Since 2010, government policy has favoured increasing institutional autonomy. Institutional self-evaluation is both an important part of the quality improvement process and a key input to external evaluation. External inspection also plays an important role, as does the publication of performance data and other information on individual institutions and on wider aspects of the education system.

Self-evaluation, school inspection and school improvement all rely heavily on the analysis of data. However, in January 2019, Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills published a draft new Education Inspection Framework[1] which has a greater focus on the ‘substance of education’. It intends to rebalance inspection by looking more closely at what is taught and how, with data on test and exam outcomes looked at in that context, rather than in isolation.

Early childhood education and care

Responsible bodies

Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills[2], is responsible for the inspection and regulation of day care and children’s social care, and the inspection of children’s services (including those for vulnerable children), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, youth work, work-based learning and adult education. It is a non-ministerial government department that reports directly to Parliament. Ofsted is headed by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI) of Education, Children’s Services and Skills, a Crown appointment, who has a statutory duty to make an annual report which is laid before Parliament.

Schools and early years settings are responsible for the self-evaluation and self-improvement of their institution. This is explored in greater depth in the sub-section ‘Schools’ self-evaluation’ below.

Approaches and methods for quality assurance

The phase of education and care spanning the period from birth to age five is known as the early years foundation stage (EYFS). The EYFS is delivered in a range of settings across public, private and voluntary providers under a common regulatory framework[3] (DfE, 2014; updated 2017). This sets out the standards that all early years providers must meet in relation to three key areas:

1. learning and development
2. assessment
3. safeguarding and welfare.

All early years provision is regulated and inspected under Ofsted’s Common Inspection Framework[4] (2015) and Early Years Inspection Handbook[5] (updated 2018). However, registration arrangements differ, and inspection criteria are applied differently, depending on whether the provision is considered to be part of the school system or not.
Outside of the school system, anyone who cares for children below the age of eight for more than two hours per day must register with Ofsted unless they are exempt, see the ‘Registration exemptions’ section of Childminders and Childcare Providers: Register with Ofsted (2018). Providers caring for children aged between birth and five years must register with Ofsted as an Early Years Register provider and follow the EYFS framework.

In January 2019, Ofsted published a consultation on a draft new education inspection framework. It is accompanied by a draft early years inspection handbook, which sets out in greater detail how the revised framework relates to early years settings. It is intended that, following this consultation, the new education inspection framework and handbook will be introduced in September 2019.

**Early Years Register providers**

All providers caring for children aged between birth and five years must register with Ofsted as an Early Years Register provider, as set out in Childminders and Childcare Providers: Register with Ofsted (2018). Registered providers are normally childminders or childcare providers on domestic or non-domestic premises, which include nurseries, nursery schools, pre-schools and kindergartens. In addition, schools, whether they are maintained schools, academies or independent schools, offering provision for children under the age of three, or running a separate pre-school, must register this provision. Under the Childcare Act 2006, the head of Ofsted, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI), is responsible for the registration and inspection of providers on the Early Years Register, and for enforcement where it appears that legal requirements are not being met.

As set out in the Ofsted guidance Being inspected as a childminder or childcare provider, new providers are generally inspected within 30 months of their registration date. All other providers are normally inspected at least once per four-year inspection cycle. The current inspection cycle runs from 1 August 2016 to 31 July 2020. Ofsted prioritises inspections and / or inspects providers more frequently where there are concerns; for example, all providers judged as ‘inadequate’ are re-inspected within six months. For further information, see the subheading ‘Inspection judgements’ below.

Providers normally receive half a day’s notice of an inspection; childminders and group providers that do not operate regularly receive no more than five days’ notice.

Inspections are carried out by Regulatory Inspectors employed by Ofsted and normally last one day. In preparation for an inspection, Ofsted inspectors gain a broad overview of the provider and its history, including information relating to any previous inspections and any self-evaluation document the provider has submitted (although completion of such a document is optional). During the inspection, inspectors spend as much time as possible gathering evidence about the quality of teaching, learning and care by:

- observing children at play;
- talking to staff and children;
- observing how staff and children interact;
- checking the children’s levels of understanding and if they take part in learning;
- talking to staff about the children’s knowledge, skills and abilities;
- observing care routines and how they’re used to support children’s personal development;
- evaluating staff knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework.

Inspectors also evaluate the accuracy of any self-evaluation supplied during an inspection, and the provider’s assessment of what needs to improve.
At the end of the inspection, inspectors give the provider verbal feedback on their findings and judgements, with concrete examples to support their conclusions. They also explain what needs to be done to improve aspects of provision, and / or to ensure that conditions of registration and / or the statutory requirements of the EYFS are met. A written report is produced, which is published on the Ofsted website.

Note: since April 2017, Ofsted has had full control of the selection, training and management of early years inspectors. Previously, two independent companies were contracted to undertake early years inspections on Ofsted’s behalf.

**Early years provision in schools**

Under Schedule 26 of the *School Standards and Framework Act 1998* [16], Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI) must keep the Secretary of State [17] informed about:

- the quality and standards of nursery education;
- the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of children for whom nursery education is provided.

Schedule 7 of the *Education Act 2005* [18] amended the *School Standards and Framework Act 1998* [16] and expanded these requirements so that the HMCI also has to report in writing on:

- how far relevant nursery education meets the needs of the range of children for whom it is provided;
- the quality of leadership and management in connection with the provision of relevant nursery education;
- the contribution of relevant nursery education to the well-being of the children for whom it is provided.

Nursery and reception classes [19] for children over the age of three in maintained primary schools and primary academies, which do not fall under the requirements to register as Early Years Register providers, are inspected according to the same inspection arrangements as schools. However, this early years provision may be given a separate inspection judgement to the overall judgement for the school.

**Primary and secondary education**

**Responsible bodies**

Responsibility for the quality assurance of primary and secondary education is shared between a number of bodies at national and local level and schools themselves. See below for further information.

**Department for Education (DfE)**

The Department for Education (DfE) [20] sets the overall policy context within which the quality assurance system operates. DfE’s aim is to foster a school-led school improvement system.

**Ofsted, the Inspectorate**

Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills [2] is responsible for the inspection and regulation of day care and children’s social care, and the inspection of children’s
services (including those for vulnerable children), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, youth
work, work-based learning and adult education. It is a non-ministerial government department which
reports directly to Parliament. Ofsted is headed by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI) of Education,
Children’s Services and Skills, a Crown appointment, who has a statutory duty to make an annual
report which is laid before Parliament.

Local authorities

Under the Education and Inspections Act 2006 [21], local authorities [22] are responsible for monitoring
and supporting the performance of the schools they maintain and for intervening when a school gives
cause for concern. They also have a duty to promote high standards in education.

Multi-academy trusts (MATs)

Multi-academy trusts (MATs) are formed of a group of academies [12] in a formal partnership
arrangement. They play a role in school improvement across the academies in their respective groups
(which are independent of local authority control), by identifying and addressing areas of weakness in
their schools.

Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs)

Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) have a responsibility to address underperformance in
academies and local authority maintained schools [11], and to build capacity in the academy system.
There are eight RSCs across eight regions of England. They act on behalf of the Secretary of State
[17] and are accountable to the National Schools Commissioner. Further information [23] is available on
the gov.uk website.

Teaching schools and teaching school alliances

Teaching schools are part of the school-led improvement system. They are outstanding schools (or
alliances of outstanding schools) which have the capacity to support and help other schools to
improve outcomes. See the gov.uk website [24] for further information.

Schools

Publicly funded maintained schools and academies in England have a high level of autonomy, carrying
first-line responsibility for their own quality assurance, referred to as ‘self-assessment’ or ‘self-
evaluation’. This provides the basis for planning, development and improvement in schools.

The prime responsibility for institutional self-evaluation and school improvement lies with
the governing board [25] and headteacher of each individual school. The headteacher and senior
management team monitor and evaluate the performance of all aspects of the work of the school in
order to set objectives for improvement. The governing board also needs to have an overview of the
performance and management of individual teachers and the school (including its own effectiveness),
and is expected to ensure that effective systems for monitoring and evaluation are in place.

Approaches and methods for quality assurance

External inspection of schools

This section covers the external inspection of maintained schools and academies, including nursery
classes in primary schools and post-compulsory education in secondary schools. This is carried out in
There are separate arrangements for the inspection of privately funded independent schools. See the article on the ‘Organisation of Private Education’ for further information.

Focus of inspection

As outlined on page 6 of the Common Inspection Framework (2015), inspections are primarily focused on evaluating how well individual children and learners benefit from the education offered by the school. The school’s response to individual needs, including its approach to helping learners to progress and fulfil their potential, is judged.

Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) and Senior HMIs carry out inspections. They are required to hold qualified teacher status (QTS). The number of inspectors involved (between one and five) varies according to the size and nature of the school.

Inspectors use all the available evidence to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the school and what it is like to be attending the school. Schools are given one of four grades (outstanding; good; requires improvement; and inadequate) for four key areas of their performance and their overall effectiveness, as described below.

Models of inspection

All external inspection of provision in maintained schools and academies, (including nursery classes in primary schools and post-compulsory education in secondary schools) is carried out under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. Full, routine inspections, known as ‘Section 5 inspections’, do not usually last longer than two days and the notification period is generally half a day. However, in cases where there are concerns about the school (e.g. relating to its curriculum, rapidly declining standards, safeguarding, or leadership), Ofsted may carry out an inspection without notice.

Schools must be inspected within five school years from the end of the last school year in which the previous inspection took place. However, they may be inspected more or less frequently than this, depending both on the overall rating that a school was given at its last inspection, and on the annual assessments of schools carried out by Ofsted. These assessments take into account both publicly available information and more in-depth data relating to pupils’ academic achievement and the school’s performance more generally. The views of parents can influence the choice of which schools are to be inspected.

The different models of inspection for maintained schools and academies for which there is no cause for concern are as follows.

a) Maintained schools and academies that were judged to be ‘outstanding’ at their last inspection are exempt from inspection and only undergo a full inspection if their performance drops.

b) All schools judged to be ‘good’ at their previous inspection receive a short, one-day inspection, approximately every four years, in order to check whether the previous grade awarded is still accurate. These short inspections do not affect the overall grade of the school or provider, but may trigger a full inspection if a change of grade is found to be necessary.

c) Pupil referral units, special schools and maintained nursery schools that were judged ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ at their previous inspection receive short inspections approximately every four years. They are not exempt from inspection if they are judged to be
‘outstanding’.

Short inspections

In 2017, Ofsted launched two consultations on the short inspection process of schools judged to be ‘good’ at their last inspection. The first consultation, which ran from June to August, focused on the length of time it takes to convert a short inspection of a school previously judged ‘good’ into a full Section 5 inspection. A second consultation, seeking views on proposals aimed at bringing more clarity to the short inspection process, ran from September to November 2017, with a report on the outcomes published in December 2017. As a result, the following arrangements have been in place since January 2018.

a) Inspectors have continued to convert short inspections to full inspections, normally within 48 hours, if there are serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour, or the quality of education.

b) If inspectors are not fully confident that the school would receive its current grade if a full Section 5 inspection were carried out, the short inspection does not immediately convert to a full inspection, but a letter is sent to the school setting out its strengths and priorities for improvement. A Section 5 inspection will then normally be carried out within one to two years, but no later than five years since the previous full inspection. This is intended to allow time for a school to address concerns and seek support.

c) Schools judged to ‘require improvement’ are re-inspected within a maximum period of 30 months.

d) Schools judged as ‘inadequate’ are either considered to have ‘serious weaknesses’ or to require ‘special measures’, making them ‘eligible for intervention’. Following the passing of the Education and Adoption Act 2016, maintained schools judged as ‘inadequate’ are converted into academies, whilst academies judged as inadequate may have their funding agreement terminated.

Note: schools deemed ‘eligible for intervention’ include schools judged ‘inadequate’; schools which have failed to comply with a warning notice issued to them; and schools which are notified by the relevant Regional Schools Commissioner that they are ‘coasting’ (see section below on ‘Evaluation of the education system as a whole’).

Framework for inspection

Following changes to the inspection system in September 2015, Ofsted introduced a Common Inspection Framework for use in four types of setting:

- registered early years providers
- maintained schools and academies
- non-association independent schools
- further education and skills providers.

This inspection framework includes a common set of judgements with consistent criteria for reaching those judgements. It aims to ensure comparability between education settings, as learners move from one provider or phase of education to another. The framework references relevant legislation throughout and is complemented by inspection handbooks for different phases / provider types, detailing how inspection criteria are applied in each setting.
In preparation for an inspection, Ofsted inspectors gather evidence to assess how well a school is performing. Inspectors use a range of evidence for the initial identification of issues to be followed up in inspection, such as performance data, the school's previous inspection report and parents' views. The inspection also takes full account of, and contributes to, a school's self-evaluation, as outlined in guidance [39] from the former National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) (subsumed within the Department for Education in April 2018).

Inspection process

Throughout an inspection, inspectors spend as much time as possible gathering evidence about the quality of teaching and learning by:

- scrutinising pupils’ work and talking to pupils about it;
- assessing pupils’ academic and vocational achievement;
- gauging pupils’ understanding and engagement in learning;
- observing on-site lessons and reviewing evidence relating to learning in off-site, alternative provision organised by the school;
- evaluating the achievement of specific groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, those with special educational needs (SEN) [40], and high ability pupils;
- talking to school leaders, governors, staff and pupils about the quality of teaching;
- examining school records and documentation, including data on attendance and the school’s self-assessment;
- assessing how far the historic and current performance of the school match.

During the inspection, the lead inspector ensures that the headteacher and senior staff are kept fully informed about, and involved in, the inspection. They are briefed on how the inspection team reaches its judgements and given opportunities to present evidence. Headteachers are also invited to participate in joint lesson observations with inspectors and to receive regular updates from the lead inspector.

Inspection judgements

When carrying out a full inspection, inspectors make graded judgements about the following areas, which enable them to make a judgement about the overall effectiveness of the setting:

- effectiveness of leadership and management
- quality of teaching, learning and assessment
- personal development, behaviour and welfare
- outcomes for children and learners.

Each of these four areas and the overall effectiveness of the school are judged using criteria relating to the following grading scale:

- grade 1: outstanding
- grade 2: good
- grade 3: requires improvement
- grade 4: inadequate.

Inspectors also consider a provider’s approach to safeguarding and how well staff promote learners’ welfare and keep them safe, as outlined in the Ofsted guidance document, *Inspecting Safeguarding in Early Years, Education and Skills* [41] (2018).

Early years provision (up to age 5) and sixth-form [42] provision (for ages 16-18/19) in a school may be
given a separate inspection judgement, which can influence the overall judgement of the school.

Inspection outcomes

At the end of the inspection, inspectors provide verbal feedback to the school on their findings and judgements, their provisional rating for the school, and any recommendations for improvement. Once the inspection report is compiled, copies are sent to the governing body, the headteacher and the local authority. The governing body must send a copy of the report to all parents and carers of pupils at the school within five working days of receiving it. The report is subsequently made publicly available and published on the Ofsted website.

Depending on the grade awarded to the school, further inspections or action, beyond addressing the recommendations for improvement, may be necessary. See the subheading ‘Models of inspection’ above for additional details.

New inspection framework 2019

In January 2019, Ofsted launched a consultation on a draft new Education Inspection Framework. The Framework aims to have a greater focus on the curriculum – what is taught and how it is taught – and to ensure that the analysis and review of data on pupil outcomes is set in that context, not in isolation. Proposals include:

- introducing a new ‘quality of education’ judgement built around the curriculum that will consider the provider’s educational intent, implementation and impact;
- inspectors continuing to look at teaching, assessment, attainment and progress as they do under the current inspection framework, but examining these elements in the context of the provider’s curriculum;
- judging ‘personal development’ and ‘behaviour and attitudes’ separately, with the aim of enhancing the inspection focus on each of these areas and enabling clearer reporting on both;
- increasing the length of short inspections (used for schools which were judged ‘good’ at their previous inspection) from one to two days, to allow enough time to gather data under the new inspection criteria;
- introducing on-site preparation for inspectors, which would involve the lead inspector visiting the school the day before the inspection to talk with school leaders.

Following the consultation, it is intended that the new Framework will be introduced in September 2019.

Evaluation of the education system as a whole

There is no single body responsible for, or single process for, the overall evaluation of the education system in England. What follows is information about how central government scrutinises the school system as a whole and how government departments and local authorities involved in the education system are themselves scrutinised and held to account.

Every year the Department for Education (DfE) publishes information on the performance of pupils in all schools.

The DfE also assesses publicly funded mainstream primary and secondary schools’ performance against defined ‘floor standards’, based on pupil attainment in national assessments. This aims to identify underperformance and trigger intervention (see the articles ‘Assessment in Primary Education’ and ‘Assessment in General Secondary Education’).
Guidance from the DfE on primary and secondary school accountability, states that, in 2018, for primary schools to meet the floor standard:

- either at least 65% of pupils meet the expected standard in English reading, English writing and mathematics;
- or the school achieves sufficient progress scores in all three of those subjects. (Progress scores measure the average progress made by pupils between the end of Key Stage 1 and the end of Key Stage 2, aged 6/7 and 10/11 respectively.)

For secondary schools, the 'Progress 8' measure acts as the floor standard. This determines students’ progress across eight subjects at Key Stage 4 (the end of compulsory full-time education, age 16). A school’s Progress 8 score is calculated as the average of its pupils’ Progress 8 scores, and this average is then compared with the progress of pupils with similar starting points, based on end of Key Stage 2 assessments (aged 10/11), in other schools.

Following the passing of the Education and Adoption Act 2016, a new category of schools requiring improvement was introduced, called ‘coasting schools’. These are schools where, over the previous three consecutive years, pupils have not fulfilled their potential. This is measured using schools’ performance and progress data for the three relevant years. Further detail on the measures for 2018 is in the DfE’s accountability guidance documents for primary (pp. 9-10) and secondary schools (p.14).

Ofsted also provides an evaluation of the sectors of the education system which it inspects in its annual report. It also publishes a range of reports evaluating provision in specific curriculum areas and aspects of social care, childcare, education, and learning and skills.

The House of Commons (the lower house of the UK Parliament) has a system of Select Committees which shadow government departments and examine their work. The terms of reference (TOR) of the Education Committee are to examine the administration, expenditure and policy of the Department for Education (DfE). The TOR also cover the work of its associated arms length bodies, including Ofsted. In addition, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the accounts relating to public expenditure.

HM Treasury, the UK’s economics and finance ministry, has overall responsibility for ensuring that public funds are spent on activities that provide the greatest benefits to society, and that they are spent in the most efficient way. HM Treasury also provides guidance (known as the ‘Green Book’) to all central government departments and executive agencies on how past and present policies, programmes and projects, should be evaluated. This is complemented by the ‘Magenta Book’, which provides guidance on how evaluation should be designed and undertaken.

The National Audit Office (NAO) scrutinises public spending on behalf of Parliament. Independent of government, it audits the accounts of all central government departments and agencies, including the DfE, as well as a wide range of other public bodies. The NAO reports to Parliament on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which these bodies have used public money.

Support for school improvement

Local authorities (LAs)

Under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, all local authorities (LAs) in England have a responsibility to monitor and support the performance of the schools they maintain, and to intervene when a school gives cause for concern. They also have a duty to promote high standards in education and to promote the educational fulfilment of every child.
Where a school is found to be ‘eligible for intervention’ (see subsection above ‘Models of Inspection’), LAs also have certain powers under the Education Act 1996 [59]. This includes the power to suspend the delegated budget of the school and to appoint an interim executive board of governors [25].

Multi-academy trusts (MATs)

Multi-academy trusts (MATs) are formed of a group of academies [12] in a formal partnership arrangement. A MAT plays a role in school improvement across the academies in its group by identifying and addressing areas of weakness in its schools. Guidance [60] for MATs from the Department for Education, covers their role in school improvement and provides good practice examples for MATs to use within their own trusts.

Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs)

There are eight Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) across eight geographic regions. They act on behalf of the Secretary of State [17] and are accountable to the National Schools Commissioner. RSCs have a range of responsibilities including:

- intervening in underperforming academies and building capacity in the academy system. Intervention may take the form of commissioning support for an academy, issuing a warning notice to an academy, terminating a funding agreement with an academy, or identifying a new sponsor for an academy;
- addressing underperformance in maintained schools [11]. This may involve issuing a warning notice to a school which is concerning in terms of its performance, leadership and governance, or safety. It may also include, under the terms of the Education and Adoption Act 2016 [34], converting any maintained school which has been judged ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted into an academy;
- tackling ‘coasting’ schools, where pupil attainment and progress have fallen below a specified level over three consecutive years. RSCs determine the best action to take with regard to a coasting school. In the case of maintained schools, this could involve converting the school into an academy.

The Department for Education (DfE) produces guidance [61] (updated in 2018) for local authorities and RSCs about their responsibilities relating to schools causing concern.

Teaching schools and teaching school alliances

Teaching schools are part of the sector-led, self-improving system. They are outstanding schools which have been nationally recognised for their capacity to support and help other schools to improve. They operate across eight regions, matched to those of the Regional Schools Commissioners (see above). They may work alone, or as part of an alliance with other teaching schools. Further information is available from the Teaching Schools Council [62].

Strategic School Improvement Fund

Funding is available through the Department for Education’s Strategic School Improvement Fund: emergency funding [63] in exceptional circumstances to help schools deal with imminent or unexpected failure.

Schools’ self-evaluation

The school inspection system places the onus on schools to be proactive and demonstrate to inspectors that they can not only diagnose where their strengths and weaknesses lie, but also do
something about improving and developing them. Schools can present a brief written summary of their self-evaluation to inspectors, although this self-evaluation should not be produced solely for inspection purposes.

Self-evaluation, school improvement and school inspection rely heavily on the analysis of data. School-level and pupil-level data is collected from schools via an annual census [64], and is then matched with data on individual pupils’ achievements in national tests (where these exist) and public examinations. Headteachers and governors are expected to make full use of the available data to understand the performance of different groups of pupils in their school and to act on this information in their school improvement planning. Inspectors use the analysis and data to raise their own hypotheses and act as a starting point for discussions with schools.

A number of tools are available to support schools’ self-evaluation, including the Analyse School Performance Service [65], accessible through the Department for Education (DfE)’s sign-in website. This offers access to a range of school and pupil performance data. In addition, the Fischer Family Trust (FFT) Aspire [66] tool allows schools to compare their attainment and progress to both national data and similar schools.

The former National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) (subsumed within the Department for Education in April 2018), issued guidance [67] for schools on good practice and resources for self-evaluation.

Historical note

The growth of school autonomy, including in terms of the school accountability / quality assurance framework, has dominated reforms in the schools sector over the past decade or more. The Education Act 2005 [18], which repealed the School Inspections Act 1996 [68], introduced a new accountability framework, which placed self-evaluation (through the use of performance data) at the centre of the inspection process. The 2005 Act provided the legislative basis for reforms set out in the joint education department and Ofsted publication, A New Relationship with Schools [69] (DfES and Ofsted, 2004). As outlined by a Department for Education (DfE) research report [70] published in 2014, these reforms have fostered a shift towards a self-improving system, led by both formal and informal networks of schools.

Article last reviewed March 2019.