Transforming Inspection for Good

by

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# Executive Summary

The accumulated evidence over three decades has never been stronger that our inspection system needs to be transformed. The hardest evidence for this comes from the international test results which had been flatlining since their inception. Ofsted has had no impact on educational standards.

The modern way forward for policy making, recommended by the OECD, is to take an evidence-based approach and to trial a new system before its introduction. We propose to run a pilot, based on peer-to-peer support and challenge, which would run alongside whatever changes the government makes to Ofsted. Whatever model proves to be the more successful could be the makings of a new, more effective and evidence-based inspection system.

## Thanks

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The opinions and mistakes in the present document belong to Peter Tymms and Frank Coffield.

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# 1Introduction

Since its inception in 1993 Ofsted has been subject to extensive criticism and calls for change[[1]](#endnote-1).Some of this has been theoretical, some empirical and some come as cries from the heart from those who have suffered injustice. While aspects of Ofsted have changed, and some of the initial excesses have been dropped, it remains essentially the same beast. This leopard will not change its spots. It does more harm than good, it sours the educational system and has lost the trust of the teaching profession. Further, we have seen its mission creep so that Ofsted not only influences and even designs the curriculum, but prescribes how and when it should be taught (Wood, 2019).

The time has come for change and for that reform to work we need a plan which takes key players in the sector with us, a plan which sets out a credible way forward which will challenge and transform the status quo. It also needs to be accepted at the highest level by politicians who believe that the tough inspection of teachers and schools is a vote winner. In order to enact serious change, the whole system will need remodelling. What follows is an outline of a formative plan which can be adjusted. The aim in the end is to transform inspection into something well thought out, humane, effective and evidence-based to enhance the quality of learning and teaching and outcomes for all children.

Given the failings inherent in the current Ofsted model, we are of the opinion that it needs transformation. We give our evidence-backed reasons for this judgement in the next section. We are not, however, politically naive enough to believe that this government, any government, will just sweep away what has been used as proof of "*robust and rigorous"* control of teachers for over 30 years, no matter how justified such an action would be. Political considerations, such as the highly predictable opposition from the right-wing press, ("*ministers kowtowing to the teachers' unions,*" for example), are likely to militate against outright abolition. Instead we fully expect there to be some partial reform of the organisation which will remove a few of its worst features, but which will leave the essence of its approach intact. So, for example, the four simplistic grade levels ("*inadequate", "requires improvement* "etc) have already been dispensed with, but the problems with Ofsted's methods and the absence of any hard evidence of its effectiveness are likely to remain. Hence our proposal to run an experimental trial of an alternative model to inspection alongside whatever version of Ofsted that the government decides on.

To avoid repetition, we use in what follows the word *“settings*” to describe all the various schools, colleges, organisations, institutions, departments and placements that Ofsted inspects. We would like to acknowledge the advice given to us by a group of experts which has improved the text substantially and so we are grateful to Professors Chris Pascal, Elizabeth Wood, Ro Pengelly, John Gray and Matt O’Leary. The final version, however, is the work of the two main authors.

# 2 Why Transformation is Necessary

*“If anyone says to you that staff morale is at an all time low, you will know you are doing something right.”* Michael Wilshaw, Ofsted’s Chief HMI, 2016.

Ofsted has become toxic and has lost the trust of the teaching profession. Ofsted claims to be “*a force for improvement*”, but standards as judged by international research have flatlined or only marginally improved (Bolden and Tymms, 2020). Ofsted has been in existence for 30 years so it has had time to demonstrate its effectiveness, but there is no hard evidence that it has done so.

There is evidence, however, that it has created more harm than good, especially to schools with high proportions of deprived pupils, which for years have received the lowest grades (Hutchinson, 2016; Bousted, 2022; Perryman et al, 2023; NAHT, 2024). The outcomes are: lower recruitment and so less resource; and problems in attracting and holding onto able teachers and leaders. These outcomes become increasingly damaging because they interact and last for years during which these schools deteriorate further.

Ofsted has failed to show that its methods are reliable and valid so its judgements are unsafe. Their methods are unreliable because inspectors interpret the Frameworks for inspection inconsistently; and those Frameworks have been changed repeatedly. Their reports don’t include information on the size, representativeness or method of selecting their sample.

Their reports are invalid because inspectors don’t witness the routine behaviour of teachers and pupils, but a performance put on for their benefit which continues only for as long as they are present. In order to protect their jobs teachers resort to “*gaming the system*” by admitting only those pupils likely to boost exam scores, *“off rolling*” challenging pupils or those with special needs. The interests of the institution are put before those of students because of Ofsted.

Teachers complain that inspectors judge their year’s work by only brief observations; and often by inspectors with little or no expertise in the age, phase or subject specialism that they are evaluating. This doesn’t stop them turning their subjective judgements into spurious quantitative scores.

These failings have been caused *partly* by Ofsted’s remit being extended to cover the full range from early childhood education, to children in care and specialist schools, to primaries, secondaries and academies, to sixth form and further education colleges, initial teacher education, education in prisons, and providers of apprenticeships and skills bootcamps. And *partly* by reductions in its annual budget (£168 million in 2013-14 to £151 million in 2023-24), so that it has been forced to spread itself too thinly over too many areas. But Ofsted is massively expensive compared with the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre which, *pro rata* carries out evaluations of the Finnish education system including universities at less than one-third of the cost of Ofsted (Moitus, S and Kamppi, P, 2020).

Given these systemic problems, it would be in Ofsted’s interest to lose some of its functions so we propose that Safeguarding be dealt with by a separate national body until the plan of the **Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-25** for multi-agency child protection teams in local authorities come into being to undertake this work.

Ofsted has also damaged the careers of staff after a verdict of “*inadequate,”* a publicly humiliating judgement. The Coroner, who conducted the inquest into the death of the headteacher who committed suicide, commented that School A is “*good in all areas, but there are safeguarding concerns which can be remedied quickly… School B is dreadful in all respects.”* (Connor, 2023: 3) Ofsted has been labelling both schools “*inadequate,*” resulting in job losses and schools forced to become academies.

There has never been any independent quality assurance of Ofsted, or there would have been some investigation into the wide regional variations in school performance. For instance, 50% of secondary schools in London “*have always been judged good or better. This compares to 23 % in the North East and Yorkshire and Humber…*”(Perryman et al, 2023:26).

Turning to the impact Ofsted has had on teaching and learning, the consensus of reports is that it has led to teaching to the test and rote learning to maximise exam results. This has turned schools into exam factories and colleges into skills factories (Coffield and Williamson, 2011; Coffield, 2017, 2025). The curriculum has been narrowed, with focus on those subjects that are tested to the neglect of others, and more resources being allocated to whatever is to be tested. (OECD, 2013) As far back as 1998, Carol Fitz-gibbon asserted: “*teachers are diverted from looking after pupils to looking after inspectors.”* (1998:15)

Elizabeth Wood has detailed how Ofsted has extended its remit of inspection to defining quality, “*good practice*” and “*best*” and even “*very best practice,*” three terms that it uses interchangeably in the context of early childhood education: “*Not only has Ofsted become the sole arbiter of quality, it also produces reports that carry significant authority in defining approved forms of practice, based on selected policy-led evidence.”* (Wood, 2020:333) The practices that Ofsted advocates have been closely aligned to government policy which lends credence to the claim that policy has been decided first and then Ofsted collects the evidence to justify it.

Observations tied to high-stakes assessment “*can lead to increased levels of inauthenticity in teachers’ practice”* (O’Leary, 2022: 4), as well as discouraging risk taking and a willingness to experiment. And yet Matt O’Leary has studied a theoretically sound alternative which puts “*teacher learning and collegial development at the heart of the process.”* (ibid:2).

School leaders have also to cope with the demands of Ofsted for data. In the fight for survival, they keep their staff in a constant state of high alert, permanently ready for a “*no notice*” inspection and call themselves “*the resident inspector*” (Wood, 2014: 226). Even “*outstanding*” schools are under pressure to retain the label so Ofsted is always with you.

Teachers internalise Ofsted’s requirements, police their practice accordingly and in this way Ofsted extends its control. Leaders coach their staff in what they think Ofsted’s latest requirements will be, they check that students’ work is marked up to date and have been assessing their colleagues’ teaching using Ofsted’s four levels of judgement. The combined impact of mounting workloads and burgeoning stress levels has led many teachers to conclude that the job is no longer worth the impact on family life so they have been quitting in droves (Coffield, 2025; Institute for Government, 2023).

If headteachers consider Ofsted’s report to be inaccurate, they quickly discover the power imbalance between themselves and the inspectorate. The complaints adjudication service cannot overturn an inspection judgement, cannot award financial compensation and its recommendations are not binding on Ofsted. (Icaso, 2024) The complaints procedure has been heavily weighted by government in Ofsted’s favour.

In July 2024, Colin Richards and Frank Norris, two former HMIs, surveyed 1,386 people, mainly teachers, using the same questions as Ofsted had used in its Big Listen, with a few of their own. One major caveat – the respondents were self-selecting (perhaps those with settled, adverse views about Ofsted) so care must be taken with the results, which should, however, still worry Ofsted because of the strength of feeling they reveal. Ninety percent of the respondents thought that inspections were inconsistent from place to place, 89% said that the social context of schools was not taken into consideration sufficiently, 85% didn’t think inspections led to improvements and 91% agreed that Ofsted was not fit for purpose.

If all the criticisms above are pulled together, it could reasonably be argued that Ofsted is a major factor in the “*full-blown workforce crisis”* in teacher recruitment and retention. (Institute for Government, 2023: 3) This catalogue of failings has to be taken together with Ofsted’s indifference to the harmful effects of some of its judgements, its persistent rejection of criticism and its inability to reform itself. Given that history, we cannot depend on the inspectors to be the agents of their own transformation.

# 3 The Proposal

Our suggested way forward consists of a research design for the implementation of an alternative inspection system to run alongside Ofsted which would then be evaluated by a well-respected and independent organisation. That build-up of evidence would then be used to enact change and a key feature of this would be a cost benefit analysis of the various inspection systems. Of course we recognise that the Ofsted system may prove to be the best. What we propose would provide an evidence base for its existence and would for the first time test independently the claims Ofsted makes about its effectiveness in raising standards.

The National Audit Office (2018) and the Parliamentary Select Committee (2024) have highlighted telling points, but one killer fact has gone almost unnoticed. Ofsted was created in a burst of regulatory changes which sought to raise standards and thus improve the economic performance of the country. The National Curriculum would state what schools were to do, testing would check that children were learning more and Ofsted would back this up by weeding out failing schools. Right now “*Ofsted aims to improve lives by raising standards in education and children’s social care*.” (Gov.UK (n.d., 1) But what evidence is there that they have raised standards? *There is none.* (Bolden and Tymms, 2020; Tymms and Merrell 2007).

Our best guide to country-level standards is the international assessments run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). They produce reports based on assessments of representative samples of pupils in countries across the world every few years. The more important studies are the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). These admittedly have their weaknesses, but crucially, although the press often focuses on rank orders, these tests use scales which are very carefully maintained across the years. This means that the scores can be reliably compared across the years. They present, across OECD countries, a picture of amazing stability with no improvement. See Fig 1.

Figure 1: Variation in UK maths results from PISA.

SOURCE: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2022 Reading, Mathematics and Science Assessments.

In general the slight fluctuations in the countries’ results are best explained by a sampling variation and the country’s economic state eg levels of unemployment, poverty etc (see for example, Aloisi and Tymms, 2017).

Our ideas are set out below under the headings: Finances, The Experimental Approach, an Alternative Model, Ten Principles of Inspection, Advisory Group and Final Comments.

## 4 Finances

The Ofsted inspection system will be replaced in one geographical area. Its budget in 2013-14 was £168 million, £151 million in 2023-24 and has applied for £212 million for 2024-25. The savings from removing Ofsted from one geographical area will be more than enough to fund the new, alternative inspection system. We further propose that the new inspectors are paid an honorarium alongside replacement costs paid to their settings. Money will be needed to fund honoraria, subsistence and travel expenses for the three members of the Advisory Board, meeting once a year for five years. Funds also to cover the cost of carry outing the evaluations, which could perhaps be an Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) project. Again they could be paid for by savings from the partial replacement of Ofsted.

A clear advantage of our proposal is that it will cost less than Ofsted because it will cut out its top-heavy, hierarchical structure, which has 29 senior managers, all on large salaries. We will, however, need people trained in, and supportive of, the new approach to fulfil the roles of:

* a senior figure in charge of the pilot and a deputy
* a small team to gather and analyse data, and to write reports
* administrative, technical and financial staff, the latter to pay the honoraria, and travel expenses and replacement costs of those undertaking the extra task of evaluation
* staff in charge of human resources, training, the organisation of inspections, communications, and the co-ordination of reports
* a small group to deal with appeals and complaints
* another small group to evaluate the quality of our alternative approach
* and three members of the Advisory Board, paid an honorarium , subsistence and travel expenses for a meeting once every five years.

## 5 The Experimental (Evidence-Based) Approach

In a typical trial run by the EEF, many schools are recruited and half of them are randomly assigned to a new intervention which is well defined. The major outcome is also pre-specified as well as secondary outcomes. The other half isn’t offered the intervention, they carry on with “*business as usual”* until after the intervention period is over. Then the outcomes from the two schools are compared.

This approach with various adjustments is the basis for the widely used Toolkit (Teaching and Learning Toolkit, n.d.). It gives information on how big an impact the intervention has, how much it costs and the strength of evidence in its favour.

In a pure experiment we would divide the UK into a number of regions – say 99 - and half would be randomly assigned to the inspection regimes. It would be decided beforehand what outcomes would be checked, for example: test scores, attendance, learner well-being and staff morale. A *primary* outcome for each of the four educational stages and *subsidiary* outcomes would be identified. The intervention would run for five years. An evaluation team would, independently, track what happened qualitatively in each of the two approaches and assess the final results with quantitative data.

Applying exactly the same methodology to evaluating Ofsted would probably not make sense, but much thinking has gone into similar situations; and designs of quasi-experiments, which do not involve randomisation are well established. Further, the influential thinker Donald Campbell (1969), wrote about it using the title***Reforms as Experiments*** and the insightful OECD (2013) report on evaluation and assessment recommended this kind of approach.

Backtracking on the purity of the experimental design a quasi-experiment might use just one large region for the trial form of inspection. The bottom line is that at the moment we have no evidence base for the existence of Ofsted or for the effectiveness of its practices. That organisation itself has no evidence, other than rising percentages of schools being awarded positive Ofsted grades, to support its assertion that inspection raises standards and improves lives (Bousted, 2020). That finding is best explained by teachers getting better at second guessing Ofsted.

## 6 Ten Principles of Inspection

The case for reform has been made as has the need to trial an alternative system so that inspection can be grounded in evidence rather than opinion. The new approach has still to be fully worked out, but we set out below ten principles on which any new system should be based under the headings Outcomes, Processes and System.

*Outcomes*

1 The purpose of inspection is to enhance the quality of learning in all settings, partnerships (including MATs) and in the system as a whole.

*Processes*

2 Inspection should be based on the established mixed-methods of research, the key aim being validity. This will provide the evidence for decision making at local, regional and national levels.

3 Inspectors need to gain the trust of teachers by celebrating their successes and offering support where they find shortcomings. This process should take into account the impacts of the local context, including the level of resource , location, local competitors and different professional cultures.

4 Dialogue between inspectors and the inspected should ensure that inspection is a shared task in which both sides learn. This should strengthen commitment to the report’s recommendations.

5 The inspection system must be humane as well as effective so it must be inclusive.

6 Inspectors must themselves have direct, recent experience of the type of setting, phase and subject that they are inspecting.

*System*

7 An equitable complaints procedure is needed in which the independent adjudicator has the power to overturn an inspection judgement.

8 Independent research should report on the short and long-term impacts of inspection.

9 The principles and practices of the inspectorate must be made public and subject to scrutiny and improvement. Their reports must contain full details of the methods used. All the main partners to the inspection (eg staff, governors, parents, local community) need to be involved in finalising the findings and recommendations of the report.

10 The inspectorate must be committed to self-improvement through research, feedback and independent evaluation of its work.

## 7 A Possible Alternative

One idea for an alternative inspection system would be a Peer-to-Peer approach where a Head, plus a small team become the inspectors of another school. They would act as critical friends with the ability to celebrate the strengths of institutions as well as to identify any serious problems, where they exist. The latter would trigger a second visit from a quite different Head, plus a small group, with action taken if the “*blind”* second set of inspectors identified the same serious problem(s). The planned Peer-to-Peer meetings would follow the pattern adopted by Ofsted to assure comparability, probably every two or three years. A report would be made public but there would be sections of it which would be confidential to the school involved. Confidentiality would be appropriate when individual students and/or staff are involved or when matter have been referred to the police. In those cases general statements can refer to the issue(s).

Through dialogue we would expect both Heads and their teams to benefit from the inspection process and outcomes which should be aimed at a two-way learning opportunity, with a clear action plan for professional development and the management of change. So dialogue must go beyond comfortable conversations to allow for challenge, support and disagreements as well as consensus. The quality of the dialogue could be judged by the five criteria set out by Robin Alexander: collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful (2006:38). In this way, unquestioned assumptions, poor practices and incompetent teachers will be dealt with.

Others have thought about and designed alternative systems. These include Perryman et al (2023) in Beyond Ofsted, which was commissioned by the National Education Union. Wilcox and MacBeath (2006) also proposed alternatives and there are also effective systems across the world. Some notable ones are to be found in the Netherlands and Finland (with no inspectors). (For a summary of the various systems, see Perryman et al 2023). Further discussion and consultation will be needed to decide which systems (or part of systems) are the best to take forward.

## 8 Advisory Board

We propose to set up a group of national and international experts in evaluation to oversee the pilot study and to whom it would be accountable. Members of the Board would be chosen for their expertise in particular phases and sectors eg pre-school, further education etc. For purposes of illustration, we suggest the following, but no-one has so far been approached, nor will they be until the project receives support:

England: a senior researcher from the team who wrote Beyond Ofsted for the National Education Union

Finland: an expert from the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre.

Netherlands: its Chief Inspector or Deputy

Those chosen will neither be personal friends nor former colleagues of the main proposers. The Board must be independent and be seen to be so.

# 9 Final Comments

This section is structured around the six questions suggested by Professor Chris Pascal, namely: why is transformation necessary? How will it come about? Where will it take place? Who will be involved? What will be the likely benefits and drawbacks? And when will it happen?

In Table 1, at the end, the key differences between Ofsted's "reformed" model and our own Alternative are made clear.

*1 Why?*

The central reason for fundamental change is that, despite 30 years of Ofsted’s existence, it has failed to raise educational standards. International research is unequivocal on this point: standards have flatlined throughout that period. Ofsted’s claim, that the increased numbers of settings judged *“outstanding*” or “*good*” is evidence of improvement as a result of inspection, doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. It’s in Ofsted’s interest and power to increase that number over time. So inspectors are marking their own homework and awarding themselves flying colours. Any marginal improvements are more likely to have been the result of teachers becoming more adept at both coping with Ofsted’s demands and teaching to the test; and pupils becoming more skilful at applying exam techniques.

*2 How?*

We give details in Section 7 above about how our alternative model will be enacted and a summary is given in Table 1 at the end. That model is in essence peer-to-peer support and challenge, where senior staff from one setting act as critical friends who celebrate (and learn from) the strengths of their neighbouring counterparts. They also identify problems, which are checked by a second “blind” inspection. Problems which are identified twice are passed on to a reform team that suggest ways to rectify them and reinspection is scheduled. If problems remain further action is triggered. Then those who have been evaluated become in turn the evaluators of another setting close by, and so on in a virtuous cycle. Improvement comes about through mutual trust where weaknesses (such as ineffective teaching) are openly admitted and addressed; and through dialogue and collegial support professional learning is stimulated, spreads through the area and takes hold as a continuous process. Professionals are more likely to become engaged in their own learning, if they share practices with colleagues doing the same job in order to improve them, than being observed by a stranger for a few minutes who is pushing an orthodox approach, decided upon in London.

*3 Where?*

We propose establishing an experiment in one geographical area which is representative, as much as is possible, of the whole country. The DfE will chose a region with, for example, inner city and rural settings, large nurseries and small placements, sixth form and further education colleges, comprehensives and academies, and partnerships in Multi-Academy Trusts. We will not, however, seek to cover the whole range of settings inspected by Ofsted such as prison education, boot-camps or unauthorised schools.

*4 Who?*

Our proposal is cost-neutral because the tranche of money that Ofsted would have spent on the designated area will be more than sufficient to fund our pilot. If the pilot proves to be successful and extended nationally, significant savings will accrue to the Treasury. We give details, in section 4 above on Finances, of the different types and levels of staff that we would need to recruit such as evaluators, researchers, administrators, technicians and managers.

*5 What Likely Benefits and Drawbacks?*

Part of the duties of the research team will be to draw up a cost-benefit analysis of the project. The main benefit will be an inspection system that improves learning for all those involved. Our alternative model will enhance learning for young children, pupils and students of all ages, senior staff, teachers, other educational and care professionals, parents, governors and local communities. We expect the proposals to generate rigorous evidence for a radical shift in educational accountability but accept that everything may not work as well as expected. Our alternative will be humane, evidence-based and, being cheaper to run, will appeal to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The greatest challenge to be faced will be the sheer size of the task in raising our current mediocre level of performance, as judged by international research, to well above average. Education alone cannot cope alone with the high levels of poverty and the record numbers of children living in temporary accommodation. The report in January this year from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation records that *“4.3 million children...about 3 in every 10 children”* (2025:6) live in poverty, one million of whom experience destitution. That is defined as lacking access to the most basic physical needs. Added to that 159,380 children in 2024 were living in substandard, temporary accommodation, “*the highest level since records began 22 years ago*” (Funk, 2024: 1). So teachers have on average 10 children in a class of 30, who have either been sleeping on floors, in damp and mouldy rooms and/or who come to school without being fed.

*6 When?*

Our proposal now needs to be widely publicised and supported by professionals across the educational system and by all those concerned about our second rate performance. It will also require political backing at the highest level, as well as support from the area and settings chosen for the pilot. Mounting a campaign to gather support, convincing the relevant Ministers and agreeing a detailed plan of action will take time. We are, however, convinced that our proposals meet the three criteria envisioned by Eric Olin Wright (2007) for radical reform: are they desirable, valid and achievable? *Desirable* because the project is based on ten explicit moral principles, with the aim of introducing an inspection system that improves educational standards for all. *Valid* because it employs practices (eg peer-to-peer reviews) that professionals have been using for years and have found to be effective. And *achievable* because our approach will bring professionals together and will empower them to take greater control of their own learning. It will release the pent-up creativity of the profession. In sum, our project is highly ambitious because our end goal is nothing less than Transforming Inspection for Good, in both senses of that word.

Table 1: The key differences between Ofsted's "reformed" model and our own Alternative

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Ofsted “Reformed”** | **Our Alternative** |
| Assume that every Ofsted rating is accurate. | Accept that inspectors are fallible |
| Focus on leadership and teaching | Focus on learning |
| Massive battery of expectations | Joint practice development |
| Culture of Fear | Culture of mutual development |
| Judgements, judgements, judgements | Evidence-based |
| Increased stress, workloads and resistance | Engages staff. Motivates and Improves morale |
| “Mechanics of inspection” | Social collaboration |
| Top down | Bottom up |
| Accountability rules, OK? | Improvement rules, OK? |

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**Endnotes**

1. See for example [ASCL - The Future of Inspection](https://www.ascl.org.uk/Our-view/Campaigns/The-Future-of-Inspection), [Home - Beyond Ofsted](https://beyondofsted.org.uk/), [NEU | Value Education](https://www.valueeducation.org.uk/), [Ofsted's inspection of schools - NAO report](https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/ofsteds-inspection-of-schools/), [Ofsted and Government must rebuild trust and make major changes to school inspections, Education Committee says - Committees - UK Parliament](https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/199622/), Wood (2019) and Coffield, 2017 and 2025 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)