



Guidance

Further education and skills operating guide for inspectors: for use from November 2025

Updated 5 November 2025

Applies to England

Contents

About this page

Conduct

Key principles

What to do before arriving on site

Notification

Planning call

Core requirements throughout the inspection

Meeting standards and determining grades

Where the evidence indicates a particular grade is likely to be reached

What to do on site during the inspection: day 1

What to do on site during the inspection: day 2 onwards

What to do after the inspection

Quality assurance and consistency checking

Additional guidance to support inspection

Additional guidance to support evidence-gathering

Specific contexts to consider

Other matters



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For use on inspections from 10 November 2025.

About this page

This guidance sets out how lead inspectors ('you') and team inspectors should carry out full inspections.

Inspectors should use the guidance in this document and [the toolkit \(https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information\)](https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information), along with their professional curiosity and compassion, to gather evidence to reach fair and accurate grades. They should also draw on their experience and expertise.

Information for inspectors on how to carry out monitoring visits is in our separate operating guide for monitoring visits of FE and skills providers. We will publish this in the autumn 2025.

Conduct

Throughout the inspection, you must act in line with our [code of conduct \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/conduct-during-ofsted-inspections\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/conduct-during-ofsted-inspections), and show professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect at all times. At the earliest opportunity, and as necessary throughout the inspection, remind both the provider and the inspection team of the importance of following the code of conduct.

Key principles

Principle 1

- Throughout the inspection, the toolkit will help you to gather evidence to celebrate the provider's strengths, validate leaders' priorities and progress and highlight where improvement is needed. In doing so, you will consider the extent to which learners and apprentices:

- achieve – academically and personally
- belong – feel that they belong to and are valued as part of the provider community
- thrive – benefit from the right systems, processes and levels of oversight, so that they are kept safe and are able to flourish, and/or fulfil their potential, whatever their background or individual needs

These prompts align closely with the evaluation areas in the toolkit and will give you assurance that you are building a clear and typical picture of all aspects of the provider's work.

Principle 2

- Leadership, inclusion and whether there is an open and positive safeguarding culture are key areas of focus when gathering evidence.

Principle 3

- The 'expected standard' in the evaluation areas in the toolkit is the starting point for planning your inspection activities.

What to do before arriving on site

Preparing for inspection

Preparation is a vital part of ensuring that the inspection is a positive experience. Being focused and proportionate is key. You may wish to review some information briefly before your first phone call with leaders to notify the inspection and return to this later in the day to review the information in more detail before the planning call.

When preparing, consider the [3 key principles](#).

Review the following, recording brief, relevant, evaluative information:

- the provider's previous inspection report

- the FE and skills inspection tool
- any pre-inspection briefing material
- any complaints made about the provider to Ofsted

Review briefly the following publicly available information (and where relevant, record brief and evaluative points):

- where relevant, the most recent [inspection report on the relevant local authority's children's services](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018>)
- where relevant, the main findings from any [area special educational needs and/or disabilities \(SEND\) inspection](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-area-send-inspection-guidance-for-inspectors) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-area-send-inspection-guidance-for-inspectors>)
- the provider's website
- information reported in the press or online

Check the [provision types that the provider offers](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#types-of-provision) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#types-of-provision>) and the scope of each one.

Use your preparation to identify what to explore in the planning call.

Checking for complaints about providers

When preparing for an inspection, review and consider any complaints that have been made to Ofsted.

Do not:

- investigate or follow up the specific circumstances of a complaint received before or during the inspection or come to any conclusions about the complaint itself
- use complaints or information about complaints as evidence to support grading, or reach any grades based on complaints; however, you may take account of wider issues and information raised by complaints when planning inspection activities and you can use the evidence that you find through those activities to support your decision-making about grades

Notification

Constructive, professional dialogue

At the heart of our inspections is a professional dialogue between inspectors, leaders and [the nominee](https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#role-of-the-nominee) (<https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#role-of-the-nominee>). This dialogue must follow our [code of conduct](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/conduct-during-ofsted-inspections) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/conduct-during-ofsted-inspections>) and always be carried out with professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect.

The notification call should set the tone for the inspection. From the outset, you should start to build positive relationships and rapport with leaders. Consider the well-being of both staff and leaders throughout.

Timing of the call

You will normally give the provider 5 to 6 working days' notice, unless the inspection is unannounced.

Contact the provider by telephone on the morning of the notification day given in your schedule, normally from 9am.

Speaking with senior leaders

Your initial contact should be with the principal, chief executive officer (CEO) or equivalent.

If they are unavailable, ask to speak with the next most senior person who is available.

Notifying leaders of the inspection

Follow the script to notify the provider of the inspection. This will ensure that the required information is accurately recorded.

Inform the provider that an inspection is taking place and explain the type and length of the inspection.

Confirm details of the inspection team, including whether there is an assistant lead inspector. Check whether there are any conflicts of interest or concerns. Note any conflicts or concerns and your response in the evidence base.

Scheduling the planning call

Agree the time for a second, longer call (the [planning call](#)) which may be split into 2 calls for large and complex providers. Explain that this is normally a video conference call, unless technology does not allow this. Agree with the senior leader the arrangements for this.

Explain what you are going to discuss on the call(s) and that the call(s) may last around 90 minutes. Emphasise to leaders that they can take breaks as needed.

Agree who should attend the call(s). Encourage the leader and nominee to invite another member of staff to assist and support them in all calls.

Nominee

Explain the role of [the nominee](https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#role-of-the-nominee) (<https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#role-of-the-nominee>). Ask leaders who they have selected for this role. Ask if the proposed nominee has accessed any of our optional training for nominees. Reassure leaders that there is no requirement for the proposed nominee to have completed this training and it will not hinder the inspection if they have not.

Confirm that the nominee is suitably placed to support inspection activity. They should be a senior member of staff with a thorough knowledge of how

the provider operates on a day-to-day basis. Record in the evidence base the role of the person selected to be the nominee.

Agree who should attend the planning call with you and the nominee. Ask the nominee to invite another member of staff present to assist and support them – but keep numbers on the call manageable. The call may also include the principal, CEO or equivalent where they ask for this, but do not ask for them to be present. It may also include the [shadow nominee](https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#shadow-nominee) (<https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#shadow-nominee>), if there is one. If others join the planning call(s) you must check that any information that you discuss is appropriate to share with them.

You must not share confidential notes or complaint-related information with the nominee. Only relevant logistical and contextual information may be shared.

Reasonable adjustments and adaptations

Ask whether anyone who will be joining the planning call requires any reasonable adjustments due to a disability and, if so, what arrangements are already in place.

Consider any requests, following the guidance in the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) section, and contact the duty desk. Advise the nominee of your decision. If they have any questions or unresolved concerns following this discussion, refer them to the provider contact helpline.

Consider making other adaptations to the inspection process where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage.

Stakeholder follow-up calls

For an inspection of a general FE college, sixth-form college or designated institution – an ‘enhanced’ inspection – you should also arrange some calls with stakeholders.

These stakeholders should be organisations that the provider works with as part of its engagement with, and contribution to, local, regional and/or national skills needs. Ask the provider to choose which stakeholders are key

in helping to realise the provider's skills strategy. All possible stakeholders are set out in the section on [specific contexts](#).

During the notification call, agree how many of the provider's key stakeholders you should speak with and ask the provider to arrange these calls. This must include calls with:

- the employer representative body
- one or two major stakeholders representing employers that the provider works with, where appropriate
- one or two major stakeholders representing civic, educational or community groups that the provider works with, where appropriate

Confirming key provider information

Ask leaders to upload the provider information listed in the [inspection information for FE and skills \(https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025\)](https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025).

Advise leaders that they will receive formal notification of the inspection in a letter, which will be sent by an inspection support administrator (ISA) as an email attachment. This will include information about the surveys to be completed by staff, learners and apprentices and a [list of documents that the provider will need to supply at the start of the inspection \(https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#information-the-lead-inspector-will-ask-for-during-the-notification-call\)](https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#information-the-lead-inspector-will-ask-for-during-the-notification-call). We will also provide information about the portal and how leaders can upload documents.

Complete and upload the notification form and inform the inspection support team that you have made the notification call.

Requests for deferral

Familiarise yourself with our guidance on [deferring, pausing and gathering additional evidence \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/deferring-ofsted-inspections\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/deferring-ofsted-inspections).

You must contact the regional Senior His Majesty's Inspector (HMI) if you receive a request for a deferral.

Planning call

Call the provider at the time agreed in the notification call. This is normally a video conference call, unless technology does not allow this. Ask the provider not to record this call or any further calls. In exceptional circumstances, you may permit the provider to record the call where this is required to respond to a request for reasonable adjustments. Similarly, tell the provider that we do not normally record the call, unless we have agreed this beforehand with them. Let the nominee know that they are welcome to take notes.

Remember that the aim of this call is to have a meaningful and professional conversation about the provider, its context and leaders' views about its strengths and priorities for improvement. It is an important discussion that will help you to form a top-level view of the provider.

Explain that the call will be in 3 parts:

- introduction and discussing practicalities
- understanding the provider's context
- planning inspection activities

Part 1: introduction and discussing practicalities

Record the roles of all staff on the call.

Remind leaders/the nominee that:

- we have a [code of conduct \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/conduct-during-ofsted-inspections\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/conduct-during-ofsted-inspections) that sets out our expectations for leaders and staff at the provider
- these expectations include asking the provider to be open, transparent and honest with inspectors, so that the inspection can be carried out with integrity

You should cover the following points.

Leaders' well-being

Check on leaders' well-being.

Establish who is responsible for the senior leaders'/nominee's well-being on a day-to-day basis. Record how to contact them.

In the case of colleges, make sure that leaders are aware that help and support for their well-being and that of their staff is available through the charity [Education Support \(https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/\)](https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/).

Reasonable adjustments and adaptations

Check that any reasonable adjustments agreed during the notification call have been put in place. Make sure you have considered any other requested adaptations appropriate to the inspection process where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage.

Remind leaders/the nominee that they can ask for any further reasonable adjustments or adaptations during the rest of the inspection process. See the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) section for further information.

Record any requests and their outcome in the evidence base, along with any other adaptations that have been requested.

Ensuring that leaders have what they need

Establish whether leaders/the nominee have the practical information they need, including links to questionnaires, the provider contact helpline number, and details about how to upload documents to the portal. Where there is an assistant lead inspector, explain their role.

Make sure leaders/the nominee understand the process of inspection and the toolkit that you will use to guide evaluation and grading – let them know where they can access the inspection documents.

Check that the provider can share with you the information asked for during the notification call and agree a deadline for providing this. Make sure you find out the arrangements for any meetings with stakeholders that you discussed during that call.

If any complaints have been made about the provider, explain that the inspection will focus on the wider issues raised by the complaints. Inspectors will not investigate individual complaints.

Ask leaders if they have any issues or concerns that they would like to raise or if there is anything they want to clarify before the inspection. Explain that they will also be able to raise any emerging matters during the inspection itself.

Part 2: understanding the provider's context and leaders' priorities for improvement

It is crucial that, as part of the planning call, you develop an accurate understanding of the provider's context, including the demographics of the learners and apprentices and their needs. This will help you to understand the lens through which leaders have made their decisions and reflect on the impact of the provider's work, particularly on disadvantaged learners and apprentices, those with SEND, those with high needs, those who are known (or were previously known) to social care, those without level 2 English and/or mathematics, and those who may face any other barriers to their learning or well-being.

Remember to apply the [3 key principles](#) throughout the planning call.

When inspecting large and/or complex providers, you may wish to split this part of the discussion into 2 calls. Use the second call to discuss each provision type or site.

Contextual information, leaders' successes and leadership priorities

To deepen your understanding of the provider, and in collaboration with leaders/the nominee, use this part of the call to discuss:

- your pre-inspection preparation
- the provider's context, including any major changes since the previous inspection or monitoring visit and details of (and responses to) any recent tensions in, or pressures from, the community
- leaders' evaluation of the provider's current strengths and successes and their priorities for improvement, including where they believe they currently sit in terms of the 5-point grading scale for each evaluation area (at whole-provider and/or provider type level)
- leaders' recent and ongoing priorities and challenges, the actions they have taken to improve or maintain standards, and how they have assessed the impact of their actions
- any relevant safeguarding issues, as identified by leaders, including any safeguarding concerns, or allegations made about adults

Leaders' approach to inclusion

Explore:

- an overview of learners' and apprentices' needs
- leaders' approach to ensuring that staff are able to identify disadvantaged learners and apprentices, those with SEND, those with high needs, those

known (or previously known) to social care, those without level 2 English and/or mathematics, and those who may face any other barriers to their learning or well-being; you need to consider this even if leaders have not identified any learners/apprentices who fall into these groups – this is to ensure that leaders are identifying and addressing the needs of learners and apprentices effectively

- how the provider supports these learners/apprentices
- the impact of the support given to learners/apprentices and if and how that impact is monitored and reviewed
- steps the provider has taken to meet the duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled learners/apprentices
- the provider's schedule/timetable, how the curriculums are organised, and how leaders work with external professionals to meet learners' and apprentices' needs – this is particularly important when inspecting specialist settings

At this point, confirm the inspection focus areas with leaders and agree the steps needed to identify the learners and apprentices to include in the case sample.

If leaders have not identified any learners/apprentices who fall into the groups listed above, reflect on why this may be the case. Take into account any contextual information about the provider.

Part 3: planning inspection activities

The purpose of this part of the call is to shape the plan for the inspection. Make sure leaders/the nominee understand the plan and know what practical arrangements they need to make to support it.

The information from your calls will help you consider and plan with leaders/the nominee what inspection activities you and the team need to carry out to gather the necessary evidence to:

- celebrate what leaders have identified as strengths
- validate the priorities leaders have identified for improvement, and whether they have an effective plan to bring about the desired impact
- highlight where there is more to do to ensure that all learners and apprentices achieve, belong and thrive

You must consider the provider's context when planning inspection activities. In land-based colleges, for example, it is vital that you visit

learning environments across the estate; in community and tailored learning providers, you must visit a range of community and outreach centres.

You need to be flexible, for example by working with leaders/the nominee to attend workplaces or by understanding that some learners and apprentices may have already completed the block release aspect of their course.

An inspector should, where relevant, plan to check the single central record (SCR) after the orientation meeting and as soon as possible at the start of the inspection. This is to assure leaders early about the quality of their safer recruitment procedures, in case they need extra time to address any minor administrative omissions. Explain that you will be looking at the culture of safeguarding across the provider throughout the inspection.

Find a suitable time during the inspection to meet with those responsible for governance and/or oversight.

Work with leaders/the nominee to agree and plan the focus areas for the inspection, taking into account their views of their priorities and their strengths, successes and areas for development.

Briefly explain [case sampling](#) to leaders/the nominee. Ask them to provide a list of learners/apprentices:

- with SEND
- who are disadvantaged
- who are known (or were previously known) to children's social care

Explain that you will use this list to select a number of learners/apprentices for case sampling. Make sure you select a representative sample, always including:

- a learner/apprentice with an education, health and care (EHC) plan, and, where possible, a disabled learner/apprentice
- a learner/apprentice who is in receipt of high needs funding
- a looked-after child
- a learner/apprentice known (or previously known) to social care
- a learner/apprentice from any other group that leaders have identified as significant to the context in which they work

Tell leaders/the nominee that you will agree on the learners/apprentices for case sampling at the beginning of day 1.

The inspection team will need to gather evidence about the experiences of learners and apprentices in each provision type. They then consider this

evidence and how it aligns with the evidence gathered for the whole-provider evaluation areas.

Explaining inspection activities on day 1

Inspection activities on day 1 follow a clear structure. Explain the following structure on the planning call to leaders/the nominee.

The team will focus on gathering direct, first-hand evidence about learners' and apprentices' outcomes and experiences, particularly disadvantaged learners and apprentices, those with SEND, those with high needs, those known (or previously known) to social care, those without level 2 English and/or mathematics, and those who face any other barriers to their learning or well-being. You will also gather evidence about leaders' priorities and actions, and the impact of these.

Inspectors will accompany relevant leaders on learning walks, so that inspectors can connect the top-level view with the first-hand evidence they gather about learners'/apprentices' experiences. These learning walks will allow leaders the opportunity to show inspectors their provision, discuss the context in which they work and exemplify the impact of their actions. Explain that as part of learning walks, inspectors will look at learners'/apprentices' work and discuss their learning with them.

Ensure that time is set aside for inspectors to spend time with learners/apprentices.

There should be ongoing reflection meetings with leaders and the inspection team throughout each day of the inspection. These meetings are an opportunity to review the evidence in relation to the toolkit evaluation areas covered so far. It is important leaders understand that sharing the team's thinking enables open, professional and transparent dialogue with them. You can also discuss whether any inspection activity needs to be adapted in light of emerging evidence.

The meetings also allow leaders to identify any evidence they feel is pertinent in reaching a well-rounded understanding of how the provider normally operates.

These reflection meetings will be rooted in an ongoing review of the toolkit evaluation areas covered in the inspection activities so far.

Each day, there should be an [end-of-day reflection meeting](#).

Leadership meetings related to the evaluation areas and learning walks/visits

Leadership meetings and learning walks/visits on day 1 might include, for instance, provision type leaders, or the leader who oversees inclusion.

While planning day 1, discuss with leaders/the nominee which evaluation areas you are likely to want to explore in more detail through focused leadership meetings and learning walks. This will help them to plan and organise these meetings at a suitable time during the inspection. Bear in mind that in smaller providers, one leader may be responsible for many different areas. Discuss with leaders who would be the most appropriate person for an inspector to talk with, and their availability.

It is important that time is scheduled to talk with leaders, so that you can understand their rationale for the strengths and areas of focus they have identified, and their actions to date. Together, you/the inspection team and leaders may then carry out further inspection activities, including learning walks, to see the impact 'on the ground'. This will help to validate the leaders' self-evaluation. Explain to leaders that learning walks are an important opportunity for them to show you their context.

During learning walks/visits, or soon after as part of ongoing reflection meetings, share a summary of your evaluations. This is so that leaders/managers/linked staff have the opportunity to reflect on whether the emerging picture of the provider is typical and one that they recognise. Where leaders do not feel this is the case, explore with them what other inspection activities may be useful and practicable.

Write-up time

Make sure leaders/the nominee understand that the inspection team will require short amounts of time between inspection activities to write up their evaluations.

End-of-day reflection meetings

The meetings will include the nominee and the inspection team. According to the size and complexity of the provider, the reflection meetings will review either a selection of, or all the toolkit evaluation areas. Make sure leaders/the nominee understand the purpose and content of the meetings.

The meetings should focus on the quality and impact of leaders' choices and actions on learners and apprentices, rather than compliance alone. They are to review the evidence gathered overall by the inspection team so far. You will use the toolkit grading standards to consider the emerging picture, starting with the 'expected standard' for each evaluation area.

By the end of day 1 (or beyond day 1 for longer inspections), the team may have gathered enough evidence to show a 'secure fit' around an evaluation area. If this is the case, and leaders agree, you may decide not to gather any further evidence in this evaluation area. This is likely to be the case where the emerging evidence aligns with the leaders' self-evaluation against the grading standards.

Explain that in this meeting you will also work with leaders to finalise the plan for day 2 (and beyond day 2 for longer inspections). It is important that

leaders are clear about meetings they might need to organise for day 2 onwards.

On the final inspection day, the end-of-day meeting will be the formal grading meeting. This is when you evaluate the evidence gathered, including that already shared and discussed at the previous meetings. Provisional final grades will be determined based on a 'secure fit'.

Final feedback meeting

Ask the provider to invite the appropriate people to the final feedback meeting at the end of the final day of the inspection. See the [inspection information for FE and skills \(https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#who-can-attend-the-final-feedback-meeting\)](https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#who-can-attend-the-final-feedback-meeting) for who may attend.

Document upload

Agree a time when you will be able to upload the revised timetable to the portal. In relation to each of the focus areas for the inspection, ask the nominee to upload to the portal a schedule of teaching and training during the on-site inspection days.

After the call(s)

Inform team members of any relevant information, especially the relevant context of the provider. Record this information in the evidence base. Also inform them of the planned activities.

Make sure all team members are aware of the outcome of any requests for reasonable adjustments, and any other adaptations to the inspection process that are to be made where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage.

Upload the team briefing letter by midday the day before the on-site inspection activity begins.

Core requirements throughout the inspection

On each day of the inspection, arrive at the time arranged with the nominee. This should not be before 8.30am. Leave the premises by 5.45pm other

than in exceptional circumstances. You may need to stay later for inspections with twilight or evening provision.

On each day of the inspection, hold an initial, brief, face-to-face meeting with the nominee, the relevant senior leader and other leaders. Check with leaders on their well-being and the well-being of other staff before inspection activities begin each day.

With the nominee, review the planned timetable and adjust inspection activities, as needed.

Remember to plan regular time to reflect on and record the evidence, including sharing any emerging evaluations with leaders/the nominee.

Throughout the inspection, you (as the lead inspector) are responsible for assuring the quality of the evidence gathered, managing the conduct of the inspection team, and ensuring the smooth running of the inspection with leaders/the nominee. You will focus on building and managing relationships with leaders, having the oversight of leadership and governance and safeguarding, and quality assuring the work of your team.

Each end-of-day reflection meeting, including the grading meeting, should include the nominee (and shadow nominee, where relevant). In these meetings, reflect with leaders/the nominee on the well-being of staff and how effective any reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations have been. Ask whether they want to change the arrangements/adaptations or make any additional requests. Refer to the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) section for further information. Continue to anticipate and consider any further reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations you may need to put in place.

Evaluating safeguarding in practice

When determining whether safeguarding is 'met', it is important to go beyond reviewing documents and ensuring that the provider meets statutory requirements. You must connect all the evidence gathered during the inspection to evaluate the effectiveness of the provider's safeguarding culture over time. This includes speaking with staff, learners and apprentices (where appropriate), reviewing policies and casework, and observing how the provider models and maintains safe practice.

To evaluate safeguarding culture, you must:

- probe further than simply the information the provider presents to you

- take account of a range of evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements over time
- through sampling, review decisions made by the provider, any incidents that have occurred since the previous inspection, and whether the provider has taken appropriate action to deal with safeguarding concerns and to safeguard the learners and apprentices affected; consider the effectiveness of the provider's referral systems and its work with relevant professional agencies
- meet the relevant senior leader to review any allegations or concerns about adults and the steps the provider has taken in response to them
- in colleges and other relevant providers, meet the appropriate governance or oversight representative to discuss how they manage processes in relation to safeguarding concerns or allegations against the principal (or equivalent)
- consider proportionately the views of learners and apprentices, staff and employers, parents or carers (who we will refer to as 'parents' throughout, for ease of reading), using questionnaires, complaints and/or local intelligence
- look for evidence of effective safeguarding training and practice and the impact of this on learners and apprentices
- ask learners and apprentices whether they feel safe and know who to turn to if they have concerns
- examine how effectively the provider is implementing its safeguarding policies and processes, and how it keeps them under review

Throughout the inspection, adapt activities to the provider's context and agree this with leaders/the nominee where possible.

In all inspections, you, as the lead inspector:

- must review the SCR (where relevant) early on day 1
- should meet the designated safeguarding lead or the responsible person and review a sample of casework on day 1

You or another inspector must also:

- meet the leader or leaders who have oversight of SEND
- meet those responsible for governance and/or oversight
- meet the leader/manager of each provision type, following the initial face-to-face meeting with leaders, especially where the provider has multiple types of provision
- where relevant, meet the designated person for looked-after children

- meet learners and apprentices, including without staff being present, where necessary
- meet relevant members of staff
- meet employers, key stakeholders and, where relevant, subcontractors
- consider the views of learners and apprentices, employers, staff, skills stakeholders (where relevant) and parents, as appropriate; this could also include considering responses to our stakeholder questionnaires
- where appropriate, speak with a representative of the local authority; this should include discussion about the provision for learners and apprentices with SEND and the safeguarding culture

Some of these activities should take place on day 1, as indicated, while others are likely to be spread across each day of the inspection.

Recording evidence

You must make sure that the evidence base:

- is a clear and accurate evaluative record of relevant evidence (rather than a verbatim record of discussion or inspection activities)
- explains how you arrived at your decisions and findings, including how you weighed the evidence in reaching these – this includes findings relating to provisional grades, as well as other relevant decisions, such as the focus of inspection activities or responses to requests from leaders/the nominee
- complies with any relevant legal requirements, thresholds and Ofsted policies (justifying any departures from policies) and reflects our guidelines (including this operating guide for FE and skills and the toolkit)

If leaders or managers have accompanied you on activities, briefly review your findings with them. Record evidence in a proportionate way, with enough detail to clearly explain the gradings you made. Recorded evidence should be more detailed in cases where decisions are more complex, or potentially have greater consequences. This is so that you can reflect accurately and clearly how the decisions were reached and how you took account of relevant policies and guidance in doing so.

There will be times during the inspection when not using a laptop may be helpful – for example, in conversations with learners and apprentices or during a learning walk. Avoid making handwritten notes to upload to your laptop later where possible; instead block out time following inspection activities to add your reflections to the evidence base at the earliest opportunity.

Meeting standards and determining grades

Evaluating against the toolkit evaluation areas and grading standards

When you have collected reliable evidence in an evaluation area to support an indicative grade, as set out in the 'gathering evidence about' sections of the toolkit, consider whether all the expected standards are reached. If this is the case, consider whether all the strong standards are also reached securely. At this point, you might have enough evidence to consider the grade 'exceptional'. This is summarised in the following table. You should call the duty desk when an 'exceptional' grade is likely.

When grading, consider the following steps.

Step	Question	Resulting grade
1. Expected standard	Does the provider reach all the expected grading standards for this evaluation area?	If no, go to the 'Where the evaluation standards are not reached' section. If yes, go to Step 2.
2. Strong standard	Does the provider also reach all the strong grading standards?	If no, grade as 'expected standard'. If yes, go to Step 3.
3. Exceptional	Is there clear evidence of the standards that define exceptional practice?	If yes, grade as 'exceptional'. If no, grade 'strong standard'.

Some minor inconsistencies may lead to priorities for improvement but do not lower the grade. Where one or more standards have not been met for a particular grade, then that grade cannot be given and you should refer to the guidance below.

Where the evaluation standards are not reached

Needs attention

An evaluation area is likely to be graded as ‘needs attention’ when both:

- the ‘expected standard’ grade has not been reached
- no ‘urgent improvement’ indicators apply

Use the indicators for ‘needs attention’ to explain the grading and outline the priorities for improvement for the provider. These should be based on the expected standards that have not been evidenced during the inspection, and the associated prompts in the ‘gathering evidence’ section of the relevant evaluation area.

Urgent improvement

If any of the ‘urgent improvement’ indicators apply, the evaluation area is likely to be graded as ‘urgent improvement’. You should call the duty desk when an ‘urgent improvement’ grade is likely.

Use the relevant expected standards to help craft the provider’s priorities for improvement, including the associated prompts in the ‘gathering evidence’ section of the relevant evaluation area.

If safeguarding is ‘met’

Safeguarding will be graded as ‘met’ if all the individual safeguarding standards are met and none of the ‘not met’ standards apply.

If safeguarding needs minor improvements

During the inspection, you may identify minor improvements that the provider needs to make to its safeguarding practices, such as correcting administrative errors in paperwork or updating policies. If leaders can make these minor improvements easily before the end of the on-site inspection, give them every chance to do so by discussing this constructively with them.

Sometimes, leaders cannot finish making the minor improvements before the end of the on-site inspection. When this is the case, you can still complete the inspection and grade safeguarding as ‘met’ if they have taken

the necessary steps to resolve the issues – for example, training has been booked but it will not take place for a number of weeks.

In some cases, the minor improvements should be such that, if they were not made straightaway, leaving them undone would not have an immediate and/or significant impact on the safety of learners and apprentices.

Suspending an inspection

In some cases, more significant improvements are needed, and leaders cannot make them before the end of the on-site inspection, nor take necessary steps to resolve them in that time.

Where this is the case, but all other evaluations are at least at the expected standard, consider suspending the inspection. Inspections can be suspended if, based on the information you have at that time, you believe leaders are capable of resolving the safeguarding issues within 3 months, and there are no significant risks to children.

When assessing whether leaders are capable of resolving the issues within 3 months, consider whether those with responsibility for governance and/or oversight have agreed to help the provider to make the necessary improvements.

If you are considering suspending the inspection, call the duty desk to discuss whether it is appropriate.

If you agree that suspending the inspection is appropriate, make sure that:

- all other parts of the inspection are complete and the evidence base is secure
- leaders are clear on the proposed deadline by which they are expected to have made the necessary changes; this should be a maximum of 3 months but can be less if the provider would like us to return more quickly and/or if we consider that there is a reason to do so
- leaders and those responsible for governance and/or oversight have agreed to help the provider to make the necessary improvements
- leaders understand that the letter they will receive about the suspension will also be copied to relevant funding and regulatory bodies
- leaders agree to publish that letter on the provider's website and to send it to parents (where required)

Explain that inspectors will return to the provider within 3 months, as set out in our [gathering additional evidence protocol](#)

(<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/deferring-ofsted-inspections>), to complete the inspection.

If you do not decide to suspend the inspection, finish it as normal and determine safeguarding to be 'not met'. You must make the rationale for not suspending the inspection clear and record it in the evidence base.

Where the evidence indicates a particular grade is likely to be reached

During a reflection meeting, if you have reliable evidence indicating a particular grade for any evaluation areas, let the nominee know. If the evidence supports a provisional grading decision, discuss and agree this with the nominee. Record the provisional grade and the nominee's comments in the evidence base.

Remember – you need to be very clear with the nominee that any indicative grading throughout the inspection is provisional. The final grading process will be carried out at the end of the inspection and will be subject to Ofsted's quality assurance and consistency checking process.

On each day of the inspection, let leaders and the nominee know if you have emerging evidence that any evaluation area is likely to be graded as 'needs attention' or 'urgent improvement', or if safeguarding is likely to be graded as 'not met' (including in cases where the inspection could be suspended in line with the criteria set out in the section [Suspending an inspection](#)).

In these cases, record the main points in the evidence base. You must emphasise that provisional grades are not confirmed until the grading meeting on the last day of the inspection.

If the decision is to suspend the inspection, consider it to be incomplete.

What to do on site during the inspection: day 1

When you arrive on site, you should:

- have a short orientation meeting with the nominee and the inspection team; summarise relevant aspects of the planning call during this
- check on the well-being of leaders and staff and find out whether any issues have arisen since the planning call
- arrange [initial provision type meetings](#)
- arrange planned inspection activities in the allocated subject/course/pathway, for example lesson visits or learning walks (where possible with a member of the provider's staff), work and/or skills scrutiny, meetings with learners and apprentices, teachers or trainers and employers, visit(s) to workplaces or meetings with curriculum leaders (the choice of activities will reflect the type of provision, programme, scale and type of provider that you are inspecting)
- check you have the list of learners and apprentices for [case sampling](#) as discussed in the planning call
- arrange to carry out [relevant safeguarding activities](#)
- check whether anyone involved in the inspection requires (and/or has requested) any reasonable adjustments because of a disability
- consider whether you need to make any other adaptations to the inspection process where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage (refer to the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) section for further information)
- if there have been any requests, record them in the evidence base along with their outcome and any other adaptations that have been requested

Follow the timetable and organisation for day 1 discussed in the [planning phone call](#).

Structure for day 1

Remember to apply the [3 key principles](#) throughout the inspection.

Typical inspection activities for day 1 should include:

- checking the SCR as a priority (where relevant)
- at the start of the day agreeing learners and apprentices for case sampling with leaders
- you (as lead inspector) meeting with the designated safeguarding lead or responsible person
- provision type meetings

- leadership meetings, learning walks, possible case sampling and any other appropriate inspection activities discussed with leaders

Be flexible and responsive – if new issues emerge, discuss them with leaders/the nominee and adjust the inspection activities as necessary. Use the toolkit to adapt what you focus on as you go. Leaders will be aware of the need for this from the planning call.

Inspection activities

Initial provision type meetings

These meetings consist of professional discussions with the managers of the provider's different provision types.

Share the agreed agenda with them. The lead inspector for the provision type will chair the meeting. Relevant team inspectors will also attend.

Each meeting will normally last up to 45 minutes.

The meeting will look at each of the areas of focus for the inspection. For each area, you should explore the structure and quality of the curriculum, teaching and training, achievement and participation, and development. In smaller providers, you may decide to discuss the curriculum in more detail.

Learning walks

Learning walks should be carried out with leaders. Remember, this is an important opportunity for leaders to show you their context. Each selected learning walk has an agreed inspection focus:

- A learning walk with a focus on inclusion helps you gather evidence on the outcomes and experiences of disadvantaged learners/apprentices, those with SEND, those with high needs, those known (or previously known) to children's social care, those without level 2 English and/or mathematics, and those who face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being. This kind of learning walk will typically include a leader, such as one with oversight of SEND/inclusion.
- A learning walk with a focus on curriculum, teaching and training, and achievement provides the opportunity to evaluate how well learners and apprentices are learning the intended curriculum.
- A learning walk with a focus on leadership gives leaders the opportunity to demonstrate how their priorities and actions are being realised. The relevant leader should, where possible, accompany you on this kind of learning walk. It should involve visits to a broad sample of learning

environments to discuss and understand the impact of leaders' work. This will provide important evidence for leadership and governance in particular, as well as other evaluation areas.

Visits to learning environments

You will have discussed with the nominee the range of learning environments the team will visit. Make sure to include a range of subjects, programmes and sector areas for each provision type. The team will also visit workplaces, subcontractors and online learning environments, as relevant.

Plan opportunities for professional dialogue with staff during these visits. Connect the evidence from observing learning activities, talking with learners and apprentices about their learning, [sampling their work](#), and so on to other evidence.

Gather evidence across a range of evaluation areas. This will help you to understand the impact of the curriculum, teaching and training on learners' and apprentices' experiences and outcomes. This is especially important for disadvantaged learners and apprentices, those with SEND, those with high needs, those known (or previously known) to social care, those without level 2 English and/or mathematics, and those who may face any other barriers to their learning or well-being.

You may visit specialist SEND provision or provision that supports learners and apprentices who face barriers to their learning and/or well-being. In these visits, you must work closely with staff to understand any arrangements that are necessary for learners when they meet an unfamiliar visitor. Be alert to these arrangements when entering a lesson/workshop or approaching them to start a conversation.

Case sampling

As explained in [Part 3: planning inspection activities](#), the initial case sample should include learners/apprentices who have specific needs or face barriers to learning. This may include disadvantaged learners and apprentices, those with SEND, those with high needs, those known (or previously known) to social care, those without level 2 English and/or mathematics and those who may face any other barriers to their learning or well-being. Further learners or apprentices may be identified for case sampling during the course of the inspection.

Case sampling can help you to evaluate whether the provider's values and policies are reflected in the day-to-day experiences of those who are in the most need of support. Establish whether their experiences are typical. You can also use case sampling to evaluate how the provider is working with multi-agency partners.

Case sampling is likely to involve reviewing records, speaking with staff who know the learners/apprentices well, and observing routines and support

strategies in action.

Sometimes, leaders may not have identified any learners/apprentices who fall into the groups listed in [Part 3: planning inspection activities](#) for case sampling. In these instances, consider how well staff are supported and trained to be able to accurately identify these learners' and apprentices' needs and to help them, should there ever be any enrolled in future.

Reviewing learners' and apprentices' work and skills

Where possible, review learners'/apprentices' work and skills as part of learning walks or visits to learning environments, and use this to support discussions with them about their learning.

Reviewing learners' and apprentices' work and skills provides further evidence about the knowledge and skills they have developed. Their work is an important part of how we inspect the curriculum, teaching and training, and of our evaluation of learners' and apprentices' knowledge and skills. However, it must be considered in the light of wider evidence.

Work and skills scrutiny is not about judging individual learners, apprentices or teachers. Reviewing work with staff and/or employers and supervisors may provide evidence of how they evaluate the quality of provision and how they ensure that, over time, learners and apprentices reach the highest possible standards.

Learners' and apprentices' work and skills take different forms. Make sure that any sample of work includes those learners/apprentices who are disadvantaged, those with SEND, those with high needs, those known (or previously known) to social care, those without level 2 English and/or mathematics, and those who may face any other barriers to their learning or well-being.

End-of-day reflection meetings

These meetings bring together the inspection team, leaders and the nominee to reflect on the emerging evidence. You should:

- check on the well-being of leaders and staff, and allow leaders and the nominee to raise any issues or concerns or seek clarification, including about the conduct of the inspection or of individual inspectors
- ensure that you have applied the [3 key principles](#) when evaluating the first-hand evidence gathered
- evaluate to what extent the evidence supports a 'secure fit' in any of the evaluation areas, starting with the 'expected standard' for each evaluation area in the toolkit
- consider which areas are emerging as strengths, and areas where the provider may have more to do – this will support you in having a transparent dialogue with leaders about the emerging evidence, give

leaders and the nominee an opportunity to suggest further evidence, and help you to identify further areas to explore

- record the nominee's comments in the evidence base
- identify the most appropriate inspection activities to gather any further evidence that is required
- discuss the practical arrangements for all the inspection activities that have been agreed
- alert leaders if the evidence suggests that any area may be likely to be graded as 'urgent improvement' or if safeguarding may be likely to be 'not met'

It may sometimes be necessary to change the planned afternoon activities to make sure that they enable you to form a clear picture across the toolkit evaluation areas by the reflection meeting at the end of day 2. You should have explained the flexible, responsive nature of the inspection process to leaders in the planning call; keep them informed in a timely way of any changes that are required.

In the meetings, use the toolkit to:

- consider how the emerging evidence relates to the grading standards for a particular evaluation area
- consider whether the evidence reliably supports an indicative grade for a particular evaluation area, using the grading standards
- consider the most appropriate focus for later inspection activities, using the evidence-gathering prompts

What to do on site during the inspection: day 2 onwards

Typical inspection activities

Begin with a brief reflection meeting with leaders and the nominee. Confirm everyone's well-being, record any overnight developments or unexpected events, and agree whether the timetable needs fine-tuning. Adjust plans only as much as necessary.

Continue to gather evidence across the evaluation areas through relevant activities. These may include:

- lesson visits and/or learning walks
- work and/or skills scrutiny
- engaging with learners/apprentices, teachers and/or trainers, and employers
- visit(s) to workplaces
- meeting curriculum leaders
- case sampling
- ongoing reflection meetings with leaders and the nominee each morning to discuss emerging evidence and to further understand the context of leaders' actions and their impact
- meetings with senior leaders
- meeting with those responsible for governance and/or oversight

At appropriate points, discuss the emerging findings with the nominee. Follow the guidance in the [Where the evidence indicates a particular grade is likely to be reached](#) section.

Continue to adapt inspection activity accordingly, explaining to leaders and the nominee as an ongoing process during the inspection.

Grading meeting

Once you have finished collecting evidence, the inspection team will hold the grading meeting. The nominee should be invited to attend this meeting.

At the beginning of the meeting:

- check on leaders' and staff well-being, and allow leaders and/or the nominee to raise any issues or concerns, or to seek clarification, including about the conduct of the inspection or of individual inspectors
- reflect with leaders and the nominee(s) on how effective any reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations were; ask them whether they want to change the existing arrangements or make any additional requests for the final feedback meeting

Following this, for each evaluation area you will:

- consider the additional evidence gathered on the last day of the inspection
- evaluate how this evidence builds on that gathered earlier in the inspection

- agree as a team the provisional grades, following the grading process set out in the section [Meeting standards and determining grades](#), in the following order (as the lead inspector, you are responsible for detailed oversight of leadership and governance and safeguarding):
- safeguarding (whole-provider level)
- inclusion (whole-provider level)
- curriculum, teaching and training (provision type level)
- achievement (provision type level)
- participation and development (provision type level)
- contribution to meeting skills needs (where relevant)
- leadership and governance (whole-provider level)
- where required, identify priorities for improvement

Final feedback meeting

Record the main points for feedback to the provider in the evidence base during the inspection.

Your feedback must be clear, respectful and grounded in the evidence gathered. It should cover the points that will appear in the written report card.

Thank everyone for their contributions, engagement and involvement in the inspection. Then explain clearly to all those attending:

- that attendance at the final feedback meeting is voluntary and any attendee may leave at any time
- the key findings from the inspection, and the provisional grades for each evaluation area – explain that any of these may change as a result of quality assurance and consistency checking procedures or moderation
- the rationale for each provisional grade and the key evidence supporting it, using the language of the toolkit
- celebrate the key strengths and validate the successes/evaluation of the provider's work
- highlight any priorities for improvement (including safeguarding, if relevant) and what the provider needs to do to improve, giving sufficient detail so that those attending understand their part in improving the provider's work, especially those responsible for governance and/or oversight

- that providers with evaluation areas graded as ‘needs attention’ or ‘urgent improvement’ will be monitored, setting out when they can expect their first monitoring visit
- that leaders should share the inspection findings with anyone who has a governance and/or oversight role, and whoever else they consider appropriate – this may include colleagues, family members and/or their wider support or management group; however, the information should not be made public or shared with parents
- that we may share the inspection findings and provisional grades with the Department for Education (DfE), the Office for Students or other relevant funding bodies/regulators/inspectional bodies and, where relevant, the Further Education Commissioner, before the report card is published
- that the draft report card they receive must not be published; they must wait for the copy of the final report card
- that when they receive their draft report card and complete their factual accuracy check they do not need to check data from other published sources but may want to review any data that was gathered on inspection or commented upon in the report card
- that the impact of provisional grades on funding and contracts is solely a matter for the relevant funding body and is not in Ofsted’s control
- that the provider has an opportunity to raise any concerns or to seek clarification about the inspection, and can also contact us after the end of the inspection, if necessary (see [inspection information for FE and skills](https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#concerns-or-complaints-about-an-inspection) (<https://gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information/inspection-information-for-further-education-and-skills-providers-for-use-from-november-2025#concerns-or-complaints-about-an-inspection>))
- that they can make a formal complaint and that information on how to do this is available in our [complaints procedure](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/complaints-procedure) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/complaints-procedure>)
- that, ideally, the senior leaders and/or the nominee should complete the post-inspection survey

Reflect the provider’s context and frame your feedback through professional dialogue, with the aim of supporting improvement. Managing the conduct of everyone who attends the meeting to make sure it is practical and constructive.

What to do after the inspection

After the end of the inspection, write the report card, following our internal writing guidance.

The text in the report card must:

- reflect the evidence gathered
- be clear, concise and focused on what matters most, as informed by the provider's context, leaders' evaluation of their provision and the toolkit
- explain the grade for each evaluation area
- make clear what the provider should improve
- be consistent with the verbal feedback to the provider at the end of the inspection

If the provider submits comments after reviewing the report card, you are responsible, as the lead inspector, for reviewing and responding to the comments and making any necessary amendments.

Quality assurance and consistency checking

You are responsible for the quality of your own work and that of your team, where applicable. You must ensure that the inspection is carried out in accordance with the [renewed education inspection framework](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework>) and the [code of conduct](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/conduct-during-ofsted-inspections) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/conduct-during-ofsted-inspections>).

As the lead inspector, you are responsible for giving team inspectors timely feedback about the quality of their work and their conduct.

Additional guidance to support inspection

As explained earlier, you must check whether anyone involved in the inspection requires (and/or has requested) any reasonable adjustments because of a disability. It is also important to continue to consider making other adaptations where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage. Refer to the [Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) section for further information.

Record any requests and their outcome in the evidence base, along with any other adaptations that have been requested.

Additional guidance to support evidence-gathering

The toolkit provides guidance on gathering evidence in each evaluation area through inspection activities, as well as the standards you will use to determine grades.

The toolkit is not a checklist.

Connect evidence across a range of activities determined by you (as the lead inspector) to gather reliable evidence and determine the grades.

Use the toolkit to guide conversations, consider evidence and ensure that grades reflect the evidence gathered during the inspection. Always discuss with leaders/the nominee the typicality of the evidence you are gathering and the emerging evaluations. Where leaders/the nominee do not believe the evidence is typical or reflective of their provision, try to gather additional evidence where appropriate within the time you have. This may be through visiting more lessons, speaking with other leaders, staff or learners/apprentices, or reviewing more of the provider's work.

Engaging with staff and leaders

Analyse the anonymous responses from the staff questionnaires and identify any themes that emerge.

Arrange to meet with the staff who are best placed to discuss the emerging themes. Discuss:

- their experience of working at the provider
- how they ensure the best possible outcomes for learners and apprentices
- the impact of leaders' actions
- the culture of safeguarding

Remind staff that you do not expect them to bring documents with them, but they may do so if they wish.

If you meet with individual members of staff or leaders/managers on their own, give them the opportunity to be accompanied by a colleague. However, it is important that staff can express their views freely to inspectors.

Adjust arrangements when necessary. For example, staff may need a break, or a later opportunity to follow up the discussion, so that they can carry out their usual routines and responsibilities.

Be proportionate in considering the views of staff. Connect evidence from their views to the wider evidence base.

Meet leaders and managers with specific areas of responsibility. This may include leaders at key subcontractors. Typically, these meetings will be face to face. However, in providers with a broad geographic spread, you may need to meet leaders and managers remotely, for example through a video conference call.

In small providers, understand that leaders may have multiple roles. Plan to reduce the need for multiple meetings, for example by discussing several topics in a single meeting.

You should take careful account of the well-being of leaders and staff, and make suitable adjustments as necessary. If you see or suspect that a leader, manager or staff member is upset or distressed at any point, you should respond sensitively. If you have serious concerns, you must inform those responsible for the person's well-being, other than in exceptional circumstances, and you must contact the national duty desk.

In exceptional circumstances, you may need to consider [pausing the inspection](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/deferring-ofsted-inspections) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/deferring-ofsted-inspections>).

Engaging with learners and apprentices

Use a range of activities to understand learners' and apprentices' typical experiences, including through:

- analysing the anonymous responses to the questionnaires and identifying any themes
- engaging with learners and apprentices, and at the start and end of their day at the provider or where their training takes place
- talking with apprentices in their workplaces
- talking with learners online if they do not attend the provider's premises
- conversations during visits to learning environments

- planned discussions with individual learners and apprentices (or groups, as appropriate) taking account of individuals' communication needs
- talking with parents (where appropriate)
- reviewing learners and apprentices' work
- reviewing relevant documents
- talking with relevant staff

Remind leaders that they must provide opportunities for inspectors to speak with learners and apprentices with no other adults present. In exceptional circumstances, learners and apprentices may ask for an adult to be present or may require this as a reasonable adjustment (for example, because of a specific communication need).

When talking with them (whether individually or in groups), follow these principles:

- Make sure you have let the nominee know, as early as possible, that you need to speak with learners and apprentices as part of the inspection, and the themes you will want to explore. Give the nominee/leaders a chance to raise any concerns.
- Agree with the nominee/leaders how you will choose the learners and apprentices you wish to meet more formally.
- Work closely with leaders on how best to talk with learners/apprentices who have learning needs, particularly in specialist settings. You may need to use assistive technology to communicate with learners/apprentices who are non-verbal. Some learners and apprentices may need another learner or a member of staff to be their advocate, or a supporting adult may need to be present to provide reassurance and/or support with communication.
- When asking learners and apprentices questions about safeguarding, do so without another adult being present. Having another adult present (especially someone whom learners and apprentices regard as connected to the provider, such as a senior leader) can affect their freedom or willingness to share their concerns and/or could cause difficulties with confidentiality.
- If any other learners/apprentices would like to speak with you or another member of the inspection team, make sure they have an opportunity to do so, even if the provider or parents have refused to allow this without an adult present. In these circumstances, the conversation should be with you and at least one other inspector. You should speak to the duty desk as soon as possible, and if practical before speaking with the learner(s)/apprentice(s). Record full details in the evidence base.
- If a learner or apprentice does not want to speak with you, or their parent does not want them to, you cannot compel them.

- Try to speak with some single-sex learner/apprentice groups to give them the opportunity to speak more freely about issues such as sexual harassment, online sexual abuse and sexual violence.

If learners/apprentices have completed a questionnaire, identify any emerging themes. Be proportionate in considering their views. Connect evidence to the wider evidence base.

If leaders prevent inspectors from talking with learners and apprentices:

- try to find out the reasons for this
- call the duty desk

Explain to leaders/the nominee that, if you are entirely prevented from speaking with learners/apprentices, you may not be able to gather the necessary robust evidence about many aspects of provision, including positive evidence from learners/apprentices about what the provider is doing well, which would enable the provider to evidence its strengths. It is also likely that safeguarding would be graded as 'not met', as you would be unlikely to be able to gather the reliable evidence needed about the provider's safeguarding culture to provide an indicative grade.

Without including information that might identify any learners and apprentices, record in your evidence base and report card if, during an inspection:

- it was not possible to speak with learners and apprentices
- inspectors were requested not to ask learners/apprentices certain questions
- an adult was present when inspectors spoke with learners and apprentices

Record the impact of any of these on the evidence gathered and the inspection outcome.

If parents ask you not to speak with learners and apprentices:

- ask leaders and those responsible for governance and/or oversight what steps they have taken to alleviate parents' concerns
- explain the importance of learners' and apprentices' views in the inspection process

Engaging with parents

Discussions with parents should take place without leaders or staff being present, other than in exceptional circumstances.

If parents raise serious concerns, follow these up with provider leaders and record their response. If the complainant has requested confidentiality, take all practicable steps to ensure that their identity is not disclosed to the provider.

Be proportionate in considering parents' views. Connect evidence from their views to the wider evidence base.

Engaging with employers

Employers are sometimes involved in elements of learners' training, for example in study programmes and T levels for work experience placements.

Employers are always involved in apprentices' training. When you are inspecting apprenticeships, you must meet some of the apprentices' employers. Do this at their workplaces where possible, or otherwise remotely.

When selecting your visits to employers, consider the location and number of apprentices. Work with the nominee to identify a sample, and to plan online/telephone meetings or visits.

Make sure that discussions include representatives who are appropriate for providing the evidence you need from employers. Provision type leaders and managers may be helpful for explaining how employers are involved in curriculum design. Talking with apprentices' line managers may be more appropriate for understanding apprentices' progress, especially for larger employers.

In relation to vocational and technical programmes, engage with employers as stakeholders, especially where the employer has been involved in co-designing the curriculum. You should also do this when placements form a considerable part of learners' and apprentices' learning programmes, such as on T levels.

When inspecting general FE colleges, sixth-form colleges and designated institutions, engaging with employers and key stakeholders provides insights into the provider's contribution to meeting skills needs.

Consider responses to the employers' questionnaire in the context of the wider inspection evidence.

Reviewing key records

Key records you review should include safeguarding records, attendance data, behaviour logs and complaints records. They may also include training records.

Review documents to connect the evidence that informs your evaluations.

Engaging with those responsible for governance and/or oversight

Meet a selection of those responsible for governance and/or oversight, on a call if necessary. Consider the provider's context when deciding who to speak with. In these discussions you should focus on the broad, strategic oversight of those responsible for governance and/or oversight, not the day-to-day operational detail of the provider.

Specific contexts to consider

Small providers

Where the number of learners is very low, it may mean you are reporting on and evaluating the experiences and outcomes of individual learners and apprentices or very small (and possibly identifiable) groups.

You must consider whether you will be able to gather enough evidence to reach grades without identifying individuals. You might do this by checking whether the provider has recently had other learners or apprentices and if so, discussing their outcomes and experiences.

If this situation arises, contact the regional Senior HMI. They may refer to the regional director to decide to defer it.

If the inspection goes ahead, you should confirm this with the nominee in the planning call.

Record all discussions and their conclusions in the evidence base. Do not proceed with the inspection unless you are confident that you can gather reliable evidence to support indicative grades.

When no teaching/training is happening at the time of the inspection

If you identify during the planning call that no teaching and training are taking place, you must consider whether reliable evidence is available from other sources to support indicative grades, including from workplace visits, or whether the inspection should not proceed.

If this situation arises, contact the regional Senior HMI. They may refer to the regional director to decide to defer it.

Safeguarding where there is residential accommodation

If you are inspecting a college with residential provision for learners and apprentices aged under 18, that provision will be inspected by inspectors from our social care team under the [social care common inspection framework](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/social-care-common-inspection-framework-sccif) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/social-care-common-inspection-framework-sccif>).

Colleges and designated institutions including the skills grade

As outlined in the section about the [notification call](#), you will ask the provider to arrange a small number of calls with key stakeholders. These may be drawn from any or all of the following groups as appropriate to the provider's work:

- Civic: local or regional government bodies; employer representative bodies, local authorities, including county, district, borough and city councils and unitary, mayoral and combined authorities; regional development bodies and agencies; Jobcentre Plus
- Employers: employers/businesses; bodies representing employers, such as chambers of commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses or the

Confederation of British Industry; relevant employer representative bodies as designated in accordance with [section 2 of the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/21/section/2) (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/21/section/2>)

- Education providers: other providers of education including other colleges, universities/higher education institutions, independent learning providers, community learning and skills providers, and schools
- Community: community representative groups; local authority projects or initiatives that train or bring into education those furthest from employment or training, or that target particular neighbourhoods, areas and communities

You might also ask the nominee to send a summary of how the provider contributes to meeting skills needs. This is often set out in a skills strategy.

Provision for 14- to 16-year-olds in colleges

Only a very small number of colleges provide full-time registered provision for 14- to 16-year-olds. You should inspect it where it exists. The [DfE guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-time-enrolment-of-14-to-16-year-olds-in-further-education-and-sixth-form-colleges) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-time-enrolment-of-14-to-16-year-olds-in-further-education-and-sixth-form-colleges>) sets out the requirements in relation to this provision and lists the colleges.

Part-time education provision for 14- to 16-year-olds is not within the scope of our FE and skills inspections in any type of provider. You should therefore not inspect and report on it. This part-time provision is the responsibility of the providers where the learners are registered and should be included in the inspections of those providers.

However, you should focus on the safeguarding of learners and apprentices who you encounter at the provision, whether full time or part time, and record this in the evidence base.

Skills Bootcamp provision

You should take account of the [DfE guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/esfa-skills-bootcamps) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/esfa-skills-bootcamps>) on the course requirements of Skills Bootcamps.

Many of these programmes are funded by combined authorities or other local authorities, and follow the specific guidance and priorities of those authorities. Where this is the case, consult the nominee and take account of the guidelines of the funding authority or authorities.

Safeguarding in adult provision

You should follow the guidance relating to safeguarding adults that is published by the DfE, the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), and the Department of Health and Social Care, and in the 'Prevent' duty guidance.

Catholic sixth-form colleges: religious education and collective worship

In Catholic sixth-form colleges, the Catholic diocese will inspect denominational religious education, the Catholic ethos and the content of collective worship.

You should not report on the content of collective worship or on denominational religious education. You may visit religious education lessons and assemblies, however, to evaluate how these contribute to learners' participation and development.

Dance and drama colleges

At the request of the DfE, we inspect dance and drama colleges that are funded to support learners and apprentices who receive Dance and Drama Award (DaDA) funding.

These inspections are carried out using the [renewed education inspection framework](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework>) and occur in cycles determined by the DfE. They might only include providers that are new entrants to DaDA award schemes.

Other matters

Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations

On all inspections, you must ask whether anyone requires any reasonable adjustments due to a disability. Contact the duty desk for all requests. Those on the duty desk may consult with relevant policy and legal teams as needed.

What is considered reasonable is an objective test that depends on all of the circumstances of the particular case. This includes the needs of the individual concerned, how effective the change will be in avoiding the disadvantage the disabled person would otherwise experience, what impact providing the adjustment will have on the inspection, and the circumstances in respect of the relevant inspection or visit.

To understand the request, you must enter into an open dialogue with the individual about their request. Ask what steps the individual thinks Ofsted should take to address the anticipated disadvantage. In the light of this, consider what adjustments might be reasonable in the circumstances of the inspection or visit. You can consider adjustments not proposed by the individual.

When considering whether the request is reasonable, you should take into account:

- how effective the reasonable adjustment would be in overcoming the disadvantage
- how practicable it is for Ofsted to make the adjustment
- the costs of making the adjustment
- the disruption that making the adjustment would cause
- the resources available to the inspector and to Ofsted
- the amount of resources already spent on making adjustments
- any health and safety risks, including the effect the arrangements will have on others

There is a 'positive' duty to make adjustments if they are considered to be reasonable, as set out here. A failure to comply with the duty to make reasonable adjustments is a form of discrimination under the [Equality Act 2010](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents) (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>) and is an 'anticipatory' duty. You can treat disabled people better or 'more favourably' than non-disabled people, and sometimes this may be an appropriate response to a request for reasonable adjustments.

It may also be appropriate to consider other adaptations that are requested where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage. Where you are being asked to make such an adaptation to avoid potential discrimination, consider what the reason is for the policy, criterion or practice that you are being asked to adapt (the objective

justification), and what impact there would be of both making and not making the adaptation.

The [Equality Act 2010](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents) (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>) protects people from unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation on the ground of a protected characteristic. This may include taking steps to avoid indirectly discriminating against someone on the ground of a protected characteristic. However, you should also consider the effect the proposed adaptation would have on others. Ensure that in making the adaptation, you are not directly discriminating against anyone else on the grounds of a protected characteristic.

If you agree to the request(s), agree a plan for reasonable adjustments or adaptations with the individual and leaders as appropriate. You must discuss and agree the plan with the inspection team.

You must record in the evidence base that you have asked leaders if they need to request any reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations. You must also record the outcome of any decisions. It is essential that this information is recorded factually, accurately and assures that the anonymity of the individual is maintained.

If the provider has concerns/complaints

Record any concerns raised, and actions taken, in the inspection evidence. Try to resolve any issues with leaders during the inspection. If this is not possible, the provider can follow the steps set out in the [complaints procedure](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/complaints-procedure) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/complaints-procedure>).

If you need to consider pausing the inspection

There may be exceptional occasions when you need to consider pausing an inspection, including in response to concerns raised by the nominee. Contact the duty desk for advice. We will consider requests on a case-by-case basis according to our published [guidance on pausing inspections](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/deferring-ofsted-inspections) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/deferring-ofsted-inspections>).

If you identify evidence or allegations of abuse on inspection

You must familiarise yourself with our [guidance on safeguarding concerns](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-safeguarding-policy/safeguarding-concerns-guidance-for-inspectors) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-safeguarding-policy/safeguarding-concerns-guidance-for-inspectors>).

If you come across evidence or allegations of child abuse, stop all other activity immediately and focus on ensuring that the child receives the help they need. Do not attempt to investigate this yourself, but make sure the appropriate authority is informed, in line with the provider's safeguarding policy. You must be satisfied that the correct referral has been made and record this in the evidence base.

If the provider uses artificial intelligence

You do not need to ask if artificial intelligence (AI) is used or actively search for it. If you come across instances where a provider uses AI, or has an explicit policy on learners and apprentices using AI, record how leaders have chosen to implement it, its impact (for example, on tackling absence), how it is monitored, and the provider's checks and balances to make sure it is accurate, safe and used in the best interests of learners and apprentices. If you have any concerns about the provider's use of AI, contact the duty desk.

If the provider uses external support

If the provider has received support from an external body, you must not evaluate or report on the quality of this or its impact on improvement. Instead, you must comment on the action that the provider has taken and the impact those actions have had on the quality of its work.

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