



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

DIOCESE OF DURHAM
DIOCESE OF NEWCASTLE

Joint Education Team
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Our Ref: DA/SAB

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Dear Parents and Carers,

I am writing to share some information about the current Ofsted inspection framework, as many parents have found recent inspection outcomes across the country confusing or surprising. My hope is that this explanation will help you understand what sits behind the judgements schools receive, both now and whenever your child's school is inspected in future. Whilst all schools' welcome scrutiny and accountability, the updated Inspection Framework is still in its infancy and the transition from one accountability model to another can take time for all concerned to adjust to.

A Shift in Expectations

Ofsted has made a number of changes to how schools are inspected. One of the biggest shifts is that the grade "Expected" is now much harder to achieve than the previous grade of "Good." If a school receives "Expected", this is something to celebrate—it means the school is meeting a very high bar.

This rise in challenge is partly due to a move away from a "best fit" approach (where inspectors looked at the overall picture) to a "secure fit" model, which means that schools are expected to meet **all** parts of the criteria in full. As a result, direct comparison between a previous "Good" and a current "Expected" is not always appropriate; they are based on different criteria, different expectations, and a higher standard of evidence.

"Needs Attention" – An Important Clarification

You may also see elements of a report described as "Needs Attention."

Ofsted is clear in its public guidance that:

- "Needs Attention" is not a fail.
- It is entirely normal for schools to have areas that require further development.

This wording simply reflects where practice is still embedding or where additional focus is needed. Many schools—no matter how strong—will have such areas, particularly during a period in which the inspection framework has changed so significantly.

(Parents can view Ofsted's own explanation here): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbl0FvY976g>

New Criteria and Embedded Practice

Another significant change is that schools are being judged on new areas of practice that were not part of the inspection expectations last year. These new elements are expected to be fully embedded, even though they are still very new. Naturally, this will take time for all schools to implement well.

A Stronger Emphasis on Data

Although Ofsted previously spoke positively about taking school context into account, the implementation of this is not yet clear. Outcomes now place a much stronger emphasis on achievement data, including:

- Overall attainment, not just progress.



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- Attendance, which has become a major focus.

As a result, schools doing excellent day-to-day work with children may nevertheless receive outcomes that feel harsh if their data does not align closely with national expectations—sometimes despite all their best efforts and the particular needs of their pupils.

Greater Scrutiny of Headteachers and Leaders

This inspection framework was introduced with the intention of supporting the wellbeing of school leaders and reducing pressure. Unfortunately, a number of school leaders are still experiencing the opposite. Inspections now involve greater scrutiny, with more inspectors on site and higher expectations across all areas. As a result, the demands placed on headteachers and senior staff have increased.

As Director of Education for the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle, I have the privilege of working alongside school leaders serving communities across the North-East, from our cities and towns to our most rural and coastal communities. I see first-hand the dedication, resilience and compassion with which headteachers, governors, trust leaders and staff serve children and families every day.

Our Church schools are called to be places where every child is cherished as a unique child of God and encouraged to flourish academically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. In often challenging circumstances, school leaders remain steadfast in their commitment to providing an excellent education whilst nurturing hope, dignity and aspiration within their communities.

Many of our schools serve communities facing significant social and economic challenges. They do far more than educate; they provide stability, care, encouragement and opportunity for children and families. Such work cannot always be fully captured by 'one size fits all' inspection frameworks or performance measures, yet it remains central to the mission and ministry of our schools.

What Matters Most

I would wish to end by reflecting on the 20+ inspections our schools have been part of over the last 7 months. Schools understand the need for external scrutiny and the role Ofsted plays in ensuring that children are given the very best opportunities.

Across the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle, our vision for education is rooted in the belief that every child should experience "life in all its fullness" and be enabled to flourish within a caring, ambitious and inclusive school community.

Even with these national changes, our commitment and hope remains that children will become:

- Confident in who they are and who they can become.
- Hopeful and resilient in the face of challenges.
- Compassionate and respectful towards others.
- Active citizens who contribute to the common good.
- Spiritually aware and able to engage with questions of meaning and purpose.
- Well-educated young people equipped with the knowledge and skills to flourish in life

Key Points to Remember

- "Expected" is harder to achieve than "Good"—and is something to be proud of.

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- **"Needs Attention" is not a fail**, and it is normal for schools to have areas identified for further work.
- **New criteria are being inspected immediately**, even though they take time to embed.
- **Attainment and attendance data now have a significant influence** on the outcome of an inspection.
- **Inspectors must now apply a 'secure fit', not 'best fit' model** reducing opportunity for context to be fully considered

Above all, our schools remain focused on enabling children and young people to flourish and to contribute positively to their communities.

Thank you, as always, for your partnership, your encouragement and the trust you place in our schools every day.

With every blessing,

David Akers
Director of Education
Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle