Introduction and background

In 2012, the Department for Education made outstanding primary and secondary schools exempt from routine inspection. This was intended to reduce what they perceived as the ‘burden’ of inspection and provide greater freedoms for highly performing state-funded schools. The exemption ran for 8 years until it was lifted in 2020.

During the period of the exemption, Ofsted could still inspect exempt schools if it had concerns. These concerns could be triggered by a risk assessment (based on data such as school performance data, workforce data, contextual data, and complaints); or by a significant change to the school (such as taking on an extra key stage). The number of inspections varied by year, but for example, in 2018-19 Ofsted inspected 11 per cent of the group. This commentary explores what happened during the period of the exemption, and after the exemption was lifted. A more comprehensive report will be published in early 2023.

Key findings

Movement in and out of the outstanding category

- There were 3,900 outstanding primary and secondary schools when the exemption was introduced, and 3,400 were outstanding when it ended. Although the numbers are similar, the composition of the list changed considerably during those 8 years.
- There were 1,400 schools (43 per cent of the total) that remained outstanding throughout the period because they were not inspected at all and so kept their grade. A further 570 were inspected but remained outstanding. About 1,900 schools ceased to be outstanding (usually after an inspection triggered by a risk assessment) and 1,500 additional schools were judged outstanding.
- Altogether, Ofsted carried out 2,900 inspections of outstanding schools in the exemption period, including some schools which were visited more than once. Of these inspections, 71 per cent resulted in the school no longer being judged to be outstanding – 51 per cent became good, 16 per cent required improvement and 4 per cent were inadequate.
- For around a fifth of the 3,400 schools still graded outstanding at the end of the exemption, their last graded inspection was one of the lighter-touch ‘reduced tariff inspections’ carried out between 2006 and 2009. Eighty-two per cent had not been inspected under either the common inspection framework (used between 2015 and 2019) or the current education inspection framework, which has different sub-judgements and more emphasis on the curriculum.
- In 2021-22, Ofsted inspected over 500 previously exempt schools. It will have inspected all previously exempt schools by the end of July 2025.
- Around 370 previously exempt schools had a graded inspection in 2021-22. On average, their last inspection was over 13 years earlier. This means they had been risk assessed many times, but their data had not raised sufficient concerns to lead to an inspection.
- When inspected, 17 per cent remained outstanding, 62 per cent became good and 21 per cent were judged requires improvement or inadequate. Twenty-five per cent of secondary schools remained outstanding compared to 14 per cent of primary schools.
- It should be noted that schools which had a graded inspection last year represent the schools that had not been inspected for the longest, and about which there were most concerns.
- Schools graded outstanding after September 2015 usually receive ungraded inspections. Ofsted carried out 130 ungraded inspections of previously exempt schools and identified concerns in 59 per cent of them. These schools will have time to make improvements before a graded inspection around 12 months later.
- Most schools that did not remain outstanding were graded less than outstanding for both quality of education and for leadership and management. A higher proportion of schools were judged outstanding for behaviour and attitudes and personal development.

Inspections since the end of the exemption

- In March 2020, routine inspection was suspended due to the pandemic, and when the exemption ended in November 2020, Ofsted did not return immediately to a normal inspection programme. Normal inspections resumed for all types of school from September 2021.
- The 34 selective schools such as grammar school which were inspected were more likely to remain outstanding than non-selective schools, and less likely to be judged requires improvement or inadequate.
- Academies (both primary and secondary) were more likely than maintained schools to remain outstanding. However, in the case of secondary schools (most of
which are now academies), the comparison is based on just 16 local authority (LA) schools.

- Overall, faith schools were slightly more likely to remain outstanding than non-faith schools. The vast majority of faith schools inspected were Christian schools.
- When comparing the most deprived group of schools to the least deprived group, the most deprived primary schools were more likely to remain outstanding (29% vs 13%). However, the pattern was reversed for secondary schools where 30 per cent of the most deprived schools remained outstanding compared to 35 per cent of the least deprived.

Comparing inspection outcomes for previously exempt schools with other schools

- The outstanding schools that had a graded inspection in 2021-22, and which on average had not been inspected for over 13 years, are by definition unusual. This makes it difficult to compare the inspection outcomes of these 370 schools with those of other schools, and to draw any conclusions.
- Twenty-one per cent of the previously exempt primary schools that had a graded inspection in 2021-22 were judged to require improvement or to be inadequate. Ten per cent of all open primary schools received a grade of requires improvement or inadequate at their most recent inspection.
- Twenty-one per cent of the previously exempt secondary schools that had a graded inspection in 2021-22 were judged to require improvement or to be inadequate. Twenty per cent of all open secondary schools received a grade of requires improvement or inadequate at their most recent inspection.