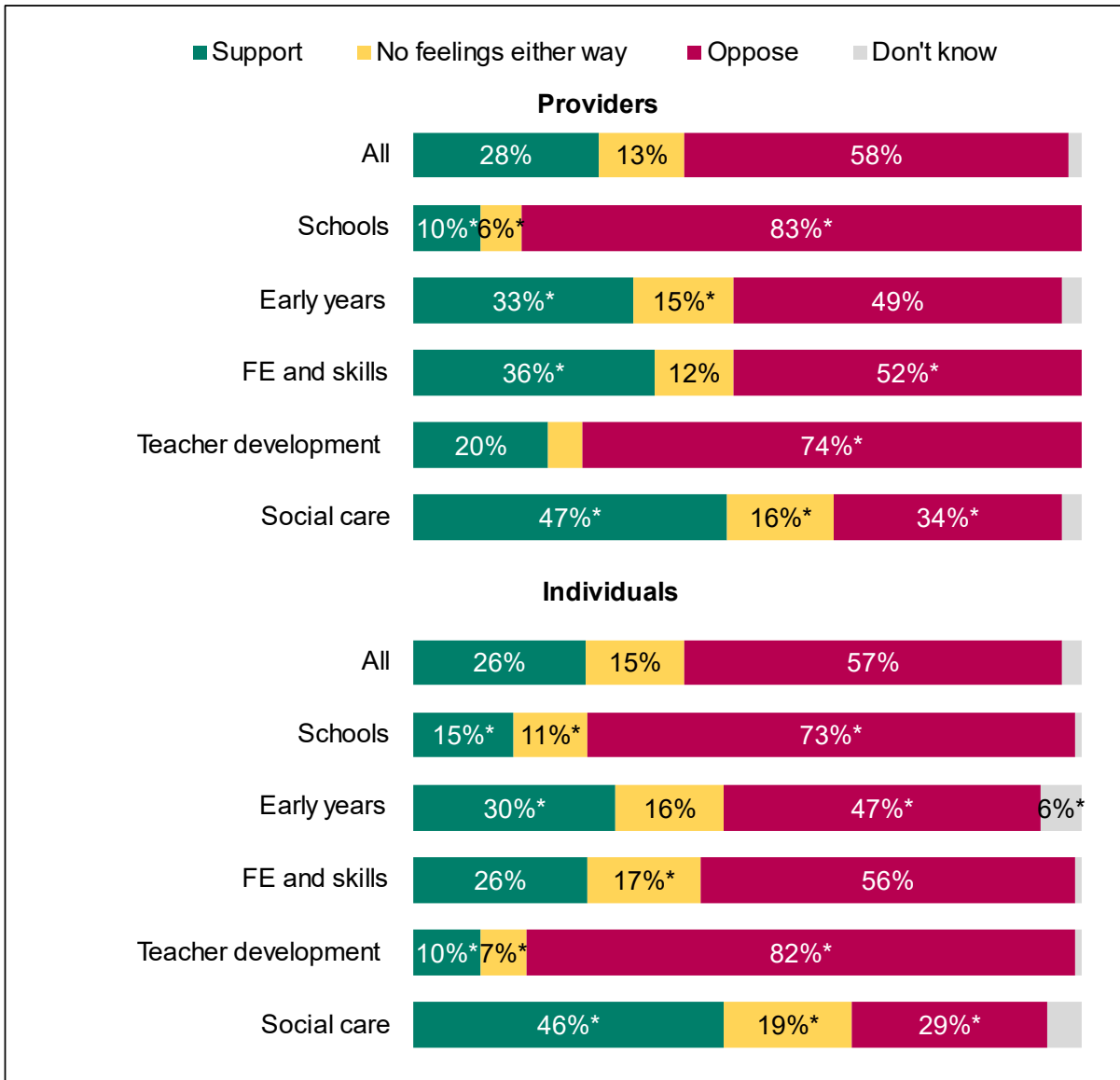
*“Educational establishments are far too complicated for a single-word judgement. It just doesn't cut the mustard really.”*

**Staff, LA maintained Primary School (Schools)**

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<sup>20</sup> Currently, Ofsted use a one-word overall effectiveness grade for [to classify overall provision]. Providers and individuals were asked: To what extent do you support or oppose using a one-word grade to sum-up an organisation's effectiveness?

**Figure 6.3 Provider and individual views on single-word judgements of overall effectiveness (provider and individual)**



Big Listen Provider Survey. J1. Views on single-word judgements to sum-up an organisation's effectiveness. All providers (3,491). Provider breakdown: Schools (1,084), early years (1,152), FE and Skills (284), Teacher development (58), Social care (908). Big Listen Individual Survey. G1. Views on single-word judgements to sum-up an organisation's effectiveness. All individuals (3,780). Individuals' breakdown: Schools (1,660), early years (376), FE and Skills (692), Teacher development (98), Social care (866). \* Indicates the figure is significantly higher than the overall total. Only figures over 5% are shown on this figure

Leaders and staff also felt that it was wrong that the single-word judgement for overall effectiveness was affected if they were not performing well in a specific sub-judgement. For example, the potential for provider to be downgraded because an area of weakness in leadership and management was not up to standard, but all others were very good was considered unfair and to not accurately reflect other areas that a provider excelled in.

*"I have seen plenty of Ofsted reports that are 'Requires Improvement' but you actually read the report and those settings are doing lots of fabulous things. They might have just been non-compliant on a certain issue that isn't necessarily a big issue."*

**Staff, PVI Nursery (Early Years)**

Many felt distilling the energy that goes into delivering aspects of provision into a single-word demoralised staff, who would like to see judgements better reflect their work. Although this opinion was more commonly voiced by providers who had received lower overall judgements, some leaders with 'Outstanding' and 'Good' ratings also felt the same.

*"It is not enough to just say you are 'Good'. What are we good at? What do we excel at? Where do we shine?"*

**Staff, LA maintained Secondary School (Schools)**

Mention was also made of the 'high stakes' that a single-word judgement could have for the wellbeing and morale of staff. Many feared the terms 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' because they are viewed as a judgement on staff's personal and professional lives. This was a key reason why single-word judgements were considered inappropriate by many. Some related the anxiety associated with single-word judgements as the reason for stress and poor health, why some left their roles, or the reason why sectors were struggling to recruit staff.

*"You come into this job to help young people and give them the great start to life that they've not had, and you're just deemed bad at doing so when you get 'Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement' and you just think am I actually failing my job, why am I doing this job?"*

**Staff, Children's Home (Social Care)**

*"I think there's a reason why there's a lot of mental health breaks that are needed for registered managers because it's just the pressure of getting one of these four words. I'll say the pressure that is applied by four gradings, right, four gradings is contributable to the reason why there's a national shortage of registered managers."*

**Leader, Children's Home (Social Care)**

Similarly, many felt the phrasing of 'Requires Improvement' and 'Inadequate' judgements have a punitive connotation that reinforced the impression that Ofsted did not work collaboratively with providers.

*"It feels so adversarial in a way that other university mechanisms of quality assurance don't feel adversarial. This year we had the course revalidation, then Ofsted and we're about to have our Departmental academic review, which is tough, but it's a conversation."*

**Leader, NPQ/EC/ITE (Teacher Development)**

It was acknowledged by leaders and staff that there was a stigma attached to a bad overall effectiveness grade, and this could have serious implications for providers in terms of demand for their provision. Even if they are judged to be performing well in certain areas, this was often unknown to parents and others who used the judgements to determine whether to consider/use the provision, and who would only go as far as looking at the overall effectiveness grade the provider had received.

*"A parent would look at that report that 'Requires Improvement' and think 'Oh, I'm confident that's not a setting I want my child to go to'. Actually, that might be a great setting for your child [...] Maybe it was a small issue [which is now] sorted and their practise is really good."*

**Staff, PVI Nursery (Early Years)**

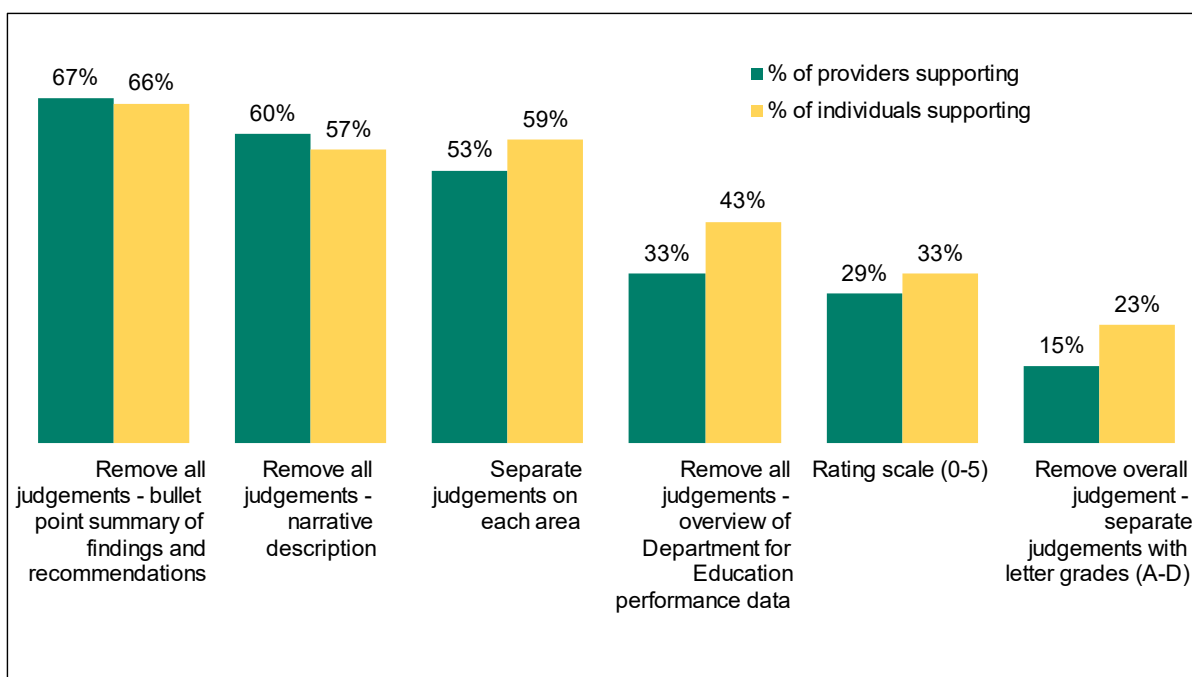
Some focus group participants also felt there were wider implications for the local area and local community associated with the single-word judgements. Leaders and staff commented that low grades can contribute to negative discourse about local communities, for example in the press or the local media, with potential impacts on aspects such as community morale and, perhaps more tangibly, house prices.

### Alternatives to single-word judgements

Although there was low levels of support for single-word judgements among providers and their staff, many acknowledged measures were needed to evaluate the quality of education and care, and for judgements to be made about children and learner safeguarding. Leaders and staff wanted this judgement to feel less reductive and provide a more informative picture of a provider, with negative points framed constructively.

Two thirds of providers (67%) and individuals (66%) favoured replacing single-word judgements of overall effectiveness with a bullet pointed summary of findings and recommendations, similar to that used by the Irish education inspectorate (Figure 6.4). The narrative description of the provider, similar to what the Welsh education inspectorate appealed to a sizeable number of providers (60% and individuals (57%).

**Figure 6.4 Provider and individual support of alternatives to single-word judgements (provider and individual)**



Big Listen Provider Survey. J2. Views on alternative grading options to single-word judgements. All providers in schools, Early Years, FE and Skills, Social Care and Teacher Development (3,491). Big Listen Individual Survey. G2. Views on alternative grading options to single-word judgements. All individuals in schools, Early Years, FE and Skills, Social Care and Teacher Development (3,780).

Department for Education performance data is not available or not applicable for providers in the social care sector. This may explain why social care providers were more likely than average to be indifferent (no feeling either way) on the option to remove all judgements and replace with an



overview of Department for Education performance data (30% vs. 22%). Among education providers only<sup>21</sup>, 33% of providers and 44% of individuals supported this alternative option.

Leaders and individuals described nuanced and less critical judgements in focus groups. There were two key aspects. Firstly, participants believe a judgement should have a constructive, collaborative tone, which would guide improvements in provision. Secondly, leaders and staff often thought that judgements should demonstrate a provider's strengths, even if very succinctly. Some suggested judgements as short statements, tailored to the specific provider and possibly using key words from the report or end of inspection discussion, which would give a flavour of what the provision was like. Alternatively, the judgement could be less tailored but taken from one of a range of agreed sentences or statements that could be used to describe the provider. Leaders and staff felt that this would provide children, stakeholders and employers a better idea of what the school was actually like, even if they did not read the full report.

*"Supposing you had instead of one word, supposing you had maybe ten different sentences that describe each organisation, I think that would be more helpful to parents."*

**Staff, Children's Home (Social Care)**

Safeguarding was one area of inspection and reporting where some were more accepting of the idea of a graded judgement. Many felt adequately safeguarding children and learners was more 'black and white', and less subjective, than other areas of the inspection, so could be covered under a graded judgement before writing a nuanced narrative about providers' strengths and areas for improvement.

*"[It could] just grade the safeguarding aspects? Because realistically, that is the key point. Are the children going to be safe? Are the safeguarding up to standards? So maybe [it] just needs to grade that part and take all the rest of the grading away, and just write a nice, or a not nice, report on what [it has] seen in that day."*

**Staff, PVI Nursery (Early Years)**

## Enhanced skills inspections for colleges

### OFSTED ENHANCED SKILLS INSPECTION OF COLLEGES

Ofsted's skills judgement for colleges was introduced in September 2022. College inspection reports now include an additional section, 'Contribution to meeting skills needs', assessing the contribution as either 'limited', 'reasonable' or 'strong', in terms of meeting the skills needs of employers and other stakeholders and the local, regional and national economy. Two focus groups made up of leaders and staff working in college settings were asked their views on the skills judgement.

Staff in focus groups were less aware of the introduction of this judgement, whereas all leaders were aware. Most leaders in the focus group had experienced an inspection with a skills judgement. Those working in colleges offering vocational courses and apprenticeships were already doing a lot of the things that the skills judgement looks at, and saw it as a chance to shine and 'show off' what they do. However, they said the skills judgement did not encourage them to do anything new. Those working in colleges mostly offering A-Levels said it was difficult to 'shoe-horn' the skills judgement

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<sup>21</sup> Schools, early years and FE Settings only

requirements into their offer. They said A-Levels were less relevant to the local skills landscape, and more related to improving student outcomes and helping them move on to university. One leader in this position said applying the judgement felt 'forced', however another sixth-form leader said the introduction of the judgement gave them a push to reach out to local employers.

The words used for the judgement of 'limited', 'reasonable', or 'strong' were disliked, for similar reasons why the single-word judgements for overall effectiveness were not liked by most. One leader suggested that the skills judgement could be part of the leadership and management judgement instead. Some felt frustrated that the skills inspection requires time and effort on the part of the college, and results in a single-word alongside a few lines in the inspection report; the result felt disproportionate to the effort put in.

## 7 Impact of Ofsted

This chapter looks at the impact that Ofsted has on the various remits it inspects. The chapter will cover Ofsted's ability to initiate change, through the way in which Ofsted hold providers accountable for the improvement of quality and service, alongside keeping children and learners safe. The perceived impact Ofsted has on wellbeing, workloads, the impact of Ofsted on recruitment and retention is also discussed, as is the impact Ofsted has on the wider community.

### Holding providers to account

#### Quality of services

Most educational providers<sup>22</sup> thought Ofsted effectively held providers accountable for the quality of the education services they provide. Nearly two-thirds (64%) felt Ofsted was effective in this respect, 15% felt it was ineffective.

Reflecting the trends reported earlier, schools and individuals were less positive on this measure. Over half (56%) of schools rated Ofsted effective, compared to 70% of FE and Skills providers and 67% of early years providers. Just under a half (46%) of individuals felt Ofsted effectively held providers accountable for the quality of the services and 26% said it was ineffective.

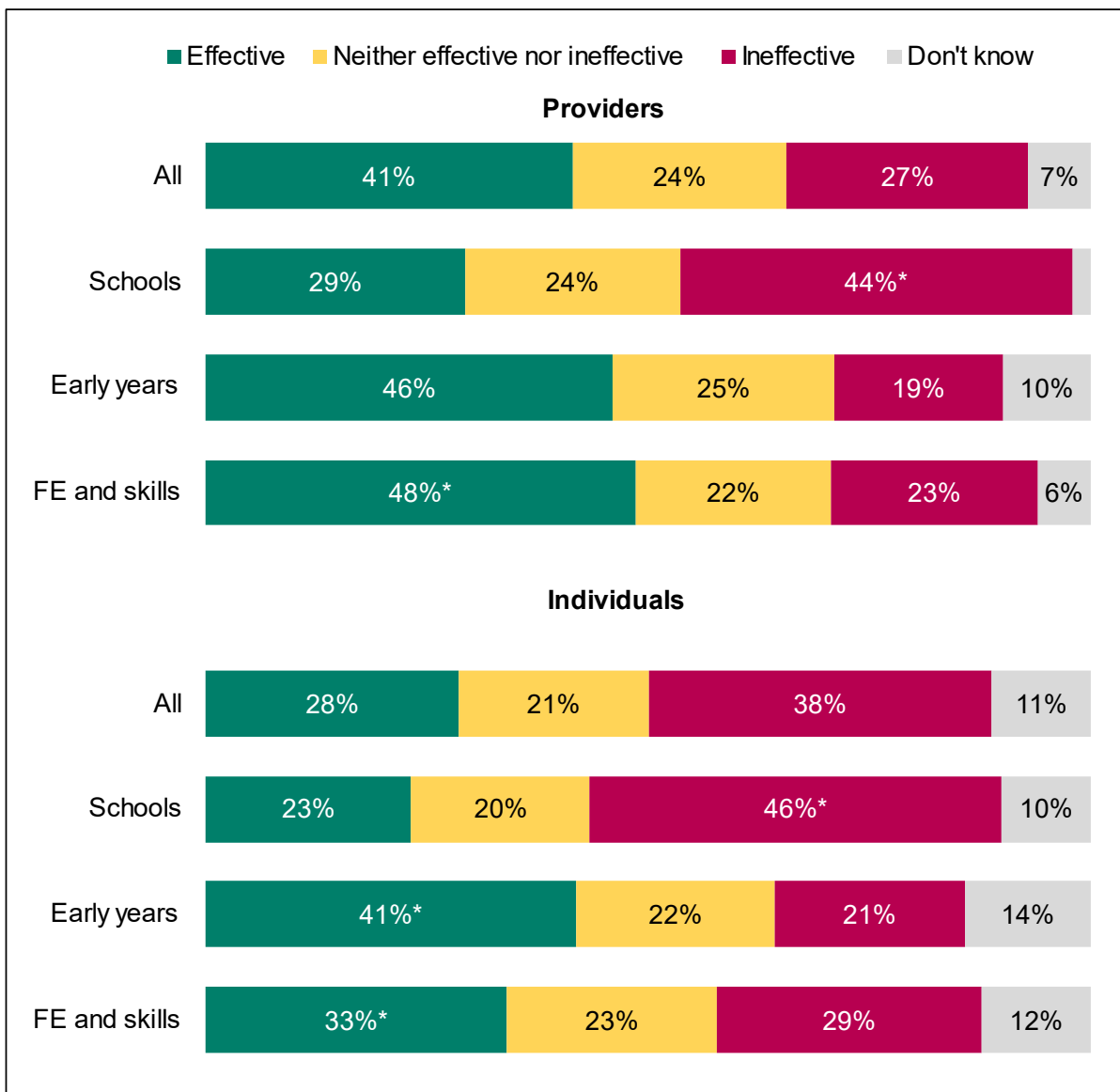
Two in five (41%) educational providers<sup>23</sup> said Ofsted effectively helped providers develop an evidence-based curriculum, though there was some variance based on provider type as shown in Figure 7.1. This difference was echoed in focus groups, with school participants more likely than those in other educational remits to report that inspections sometimes felt like a tick-box exercise, rather than focusing on a method to improve quality of provision. The importance placed by focus group participants on improvement is discussed earlier in the Inspection coverage section.

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<sup>22</sup> This question was asked of providers in the following remits: Schools, Early Years, FE and Skills, Teacher Development or Area SEND only.

<sup>23</sup> This question was asked for schools, early years and FE and Skills only.

**Figure 7.1 Effectiveness of Ofsted's approach to help providers and individuals develop an evidence-based curriculum (p**



Big Listen Provider Survey.I1\_4 Effectiveness of Ofsted's approach: helping those at your organisation or setting develop an evidence-based curriculum. Schools, early years or FE and Skills settings only (2520). Big Listen Individuals Survey. F1\_4. Effectiveness of Ofsted's approach: helping those at your organisation or setting develop an evidence-based curriculum. Schools, early years or FE and Skills settings only (2728).

An \* indicates the figure is significantly higher than the overall total. Only figures over 5% are shown on this figure.

### Keeping children and learners safe

Most providers thought Ofsted effectively holds providers accountable for keeping children and learners safe<sup>24</sup>. Three quarters of providers surveyed (76%) felt this way and the difference between social care providers (79%) and schools (70%) was smaller than other measures. However, fewer primary schools (63%) felt Ofsted was effective, and one in six (18%) rated Ofsted as ineffective.

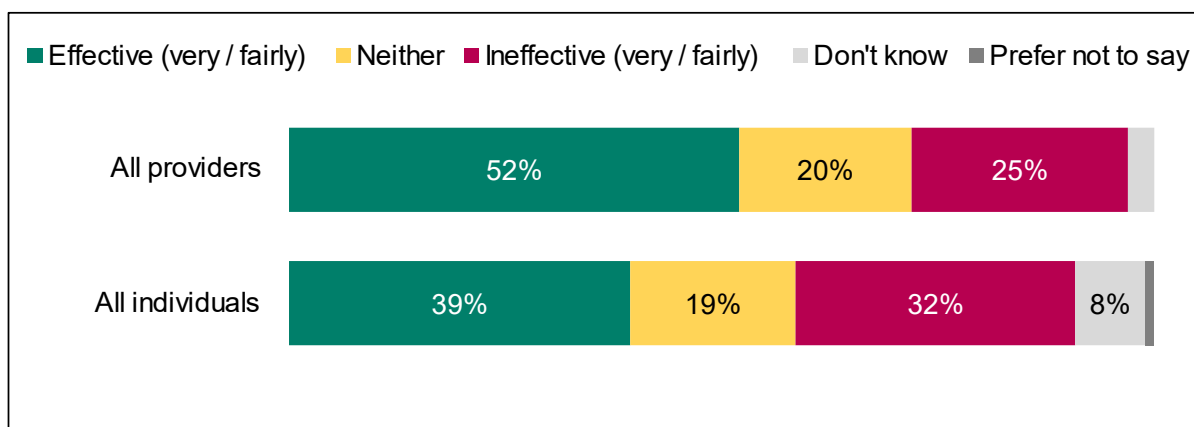
Three-in-five individuals (61%) felt Ofsted held their sector and providers accountable for keeping children and learners safe. More staff from social care providers rated Ofsted as effective (71%) compared to those working in schools (57%). Although there was not complete agreement around effectiveness, leaders and staff in the focus groups agreed that in the event of a safeguarding concern, Ofsted was the appropriate authority to review and assess safeguarding arrangements. This was likely due to the fact that, despite criticisms towards Ofsted, the majority of providers believed it is effective at holding settings and organisations accountable for the arrangements they have in place to keep children, young people and learners safe (76%).

### Improving quality of provision

Perceived trust in Ofsted correlates to views on whether Ofsted helps provider staff improve the quality of provision (see the Culture chapter). Overall, half of providers surveyed (52%) said Ofsted effectively helped their staff improve the quality of provision; a quarter (25%) said Ofsted were ineffective. Only a third (33%) of schools said Ofsted was effective.

Figure 7.2 shows individuals were less positive than providers. Two in five individuals (39%) said Ofsted effectively helped staff improve the quality of provision and a third (32%) said Ofsted were ineffective. Only a quarter (24%) of individuals working in schools rated Ofsted as effective in the measure and 49% said it was ineffective.

**Figure 7.2 Rating of Ofsted’s approach towards helping staff at settings improve the quality of the provision (provider and individual)**



Big Listen Provider Survey. I1\_3. Effectiveness of Ofsted's approach: helping staff at your setting improve the quality of provision. All providers (3,496). Big Listen Individual Survey. F1\_3. Effectiveness of Ofsted's approach: helping staff at your setting improve the quality of provision. All individuals (3,831). Only figures over 5% are shown on this figure.

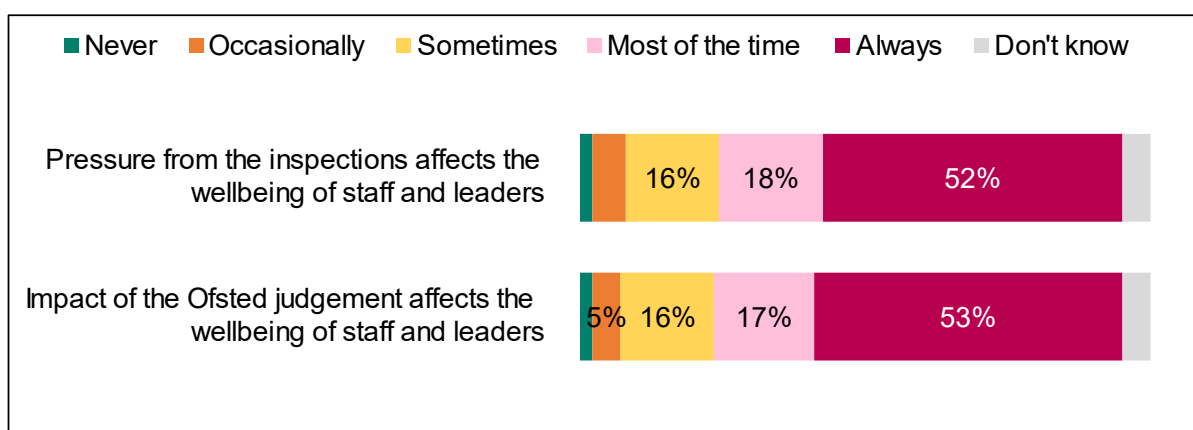
<sup>24</sup> This question was asked of providers in all remits except for FE and Skills.

The statistical relationship between trust and effectively helping staff improve provision may offer a route towards engaging remits, especially schools. Providers and individuals said they would welcome a collaborative approach when working with Ofsted, and guidance on how to improve provision. While providers felt they were in the best position to assess what and how to make improvements in their own settings, and they definitely want to retain agency to do this, they also wanted examples of good-practice and guidance on effective practice to improve the impact of their provision. These ideas are discussed in more detail discussed earlier in the Inspection coverage section.

### Impact on leader and staff wellbeing

Our findings suggest that inspections and the impact of inspection judgements affected staff wellbeing. Half of the individuals surveyed (52%) said the pressure from Ofsted inspections always affected the wellbeing of leaders and staff, and that Ofsted judgements always affected wellbeing (53%, Figure 7.3). Individuals working in schools (73%) and Teacher Development (67%) were more likely to say inspections ‘always’ affected leaders and staff wellbeing compared to those employed by social care providers (19%). The same pattern of findings was found in terms of the impact of the judgement on wellbeing. These are large differences in views and underline important differences between Ofsted’s remits and the significant impact of Ofsted’s inspections and judgements on people working in schools specifically.

**Figure 7.3 How often Ofsted inspections and judgements impact staff and leader wellbeing (individual)**



Big Listen Individual Survey. F2\_3, F2\_4. How often does....All individuals (3,831). Only figures over 5% are shown on this figure. Prefer not to say 1% in each instance.

Leaders and staff were aware of their responsibilities associated with an Ofsted inspection, and were concerned that one mistake could downgrade a providers’ judgement. They felt responsible for everyone else (i.e. their colleagues and provision) and this was a large part of what caused the worry, alongside the increased workload.

*“I think it was just a sort of collective and individual stress that it puts on everybody because, you know collectively as a school the judgement could make a massive difference to your intake, and individually it felt stressful because you didn’t want to be the one person that did something in a 10 minute bit of a lesson observation that had a negative impact on their overall judgement.”*

**Leader, LA Maintained Primary School (Schools)**

Prior to an inspection, leaders and staff said they felt stressed when waiting or preparing for an inspection which, in a few cases, could go on for months and years. Some, predominantly from schools, mentioned that knowing they were 'due' an Ofsted inspection resulted in excessive levels of preparation which increased workloads, and some mentioned they were relieved when the inspection was announced. That said, some did agree that certain remits (such as social care) needed unannounced visits.

*"You go from week to week to week going 'is it the call, is it the call, is it the call, is it the call?' And it's just not sustainable for people's lives. It's not."*

### **Leader, FE and Skills**

There was a general feeling of unease during inspections. Leaders and staff noted that even if an inspector was pleasant and professional, the negative emotions associated with inspections persisted. Some attributed this feeling to previous bad experiences, anecdotal evidence from friends and colleagues, or the perceived negative consequences of a poor Ofsted inspection. Leaders and staff often used the term "high stakes" in relation to inspections, and the pressure to perform well caused concerns, worries and stress for leaders and staff. Pressure was not limited to letting down their colleagues or their provider, but also in terms of the wider community, in respect of reputation and house prices (boosted by 'Outstanding' schools).

*"A parent said, 'I hope you're not going to let our house prices go down'. So again, you'd better keep the Outstanding judgement."*

### **Staff, LA Maintained Primary School (Schools)**

Some respondents reported positive interactions with inspectors and talked about feeling supported or confident throughout their inspection. As outlined in the Inspection Practice Chapter, around 7 in 10 (73%) providers and 6 in 10 (56%) individuals felt that inspectors conducted their inspections with courtesy and respect (i.e. they rated it as very or fairly good), though this fell in schools for both providers and individuals (66% and 45% respectively). Around 6 in 10 (61%) providers reported that inspectors were good at building positive relationships with leaders and staff during inspections.

In instances where inspectors fostered a positive relationship and experience, leaders and staff reported more collaborative and an inspection that was focused on the improvements to be made. One person in a focus group highlighted how this more collaborative approach allowed for a genuine representation of their setting as it reduced the stress associated with an inspection.

*"Our experience was one that was very positive. We did work collaboratively with them. They were open to challenge. They were quite pragmatic about the logistics side of things as we were dealing with things on the fly, trying to organise things and relaying that information. Yeah, it was very positive, I think that allowed us to be far more settled in our approach to it, our delivery partners and everyone else's stress surrounding that. I think it was really refreshing as well, ...the question going into it was around ensuring that everyone's mental health and their capacity to be involved in conversations was respected, and it felt genuine."*

### **Staff, NPQ/ECF (Teacher Development)**

During inspections, some leaders and staff were reassured or confident as the preparation stage was finished and the process was now happening, however these individuals were in the minority. Many in the qualitative research said the demeanour of the inspector directly impacted on how they felt during the inspection. Feedback from the focus groups indicated that some inspectors can be frosty, or act in a way which puts those in the setting immediately 'on edge'. The manner also led to some feeling

targeted or like they were doing the wrong thing. One staff member discussed that their colleague was really worried about the inspection because English was not her first language and was very worried that she would misinterpret questions.

*"[Inspectors] walk in the door, and you just feel like it's guilty until proven innocent."*

**Staff, Primary Academy (Schools)**

*"I think they've made their minds up whether they've got the paperwork ready or not, and they're all so nitpicky. They always look for something ... different. They're not consistent in what they're looking for."*

**Leader, Childminder (Early Years)**

Leaders and staff wanted more recognition for their areas of strength and constructive criticism on how to improve (not just markers to say that things are wrong). When the idea of making the inspection more about constructive feedback came up in focus group discussions, leaders and staff were much more enthusiastic. They thought that inspection practice that focussed on recognising good practice, and on improving any areas of weakness would help providers improve and make a positive impact on wellbeing following the inspection. It was felt that this approach would fit in more with how they teach / look after their children and was a more effective way to be focused on how to improve settings and organisations.

Leaders and staff reported that negative impacts can continue after the inspection had finished. There was lengthy discussion in focus groups of the impact of single-word judgements (covered in the Reporting chapter), with some noting that it felt stigmatising or that they were personally failing. Staff and leader wellbeing was often linked to the outcome of their inspection, however, even those rated Outstanding reported lasting effects of stress of a poor previous grade.

*"It is like a badge you wear, I'm afraid, it's got that stigma. When I was 'Inadequate', it was horrendous and it doesn't go away, you know, that 'Inadequate'. And yes, it was amazing when we had 'Outstanding', but it is like a badge that you get associated."*

**Leader, Independent Fostering Agency (Social Care)**

## Impact on children and learners

Just over a half of providers (55%) said inspectors were good at showing empathy to staff, children or learners – this fell to less than half (48%) of schools – and overall, a quarter of providers (23%) felt inspectors were poor at showing this empathy<sup>25</sup>. Again, individuals were less positive about the situation. Focus group discussion included accounts of inspectors engaging poorly with children, and making children and learners “stressed and nervous”. These inspectors’ were described as less able to show warmth, make eye contact or ‘be human’ with the children, young people and learners. Examples were offered across all remits.

Providers reported cases where children and learners felt unsettled or uneasy with new adults. Many leaders and staff, particularly those working in schools, social care and early years, noted that the way inspectors dressed and acted was very formal, and not typical for providers. At times this was

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<sup>25</sup> Please note, social care, Area SEND and local authorities leaders and staff were only asked about how empathetic Ofsted was towards staff.



confusing, distracting and distressing for the children and learners, especially if the inspector has limited interaction with them.

*“Imagine [you’re in your] own home and you just have somebody you don’t know knocking around in your kitchen and watching you and you’re trying to sit in the living room. It’s a big thing, and I think [what’s] understated is the impact it has on children.”*

**Leader, Children’s Home (Social Care)**

*“I’ve had to say to the inspectors, you obviously want to go in this room to see what’s happening, but please be prepared for the children to leave the room because you’re [...] in a suit, people of authority. Basically, they’re just terrified because [people looking like that] walk into their house and take them away, right? That’s their mindset. It undoubtedly has a negative impact on the children during the inspection.”*

**Leader, LA-maintained Secondary School (Schools)**

As noted in the Inspection Practice chapter, some providers felt that inspectors did not always have the knowledge and expertise to understand the needs of children, young people and learners with SEND (52% rated Ofsted as good for this area, 15% rated Ofsted as poor). In the qualitative research, leaders and staff mentioned this could lead to inspections feeling unnecessarily unsettling for these children and learners. Further to this, social care providers reported that the short or no notice period of inspections meant that they did not have adequate time to prepare their children with SEND for the inspection, with new processes and new faces, to ensure they were comfortable.

Providers also discussed Ofsted’s impact on some children and learners’ access to education and care, those who face unnecessary exclusions or removals from education, or children denied entry from social care provision. There were also reported instances where children or learners were excluded or not accepted to the setting due to fears that their behaviour and / or grades could negatively impact an Ofsted inspection result. Around a tenth report of providers that this is happening to a large extent (7%)<sup>26</sup>, whilst two-fifths reported it happened at least occasionally (44%)<sup>27</sup>. There was a perception that some children and learners’ behaviour could negatively impact a provision’s Ofsted grade, therefore they are either excluded on the day of inspection, or not accepted into a setting (in social care) as a precautionary measure.

*“I’ve worked with young people where all of a sudden, they’ve been out for the entire day, both days that Ofsted have been in, because [staff] don’t want to deal with their behaviours while Ofsted are there. [That] tells you everything you need to know, unfortunately.”*

**Staff, Children’s Home (Social Care)**

## Impact on workloads

Ofsted inspections increased workloads for most providers. More than nine-in-ten providers (93%) and over eight-in-ten (85%) individuals said they at least occasionally faced undue pressure on workloads from inspections. Two-thirds (68%) of individuals said inspections always added undue pressure to workloads or did so most of the time. More individuals working in schools (84%) felt this

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<sup>26</sup> 7% reported children or learners were ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’ excluded or not accepted into settings as a consequence of the inspection process.

way compared to the average, and to those working in social care (36%). These patterns were repeated in the provider evidence.

Leaders and staff in the qualitative research discussed the high level of preparatory work required before an Ofsted inspection. School leaders often wanted documentation easily accessible during the inspection in case it was requested by inspectors. In FE and Skills, the high workload related to site visit organisation and preparation was consistently noted. Leaders reacted to the focus of a forthcoming inspection (based on the notification call) and considered all tangential evidence that may relate to the focus. The negative consequences of a poor inspection rating was one driver for ensuring enough data was accessible for inspectors. Further, the perceived implications of poor Ofsted overall effectiveness judgements also compelled some staff to prepare for an inspection outside of the expected inspection cycle, such as setting up 'Mock-Ofsted's'. Removing staff from their usual work to prepare for an inspection was also reported by FE and Skills providers who described the problems created by the number of interviews they had to organise.

One leader at a Local Authority described the financial impact of preparation time for Ofsted inspections, saying preparation for one inspection took over 180 hours of senior officers' time. In addition, a meeting with the necessary senior leadership cost the local authority over £1,000 in staff costs. There was work coordinating with schools, parents and partners, hosting meetings and booking spaces for feedback sessions. In addition to this, the amount of co-ordination needed resulted in the local authority having to remove staff from frontline work.

More broadly these additional processes placed a longer-term workload pressure on staff, with Ofsted seemingly always top of mind for some.

*"As much as I try to help my staff manage their workload, when we know that there's an inspection due, workload triples. And as much as I say to people 'no, I don't want you doing that' the team don't want to let the school down, so therefore [they] start doing more and more and more, because they want their subject to be perfect, and they want everything to be OK."*

**Leader, Voluntary Aided Primary School (Schools)**

*"I think even if you felt like you were prepared, going home at 5pm when you know you've got Ofsted feels like completely the wrong thing to do, and it shouldn't. If you are ready, you should be able to do that. So we had staff who were supposed to go home at 3pm and were still there at 7pm."*

Leader, PVI Nursery (Early Years)The impetus to 'put on a show' for Ofsted was a common impact of inspections reported in many focus groups, particularly for schools. The day-to-day work undertaken on inspection days is not "business as usual", but instead an attempt by providers to present a version of their provision that they think inspectors want to see. This increased workloads more than would be otherwise the case. For example, teachers create highly detailed lesson plans for review, which is not a part of their usual workload, or leaders and staff across sectors compiled more evidence than usually needed.

*"We could be inspected anytime between now and the next 12 months. We have already spent a disproportionate amount of hours on things like dialogue sheets, getting ready for the narrative that we are going to say to the inspectors, collecting evidence and data that has not been factored into our lecturer workload. I have probably done an additional 8 hours in the last four weeks on Ofsted alone. That's over and above my normal workload, and I'm expecting that to continue and accelerate until we're Ofsted-ed."*

**Leader, NPQ/ECF/ITE provider (Teacher Development)**

Once inspections were underway, some staff felt that the workload impact shifted more to leaders in the provision. Leaders had to spend time escorting the inspectors around the setting whilst staff had to continue teaching. Some leaders mentioned that for the period of the inspection, the inspection activity was “all consuming”, and there is a lot to catch-up on when Ofsted leaves.

### Impact on recruitment and retention

Some providers thought Ofsted inspections and judgements had exacerbated the already challenging recruitment and retention, at both senior and junior levels within the sector. The core issue was the impact of inspection processes and judgements on staff wellbeing. High workloads, coupled with the potential of receiving a poor inspection grade, impacted staff morale. Some leaders and staff in focus groups admitted that inspections, and the subsequent judgements, had made them rethink their roles in their provision, and more broadly in the sector. From the research, inspections can appear to have the unintended impact of driving people away from a career that they love, due to feelings of inadequacy.

*“You love everything about (teaching), you love the kids, your community, your families, and then you’ve got this thing on the other side, the dark side which is Ofsted, which is the thing that makes you think, actually, I’d give all that up because I don’t want to have to put up with that for the next two years.”*

**Leader, Primary Academy (Schools)**

Leaders and staff were keen to point out that in some cases, junior staff and apprentices struggled with the Ofsted process. This was particularly highlighted in early years, schools and social care providers. Staff reported that the negative impact on wellbeing experienced by junior members of staff for their first inspection can put them off continuing in the profession, as they are concerned about having to be part of a future inspection. These sectors are facing industry-wide recruitment and retention problems, alongside pressure to provide for all the children and learners who need care. The negative impacts of Ofsted inspections were seen as adding to other issues in the sector.

*“It’s such a hard industry to be in, so why are you making it harder? Surely it would be in the Government’s interest and Ofsted’s interest to retain people in the industry. I’ve just been so traumatised by it I don’t want to do it anymore.”*

**Staff, PVI Nursery (Early Years)**

In focus groups, respondents reported on the shortening tenure of many senior leadership positions, with respondents feeling that people only wanted to go through one or two Ofsted inspections. Leaders in focus groups highlighted the high turnover of people in senior positions, such as headteachers, partly due to the stress they feel as a result of Ofsted inspections, even despite positive inspection results.

*“I genuinely feel like I have PTSD from our last Ofsted inspection, and the Ofsted inspection went fine, we got good with outstanding features, but it was just the most horrific experience, and not one that I want to relive, so I won’t, because I’m stepping down from leadership.”*

**Leader, Independent Secondary Special (School)**

## 8 Conclusions

This draws conclusions from the evidence based on Ofsted's three main research objectives.

### Views on the perceived strengths and weaknesses to Ofsted's current approach

Social care providers consistently rated elements of Ofsted's inspection, reporting and impact higher than other remits. Schools were more critical, especially primary schools. This suggests Ofsted's processes are better suited to social care settings, and more emphasis on change is needed in educational settings.

The current length and frequency of inspections, and the breadth and depth of coverage worked well for most providers. The evidence shows inspectors usually conducted themselves professionally and reports were clear (albeit lacking in detail) and easy to read. However, individuals were less positive about inspectors, and focus group participants made strong connections between negative views of inspections and an inspector's manner, knowledge and experience. The trust expressed in Ofsted also related statistically to whether providers and individuals thought inspectors acted empathetically. The evidence suggests the approach of inspectors influences perceptions of Ofsted. By extension, views of Ofsted may alter if inspectors take a different approach to their duties.

Ofsted inspection reports and particularly the single-word judgements (both for overall effectiveness, and for specific aspects of provision) had a wide-reaching impact that varied between remits. Schools especially felt reports and overall judgements affected parental choice and staff wellbeing. A few participants noted single-word judgements conveyed a simple, recognisable message but most education providers felt these judgements were too reductive to adequately describe their provision. The evidence suggests providers and individuals preferred more detailed, descriptive judgements because they can better describe the strengths and weakness of their provision.

Providers and staff wanted a collaborative inspection process to help them improve their provision. They described inspection reports as perfunctory with content that did not acknowledge hard work of leaders and staff, nor showcase and explain why practice is good. Inspections were stressful for many leaders and staff, and the impact of an overall 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' judgement (or even the prospect of such a judgement) was deemed detrimental to staff wellbeing. Some felt that a culture of 'constant fear' had been created, where the anxiety of the next Ofsted inspection started as soon as they knew one was due. Some providers felt inspectors were not knowledgeable about their specific type of provision and questioned such inspectors' ability to accurately consider and reflect on the quality of provision. Equally, some praised the conversations they had with inspectors because they offered the guidance and advice they sought. Many participants wanted this advice to appear in reports as it could guide their improvement plans. The current structure of inspection reports lacked utility and value for many.

Inspections and resulting reports were criticised for ignoring context. The EIF covers a range of educational provision and many educational providers felt the framework was too broad to account for nuance between providers. They felt the framework (and hence inspections) did not account for wider socio-demographic factors or attributes of learners present in the setting. Some FE and skills providers felt they were not judged on the most relevant factors for their children and learners, in particular when the learners were adults. Factors like demographics and cohort attributes affect how settings plan for and manage behaviour and attendance. The idea of a framework was welcome for some because it could potentially deliver a consistent process, but the current coverage (all educational remits) resulted in a framework which was seen as too high level. Many providers felt

inspections and inspection reports did not account for their specific circumstances and hence could not reflect the experiences of learners or children in their settings.

### Views on the changes made to Ofsted's approach in the last year

There were early indications that recent changes to Ofsted's approach improved staff wellbeing. Participants noticed a stronger emphasis during inspections on staff mental health through more frequent check-ins. Survey findings show those inspected recently were more likely to feel that inspectors were empathetic. However, the research also found that many leaders and staff were unaware of all recent changes, particularly changes to the complaints procedure and the option to 'pause' inspection. Once informed of these changes as part of focus group discussions, they were generally positive towards them. There is scope for future communication to providers on these new measures, which may positively benefit perception of Ofsted's culture. Any cultural changes would take a while to embed, and there may not have been time yet for changes within the last year to appear in the research evidence, or for all providers to become aware of new processes.

### What more can be done to protect children and learners, and to improve standards

There were no concerns raised over Ofsted's coverage of safeguarding in inspections, which was perceived as sufficiently comprehensive. The evidence found the inspection process itself carried some risk of being unsettling for children and learners, particularly vulnerable learners or those with SEND. Leaders and staff felt the training for some inspectors could improve and focus on how to interact with young children, particularly those with additional needs. Such participants felt training would help inspectors avoid distressing learners and collect better data on children's experiences.

Many felt Ofsted could do more thorough inspection reports to support providers to improve standards. Reports needed more detail on a provider's strengths and explain why their practice is good. The prevailing view was providing more detail in judgements (rather than using a single-word) helped parents and other stakeholders make more informed, nuanced decisions about provision.

More widely, participants were concerned that Ofsted inspection processes contributed to existing staff recruitment and retention issues in the education and social care sectors. These participants felt perceptions of Ofsted exacerbated recruitment and retention issues. Consequently, their workforce of well-trained and experienced staff was smaller which could (in their view) negatively impact children and learners. A collaborative approach to inspection centred on improving practice was felt the best way to protect children and learners, to support recruitment and retention, and to improve standards.

## 9 Technical Annex

### Quantitative sampling

The sampling process for the provider and individual surveys required two distinct approaches. This was because sample was available for providers, whereas there was no individual sample available.

#### Provider survey

The sample for the provider survey was provided by Ofsted. Across all seven remits we received a starting sample of 64,837 providers. A census approach was taken for the provider survey, meaning all providers for whom we had a valid email address were invited to take part. Any duplicated Unique Reference Numbers (URNs) were also removed. Table 9.1 shows the starting sample, broken down by provider type, once exclusions were applied.

Around 45,000 early years providers were also not included in the original sample provided by Ofsted (and thus are not shown in Table 9.1 below). These providers were excluded because they either withheld their consent for Ofsted to use their contact details, were an 'EY Registration' provider which meant they were responsible bodies/persons for settings but not providing for children themselves, or because they had special considerations (e.g. military bases, refuges).

**Table 9.1 Provider sample received, exclusions and starting sample, by remit**

Provider type	Starting sample (after exclusions applied)
Schools	20,701
Early years	13,834
Social care providers	4,308
Area SEND provision	180
Local authority children's services	153
FE and Skills	1,828
Teacher development	251
<b>Total</b>	<b>41,255</b>

#### Individual survey

As there was no individual-level sample available it was necessary to contact individuals via their providers.

Included within the invite to providers asking them to complete the provider survey was a link to the individual survey. The invitation asked that providers share the link with their staff so they too had an opportunity to give their views on Ofsted. Subsequent reminder emails took the same approach.

## Quantitative fieldwork

### Mainstage fieldwork overview

The fieldwork for both surveys ran from 18<sup>th</sup> April to 14<sup>th</sup> June 2024. Both surveys were initially conducted online. Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) was conducted from 13<sup>th</sup> May to 14<sup>th</sup> June 2024 to boost the number of survey responses from providers. For those completing online, the provider survey took 17 minutes and 35 seconds on average, while the individual survey took 21 minutes and 5 seconds on average. For those completing the provider survey by telephone (CATI), this took 30 minutes and 15 seconds on average.

### Completed interviews

3,496 respondents completed the provider survey (3,269 online and 237 via the CATI boost), and 3,831 completed the individual survey. The profile of responses achieved across the Ofsted remits is shown in Table 9.2. Table 9.2 also shows the sampling error based on any survey finding of 50%, because this percentage produces the maximum possible variation. If a survey finding is further away from 50%, the sampling error will be less. For example, with a provider survey finding of 50% at a question based on all those in schools, we can be 95% confident that the 'true' value of the survey findings will lie within a +/- 3.0% range (e.g. 47.0% - 53.0%).

**Table 9.2 Number of completed surveys at provider and individual level**

Remit	Provider survey completes	Sampling error for provider survey finding of 50%	Individual survey completes	Sampling error for individual survey finding of 50%
Schools	1,084	+/- 3.0%	1,660	+/- 2.4%
Early years	1,152	+/- 2.9%	376	+/- 5.1%
Social care providers	908	+/-3.3%	866	+/- 3.3%
Area SEND provision	5	+/- 43.8%	51	+/- 13.7%
Local authority children's services	5	+/- 43.8%	88	+/- 10.4%
FE and Skills	284	+/- 5.8%	692	+/- 3.7%
Teacher development	58	+/- 12.9%	98	+/- 9.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,496</b>		<b>3,831</b>	

### Response rate

Attempts were made to call 1,969 providers sampled for the CATI boost provider survey. 1,903 of these providers were eligible to take part in the survey, with 237 interviews completed via telephone, resulting in a 12% response rate.

41,255 providers were invited by email to take part in the online provider survey, with 3,269 responses completed, resulting in an 8% response rate. A breakdown of online fieldwork for the provider survey can be seen in Table 9.3 below.

**Table 9.3 Online responses to provider survey**

Outcome	n	% of total
Total starting sample	41,255	100%
Completed survey	3,269	8%

15,954 individuals were invited by email to take part in the individual survey, with 3,831 responses completed, resulting in a 24% response rate. A breakdown of online fieldwork for the individual survey can be seen in Table 9.4 below.

**Table 9.4 Online responses to individual survey**

Outcome	n	% of total
Total starting sample	15,954	100%
Completed survey	3,831	24%

## Quantitative analysis

### Interpreting the findings

In terms of the findings from the quantitative surveys that are included in the accompanying research report:

- Differences between sub-groups are only commented on in the text if they are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (i.e., statistically we can be 95% confident that the differences between the sub-groups are 'real' differences and not a result of the fact that the findings are based on a sample of providers/individuals rather than a census of all providers/individuals inspected by Ofsted).
- Questions were routed to different remits, therefore not all remits were asked all questions (e.g. where a question was not relevant or of interest). The full granular response to each question is in the published tables.
- Percentages may not total to exactly 100% due to rounding to the nearest whole number.
- Provider-level findings for Area SEND provision and local authority children's services are not reported on separately due to the low number of provider responses, although their responses do contribute to the 'total' provider response. Both groups are included in qualitative reporting, and survey responses are reported at an individual-level.
- For ease of interpretation, findings from the quantitative survey are often summarised as positive or negative responses from a five-point scale. For example, where respondents were asked to rate an area of inspection as 'very good', 'fairly good', 'neither good nor poor', 'fairly poor' or 'very poor', results are reported in the aggregate as percentage



responding 'good' (either very or fairly good) and percentage responding poor (either fairly or very poor).

- Caution should be taken when interpreting results in the data tables by date of last inspection. Analysis has been carried out at two key timepoints, before versus after September 2019 (the introduction of the Education Inspection Framework or EIF) and before versus after September 2023 (the latest changes to the EIF). When viewing the data tables, results from September 2023 onwards appear more positive on a number of measures. However, it should be noted that the profile of individuals and providers inspected after September 2023 is skewed towards social care providers who have consistently responded more positively than other groups across timepoints. For this reason, findings by date of last inspection are only highlighted in this report if a remit specific pattern was seen.

## Weighting

While it would be hoped that an attempted census would give an achieved sample profile that was close to the population profile, checks were conducted against a range of characteristics to confirm whether any corrections were needed. Sample vs. population profiles were compared for the following: organisation type, overall effectiveness (OE) grade, region, date of last inspection, and size and provider type within various remits.

The original sample data provided by Ofsted was used for the population for all organisation types except early years. For the early years settings population, we also included organisations excluded from the original sample because they had asked for their contact details not to be shared or because they were settings with special considerations (e.g. military bases). We did, however, exclude 'EY Registration' settings from the population, as they were not considered to be providers themselves.<sup>28</sup>

This comparison showed that it would be necessary to apply weights by organisation type and date of last inspection. Table 9.5 below shows the profiles before and after weighting was applied. The provider type weight primarily corrected for Early Years settings being underrepresented and social care providers being overrepresented. The data of last inspection weight mainly corrected for those who had last been inspected from September 2023 onwards being overrepresented and those who had last been inspected before September 2019 being underrepresented.

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<sup>28</sup> Early years Registration providers are responsible bodies/persons for settings but not providing care for children themselves.

Table 9.5 Unweighted and weighted profiles – provider type and date of last inspection

	Unweighted base	Unweighted profile	Effective base	Weighted profile / Population profile
<b>Provider type</b>				
Schools	1,084	31.0%	964	27.6%
Early years	1,152	33.0%	2,140	61.2%
Social care providers	908	26.0%	248	7.1%
Area SEND provision	5	0.1%	5	0.1%
Local authority children's services	5	0.1%	5	0.1%
FE and Skills	284	8.1%	117	3.3%
Teacher development	58	1.7%	17	0.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,496</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3,496</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Date of last inspection</b>				
September '23 onwards	692	19.8%	386	11.0%
September '19 – August '23	1,691	48.8%	1,672	47.8%
Pre-Sept '19	769	22.2%	1,095	3.1%
Unknown	344	9.8%	343	9.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,496</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3,496</b>	<b>100%</b>

It was not possible to weight the individual survey as there was no sample or population data available to weight to.

### Multiple regression analyses

Views on Ofsted's culture was an important aspect of the findings. The provider and individual surveys both included a question on trust:

- Ofsted's ambition is to be an inspectorate and regulator that is trusted by parents, children, learners and the sectors they work with. Overall, to what extent do you agree or disagree that Ofsted currently achieves this ambition of being trusted?

The analysis used trust as one expression of Ofsted's culture, reasoning that favourability towards Ofsted would likely relate to whether a provider or individual trusted the organisation.

Agreement as to whether Ofsted currently achieves its ambition of being trusted varied between providers and individuals, especially by remit. Simple multiple regression analysis was undertaken to explore which other survey variables influenced perceptions of trust.

The regression concerned all respondents so questions that were only posed to a specific audience (e.g., schools) were excluded from the models. Regressions were conducted using SPSS.

### Qualitative research phase

The qualitative research strand comprised 49 online focus groups (lasting approximately 90 minutes) and 3 depth interviews, with a profile of those taking part shown in Table 9.6. The focus groups and interviews were carried out between 30<sup>th</sup> April and 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2024, with 45 groups taking place before the pre-election period for the 2024 UK General Election<sup>29</sup> and 7 groups taking place after the election. Each focus group was intended to split into two halves: a discussion centred around key themes relevant to the experience of interacting with Ofsted; and a deliberative task which aimed to delve more deeply into a particular area or theme.

**Table 9.6 Number of completed focus groups by remit/level**

Remit	Leader groups	Staff groups	Total
Schools	6	5	11
MAT leaders	2	-	2
Early years	6	6	12
Social care providers	4	4	8
Area SEND provision	1	1	2
Local authority children's services	-	2	2
FE and Skills	5	4	9
Teacher development (staff and leaders)	2	-	2
Employer provider	1	-	1
Governors (schools)	3	-	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>52</b>

### Sampling and recruitment

Participants for these groups were mostly recruited from those who completed either the providers or individual survey, although there was some additional free-finding of participants for harder to reach groups.

<sup>29</sup> Research related to government policy that might affect voting intention is paused prior to general elections.

During recruitment, efforts were made to ensure that a good mix of staff and leaders from different remits and levels took part in the focus groups. Participants were recruited through a mix of email and telephone invitations.

Where possible, focus groups consisted of 6 participants from the same remit and level. Where this was not possible, smaller groups, or groups consisting of some staff and some leaders, were arranged instead. Groups always contained individuals from the same remit.

### **Incentives**

To thank participants for their time, each focus group participant was compensated with £50.

### **Topic guides and focus group format**

- Topic guide questions differed slightly depending on the audience of the focus groups, though the guides focused on four key themes: the inspection process; aspects of timing; reporting processes; and Ofsted's approach and staff wellbeing. Given the time available for discussions on these themes (approximately 30 minutes), discussions tended to be limited to two or three of the four key themes. The inspection process – what an inspection covers and whether it does so in enough detail; the relevance of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF); the effectiveness of assessing pupil behaviour; and the impacts of the inspection process on workloads and the wellbeing of staff, children, learners and trainees.
- Aspects of timing: views on the notice period given for inspection; factors that should determine the frequency and length of an inspection; and the consequences of reporting timings.
- Reporting processes: how Ofsted reports and what reports should focus on; views on single word judgements; the accuracy of Ofsted's reporting; how settings use reports to inform improvements.
- Ofsted's approach and staff wellbeing: how inspectors should act and support staff during an inspection; the impact of Ofsted on participants' wellbeing; how senior leaders could become inspectors themselves or inform inspector training; and how collaborative Ofsted inspections feel.

The three depth interviews undertaken focused on areas outlined above, and did not involve a deliberative task.

### **Deliberative tasks**

The second half of focus groups focused on a single deliberative task. These deliberative tasks focused on a key element of providers' interactions with Ofsted. Six tasks in total were used in focus groups, with some being specific to individual types of providers. These deliberative tasks focused on: length of inspections; teacher development improvements; ILACS proportionality, single word judgements; reporting; skills judgements; complaints and concerns; safeguarding; and EIF impact.

### **Analysis framework**

Each interview was summarised in a Microsoft Excel analysis framework. The analysis framework was structured around the topic guide content, with each row corresponding to a participant. All

framework entries were reviewed by a senior member of the research team to ensure an appropriate level of detail and quality of the summaries, as well as to maintain anonymity of participants.

### Mixed methods reporting

The final research report combines findings from the quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups across all remits included in this research. Quantitative survey findings give us a broad understanding of provider and individual views on how Ofsted operates, how it helps settings improve, and its strengths and weaknesses. Focus group findings then allow us to delve into the detail, understanding the nuances that underpin the broad quantitative results.

For example, quantitative survey findings allow us to understand broadly how often Ofsted judgements impact upon staff wellbeing. The focus groups then allow us to understand in detail what the physical and mental impacts upon staff wellbeing are and how staff felt before, during and after their most recent inspection.

### Strengths and limitations of this research

Strengths of this research include:

- Adopting a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups as outlined above;
- Quantitative survey data with robust base sizes allows for results to be reported as being representative of the population of each Ofsted remit;
- Adopting focus groups and deliberative tasks for the vast majority of our qualitative methodology allowed us to gather a wider range of views than would have been possible in individual interviews and allows ideas to develop as participants 'bounce off' each other;
- High levels of engagement from providers and individuals, notably during the qualitative phase; and
- A broad range of respondents from across Ofsted remits participating in both the quantitative and qualitative elements, from schools and colleges to social care providers.

Limitations of this research include:

- Quantitative survey findings are subject to sampling error, as outlined in Table 9.2;
- Focus groups and deliberative tasks can be difficult to control, some participants may not contribute to the same extent as others, and the views expressed in small group settings may not be representative of the wider population;
- Lower levels of survey engagement among some remits, namely Area SEND provision and local authority children's services, meaning that survey findings from these remits could not be reported on due to low base sizes; and

- Difficulties in recruiting certain remits to participate in focus groups, leading to some depth interviews or smaller focus groups than initially planned.

## Research ethics

IFF Research produced data protection agreements and privacy notices for surveys and focus groups. All participants in this research were members of staff working for providers that fall under Ofsted inspection remits. The research was designed to ensure minimal disruption to any ongoing inspections, with it being made clear that these surveys and focus groups were not related to, or would affect, inspections in any way. Participation in this research was voluntary, with this being made clear to respondents to ensure they could provide informed consent to participation in this research.

Survey and focus group data was held securely and not published, shared, or otherwise disclosed in a way which could make it possible to identify any individual or organisation participating in the research. Respondents had the right to ask for a copy of their data, change their data or withdraw from the research any time up until the point of anonymisation. All personal data will be deleted 6 months after the project end date.

## Safeguarding

The survey preamble reminded participants to exclude safeguarding concerns in the open (other specify) text boxes, and if they had any, to follow the due process of contacting Ofsted.

For the focus groups, moderators were briefed on how to look after their own wellbeing, and that of the participants.

Focus group moderators encouraged participants to not speak about or identify particular children or vulnerable adults as a part of the conversation during the group introduction. Where participants had a safeguarding concern, they were be advised to follow the safeguarding protocols of their own organisation. If a moderator heard information as part of the group that raised immediate safety concerns of an adult or a child, the moderator informed the respondent that they (the moderator) would need to do something about this information. In the event, no safeguarding concerns were raised during surveys or focus groups.

All moderators were briefed on how to respond to a participant who was upset or angry or a participant who was offensive or aggressive (in particular that they can and should terminate a focus group in this latter case). In the event, no such instances occurred.

“ : Research illuminates the world for organisations businesses and individuals helping them to make better-informed decisions.”

Our Values:

### 1. Being human first:

Whether employer or employee, client or collaborator, we are all humans first and foremost. Recognising this essential humanity is central to how we conduct our business, and how we lead our lives. We respect and accommodate each individual's way of thinking, working and communicating, mindful of the fact that each has their own story and means of telling it.

### 2. Impartiality and independence:

IFF is a research-led organisation which believes in letting the evidence do the talking. We don't undertake projects with a preconception of what “the answer” is, and we don't hide from the truths that research reveals. We are independent, in the research we conduct, of political flavour or dogma. We are open-minded, imaginative and intellectually rigorous.

### 3. Making a difference:

At IFF, we want to make a difference to the clients we work with, and we work with clients who share our ambition for positive change. We expect all IFF staff to take personal responsibility for everything they do at work, which should always be the best they can deliver.



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