**Requires Improvement**

Why primary schools need a distinct

model of inspection

The Oxford School of Thought (OST) is **the** primary education think tank – the first of its kind in the UK. We regard learning as a continuum, and we recognise the powerful and enduring influence of primary education across a lifetime of learning.

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## Summary

OST proposes a distinct model of school inspection for primary schools, highlighting the need for a framework that reflects the [unique nature of primary education](https://www.unicef.org/education/primary-education).

The current inspection model, which primarily caters to secondary schools, fails to address the developmental and educational needs of primary school children. This has led to a lack of focus on the holistic, child-centered approaches necessary for young learners.

The document emphasises that primary education fosters curiosity, relationships, and a broad, engaging curriculum, factors [critical to the early stages of lifelong learning](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/nov/27/primary-school-importance).

To improve outcomes for students and to support teachers, the proposed inspection model should focus on these aspects, providing a more supportive, collaborative, and developmental approach to school evaluation.

The paper outlines some key components for a primary-specific inspection framework, such as the importance of cross-curricular links, teacher-pupil relationships, inclusivity, and the integration of the school within its community and primary teaching experience for inspectors.

By calling for a developmental and collaborative inspection model the paper aims to shift away from punitive measures and towards a system that encourages continuous improvement, addresses the well-being of both students and staff, and contributes to the broader goal of fostering lifelong learning.

This new approach is seen as essential for enhancing the education system, teacher retention, and children's mental health, and is framed as a necessary step in responding to recent government reviews on curriculum, assessment, and inclusion.

## **Introduction**

A high-quality inspection model is part of an effective school system. The [anticipated revision](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-sets-out-proposals-for-fairer-education-inspections-and-new-more-detailed-report-cards) to the inspection framework needs to go beyond addressing the urgency to replace one-word judgements, and significantly change the approach to inspecting schools.

Fundamentally, school inspection should be shaped differently to fit the secondary and primary phases and reflect their unique purposes. We believe there is a case for a separate framework for primary schools.

Current Government reviews into Curriculum and Assessment, SEND and Ed Tech herald revised outlooks for schools and the review of the inspection framework should be part of that process, enabling better outcomes for children and a motivated teaching profession.

We believe that primary schools and early years education settings need a distinctive model which celebrates and enhances how young children learn and their teachers create inclusive, motivating and challenging environments appropriate to children’s developmental stage so that they become life-long learners.

The reasons for a distinctive model and the principles to inform the design of such a model are set out in this paper. Early years settings are a critical part of primary education and we believe that similar considerations apply to them.

This is intended to open up a wide-ranging and evidence-informed debate, involving children as well as parents, professionals, policy-makers and other stakeholders. Schools will gain greater confidence and become vibrant communities of learners - at every level. We intend that this paper will be a catalyst for making such a vision a reality.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review calls for greater breadth and balance, we believe that it is essential to shape and introduce a model of accountability which both helps to identify the strengths and weaknesses of schools and empowers schools to improve. As such, it will need to incorporate an expectation of engagement with current research.

Together, leaders and teachers must be engaged in a perpetual quest to discover, ‘What works here?’ and be attentive to evidence-based change and possibilities thinking. Such a model can – and must – encourage and enable schools to maintain an emphasis on high quality education and to adopt more holistic and engaging approaches to enhance children’s learning. This will also have significant benefits for children’s mental health and well-being and teacher recruitment and retention.

There is an emerging consensus for a developmental model. A recent NAHT survey, [Resetting the relationship: Ofsted reform](https://www.naht.org.uk/Portals/0/PDF%27s/Reports/Resetting%20the%20relationship%20-%20Ofsted%20reform.pdf?ver=2025-01-17-090549-800), shows that more than 9 in 10 of school leaders do not have confidence in Ofsted to design an effective new inspection framework. 76% of those surveyed called for a completely new framework and inspection methodology.

An approach in which inspection is part of a supportive and collaborative long-term approach to school improvement based on self-evaluation, would help to restore confidence. OST therefore proposes, as part of any change, a model for early years and primary school inspection.

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## Key issues to consider in the primary education context

Primary and early years education attempt to harness children’s natural curiosity in order to create and foster lifelong learners. That initial engagement is vital to ensure progression through the steps needed to adopt the appropriate skills for life linked to the accumulation of knowledge.

Relationships are vital to the success of any primary school. It should be the first consideration when conducting an inspection or self evaluation. The relationship of the class teacher with the children is crucial to the development, progress, well being and attainment of the class for which that teacher has responsibility. This extends across almost all areas of the child’s school life. Relationships between staff, leadership, governors, parents and the wider community underpin the success of the child and the school. Successful relationships lead to supported, confident children, with high self-esteem who reach high attainment levels.

Ethos***,*** purpose and aims of the school should underpin the relationships and the work of the school and evidence of the ethos should be apparent in all areas of school life as it informs decision making processes, policies and relationships.

The learning environmentof the school should reflect the ethos and ensure that the school is secure, accessible to all, well-maintained, and supportive of children in their learning. This will include purposeful displays and well thought out resources which support the curriculum, reflect and value the cultural and ethnic heritage of the pupils, value their views and initiatives, promote inclusivity and showcase achievements. The learning environment will underpin the curriculum.

The curriculumin a primary school should beholistic, broad, and developmentally appropriate with evident cross-curricular links which foster a cohesive approach in parallel to the way in which young children learn; and a focus on hands-on exploration and rich experiences which support the practice and consolidation of different types of knowledge, skills and concepts associated with a wide range of subject disciplines. There should be a balanced approach which values and encourages physical activity, including sport, all art forms and creativity – alongside more academic subjects and the spiritual, social, cultural, and moral development of children. Well planned educational visits and learning beyond the classroom should have significant emphasis and recognition as contributing to the development of children, enhancing learning, fostering inquiry and enriching the curriculum.

Teaching should be exciting, motivating, well-structured, purposeful and engaging in order to foster curiosity, innovation, teamwork and a range of outcomes. Differentiation for SEND pupils should be easily apparent and inclusion and diversity embedded.

Planning, assessment and record keepingare vital to ensure progress but must be meaningful and based on observations, thorough knowledge of the children, and ongoing evaluation of children’s work. Record keeping should enable staff to check progress of individuals, feed into decisions about and future planning for individual pupils and be accessible for parents. Teacher’s workload should not be determined by mindless data collection.

Staff, including teachers, need to feel valued as a part of the school community. A school and inspection must consider the retention of high quality staff who feel they can contribute to the well-being of their pupils. The evolving life of the school and creative ways of engaging children in the curriculum should be welcomed and encouraged. A healthy turnover of staff brings new ideas and to that end a diverse staffing group enhances the experience of the children. But consideration should also be given to a school which has a significant number of new staff who need time to become properly embedded in the ethos of the school.

Governance and leadershipare integral to the successful running of a primary school, being aware of strengths and weaknesses, with governors being involved in school self-evaluation. Headteachers will be working on occasions in the classroom with teachers and governors should have links with staff, parents and children.

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## The case for a specific primary inspection framework

While external assessment of the work of a school is valued and helps teachers refine their practice, the present framework is not sufficiently honed to target the distinct learning opportunities within the primary classroom.

There is a profound difference in the structure of the learning environment when one teacher is responsible for the whole learning of thirty mixed ability children, as opposed to the weekly exposure of a group of usually similar ability secondary children to a specific academic subject.

Primary educational settings are much smaller than their secondary partners and are often so small that mixed ages are in the same class. This means that often a teacher is responsible for more than one subject throughout the school and with a full time class responsibility.

Very young children do not necessarily understand the divisions which adults create between subjects, but this does not limit their interest in the pursuit of knowledge. Inspectors embracing a cross curricular approach rather than specific subject knowledge will be able to notice the skill required to advance learning. Especially in the Early Years, growth in knowledge is achieved through activity and the practical application of skills. Understanding young children, how they learn and fostering a love of learning is paramount. Making brain connections is time sensitive. NHS England points out that 90% of brain development happens during the [early years.](https://www.nhs.uk/start-for-life/early-learning-development/?WT.mc_ID=Search_Brand_HLE2425&wt.tsrc=paid_search&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAqrG9BhAVEiwAaPu5zvgwA21ypPm86j7gMV0gfIJCFIb-_KtbenxHlR_BYzPsyw23XBec0xoCspQQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds)

Skilled practitioners move children forward in their learning by following a child’s lead, asking those enabling questions and giving time for children to explore and to wonder.

It is imperative for inspectors to have valuable primary classroom experience, an understanding of the dynamics of early childhood settings, and the family learning environment that is present within primary schools.

The views of parents about their school are important. The vital link between parents – the first teachers in a child’s life – and the teacher should be highly valued. That partnership continues through the primary phase and goes far beyond homework. This is about continuing learning beyond school in tandem with the child’s burgeoning awareness of the world through the experience of the primary classroom.

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## How primary inspection could work

Every inspection needs to address the following questions in the context of the aims, ethos and phase of the school or educational setting:

*What is being done?*

*How is it being done?*

*Is it being done well?*

*How could it be improved?*

**Elements of any inspection**

* The education and development of children
* Institutional management and governance
* Curriculum development
* Physical and mental welfare of staff, pupils and families
* Personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
* Positive integration within the community
* Inclusivity

**Elements specifically for a primary school inspection**

* The importance of encouraging the shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation in the way young children learn
* An understanding that cross curricular links mean that children often do not recognise the distinction between subject areas
* A cross curricular understanding is an important asset for a primary school inspector, recognising progress and achievement across a broad, balanced and integrated curriculum
* Recognition of the learning environment when one teacher is responsible for the whole learning of thirty mixed ability children on a daily, hourly basis for a complete academic year
* Taking account of the smaller nature of primary schools and the multiplicity of roles held by individual staff
* Consideration of the limited human and financial resources for a management structure when compared to a secondary school, frequently the primary headteacher’s role is to be part of the teaching resource
* The important role played by a primary school in relation to families and the life of the community

## Concluding comments

OST is concerned that over at least two decades there has been a reduction in the agency and autonomy of school leaders and teachers whose purpose is now solely to meet government and Ofsted standards, objectives and demands in an increasingly prescribed manner. This kind of centralised control has resulted in schools not having to think for themselves and a narrowing of the curriculum.

OST hopes that this paper will support Ofsted in their aim to make inspections developmental, collaborative and supportive, schools should not feel that they have been subjected to a punitive process without positive support given for improvement.

Issues concerning cost benefits, a timetable for a school inspection, and other detailed aspects are not covered in this report and can be found in our [introductory paper](https://docs.google.com/document/u/0/d/1_uJToDUFi28amgeAxyrdjRaHK--YBpZQ6ld4jYDcZQ0/edit)

We support views being expressed elsewhere, that safeguarding is [an issue for local authorities](https://beyondofsted.org.uk/).

OST is aware that good work is [being piloted elsewhere](https://www.tes.com/magazine/analysis/general/could-self-evaluation-model-work-mat-inspection) to improve the inspection of schools. We hope that the ideas set out above will be carefully considered and we would be happy to discuss in detail how a suitable inspection framework could be developed.

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