



Everything Early Years Leaders Need to Know About Ofsted's Renewed Inspection Framework

On Friday 20th March, Blerina Miftari, Policy Lead at Ofsted and Sam Sleeman-Boss, Early Years Regulatory Inspector at Ofsted, spoke at Childcare & Education Expo London 2026 to explain what Early Years leaders can expect from an inspection under Ofsted's renewed framework. If you were not able to attend the seminar, or would like to refresh your memory, the six key topics are below.

Renewed Approach and Inclusion Focus

After growing demand from parents for better and more detailed information about their children's nursery, preschool, out-of-school club or childminder, inclusion is now the major focus for all inspections. Ofsted have introduced a separate inclusion evaluation area where inspections prioritise children who face barriers to their learning and wellbeing. This includes:

- Socio-economically disadvantaged children
- Children with SEND
- Children known or previously known to social care
- Other children identified by leaders as vulnerable

Inspectors will evaluate how Early Years settings remove barriers and provide high-quality support for all children. For leaders, this means being able to clearly articulate, not just demonstrate, how your provision is adapted for your most vulnerable children, and how you know it is making a difference. Parents have asked for clear information about setting strengths and areas for improvement and report cards will now provide this.

What Has Changed in the Inspection Process

Ofsted will now be considering published local data to understand the community of the Early Years setting. Ofsted will be looking at local area information such as:

- Deprivation data
- EYPP take up
- Obesity levels and oral health data

Inspectors will make the notification call before 10:00 on the day before the inspection. Leaders will also receive a pre-inspection email requesting key data about children and staff at the setting. Ahead of the inspection, there will be a planning call (30-45 minutes) to understand the setting's unique content, curriculum intent, strengths, areas for improvement and approach to inclusion. This will replace the former "learning walk". For childminders, Ofsted's five-working-day notification period will continue, but the specific notification day will now be agreed upon to ensure key children are attending.

Onsite Activities

Here is a breakdown of the day of inspection:

1. Arrival and introduction – inspectors arrive and do a quick introduction with leaders, staff and children.
2. Shared observations begin- inspection starts, with leaders staying with inspectors as much as possible. The inspectors will look at what you want children to learn, how it's taught, how you know it's working. There will be a strong focus on inclusion.
3. Ongoing discussions- during observations, inspectors talk with staff, leaders, parents, SENCOs.
4. Case sampling- inspectors focus on selected children with SEND, barriers to learning and those known to social care. They will look at progress, support given, day-to-day experiences.
5. Checking documents- inspectors may look at DBS records and safeguarding and recruitment checks.
6. Reflection time- after the observation the inspector will take time to think about what they have seen. Leaders can also reflect.
7. Ongoing feedback- throughout the inspection, inspectors will highlight strengths, confirm priorities and point out improvements. If there is a serious concern, leaders will be informed early.

Evaluation Areas and Application by Setting Type

The evaluation areas aligned to EYFS are:

- Safeguarding (met/not met)
- Inclusion
- Curriculum and teaching
- Achievement
- Behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines
- Children's welfare and wellbeing
- Leadership and governance

If no children are present/on roll: only leadership and governance are graded.

Out-of-school/holiday-only provision: curriculum and teaching and achievement are not evaluated.

The new framework tailors evaluation to setting types and attendance, ensuring fair application.

The Toolkit and How It's Used

The Toolkit has been in effect since November 2025 and replaces the old Ofsted handbook. The Toolkit has been introduced to increase transparency and consistency, helping to clarify what inspectors consider and how standards apply across diverse settings.

Built on existing expectations, the new Toolkits show evaluation areas, themes and standards. They are not intended to increase workload as there is no requirement for formal self-evaluations.

Toolkit Structure:

1. Cover page with a statement per evaluation area.
2. Evidence gathering prompts and themes – begins with strategic leadership theme and ends with inclusive practice theme. The prompts guide inspector exploration. It is not a checklist for providers.
3. Application notes that are tailored to each setting type and child age.

Grading and the Five-Point Scale

Other than safeguarding, which is set as met/not met, all evaluation areas use a five-point scale.

- Urgent improvement: significant breaches with serious impact on safety, wellbeing, learning/development.
- Needs attention: indicators show gaps preventing a secure fit to expected standard.
- Expected standard (green): secure fit to all standards; high bar aligned to EYFS requirements; uses “typically/generally” to recognise non-perfection.
- Strong standard: exceeds expected with secure consistency.
- Exceptional: rare; transformational practice beyond the setting; among the best nationally, suitable for system-wide sharing.

Ofsted has noted that most evaluations usually fall within needs attention, expected standard or strong standard.

Key Takeaways for Early Years Leaders

- **Inclusion is central to inspections:** Be prepared to explain how your setting supports disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

- **Know your community:** Inspectors will use local data, so understand your local area.
- **Prepare for early engagement:** Expect pre-inspection emails and planning calls.
- **Stay involved during the inspection:** Leaders are expected to remain alongside inspectors, contribute to discussions and highlight key practice.
- **Understand the Toolkit:** Use it as a guide to inspector thinking, not as a checklist.
- **Be clear on evaluation areas:** Ensure your team understand what is being assessed and how it may differ depending on your setting type.
- **Embed continuous reflection:** Use ongoing feedback during the inspection as an opportunity to demonstrate reflective leadership.