



Inspections under the new Ofsted framework: an exec head's experience

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Sophie Powell, executive headteacher, Fairview Community Primary School and The Compass Partnership of schools, explains how knowing the key points in the relevant handbook enables you to put your case more effectively – and some key points she has learned from the new process

Working for a trust with seven schools in Greenwich and three others in Medway, I have experienced four inspections since December 2019; two of them were back-to-back. As executive head, I was fully involved in two of the four inspections, and welcomed to be a part of the process. Overall, it was a very positive experience (as much as inspections can be!).

The inspectors checked in regularly with leaders about staff and were actively seeking feedback on themselves as inspectors. This had not happened under the old system.

The inspectors were approachable and candid, which helped when I was anxious about how they would operate under the new framework. We were listened to and seen as part of the process. They checked in regularly with staff and were actively seeking feedback on themselves as inspectors. This had not happened before under the old system. And most of the time they were sensitive about the people they would be dealing with. For exam-

ple, one asked, “how are staff feeling in school? Is there someone we should not see because of their personal circumstances at this time?”

Unlike in the past, the inspectors gave little away about how they were forming their conclusions and opinions about the school involved. They had ‘keeping in touch’ meetings with us, and further meetings at the end of each day, but there were no comments like we used to get such as “the children in that class are learning particularly well.”

Take every opportunity to sow the seeds

Also different was the sense that the inspectors were happy to navigate their own way around the school, based on the initial map we had given them. It was almost a feeling that they wanted to see things through their own eyes, not ours: we might be avoiding certain classes or a certain child, for instance. We wanted to exploit every minute with the inspection team to tell our compelling narrative. One of the things you have to do is maximise every opportunity to sow seeds with the inspector about your curriculum, parents, relevant data, etc. My advice to school leaders would be: whenever possible, accompany the inspectors.

The process was very fast-paced when it came to reviewing the evidence the inspectors had gathered. Leaders and teachers had to be very concise in their communications. We had prepared well, but were not always given enough time to pass on the positive information we had available. It was all about the curriculum as a progressive model and its impact in the present, past and future.





Looking for fault

Inspectors are very well briefed on this framework (understandably). One walked around with a copy of the national curriculum under his arm and read the geography curriculum before talking to the children. They were constantly seeking connections between the subject leaders, teachers, children, documentary evidence, governors, parent view and the children survey. It felt like a great big jigsaw puzzle. If one detail was not aligned with the rest, it would become a key focus of the inspection trail. So if one child was less attentive on learning than the others in a class, the inspectors would focus on that child, asking why. And when at lunch a KSI child mentioned bullying (in a flippant manner), the inspector followed through quite heavily.

They were looking for areas of difference, and it seemed had an obsession with every child, regardless of age, ability, culture or ethnicity. Inspections under the previous format had not shown obsession to that level. One nursery child, having been asked who their favourite author was, was unable to recall anyone. The inspector raised this at a KIT meeting as a potential area of concern and wanted to discuss this further with the leaders. I had an overriding sense that they were looking for fault in these minor things, linking them closely to the 'forensic analysis' of the deep dives. Another example: one of our schools has nurture provision, and the inspectors seemed very focused on this in their 90-minute phone call. But because of our rationale, analysis and paperwork, we were confident in putting our argument. As experienced leaders we were

able to have a very clear narrative about why the inspectors were seeking these (relatively rare) things. Other, less experienced leaders might be unable to tell a compelling story in this context and might find it difficult to cope with that level of challenge.

But I do understand where the inspectors are coming from on key issues like off-rolling, bullying, gaming and key aspects of the framework, though it puts us under a lot of pressure.

Nail your argument

The 90-minute conversation is new, and a key opportunity for school leaders. You have to nail your argument in those 90 minutes, which means being exceptionally well prepared. I had a copy of the section 8 framework in front of me, with highlights and post-its. Same with the school development plan, curriculum progression framework and our rationale for reading, phonics, and maths. We had our story ready!

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I'd prepared – as page 15 of the S8 handbook says, we should know what they will be judging us against – so I was able to pre-empt the questions the inspec-



tor was going to ask. There are easy and quick wins (relatively!) for leaders if you follow what's in there; as it says on page 23, "have it ready". We had ranked our subjects from best to most 'emerging', and we had a clear story in response to questions such as, is your school focus on the curriculum rich, broad, balanced, coherent, purposefully sequenced and precise for all children and stages? Can you show they have conceptual understanding alongside clear retention of knowledge? It's rigorous: the inspectors are seeking to find out what the children can articulate about their learning that day, and last week, and last year!

Is it fair? In general: yes, absolutely, though we mustn't let it detract from the day job, which is the quality of education and safeguarding in the school. And there are exceptions. An inspector was looking at a year 4 science session on the water cycle. He queried a Y4 and a Y6 pupil about structures in biology, and at the end asked the Y6 child to explain to the Y4 child what they should be looking forward to in their science curriculum: he was expecting them to remember what they had been doing two years ago! To me that was ridiculous, and I told the inspector it was not the fairest of questions, in my opinion.

What we do differently now as a result of these Ofsted visits

As a school leader, I've always been passionate about a broad and balanced curriculum for all learners. This focus in the inspections is right and proper, and it has made us in school more focused on the

connections between different subjects. We have always engaged in whole-school projects, but what we have not done before and are doing as a result of the new inspection framework is to grow experts in the different subjects. As I pointed out to an inspector: to a teacher in primary teaching 12 subjects, it's incredibly difficult to be that skilled across every subject in the curriculum. So now, through our trust, our subject experts are disseminating expertise to other staff who are less confident about teaching the level of granular detail required.

There was an overriding feeling of connectedness. All stakeholders were involved, and questioned. Teachers' workload and wellbeing was another focus throughout the inspections. Pupil voice surveys ask questions like, 'How do your teachers help you to learn effectively?' There is a constant focus throughout the inspection on SEND; it is not treated as a separate entity – and rightly so, in my opinion.

Inspection now is as rigorous as it has ever been. People say there is less pressure on the headteacher but more on teachers: true, but we all feel it, because we are all invested in the school. And we want to portray the school as well as we can. It's our job as SLT to be prepared for whatever the framework is focusing on this time: if not, we're doing our school and community a disservice.