Introduction and background

There are thousands of organisations including schools, children’s homes, childminders and prisons which provide education, training and care services in England. Ofsted’s role is to make sure that these institutions deliver for children and learners. They do so both through independent inspection of the provision and through regulation which determines whether providers are fit to provide services. Over the last 25 years, Ofsted’s model has been adopted as a blue print for public service inspection and regulation, both domestically and abroad. The impact of its findings has gone beyond inspection, providing evidence from which others can learn and leading to changes in policy and practice in a wide range of areas. Its reporting in education allows parents to make informed decisions about where to educate their children. Most importantly, however, it exists to act as an advocate for children, young people and adult learners. In recent years it has highlighted the outcomes for those young people most at risk of being left behind, including children in care, children with special educational needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In the light of the rapid pace of change in education and policy, Ofsted recognises the need to constantly review its strategic priorities taking account of new evidence, sector change and the need to further reduce inspection burdens. The strategy summarised below sets out how the organisation aims to do this.

Key points

A force for improvement

- Ofsted’s new guiding principle is that it exists to be a ‘force for improvement through intelligent, responsible and focused inspection and regulation.’ This principle is unpinned by 3 core values: children and students first; independence; and accountability and transparency.
- Ofsted aims to be a force which leads to better outcomes for children and young people. The word ‘force’ is used as Ofsted recognises that it is not in itself an ‘improvement agency’ and that direct improvement work is best undertaken by those on the ground. It does, however, state its belief that the primary purpose of inspections is to lead to improvement.
- Ofsted makes judgements of performance. These focus on key strengths, from which other providers can learn, and areas of weakness, in which providers should improve their performance. Ofsted inspections also act as a trigger to others to take action. That action can be responsible bodies taking action to improve practice in a local authority or nursery, parents and older students being able to vote with their feet, or government being able to take action to support or, in cases of inadequacy, convert or rebroker a failing school.
- Ofsted can choose when and how often to inspect. Through this timing, it aims to catch providers before they fall, thereby making the improvement easier to implement.
- Regulation by Ofsted ensures that providers meet minimum standards and provide a safe environment for children. Those that do not are either given notice to improve or, if they fail to do so, they are closed; by Ofsted directly or, in the case of independent schools, the Department for Education.
- Ofsted’s role in improvement extends beyond day-to-day inspection and regulation. The organisation also sees itself as having an important role in system-wide improvement, creating conditions to facilitate social mobility and reducing regulatory burdens.
- Ofsted’s unique bird’s eye view of education, training and care provision enables it to look at the full range of young people’s experiences, giving a first-hand, unvarnished view of what works. Ofsted aims in the future to use these insights more in order to inform national policy debate and local provider practice.

How this is achieved

- The second half of Ofsted’s guiding principle specifies the ways in which it will act as a force for improvement: through ‘intelligent’, ‘focused’ and ‘responsible’ inspection and regulation.

Intelligent

- The term ‘Intelligent inspection and regulation’ reflects Ofsted’s view that its work should be evidence-led and that evaluation tools and frameworks should be reliable. Ofsted can only act as an effective force for improvement if it knows what works to improve outcomes and can evaluate it effectively.
- Inspection can be described as ‘an art done scientifically’. Ofsted recognises the need to go beyond the data. Inspections should also explore how results have been achieved and in some cases act as a counterbalance to any unintended incentives in the accountability system.
Under the heading ‘intelligent inspection and regulation’ there are 4 key workstreams as outlined below.

• Measures must be valid; they must provide a fair assessment of quality. Judgements about that quality should be generalisable beyond the time of inspection, i.e. they should reflect the overall quality of a provider and its capacity to improve. Ofsted will aim to ensure that it is measuring the right things, and that the measures add up to a meaningful overall judgement. Ofsted will work to reduce unconscious bias in inspection judgements, particularly as it affects providers in disadvantaged areas.

• Ofsted recognises the need for a skilled workforce with inspectors who have access to the latest research and thinking. Ofsted will review and aim to slim down its reporting process so that inspectors have more opportunities to use their professional experience in providing challenge and support rather than writing lengthy reports.

• Ofsted will look at informative grading. It will work with the Department for Education to conduct research into the impact of the inspection grading structure. It will revisit the ‘requires improvement’ grade.

• Ofsted will publish more aggregation of insights from inspections, identifying negative trends before bad practice becomes embedded and showing what good providers are doing. Alongside this, they will, however, continue to emphasise that there is no preferred teaching style.

Responsible

• Ofsted recognises the huge impact and influence which it has on providers. There are 4 key workstreams in this area as below.

• Ofsted will be responsive and engaged. It will be willing to address criticisms with an effective complaints procedure and use feedback from all stakeholders. It will seek to reduce regulatory burdens, streamlining its processes and tackling the workload side effects of inspection. It will continue to build on the strengths of its regional model, gaining a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of provision across the country.

• Ofsted should always have an understanding of the consequences of its judgements. It will work to ensure that judgements are fair and do not deter professionals from working in areas which require particular support. It is also important that leaders do not misrepresent Ofsted policy as a way to justify bad practice – particularly where it relates to the real quality of education or unnecessary workload for staff.

• Ofsted will be committed to responsible intervention. Although new providers must be given a chance to improve when they take over a previously underperforming institution, they should not be able to evade any form of scrutiny for long periods of time. Institutional intervention must also be proportionate and Ofsted continues to look at how to reduce regulatory burdens, particularly on small providers.

• Ofsted commits to ‘addressing our audience’. It recognises that its reports serve a wide range of people and that they must therefore be audience appropriate. It will aim, for example, to make reports more accessible to parents and to build on the success of Parent View.

Focused

• Under the ‘focused inspection and regulation’ heading there are five priority work streams as below.

• Ofsted will work on prioritising inspection. It will make more use of the flexibility allowed in legislation to survey and inspect a greater proportion of outstanding schools. In order to do this, it may, within legislative limits, lengthen the interval between inspection visits of good providers.

• Keeping children safe is vital. Ofsted will ensuring that providers have the policies and procedures in place to deal with safeguarding effectively, tackling, amongst other things, the risks of radicalisation and extremism.

• Keeping pace with rapid changes in the education landscape is key. Ofsted recognises that inspection should be targeted at the right level within a provider, the level at which decisions are made. In the coming months, it will work with the Department for Education to develop new approaches to better scrutinise education, training and care structures, including at the multi-academy trust level.

• Ofsted will continue to report on outcomes for groups such as disadvantaged pupils at the national level and through survey inspection work. It will also make sure that inspectors are properly trained on identifying what can be inferred from the performance of small sub-groups within a provider. The existence of a gap does not always indicate that an intervention at sub-group level is the right approach. Very often, identifying and correcting institutional shortcomings improves outcomes, with disproportionate benefits for lower attaining and disadvantaged students.

• In developing the right framework in 2019, Ofsted will avoid focusing on areas that do not provide a measure of quality of education and look to report separately on areas which could skew overall judgements. The introduction of new ILACS (Inspection of local authorities and services) framework from January 2018 will allow it to focus in detail on specific areas of a provider where there is concern.

Underpinning values

• Children and students first Ofsted will focus on improving outcomes for young people and will have high expectations for every single child. The defining test for Ofsted will be whether its work helps children and young people reach their full potential and keeps them safe.

• Independence Ofsted’s independence is an essential force for improvement for children and young people. At the provider level, it will report findings without fear or favour. At national, level it will continue to offer impartial advice, grounded in inspection evidence, on the quality of education and care, on how that provision could be improved through national and local government action. It will also advise on the impact of current policies and other initiatives.

• Accountability and transparency Ofsted holds itself accountable by publishing metrics that demonstrate how well it is performing in its inspection and regulatory functions and how it spends taxpayers’ money. It operates with maximum transparency, ensuring that the development and process of inspection are available for scrutiny.

• Evaluation Ofsted will publish new evaluation and accountability metrics in order to measure the success of the strategy in improving outcomes for children and young people.