



info@ofstedcoalition.co.uk

24 September 2026

The Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings,
Great Smith Street
London,
SW1P 3BT

Dear Lucy Powell,

We are writing as the Ofsted Coalition, a coalition of organisations and individuals who share a deep concern about the impact and effectiveness of England's school inspection system.

We have written previously to your predecessor, Bridget Phillipson, setting out our concerns about Ofsted and urging the Government to ensure that reform addressed the fundamental problems exposed by the preventable suicide of Ruth Perry. We welcomed the decision to remove single-word judgements, but argued that changing the presentation of inspection outcomes would not, by itself, address the serious underlying problems of a high-stakes, low-reliability and insufficiently accountable system.

We are writing again because we still do not believe that the reforms have addressed those underlying hazards. Indeed, the new system has largely changed the presentation — and multiplied the number — of judgements, without resolving fundamental questions about safety, fairness, reliability, effectiveness, proportionality, power and accountability.

Safety must come first

There continue to be reports of school leaders experiencing acute distress and suicidal ideation following Ofsted inspections, including under the new framework.

This is not simply a question of whether inspection causes stress. The particular circumstances of high-stakes inspection can create foreseeable personal and occupational risks: humiliation, a sense of entrapment, threatened loss of livelihood and professional identity, perceived injustice and the absence of meaningful redress.

These risks should be formally assessed and managed as health and safety risks, with effective preventive measures, transparent monitoring and independent oversight. Under

no circumstances should anyone accept acute psychological harm — or, ultimately, suicide — as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of accountability.

Ofsted is therefore not simply an education policy issue. It is a health and safety issue.

Independent complaints must mean independent redress

We welcome the Government's commitment to introducing "greater independent oversight" of Ofsted complaints. However, reviewing how Ofsted handled a complaint is not the same as providing independent redress.

If an independent reviewer concludes that an inspection finding is unsound, there must be a binding mechanism to require that finding to be corrected, withdrawn or replaced through reinspection, where appropriate. The fact that the Chief Inspector has statutory authority over inspection judgements should not be used as a reason why independent adjudication cannot have meaningful effect.

Complainants must also be able to put their case directly to the reviewer, with access to all relevant evidence.

Without these safeguards, "independent oversight" risks becoming an additional layer of scrutiny which, crucially, lacks the power necessary to remedy injustice.

Who holds Ofsted accountable?

There remains a fundamental concern about the process through which Ofsted itself has been reformed.

Following the Education Select Committee inquiry, the coroner's Prevention of Future Deaths report, Dame Christine Gilbert's independent review and the McBrearty review of wellbeing, Ofsted has largely been allowed to determine and implement its own response through, for example, the Big Listen and subsequent reforms.

Ironically, we would not accept this approach for a school. If a school were found wanting by Ofsted, we would hardly say: *"The school will now conduct its own 'big listen', decide which criticisms it accepts and determine for itself what reforms are necessary."*

Yet this is, in effect, the position in which Ofsted has found itself.

A culture cannot credibly be reformed solely through a framework designed and implemented by the organisation whose culture is in question. Ofsted itself must be held to account.

Reliability matters: can inspection support the consequences attached to it?

Alongside safety and accountability, there is a fundamental question about the reliability of Ofsted inspection judgements.

The problem is not simply how inspectors apply the framework. It is also the architecture of inspection itself. A short inspection by a limited team can directly examine only a small proportion of a school's work. Its conclusions therefore necessarily depend upon sampling

decisions and professional interpretation, creating an unavoidable risk of variation in judgement between inspectors.

This creates what we have described as a “perfect storm” of high stakes and low reliability: potentially enormous consequences are attached to judgements that are necessarily based on limited evidence and significant professional interpretation.

The removal of single-word judgements does not remove this problem. Nor does multiplying the number of judgements necessarily make the underlying judgements more reliable.

If inspection is to carry significant consequences for schools and school leaders, there must be a much stronger basis for confidence that its judgements are sufficiently consistent, evidence-based and reliable to justify those consequences.

The problem is bigger than the framework

The Government should therefore be cautious about assuming that further changes to the inspection framework will solve the problem.

The issue is the wider culture and architecture of school accountability. The consequences extend beyond individual leaders. The pressure associated with inspection contributes to difficulties recruiting and retaining school leaders, encourages competition between schools and can reduce opportunities for collaboration, cooperation and mutual professional support.

This matters particularly for schools serving the most disadvantaged and challenging communities, where the consequences of a punitive or unreliable accountability system can be greatest.

The crisis in recruitment and retention

The extreme pressure and perceived unfairness of the current inspection regime are actively driving talented professionals out of the education sector. School leaders and teachers are increasingly leaving the profession - or choosing not to step up into leadership roles - due to the disproportionate personal and occupational risks attached to inspection outcomes. A system that burns through its most valuable resource simply cannot support school improvement. The process of rebuilding workforce trust requires an accountability system that values, protects and retains teachers, not one that pushes them away.

We therefore believe that England needs an accountability system that is:

Safe – protecting the wellbeing and lives of those who work within it

Fair – recognising the context and complexity of schools and providing genuine opportunities for challenge and redress

Proportionate – matching the intensity and consequences of accountability to the evidence and risks involved and

Accountable – ensuring that Ofsted itself is subject to meaningful independent scrutiny.

The evidence is already there. What is required now is action. We do not believe that another review of Ofsted is necessary before action is taken.

The Education Select Committee inquiry, the coroner's Prevention of Future Deaths report, Dame Christine Gilbert's independent review, the McBrearty review of wellbeing and also the evidence gathered through the Big Listen have already provided substantial evidence of the problems within the current system.

The Government should act on the readily available evidence and use all the powers available to it to ensure that the known risks are addressed. This should include:

- formal and independently scrutinised assessment and management of the health and safety risks
- independent complaints adjudication that provides effective redress
- meaningful external accountability for Ofsted's response to the findings already made.

The process must ensure that, where an independent adjudicator finds an inspection finding to be unsound, that determination results in the finding being corrected, withdrawn or replaced through reinspection, where appropriate, rather than merely reviewing whether Ofsted followed its own procedures.

We recognise that accountability is important. We do not argue against robust accountability. We argue for better accountability: accountability that provides trustworthy information, supports improvement while protecting the people and communities it is intended to serve.

You have already recognised that a change of culture is required to move away from systemic, high-stakes competition toward collaboration. That fundamental shift cannot be achieved solely through changes to an inspection framework designed and implemented by the very organisation being scrutinised.

We urge you, therefore, to act now on the substantial evidence already available to ensure that Ofsted is subject to meaningful external accountability.

The aim should be an inspection and accountability system that is **Safe, Fair, Proportionate and Accountable**.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you and your officials.

Yours sincerely,

Ofsted Coalition

Maggie Abraham ForThe100.org.uk

Dr Robert Abraham ForThe100 campaign

Dr Kulvarn Atwal Principal, The Thinking Schools Federation

Edmund Barnett-Ward	Caversham Primary School Parent
Melissa Benn	Writer and researcher
Scott Brerton	
Maxine Carrick	Forthe100
Alison Clark	
John Cosgrove	Retired Headteacher
Liz de Oliveira	
Professor Emeritus Educational Leadership Colin Diamond CBE	University of Birmingham
Keziah Featherstone	Co-chair Headteachers' Round Table
Frances Field	Retired Head of English and Drama
Vic Goddard	CEO of PCLC
Adrian Gray	River Education
Kieran Green	Vice Chair & Events Lead, Fabian Education Policy Group
Peter Green	Former HMI
Hilary Grime	ForThe100
Dr Dani Hall	Independent researcher
John Hayes	Retired Executive Head; former LA advisor
Sarah Hill	
Di Hoeksma	
Professor Brian Hudson	Chair of the Fabian Education Policy Group
Azir Iqbal	
Julie Kelly	Chair of the National Association of Small Schools (NASS)
Joanna Lane	CEO, Christopher Lane Trust
Brian Lightman	Former general secretary ASCL
Adrian Lyons FRSA	Former HMI (2005 - 2021)
Alasdair Macdonald	Chair of the New Visions for Education Group (NVEG)
Professor Martin McKee CBE	
Martin McKee CBE	Professor of European Public Health, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

Abbas Mohamed	
Hilary Mullen	
Frank Norris MBE FCCT	Former Senior HMI responsible for school framework development
Dr Deborah Outhwaite	Chair, BELMAS
Hilda Palmer	Families Against Corporate Killers
Lee Parkinson MBE	Primary Teacher
Prof. Jane Perryman	Professor of Sociology of Education, IOE, University College London
James Pope FCCT	Former Headteacher, Director of Inspireducate and Founder of HeadsUp4HTs
Alba Richards	
Prof. Colin Richards	HMI (retired)
Mr Mike Riley	
Norman Rimmell	Fabian Society Education Policy Group
Des Rose	Fabian Education Policy Group - Head of Economics & Work Related Curriculum (Retired)
Peter Tymms	Emeritus Professor
Jonny Uttley	Recent Trust CEO and Headteacher
Paul Vittles	Suicide Prevention Consultant
Prof. Sarah Waters	Suicide researcher, University of Leeds
Jeremy Waxman OBE	Retired Headteacher (1998-2019)
Christine Whatford CBE	Former Director of Education and Head teacher
Dr Ian Widdows	Researcher, former secondary school headteacher
Mark Wilson	Wellspring Trust Chief Executive Officer
Paul Woolston	