

Ofsted in 2025: What's Changing—And How Smart School Leaders Are Responding

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Ofsted inspections in 2025 are no longer about ticking boxes or performing under pressure. They're about leadership clarity, safeguarding culture, and curriculum depth—seen through the eyes of real staff, real pupils, and real challenges.

This year, inspectors are asking sharper questions, digging deeper, and expecting more joined-up thinking across safeguarding, workload, curriculum, and inclusion.

In this feature, we explore what's changed, what not to overlook, and how leadership teams can prepare with purpose, not panic.

What's New—and What It Means for You

1. Safeguarding is No Longer a Policy Folder—It's a Practice Culture

What's changing:

Inspectors are shifting focus from documentation to staff understanding, consistency of reporting, and leadership oversight. They're asking:

- "Can any member of staff explain how and where they report a low-level concern?"
- "What do you do when a DSL is off-site—how is continuity maintained?"

- “How does safeguarding work in after-school clubs and external lettings?”

What leaders are doing:

- A London primary runs 15-minute safeguarding refreshers every half term—live, not online.
- A Midlands trust maps concern-reporting patterns to improve supervision in hotspots (e.g. toilets, corridors, transitions).
- One school uses short staff quizzes before INSETs to spot training gaps.

2. Workload and Staff Sustainability Are Inspection Themes

What’s changing:

For the first time, workload and wellbeing are being inspected not as side issues, but as leadership responsibilities.

Inspectors may ask:

- “What unnecessary workload have you removed this year?”
- “How are curriculum changes impacting teacher planning time?”
- “What feedback structures exist, and how often are they reviewed?”

What leaders are doing:

- A South Coast MAT reduced planning duplication by standardising medium-term plans trust-wide.
- One rural school replaced live marking with whole-class feedback—monitored through book looks and staff voice.
- Another now publicly lists “what we’ve stopped doing” on staffroom noticeboards.

3. Curriculum Equity is Under the Spotlight

What’s changing:

Inspectors are re-focusing on whether your curriculum is:

- **Sequenced and sustained**, even with staff absence or budget pressure
- **Accessible** to all pupils—including those with EHCPs or low prior attainment
- **Protected** for Year 11 and vulnerable learners (no curriculum narrowing)

Inspectors may ask:

- “Can pupils explain how today’s lesson connects to what they did last week?”
- “What adaptations exist for your lowest prior attainers?”
- “How do subject leaders check curriculum is delivered consistently across classes?”

What leaders are doing:

- A MAT in the North is auditing sequencing across all core subjects post-Ofsted dip in outcomes.
- One secondary mapped ‘access’ against FSM/SEND outcomes to identify curriculum drop-off points.
- A small primary reduced its subject load to focus deeply on core retention and cross-curricular links.

4. Contextual Leadership Is Officially In-Scope

What’s changing:

The 2024 framework update means inspectors are required to factor in:

- Funding pressures
- Post-pandemic recovery challenges
- Local staff recruitment barriers
- Deprivation levels and attendance complexity

What leaders are doing:

- A West Yorkshire headteacher uses a “context case file” with: funding history, staffing turnover, and key pupil-group shifts.
- One MAT prepares a trust-wide contextual dashboard to help schools frame progress fairly without excuse-making.

Inspectors are now asking:

- “What are your three biggest context challenges, and how are you adapting to them?”
- “How do you ensure disadvantaged pupils catch up and keep up?”
- “How have you adjusted curriculum or support based on community

need?”

How to Prepare: Leadership Moves That Make the Difference

Focus Area	What Strong Leaders Are Doing
Safeguarding	Monthly safeguarding clinics, DSL job-shadowing, live policy walkthroughs
Workload	Visible workload reviews, CPD linked to actual delivery time, removing duplication
Curriculum	Pupil voice routines, subject deep dives led by SLT, sequencing audits
Governor Readiness	Inspection one-pagers: top 3 risks, 3 priorities, and 3 “what we’ve stopped”

Inspection Red Flags to Avoid

- **Over-prep that exhausts staff:** Endless walkthroughs, over-scripted answers, staff confusion.
- **Curriculum that isn’t lived:** Strong on paper, weak in the classroom—especially in small or split-year settings.
- **Safeguarding “gaps in the chain”:** Over-reliance on one DSL, unclear reporting thresholds, gaps in after-hours provision.
- **Staff can’t explain the ‘why’:** Curriculum, behaviour, and workload decisions must be justified in context.

Final Thought

In 2025, Ofsted wants truth over polish.

They want to see **schools led by clarity, not choreography**—places where safeguarding is understood, curriculum is real, and staff wellbeing isn’t just promised, but planned.

And that means the best inspection prep isn’t more paperwork. It’s thoughtful, visible leadership—backed by systems that work on ordinary days, not just inspection ones.