

The Big Listen

Your response

Are you responding on behalf of an organisation?

Yes - please provide name of organisation (optional)

Natspec

If yes, where does your organisation operate?

Nationally

Your response

Please tell us in which capacity you are completing this survey. (Tick all that apply)

Other (please specify):

Learning provider membership organisation

If you are responding in a professional capacity, please specify where you work.

Other (please specify):

Learning provider membership organisation

Question

We know that our inspection reports are important. Below, we have set out the aims that we believe every inspection report should achieve. Some of these are already required by law. We would like to know your views on these.

How important are each of the following to you?

	Very important	Important	Neutral	Not very important	Not at all important
Make sure it is clear what attending the provision is like for the learner, such as whether they are having a good learning experience and feel safe.		X			
Make sure, where relevant, that it is clear for employers what the provider is like and how it works with employers.			X		
Make it clear how well the most disadvantaged learners gain knowledge and skills, achieve and are supported by the provider.	X				
Make it clear how leaders and staff create a safe, disciplined and positive environment and the impact this has on the behaviour and attitudes of learners.	X				
Make it clear how leaders, managers and those responsible for governance ensure that the education and training have a positive impact on all learners.	X				
Make it clear how the curriculum should support learners to develop their knowledge and skills beyond the purely academic, technical or vocational. This includes how the provider supports learners' mental health, develops their character and promotes equality of opportunity.	X				
Make it clear how the provider's curriculum develops the knowledge, skills and behaviours its learners need, how teachers teach and assess, and the outcomes that learners achieve as a result of the education they have received.	X				
Where relevant, make it clear that apprenticeship training gives apprentices the knowledge, skills and behaviours that contribute to their workplace and help them progress to their intended job role, other sustained employment, promotion or higher level of apprenticeship/qualification.			X		
Make it clear that inspectors have considered learners' progress, their achievement and their progression to positive destinations, and how this has affected the overall judgements about the provider.	X				
Make clear what the provider does to support learners with SEND and those	X				

Question

We know that our inspection reports are important. Below, we have set out the aims that we believe every inspection report should achieve. Some of these are already required by law. We would like to know your views on these.

How important are each of the following to you?

	Very important	Important	Neutral	Not very important	Not at all important
with high needs.					

Your views

Please tell us what you think Ofsted's priorities should be when reporting on inspection, and why, and what we can improve.

Comments:

- Ofsted's primary objective should be the objective reporting of inspection findings against the criteria published in its inspection framework. The reports should help learners (and their families) and SEND commissioners understand the quality of the provision of different providers and make fair comparisons between providers to support the making of informed decisions about their FE options and. The reports should give providers useful information in terms of understanding their strengths and weaknesses and how they might improve their provision.
- Nationally organised, cross-regional moderation of reports would lead to greater consistency in length, detail, use of examples and qualifying statements. It would also support greater consistency in the awarding of overall grades and grades for provision types and judgement areas.
- The use of sub-headings, rather than continuous prose, would help readers better navigate the section, 'What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?'

Question

Our ambition is that Ofsted education inspections should always do the following.

How important are each of the following to you?

	Very important	Important	Neutral	Not very important	Not at all important
The way we carry out inspections is consistent from place to place and across the same type of FE and skills provision and provider.		X			
The way we carry out inspections is consistent across the same phases of education offered by different providers, such as sixth-form provision in schools and sixth-form provision in colleges.		X			
Inspections are long enough to allow inspectors to form accurate judgements.		X			
The time between notifying an FE and skills provider about a forthcoming inspection and carrying out the inspection is short but appropriate.		X			
We consider the context of the provider's local area(s) as part of our inspections, and in the judgements that we make, accepting that many providers operate regionally or nationally.			X		

Your views

Do you have any comments on Ofsted's current inspection practices and whether they should change?

Comments:

While the statements above do not refer to 'college', we have presumed that this was an oversight and answered as if the statements read, 'school, college, AP' etc. This omission does not give us confidence that senior leaders within Ofsted fully appreciate the value of FE provision.

While we want to see consistency across inspections, we need to see a willingness to apply specific approaches relevant and proportionate to provision and provider types. The judgements and expectations of providers, in terms of quality of provision/standards need to be consistent, but inspectors will need to be flexible in terms of specific activities completed in order to arrive at those judgements.

In terms of improvements to inspection practice in relation to young people with SEND in FES settings, we would like to see Ofsted

- Improve consistency across regions in application of inspection methodology within provision of the same/similar type, reporting and assigning of grades, e.g. through nationally coordinated cross-region moderation.
- Improve consistency in terms of depth of inspection across high needs provision, regardless of FES provider type. While specialist colleges can expect a greater degree of scrutiny on the basis that high needs provision typically accounts for all of their provision, it would be helpful if reports on GFES, where the vast majority of high needs-funded 16-25 year olds are enrolled, made more explicit reference to the quality of high needs provision. Young people with SEND and their families, and commissioners would then be able to make more informed comparisons between potential providers. This may require more inspection time within GFES to be spent on reviewing high needs provision and greater use of specialist high needs inspectors. Ofsted should also ensure its annual report includes a proportionate analysis of the quality of high needs provision across both mainstream and specialist settings, unlike in recent years where the focus has been either solely or largely on specialist colleges.
- Increase the notice period to 6 days for specialist colleges, bringing it into line with the revised notice period for GFES to help ensure a level playing field.
- Ensure proportionality in terms of the inspector tariff, so that very small specialist providers are not faced with an unnecessarily large inspection team and avoid adding shadow inspectors to teams inspecting very small providers. We are aware of at least one instance where a provider with fewer than 15 learners was subject to a 3-day inspection by a 5-strong team.
- Apply a greater flexibility of approach to inspections and be more responsive to specific learner cohorts (e.g. those with PMLD/accessing end of life care). This might include a greater willingness to request and listen to staff explanations of what an inspector is seeing in sessions where appropriate pedagogy might be substantially different from that used with more cognitively able learners.
- Better understand learners' needs in advance so that the inspection team is appropriately staffed to be able to communicate with learners and staff and to have sufficient familiarity with the provision type to be able to make informed judgements
- Make available a desk-based expert to whom high needs inspectors can refer during inspection when they would benefit from specialist advice on a particular cohort (e.g. learners with PMLD)
- Use more accessible tools and a longer timeframe to hear learner voice than the standard learner survey which excludes many learners with SEND from giving their feedback.

Ofsted must also refrain from attempting to give notice of inspection during half term. This happened twice in the February 2024 half term to specialist colleges, one of which was able to defer after a stressful series of miscommunications and one of which proceeded with the inspection but experienced increased anxiety as a result. Ofsted should also be more sensitive when scheduling inspections of providers with senior leaders who act as OIs. One very small specialist college was recently inspected in a week where their principal was out on inspection the week before and the week after.

Question

Do you agree with the following statements?

	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Don't know
Ofsted holds FE and skills providers to account for the quality of education and training that learners receive.	X			
Ofsted holds providers to account for keeping learners safe.	X			
Ofsted holds FE and skills providers to account for the employability and life chances of learners.	X			
The number of good and outstanding FE and skills providers in England is truly reflective of the overall quality of the FE and skills sector.				X
Ofsted has an equal impact on the performance of different types of FE and skills provision (for example, education programmes for young people, apprenticeships, adult learning programmes) and providers (for example, FE colleges, independent learning providers, adult learning providers).				X
Ofsted should be able to inspect part-time provision for 14- to 16-year-old learners who are in FE colleges but not registered at a school (we currently do not have the power to do this).		X		
Ofsted should be able to inspect higher technical qualifications.		X		

Your views

How do you think Ofsted could best raise standards and improve lives for learners?

Comments:

- Ofsted's primary role should be to judge the quality of provision, leaving the raising of standards and improving of lives to the providers who work directly with children and young people. However, there are changes that Ofsted could make to be more supportive of providers in their quality improvement role. Examples include making the provision to learning providers of information to support QI a publicly stated key purpose of inspection; giving providers a full transcript of the information shared in the end of inspection de-briefing meetings (rather than relying on exhausted staff taking copious notes at the end of an exhausting week); running sector-specific events in which analysis of recent reports is presented to providers as a way of sharing effective practice or key success indicators (building on the support events some regional HMIs have helpfully begun to offer Natspec members and on the annual national events led by the HMI with the policy lead for high needs); engaging in more professional dialogue with staff during inspections; an increased willingness to engage in learning visits to improve inspector understanding of more specialist types of provision and to engage in, lead, and share findings from research.
- Ofsted should further develop its understanding of provision for learners with SEND, including those with more complex needs, and design more appropriate methodologies for its inspection. This will require strong leadership from a senior policy adviser whose role is to oversee high needs inspections in FE and Skills settings.
- Ofsted should inspect any provision directly commissioned by LAs using high needs funding, and not just where the provider has its own ESFA contract.
- Ofsted should inspect residential provision in specialist FE settings for 19-25 year olds with EHC Plans, which are funded by ESFA for 16-19 education, where the FE setting carries out no CQC-regulated activities, and is therefore not subject to CQC inspection. Currently a small number of specialist colleges are subject to Ofsted inspection under the SCCIF, where they offer residential provision for 16-18 year olds but undertake no CQC-regulated activities. However, there is an inspection vacuum for specialist residential FE colleges in a similar position whose learners are aged 19 – 25 (with EHCPs).

Your views

Do you have any comments on Ofsted's openness, and how easy it is to provide feedback to help us improve?

Comments:

- It is too early to say if the new complaints process will have the desired impact but it is a step in the right direction.
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- Inspectors are not always arriving with sufficient understanding of the learner group in specialist colleges to communicate with learners effectively or to be appropriately sensitive as they go about their business. Examples include having no/too few members of the inspection team being able to converse with deaf students and teachers; speaking openly about a safeguarding issue where the college had taken a strategic decision to share highly sensitive information with staff on a need-to-know basis; asking a student with life-limiting illness about their longer-term plans for the future, despite being briefed about the student's likely life expectancy; leaning on a student's wheelchair from behind and talking about the student as if they were not present).
-
- Natspec has been able to have frank conversations with key staff at Ofsted who have shown a willingness to listen, but progress on addressing issues has been slow. It appears that Ofsted colleagues are sometimes unwilling or unable to act on feedback or to take up offers of support. For example, Ofsted colleagues were initially enthusiastic about an offer from Natspec to help upskill high needs inspectors on PMLD learners' needs and pedagogy through the production of a video training resource, but this was later rejected. Natspec wrote an article for an internal magazine for members on the benefits of being an Ofsted Inspector to help encourage more senior staff from within specialist colleges to take up the role. Again, Ofsted initially welcomed this as one means by which to address a gap in expertise, but then withdrew permission for the article to be published. Ofsted's policies on what it can and can't engage with appear to be restricting its ability to grow the expertise it needs to conduct high quality inspections of provision for FE learners with SEND, particularly those with more complex needs.

Question

We know that our inspection reports are important. Below, we have set out the aims that we believe every inspection report should cover. Some of these are already required by law. We would like to know your views on these.

How important are each of the following to you?

	Very important	Important	Neutral	Not very important	Not at all important
Make it clear what attending the provision or service is like for the child or learner, such as whether children and learners are safe and happy there.		X			
Make it clear how effective the provision or service is, including whether it is meeting children and learners' individual needs.	X				
Make it clear how well the provider or service understands the outcomes for children and learners with SEND and/or in AP, and how that understanding informs the provision they offer to support children and learners.		X			
Explain how well the provider or service is performing in relation to the quality of local SEND or support services (for example, where the health or local authority provision is weak but the school's provision is strong).			X		
Explain how effectively a setting or service supports children and learners with SEND and prepares them to move on to a suitable and appropriately challenging next phase of education and/or adulthood.	X				
Explain how effectively the provider or service works with parents and carers and responds to children's ambitions.	X				
Explain how effectively the provider or service works with partners to address the needs of children with SEND in the local area.		X			

Your views

Please tell us what you think Ofsted's priorities should be when reporting on provision, AP or services for children and learners with SEND and why, and what you think we could improve.

Comments:

- If the quality of a provider's provision is impacted by the performance of the LA (e.g. poorly written or out-of-date EHCPs making it difficult to construct programmes to help learners' achieve aspirations; access to LA-commissioned services, such as SLT, not extended to post-16 students/FE providers, LA not meeting statutory deadline for agreeing places impacting on smooth school to college transitions), Ofsted should make this clear in the provider's report. This should also be evidence that is considered in SEND area inspections.
- In SEND area inspections, Ofsted should explicitly report on how well local areas are meeting their statutory requirements under the Children and Families Act, as this is not being done by any other body. In due course, information from the local area inclusion dashboards should form part of the evidence considered pre-inspection. Reports might also cover more strongly the perspectives of young people and families on how well they think their needs are being met, and of education providers on how effectively the LA works with them as a commissioner and funder of services.
- Note 'young people' or 'learners' and 'colleges' should be, but are not, referenced in all statements above. This does not give us confidence that senior leaders within Ofsted fully appreciate the value of FE provision for learners with SEND.

Question

Our ambition is that Ofsted inspections should always do the following.

How important are each of the following to you?

	Very important	Important	Neutral	Not very important	Not at all important
Work with leaders and practitioners during the inspection to understand whether the school, AP, service or wider local area partnership is meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND.	X				
Work with leaders and practitioners during the inspection to understand whether the school, AP, service or wider local area partnership is offering a positive experience for children and young people with SEND that will improve their future outcomes.	X				
Use any available data on the outcomes of children and young people to understand whether the school, AP, service or wider local area partnership is offering them a positive experience that will improve their future outcomes.		X			
Use feedback from parents and carers, and children where appropriate, to understand whether the school, AP, service or wider local area partnership is meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND.	X				

Your views

Do you have any comments on Ofsted's current inspection practices and whether they should change?

Comments:

- Improve consistency across regions in application of inspection methodology, reporting and assigning of grades, e.g. through nationally coordinated cross-region moderation.
- Improve consistency in terms of depth of inspection across high needs provision, regardless of FES provider type. While specialist colleges can expect a greater degree of scrutiny on the basis that high needs provision typically accounts for all of their provision, it would be helpful if reports on GFEs, where the vast majority of high needs-funded 16-25 year olds are enrolled, made more explicit reference to the quality of high needs provision. Young people with SEND and their families, and commissioners would then be able to make more informed comparisons between potential providers. This may require more inspection time within GFEs to be spent on reviewing high needs provision and greater use of specialist high needs inspectors. Ofsted should also ensure its annual report includes a proportionate analysis of the quality of high needs provision across both mainstream and specialist settings, unlike in recent years where the focus has been either solely or largely on specialist colleges.
- Increase the notice period to 6 days for specialist colleges, bringing it into line with the revised notice period for GFEs to help ensure a level playing field.
- Ensure proportionality in terms of the inspector tariff, so that very small specialist providers are not faced with an unnecessarily large inspection team and avoid adding shadow inspectors to teams inspecting very small providers. We are aware of at least one instance where a provider with fewer than 15 learners was subject to a 3-day inspection by a 5-strong team.
- Apply a greater flexibility of approach to inspections and be more responsive to specific learner cohorts (e.g. those with complex needs/life-limiting illness). This might include a greater willingness to request and listen to staff explanations of what an inspector is seeing in sessions where appropriate pedagogy might be substantially different from that used with more cognitively able learners.
- Better understand learners' needs in advance so that the inspection team is appropriately staffed to be able to communicate with learners and staff and to have sufficient familiarity with the provision type to be able to make informed judgements
- Make available a desk-based expert to whom high needs inspectors can refer during inspection when they would benefit from specialist advice on a particular cohort (e.g. learners with PMLD)
- Use more accessible tools and a longer timeframe to hear learner voice than the standard learner survey which excludes many learners with SEND from giving their feedback.
- While we agree that Ofsted should be using available outcomes data to help them understand the impact of the provider/service on the outcomes of children and young people, we would like Ofsted to recognise the paucity of relevant, nationally collected outcomes data for children and young people with SEND, for whom qualification achievement or progression to higher education or employment may not be appropriate.

Question

Do you agree with the following statements?

	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Don't know
Ofsted holds early years settings to account for the quality of their SEND provision.				X
Ofsted holds mainstream schools to account for the quality of their SEND provision.			X	
Ofsted holds schools, independent providers and PRUs to account for the quality of their AP.				X
Ofsted holds special schools (including special academies, independent and non-maintained special schools) to account for the quality of their SEND provision.				X
Ofsted holds further education and skills providers to account for the quality of their SEND provision.	X			
Ofsted holds local areas to account for how well they support children with SEND and other vulnerable children, including the provision and services they commission for children.			X	
An unintended consequence of Ofsted's inspection and regulation is that mainstream schools exclude, suspend, off-roll, or place off-site, pupils with SEND.	X			
An unintended consequence of Ofsted's inspection and regulation is that mainstream schools are less inclusive of pupils with SEND, so they are not offered tailored provision off site or in special schools.				X
The number of good and outstanding SEND and/or AP providers and services in England gives a strong indication of the overall quality of the SEND and/or AP system.			X	
Ofsted should be able to inspect groups of providers as a single entity to understand their overall impact on children and learners. These include multi-academy trusts and owners of large independent school providers or residential care homes.				X
Ofsted should have an oversight role for smaller unregulated settings such as unregistered AP.	X			

Your views

How do you think Ofsted could best raise standards and improve lives for children and learners with SEND or in AP settings?

Comments:

As the membership body for specialist FE providers, our responses are limited to further education settings and young people.

- Ofsted's primary role should be to judge the quality of provision, leaving the raising of standards and improving of lives to the providers who work directly with children and young people. However, there are changes that Ofsted could make to more effectively position the inspectorate as supportive of providers in their quality improvement role. Examples include publicly stating that giving providers the information they need to support QI is a key purpose of inspection; giving providers a full transcript of the information shared in the end of inspection de-briefing meetings (rather than relying on exhausted staff taking copious notes at the end of an exhausting week), running sector-specific events in which analysis of recent reports is presented to providers as a way of sharing effective practice or key success indicators (building on the support events some regional HMIs have helpfully begun to offer Natspec members and on the annual national events led by the HMI with the policy lead for high needs); engaging in more professional dialogue with staff during inspections; an increased willingness to engage in learning visits to improve inspector understanding of more specialist types of provision and to engage in/lead/and share findings from research.
- Ofsted should further develop its understanding of provision for learners with SEND, including those with more complex needs, and design more appropriate methodologies for its inspection. This will require strong leadership from a senior policy adviser whose role is to oversee high needs inspections in FE and Skills settings.
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- We acknowledge that SEND area inspections result in a written report, the assignment of a publicly available grade and reinspection where there are failings. To that extent, Ofsted is holding local areas to account. However, we do not believe that Ofsted/CQC inspection is acting as a sufficiently strong impetus to affect local area practice in relation to SEND. We do not see the same efforts from local areas to achieve rapid improvements following a poor inspection outcome, as we do in the response of providers to a Requires Improvement or Inadequate grade.

Your views

Do you have any comments on Ofsted's openness, and how easy it is to provide feedback to help us improve?

Comments:

- Natspec has been able to have frank conversations with key staff at Ofsted who have shown a willingness to listen, but progress on addressing issues has been slow. It appears that Ofsted colleagues are sometimes unwilling or unable to act on feedback or to take up offers of support. For example, Ofsted colleagues were initially enthusiastic about an offer from Natspec to help upskill high needs inspectors on PMLD learners' needs and pedagogy through the production of a video training resource, but this was later rejected. Natspec wrote an article for an internal magazine for members on the benefits of being an Ofsted inspector to help encourage more senior staff from within specialist colleges to take up the role. Again, Ofsted initially welcomed this as one means by which to address a gap in expertise, but then withdrew permission for the article to be published. Ofsted's policies on what it can and can't engage with appear to be restricting its ability to grow the expertise it needs to conduct high quality inspections of provision for FE learners with SEND, particularly those with more complex needs.
- Inspectors are not always arriving with sufficient understanding of the learner group in specialist colleges to communicate with learners effectively or to be appropriately sensitive as they go about their business. Examples include having no/too few members of the inspection team being able to converse with deaf students and teachers; speaking openly with staff about a safeguarding issue where the college had taken a strategic decision to share highly sensitive information with staff on a need-to-know basis; asking a student with life-limiting illness about their longer-term plans for the future, despite being briefed about the student's likely life expectancy; leaning on a student's wheelchair from behind and talking about the student as if they were not present.

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Comments:

We appreciate that with the appointment of a new chief inspector, there may be appetite for a new inspection framework. We also understand that some respondents to the Big Listen may be suggesting the removal, or significant downplaying, of the key judgements 'Behaviour and Attitudes' and 'Personal Development,' on the basis that they are not equally relevant across all provision types. They are, however, critical to understanding the effectiveness of provision for learners with SEND – and indeed highly relevant for all 16-19/25 provision. We would argue strongly that these two key judgement areas give learners and their families important information about the holistic education providers should be offering to young people in order that they can develop as active citizens as well as progress onto employment or higher education. We would therefore support their retention for 16-19/25 provision.

Despite a clear need for more Ofsted Inspectors with expertise in SEND, particularly in complex needs, the recruitment process for OIs appears to be sluggish. Some Natspec members who have registered an interest in becoming an OI report waiting a long time for a response from Ofsted. While OIs from within the specialist FE sector value the professional development and insight gained from taking on the role, some have commented on the low level of pay (which has not been increased for some time) and lack of generosity in the expenses policy, which make it financially challenging to take on the OI role.

We want to know that we are hearing from everyone. Are you happy to answer a few questions about yourself?

Yes

Gender

Female

Age (Please note: a separate survey aimed at children will be launching soon)

45 to 54

How would you describe your ethnic group?

White
English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British

Sexual orientation

Heterosexual

Religion/belief

None

Disability

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

No