

Ofsted Webinar January 2026
Further Education & Skills Inspections – renewed framework
Summary of Discussions

This document is a summary of the points covered during the session with Ofsted in January 2026. Ofsted requested that the session was not recorded and that slides used were not shared. This is a write up of notes taken and as such is not for use as a source of advice but as a summary of key points.

If you have any queries please contact Rebecca Rhodes at r.rhodes@bolton.ac.uk. UVAC is running an FAQ updated each month and your queries will be discussed at our meetings with Ofsted and the replies published on our Ofsted Resources page: <https://uvac.ac.uk/webinar/ofsted-updates/>.

UVAC
January 2026

Overall purpose and approach

The session explained how Ofsted's renewed inspection framework for Further Education and Skills (FES) will operate in practice, with particular focus on:

- The new five-point grading scale
- The strengthened emphasis on inclusion
- Changes to inspection methodology (planning, focus areas, learning walks, case sampling)
- The new system of monitoring inspections
- Use of the new report cards instead of overall effectiveness grades

Ofsted (Rebecca Perry-Tomlinson) emphasised that:

The framework is intended to be more collaborative, contextual, and supportive, while maintaining high standards and clear accountability.

- The “expected standard” is a high bar, not a minimum threshold.
- Inspections will start from this benchmark.
- Context will be actively considered in all inspection activity.
- Inspections aim to celebrate strengths, validate improvement work, and clearly identify areas needing further development.
- Professional conduct (empathetic, respectful, courteous) is a core expectation of inspectors.

Only sixth form colleges, general FE colleges and specialist designated institutions will receive a grade for “contribution to meeting skills needs”; most other providers will not.

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Inclusion as a central inspection focus

For the first time, inclusion is graded explicitly and considered in two ways:

1. Provider-level inclusion evaluation area
 - Focuses on *leaders' actions*: how needs are identified, assessed, and how barriers to learning and wellbeing are reduced.
2. Provision-type evaluation areas
 - Focus on how staff implement inclusion through curriculum design, teaching practice, support arrangements and learner experience.

Key elements of inclusion

The toolkit highlights three main factors:

- Early and accurate identification of needs
- Reducing barriers to learning, training and wellbeing
- Working effectively with learners/apprentices and relevant stakeholders, including listening to learner aspirations

Groups referenced in the toolkit

Four broad groups are highlighted (not exhaustive):

- Economically disadvantaged learners/apprentices
- Learners/apprentices with SEND or high needs
- Learners/apprentices known or previously known to social care or justice services
- Learners/apprentices facing other barriers (including lack of Level 2 English and/or maths, temporary vulnerability, bereavement, health issues, relationship breakdown, etc.)

Inspectors stressed:

- Providers are not expected to label learners or maintain formal category lists.
- Learners may fall into multiple categories.
- Disclosure is voluntary; adult learners in particular may choose not to share personal information.
- The emphasis is on whether providers are inquisitive, supportive and responsive, not on formal classification.

Planning stage of inspections

Inspection planning has been expanded and now consists of three parts:

1. Practical arrangements – timing, logistics, scope

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2. Understanding provider context – learners, apprentices, provision, strengths, improvement priorities, recent changes
3. Planning inspection activities – agreeing inspection focus areas and case sampling approach

Providers will be asked:

- What they do well
- What improvements they are working on
- What still needs development
- How decisions have been made and what impact has been achieved

This information informs inspection focus areas and sampling decisions, although final decisions rest with the lead inspector.

Inspection focus areas (replacing deep dives)

Deep dives are no longer used.

Instead, inspectors work through inspection focus areas, which may include:

- Groups of courses or standards
- A whole provision type (e.g. skills bootcamps)
- Cross-cutting aspects such as progress reviews or careers guidance
- Particular evaluation areas from the toolkit if evidence is limited or emerging

Focus areas:

- Are shaped by provider strengths, priorities, and risks
- May evolve during the inspection
- Include multiple evidence-gathering activities (visits, discussions, document review, learner work, employer input)

The toolkit is not used as a checklist, but as a guide to conversations, evidence gathering and grading standards.

Learning walks

Leads aim to plan three joint learning walks:

- Inclusion
- Curriculum, teaching, training and achievement
- Leadership

Key points:

- They may be physical or virtual.
- They do not follow a fixed format.
- Providers choose what to showcase.
- They are collaborative, not inspector-directed demonstrations.

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Case sampling

Case sampling replaces earlier case-study style approaches.

- Lead inspectors select typically two learners/apprentices per inspector.
- Selection focuses where possible on learners facing barriers, but not all providers will have learners in all groups.
- Sampling involves:
 - Reviewing learner work
 - Progress checks
 - Support plans
 - Discussions with learners and staff
 - Visiting learning/work environments

Inspectors do not follow individuals throughout the inspection; the learners' experience is included alongside wider evidence gathering.

The purpose is to understand lived experience, not to audit individual histories.

Context as a core principle

Context is considered from:

- Planning stage onwards
- Learner demographics
- Provider type and size
- Delivery models
- Regulatory environments
- Local labour markets and learner needs

The toolkit includes guidance on how evaluation areas apply to different provision types (apprenticeships, young people's programmes, adult learning, HE, etc.), with standards that vary accordingly.

Monitoring inspections (post-inspection process)

Monitoring visits are now monitoring inspections and can change grades.

Key changes:

- Triggered when:
 - An evaluation area is graded urgent improvement or needs attention, or
 - Safeguarding is not met
- A named HMI relationship lead is assigned to the provider.
- Inclusion is now a specific theme in monitoring inspections.
- Notification is up to 5 working days.

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Timescales (examples):

- Urgent improvement / safeguarding not met:
 - Monitoring inspection within ~6 months
- Needs attention:
 - Monitoring inspection within ~13 months
- Providers can request earlier monitoring if they believe improvements are ready to be evidenced.

Other monitoring types:

- New providers (within 18 months of starting delivery)
- Newly merged colleges
- Focused monitoring inspections (serious concerns or at HMCI / Secretary of State request)
- Legacy providers previously graded under the old framework

Report cards

Report cards replace the overall effectiveness grade.

They contain:

- Separate grades for each evaluation area
- Short narrative summaries
- Contextual performance data

Providers may show “spiky profiles” (strength in some areas, development in others), which is considered normal.

Governance

Those responsible for governance are expected to:

- Understand the provider’s strategic approach to inclusion
- Be aware of outcomes for learners facing barriers
- Engage with improvement priorities