

## OfSTED from within

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# OfSTED from within: Inspectors' views on challenges and future direction

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Meng Tian  and Colin Diamond

## Abstract

In England, current punitive and performative inspection practices have intensified public resentment towards the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OfSTED). In 2024, a new His Majesty's Chief Inspector was appointed, initiating a system-wide review of the inspection framework and practice. In July 2024, the Labour government won the general election, raising hopes of resetting the accountability system. Against this backdrop, this paper presents an insider's view of OfSTED. Eleven former Her Majesty's Inspectors and serving OfSTED inspectors were interviewed. Through the lenses of espoused theories and theories-in-use, this study uncovered inspectors' shared concerns about an increasingly politicised OfSTED, a narrowed focus on education quality, an increased workload and diminished professional autonomy. Some root causes behind inconsistent inspection judgements and highly standardised inspection reports were explained. While only a few inspectors wanted to abolish one-word judgements at the time of the interviews, all expressed genuine belief in the value of inspection when carefully designed and properly conducted to serve pupils and schools. This paper highlights why scrapping one-word judgements is a welcome change, but more work is needed to rebuild trust, professionalise and depoliticise OfSTED, encourage local ingenuity and lower the stakes of inspections.

## Keywords

OfSTED, inspector, England, education policy, education change, interview

## Introduction

In England, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OfSTED) is a non-ministerial department of His Majesty's Government that conducts education inspections and regulates services that care for children and young people (OfSTED, n.d.). For years, OfSTED has been criticised for burdening teachers and leaders with excessive workloads and

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emotional distress, offering inconsistent inspection judgements and demoralising educators working in challenging circumstances (Colman, 2022; Courtney, 2016; NEU, 2023; Perryman et al., 2018). Pressure continues to mount on OfSTED following the tragic suicide of primary school headteacher Ruth Perry in January 2023, 54 days after her school was downgraded from the highest rating, ‘Outstanding’, to the lowest grade, ‘Inadequate’, due to safeguarding concerns (Weale, 2023).

So far, most academic discourses have focused on scrutinising OfSTED inspection policies and the lived experiences of school leaders and teachers (Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023; Bokhove et al., 2023; Colman, 2022; Courtney, 2016). Only a few studies account for inspectors’ viewpoints and tell their side of the story. One example is the November 2023 special issue of *FORUM: Educational inspection: coercive or responsive?*. Several former inspectors courageously shared their views on OfSTED (FORUM, 2023). However, bound by non-disclosure agreements, serving His Majesty’s Inspectors (HMIs) are prohibited from making comments that may portray the government or OfSTED in a negative light. Unlike the head of OfSTED, His Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI), who receives significant media coverage, HMIs are only able to engage in research about OfSTED after they have stepped down from their role. Besides HMIs, OfSTED directly contracts with school practitioners and education consultants who are paid a day rate to conduct freelance inspections. They are called OfSTED inspectors (OIs). To date, how former HMIs and serving OIs conduct inspection and their views on the future of OfSTED, have been significantly understudied. To contribute knowledge to the field, this study presents findings from 11 interviews with former HMIs and OIs and answers the following questions:

- How effective is the 2019 Education Inspection Framework compared to previous frameworks?
- What are the root causes behind the criticisms of OfSTED?
- What does the future look like for OfSTED?

## **A complex landscape of education inspection**

Education inspection in England is an open complex system consisting of multiple interdependent agents. These agents include, but are not limited to, the inspectorate and regulator OfSTED, the Department for Education (DfE), local authorities, local authority-maintained schools, academy schools, other education providers, teachers’ unions, headteachers’ unions, professional associations, parents and students, as well as legal and education consultancy companies providing inspection advice to schools (Tian, 2024a). These agents self-organise their interactions, leading to the emergence of patterns of relationships within the complex system (Boulton et al., 2015).

Recent studies have shown that OfSTED changes its inspection requirements to divert criticism and appear as a forward-looking self-revitalising agency (Colman, 2022; Tian, 2023, 2024a). OfSTED uses new inspection frameworks, data collection methods and reporting guidelines to keep other agents occupied with ever-evolving inspection demands for the purpose of sustaining a hierarchy of power. However, these relationship patterns were invaded by Ruth Perry’s tragic suicide, now driving the system towards a tipping point (Freedman, 2023). Several possible futures lie ahead. The inspection system may collapse entirely, transform into a new era underpinned by new values and principles or revert to its old behavioural and relational patterns (Tian, 2024a). Complexity theorists also suggest that history and the order of events matter (Boulton et al., 2015; Byrne and Callaghan, 2013). Among all these patterns of relationships,

the relationship between OfSTED and the DfE holds particular significance. These dynamics can be further understood by examining the appointment of HMCI and the Secretary of State for Education.

## **Patterns of politicisation: HMCIs and secretaries of state for education**

Appointed by Order in Council, HMCI is a crown appointment responsible for the leadership and management of OfSTED (Education Committee, 2023). OfSTED was created in 1992 to address central government's concerns about inconsistent standards in English schools. With local education authorities being responsible for standards, there was no systematic inspection of schools prior to OfSTED. A small group of HMIs used to carry out school visits but there were no public reports. Since 1992, the OfSTED inspection model has been one component of the government's efforts to establish national standards, including the National Curriculum and pupil testing. The appointment of HMCI has always been highly politicised reflecting the administration's policies. Table 1 summarises the list of HMCI appointments, their key inspection policies and frameworks, along with the education secretaries who have held office.

For example, HMCI, David Bell, appointed by Labour Secretary of State, Estelle Morris, was a former headteacher and local education authority director. By contrast, recently retired HMCI Amanda Spielman had a career in finance before entering education via the Ark MAT in line with the Conservative Party's ideology. Between 2017 and 2023, the public expressed dismay with OfSTED and Spielman's leadership, particularly following Ruth Perry's suicide. Spielman believed the tragedy was purposefully used to discredit OfSTED (Walker, 2023b), stating she would 'rather be unpopular than say things [she] didn't believe to be true' (Dickens, 2024: 1). Meanwhile, the Conservative Party experienced internal turmoil, as evidenced by the frequent changes in the Secretary of State for Education. Under public pressure, the new HMCI, Sir Martyn Oliver, commissioned former HMCI Dame Christine Gilbert to conduct a review of OfSTED's handling of Ruth Perry's tragedy. In her findings, Gilbert noted that OfSTED 'appears defensive and complacent rather than reflective and self-critical', while the chief inspector acted with a sense of entitlement (Whittaker, 2024a: 6).

These internal OfSTED reviews and the subsequent recommendations appear to focus on improving crisis communication, mental health awareness training and post-inspection surveys (Whittaker, 2024a). However, they shy away from addressing the intricate relationship between OfSTED and the DfE. For example, the preferred candidate to be appointed as HMCI is interviewed by the Education Select Committee of Members of Parliament with a recommendation to appoint or not. In practice, when the Select Committee has not been supportive of the appointment, it has gone ahead regardless, which illustrates the quintessentially political nature of the role. Since 1992, the way in which OfSTED develops its inspection policies has been deeply influenced by the prevailing education policies of the government. At the basic education level, OfSTED grades have been used to inform and justify Regional Directors' decisions to convert local authority-maintained schools that received two consecutive ratings below 'Good' to academies (Weale, 2019). At the tertiary education level, the DfE, acting through the Education and Skills Funding Agency, intervenes in apprenticeship programmes provided by universities and colleges using OfSTED grades (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2021). By appointing HMCIs who are compliant with the government, the DfE can instrumentalise OfSTED to advance its political agenda. This model is very different from the pre-OfSTED 'arms' length' HMI *modus operandi*, designed to be apolitical and to monitor a decentralised education system in England.

**Table 1.** HMCI, secretaries of state for education and key changes and frameworks 1992–2024.

Year	HMCI	Background	Secretary of State for Education	Key changes	Inspection framework
1992–1994	Lord Stewart Sutherland	Academic and former Vice Chancellor of the University of London.	Kenneth Clarke (Conservative)	Make OfSTED fit for purpose with the first national inspection framework and train over 7500 inspectors. Within three years, OfSTED had inspected all schools in England.	First inspection framework with a five-point grading system was introduced in 1992. Schools to be inspected every four years.
1994–2000	Sir Chris Woodhead	Former English teacher at state and independent schools.	John Patten (Conservative) Gillian Shephard (Conservative) David Blunkett (Labour)	Widen OfSTED's remit to include the inspection of local authorities and teacher training. Woodhead was a controversial appointment as he promoted his own views on traditional standards and criticised 'bad teaching'. He was perceived to be critical of state schools.	Seven-point grading system was introduced in 1996. Inspection teams were reduced and reports shortened. Evidence suggests Woodhead's interference with draft OfSTED reports to alter their meaning and remove politically uncomfortable facts (Elliott, 2012).
2000–2002	Sir Mike Tomlison	Former chemistry teacher and senior secondary HMI.	Estelle Morris (Labour)	Introduce proportionality and an inspection cycle determined by the performance of a school. Appointed to ensure OfSTED's	Inspector teams were reduced further, and reports simplified with a four-point scale.

*(continued)*

Table 1. (continued)

Year	HMCI	Background	Secretary of State for Education	Key changes	Inspection framework
2002–2006	Sir David Bell	Former headteacher and local authority director of education.	Estelle Morris (Labour) Charles Clarke (Labour) Ruth Kelly (Labour) Alan Johnson (Labour)	reports and statements were evidence-based. Reduce inspection to two days. Emphasise school self-assessment and improvement.	2005 Common Inspection Framework was introduced, including a differentiated model of inspections and 'little or no notice' inspection.
2006–2011	Dame Christine Gilbert	Former headteacher, local authority director of children's services and local authority chief executive	Alan Johnson (Labour) Ed Balls (Labour) Michael Gove (Conservative)	The Green Paper, <i>Every Child Matters</i> , outlines the Government's proposals for the reform and improvement of childcare.	Short and focused review of school's performance was used, integrated with school self-evaluation and improvement planning. Inspection reports provided to parents (OfSTED, 2006).
2012–2016	Sir Michael Wilshaw	Former headteacher and founding head of Mossbourne Academy in Hackney.	Michael Gove (Conservative) Nicky Morgan (Conservative)	Focus on 'standards' and 'behaviour'.	2015 Common Inspection Framework was introduced.
2017–2023	Amanda Spielman	Worked in finance, management consultancy, a founding member of the Ark academy trust and chaired	Nicky Morgan (Conservative) Justine Greening (Conservative) Damian Hinds (Conservative) Gavin Williamson (Conservative)	Focus on English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and cognitive science-driven subject deep dives.	2019 Education Inspection Framework was introduced.

(continued)

**Table 1.** (continued)

Year	HMCI	Background	Secretary of State for Education	Key changes	Inspection framework
		Ofqual, the examinations and qualifications regulator	Nadhim Zahawi (Conservative) Michelle Donelan (Conservative) James Cleverly (Conservative) Kit Malthouse (Conservative)		
2024-date	Sir Martyn Oliver	Former headteacher and CEO of Outwood Grange Multi Academy Trust	Gillian Keegan (Conservative) Bridget Phillipson (Labour)	Initiate OfSTED Big Listen.	Single-phrase judgements were scrapped.

## Espoused theories and theories-in-use: Evaluating inspection frameworks and practices

Applying Schön and Argyris' (1992) theory of action framework, we explore how inspectors use mental maps to guide their actions and assess the alignment between their inspection objectives, values and priorities (i.e., espoused theories) and the actual school performance presented in the inspection reports (i.e., theories-in-use). If these elements align, we argue that the espoused theories are congruent with the theories-in-use. By contrast, misalignments can cause cognitive dissonance and moral dilemmas.

Most professional practitioners such as inspectors may not be fully conscious of the mental maps they employ when interpreting the espoused theories, making decisions or taking actions (Kerr, 2009; Schön and Argyris, 1992). In practice, it requires a high degree of reflexivity for inspectors to dissect and analyse their own thinking process, enquiry techniques, emotional experiences and power dynamics (Ide and Beddoe, 2023). In this study, we used semi-structured interviews as a method to facilitate inspectors' reflexivity (Atkins and Wallace, 2012).

## Research methods

Convenience sampling was employed to recruit research participants. Leveraging the second author's professional networks, we combined snowballing and open-call approaches. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method that gives researchers access to hard-to-reach population (Parker et al., 2020). Inspectors are hard-to-reach participants because criticisms of OfSTED are often projected to individual inspectors and have made the entire sector unpopular in recent years. It requires a high degree of trust for inspectors to willingly share their authentic views on OfSTED and the criticisms the sector has received (Parker et al., 2020). Furthermore, recruiting serving HMIs is impossible due to their civil servant status and the non-disclosure without authority requirement as specified in the Civil Service Code (Civil Service, 2015).

We received endorsement from key leaders in the former HMI community and approached potential interviewees individually, providing detailed research information, interview questions and a consent form. Some interviewees recommended other suitable former HMIs. The second author also posted a call for research participants on his X account, and five OIs volunteered to join the project. In total, six former HMIs and five OIs were recruited (see Table 2). The six former HMIs have either retired or stepped down. Some still conduct inspections as OIs, while others consult for schools. The five OIs are active school leaders who conduct freelance inspections. All the interviewees have 8–28 years of inspection experience, have used at least two inspection frameworks and have worked with at least two HMCIs. The breadth and depth of their knowledge allow us to explore the historical, political, educational and practical reasons behind the criticisms of OfSTED and its future development.

All interviews were conducted online, lasting 60–75 min each, and were audio recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Pseudonyms were used in the Findings. Personal identifiable data and specific roles in OfSTED were redacted. Both authors independently coded the transcripts, reviewed and compared themes (Alvesson, 2023; Swain, 2018). Final themes were agreed upon by both authors and approved by all interviewees.

## Findings

### *From data to curriculum: Major changes in inspection frameworks*

Interviewees agreed that the 2019 EIF differed from previous frameworks in inspection foci, data collection methodologies and reporting. The most significant change was the shift from examining data to assessing curriculum. For example, the EIF endorsed a particular approach to evaluating how phonics is taught in schools. Inspectors received reading lists and research publications on teaching phonics during the training, which subtly suggested its importance and guided inspectors' examination during subject deep dives.

OfSTED appeared to set up its own research machine. And then select what supported the Chief Inspector's (referring to Amanda Spielman) arguments. (Deborah)

The research will suit as well. For example, focusing on phonics when teaching reading. That's the sort of thing we were looking at. (Gemma)

**Table 2.** Demographics of the 11 interviewed inspectors.

Pseudonym	Role	Gender	Years of inspection experience
Alice	Former HMI	Female	12 years as HMI
Aaron	OI, Former HMI	Male	6 years as OI, 19 years as HMI
Brian	OI, Former HMI	Male	3 years as OI, 16 years as HMI
Beth	Former HMI	Female	10 years as HMI
Celia	OI, Former HMI	Female	3 years as OI, 16 years as HMI
Deborah	Serving OI	Female	8 years as OI
Emma	Serving OI	Female	28 years as OI
Frances	Serving OI	Female	8 years as OI
Charlie	Former HMI, Serving OI	Male	6 years as HMI, 4 years as OI
Gavin	Serving OI	Male	12.5 years as OI
Gemma	Serving OI	Female	8 years as OI



Because there is importance placed on reading and learning about phonics, and that's a deep-dive methodology that never used to be in place. (Gavin)

One inspector shed light on the role of HMCI in shaping the focus of the frameworks.

The difference between the predecessor framework and the 2019 framework was that OfSTED began to have a preferred style in certain areas. And that was driven by the Chief Inspectors (referring to Michael Wilshaw and Amanda Spielman) in both of these situations. (Charlie)

Inspectors also emphasised that the EIF was predominantly based on the secondary school subject model, which was incompatible with teaching and learning in early years, primary and special schools. The EIF compelled inspectors to apply a prescriptive curriculum lens to all practices.

We've got examples of inspectors going into special schools and saying, 'why aren't they achieving in the phonics check?'. Well, because they're nonverbal. (Alice)

It becomes a matter of curriculum sequencing and building on skills and knowledge. And this is extremely hard. Small village schools have got a greater job to do in terms of working it out and making it work. (Emma)

Another endorsement by OfSTED and former HMCI Amanda Spielman was the English Baccalaureate (E-Bacc) curriculum. Several former HMIs were critical of this political agenda and its effect on narrowing students' choices. Although lead inspectors were instructed not to specify the delivery of the E-Bacc curriculum in inspection reports, many inspectors complied with this agenda by selecting E-Bacc subjects for deep dives.

And I know schools have dropped vocational courses because of this target to get more pupils doing E-Bacc...And then suddenly everything was about the curriculum, and very much the academic curriculum, the E-Bacc. All the arts and creative subjects were seen as second-class subjects. (Aaron)

The EIF turned into a very academic framework. The E-Bacc. Just looking at a curriculum rather than looking at its impact on children...Cognitive science and the sequencing of curriculum. And I think it (EIF) genuinely has lost sight of children. (Beth)

But I'll negotiate a bit on subject deep-dive, maybe something on the E-Bacc list. (Frances)

Interviewees claimed that previous frameworks required inspectors to analyse trends and patterns in student data, identify disadvantaged groups and discuss performance gaps with school leaders and teachers. With the implementation of the EIF, more inspectors observed inconsistencies, noting that while some schools had well-curated curricula, their students exhibited poor academic performance.

Now that the EIF has been around for a few years, most people have got that. Now, 90% of schools are 'Good' or better; or 90% of schools know what they have to write for the documentation basically... That's another inconsistency: some inspectors take very little notice of final outcomes, whereas others will say actually the curriculum can't be great if it's delivering these results. (Brian)

### *High-stakes single-word judgements and low-information reports*

Regarding whether OfSTED should abolish single-word judgements, the interviewees had differing views. Some felt powerless, noting that OfSTED lacked the authority to make such a significant change. Others argued that inspectors were inadequately trained to deliver unbiased judgements.

Because OfSTED doesn't have the power to initiate some of the changes that are being called for, you know, getting rid of the grades, changing the framework. (Aaron)

Lip service is paid to those things (referring to inspection judgements). We're not trained in any of that business. Nothing about bias, conscious bias, unconscious bias. (Deborah)

Others advocated for abolishing single-word judgements, arguing that it was the root cause of all problems.

Anything can move on, but single-word judgements have to be tackled first. The link now between inspection grades and quite crude measures about what happens to schools is getting in the way of the whole purpose of inspection. (Alice)

If you don't do the judgement last, or there isn't a judgement, you can have a really open conversation about the evidence. (Charlie)

One inspector echoed the DfE's perspective that parents needed single-word judgements for guidance.

Should they get rid of the word? Well, quite frankly, no. I think, you know, keep it simple. Because not all parents are educationalists. (Gavin)

Despite the disagreement over single-word judgements, all inspectors agreed that the inspection reports had become bland and generic. This change was partly due to the heavy inspection workload and partly because of OfSTED's strict reporting guidelines. Since 2019, a prescriptive graded inspection report template has been used to guide the lead inspector's reporting. The guidelines require lead inspectors to eliminate jargon and use specific terms such as 'children', 'pupils', and 'students' to denote learners of different ages. School-specific features, including commendable practices, are often omitted if they fall outside the reporting scope. Because the EIF focuses on the curriculum rather than student data, inspection reports should not include comments on pupil performance based on gender or ethnicity.

The reports are getting more standardised, blander and non-informative. (Celia)

Some information you cannot flesh out in the report. So where is the space for inspectors to give these when the school asked for feedback? (Gemma)

What's happening to Black kids in schools? It's not something that's being picked up in the framework. Offsetting the full screen in the things that they have deemed important to measure. (Deborah)

All inspection reports must be reviewed using the Hemingway Editor app to achieve a Grade 10 readability level for parents to comprehend, and they must also be checked by the OfSTED quality assurance (QA) team. Several interviewees declined to lead inspections to avoid the burden of

writing reports, highlighting that the writing and QA processes were stressful and negatively impacted inspectors' well-being.

You upload it onto the portal, and then somebody QAs it. It comes back to you and it's full of red tracking. You begin to think I'm obviously illiterate myself. It's quite emotional, right in that report, simply because it's stressful to get it right, to write in the right style and language. (Frances)

### *Winners and losers under the EIF*

When asked which schools appeared to perform better and which ones were falling behind under the EIF, inspectors presented diverse views. This area involved inspectors using their previous experiences and interpretations of the framework to evaluate the quality of education at schools. Their varied perspectives demonstrated how both the inspection criteria and personal judgement can influence inspection results.

Some found that academically high-performing schools might struggle with the new framework if they had not learned to effectively articulate their curriculum intent, implementation and impact as required by the EIF.

Some schools that came out very well from the previous framework, particularly high-performing grammar schools have found the new framework to be much more challenging. (Brian)

Small rural schools with mixed-age classes were further disadvantaged because they were unable to provide a well-sequenced curriculum for each year group due to limited resources.

I've done quite a lot of inspections at very small rural schools where they have mixed-age classes. They really struggle. (Gemma)

Similarly, schools with high student turnover were judged unfavourably because their students did not consistently study the full curriculum at a single school. Some schools chose to exclude these students, which further exacerbated education access and equity.

Late arrivals, children who've come from overseas. So, they joined in Year 4. They haven't had all the curriculum experience in other year groups. Suddenly, the school has to meet their needs and then OfSTED's needs. (Aaron)

One inspector mentioned that schools which blindly chase the fad of progressive education received worse results, although the definition of 'progressive' remained vague.

The schools that do worse are the ones that don't have a clear view of what works, what the 'best bets' in education are, but cling onto what might be called progressive. (Charlie)

When discussing which schools achieved better results under the EIF, some inspectors mentioned schools in challenging circumstances. This was partly because the EIF did not require inspectors to scrutinise student performance data, allowing schools to potentially conceal weaker subjects by taking advantage of the two-day inspection timetable.

Schools that benefit from the framework are those in challenging circumstances. Their test results are not the priority anymore. (Gavin)

I know under this framework, there are more schools in disadvantaged areas getting at least 'Good'. (Frances)

Schools can play the system. Because if you (referring to schools) have a weak subject that's not well developed, you can hide it. Say that you only do it on a Friday afternoon because you know inspectors won't be inspecting on a Friday afternoon. (Aaron)

### *A force for improvement or an improvement agency*

Several OIs agreed with OfSTED's statement that they are a force for improvement, but not an improvement agency. They believe that OfSTED holds schools with serious concerns accountable, and that inspectors are the ones who can call them out.

For improvement there needs to be some level of accountability... Especially when schools are put into special measures and things are not looking good. Without that external audit, it makes things much more difficult. (Gavin)

One school that I inspected was put into special measures because they were isolating very vulnerable young children in rooms on their own with the door shut. And that's not okay, for a child to spend all day in a room on their own. That's just wrong. It's unsafe. So, somebody has to be looking at that. (Gemma)

One inspector highlighted the misalignment between OfSTED's role as a 'force for improvement' and schools' expectations of receiving concrete improvement advice from inspectors.

I think OfSTED is a force for improvement, and we do a good job there at times. As for being a school improvement agency, no, we're not. However, if I had a pound for every time a teacher, a teaching assistant, a headteacher or a governor asked me, 'What would you do?', 'Can you advise us?' or 'What have you seen somewhere else that is good?', I'd be a very rich woman. (Emma)

Compared to the OIs, who were more agreeable with OfSTED's positioning as a 'force for improvement', the former HMIs reminisced about the 'good old days' when they had more autonomy to help schools improve. By comparing and contrasting the different roles OfSTED has played throughout its history, these former HMIs expressed disappointment with current practices.

If you are a force for improvement, it means you are judging and walking away. If you're an agent of improvement, it means you will work with schools to help them improve. ... We were much more developmental before. I used to go into schools, and we were encouraged to work with schools through a professional dialogue. (Beth)

I'd struggle with that because I think the best thing that OfSTED ever did was its work on supporting schools that were struggling, either in special measures or 'Requires improvement'. (Aaron)

For most of my time as an inspector, the mantra was improvement through inspection. That started pre-2001. It's funny how that message has morphed into various other things over time. Do I feel that OfSTED is a force for improvement? No, especially not since 2019. The 2019 framework actually got in the way of schools doing what's right for them because the fear has grown over time. (Alice)

### *Inspection team dynamics*

Regarding how the final inspection result was determined and the power dynamics within the inspection team, inspectors noted that they usually followed the lead inspector and adhered to a 'gentleman's agreement' not to disagree with each other in front of school staff. Several inspectors also confirmed that if schools were genuinely 'Outstanding' across the board, they would remain 'Outstanding' under the EIF. In most cases, the inspection team reached a preliminary judgement after the first day, so the debriefing on the second day should not come as a surprise to the school leader.

Each team inspector brings their own evidence to the table, and it is pretty unusual for there to be disagreements because people are reporting directly on what they have observed. (Brian)

Occasionally, individual inspectors' preferences for information-gathering methods and unconscious biases related to their gender and ethnicity can lead to varied inspection decisions. Although schools in England are becoming increasingly diverse, there appears to be limited effort to diversify inspection teams. This lack of diversity has hindered the inspection teams' ability to gain a nuanced and culturally informed understanding of school practices.

You get these horror stories of inspectors asking pupils about a bit of history that they should have learned two years ago. Can they remember it? Can they remember the facts? (Aaron)

In secondary (inspection) teams, they tend to be male-heavy. I might be the only woman on the team. I uncovered issues about girls in schools that were potentially jeopardising... Another time, I also heard about a situation where a White female inspector asked quite inappropriate questions of Muslim girls. (Deborah)

The power dynamics between HMIs and OIs appear to have reversed in recent years due to high HMI attrition. HMI positions previously represented the career pinnacle and a hallmark of one's expertise. Some former HMIs spoke about their prestigious status and authority within the team, and how these dynamics have shifted with the recruitment of younger HMIs who have little to no school leadership experience.

It was the big pinnacle. You'd been a leader, and then you become an HMI. Now it's the opposite. You do it (referring to being an HMI) midway through your career. (Celia)

Some OIs found it difficult to follow the HMI's lead when there was a mismatch between their expertise and the inspection content.

You will find some OIs who are far more experienced and knowledgeable than certain HMIs. I am a secondary specialist. My lead inspector is a primary background HMI. They definitely will not do as good a job as I do because they don't have the secondary specialist knowledge. (Charlie)

Among all the accounts of power dynamics, one was particularly alarming. One former HMI mentioned that she rated a maintained school as 'Good' after the inspection, but this decision was challenged by senior members at OfSTED. They wanted to issue a double 'Requires Improvement' rating, which would compel the school to convert into an academy. This experience caused severe cognitive dissonance for this inspector.

It turns out now that (the issue) was related to academisation... I gave them (referring to the maintained school) a 'Good', and I got challenged on that. I was told it couldn't possibly be 'Good'. And I thought, no, you weren't there. You know I was there. I've done a lot of inspections, and this is my judgement. (Alice)

### *Suggestions for improvement*

When envisaging the future of OfSTED, interviewees highlighted several changes they wish to see. To improve the well-being of both school practitioners and inspectors, the inspection workload and its intensity need to be better managed. The push to inspect all previously exempt schools with 'Outstanding' grades by 2025, coupled with a tighter budget, has led many experienced HMIs to leave the profession. Consequently, younger and less experienced HMIs have been recruited and are now leading inspections after only a brief induction.

I would like to see changes in work conditions for HMIs, including induction, workload, mentoring, training and decision-making power. (Celia)

There're plenty of people who are applying to be HMIs, but they don't stay very long. Two main reasons they don't stay: One is workload and the second is pay. You can get far more pay now working in an academy. (Aaron)

The OIs, who hold full-time positions as school leaders or teachers, found it challenging to complete the minimum requirement of 16 days of inspection per year and attend *ad-hoc* compulsory training. Some OIs acknowledged the limitations of the two-day inspection, but they were reluctant to extend its length under the current conditions.

There is not enough time during a two-day inspection to do justice to the foundation subjects. God forbid we go back to four days of inspection per week. (Emma)

Several inspectors suggested improving engagement with school practitioners, which aligns with HMCI Sir Martyn Oliver's vision of recruiting more practitioners into OfSTED. Although this is not a new idea, the interviewees urged the HMCI to carefully assess practitioners' willingness and availability to inspect, as well as the number of practitioners needed to make a meaningful impact on OfSTED's culture and reputation.

Better engagement with practitioners. Understanding that we (referring to OIs) can't all come out at any time. We have very limited availability. And when certain things happen, it becomes more difficult to inspect. (Gavin)

More practitioners as OfSTED inspectors. Sir Martyn wants them to have more ownership. Now, that's going to be a logistical challenge, because Michael Wilshaw wanted that as well. He basically wanted practising headteachers to lead all inspections and give credibility. But there just weren't enough people coming forward to do it. (Aaron)

Several inspectors highlighted the issue of OfSTED being used by the DfE to control schools and impose specific ideologies. Real change would occur if OfSTED were to become a professional agency independent from the government. They acknowledged that the HMCI played an important role in leading changes. Nonetheless, appointing the HMCI based on political reasons rather than professional credentials has pre-emptively prevented OfSTED from implementing meaningful changes from within.

For the HMCI to criticise government policy, without fear or favour, doesn't happen anymore. (Brian)

The idea that the Chief Inspector could be appointed from the ranks of the HMIs doesn't happen. That would be what you would expect. But it doesn't happen. (Aaron)

OfSTED should return to its two key foci – informing parents of the quality of education and informing parliament of what is and is not working in government education policy on the basis of direct observation. It should not be the DfE's ideological curriculum police. (Brian)

Instead of abandoning data scrutiny and focusing solely on the curriculum, a few inspectors suggested a balanced approach that examines both data and curriculum. Test scores, attendance records, destination data and trends and patterns of performance were viewed as valuable information about individual pupils that can aid inspectors' analysis and judgement.

I thought EIF was a good inspection framework, and I still do. But without data on the children, it's meaningless. The whole emphasis on the curriculum is a good emphasis, but it needs to be coupled with looking at children and their data. Children are vulnerable, and they might be extremely bright. They don't need to go through this curriculum sequence to be ahead of other children. (Beth)

Following the change of inspection methods, providing more informative reports to help schools improve and keep parents informed was another recommendation.

I think the reports could be written in a better way. I don't know how you solve that because of workload. Maybe there needs to be a certain report for parents and then a different report for school leaders. (Frances)

## Discussion

Shortly after we collected the interview data, the UK government decided to scrap the single-word judgements in early September 2024 and plans to introduce School Report Cards in 2025 (Department for Education, 2024). We have argued elsewhere that this is a positive initial step towards addressing fear-induced performativity and the broken trust between OfSTED and schools (Diamond, 2024a, 2024b; Tian, 2024b). However, changing the reporting format alone will not be sufficient if the government and OfSTED do not address the underlying problems. This study has revealed several pressing issues from the viewpoints of inspectors.

### *Inspectors' shared concerns with headteachers*

The 11 inspectors shared similar views with the school headteachers regarding the changing focus of the EIF, the narrowed scope of subject deep-dives and the low-information reports (Colman, 2021). These inspectors highlighted a disparity between the espoused theories and the theories-in-use during the inspection process. According to the espoused theories, OfSTED should function as a force for improvement, being open and accessible to various audiences, understanding schools' needs and developing an evidence base on curriculum and pedagogy (OfSTED, 2022). While some of these principles have been implemented – such as placing poor-performing schools into 'special measures' and producing inspection reports for parents – inspectors expressed concerns about certain practices. Specifically, the inspectors were critical of OfSTED's in-house research promoting phonics-focused pedagogy, the excessive endorsement of the E-Bacc curriculum and the complete abandonment of data scrutiny. These

approaches not only narrowed the scope of education but also hindered meaningful dialogue between inspectors, school leaders and teachers. In an effort to develop a research-informed EIF, OfSTED invested £2.4 million into conducting in-house research on curriculum quality and its evaluation (Whittaker, 2018). However, in practice, the EIF has not satisfactorily delivered the promised outcomes, and in 2021, the then Deputy Director for Research and Evaluation at OfSTED returned to academia (Gibbons, 2021). History shows that changing the inspection framework only camouflages the power imbalance between OfSTED and schools; it does not tackle it.

Writing inspection reports is another cumbersome task where espoused theories misalign with theories-in-use. A study that examined topics emerging from 60,000 inspection reports between 1997 and 2022 confirms that. Under the EIF, reports have shifted to focus more explicitly on curriculum, leadership and subject specialism, incorporating more terminology from the framework (Bokhove et al., 2024). Under the guise of QA and standardisation, OfSTED exerts power over both schools and inspectors to ensure compliance. Several interviewees in this study reported that writing OfSTED reports and passing QA checks caused heightened stress, cognitive dissonance and an unbearable workload. They selectively reported evidence, not because it authentically represented the school but because it fit the rigid framework. This long-term misalignment between inspectors' actions and values threatens to damage their professionalism and well-being (Rees and Knight, 2007).

### *Government's control over inspection*

When OfSTED was created in 1992, its HMIs became civil servants under standard civil service contracts. HMIs are prohibited from expressing opinions or engaging in research that is not government-approved. The government, as the regulator of education in England, instructs OfSTED on what should be inspected, when and how, while also specifying the resources available (Freedman, 2023). Although HMIs and OIs are not directly employed by the DfE, and OfSTED is positioned as an independent non-ministerial department on paper (espoused theories), its activities often overtly or covertly align with government priorities (theories-in-use) (Perryman et al., 2023).

The collaboration between OfSTED and the DfE in implementing government policy has been evident for many years. A notable example is the response to the DfE's report highlighting the risks of entering pupils early for GCSE examinations, including English and mathematics, before they are ready (Department for Education, 2012). After that, OfSTED's follow-up survey confirmed the government's findings and discouraged schools from continuing this 'damaging trend' (OfSTED, 2013).

Consider another example: despite objections from the Education Select Committee, the Conservative government appointed former HMCI Amanda Spielman to lead and launch the EIF, demonstrating the government's influence over OfSTED (Dufour, 2023). Under Spielman's leadership, OfSTED's priorities shifted to actively inspecting phonics and maths, while largely overlooking subjects like performing arts (Walker, 2023a). The latest *School Inspection Handbook* further reflects government priorities, noting the goal for 90% of Year 10 pupils to study EBacc GCSE courses by 2025 (OfSTED, 2024: 231).

All the inspectors in this study believe that well-conducted inspections can uncover problems and help schools improve. However, one interviewee's account raises concerns: her inspection grade was challenged by senior OfSTED members. She later realised that OfSTED wanted this maintained school to receive a double 'Requires Improvement' rating, pushing it towards academisation. This, again, is an example of OfSTED exercising power over individual inspectors to report 'what they wanted to see' instead of 'what they saw' (Price Grimshaw, 2023: 35). Despite its rarity, such abuse of power can occur when circumstances require.



### *OfSTED's fitness-for-purpose*

Another root cause of school practitioners' fear and resentment is the lack of an effective complaint system to hold inspectors accountable for misconduct (Tian, 2023). Several interviewees reported witnessing or hearing about inspectors' inappropriate conduct and biases, whether conscious or unconscious. Some noted that the complaint process relies solely on evidence in inspection reports, ignoring new evidence presented by schools. This arrangement pre-emptively silences many school practitioners who believe they have received unfair judgements.

When using the EIF, inspectors often rely on subjective judgement and OfSTED's preferred styles over objective data (Lyons, 2023). This is exacerbated by insufficient bias training and a lack of diversity in inspection teams. As our findings revealed that, an all-male team may struggle to fully understand girls' safeguarding concerns, while an all-White team might overlook challenges faced by ethnic minority students. Moreover, inspectors are under pressure to meet targets with limited time and resources, further contributing to variability in judgements.

Public knows little about the consistency and reliability of inspections because OfSTED rarely grants external access to their database (Jerrim, 2023). This opacity turns the inspection process into a 'black box', leading schools to employ strategies such as appeasing inspectors and hyper-enacting policy to gain favourable results (Colman, 2021; Lyons, 2023). Inspectors in this study noted that schools that effectively articulated their curricula or concealed weaker subjects often fared better in inspections. The 'game' of inspection became the theories-in-use and has further deviated from OfSTED's espoused theories of raising standards, improving lives. Two former inspectors, dissatisfied with the official Big Listen consultation, launched an 'Alternative Big Listen' survey. Their July 2024 findings, based on 1368 responses, revealed that 80–90% of respondents were dissatisfied with the current four-point rating scale, the consistency of inspection results and the consideration of school context (Whittaker, 2024b).

With the abolition of single-word judgements, both independent and OfSTED-commissioned reviews have highlighted the problems of high-stakes inspections and the broken trust in the accountability system (Perryman et al., 2023; Whittaker, 2024a, 2024b). Looking forward, OfSTED should avoid being instrumentalised or weaponised by the government to serve individual politicians' career ambitions. Depoliticising and professionalising OfSTED require granting inspectors the autonomy and trust to evaluate schools' overall performance and have genuine dialogues on improvement, without fear or favour.

In Wales, the inspectorate, Estyn, invites senior leaders from neighbouring schools to serve as peer inspectors, providing contextual information and offering peer learning opportunities to the inspected schools (Estyn, 2024). In Scotland, schools engage in self-evaluation before inspections, which are low-stakes, dialogical and development-oriented (Education Scotland, 2022). Instead of pursuing ambitious inspection targets, Scotland selects an annual sample of 120 schools to inspect and provide evidence for the National Improvement Framework. While the Welsh and Scottish systems are not without criticism, they offer examples for OfSTED to consider in rebalancing its power dynamic with schools and rebuilding trust.

### **Conclusion**

Waves of criticism highlight the need to re-examine OfSTED, including its political stance, priorities and practices. Compared to school practitioners, inspectors are less accessible as research

participants, and their perspectives are often overlooked. This paper addresses this knowledge gap by incorporating former HMIs and OIs' voices into the discourse.

Our findings challenge some previously held assumptions that conflate individual inspectors with OfSTED. The study reveals that many inspectors, acting as OfSTED's messengers, are constrained by the prescriptive inspection framework, confusing methodologies, overwhelming targets, government policy priorities and rigid reporting guidelines. Consequently, the message they convey during inspections appears high-stakes for schools and low-information for parents.

Like school leaders, inspectors face challenges such as heavy workload, high attrition rates and increased scrutiny of their practices and professional judgement. Today, OfSTED requires not only a restructuring of its inspection framework, methodologies and reporting system but also a cultural shift to prioritise learners over political agendas.

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