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How to ace Ofsted

By making every day inspection-ready

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How to Ace Ofsted

By making every day inspection-ready

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Matt Bromley



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How to Ace Ofsted: By Making Every Day Inspection-Ready FREE SAMPLE

A note on the text

This book is a repost to the snake-oil salesmen who'll tell you what to do to impress inspectors. Don't be fooled by the title – which is tongue-in-cheek; the subtitle is doing the heavy-lifting here. It's a book about doing what's right for your pupils every day, not what's right for inspectors during their two-day visit.

Yes, it unpacks the 2025 inspection framework in a way that makes sense to busy school leaders and teachers, and yes, it offers lots of practical tools that will help you evidence what you do when you get *the call*, but it is about the long-haul of genuine and sustainable school improvement, not quick fixes.

Do not attempt to tick off every suggested action in this book. Instead, use them to help you sense-check what you do now and to help you consider what you could do differently (note: not *more*, just differently) in the future. Use them to help you frame conversations with colleagues and to provide a starting point for those new to their leadership roles so that they're not faced with a blank page and a tight deadline when tasked with producing a policy or strategy but, instead, they have something on which to hang their hats.

In short, use it as you will but please use it pragmatically and sensibly. And use your professional judgment throughout: take what works for you and ignore what doesn't.

Introduction

Winston Churchill is purported to have said that “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried”. The same might be said of Ofsted – the Office for Standards in Education, a government quango that inspects state-funded schools in England.

Ofsted divide opinion. Either they’re a force for good, ensuring educational standards are improved, children are kept safe, and parents are able to make informed decisions about where to educate their children. Or they’re responsible for untold stress and suffering among school leaders and staff, putting hard-working educationalists through torture and ruining reputations.

I have my view, but I won’t share it within these pages. I will say this, though: Ofsted are not perfect and nor is their latest inspection framework. But it exists and schools can’t escape it. And so, in this book, I want to focus on what schools can do to ensure an inspection is as pain-free as possible – and ends in success. Not by doing lots of things solely for the purposes of inspection, or by producing lots of documents only for inspectors’ eyes. But by understanding the inspection process and developing a shared language so that all staff know what inspectors are looking for, and by ensuring that what they do every day is in the best interests of children and communities.

This book is packed with practical tools and tangible tips – all of which constitute perennial good practice advice about how to make school improvement your routine not your rescue plan. In short, this is a book not about faking inspection readiness but about making inspection-readiness your everyday reality.

We don’t do it for Ofsted. As educators, we do what we do for the children and communities we serve. And if we do what’s in their best interests and act with integrity at all times, then we should have nothing

to fear from Ofsted. So, this book is about that: doing what's right for our children and communities *and* making that work within the inspection process.

When you get '*the call*', don't panic! Your school is amazing and so are you. Besides – and let me whisper this – even if it's not quite where it needs to be yet, it's too late to do anything about it by the time inspectors turn up at your door. So don't try! If you attempt to make changes after you've had '*the call*' then it will backfire. So, as I say, don't panic.

It is what it is. Be honest, be confident, be you. And as a school leader, your colleagues are looking to you to model how to feel. You are their weathervane; you tell them which way the wind's blowing. If you panic, so too will they. If you project apprehension, they'll become nervous. So be the 3Cs: calm, collected, and confident. Even if that means you have to fake it before you make it.

Next, put wellbeing ahead of everything else. That means your pupils, your staff, and you! Take time to switch off. Stay fed and hydrated. Promote a healthy work-life balance, even the night before the inspection starts. No, especially the night before the inspection starts. Don't commit to keeping the school open till midnight and encourage colleagues to stay late preparing – doing displays, marking books, writing lesson plans. All you'll achieve is heightened stress levels and exhaustion. The best preparation is to go home at a reasonable hour and relax. Tell colleagues this is the expectation then model it: leave the car park early and your colleagues will follow.

The same rule applies during the two-day visit by Ofsted. Keep wellbeing top of the agenda. Walk the floor as often as possible, be visible. Check in with colleagues at lesson changeover and during social times. Smile. Be kind. Reassure. Compliment. Tell your colleagues they're amazing – you know it, their pupils know it. Soon, so too will inspectors.

Remember that inspectors don't know your school as well as you do. They don't walk those corridors every day, speak to children and their parents, work with your staff. As such, they are liable to make mistakes

about your school. Don't get frustrated by their errors of judgment or by the misconceptions they bring with them. Challenge them. Diplomatically, politely, but firmly and robustly. And always with evidence.

And don't just rely on dry data – stats have their uses, and I happen to love graphs, but they only show part of the picture. So, tell stories. Bring the data to life. Talk about the wonderful young people in your school – what they're like, what they do and say, what they achieve, where they go next. Celebrate their successes. And not just their academic successes, either; but what they do beyond the curriculum and how they develop as people. And don't just focus on the high-fliers, those to whom success seems to come easy. Talk about the children who face challenges and for whom success is an uphill struggle. Talk about how they overcome those challenges – with your help – and are determined to break the chains of their birth and define their own destinies.

In all you say, remember to focus on *impact, impact, impact!* What is the impact of your actions on the children and communities that you serve? Bring everything back to the '*so what?*' – what does this mean for pupils and how does it help prepare them for future success?

Finally, rather than reinventing the wheel, adopt Ofsted's three principles of inspection as your guiding star. Those principles are:

1. Achieve
2. Belong
3. Thrive

Inspectors are told to hold these principles close to their hearts (I paraphrase) during inspection and thus you'd be wise to adopt them as part of your shared language.

In practice, ask:

1. What do we do as a school to ensure that every pupil, regardless of background and need, is helped to achieve good academic outcomes and develop as a person so that they are prepared for

the next stage of their journey? What do our outcomes look like in their broadest sense and do those with differences and disadvantages achieve in line with their peers?

2. What do we do as a school to foster a sense of belonging for all, so that every pupil is seen and heard, and valued and respected? How do we ensure our school – its social and emotional environment, and its curriculum, teaching and assessment methods – reflects our pupils’ own lives and experiences? What impact does this have on pupil attendance, behaviour, and wellbeing?
3. What do we do as a school to ensure every pupil can flourish? From policies and procedures, and systems and structures, to staff attitudes and daily actions, how do we create a culture in which children develop the knowledge and skills needed to be successful citizens of the world? Here, think about your personal development programme, extra-curricular activities, and careers education.

Top tips

Here are some more of my top tips for making a success of inspection...

- Remember **Ofsted are not why we do what we do!** Operate your normal school day and don’t panic! Preparation is not about rehearsing a performance; it’s about making your day-to-day reality inspection ready.
- **Make quality assurance your routine, not your rescue plan.** Maintain a rolling SEF that is updated termly with fresh evidence; avoid the “midnight before” rewrite. Link quantitative data, qualitative feedback (pupil/staff voice), and first-hand observation to tell a coherent story. Ensure every subject lead has a concise curriculum narrative, key data trends and how they’ve been addressed, and examples of pupil work showing progression over time

- **Align your narrative to impact, not activity.** Ofsted will be less interested in what you are doing, and more in what difference it makes. When discussing interventions, talk about impact on pupil learning rather than simply listing strategies. For wellbeing initiatives, show how they improve attendance, engagement, or wellbeing. In SEND provision, evidence closing gaps over time, not just the provision offered.
- **Embed cultural readiness.** Inspection readiness is as much about mindset as it is about paperwork. Think: can all staff articulate the school's vision and core pedagogical principles in plain language? Can all staff explain their role in safeguarding, curriculum delivery, and pupil wellbeing? Can all pupils describe their learning, how they know they are making progress, and how the school supports them?
- **Keep safeguarding inspection ready.** Conduct termly safeguarding audits against the latest KCSIE and anticipated 2025 safeguarding guidance. Train all staff on emerging priorities (AI safety, gender-questioning pupil protocols, online harms). Ensure case records are accurate, timely, and securely stored – inspectors often look for consistency here as an indicator of culture.
- And above all... **protect staff wellbeing** before, during, and after an inspection. Avoid “mock inspections” that mimic stress without improving practice – opt for coaching-based reviews instead. Keep paperwork requirements proportionate; don't generate “for Ofsted” documents that have no day-to-day value. Reassure staff that preparation is about showcasing reality, not performing perfection.

If inspection readiness is baked into your everyday systems, there's no need to gear up when the call comes because the call won't change what you do. The most confident schools are those where: Quality assurance is live, lean, and purposeful; everyone can tell the school's story; and impact is clear, consistent, and compelling.

Talking of which...

Articulating impact

Here's a useful rubric I've developed to help articulate to inspectors the impact of your actions since the last inspection. It will keep you focused and succinct.

Objective:

In order to... [e.g. improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils]

Actions:

We did x, y, z... [detail the tangible steps taken: what, when, by whom]

Impact:

As a result of which, we... [use comparative data which shows the improvement not the outcome, e.g. the attendance of disadvantaged pupils improved from X% to Y% / by Z percentage points]

Evidence:

We know this because... [outline the data sources, aim for a weight of evidence which combines quantitative and qualitative data inc. staff/pupil voice]

Next:

Our next step is... [say what you'll do now to further improve/sustain/embed your good practice]

Here it is in tabular form...

Objective	Actions	Impact	Evidence	Next steps
In order to...	We...	As a result of which...	We know this because...	Our next step is...

NOTE: This table, like every table in this book, is available to download from bit.ly/HowToAceOfsted

It would be helpful to have a line prepared for each of your areas for improvement from the last inspection and then to share it with all your staff so that everyone ‘sings from the same hymn sheet.’ In addition, I’d suggest you have a slimmed down version of your school improvement plan in which you articulate your top three strengths as a school and your top two areas for development. Again, share this with staff so everyone says the same things. For each aspect, explain:

- The strength
- How we know it’s a strength
- How we’re maintaining / embedding this good practice
- The weakness
- How we know it’s a weakness
- What we’ve already done to address it
- What more we plan to do
- Our intended outcome

Again, here it is in tabular form...

Strengths	How we know	How we’re maintaining	Weaknesses	How we know	What we’ve done	What we plan to do
1			1			
2			2			
3						

Part One: Inspection-ready when *the call* comes



Chapter 1: The 2025 Inspection Framework

As predicted, Ofsted have replaced one- or two-word judgments with a report card. There are now six evaluation areas, which is a significant reduction from the original proposal, each judged on a 5-point scale.

Six evaluation areas

The six areas are:

1. Inclusion
2. Curriculum and teaching
3. Achievement
4. Attendance and behaviour
5. Personal development and wellbeing
6. Leadership and governance

There is a separate section for ‘safeguarding’ which will be judged to have been ‘met’ or ‘not met’ and separate evaluation criteria for ‘early years’ and ‘post-16’ where applicable.

It’s worth noting that inclusion is not only a standalone evaluation area, but it also runs through the framework like the letters in a stick of Blackpool rock. Why? Because Ofsted believes that, from leadership to teaching to behaviour, all aspects of education should support children who are disadvantaged, those who have SEND, and those who are known to children’s social care.

Accordingly, the report card has a section detailing ‘what it’s like to be a pupil at this school’ and inspectors are told to focus on the experiences of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in a school. In short, schools will be judged by the outcomes achieved by those who face the greatest challenges.

Inspectors will evaluate whether schools are identifying and offering high-quality support for all children. This will include how schools are using targeted funding (such as the Pupil Premium) to support children who are disadvantaged, and those who have SEND or are known to children's social care.

Although Ofsted refer to those children who are disadvantaged, those with SEND, and those who are known to children's social care, they acknowledge that it is for schools, not them, to 'define' inclusion. As such, schools would be wise to agree their own definition of 'disadvantage' and this, I would argue, should extend beyond funding formula. Ask: who are at risk of being excluded from school-life? Who are our most disadvantaged and vulnerable children? We'll explore this further in Chapter 2.

Five-point scale

The 5-point grading system is as follows:

1. Urgent improvement
2. Needs attention
3. Expected standard
4. Strong standard
5. Exceptional

The methodology inspectors use to grade schools has changed from a 'best fit' model, which allowed inspectors to award grades by determining a 'best fit' across a range of standards, to a 'secure fit' model which means that each standard within a grade must be met before it can be awarded.

The new methodology will start by gathering evidence at the 'expected standard' because this is what Ofsted say they'd typically expect to see on inspections. It covers the statutory, professional and non-statutory guidance that providers are already expected to follow. The 'strong standard', with its tighter definitions, looks for evidence of practice to be consistent, embedded and highly impactful. An evaluation area will be graded 'needs attention' when the 'expected standard' of the evaluation area is not met because weaknesses or inconsistencies in

practice have a negative impact on children in general or on a particular group.

An area graded ‘needs attention’ will be accompanied by one or more recommendations, which will describe what needs to improve (but not how to do it).

Contrary to what was originally proposed, Ofsted will not ask providers to submit case studies of exemplary practice to the Ofsted Academy for approval. Instead, inspectors will evaluate ‘exceptional’ practice in the same way as other grades: using their evidence and applying the toolkit during inspection.

Ofsted will grade an area as ‘urgent improvement’ when they: evaluate it to be failing overall or failing a significant group of children, or when they identify serious, critical or systemic shortcomings in practice, policy or performance, against professional/ statutory or non-statutory guidance and requirements.

Context counts

As before, there will be a notification call between 9.30am and 10am on the Monday of the week in which a school is inspected, followed later that day by a 90-minute planning call. Inspectors will use the planning call to understand a school’s context. This includes the children’s needs and leaders’ evaluation of their school’s strengths and areas for improvement.

Ofsted will also share data about the school’s context alongside the report card. This will include demographic and outcome information. Published summary data – the latest data available at the point when the inspection took place – will sit alongside report cards and complement the qualitative findings from inspections: this will show the profile of pupils, as well as performance and attendance data.

As such, schools will not be judged using a ‘one size fits all’ approach, but, instead, their unique circumstances and challenges will be considered when reaching judgments.

Preparing for inspection

Later in this book, I will dissect the six evaluation areas. In this chapter, however, I'd like to focus on the logistics of an inspection.

As I said above, there are two calls: the notification call and the planning call.

The notification call

On the notification call, inspectors will ask to speak with the headteacher or, if they are unavailable, the most senior member of school staff who is available. They will inform the school that an inspection is taking place and explain the type and length of the inspection. They will then schedule the planning call and explain that this is normally a video conference, unless technology does not allow this.

I would encourage headteachers to have at least one other senior leader present on the planning call to assist, ideally more. A new role of nominee has been created to support with planning, communication and ongoing engagement throughout the inspection, helping to streamline the workload. This nominee should also be on the call.

Talking of **the nominee**...

Ofsted will invite providers to nominate an individual working within the setting/provision to act as a nominee. The nominee will support planning, communication and ongoing engagement throughout the inspection, helping to streamline the workload. They will:

- Attend the planning call
- Inform stakeholders about the inspection
- Make sure pupils, parents and staff are informed about how they can give their views
- Brief staff about inspection arrangements
- Provide information for the lead inspector to support inspection planning
- Provide insight into the school's context

- Liaise with the lead inspector and make sure documents and information are available, and staff can attend meetings
- Attend regularly planned meetings with inspectors to review evidence and discuss emerging findings and grades
- Act as the link between the lead inspector and the school leader if the school wants to raise any issues and concerns
- Keep other leaders up to date on the progress of the inspection
- Join the lead inspector for inspection activities
- Suggest to the inspection team where additional evidence could be gathered
- Coordinate feedback arrangements, in particular at the end of the inspection

Between the notification and planning calls, I would advise headteachers to:

- Notify their chair of governors, academy trust leaders, local authority, and any other relevant stakeholders such as a school improvement advisor or diocese.
- Meet with SLT to gather information for the planning call (see below) and agree who will attend that call – and who will take notes.
- Take a break, get some fresh air, and gather their thoughts.

The planning call

The planning call is in 3 parts:

1. Introduction and discussing practicalities
2. Understanding the school's context
3. Planning the timetable for the first inspection day

The first part will explore leaders' wellbeing, reasonable adjustments and adaptations, and information gathering. Inspectors will want to know about:

- the scheme of delegation
- the school's religious character
- any nursery provision

- any before- and/or after-school care and holiday clubs managed directly by school
- which decisions are made centrally by trust leaders, and which are delegated to the headteacher

The second part focuses on the school's context, including any changes since the previous inspection. Specifically, inspectors will want to know about:

- leaders' recent and ongoing priorities and challenges, the actions they have taken to maintain or improve standards, and how they have assessed the impact of their actions
- leaders' evaluation of the school's 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 (on which, more in a moment)
- any recent tensions in, or pressures from, the community
- any relevant safeguarding matters, as identified by leaders, including any safeguarding concerns, or allegations made about adults
- leaders' approach to inclusion
- leaders' approach to ensuring that staff can identify disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND, those known (or previously known) to social care, as well as those who face other barriers to their learning and/or wellbeing, for example young carers
- the school's timetable, how the curriculum is organised, and how leaders work with external professionals to meet pupils' needs
- any current use of part-time timetables and whether the school is currently making any use of alternative provision

And the final part is about scheduling. Inspectors will want to organise meetings with the designated safeguarding lead and those responsible for governance. They will also want a list of pupils for 'case sampling'. Schools should be ready to:

- select approximately six pupils
- select a representative sample, including:
 - a child with EHCP and, where possible, a disabled child
 - a looked-after child
 - a child known, or previously known, to social care
 - a child who receives Pupil Premium funding

- a child from any other group identified as significant to the school's context

Inspectors will also want to know the following:

- The school's designated religious character (where applicable)
- The number of pupils on roll (and separately, where applicable, the number of pupils in the post-16 provision), and their sex and age range
- Whether there is any specially resourced provision for pupils with SEND or other pupils, or any other alternative or designated units for pupils
- Whether any pupils attend off-site AP
- Whether any pupils attend a pupil support unit under the school's URN
- Whether the school has any pupils on roll whose places have been commissioned by a local authority
- Whether any pupils are currently on a part-time timetable, receiving flexi-schooling or being educated remotely
- Whether the school directly leads and manages any nursery provision, before- and/or after-school care or holiday clubs

Further, they'll want to know:

- Whether the school operates from more than one site, for example whether it offers early years or post-16 provision on separate premises
- What early career framework the school is using for early career teachers (ECTs), if any
- Any reason the inspection should not take place (for example, if the school is within 6 months of confirmed closure and this can be evidenced in a funding agreement)
- Details of (and response to) any recent tensions in, or pressures from, the community
- The start and end date for the next school holiday any other dates when the school will be closed within the next 2 months, for example for a religious festival
- Details (though not personal information) of who lives on the school premises
- Information about any other factors the school considers relevant to its current context, including: any concerns, such as perceived conflicts of interest
- Details of the nominee (where applicable)

In addition, inspectors will ask:

- If there are any pupils with SEND: the number of pupils, what their needs are, the type(s) of language and/or communication systems used (for example British Sign Language), and the staffing support they receive
- If any pupils are in off-site AP: information about the AP's name, address, registration status, URN (if registered), number of pupils that attend and for what reason, their start dates, and the hours they attend
- If any pupils are in any pupil support unit under the school's URN: information about its purpose, size, location, number of pupils attending, whether it provides for pupils from other schools or pupils whose place is commissioned by a local authority, and the timetables of the pupils attending
- If the school is an academy: information about any pupils who have been transferred to one of the trust's other academies acting as an AP and who may now be on roll there
- Information about the number of pupils on a part-time timetable, being flexi-schooled or being educated remotely, and any elective home-education arrangements for pupils registered at the school

The following set of strategic documents will be required:

- Anything that sets out school improvement priorities or the longer-term vision
- For maintained schools, minutes from the meetings of the governing body
- For academies, minutes of the board of trustees' meetings
- Reports from any external evaluation of the school
- Records and analysis about behaviour and attendance,
- Any pupils taken off roll, including the reasons why
- Suspensions and permanent exclusions, incidents of poor behaviour and any use of internal isolation
- Information about the school's use of AP
- Information about any pupils directed off-site and/or pupils on managed moves
- Any bullying, harassment, or directly or indirectly discriminatory or prejudiced behaviour
- Any sexual harassment and/or sexual violence
- Any restrictive physical intervention

- Inclusion information for case sampling

And they will want the following operational documents:

- Wi-Fi details, if the school has it, so that inspectors can connect to the internet
- Map of the school buildings and other practical information
- The school timetable
- The current staff list (indicating ECTs, mentors and induction tutors)
- Details of any staff absence
- Times for the school day, including any planned interruptions to normal school routines

You may find this simple document inventory useful:

Document	Location	Owner	Last updated

Throughout these calls and the early stages of a visit, I would advise that SLT remember that inspectors do not know your school the way you do. You walk those corridors day in day out, greet pupils and their families every morning, and know your staff. As such, do not be afraid to correct inspectors' misconceptions or mistakes, and to – robustly but diplomatically – disagree with inspectors' perceptions and judgments. Just make sure you have supporting evidence!

Remember, too, that the planning call isn't a test. The inspector will be looking to triangulate everything you tell them with staff and pupils when they visit your school. So, be as honest and as clear as you can. If you don't know an answer, say so, and promise to find out. And be realistic: don't massage data or stretch the truth; if something isn't yet good enough, say so and explain what you're doing about it.

While being a headteacher or senior leader can feel lonely at times, remember you are far from alone and your staff are going to be pivotal as you navigate the inspection process. So, keep them in the loop and keep them positive. Walk the floor, smile, check in, reassure.

After the planning call, I'd suggest you:

- Call your chair of governors to provide an update and ask them to share information with the governing body when organising those who will meet the inspector.
- Notify all staff quickly, via email if necessary, about the inspection.
- Meet with staff in person at the end of the school day to answer any questions and provide reassurance.
- Discuss with senior colleagues any timetable arrangements and amendments necessary to the usual running of the school day.
- Arrange to meet with the middle leaders who are likely to be involved in learning walks and meetings.
- Arrange food for any staff members staying late to finish preparations – but try to avoid this! Better to encourage everyone to go home and switch off!
- Send survey links to parents/carers.
- Check the school environment before you leave. Is everything where it should be?

More than anything, instead of thinking 'oh no, here we go' when that call comes, try thinking 'let's go, we're ready to show off our wonderful school'.

Earlier, I said that, during the planning call, inspectors will expect you to share your assessment of the six evaluation areas using their 5-point scale. As such, you might find this table useful...

Evaluation area	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Inclusion			
Curriculum and teaching			
Achievement			
Attendance and behaviour			
Personal development and wellbeing			
Leadership and governance			
Early years / post-16			

Key: 1=exceptional | 2 = strong standard | 3=expected standard | 4=needs attention | 5=urgent improvement

Busting some myths

Here's a useful reminder of what not to do!

Your school does not need to provide:

- any information beyond what Ofsted specifically ask for
- information in any specific format (as long as it is easily accessible for inspectors)
- written evidence of oral feedback to pupils
- predictions of attainment and progress scores
- performance and pupil-tracking information
- any specific document or plan in relation to the pupil premium

In terms of curriculum, Ofsted say they evaluate schools that take radically different approaches to the curriculum fairly and evaluate a school's curriculum favourably if they have built or adopted a curriculum with appropriate coverage, content, structure and sequencing, and implemented it effectively.

Inspectors will consider the extent to which the curriculum reflects the breadth and ambition of the national curriculum, and how inclusive the curriculum, culture and practices are. This is the case whether the school has devised its own curriculum or uses, for example,

commercial or local schemes. It is up to school leaders to determine the school's practices and to justify these on their own merits.

Likewise, Ofsted do not prefer any particular method of planning (including lesson or curriculum planning), teaching or assessment. They do not expect a specific format for curriculum planning. They do not require schools to show individual lesson plans or previous lesson plans.

As was the case under the previous framework, Ofsted do not grade individual teachers or lessons, and they do not evaluate individual pupil workbooks or expect workbooks to be compiled solely to provide evidence for inspection. They do not use work scrutiny to evaluate teachers' marking.

Talking of marking, as before, Ofsted do not specify the frequency, type or volume of marking and feedback. They do not require schools to make sure that work in pupils' books or folders is of a specific quantity or done at a particular frequency.

The inspection visit

After the notification and planning calls on Monday, inspectors will spend Tuesday and Wednesday on site.

The first day is in two halves as follows...

Firstly, having looked at your single central record, inspectors will carry out learning walks with leaders, and this will include looking at pupils' work. They will engage in discussions with pupils at the start of the day and social times. And they will meet with school leaders and the nominee.

Secondly, there will be more focused leadership meetings with those responsible for particular areas of school including the SENDCo and Pupil Premium Coordinator. There will be further lesson visits or other learning walk activities (e.g. with leaders responsible for curriculum and teaching, or leaders responsible for behaviour), and further informal or planned discussions with pupils including the case sample.

Inspectors will meet other staff and there will be discussions with parents/carers, and with leaders of any alternative provision that pupils attend.

Throughout, there will be regular reflection meetings with leaders and the inspection team.

In academies, inspectors will also meet the CEO and anyone else from the trust as agreed and have at least one meeting with the chair of the board of trustees (or their delegate) and as many trustees as are available, to cover governance oversight and arrangements for areas such as safeguarding, behaviour and curriculum.

During the visit, inspectors will make sure there is a clear and accurate evaluative record of relevant evidence (rather than a verbatim record of discussions or inspection activities) and that this evidence base explains how inspectors arrived at their decisions and findings, including how they weighed the evidence in reaching these.

Learning walks

Learning walks will have different foci. There will be a learning walk focused on inclusion that will be used to help inspectors gather evidence about the outcomes and experiences of disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND, those known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who face other barriers to their learning and/or wellbeing. This learning walk will typically include a leader, such as the SENDCo and/or the inclusion leader.

There will be a learning walk with a focus on curriculum, teaching and achievement which will be used to evaluate how well pupils are learning the intended curriculum.

A further learning walk will focus on leadership, giving leaders the opportunity to demonstrate how their priorities and actions are being realised. The headteacher or a relevant leader will usually accompany inspectors on this kind of learning walk, and it should involve visits to a broad sample of lessons to discuss and understand the impact of leaders' work.

In secondary schools, the curriculum, teaching and achievement learning walks will focus on these three aspects across an agreed group of subjects. Inspectors will select the subjects during the planning call, accounting for leaders' views and what they have told inspectors about areas that are strong and those where there is more to do. These walks should usually include a senior leader or relevant subject leaders, who may accompany inspectors for specific parts of the learning walk that relate to an area which they lead.

Where possible, inspectors will review pupils' work as part of learning walks and use this to support discussions with pupils about their learning. Reviewing pupils' work will provide further evidence about the curriculum pupils have been taught, how this has been taught, and the knowledge and skills they have developed.

Ofsted say that pupils' work is an important part of how they inspect the curriculum and teaching, and of their evaluation of pupils' knowledge and skills, but that it will always be considered in the light of wider evidence.

Inspectors will review the work of disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND, those known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who face other barriers to their learning and/or wellbeing.

Meetings

Throughout the two-day visit there will be reflection meetings. Their purpose is to:

- Confirm everyone's wellbeing
- Record any new reflections or unexpected events
- Agree whether the timetable needs fine-tuning.
- Allow leaders to share additional evidence.

There will be a grading meeting on day two to which leaders and the nominee are invited to attend. And at the end of the second day there will be the final feedback meeting to which leaders and governors are invited.

There will be meetings with various school leaders including the SENDCo and/or inclusion leader, as well as with those responsible for governance. With regards the latter meetings, inspectors will consider the school's context and, where applicable, the scheme of delegation when deciding who to speak with. Meetings with governors will explore:

- How governors/trustees carry out their functions – particularly in shaping and supporting the school's vision, ethos, and strategic direction – and the impact this has on day-to-day decisions.
- Whether the way governors support and challenge leaders helps the school to provide a high-quality education for pupils.
- How effective processes and policies are.
- How governors/trustees assure themselves that these are understood and effectively implemented across the school.

When planning meetings and other inspection activities, you may find the following table useful:

Activity	Who?	What?	When/where?
Eg Inclusion learning walk	PP Coordinator / SENDCo	Observe class X / pupil Y	Tuesday lesson 3 / Room 4B

The outcomes of inspection

Ofsted have implemented a 'suspend and return' policy. This means that inspectors can suspend an inspection to allow a school to resolve minor issues with safeguarding within three months, as long as that is the only issue.

Schools graded as 'urgent improvement', and therefore in a category of concern, will receive a monitoring inspection each term following the publication of the report card. The monitoring inspections will focus on the areas for improvement identified at the full inspection.

Schools that require significant improvement will receive up to five inspections within 18 months of the last full inspection. Schools that require special measures will receive up to six inspections within 24 months of the last full inspection. There will be one inspection per school term. The end of each monitoring inspection will include checking the readiness for the removal of a category of concern. This will determine whether monitoring will continue or whether the school has improved enough to have a full inspection, in which the category of concern can be removed. Ofsted will set out the findings of each monitoring inspection and publish these in the report card.

Schools with any evaluation area that is graded as 'needs attention' will also receive monitoring. Their monitoring programme will start with an initial call to the headteacher to discuss the progress the school has made towards reaching the 'expected standard' since their full inspection. These monitoring inspections will only look at the evaluation areas that were graded below the 'expected standard'.

A monitoring inspection can move a grade up to at least 'expected standard' and Ofsted will update the report card. Once the school is graded 'expected standard' or above in all areas, the monitoring programme will end. A monitoring inspection can also move a grade down to 'urgent improvement'. This is likely to lead to the inspection being deemed a full inspection, after which Ofsted will publish a new report card with a full suite of new grades.

Ofsted will no longer be carrying out ungraded inspections. All routine inspections will be full inspections.

Ofsted will continue with full inspections every four years as part of the school inspection cycle.

Schools that are being monitored and do not improve by the end of the monitoring programme may receive a full inspection sooner.

Chapter 2: Defining disadvantage

It's worth noting that, as well as being an evaluation area in its own right, inclusion is at the heart of the entire framework. For example, the report card has a section detailing 'what it's like to be a pupil at this school' and inspectors are being told to focus on the experiences of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children in a school. In short, schools will now be judged by the outcomes they achieve for the children whose backgrounds or additional and different needs pose the greatest challenges to them.

As I said earlier, inspectors will use the 90-minute planning call on the Monday afternoon to understand children's needs and leaders' evaluation of their school's strengths and areas for improvement, so that their findings can be put into context. This includes your definition of disadvantage.

Ofsted will also share data about the school's context alongside the report card. This will include demographic and outcome information. Published summary data – the latest data available at the point when the inspection took place – will sit alongside report cards and complement the qualitative findings from inspections: this will show the profile of pupils, as well as performance and attendance data.

As such, schools will not be judged using a 'one size fits all' approach, but, instead, their unique circumstances and challenges will be considered when reaching judgments.

Evaluating inclusion

Inspectors will evaluate whether education providers are identifying and offering high-quality support for all children and pupils, especially those who are disadvantaged, those with SEND, and those who are known to children's social care.

This will include how providers are using targeted funding (such as the pupil premium or high-needs funding) to support children and learners who are disadvantaged, and those who have SEND or are known to children's social care.

As I say above, Ofsted have made inclusion both a specific evaluation area and a key theme across other evaluation areas. From leadership to teaching to behaviour, all aspects of education provision should support children and learners who are disadvantaged, those who have SEND, and those are known to children's social care.

Defining disadvantage

It is not for Ofsted to define disadvantage. In the documentation, they refer to those children and learners who are disadvantaged, those with SEND, and those who are known to children's social care. And they say they'll always consider where those with protected characteristics are negatively impacted by barriers in a provider's context.

But this need not be your definition of disadvantage. Indeed, I would suggest you agree a shared definition for your school, and I would encourage you to look beyond the funding formula when doing so because that is not a perfect science. Take, for example, the pupil premium which targets funding at pupils claiming free school meals, those with are or have previously been looked after by a local authority, and the children of service families. But this is a narrow definition of disadvantage that excludes many of our most impoverished and 'at risk' children.

Your school's shared definition will be central to your argument about your context and how you're supporting disadvantaged pupils and closing the attainment gap between your disadvantaged pupils and their peers. So, let's do a deeper dive on it...

The pupil premium is flawed on the following grounds:

Firstly, free school meals are only available to families on certain income-related benefits. Low-income families who fall just above the

threshold, or those with insecure work patterns, may experience significant financial hardship but are not entitled to FSM.

Secondly, some families who are eligible do not apply for FSM due to stigma, lack of awareness, language barriers, or difficulties navigating the application process. This under-registration reduces the number of children attracting funding.

Thirdly, children from families with “No Recourse to Public Funds” (NRPF) are often not eligible for FSM, even though many live in deep poverty. This group is therefore systematically excluded from pupil premium support.

Finally, FSM eligibility reflects a “snapshot” of income linked to benefits at a given point in time. It may not capture families experiencing temporary but acute financial crises, or those whose circumstances fluctuate.

And the situation has worsened recently because, although the government has expanded FSM entitlement to all families receiving Universal Credit, which they claim will benefit 1.7 million children in Years 3 to 11, the change is not being extended to pupil premium funding nor home-to-school transport extended rights, funding which will continue to be “based on the existing FSMs threshold”.

As a consequence, many disadvantaged pupils are “invisible” to the system, meaning schools do not receive the resources intended to support them. Schools serving areas with widespread hidden poverty may have high need but relatively low PP allocations. Universal FSM policies have reduced the incentive for parents to apply for means-tested FSM, further weakening the link between disadvantage and PP funding.

In short: the pupil premium fails to capture many of the most disadvantaged children because it relies on an imperfect proxy for poverty. And thus schools need to look beyond the funding to identify those children most in need of additional support in their context.

Here's one approach you could take to more accurately identify the most disadvantaged children in your setting. Instead of relying solely on funding, you could build a multi-criterion "vulnerability profile" of pupils, drawing on different data sources. These sources could include:

1. Measures of economic hardship, such as:

- FSM eligibility (means-tested, "Ever 6" FSM)
- Families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) or ineligible for FSM despite low income
- Pupil premium eligibility gaps (children not registered for FSM but known to be struggling)
- Household income banding (where available via local authority data)
- Eligibility for local hardship grants / discretionary housing payments

2. Family and home circumstances, such as:

- Looked after children (LAC) and previously looked after (PLAC)
- Young carers
- Children subject to a Child Protection Plan or Child in Need Plan
- Children living in temporary accommodation or known housing insecurity
- Families using food banks or referred to early help/social services
- Parental factors: long-term unemployment, substance misuse, imprisonment, domestic abuse

3. Educational indicators, such as:

- Persistent absence or lateness (often linked to socio-economic stress)
- Low prior attainment or delayed language development
- Limited access to digital devices or internet at home
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) without adequate family resources

4. Contextual deprivation, such as:

- Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD): linking pupil postcodes to local area deprivation scores
- Neighbourhood free school meal take-up rates (school-level benchmarking)
- Rural/isolated households with limited access to services

In practice, you might then...

Gather data from: school records including FSM registration, attendance, attainment, SEND status, safeguarding logs; local authority data including children's services, housing, NRPF teams, discretionary funding records; national datasets including IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index) linked to pupil postcodes and IMD rankings for local areas; community intelligence including food bank referrals, voluntary sector partners, early help services; and parent/carer surveys including self-reported barriers (digital poverty, childcare costs, food insecurity).

Use this data to: create a "disadvantage dashboard" combining multiple indicators; develop a tiered support model (e.g. FSM+PP pupils, wider economic hardship pupils, vulnerable context pupils); and direct interventions (academic tutoring, pastoral care, wellbeing support) more accurately than FSM alone.

You are helped in that the pupil premium is flexible funding. Whilst you must monitor and evaluate the impact of pupil premium spending on eligible pupils, and report on this in your strategy for audit purposes, your spending is not limited to eligible pupils. Indeed, you can use the funding in any way you wish, so long as it's evidence-informed and you can justify it. I would suggest you identify your disadvantaged cohort in your strategy and also monitor and evaluate the impact of your actions on this broader group.

Chapter 3: Inclusion

Under the evaluation area of ‘inclusion’, inspectors will gather evidence relating to the following factors:

- setting high expectations for all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children’s social care, and those who may face other barriers to their learning and/or wellbeing
- embedding a culture in which early and accurate assessment of pupils’ needs is prioritised
- using the information from the assessment of pupils’ needs to implement a continuous cycle of planning, actions and review in order to reduce barriers to pupils’ learning and/or wellbeing
- involving specialists when necessary to support pupils’ development
- putting in place a pupil premium strategy that is well thought through, is based on evidence of what works well to support the achievement of eligible pupils, and accounts for any challenges pupils face that may negatively affect their education and their readiness to engage with school
- working closely and effectively with pupils, parents, professionals and staff, and ensuring that pupils’ and parents’ views and aspirations are included in decision-making about support for pupils

So, what might this look like in practice? Let’s explore each factor in turn...

1. Setting high expectations

In practice this might look like:

- Articulating a clear curriculum ambition for *every* child (e.g. all pupils study the full breadth of subjects unless there is a clear evidence-based reason otherwise)

- Ensuring all teachers use scaffolding rather than lowering the bar (e.g. visual prompts, sentence starters, pre-teaching key vocabulary)
- Applying behaviour and attendance expectations consistently, with appropriate support for those who struggle

How to prepare:

- Review curriculum pathways: ensure no group is disproportionately excluded from subjects
- Gather evidence of how staff adapt teaching (not “dumbing down”) to ensure access
- Train staff to challenge unconscious bias and deficit thinking

2. Embedding a culture of early and accurate assessment

In practice this might look like:

- Conducting baseline assessments (academic, speech/language, social/emotional) when pupils join
- Using systematic screening tools (phonics checks, reading age tests, attendance/behaviour trackers)
- Training staff to spot early warning signs of need (speech delay, trauma indicators, hidden disadvantage)

How to prepare:

- Map assessment processes across phases: what is checked, when, and how information is recorded
- Provide CPD for teachers and support staff on noticing early indicators
- Ensure SENDCo and pastoral teams regularly share insights with teaching staff

3. Using assessment information in a continuous cycle

In practice this might look like:

- Making individual pupil support plans *live documents* (updated regularly, not filed away)
- Conducting termly reviews of interventions (e.g. literacy catch-up, mentoring) with data showing impact
- Ensuring leaders *stop* ineffective strategies and replace them with stronger approaches

How to prepare:

- Audit current interventions: which ones are evidence-based (e.g. EEF Toolkit)?
- Build systems for reviewing progress (meetings, pupil progress boards, dashboards)
- Keep case studies of pupils showing how the cycle has worked to reduce barriers

4. Involving specialists when necessary

In practice this might look like:

- Putting in place swift referral pathways to external professionals (educational psychologists, CAMHS, speech & language therapists, youth workers)
- Scheduling joint planning meetings with specialists and school staff
- Ensuring staff act on specialist recommendations consistently in the classroom

How to prepare:

- Keep logs of referrals and follow-ups
- Train staff to interpret and implement specialist advice
- Build relationships with local agencies and keep evidence of collaborative working

5. Pupil Premium strategy

In practice this might look like:

- Publishing your PP strategy on the school website showing links to EEF evidence, but tailored to local challenges (e.g. high mobility, NRPF families, digital poverty)
- Allocating funding to *both academic and pastoral barriers* (e.g. tutoring, but also breakfast clubs and attendance support)
- Ensuring leaders can explain why certain decisions were made and what outcomes are being tracked

How to prepare:

- Write a clear PP statement (3-year plan with annual review) that goes beyond FSM tick-boxes
- Monitor and evaluate impact: show data, but also pupil voice and case studies
- Ensure governors/trustees are engaged and can articulate the rationale

6. Working closely with pupils, parents, professionals, and staff

In practice this might look like:

- Holding regular structured conversations with parents of disadvantaged/SEND pupils (not just at parents' evenings)
- Ensuring pupil voice forums feed into decisions about curriculum, wellbeing, and provision
- Scheduling multidisciplinary meetings where staff, parents, and professionals co-create plans

How to prepare:

- Set up systems for recording pupil and parent feedback and how it has been acted upon
- Train staff in relational practice and effective communication with families
- Develop examples of co-produced plans (e.g. Education, Health & Care Plans, pastoral support plans)

Pupils not policies

Note that Ofsted will want to see not only *policies and strategies* but also *the lived experience of pupils*. As such, you should be ready to:

- Provide case studies of individual pupils (anonymised) showing how barriers were identified and reduced.
- Show evidence that inclusion is everyone's responsibility, not just the SENDCo or PP lead.
- Demonstrate impact with both data (attendance, attainment, progress) and stories (pupil/parent voice).

When considering the factors above, inspectors will take account of how they apply to different ages and stages of learning, and the needs of different groups of pupils. So be ready to talk about your context and show an understanding of the community you serve and of the pupils on your roll.

You may find this action plan useful when auditing your school's current position against the above factors...

Focus Area	Actions	Evidence	RAG	Next Steps
1. Setting high expectations	Articulate a clear curriculum ambition for every child Ensure teachers use scaffolding not lowering expectations Apply behaviour/attendance expectations consistently	Reviewed curriculum pathways show no disproportionate exclusions Lesson observations/work scrutiny evidence scaffolding Consistency in behaviour/attendance logs		
2. Embedding a culture of early and accurate assessment	Conduct baseline assessments (academic, speech/language, social/emotional) Use systematic screening tools Train staff to spot early warning signs	Assessment maps across phases Screening results stored consistently Records of CPD on early indicators		
3. Using assessment information in a continuous cycle	Make pupil support plans live and updated Conduct termly reviews of interventions with impact data Stop ineffective strategies and replace with stronger ones	Intervention audit with EEF evidence base Progress review systems in place (dashboards/boards) Case studies of pupil progress		

4. Involving specialists when necessary	Establish swift referral pathways Schedule joint planning with specialists Ensure staff act consistently on recommendations	Logs of referrals/follow-ups Meeting notes/action plans from joint planning Evidence of classroom practice aligned to advice		
5. Pupil Premium strategy	Publish strategy linking to EEF evidence and local challenges Allocate funding to academic and pastoral barriers Leaders explain rationale and tracked outcomes	Published 3-year PP plan Monitoring reports with data, pupil voice, case studies Governor/trustee meeting minutes showing engagement		
6. Working closely with pupils, parents, professionals, and staff	Hold structured conversations with parents of disadvantaged/SEND pupils Ensure pupil voice informs decisions* Schedule multidisciplinary meetings for co-created plans	Logs of structured conversations Records of pupil voice forums and responses Co-produced plans (EHCPs, pastoral support plans)		

Gathering evidence of ‘inclusion’

The toolkit says that, in gathering evidence about how schools identify, assess and meet needs, and reduce barriers, inspectors will consider the extent to which:

- leaders understand that the most effective inclusion strategy begins with everyday high- quality inclusive teaching, which has most benefit for the pupils who find learning hardest and reduces the need for individual adaptations
- leaders have established a culture in which staff understand the range of barriers that pupils may face to their learning and/or wellbeing, including those specific to their community and the school’s context; they quickly and accurately identify pupils facing these barriers
- leaders make sure pupils receive effective support, consult with external specialists and implement their advice as necessary, and ensure that appropriate reasonable adjustments are made in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and the SEND Code of Practice
- leaders work closely with parents, taking their views into account and making best use of their knowledge of their children
- leaders make sure that any alternative provision the school uses is suitable and safe, and the decisions to place pupils in it are made in pupils’ best interests
- the published school accessibility plan meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, is implemented effectively and is reviewed regularly

In practice, I'd suggest schools focus on the following:

1. High-quality inclusive teaching as the foundation

What it looks like in practice:

- Teachers use adaptive teaching (e.g. scaffolds, modelling, retrieval practice) that benefits all pupils but particularly those who struggle
- Teaching plans account for varied starting points, rather than relying heavily on 1:1 interventions
- Staff see “quality first teaching” as the default strategy for inclusion

How to prepare:

- Provide CPD on adaptive teaching strategies (EEF guidance)
- Monitor lessons to check for inclusivity in day-to-day classroom practice, not just interventions
- Gather pupil voice from disadvantaged/SEND pupils on how teaching helps them access the curriculum

2. Culture of staff understanding the barriers pupils face

What it looks like in practice:

- Staff know the specific challenges in their context (e.g. high mobility, digital poverty, rural isolation, language barriers)
- Inclusion is part of whole-school ethos, not siloed to SEND or pastoral staff
- Teachers show awareness of trauma, social care involvement, or community-level disadvantage

How to prepare:

- Run whole staff training on contextual barriers (using local data, IMD indices, safeguarding reports)
- Share anonymised pupil case studies in staff meetings to build collective understanding
- Ensure policies (behaviour, attendance, curriculum) reflect local context, not generic templates

3. Quick and accurate identification of pupils facing barriers

What it looks like in practice:

- Clear systems for flagging concerns (academic, attendance, behaviour, wellbeing)
- Early screening tools: phonics, speech and language, literacy/numeracy baseline, wellbeing surveys
- A joined-up approach where concerns raised by teachers reach pastoral and SEND teams promptly

How to prepare:

- Audit how quickly pupils are picked up for additional support and whether thresholds are too high/slow
- Check referral systems: are they simple, accessible, and consistently used by staff?
- Use data dashboards to identify at-risk pupils early (e.g. persistent absence alerts)

4. Effective support, specialist consultation, and reasonable adjustments

What it looks like in practice:

- External professionals (e.g. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Specialists or CAMHS, Speech and Language Therapists or SALT, and Education Psychologists or EPs) are brought in when needs are beyond the school's expertise
- Advice from specialists is consistently implemented in classrooms
- Reasonable adjustments are visible to staff but not fellow pupils: e.g. seating arrangements, use of assistive tech, modified timetables

How to prepare:

- Keep records of referrals, specialist reports, and evidence of follow-up actions
- Train staff to interpret and apply specialist guidance

- Audit whether Equality Act and SEND Code of Practice duties (reasonable adjustments, graduated approach) are fully met

5. Working closely with parents and valuing their knowledge

What it looks like in practice:

- Parents are partners, not passive recipients: their insights are sought and used in planning support
- Communication is two-way, jargon-free, and regular
- Meetings with parents focus on solutions and aspirations, not just problems

How to prepare:

- Schedule structured conversations beyond parents' evenings
- Evidence parental input in SEND reviews, support plans, or pastoral meetings
- Collect parent voice and show how it has influenced decisions

6. Alternative provision: suitability, safety, and best interests

What it looks like in practice:

- Placements are carefully chosen, quality-assured, and monitored
- School leaders visit providers regularly to check safeguarding, curriculum quality, and outcomes
- Pupils remain on roll, with reintegration plans where appropriate

How to prepare:

- Keep documentation of due diligence checks on AP providers
- Maintain ongoing progress reports from providers
- Be ready to evidence why AP was the right choice for a given pupil, with parent/pupil voice included

7. Accessibility plan (Equality Act 2010 compliance)

What it looks like in practice:

- The school has a published accessibility plan covering curriculum access, physical environment, and communication
- The plan is not a “paper exercise”: evidence shows adjustments are made and regularly reviewed
- Leaders monitor progress towards actions in the plan

How to prepare:

- Review your accessibility plan annually and update with measurable objectives
- Show evidence of practical changes (e.g. ramps, accessible signage, large print resources)
- Be able to demonstrate how pupils with SEND are consulted about accessibility improvements

It might be useful to gather the following evidence together:

- CPD logs (adaptive teaching, inclusion training)
- Data dashboards (attendance, progress, referrals)
- Case studies (showing assessment → action → review cycle)
- Records of specialist referrals and adjustments implemented
- Parent/pupil voice surveys and meeting notes
- Alternative provision QA documents
- Accessibility plan (with review notes and evidence of implementation)

You might find the following action plan useful when auditing your current practice in this area...

Focus Area	Actions	Evidence	RAG	Next Steps
1. High-quality inclusive teaching as the foundation	Teachers use adaptive teaching (scaffolds, modelling, retrieval practice) Plans account for varied starting points, not just one-to-one interventions “Quality first teaching” seen as the default	CPD records on adaptive teaching (EEF) Lesson monitoring shows inclusive practice Pupil voice feedback from disadvantaged/SEND pupils		

2. Culture of staff understanding the barriers pupils face	Staff understand contextual challenges (mobility, poverty, rural isolation, language) Inclusion embedded in whole-school ethos Teachers show awareness of trauma/social care involvement	Records of whole-staff training using local data Staff meeting minutes with anonymised case studies Policies adapted to reflect local context		
3. Quick and accurate identification of pupils facing barriers	Clear systems for flagging concerns Early screening tools in place (phonics, literacy/numeracy, wellbeing) Joined-up processes between teaching, pastoral, SEND	Audit of identification speed and thresholds Records of referral system use Dashboards showing early alerts (e.g. persistent absence)		
4. Effective support, specialist consultation, and reasonable adjustments	Bring in external specialists when required Staff implement advice consistently Reasonable adjustments made discreetly (seating, tech, timetables)	Logs of referrals, reports, and follow-up Evidence from observations of staff applying advice SEND/Equality Act audit outcomes		
5. Working closely with parents and valuing their knowledge	Parents seen as partners in planning Communication is two-way, clear, and regular Meetings focus on aspirations and solutions	Records of structured conversations Evidence of parental input in SEND reviews/support plans Parent voice collected and acted on		
6. Alternative provision: suitability, safety, and best interests	Carefully chosen, quality-assured placements Leaders visit providers regularly Pupils remain on roll with reintegration plans	Due diligence documentation on providers Progress reports from AP providers Case studies showing rationale for placement with parent/pupil input		
7. Accessibility plan (Equality Act 2010 compliance)	Published accessibility plan covering curriculum, environment, communication Evidence of adjustments being implemented Leaders monitor and review progress	Annual reviews of plan with measurable objectives Evidence of physical/environmental adjustments Records of pupil consultation on accessibility		

A deeper dive into disadvantaged pupils

In gathering evidence about supporting disadvantaged pupils, inspectors will consider the extent to which:

- leaders have a secure understanding of their disadvantaged pupils' needs and use the best available evidence, including high-quality research, to

inform their approaches to addressing these; this includes regularly reviewing their strategy for pupil premium and for early years pupil premium, if this applies

- the pupil premium strategy is aligned with wider school improvement priorities, and staff are clear about their roles in delivering the strategy
- the pupil premium strategy is implemented and monitored effectively, including through training and support for staff
- any necessary adaptations to approaches the school uses to support disadvantaged pupils are timely and effective
- leaders' approaches, including developing the pupil premium strategy, have a positive impact on pupils' learning

Here's a useful checklist of actions to take...

1. Secure understanding of disadvantaged pupils' needs

Leadership actions:

- Map disadvantaged pupils' barriers to learning (academic gaps, attendance, digital access, family circumstances)
- Use multiple data sources: attainment, progress, attendance, behaviour, safeguarding, pupil/parent voice
- Identify groups at risk of being missed by FSM/pupil premium (e.g. NRPF families, just above threshold)

Evidence file:

- Pupil profiles and contextual analysis
- Case studies showing individual barriers and interventions
- Staff awareness (tested via discussion with leaders)

Top tip:

- Keep an updated "disadvantaged dashboard" showing key data and trends

2. Use of high-quality research and evidence

Leadership actions:

- Base PP strategy on EEF Toolkit, DfE guidance, and peer-reviewed studies
- Choose interventions with strong evidence of impact (e.g. tutoring, metacognition, feedback, attendance support)
- Avoid scattergun spending; prioritise depth over breadth

Evidence file:

- Strategy document referencing evidence sources
- Rationale for chosen interventions (why this approach, for this school)

Top tip:

- Train leaders and governors to articulate the evidence base underpinning decisions

3. Regular review of Pupil Premium and Early Years Pupil Premium strategies

Leadership actions:

- Review strategy impact at least termly; adjust based on progress data
- Publish annual impact review (DfE requirement)
- In EYFS, track progress of disadvantaged children in prime areas and early literacy/numeracy

Evidence file:

- Termly impact reports and review notes
- Adjustments made where outcomes aren't improving

Top tip:

- Be ready to show a “plan–do–review” cycle in action, with examples

4. Alignment with wider school improvement priorities

Leadership actions:

- Link PP priorities to whole-school improvement (e.g. SEND strategy, literacy strategy, attendance policy, etc.)
- Ensure disadvantaged focus runs through curriculum design, behaviour, assessment, and enrichment
- Embed inclusion in staff performance management objectives / professional development targets as appropriate

Evidence file:

- School improvement plan cross-referencing PP strategy
- Department improvement plans showing disadvantaged focus

Top tip:

- Governors/trustees should be able to explain how PP aligns with the school's overall vision

5. Clarity of staff roles in delivering the strategy

Leadership actions:

- Share the PP strategy with all staff (not just SLT)
- Define roles: teachers (adaptive teaching), TAs (targeted support), pastoral team (attendance/family engagement)
- Provide clear expectations in job descriptions and CPD

Evidence file:

- Staff surveys/pupil progress meetings showing awareness
- Lesson visits where inclusive practice is consistent across staff

Top tip:

- Test staff readiness: can a classroom teacher explain how they support disadvantaged pupils daily?

6. Effective implementation and monitoring (with staff training and support)

Leadership actions:

- Train staff in evidence-based strategies (feedback, scaffolding, retrieval, metacognition)
- Monitor implementation through learning walks, book looks, and pupil voice
- Provide coaching or mentoring where gaps are identified

Evidence file:

- CPD records linked to PP priorities
- Monitoring notes showing follow-up actions
- Examples of adjustments following evaluation

Top tip:

- Keep an implementation log (who trained, what strategies adopted, what was checked, what changed, what impact)

7. Timely and effective adaptations

Leadership actions:

- Track data frequently enough to spot lack of progress early
- Adjust interventions quickly (e.g. move from group tutoring to 1:1 if needed)
- Respond to contextual shifts (e.g. local economic hardship, rise in attendance issues)

Evidence file:

- Records showing mid-year changes to provision
- Case studies of pupils whose support was adapted promptly

Top tip:

- Have at least two examples ready of interventions that were changed because they weren't working

8. Positive impact on pupils' learning

Leadership actions:

- Measure both academic and non-academic outcomes (progress, attendance, engagement, wellbeing)
- Track long-term impact, not just short-term test results
- Showcase success stories, alongside quantitative data

Evidence file:

- Progress/attainment gap trends closing over time
- Attendance improving for disadvantaged pupils
- Pupil/parent voice reflecting positive changes

Top tip:

- Prepare a set of 3–4 anonymised case studies showing clear impact

You might find the following action plan useful when preparing the above:

Focus area	Actions	Evidence	RAG	Next steps
Understanding Needs	Analyse barriers (academic, attendance, behaviour, family context).	Pupil profiles, disadvantaged dashboard, case studies.		
Use of High-Quality Research	Base interventions on EEF Toolkit, DfE guidance, peer-reviewed evidence.	Strategy references research, rationale for chosen approaches.		
Regular Review (PP & EYPP)	Conduct termly reviews, publish annual impact report, adjust strategies.	Review notes, updated PP strategy, EYFS progress data.		
Alignment with School Improvement Priorities	Integrate disadvantaged focus into SIP, curriculum, behaviour, attendance.	SIP cross-references, department plans, governor oversight.		

Clarity of Staff Roles	Share PP strategy widely, set clear staff responsibilities, link to performance management.	Staff articulate their role, CPD logs, job descriptions.		
Implementation & Monitoring	Provide CPD, monitor teaching, coach/mentor staff where needed.	CPD records, lesson monitoring notes, pupil voice evidence.		
Timely Adaptations	Identify issues quickly, adapt interventions promptly, respond to local context.	Records of mid-year changes, case studies of adaptations.		
Positive Impact on Learning	Track academic + non-academic outcomes, gather pupil/parent voice.	Attainment gap trends, attendance data, success stories.		

A deeper dive into pupils with SEND

In gathering evidence about supporting pupils with SEND, inspectors will consider the extent to which:

- a qualified SENDCo is empowered, through their leadership status within the school, to lead whole-school improvement for pupils with SEND
- the published SEN information report, as required by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014 and section 69 of the Children and Families Act 2014, is easily accessible and accurately describes the school's provision and support for pupils with SEND
- leaders identify pupils' emerging or changing needs quickly and accurately, make sure support is effective and draw on any specialist advice when necessary
- leaders use the 'graduated approach' (a continuous cycle of 'assess, plan, do and review') which helps to ensure that pupils receive an appropriate level of support and meets pupils' needs, and staff receive suitable training and support to implement it
- leaders make sure their work improves the progress and achievement of pupils with SEND and they do not lower their expectations of them
- leaders are committed to their role in the local area partnership's strategy to improve the experiences of, and outcomes for, pupils with SEND; they promote the local offer and help pupils with SEND, and their families, to find out what support is available and how to access it
- leaders meet the needs of pupils with SEND, and adapt the environment, teaching and the school's wider offer in ways that support them to access education

- leaders monitor the progress of pupils with SEND, and review adaptations and support systematically, making any necessary changes to improve their learning and/or wellbeing
- leaders support successful transitions for pupils with SEND, whether that is into or within the school or on to other settings or adulthood

Here's a useful checklist of actions to take:

1. Empowered SENDCo with leadership status

Leadership actions:

- Ensure SENDCo sits on SLT or has direct line to HT/governors
- Protect time for strategic leadership

Evidence file:

- Leadership chart
- SENDCo role description
- Minutes from strategic meetings

Top tip:

- Be ready for inspectors to meet the SENDCo and ask how they influence whole-school improvement — rehearse key messages.

2. Published SEN Information Report

Leadership actions:

- Update annually
- Ensure accessibility (clear language, translations if needed, easy website navigation)

Evidence file:

- Compliant website
- Parental feedback
- Examples of families using report

Top tip:

- Do a mock parent journey — can a parent find the report within two clicks and understand it?

3. Early and accurate identification of needs

Leadership actions:

- Clear referral systems
- Staff trained to notice early signs
- Prompt use of external specialists

Evidence file:

- Referral logs
- CPD records
- Case studies of early support

Top tip:

- Keep a sample of anonymised case studies showing how early identification changed a child's trajectory.

4. Graduated approach ('assess, plan, do, review')

Leadership actions:

- Embed cycle across all teachers, not just SEND team
- Provide staff templates
- Monitor impact of reviews

Evidence file:

- Individual support plans
- Staff training logs
- Evidence of review-led changes

Top tip:

- Inspectors may ask teachers to describe the cycle — check that all staff can explain it in plain terms.

5. High expectations for pupils with SEND

Leadership actions:

- Ensure SEND pupils access full curriculum
- Challenge deficit thinking, track ambitious targets

Evidence file:

- Curriculum maps
- Attainment/progress data
- Pupil voice on challenge

Top tip:

- Have an example of a SEND pupil achieving highly in mainstream curriculum — inspectors like real-life stories.

6. Contribution to local area SEND strategy

Leadership actions:

- Actively engage in LA forums
- Share practice
- Signpost families to local offer

Evidence file:

- Records of LA meetings
- Newsletters signposting local offer
- Joint projects

Top tip:

- Keep a file of communications where the school has promoted the local offer (letters, website, workshops).

7. Meeting needs through environment, teaching, and wider offer

Leadership actions:

- Audit accessibility
- Adapt teaching/resources
- Ensure equitable access to enrichment

Evidence file:

- Accessibility audits
- Lesson observations
- Participation logs

Top tip:

- Be able to show inspectors how SEND pupils access trips, clubs, or leadership roles — don't let enrichment evidence slip.

8. Monitoring progress and reviewing adaptations

Leadership actions:

- Track SEND progress
- Hold review meetings
- Adjust support rapidly when needed

Evidence file:

- Data dashboards
- Review records
- Evidence of changed provision

Top tip:

- Have 2–3 ready examples of where provision was changed mid-year due to monitoring outcomes.

9. Supporting successful transitions

Leadership actions:

- Create clear transition pathways
- Personalise support (social stories, keyworker visits)
- Engage parents early

Evidence file:

- Transition timetables
- Feedback from families
- Follow-up reports post-transition

Top tip:

- Keep a transition case study for each phase (EYFS entry, KS2→KS3, post-16/19) to show consistency across ages.

You might find the following action plan useful when preparing the above:

Focus area	Actions	Evidence	RAG	Next steps
Empowered SENDCo with leadership status	Ensure SENDCo sits on SLT/has direct line to HT/governors; protect SENDCo's strategic time.	Leadership chart, SENDCo role description, SLT minutes.		
Published SEN Information Report	Update annually, ensure clarity and accessibility, make easy to find.	Website report, parental feedback, examples of usage.		
Early and accurate identification	Clear referral systems, staff training, quick use of specialists.	Referral logs, CPD records, case studies.		
Graduated approach ('assess, plan, do, review')	Embed cycle across all staff, provide templates, monitor effectiveness.	Individual plans, review records, CPD logs.		

High expectations for pupils with SEND	Ensure curriculum breadth, challenge deficit thinking, track ambitious targets.	Curriculum maps, attainment data, pupil voice.		
Contribution to local area SEND strategy	Engage in LA forums, share practice, promote local offer.	Partnership meeting notes, newsletters, website links.		
Meeting needs via environment, teaching, wider offer	Audit accessibility, adapt teaching/resources, ensure enrichment access.	Accessibility audits, lesson observations, enrichment participation.		
Monitoring progress & reviewing adaptations	Track SEND progress, termly reviews, adjust support swiftly.	Progress dashboards, review records, provision change notes.		
Supporting successful transitions	Create clear pathways, personalise support, engage parents early.	Transition timetables, feedback, follow-up reports.		

A deeper dive into pupils known to children's social care

In gathering evidence about supporting pupils who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, inspectors will consider the extent to which:

- the designated teacher for looked-after and previously looked-after children is appropriately qualified and experienced
- each looked-after child has a personal education plan and receives high-quality support to improve their learning and/or wellbeing
- the designated safeguarding lead and other leaders use their knowledge of a pupil's social care status to inform decisions about promoting their welfare, such as providing additional academic support, supporting their wellbeing or reducing barriers to attendance
- leaders share information effectively with the local authority, and support the authority to complete statutory assessments in relation to pupils' social care needs
- leaders work well with social workers, virtual school headteachers and other professionals to plan and provide multi-agency support for pupils who are known (or previously known) to children's social care

Here's a useful checklist of actions to take:

1. Qualified and experienced Designated Teacher (DT) for LAC/PLAC

Leadership actions:

- Appoint a Designated Teacher who has appropriate training and status
- Provide time and authority for the DT to lead and influence practice across the school
- Ensure governors are aware of statutory DT responsibilities

Evidence file:

- DT training records and qualifications
- Role description and evidence of contribution to leadership decisions
- Minutes of meetings where DT updates governors/SLT

Top tip:

- Be ready to explain how the DT champions LAC/PLAC across the school, not just administratively

2. Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and high-quality support

Leadership actions:

- Ensure every LAC has an up-to-date, high-quality PEP, co-produced with carers, social workers, and the child
- Monitor PEP targets closely, linking them to academic progress and wellbeing
- Provide interventions tailored to individual needs

Evidence file:

- Current PEPs and quality assurance records
- Progress tracking showing impact of support
- Case studies of improved outcomes from targeted provision

Top tip:

- Have a few anonymised PEPs ready to demonstrate quality and review processes

3. Using social care knowledge to support welfare

Leadership actions:

- Ensure DSL and DT share relevant social care information appropriately with staff who need it
- Use this information to inform academic, pastoral, and attendance support
- Provide flexible strategies to reduce barriers (e.g. catch-up tuition, mentoring, attendance plans)

Evidence file:

- Records of attendance, interventions, and support linked to social care knowledge
- Safeguarding records showing decision-making processes
- Staff briefings on how needs are considered in practice

Top tip:

- Be able to show inspectors examples where social care knowledge directly shaped provision

4. Sharing information with the Local Authority (LA)

Leadership actions:

- Establish clear protocols for information-sharing with LA
- Contribute to statutory assessments promptly
- Keep accurate, timely records of communication and support

Evidence file:

- Records of statutory assessment contributions
- Correspondence logs with LA
- Case examples of effective collaboration

Top tip:

- Keep a portfolio of evidence of timely responses to LA requests

5. Multi-agency working

Leadership actions:

- Work closely with social workers, Virtual School Headteachers, CAMHS, and other professionals
- Hold regular multi-agency meetings to coordinate support
- Ensure actions agreed are followed up and reviewed

Evidence file:

- Minutes from multi-agency meetings
- Joint plans showing agreed interventions
- Feedback from professionals on collaborative working

Top tip:

- Prepare one or two examples where multi-agency working improved a child's outcomes

You might find the following action plan useful when preparing the above:

Focus area	Actions	Evidence	RAG	Next steps
Qualified Designated Teacher	Appoint an experienced DT; ensure leadership status and time to lead.	DT qualifications, role description, SLT/governor minutes.		
Personal Education Plans (PEPs)	Ensure all LAC have high-quality PEPs, regularly reviewed and linked to outcomes.	Up-to-date PEPs, progress data, case studies.		

Using social care knowledge	DSL/DT use information to inform welfare, attendance, and academic support.	Safeguarding/attendance records, staff briefings, intervention logs.		
Sharing information with LA	Clear systems for timely information-sharing and statutory contributions.	Records of LA communications, statutory assessment contributions.		
Multi-agency working	Regular collaboration with social workers, VSH, and other professionals.	Meeting minutes, joint plans, professional feedback.		

A checklist for ‘inclusion’

Ofsted say that schools will have met the ‘expected standard’ when all of these features apply:

- Leaders identify pupils’ needs quickly and accurately, including any emerging or changing needs. This includes the needs of disadvantaged pupils, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children’s social care, and those who may face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being.
- Leaders have high expectations for these pupils. Typically, the support they provide (following specialist advice if needed) reduces barriers to their learning and/or wellbeing.
- Leaders take a graduated approach, which means pupils’ needs are generally met. Staff receive suitable training and support to implement this approach.
- Leaders have a secure understanding of these pupils’ needs and the progress they make. They use appropriate evidence to inform their pupil premium strategy, including when selecting approaches to take. The strategy and approaches are generally understood and implemented by staff
- The qualified SENDCo has sufficient authority within the leadership structure to make a positive difference for pupils with SEND.
- Leaders are committed to, and understand, their role in the local area partnership’s strategy to improve the experiences of, and outcomes for, pupils with SEND. Where appropriate, they ensure that local partnership strategies have a positive impact on pupils at the school.
- Leaders support pupils who are known (or previously known) to children’s social care, including looked-after and previously looked-after children, well. Staff work effectively, including with the virtual school, so that pupils’ personal education plans generally improve their learning opportunities and experiences.

- Alternative provision is commissioned appropriately and is used in pupils' best interests. Leaders take responsibility for the education and welfare of pupils who are placed in it.

Here's an action plan to help you self-evaluate your current position against these standards and plans your next steps... the first version is pre-populated as an example; the second is a blank template for you to use:

Example:

Focus area	Strengths	Evidence	Areas for development	Actions	Success criteria
Identifying Pupils' Needs	Clear referral systems; early screening; staff confident in raising concerns.	Case studies showing timely interventions; pupil progress data; staff/pupil/parent feedback.	Ensure consistency in identification across all year groups and subjects.	Whole-school CPD on early identification; improved data dashboards tracking vulnerable groups.	Needs identified within half a term of emerging; fewer missed or delayed referrals; positive inspection feedback on consistency.
High Expectations & Effective Support	Leaders promote ambitious targets; interventions linked to reducing barriers.	Monitoring of pupil progress; lesson observations showing challenge for all; pupil voice.	Ensure interventions consistently link back to long-term outcomes, not just short-term fixes.	Staff training on adaptive teaching; monitoring of intervention impact through termly reviews.	Disadvantaged /SEND/social care pupils make progress in line with peers nationally; interventions show measurable long-term impact.
Graduated Approach (Assess–Plan–Do–Review)	Cycle embedded in SEND support plans; reviewed regularly.	Documentation of reviews; evidence of adaptations after reviews; staff confident in explaining process.	Ensure consistency of graduated approach beyond SEND (e.g., disadvantaged, attendance, SEMH).	Standard templates for all support plans; cross-staff training on graduated approach.	All pupils with additional needs have reviewed plans showing impact; teachers articulate graduated approach confidently.

Secure Understanding & Pupil Premium Strategy	Leaders analyse barriers; PP strategy evidence-informed and linked to SIP priorities.	PP strategy published/aligned with EEF research; governors understand rationale; impact evaluations completed.	Ensure all staff understand and implement pupil premium strategies consistently.	CPD and regular briefings on PP strategy; link appraisal objectives to delivery.	All staff articulate their role in PP delivery; PP pupils show improved outcomes in attainment, attendance, and wellbeing.
SENDCo Leadership & Authority	SENDCo sits on SLT; contributes to strategic decisions.	SENDCo leads CPD; SLT/governor minutes; influence on curriculum adaptations.	Further empower SENDCo to challenge subject leaders and monitor provision in classrooms.	Schedule SENDCo learning walks and deep dives with curriculum leaders.	Subject leaders demonstrate accountability for SEND progress; inspection evidence shows SENDCo's influence.
Local Area Partnership Strategy (SEND)	Leaders engage with local SEND forums; signpost local offer to families.	Records of partnership meetings; communications to families.	More systematic evaluation of how partnership engagement impacts pupils in our school.	Track outcomes of pupils referred to local services; include in termly SEND reports to governors.	Measurable positive outcomes from local partnership work (e.g., reduced exclusions, improved progress).
Support for Pupils Known to Social Care	DT/DSL work closely with social workers and Virtual School; PEPs in place and reviewed.	High-quality PEPs; evidence of multi-agency meetings; attendance/progress monitoring.	Ensure PEP targets are consistently linked to academic and wellbeing outcomes.	Quality assurance of PEPs; joint training with Virtual School.	Pupils with PEPs demonstrate improved attainment, attendance, and engagement.
Alternative Provision	AP placements carefully chosen/monitored; focus on welfare and education.	Due diligence checks; AP attendance/progress reports; reintegration evidence.	Strengthen evaluation of AP's long-term impact on pupils' outcomes.	Termly review meetings with AP providers; systematic parent/pupil feedback.	AP pupils make positive progress and transitions; AP decisions praised by inspectors as 'in pupils' best interests'.

Template:

Focus area	Strengths	Evidence	Areas for development	Actions	Success criteria
Identifying Pupils' Needs					
High Expectations & Effective Support					
Graduated Approach (Assess–Plan–Do–Review)					
Secure Understanding & Pupil Premium Strategy					
SENDCo Leadership & Authority					
Local Area Partnership Strategy (SEND)					
Support for Pupils Known to Social Care					
Alternative Provision					

Chapter 20: The secret of school improvement

School improvement is a journey, not a destination. Education systems constantly cycle through initiatives and mandates, each new policy promising transformative change. And yet, the truth is, lasting improvement rarely comes from a single policy, a flashy programme, or a tick-box inspection framework. Rather, it comes from the quiet, deliberate work of creating a culture where learning thrives – for pupils and staff alike.

Understanding school improvement

Improvement versus change

First, it's important to differentiate between change and improvement. Change can be superficial; improvement is sustainable. A school may implement a new literacy programme, switch assessment systems, or install a new MIS – but if these changes do not alter the learning culture, and with it improve outcomes, they will not deliver enduring impact. Improvement is about consistently enhancing the experiences of pupils and educators, cultivating a climate where excellence becomes habitual rather than episodic.

The power of small wins

Effective school improvement often hinges on small, manageable victories. These wins, when celebrated and built upon, create momentum. This isn't about chasing recognition or performance tables; it's about creating confidence amongst staff and pupils that progress is possible. A few well-chosen, achievable changes in teaching practice can ripple outward, reshaping culture and expectations over time.

Culture: The heartbeat of improvement

Shared beliefs and values

At the heart of every successful school lies a shared set of beliefs about learning. Culture is not imposed; it is nurtured. Staff must believe that every child can learn, that teaching matters, and that improvement is a collective responsibility. When these values are embedded, they guide everyday decisions, from classroom practice to staff development.

Trust as the foundation

Trust is the silent engine of school improvement. Leaders may have vision and strategy, but without trust, initiatives falter. Teachers need to feel safe experimenting, reflecting, and taking risks. Pupils need to feel secure in the learning environment to push boundaries. Trust is built through consistency, transparency, and an unwavering commitment to fairness.

Leadership that inspires

Distributed leadership

No single leader can drive sustained improvement alone. Effective schools cultivate distributed leadership, empowering staff at every level to take ownership of initiatives. This doesn't dilute responsibility; it strengthens it. When teachers lead projects, mentor colleagues, or contribute to decision-making, they invest emotionally in the school's success.

Leading by learning

Leadership in schools is most powerful when leaders model the very mindset they seek to cultivate. Observing leaders engage in professional learning, reflect publicly on their practice, and acknowledge mistakes sets a powerful example. Improvement becomes a shared journey rather than a top-down directive.

Teaching and learning: The core mission

Clarity of purpose

High-performing schools articulate a clear, unambiguous vision for teaching and learning. Everyone – from the newest teaching assistant to the headteacher – must understand what excellent teaching looks like and why it matters. Clarity allows staff to align their efforts, focus on what truly impacts learning, and avoid being distracted by the latest trends that promise quick fixes.

Consistency across classrooms

Consistency does not mean uniformity. Teachers retain professional autonomy, but there must be shared expectations around core pedagogical principles. When pupils move from one classroom to another, they should experience coherent routines, high expectations, and a familiar approach to marking and feedback. Consistency breeds security, reduces cognitive load for pupils, and accelerates progress.

Professional development that works

Embedded, not episodic

Too often, professional development is an isolated workshop, followed by the hope that teachers will magically implement new strategies. The most effective development is embedded, iterative, and context-specific. Coaching, peer observation, and collaborative reflection ensure that new ideas translate into improved practice.

Learning together

Schools that improve cultivate communities of professional learning. Teachers discuss practice, share challenges, and celebrate successes collectively. This collaborative culture transforms professional development from a top-down event into an ongoing, dynamic process that reinforces the school's values and goals.

Data: A tool, not a trap

Using data wisely

Data can illuminate, but it can also obscure. Schools that improve, understand data as a tool to guide thinking, not a hammer to enforce compliance. Assessment should inform teaching, identify gaps, and guide intervention – not reduce pupils to numbers or teachers to metrics.

Encouraging reflective practice

Data works best when paired with reflective practice. Teachers and leaders interrogate evidence critically: “What does this tell us about learning?” rather than “What does this say about performance?” Reflection turns data into actionable insight and reinforces a culture of continuous improvement.

Engaging pupils as partners

Pupil voice matters

Improvement isn’t only about adults. Pupils, when genuinely involved, provide insights that adults cannot see. Schools that listen to pupil voice develop richer curricula, more responsive teaching strategies, and a sense of ownership among pupils.

Cultivating agency

When pupils understand their learning goals, track their progress, and participate in shaping the learning environment, they become partners in improvement. Agency nurtures motivation, resilience, and curiosity – the very qualities that drive enduring success.

The importance of systems

Coherent structures

Strong schools are not chaotic; they are organized systems of interlocking routines and practices. Systems do not replace professional judgment; they support it. From behaviour management to lesson planning, systems ensure clarity, fairness, and efficiency, allowing teachers to focus on what matters most: teaching and learning.

Continuous review

No system is perfect. Schools that improve regularly review and refine structures based on evidence and feedback. Flexibility, combined with consistent expectations, allows schools to evolve while maintaining stability.

Community and parental engagement

Building partnerships

Improvement extends beyond the school gates. Parents, carers, and the wider community contribute to the learning ecosystem. Schools that engage families as partners see stronger attendance, better behaviour, and higher achievement.

Communicating with purpose

Communication should be transparent, frequent, and meaningful. When parents understand the school's priorities, they can reinforce learning at home and support improvement initiatives, creating a virtuous cycle of collaboration.

Resilience in the face of setbacks

Learning from failure

Improvement is rarely linear. Schools encounter setbacks, resistance, and unexpected challenges. The key is resilience – the ability to reflect,

adapt, and persist. Schools that view mistakes as learning opportunities cultivate a culture of growth rather than fear.

Celebrating progress

Amid the challenges, celebrating progress – no matter how small – reinforces morale and motivation. Recognition of effort, commitment, and incremental improvement reminds staff and pupils that their hard work matters.

The ‘secret’ - 3Ps: patience, persistence, and purpose

The “secret” of school improvement is deceptively simple: it is deliberate, patient, and purposeful. It is built on the foundations of trust, culture, and shared vision, and it thrives when leaders, teachers, and pupils collaborate in a sustained journey of learning. There are no shortcuts – just consistent, reflective practice, embedded professional learning, and an unwavering commitment to what truly matters: creating conditions where every pupil can thrive.

Improvement is not about flashy initiatives or rapid transformations; it is about the quiet, unglamorous work of embedding excellence into everyday routines. When schools embrace this, they discover that the true engine of improvement is not policy or technology, but people – committed, reflective, and united in a shared purpose.

Conclusion

School improvement is not a secret to be unlocked overnight. It is a process, a mindset, and a culture. By investing in trust, clarity, consistency, professional learning, and genuine collaboration, schools lay the groundwork for sustainable change. The difference between a school that merely survives and one that thrives lies in these foundations – often unseen, rarely celebrated, but profoundly transformative.

In the end, school improvement is about more than exam results or performance metrics – and it’s certainly about more than putting on a performance for Ofsted! It is about shaping a community where pupils

grow, teachers flourish, and learning becomes an enduring joy. And when that happens, everything else follows.

About the author

Matt Bromley is CEO of *bee* and Chair of the *Building Equity in Education Campaign*. He is an education journalist, author, and advisor with twenty-five years' experience in teaching and leadership including as a secondary school headteacher and academy principal, further education college vice principal, and multi-academy trust director.

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Find out more at [bee-online.uk](https://www.bee-online.uk)

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