

 **GOV.UK**

[Departments](#) [Worldwide](#) [How govern](#)
[Policies](#) [Publications](#) [Consultations](#)



Find an inspection report
Inspection guidance, hand
Parent View: what do you
Become a childcare provi

Your complete guide to Ofsted inspections 2026

Ofsted inspections remain one of the most significant aspects of professional life in the early years sector. They play an important role in maintaining standards, safeguarding children, and ensuring that high-quality learning and care experiences are consistently provided. Inspection outcomes also influence how parents view settings, shape improvement priorities for managers and staff, and can, in some cases, affect funding, recruitment and the reputation of the setting or group.

However, inspection practice in England is evolving. In recent years, the inspection system has been the subject of increasing debate across education and government. Leaders and practitioners have raised concerns about the emotional pressure inspections can place on staff, the limitations of single-word overall judgements and the need for clearer and more meaningful feedback for families.

Many professionals felt that the traditional grading system did not fully reflect the variety of educational offers and the complexity of early years provision. For example, a setting might demonstrate excellent relationships, strong safeguarding systems and inclusive practice, yet still be developing aspects of curriculum delivery or leadership capacity. Reducing this picture to one overall word felt overly simplistic and did not always support constructive improvement.

At the same time, parents and carers were seeking clearer information about what inspection outcomes actually meant for their children's experiences. There was a growing recognition that inspection reports needed to provide more detailed insights into strengths and areas for development.

In response, Ofsted introduced reforms to the inspection framework from November 2025. These reforms aim to create a more balanced and transparent system that recognises the many dimensions that contribute to quality in early education. While the fundamental purpose of inspections remains unchanged – ensuring that children are safe, well cared for and supported in their learning – the way inspections are conducted and reported has shifted.

Ofsted has also promised changes to its approach following concerns about workload and inspection stress for staff, and especially for setting managers and owners.

This includes:

- Extra inspectors on some inspections
- Limits on the number of hours inspectors can spend on site
- Clearer guidance on what inspectors will and will not expect
- A more collaborative tone

These steps are intended to reduce stress and make inspections feel more supportive, though many leaders may understandably remain cautious and it will remain to be seen whether the aims are met in practice.



These changes represent not just procedural adjustments, but a wider cultural shift in the way inspections are carried out and their purpose. They are no longer seen as the once-coveted 'badge of honour' to be collected and displayed prominently in a banner pinned to the exterior fence! Inspections are increasingly intended to support dialogue, reflection and improvement, rather than simply delivering attention-grabbing, single-word, high-stakes judgements. For early years practitioners and managers, understanding this evolving landscape is essential to feel confident and prepared for inspections in 2026 and beyond.

What the new Ofsted inspection looks like in practice

Although inspection reforms have introduced new reporting systems and areas of emphasis, the fundamental structure of an Ofsted inspection in early years settings remains broadly familiar. However, there are important developments in how inspections are scheduled, how evidence is gathered and how inspectors engage with staff that leaders and managers need to understand.

1. Inspection frequency and timing

One of the most significant practical changes is the move towards more frequent inspection cycles. Routine inspections for regulated early years providers are now expected to take place approximately every four years, rather than the previous six-year cycle. This reflects a national priority to monitor quality more regularly and ensure that concerns are identified and addressed at an earlier stage.

Newly registered settings may also experience inspection sooner than in the past. Instead of waiting up to two and a half years for a first inspection, many providers can now expect a visit within 12 to 18 months of registration. While this may feel daunting for new leaders, it also provides earlier professional feedback and support for improvement.

2. Notification and preparation

Most inspections continue to be short notice. Settings are typically informed by telephone shortly before the visit, often the day before or on the morning of the inspection. During this initial conversation, inspectors may ask leaders about:

- Number of children on roll
- Staffing arrangements
- Children with additional needs
- Any recent changes or challenges
- Practical arrangements for the inspection day

Leaders may also be asked to ensure key documentation and safeguarding information are readily available. This reinforces the importance of maintaining everyday readiness rather than relying on rushed, last-minute preparation.

3. What happens during the inspection visit

Inspection visits focus heavily on observing the lived experience of children within the setting. Inspectors aim to understand what it is genuinely like to attend the provision, rather than reviewing extensive paperwork.

Typical inspection activities may include:

- Learning walks through different rooms or outdoor spaces
- Observations of adult-child interactions
- Discussions with practitioners about curriculum intent, implementation and impact (the three 'I's)
- Review of safeguarding procedures and staff knowledge
- Meetings with leaders to explore quality monitoring and improvement planning
- Gathering parental views where possible

Deep dives into aspects of the curriculum may still take place, particularly in key areas such as communication and language or personal, social and emotional development.

There is also a growing emphasis on professional dialogue. Inspectors are expected to engage constructively with leaders and practitioners, building a rounded picture of practice rather than relying on isolated observations.

4. Feedback and next steps

At the end of the visit, inspectors typically provide verbal feedback outlining strengths and areas for development. This discussion is an important opportunity for leaders to clarify understanding and begin planning next steps.

Under the renewed framework, inspection outcomes are communicated through detailed report cards rather than single overall judgements, offering a more nuanced reflection of quality across different aspects of provision.



The new Ofsted report card explained

One of the most significant and widely discussed changes to inspection practice is the introduction of the Ofsted report card. This represents the biggest shift in inspection reporting in decades and, as previously mentioned, marks a move away from the traditional single-word overall judgement.

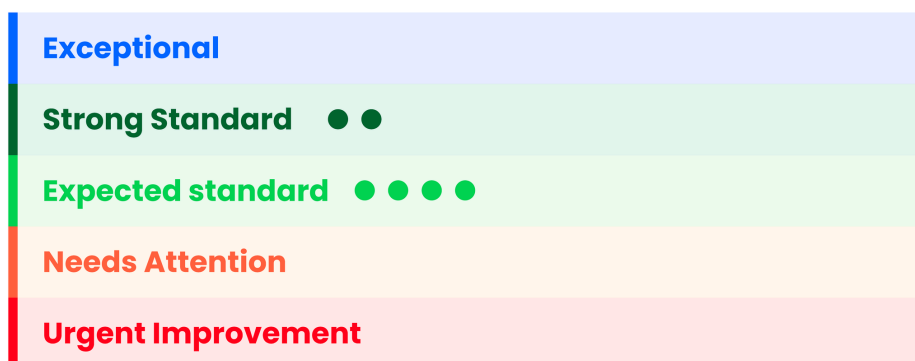
Previously, settings were given an overall grade such as “Outstanding”, “Good”, “Requires Improvement” or “Inadequate”. While these grades were widely recognised, they did not always capture the full complexity of a setting’s provision. A nursery or pre-school might demonstrate excellent leadership and safeguarding practice, but still be developing aspects of curriculum implementation or inclusion, which might prevent the excellent leadership from being fully reflected in the grade given. A single overall grade could therefore feel overly reductive and sometimes discouraging for teams working hard to improve.

Under the renewed inspection framework, settings now receive a detailed report card that evaluates their performance across several key areas.

Areas of inspection are now:

- Inclusion (including how settings support children with SEND, disadvantaged children and those known to social care)
- Curriculum and teaching
- Achievement
- Behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines
- Children’s welfare and well-being
- Leadership and governance

Each area is graded separately using a new, colour-coded, five-point scale:



These grades are now presented using colour coding to make reports more accessible and easier for parents and carers to understand, ranging from red through amber, green to blue. The intention is to provide a clearer, more balanced picture of quality and progress.

Another important feature of the report card is the inclusion of more narrative comments. Instead of simply stating a grade, inspectors provide explanations of what they observed during the inspection. This may include examples of strong practice, reflections on leadership effectiveness or suggestions for development. Many reports also include sections such as “What it is like to be a child at this setting” and recommended next steps for improvement.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding continues to be assessed separately and remains a fundamental requirement. Rather than being graded on the five-point scale, safeguarding arrangements are judged as either “met” or “not met”. This reinforces the message that safeguarding underpins all aspects of early years provision and settings, which receive a “not met” grade, will face increased scrutiny and will be expected to address the issue immediately.

That said, the new report card approach aims to support improvement rather than simply label performance. Settings can demonstrate strengths in one area while acknowledging that further development is needed elsewhere. For many leaders and practitioners, this system offers an opportunity to present a more authentic picture of their setting’s journey, but it also means teams must be confident in understanding each evaluation area and able to explain how their everyday practice supports positive outcomes for children.

Understanding the inspection judgement areas in depth

Under the renewed inspection framework, inspectors evaluate early years provision across several key areas. Understanding what inspectors are looking for in each of these areas can help leaders and practitioners feel more confident and prepared.

Inclusion

Inclusion is now recognised as a central component of quality in early years education rather than an additional aspect of provision. Inspectors consider how effectively settings identify and support children who may face barriers to learning or well-being. This includes children with special educational needs and disabilities, disadvantaged children and those known to social care.



In practice, inspectors may look at how quickly concerns about development are identified, how settings work in partnership with families and how external professionals such as speech and language therapists or SEN advisory teams are involved. They may also observe whether environments and activities are adapted appropriately to enable all children to participate fully.

Inclusive practice is often reflected in everyday interactions. For example, practitioners may demonstrate flexibility in routines, use visual supports, model language or provide targeted interventions that help children build confidence and independence.

Curriculum and teaching

Inspectors continue to place strong emphasis on the quality of the curriculum and how it is implemented through adult interactions. Leaders should be able to explain the intent behind their curriculum, including what they want children to learn and how learning builds over time. During inspection, practitioners may be asked about how they support communication and language development, how they respond to children's interests and how they use assessment to inform next steps. Inspectors recognise that early years teaching is not formal or classroom-based, but rooted in play, exploration and responsive engagement. High-quality interactions, such as extending children's thinking through open-ended questions or modelling new vocabulary, are often key indicators of strong practice.

Achievement

Achievement is evaluated in relation to children's starting points and the progress they make over time. Inspectors are more interested in whether children develop the knowledge, skills and confidence needed for their next stage of education, rather than whether all children reach the same level at the same time, which we know they don't. This includes looking at children's independence, curiosity, persistence and ability to form positive relationships. Inspectors understand that development is not always linear and that contextual factors may influence progress. Settings are therefore encouraged to demonstrate how they support each child's individual learning journey.

Behaviour, attitudes and routines

As early years practitioners know, a calm and purposeful environment supports children's emotional security and readiness to learn. Inspectors observe how practitioners promote positive behaviour, establish consistent routines and support children in managing transitions. For example, they may consider how staff help children share resources, resolve conflicts or develop self-regulation skills. The development of independence, such as tidying away equipment or managing personal care tasks, is also often noted.



Leadership and governance

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of provision. Inspectors consider how leaders monitor practice, support staff development, and drive continuous improvement. This may include reviewing supervision arrangements, training programmes and quality improvement plans. Strong leadership is often evident where staff feel confident discussing their practice and understand the setting's vision and priorities.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding remains a stand-alone judgement and is central to inspection outcomes. Inspectors expect settings to demonstrate a strong safeguarding culture where staff understand their responsibilities and concerns are acted upon promptly. Evidence may include safer recruitment procedures, regular safeguarding training, clear reporting systems and effective multi-agency collaboration. Maintaining up-to-date policies and ensuring all staff understand their role in protecting children are essential elements of inspection readiness.

How settings can confidently prepare for inspections

Although inspection frameworks and reporting methods are evolving, the most effective preparation remains consistent high-quality practice. Settings that embed strong systems and reflective leadership into everyday routines are often best placed to approach inspection with confidence.

One of the most important steps leaders can take is to ensure that safeguarding remains robust and clearly understood by all staff. Regular training, supervision discussions and clear reporting procedures help build a safeguarding culture where concerns are recognised early and acted upon appropriately. Inspectors are increasingly interested in how safeguarding operates in practice, rather than simply reviewing policies.

Leaders should also ensure that curriculum intent is well understood across the team. Practitioners need to feel confident explaining how their interactions support children's development and how learning experiences build over time. This does not require complex documentation, but it does involve shared understanding and professional dialogue across the setting.

Inclusive practice is another key preparation focus. Reviewing SEND procedures, strengthening partnerships with families and ensuring environments are accessible for all children can help settings demonstrate their commitment to equity. Inspectors are likely to look for evidence that barriers to learning are identified and addressed thoughtfully.

Maintaining clear and organised documentation can also support inspection readiness. Inspection toolkits emphasise that leaders do not need to create additional paperwork purely for inspections. Instead, evidence should arise naturally and be collated from everyday practice on an ongoing basis. This includes things such as safeguarding records, supervision notes and quality improvement plans.

Equally important now is supporting staff well-being and confidence. Open conversations about inspection expectations, opportunities for reflective practice and mentoring for less experienced practitioners can help reduce anxiety around the entire inspection process. Viewing inspection as a professional dialogue rather than a high-stakes test can foster a more positive mindset across the whole team.



Ultimately, inspection reform signals a shift towards recognising the complexity of early years provision and supporting continuous improvement. While change can feel challenging, settings that prioritise strong relationships, inclusive environments and thoughtful leadership are likely to navigate inspections successfully. Ultimately, inspections should be about showcasing what settings do well daily rather than feeling like a one-off exam. Staying informed about inspection developments and embedding reflective practice into everyday routines will help ensure that settings remain confident, prepared and focused on delivering the best possible experiences for young children, regardless of whether they have an upcoming Ofsted inspection or not.

Inspection readiness checklist for early years settings

Preparing for inspection does not mean creating large amounts of new paperwork or changing your day-to-day practice. Instead, it is about ensuring that high-quality systems are embedded and consistently understood by the whole team.

Leaders may wish to use the following checklist to support ongoing readiness.

Safeguarding

- All staff understand safeguarding procedures and know how to report concerns
- Safeguarding training is up to date and regularly revisited
- Recruitment processes and records are clear and compliant with confidentiality and with safer recruitment guidelines
- Designated safeguarding leads are trained and feel confident in their role

Inclusion

- SEND procedures are clear and consistently implemented
- Partnerships with families and external professionals are strong
- Environments and routines are adapted to meet individual needs
- Disadvantaged children are identified and supported effectively

Curriculum and teaching

- Staff understand the setting's curriculum intent and learning priorities
- Practitioners can explain how everyday interactions support children's development
- Communication and language opportunities are prioritised
- Assessment is used to plan meaningful next steps

Behaviour and attitudes

- Children demonstrate positive relationships with adults and peers
- Clear and consistent behaviour expectations are understood across the setting
- Staff support emotional regulation and social development effectively
- Transitions and routines are calm, purposeful and well established
- Children show increasing independence and confidence in daily activities

Achievement and development (outcomes)

- Children make progress from their individual starting points
- Staff understand how learning builds over time
- Assessment information is used to support learning rather than generate paperwork
- Gaps in development are identified early and responded to appropriately
- Practitioners can explain how the curriculum supports children's long-term development

Leadership and staff development

- Supervision and professional development systems are in place
- Staff feel confident discussing their practice and improvement goals
- Quality improvement plans are reviewed regularly
- Team communication supports shared understanding of priorities

Well-being and inspection culture

- Leaders encourage open conversations about inspection expectations
- Staff feel supported and valued in their roles
- Inspection is viewed as an opportunity for reflection and growth

Supporting documentation and organisation

- Key records are accurate, accessible and part of normal practice
- Policies are up to date and understood by all staff
- Evidence of impact is gathered naturally through everyday systems



References and resources

- Ofsted (2025). [Ofsted confirms changes to education inspection and unveils new-look report cards - GOV.UK](#)
- Ofsted (2025). [Education Inspection Framework – renewed framework for inspections from November 2025. Available at: GOV.UK](#)
- Department for Education (2024). [Early years foundation stage \(EYFS\) statutory framework - GOV.UK](#)
- [Early years inspections: frequently asked questions – Ofsted: early years](#)
- Ofsted YouTube channel. Example walkthrough of the new early years report card. Available at: www.youtube.com
- <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/content/features/inspections-part-3-ofsteds-areas-of-interest>
- [New Ofsted framework 2026: key inspection changes explained](#)

Parenta Solutions



SOFTWARE

NURSERY MANAGEMENT - ABACUS

- Save hours by reducing planning time by 50%
- Speedy invoicing to all parents and carers in minutes
- Instant view of all financial reports
- Manage payments and track debt

EYFS LEARNING JOURNEY TRACKER - FOOTSTEPS 2

- Record meaningful and detailed EYFS observations
- Improve essential safeguarding and save hours of time
- Reduce your workload and spend more time with the children
- Identify at a glance each child's development pathway

ONLINE DAILY DIARY - DAYSHARE

- Share every magical moment of each child's day with their parents and carers with our online diary software

PARENT PORTAL APP

- Bringing parents and carers closer to their child's day by providing a timeline of their progress
- Download Parent Portal App on Android or iOS



ONLINE CPD COURSES

No deadlines, no time restrictions, no classroom! Support your staff or further your professional development with our online CPD accredited courses



TRAINING

Increase employee motivation and keep staff for longer within your setting by offering training - the ideal tool for you to develop your team.

Parenta courses include:

- Level 2 Early Years Practitioner
- Level 3 Early Years Educator
- Level 5 Early Years Lead Practitioner

PLUS ... Parenta offers a free recruitment service - no fees!



MARKETING SOLUTIONS

WEBSITE DESIGN

- Our childcare websites generate genuine interest and leads from parents and carers
- We specialise in designing and building childcare websites so you can rest assured that our team know what Ofsted and parents/carers are looking for

BRANDING & DESIGN

- Showcase your setting with branded products. From newsletters to logos and prospectuses to business cards, we take care of all your branding needs

SOCIAL MEDIA

- We assist you with setting up and using your social media accounts in no time to help you increase your setting's visibility

Working together for our children



0800 002 9242



hello@parenta.com

Follow us on social media @TheParentaGroup



www.parenta.com

Parenta, Stratford House, Waterside Court, Neptune Way, Medway City Estate, Rochester, Kent, ME2 4NZ