

HMCI commentary: Our plans for the autumn

The enormous and desperately sad loss of lives has of course been the most devastating aspect of the coronavirus pandemic. But as we have taken the necessary steps to stop the spread of the virus, there has also been growing concern about the impact on children. The closure of schools to most pupils has not only limited education for millions, but it also makes far too many vulnerable children almost invisible to care services.

I know that teachers and headteachers have been working hard to sustain education through the lockdown. We've seen new ways of working and challenges overcome. The vast majority of schools have remained open – first for key worker and vulnerable children, now for selected year groups.

I've been impressed at the tenacity and resolve of so many school staff, pupils and parents in these uncertain and difficult times. And schools will face a new set of challenges when they open their doors fully in September.

Unequal experiences

Although many children have continued to learn well, and will bounce back straight into their studies, it's a sad fact that children will have had very unequal experiences at home. Not every child will have had a quiet place to work, a supportive adult on hand to help, or access to technology; many will have become demotivated, even with all of these. For some, catching up on lost learning won't be easy. Schools will be thinking hard about how to help the children who need it most, while taking into account the health restrictions, finite resources, staff and space.

But children are resilient, as are schools and teachers. I have every confidence that with clear guidance and careful planning, schools will get pupils where they need to be.

Ofsted's role as schools return

As [schools reopen for all](#), there is an important role for Ofsted. It will be helpful for parents, government and the wider public to get some insight on how schools and other providers are bringing children back into formal education after such a long time away. That's part and parcel of how we recover and set children back on the right path.

In gathering that insight, we need to meet schools where they are, and also to play our part in the rebuilding of education. So our routine inspections will remain suspended for the autumn term, with a plan to resume in January. In the autumn term, Ofsted will be carrying out 'visits' to schools and colleges, not inspections. Our visits will look at how schools and colleges are getting pupils back up to speed after so long at home. And we will help

them through collaborative conversations, without passing judgement – this isn't inspection by stealth. We'll use our visits to listen to school leaders' experiences and plans, and to provide constructive challenge.

The visits will not be graded. We'll publish the outcomes of our discussions with leaders in a short letter so that parents can understand what steps are being taken to help children back into full-time education. And we will use what we learn from our visits to report on the picture across England.

The visits will be piloted with volunteer schools and colleges from September, with the full programme starting from October. We'll be having further conversations with unions and others about how the visits will operate and we'll publish more details as appropriate; but I would stress again that this is about a constructive conversation – we're not trying to catch schools out. After all, we share the same aim: helping this generation of children and young people make up for lost time and get the high-quality education they deserve.

Our regulatory work

Of course, our work covers more than just schools and colleges. Our vital regulatory work in children's social care and early years has continued throughout lockdown, even though regular inspections have been suspended. We have worked to make sure that standards are being maintained and that there is well-run, safe and effective social care and childcare available for all who need it.

Going into the autumn, we will be making visits to a range of providers, and these will be designed to reflect the work those providers do and our regulatory role. Visits will be made to nurseries and childminders to monitor progress and regulatory standards, particularly looking at those where we have concerns, but including a wider sample. We will also be visiting local authorities and children's social care providers, including children's homes, to check on the experience and progress of children needing protection or care. These visits will not be graded, but if we have serious concerns, we will use our enforcement powers.

As in everything we do, we will be acting in the best interests of children – whether that's helping to improve their education, or keeping them safe from harm. Life may not return fully to normal yet, but a full return to school in September offers universal benefits to every child. And as education gets back on its feet, Ofsted will play its part.