

Inspecting the curriculum

Revising inspection methodology to support the education inspection framework

Note: This guidance has been withdrawn because it's out of date. Read our operating guides and inspection toolkits for:

- [maintained schools and academies](#)
- [further education and skills](#)
- [non-association independent schools](#)
- [registered early years settings](#)



Inspection methodology for the 'quality of education' judgement

1. In January 2019, we consulted on proposals for a new inspection framework for education providers. In May 2019, we confirmed our plans for inspection, to begin in September 2019. The most significant change from current arrangements is the introduction of a 'quality of education' judgement. This combines aspects of the previous key judgements of 'teaching, learning and assessment' and 'outcomes' to provide a more holistic view of standards, particularly focusing on the curriculum. We will continue to report on all aspects of a school, as set out in section 5 of the Education Act 2005, but will do so within the new judgement headings.
2. The feedback we received on this proposal during the consultation was very positive. When respondents had concerns, these centred around implementation, with questions about how evidence would be gathered and assessed to inform the judgement, and about the reliability of discrete inspection methods such as lesson observation and work scrutiny. This document explains how inspectors will assess the quality of education while recognising that each inspection is rightly different and can take differing courses. The document also focuses primarily on inspecting schools. The main principles are applicable across different education remits, but methods will need to be adapted to be appropriate for different settings. We are therefore continuing to gather insight on the best approaches in all settings through piloting and inspection.

An evolution of current practice

3. The outgoing common inspection framework (CIF, in use until September 2019) asks inspectors to form a view of different aspects of a school's work to deliver high-quality education for children and then to put these together towards the end of an inspection to reach a judgement of 'overall effectiveness'. In order to do this, inspectors take a wide sample of activities across the school (principally teaching, assessment and pupils' work) to reach the 'teaching, learning and assessment' judgement. They discuss pupils' progress and attainment with leaders to form a view of pupils' outcomes and the means by which they achieve these outcomes. Finally, inspectors draw this evidence together with the other evidence they have gathered to reach an 'overall effectiveness' judgement. The final stage of this aggregation takes place at the final team meeting (which is normally observed by school leaders). Throughout the inspection, inspectors will have been sharing and triangulating their evidence and keeping leaders informed of their emerging findings. This evidence-gathering model is appropriately designed to support conclusions under the CIF.

4. Ofsted's understanding of educational effectiveness¹ has evolved from the CIF, and has informed the development of the new education inspection framework (EIF). Therefore, we require a similar evolution in the way that evidence is gathered and connected.
5. At the heart of the EIF is the new 'quality of education' judgement, the purpose of which is to put a single conversation about education at the centre of inspection. This conversation draws together curriculum, teaching, assessment and standards. In doing this, we draw heavily on the working definition of the curriculum that Ofsted has used over the last couple of years. This definition uses the concepts of 'intent', 'implementation' and 'impact' to recognise that the curriculum passes through different states: it is conceived, taught and experienced. Leaders and teachers design, structure and sequence a curriculum, which is then implemented through classroom teaching. The end result of a good, well-taught curriculum is that pupils know more and are able to do more. The positive results of pupils' learning can then be seen in the standards they achieve.² The EIF starts from the understanding that all of these steps are connected.
6. The EIF is built around the idea of the connectedness of curriculum, teaching, assessment and standards within the 'quality of education' judgement. It then follows that the inspection methodology for this judgement should be structured so that inspectors are able to gather evidence of how a school's activities to deliver a high-quality education for its pupils link and are coordinated in order to achieve the highest possible standards. The findings and approach set out in this report therefore apply across shorter and fuller types of inspection, for example section 5 and section 8 inspection in schools.³ This is the process that inspectors will normally follow, but they may, on occasion, choose to operate differently because of circumstances they identify at schools.

Developing an inspection method to assess 'quality of education'

7. By the time we start to use the EIF on inspection, we will have completed approximately 200 pilot inspections in schools, the largest such programme we have ever carried out. These pilots are helping us to develop and refine a method for evidence-gathering on inspection that reflects the connectedness of the new 'quality of education' judgement.
8. This method has various elements:

¹ 'Education inspection framework: overview of research', Ofsted, January 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework-overview-of-research

² 'School inspection update: academic year 2018 to 2019', Ofsted, September 2018; www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-update-academic-year-2018-to-2019.

³ As set out later in this note, the methodology will necessarily be different for the very smallest schools and providers. We are continuing to pilot how we will adapt and apply that methodology in those settings.

- **Top-level view:** inspectors and leaders start with a top-level view of the school's curriculum, exploring what is on offer, to whom and when, leaders' understanding of curriculum intent and sequencing, and why these choices were made.
 - **Deep dive:** then, a 'deep dive', which involves gathering evidence on the curriculum intent, implementation and impact over a sample of subjects, topics or aspects. This is done in collaboration with leaders, teachers and pupils. The intent of the deep dive is to seek to interrogate and establish a coherent evidence base on quality of education.
 - **Bringing it together:** inspectors will bring the evidence together to widen coverage and to test whether any issues identified during the deep dives are systemic. This will usually lead to school leaders bringing forward further evidence and inspectors gathering additional evidence.
9. Further evidence-gathering activity will follow in order to test the emerging conclusions from this work. This is likely to include follow-up conversations with leaders, members of staff, those responsible for governance and pupils. It will usually also involve sampling of other areas of education within the school to probe questions that have emerged as a result of the deep-dive work.
 10. It is crucial to note that inspectors will not reach judgements on the basis of any single inspection activity; rather, inspection judgements will be reached once inspectors have connected the different types and pieces of evidence in the manner set out above.
 11. Our piloting to date has been based on the assumption that, as per the public consultation, most routine inspection types will last two days. At present, short inspections last one day. Our piloting so far tells us that this new methodology can be carried out securely within that timescale, and that the two-day period is useful for both inspectors and school leaders because it gives time for reflection and for schools to bring forward additional evidence on the second day if they feel that the view formed on day 1 could be supplemented or challenged if inspectors were aware of other information.⁴ Our piloting has been carried out by the current inspection workforce, and designed on the basis that no additional subject specialism should be required in order to deliver it consistently and reliably.
 12. Pilot inspections have tested the full range of judgements and evidence-gathering techniques inspectors will use when they come to inspect against the EIF. The method set out above focuses primarily on the judgement of 'quality of education' but, in parallel with this, inspectors will also be gathering evidence about 'personal development', 'behaviour and attitudes' and 'leadership and

⁴ We have proposed in our consultation approach to carry out shorter (one-day) inspections for the smallest schools and maintained nursery schools, due to the fundamentally different organisation and operation of those schools. We are carrying out further piloting to apply the methodology appropriately in those contexts.

management' judgements. These activities are integrated within a single inspection. When inspectors are forming their initial 'top level' view, they will also be gathering evidence about leadership and management. Do leaders have a clear and ambitious vision, for example, for providing high-quality, inclusive education to all pupils?⁵ Similarly, when inspectors are gathering evidence first-hand in classrooms, they will be alert to any evidence that helps them understand whether the school has high expectations for pupils' behaviour and conduct, and whether these expectations are applied consistently and fairly. In addition, inspectors will be recording any evidence which helps them to understand whether the curriculum and the school's wider work support pupils to develop character.⁶ They will also carry out activities to gather evidence specifically around each of the inspection judgements.

Forming a view of the curriculum offer: taking a 'top level' view

13. We consulted on a proposal to allow inspectors and school leaders to prepare for the inspection at the school on the afternoon before the inspection starts. Following consultation, we have decided that inspectors will prepare away from the school, as they do now, and arrive at 8am on the first day of inspection.
14. However, the extensive piloting we have carried out shows us that there were aspects of the on-site preparation model that inspectors and school leaders valued greatly, in particular the opportunity for extended discussion about the inspection before it started. Inspectors will therefore hold an introductory conversation by telephone with school leaders before the inspection begins. This should include giving school leaders the opportunity to explain their school's specific context and challenges. Inspection experience, including our pilot inspections for this framework, shows that this helps both leaders and inspectors build stronger professional relationships.
15. Inspectors will use this conversation to understand:
 - the school's context, and the progress the school has made since the previous inspection, including any specific progress made on areas for improvement identified at previous inspections
 - the headteacher's assessment of the school's current strengths and weaknesses, particularly in relation to the curriculum, the way teaching supports pupils to learn the curriculum, the standards that pupils achieve, pupils' behaviour and attitudes, and personal development
 - the extent to which all pupils have access to the school's full curriculum

⁵'Education inspection framework', Ofsted, May 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework

⁶'Education inspection framework', Ofsted, May 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework

- a discussion of specific areas of the school (subjects, year groups, aspects of provision, and so on) that will be a focus of attention during inspection.
16. This telephone conversation will last up to 90 minutes. It will help inspectors and school leaders to establish a rapport before inspection and give them a shared understanding of the starting point of the inspection. It will also help inspectors to form an initial understanding of leaders' view of the school's progress and to shape the inspection plan. Our experience from piloting the new framework shows that this is the part of preparation that school leaders and inspectors often find to be the most helpful and constructive.
 17. Inspectors will then build on the insight from this conversation during the inspection.

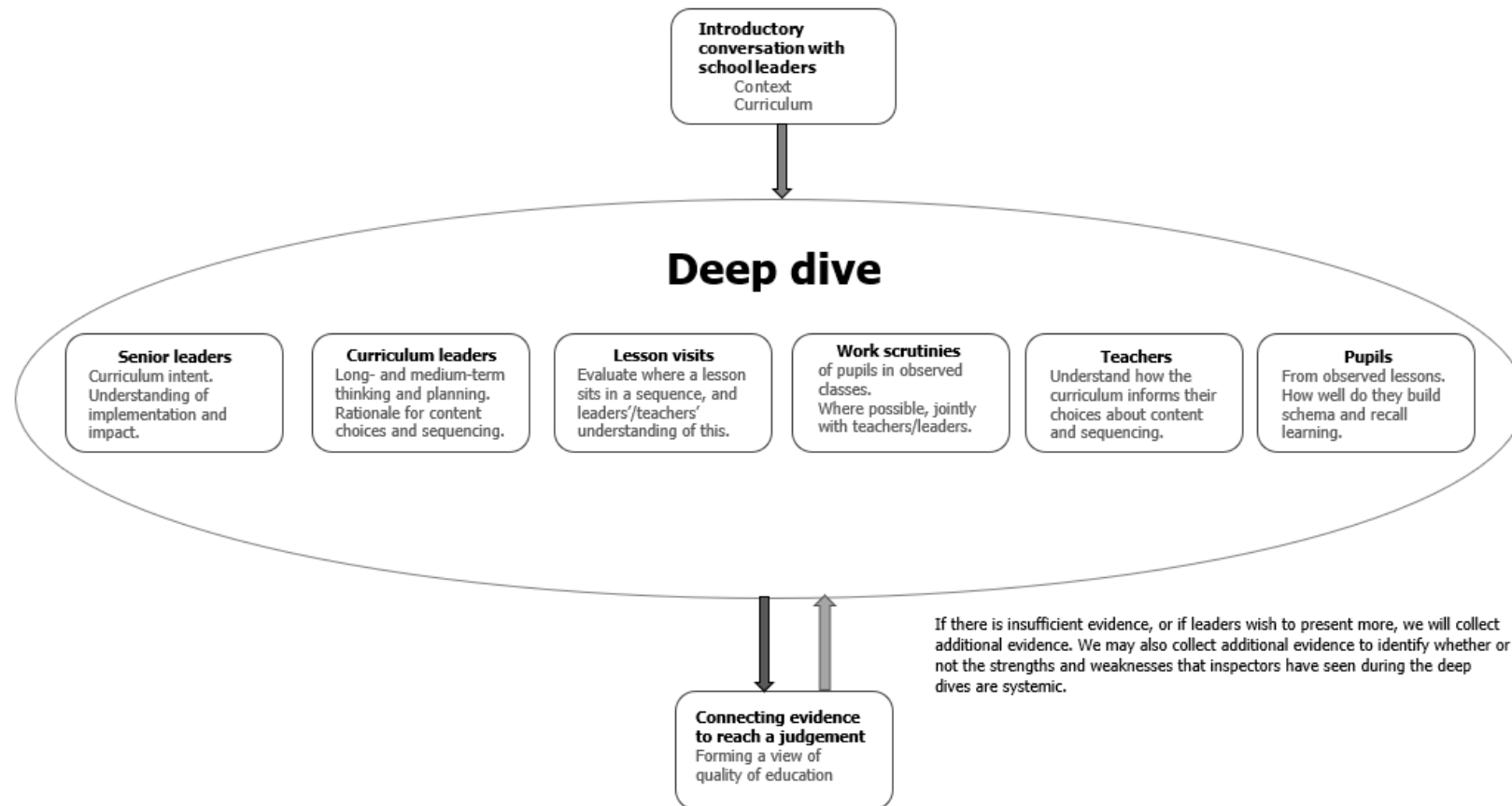
Forming a view of the quality of education: carrying out deep dives

18. It is essential that the primary focus of inspection is on the education that pupils are actually receiving day-by-day in classes, rather than simply being about the ambitions or intentions of senior leaders. A key mantra used by inspectors is 'let's see that in action together'. This is the core of the deep-dive approach. Its aim is to allow inspectors to gather the evidence necessary to form an accurate evaluation of how education flows from intention to implementation to impact within a school. Without doing this, it would be impossible to form a valid judgement of the quality of the education that a school provides.
19. In gathering this deep, rich evidence about the education that a school provides in one subject, topic or aspect, inspectors carrying out the pilot inspections have been careful not to rely on small samples of evidence. One deep dive is insufficient to form a view of the school's provision, but a collection of deep, connected case studies of subjects, topics or aspects can allow inspectors to form a valid and reliable view of the education on offer, provided that it is subject to further evidence-gathering to test the systemic strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum.
20. In primary schools, inspectors will always carry out a deep dive in reading and deep dives in one or more foundation subjects, always including a foundation subject that is being taught in the school during the time that inspectors are on-site. In addition, inspectors will often carry out a deep dive in mathematics. The total number of deep dives will vary depending on the size (tariff) of the inspection. In small schools (with less than 150 pupils), the methodology will be adapted to reflect the tariff of inspection.
21. In secondary schools, the deep dives will typically focus on a sample of four to six subjects, looking at a wide variety of pupils in different year groups across that sample.

22. The deep dive includes the following elements:

- evaluation of **senior leaders'** intent for the curriculum in this subject or area, and their understanding of its implementation and impact
- evaluation of **curriculum leaders'** long- and medium-term thinking and planning, including the rationale for content choices and curriculum sequencing
- visits to a deliberately and explicitly connected **sample of lessons**
- **work scrutiny** of books or other kinds of work produced by pupils who are part of classes that have also been (or will also be) observed by inspectors
- discussion with **teachers** to understand how the curriculum informs their choices about content and sequencing to support effective learning
- discussions with a group of **pupils** from the lessons observed.

Pre-inspection



Bringing it together

23. Our research suggests that the following are important considerations for inspectors looking to ensure a robust view of the quality of education:

- **Context matters** – carrying out lesson visits or work scrutiny without context will limit validity. It is important that, in order to make lesson visits and scrutiny more accurate, inspectors know the purpose of the lesson (or the task in a workbook), how it fits into a sequence of lessons over time, and what pupils already knew and understood. Conversations with teachers and subject leads can provide this contextual information.
- **The sequence of lessons, *not* an individual lesson, is the unit of assessment** – inspectors will need to evaluate where a lesson sits in a sequence, and leaders'/teachers' understanding of this. Inspectors will not grade individual lessons or teachers.
- **Work scrutiny will form a part of the evidence we use to judge whether the intended curriculum is being enacted.** Do the pupils' books support other evidence that what the school set out to teach has, indeed, been covered? Work scrutinies can provide part of the evidence to show whether pupils know more, remember more and can do more, but only as one component of the deep dive which includes lesson visits and conversations with leaders, teachers and pupils. Coverage is a prerequisite for learning, but simply having covered a part of the curriculum does not in itself indicate that pupils know or remember more. Work scrutinies cannot be used to demonstrate that an individual pupil is working 'at the expected standard' or similar, and it is not valid to attempt to judge an individual pupil's individual progress by comparing books from that pupil at two points in time.
- **Inspectors can make appropriately secure judgements on curriculum, teaching and behaviour across a particular deep dive when four to six lessons are visited** and inspectors have spoken to the curriculum lead and teachers to understand where each lesson sits in the sequence of lessons. The greater the number of visits, the more inspectors can see the variation in practice across a deep dive. However, there is a point after which additional visits do little to enhance the validity of evidence. Since an inspection evidence base will include multiple deep dives, the total number of lessons visited over the course of the inspection will substantially exceed four to six.
- **In each deep dive, inspectors should review a minimum of six workbooks (or pieces of work) in lessons they visit, and scrutinise work from at least two year groups in depth** in order to ensure that evidence is not excessively dependent on a single cohort. Normally, inspectors will repeat this exercise across each of the deep dives, subjects, key stages or year groups in which they carry out lesson visits.

24. As mentioned above, inspectors may deviate from this process when the circumstances they identify in the inspected provider require this.

The sequence of evidence-gathering activities

25. Our experience of the pilot inspections confirms that it is essential to begin the process with the top-level conversations about the intended curriculum offer across the school, and the intended curriculum for the particular subjects, topics or aspects under consideration in the deep dive. This is because, as noted above, inspectors must understand the purpose and context of a particular lesson they visit and the sequence of lessons within which that sits, or of the work that they scrutinise. This is also why inspectors will carry out as many activities as possible jointly with school and curriculum leaders.
26. Once the inspector is in the midst of carrying out the deep dive, however, it is important that they ensure that they can gather as much rich evidence as possible and make the connections between those pieces of evidence, rather than adhering to any strict or specific sequence. The pilot inspections suggest that the EIF approach allows for much greater depth of evidence to be gathered than the current framework does, and this evidence in turn is more rigorously triangulated. Even when there are challenges on the first day, it is possible to bring all the evidence together and tie up loose ends on the second. Bringing the evidence together and achieving connectedness is an important inspection skill, so this will be a focus area of inspector training. Some concerns exist over the possibility that if one subject which is the focus of the deep dive is a weak subject, then this could give a distorted view of the school, which is why we are proposing to look at four to six subjects in secondary schools and three to five in primary schools, depending on the size of the school and the inspection team. It is also why the follow-on activities to establish whether the issues and strengths identified in deep dives are systemic and replicated elsewhere in the school are so important.
27. Our piloting has also reinforced our position that intent, implementation and impact are never to be treated as separate, disconnected sub-judgements. Inspectors will always seek to connect and triangulate evidence across the 'quality of education' judgement to form a single view of the quality of education provided.

Bringing the evidence together

28. At the end of day 1, the inspection team will meet to begin to bring the evidence together. The purpose of this important meeting is to:
 - share the evidence gathered so far to continue to build a picture of the quality of education, identifying which features appear to be systemic and which are isolated to a single aspect
 - allow the lead inspector to quality assure the evidence, and especially its 'connectedness'
 - establish which inspection activities are most appropriate and valid on day 2 to come to conclusions about which features are systemic

- bring together evidence about personal development, behaviour and attitudes, safeguarding, wider leadership findings, and so on, in order to establish what further inspection activity needs to be done on day 2 to come to the key judgements.

Reaching final judgements

29. Once evidence gathering has been completed on day 2, the inspection team will meet again. They will discuss the evidence from day 1, consider how the evidence from day 2 develops the picture of the quality of education, and then use the relevant handbook to reach a final judgement.

Implications for inspection

30. The pilot inspections have shown us that the method described in this report is an effective means of gathering connected evidence towards the new 'quality of education' judgement.
31. Each handbook has been updated to reflect the understanding set out in this report, to ensure that we are fully transparent about our inspection methodology. This will be reflected in all our training and in ongoing quality assurance of inspections.
32. The focus of ongoing piloting from May to July will be on further refining the detail of inspection against this model. It is essential that this model is fully tested in all the types of provision that we plan to inspect, and appropriately adapted when needed. To date, we have carried out inspection pilots in nursery schools, pupil referral units (PRUs), special schools, and infant, first, junior, primary, middle and secondary schools, as well as schools with sixth forms.
33. This piloting in different types of schools has exposed some specific challenges, and these are now a focus for our final phase of EIF piloting during summer term 2019. In small schools, staff capacity is very limited and specific subjects may not be taught during the two days of the inspection or it may be that only a few lessons can actually be observed. In PRUs, there are several sites to visit, and we are working to ensure that our methodology can accommodate this.
34. This piloting of the methodology in a wide range of provision types will continue, and we will take the findings into account when adapting our methodology.
35. Since 2017, inspectors have been receiving training on the core elements underpinning the EIF. Our training is now intensifying. From July onwards, all inspectors will undergo training in methodology to prepare them to inspect against the new EIF handbook. The content of that training will reflect the understanding set out in this paper and the further refinements and clarifications emerging from the pilot inspections carried out during the period between now and that time.

36. Our aim is that all of these elements together will enable us to use an inspection methodology that provides valid and reliable judgements against the new 'quality of education' judgement.
37. To further ensure this, we carried out research on the validity of lesson visits and work scrutinies, which will be published in June. We will also closely monitor the implementation of the new inspection framework on an ongoing basis.



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