



## Ofsted Inspection Report Cards: Lessons Learned from the Inspectorates of Wales and Scotland

### Executive Summary

In 2024, His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) launched the Ofsted Big Listen to gather public feedback on how to improve inspection framework and practices. The consultation led to the abolition of the single-phrase overall judgement. Respondents also called for inspection reports to better reflect learners' experiences, happiness, and wellbeing; the quality of SEND provision; and the school's context, strengths, and areas for improvement.

In response, the Department for Education (DfE) allocated £6.2 million to support Ofsted in the development and implementation of report cards. However, the piloted report cards and accompanying toolkits, released in 2025, generated mixed and controversial responses.

Against this backdrop, our research offers policy recommendations informed by stakeholder feedback on Ofsted's report cards and draws comparative insights from the inspection reporting practices of inspectorates in Wales and Scotland.

### Policy Recommendations

#### ***1. Embed Improvement Ethos in Inspection Reporting***

Ensure that Ofsted embeds a school improvement ethos within its report cards and includes signposting to effective practices, as well as to the follow-up multi-agency improvement model.

#### ***2. Reduce High-Stakes Culture and Rebuild Trust***

Establish a multi-agency improvement model that enables Ofsted, local authorities, regional diectors, school improvement advisers, academy trusts, and schools to collaboratively identify improvement solutions and resources, rather than merely triggering punitive consequences based on inspection results. Use follow-up visits to assess progress in areas of "raising concern" or "attention needed". If the school has met the necessary standards, update the report card to reflect this progress.

#### ***3. Rename and Clarify the Grading System and Descriptors***

Rename and clarify the distinction between the grades "secure" and "strong" and their descriptors. Position the safeguarding outcome at the top of the report card and specify the consequences of a 'not met' safeguarding requirement. Commend effective practices, even when they fall outside the assessment areas. The toolkit for schools should contain clear and distinctive descriptors that guide schools to progress grade by grade. Some descriptors in the 'exemplary' grade should be rephrased to demonstrate that schools can realistically achieve them.

#### ***4. Diversify the Inspection Team and Viewpoints in Report Card***

Invite serving school leaders from similar contexts to act as peer

inspectors, and include a key member of the inspected school in the inspection team to foster professional dialogue that informs both the grading and the narrative published in the report card.

### **5. *Manage Anxiety and Establish a Phased Approach***

Manage leaders' anxiety during the inspection window following the launch of the new framework by clearly detailing the process, timeline, and follow-up actions. Collect leaders' and teachers' feedback to further improve the framework before large-scale implementation.

#### **About the research**

The above recommendations are drawn from our QR Policy Support Fund project, The Future of Inspections. The study involved a systematic literature review of 435 policy documents and research publications, complemented by three focus groups and one conference with 48 participants representing Ofsted, Education Scotland, Estyn, the National Governance Association (NGA), academy trusts, schools, local authorities, professional associations, international consultants, and universities.

Our findings highlight that the DfE and Ofsted should first address the pervasive fear and performative compliance that have become entrenched in the English inspection system over the past 15 years, largely as a result of political narratives and media portrayals of schools.

The report cards, along with the accompanying toolkits, have the potential to enhance the clarity of inspection requirements and support

school leaders in self-assessing and improving performance— provided that the DfE and Ofsted succeed in detaching punitive consequences from inspection outcomes, and in allowing sufficient space and resources for improvement

Unlike Estyn and Education Scotland, Ofsted has expanded its original four assessment areas to 11. In its current form, some grades and descriptors appear confusing and overwhelming. School leaders fear they have more areas where you can fail. In the absence of an overall grade, it remains unclear whether all 11 assessment areas carry equal weight, and how parents interpret individual grades when choosing schools.

Ofsted should use report cards to validate and disseminate effective practices across schools. This entails providing more tailored, narrative-based evaluations rather than relying solely on summative grades.

#### **Contact**

Dr Meng Tian, Associate Professor in Educational Leadership, University of Birmingham

[m.tian@bham.ac.uk](mailto:m.tian@bham.ac.uk)

Professor Colin Diamond, Professor in Educational Leadership, University of Birmingham

[c.diamond@bham.ac.uk](mailto:c.diamond@bham.ac.uk)

We advance  
**We activate**  

---

birmingham.ac.uk