



Ofsted Inspection New Approach Explained

A guide for families

What has changed, and why it matters

In November 2025, Ofsted moved away from the single overall grade that schools had been given for many years. The familiar one-word judgments of "Outstanding", "Good", "Requires Improvement" and "Inadequate" have gone.

In their place sits a more detailed picture. Schools are now graded across several distinct areas, each with its own grade on a new five-point scale, and families receive a report card rather than a single label. Safeguarding continues to be judged separately, as either "met" or "not met."

The change matters for two reasons. First, it gives families a fuller view of a school's strengths and the areas it is working on, rather than reducing all of that to one word. Second, the bar has been raised. Each of the new grades has been written to a higher standard than its closest predecessor, and grading is now "secure fit", which means a school must meet every part of a descriptor to be awarded that grade.

In short

Schools no longer receive a single Ofsted grade. They are graded across multiple areas, on a five-point scale, with safeguarding judged separately. The new grades are not a like-for-like swap with the old ones; the bar has moved upwards. Watch this short OFSTED video for an overview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbl0FvY976g>

The areas inspectors look at

During a full inspection, every school is graded across six core areas. In our primary and infant schools, Early Years provision will also be graded, and safeguarding is assessed separately throughout.

The six core areas

- **Leadership and Governance:** how well the Headteacher, senior leaders, governors and trustees set direction, hold the school to account and create the conditions for staff and pupils to succeed.
- **Curriculum and Teaching:** the quality of what is taught and how it is taught, including how well teachers know their subjects and how learning is sequenced over time.
- **Achievement:** how well pupils learn, remember and apply what they are taught, and the academic and personal outcomes they reach.
- **Attendance and Behaviour:** how regularly pupils attend, how they conduct themselves around the school and in lessons, and the culture that underpins both.
- **Personal Development and Wellbeing:** the wider opportunities pupils are given to grow as people, including character, citizenship, and pastoral support.
- **Inclusion:** how well the school identifies and meets the needs of every pupil, particularly those with SEND, those who are disadvantaged, and those facing other barriers to their learning or wellbeing.

For Primary Schools and Infant Schools

- **Early Years:** graded in schools with nursery or reception provision.

And throughout: Safeguarding

Safeguarding is judged separately as either "Met" or "Not Met". Inspectors look at the school's culture of safeguarding, its records, and how concerns are identified, reported and acted on.

The new grading scale

Each of the areas above is graded on the same five-point scale. The descriptions below are written in plain English. Ofsted's full grade descriptors sit behind each one.

Grade	What it means
Exceptional	A new and very high bar. Only a small number of schools nationally are expected to reach this grade, with practice among the best nationally. <i>The school's work would need to be transformational in this area.</i>
Strong Standard	The school is doing very well in this area. <i>Practice is excellent, consistent and embedded across the school.</i>
Expected Standard	A new high bar that all schools are expected to reach. <i>Achieving this grade indicates the school is doing well across the area.</i>
Needs Attention	An advisory note. Something in this area is not yet where it needs to be, or it is too early to see the impact of the school's work. <i>It is not the same as the old "Requires Improvement".</i>
Urgent Improvement	The most serious of the grades, expected to apply to only a small number of schools.

Safeguarding

Judged separately as either "Met" or "Not Met".

Secure fit, not best fit

Under the new framework, a school must meet every part of a grade descriptor to be awarded that grade. If one element is missing, the grade is not given. This is a deliberate change and it is one of the reasons the new system feels tougher than the one it replaced.

How does this compare with the old system?

Ofsted has been clear that the new grades do not translate directly to the old ones. The framework is different, the descriptors are different, and the bar has been raised across the board. With that caveat firmly in mind, the table below presents the closest comparison we can make to help families put the new grades in context.

Old judgement (pre-November 2025)	Closest new grade
	Exceptional <i>(a higher bar than the old Outstanding)</i>
Outstanding	Strong Standard <i>(broadly, the upper end of the old Good into outstanding)</i>
Good	Expected Standard <i>(a new grade across the old Good and Requires Improvement, set as the threshold for an effective school)</i>
	Needs Attention <i>(an advisory note; not a category of concern, performance generally stronger than the old Requires Improvement)</i>
Requires Improvement	
Inadequate	Urgent Improvement

The most important point: "Expected Standard" is the new threshold for an effective school and is a higher bar than "Good" used to be. A school graded "Expected Standard" across the board is doing well; a school graded "Strong Standard" is doing very well.

What an inspection actually looks like

Full inspections normally last two days. The school is told the day before. During the visit, inspectors will:

- walk the school with leaders and watch lessons in progress across the curriculum, talking with pupils about what they are learning.
- spend time around the school at the start of the day, at break and at lunch, to see the everyday rhythms of school life.
- talk with groups of pupils, chosen to reflect different year groups and backgrounds, about their experience of school.
- look at pupils' work, displays, and the records the school keeps on behaviour, safeguarding, attendance and improvement.
- meet with the Headteacher, senior leaders, subject leaders, the SENCO, early years lead (where applicable), and members of the governing body and Trust.
- review the views of families and staff through Ofsted's online questionnaires and through conversations during the inspection itself.

Inspectors are interested in the impact of what the school does, not in compliance for its own sake. They do not grade individual teachers or individual lessons, and they do not expect leaders to produce reams of paperwork to evidence each standard.

After the inspection

At the end of the visit, inspectors will produce a written Report Card detailing the judgements in each area and how the school may improve further. Once the report card is finalised, the school must send a copy to the families of every pupil within five working days. Ofsted then publishes it on its report's website. The entire process can take 2-3 months after the Inspection, so don't be surprised if you don't hear anything from your school immediately afterwards.

What this means for families

Across The Leaf Trust, our schools have been preparing for the new framework throughout the past year. A few points are worth keeping in mind as inspections roll out:

- The new grades read very differently from the old ones. A grade of "Expected Standard" should not be read as a downgrade from "Good"; it is a new high bar, and a school reaching it across the board is doing well.
- "Needs Attention" is an advisory note. It signals an area the school is working on, or where the impact of recent change has not yet had time to show. It is not a category of concern.
- With "secure fit" grading, schools may reach the threshold for one grade on most of a descriptor but be held to the grade below because of a single element. This is built into the system, not a quirk of any individual inspection. This is a change from the last inspection framework, in which a school only had to demonstrate it met "most" of the criteria in that section.
- Families have an important voice during inspections. You will be invited to share your views via Ofsted's questionnaire during your school's inspection, and we encourage you to do so.

Where to find out more

The full Ofsted documentation behind this guide is published on GOV.UK:

- Inspection information for state-funded schools: gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information
- Ofsted reports for individual schools: reports.ofsted.gov.uk

If you have any questions about Ofsted or about how it applies to your child's school, please contact the school. Your school will be happy to discuss anything in this guide in more detail.