

FDA UNION REPORT

Beyond the Framework:

*The people
behind inspections*



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FOREWORD



At the FDA, we are proud to represent His Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) — dedicated professionals who play a vital role in safeguarding the quality of education. This report shines a light on the reality of their work: a profession driven by integrity, expertise, and a deep commitment to children’s futures.

The findings here are both sobering and hopeful. On the one hand, we see overwhelming evidence that parents and educators value the role of Ofsted inspections. An impressive 73% of parents think Ofsted reports are important when choosing which school to send their child to, and 74% of teachers in England believe their most recent inspection was accurate. These figures affirm the importance of independent, high-quality school inspections in building trust and transparency in our education system.

But behind these numbers lies a workforce under immense pressure. A staggering 98% of HMI report working beyond their contracted hours, with three out of five working more than 10 additional hours each week and the majority exceeding legal weekly limits. Nearly 90% say this is harming their wellbeing, and many feel unsupported by the very organisation they serve. These are not just statistics — they are warning signs.

If we want inspections to be meaningful, fair, and trusted, we must ensure that those delivering them are respected, supported, and heard. That means recognising the human cost of current workloads, the impact burnout will have on the organisation’s ability to deliver and reforming the system to prioritise quality over quantity. It also means listening to educators, who overwhelmingly want inspections to be more personal, more humane, and more focused on helping schools improve.

This report is not a call to dismantle Ofsted, quite the contrary — it is a call to strengthen it by valuing and supporting the people who make it work. The FDA stands firmly on the side of parents and children, advocating for an inspection system that is both rigorous and compassionate. We believe that by improving the working lives of HMI, we can enhance the quality of inspections, rebuild trust across the sector, and ultimately deliver better outcomes for every child.

We urge Ofsted and the Department for Education to take these findings seriously and to work with us to implement the recommendations set out in this report. Together, we can build an inspection system that is fit for the future — one that respects its workforce, supports educators, and serves the best interests of children and their families across the UK.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Dave Penman'.

Dave Penman, General Secretary, FDA Union

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

73%

of parents believe that Ofsted reports are important to them when choosing which school to send their child to

Many of the recent headlines regarding Ofsted school inspections focus on the stress of inspections and the sharpness of judgements. They conflate the system with the people delivering it, erasing the professionalism, humanity, and integrity of His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) doing the work. And yet, despite this narrative, an independent YouGov poll of UK parents with children aged under 18 shows that **73% of parents believe that Ofsted reports are important to them when choosing which school to send their child to. Furthermore, 83% of parents agree with the principle that school performance should be independently reviewed and made available to the public.**

These figures reflect a general public that still sees inspections as critical for their children's futures and represent a strong desire from parents for an independent regulator staffed by credible and respected individuals. And these positive sentiments regarding inspections continue across the sector, with an independent YouGov poll of educators from across England showing that **74% of teachers believe that the most recent Ofsted inspection at their school was accurate.**

There have been calls from some quarters for the total abolition of Ofsted, but the findings included within this report suggest that these statements are coming from a loud minority as opposed to a majority. HMI have an important role in ensuring that children receive the best possible education and this is, in general, recognised by parents and the sector.

We acknowledge that reform is needed, and HMI will never be blockers to implementing changes that benefit both the education of children and the experience of educators. However, the success of any reform will be reliant on HMI, and they are overworked and overstretched. Our research tells us that **98% of HMI have worked more than their contracted hours across the past six months.**

There are a number of long-standing issues impacting the lives of HMI. Recognising and addressing them are vital for the success of the new framework introduced by Ofsted and will ultimately enhance the education of children across the UK.

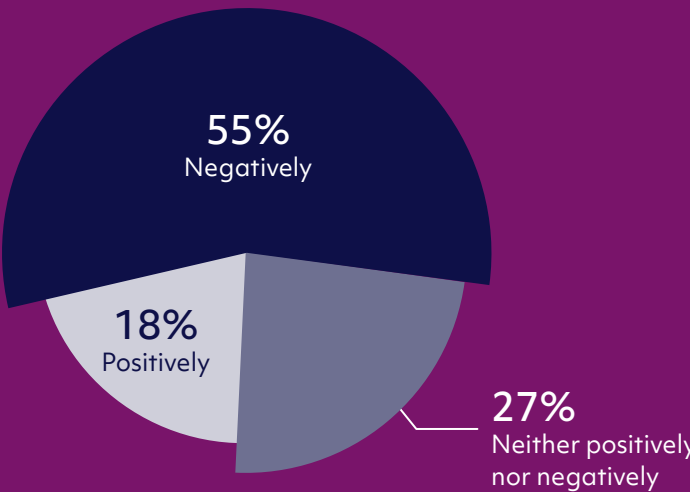
SECTION ONE: PURPOSE

“When I entered teaching, my principle aim was making a difference to kids and with this job, I think you absolutely can [make a difference].”
– an anonymous HMI

It is likely that most people who have been on social media or read a paper in the last few years will have seen Ofsted come under scrutiny. There have even been numerous calls for Ofsted to be scrapped altogether.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that our HMI survey reveals **55% of HMI believe that educators perceive them ‘negatively’**. In total, **only 18% of HMI believe educators perceive them ‘positively’**.

How do you feel educators perceive HMI?

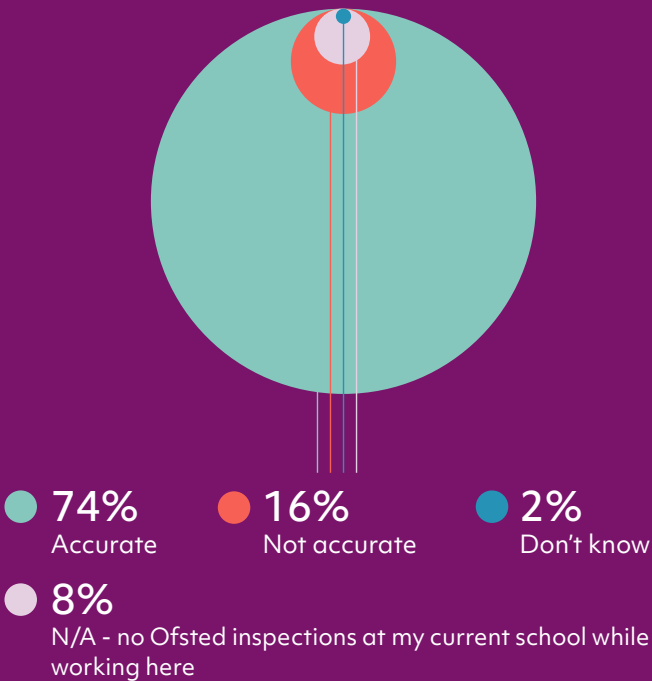


Percentage figures rounded to the closest 1.0. HMI survey.

These feelings are justified given the swathe of negative stories regarding Ofsted and the people carrying out school-based inspections. But our findings suggest that these feelings could, perhaps, be misplaced. When we asked teachers from across England in a YouGov poll about their experience with HMI, **the majority of teachers (74%) felt inspections were accurate**. A strong endorsement of inspectors’ ability to understand the complexity of school life and make fair, balanced judgements, which speaks to a counter narrative from

the mainstream media about teachers’ attitudes to hardworking and professional HMI.

Thinking about the most recent Ofsted inspection at your current school, in your opinion, how accurate was this at capturing your school’s current standing?



Percentage figures rounded to the closest 1.0. YouGov survey.

This positivity is not limited to the sector. When we asked parents with children 18 years and under from across the UK through a YouGov poll about the role of Ofsted, the response was clear: **73% of parents believe Ofsted has an important role to play in education and that Ofsted reports are important when choosing which school to send their children to. Building on this understanding, our research further tells us that 83% of parents believe that school performance should be independently reviewed and made publicly available.**



“I’ve never had a negative experience with an Ofsted inspector where they have not been fair or supportive with their challenge.”
– an anonymous educator

How important, if at all, are Ofsted reports to you when choosing which school to send your child to?

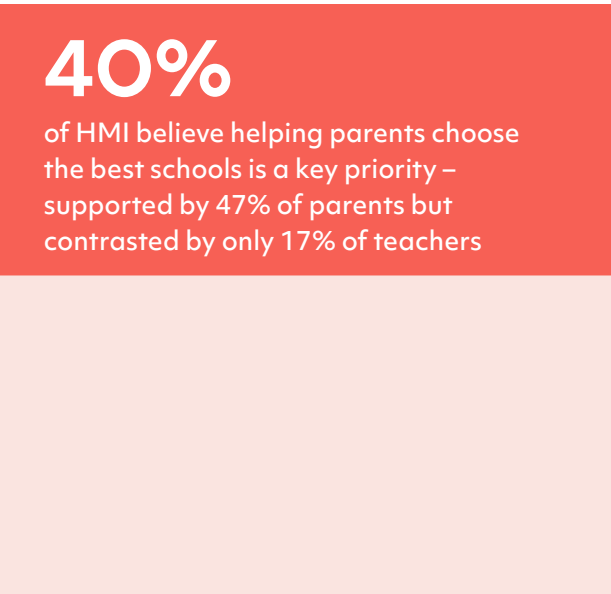


Percentage figures rounded to the closest 1.0. YouGov survey.

We now have quantifiable evidence that shows that both the public and the wider sector do not, in general, agree with the negative narrative surrounding HMI. This is an important reminder for HMI that they are valued by the public, that their work is delivered accurately, and it helps parents to make vital decisions on the future of their children’s lives.

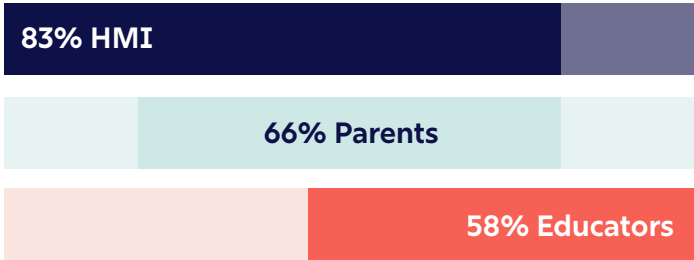
Parents and the sector believe that the role of HMI is purposeful. Variance starts to appear when assessing exactly what the purpose of inspections should be.

We asked HMI, teachers in England and parents of children aged under 18 what they believe the main priority of HMI should be, and the results are as follows:

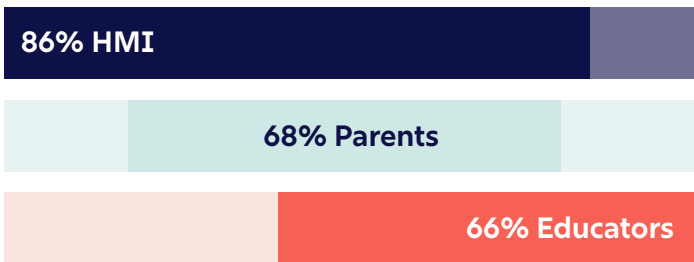


Which, if any, of the following do you think should be the priority for HMI?
(please select all that apply)

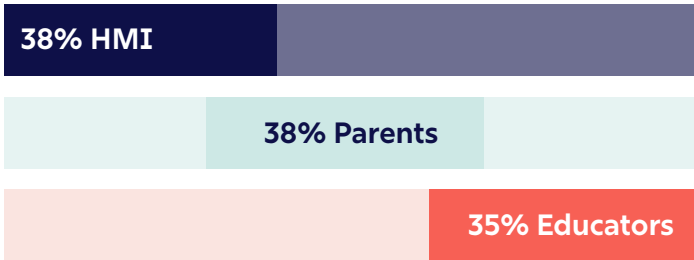
Ensuring a high standard of safeguarding is maintained for all children



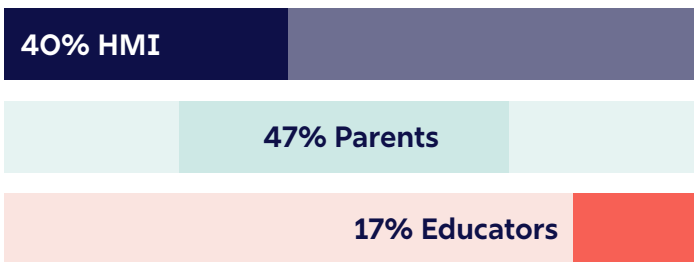
Helping schools to deliver the highest possible educational outcomes for all children



Supporting educators' development



Helping parents have the information they need to choose the best schools for their child(ren)



Percentage figures rounded to the closest 1.0.

The graphs on the previous page illustrate that opinions are somewhat divided on what the top priority for HMI should be. Unsurprisingly, 'helping parents choose the best schools' is the only area where parents place more importance on the role of HMI than educators and inspectors themselves. However, all groups agree that supporting schools to deliver the highest possible educational outcomes for all children is a top priority for HMI.

"Some of the decisions I've been happiest with is when we've spotted some real things that are unsafe for children. We never get to talk about this but when you've been the person to notice something unsafe, call it out and then know that those children are going to be safe, you can leave feeling satisfied about your job. If it wasn't for Ofsted, who else would do that?"
– an anonymous HMI

"[HMI] should capture everything they need in a supportive manner to ensure the schools can strive to be better."
– an anonymous educator

"It's important to know that a school has a great understanding of SEND and are able to offer enough support and provisions for the children."
– an anonymous parent of a SEND student

This shared belief underscores the vital role HMI play in improving outcomes for school-aged children; a responsibility they carry with pride. Interestingly, in general, there is a difference in levels of positivity regarding inspections and HMI when comparing smaller schools and larger schools.

We recognise that there are additional responsibilities that are associated with inspecting larger school settings, and significant logistical pressures on school leaders in supporting a larger inspection team. Because of this, smaller schools benefit from a more personal inspection as the setting allows for inspectors to have more one-on-one interactions with staff, which results in direct, unfiltered communication.

“Teachers want to know whether they are or aren’t doing a good job. So, if we do the inspection humanely, within a time frame that allows us to talk to them rather than rushing through it, surely that will improve what we do.”

– an anonymous HMI

This suggests that a more personable inspection with less time constraints is preferred by educators. These decisions are made at an organisational level and it’s important to note the clear distinction between HMI and Ofsted as an organisation. While HMI are employees of Ofsted, they are not synonymous with organisational policy. They are professionals trying to improve the lives of children and conduct inspections as supportively and personably as the constraints of the current framework allows for. The success of any changes to the framework will be dependent on the hard work, dedication and rigorous implementation of processes by HMI.

“[My top priority is] making sure all children get the best possible education.”

– an anonymous HMI



SECTION TWO: PROCESS

“I’ve never come across an inspector who’s not wanted the best for the school and the best for the leaders.”

– an anonymous educator

Testimonies such as the one above prove that educators regularly have positive experiences with HMI. Despite some fairly widespread criticism of Ofsted as an organisation, educators often recognise that HMI take pride in their work:

“I think the inspectors took the time to listen to me and understand the narrative around the school. They were clear on what they would like to see and why.” – an anonymous educator

“I found our lead inspector to be very positive, warm and clearly willing to listen.” – an anonymous educator

These declarations help demonstrate that the idea that HMI are viewed negatively by most is not wholly accurate. In fact, many educators find the inspection process more supportive and personable than they expected. HMI remain committed to carrying out inspections in a consistent, thorough and supportive way, which is impressive considering the challenging working conditions that they must contend with.

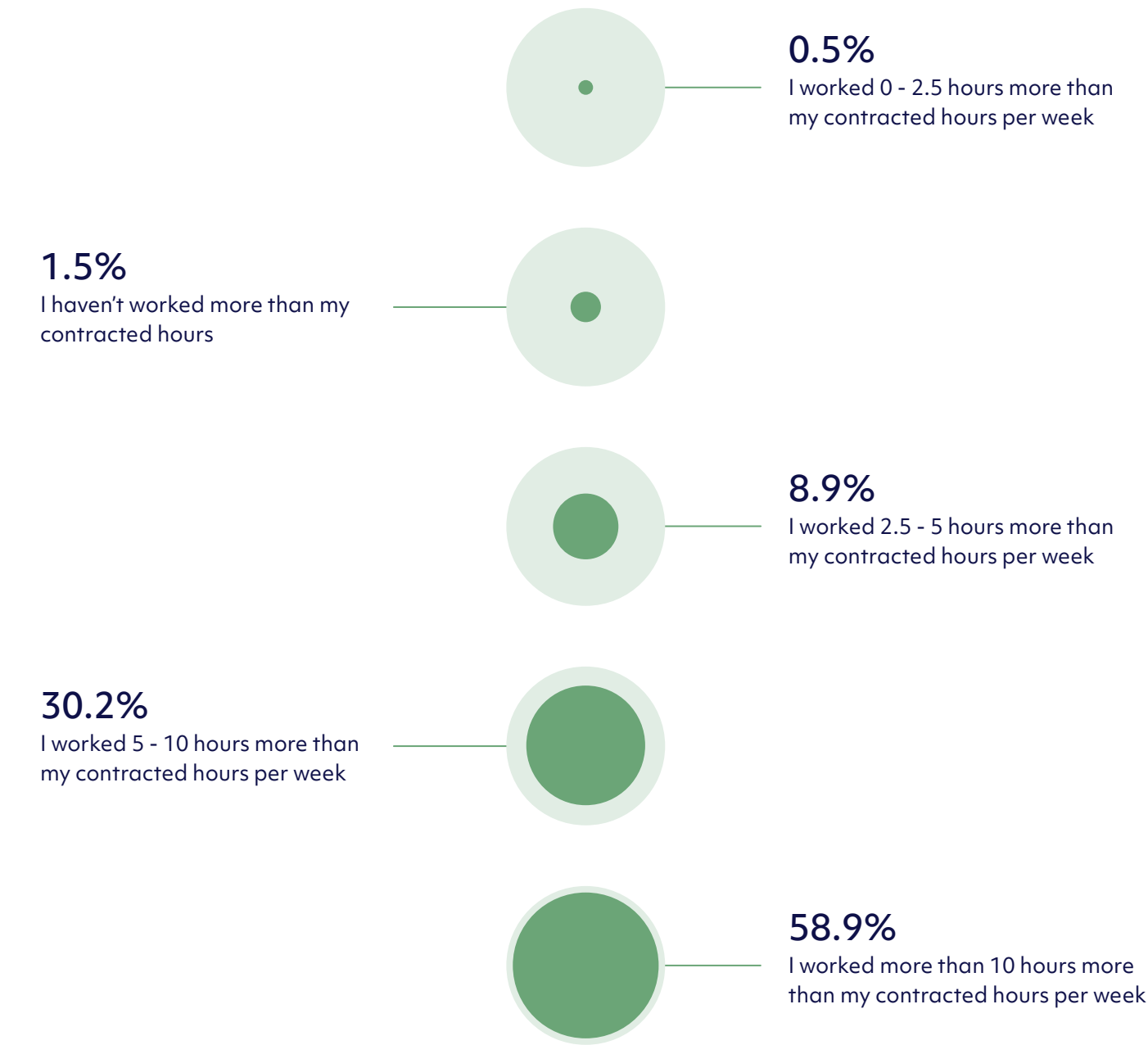
We know that, often, by the time an inspection is completed, HMI have already fulfilled their contracted working hours for the week. They are then expected to write well-considered reports, attend meetings and training sessions and complete a range of other administrative and quality assurance tasks.

It will come as little surprise that we can now definitively state that **98% of HMI have worked more than their contracted hours across the past six months**. And it’s not just a couple of extra hours per week that HMI are working; **the majority of HMI (59%) are working more than 10 hours above their contracted hours per week**. This means that most HMI are working at least 55 hours per week, significantly more than the law set out in The Working Time Regulations in 1998, which states workers must not work more than 48 hours per week on average.

All data and graphs included within this section from HMI survey



Over the past six months, how many hours over your contracted hours did you work on average per week?



Percentage figures rounded to the closest 0.1.

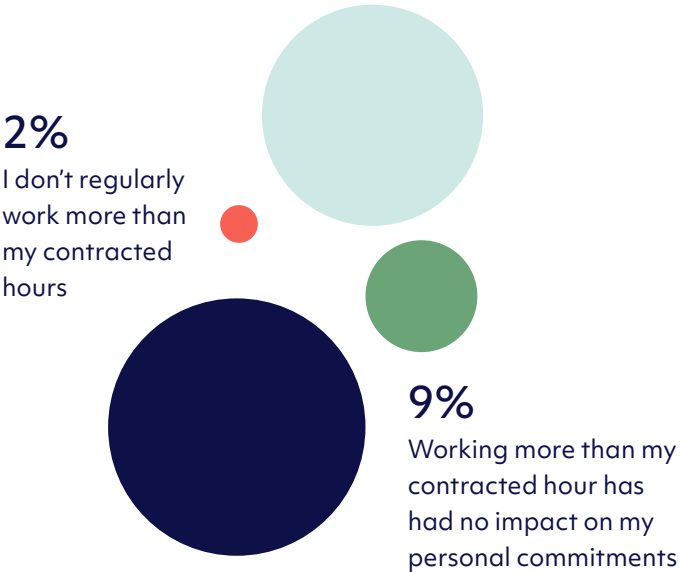
“Do I feel valued? If you had asked this at the end of last year, I’d have been way more positive than I am now. No is probably the answer, which is really sad.” – an anonymous HMI

These sentiments echo the findings included within Dame Christine Gilbert’s 2024 ‘Independent Learning Review for Ofsted’, in which the phrase ‘volume trumps quality’ was heard multiple times during research calls with HMI. Dame Christine Gilbert’s review recommended that Ofsted advises the Department for Education (DfE) and government of the dangers of over working HMI and chasing volume at the expense of inspection quality; words we wholeheartedly agree with, especially given the knock-on effect to the overall quality of life of HMI.

The vast majority of HMI claim that working such long hours is impacting their personal lives, with **89% of HMI regularly having to rearrange or cancel personal commitments due to working more than their contracted hours**. This is exacerbated by **89% of HMI stating that working more than their contracted hours ‘significantly’ negatively impacts their wellbeing**. The very people who are tasked with instilling peace of mind within parents and carers about the quality of their child’s schools are having their personal lives impacted by institutionalised poor working conditions.

If you regularly work more than your contracted hours, how has this impacted your personal commitments?

42%
Working more than my contracted hours means I sometimes rearrange or cancel personal commitments



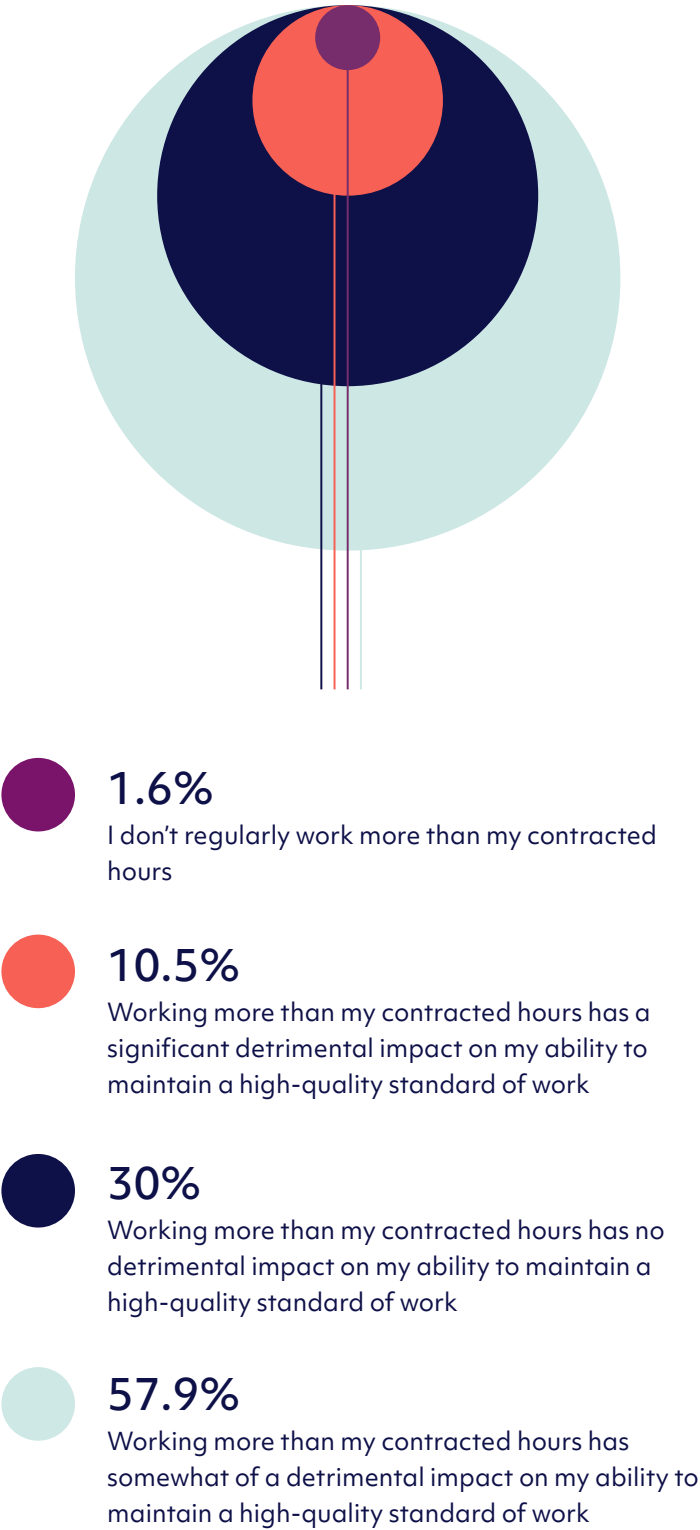
47%
Working more than my contracted hours means I often rearrange or cancel personal commitments

Percentage figures rounded to the closest 1.0.

In any workplace, an issue that is impacting the wellbeing of 89% of the staff must be addressed by the employer – but it’s not just the personal lives of HMI that are being impacted. **69% of HMI believe that working more than their contracted hours has an impact on the quality of their work**. Ofsted has a real opportunity to improve the quality of inspections and therefore, the quality of education, by addressing the issue of working hours for HMI at the same time as reforming the inspection framework.

If you regularly work more than your contracted hours, how has this impacted the quality of your work as an HMI?

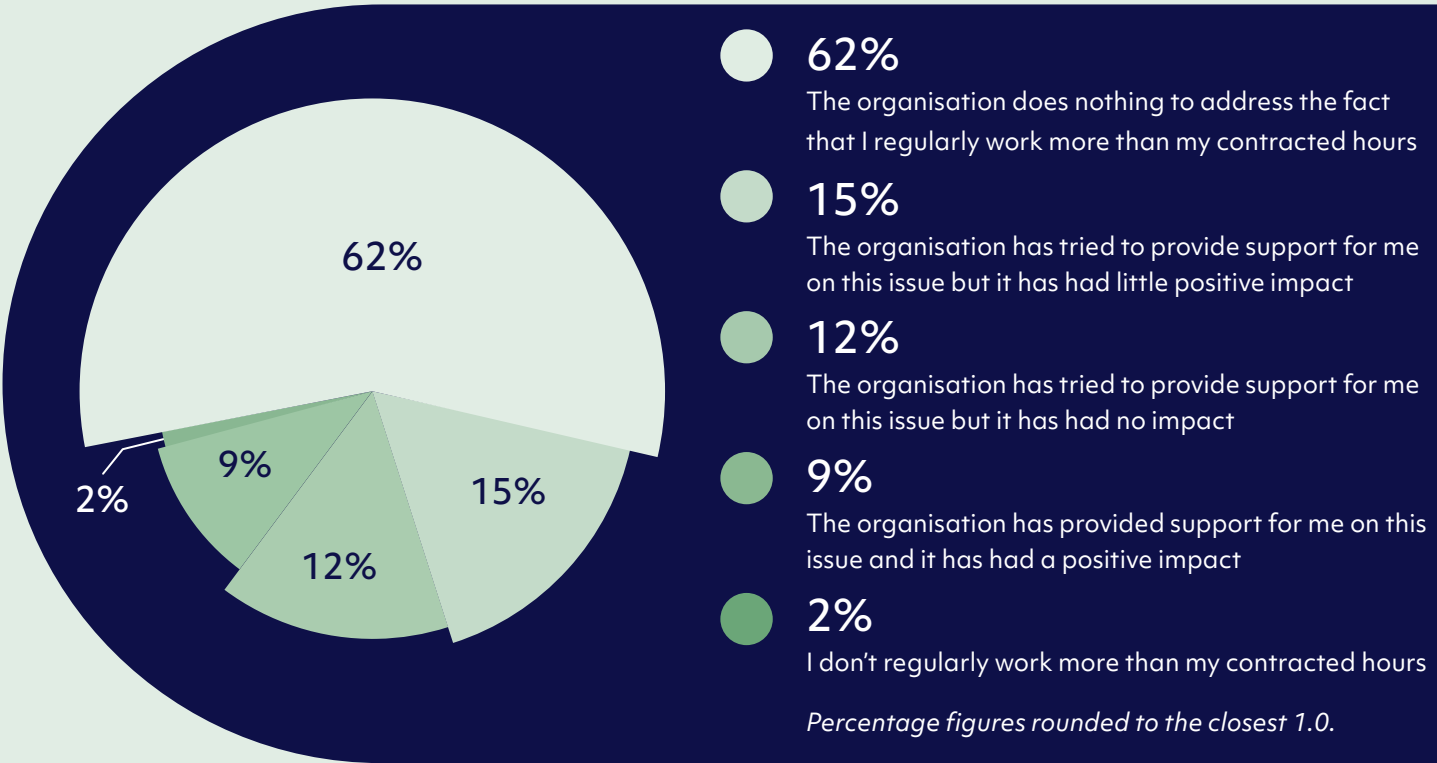
Percentage figures rounded to the closest 0.1



“You’re operating on maybe three or four hours sleep, but you can’t get it wrong, because you’re making important decisions and pulling 50,000 words into a judgement.” – an anonymous HMI

This is a widespread issue affecting nearly all HMI, and it’s clear that change is needed at an organisational level. Worryingly, **62% of HMI say the organisation has done nothing to address them regularly working beyond contracted hours. Only 9% feel they’ve received any meaningful support**. While most educators believe inspections are accurate and HMI are doing their job well, people can only perform at their best when they feel heard, valued, and supported. Our research suggests that many HMI do not feel this way.

If you regularly work more than your contracted hours, what, if anything, is the organisation doing to support you on this?



“The organisation does not appear to notice or care. There is an embedded culture that this is expected and accepted.” – an anonymous HMI

HMI are committed to their process of delivering an engaged and friendly inspection experience whilst working within the constraints of the inspection framework. This is despite the often challenging working conditions that they operate within. It is our hope that the new inspection framework will have a positive impact on education and Ofsted has an opportunity to enhance the inspection process further by assessing the working conditions of HMI. Implementing genuine changes that will improve the lives of HMI will ultimately increase educational outcomes for school age children.

SECTION THREE: PROGRESS

This report and the data and testimonials included within it prove that HMI are valued and respected by both parents and the sector, and that independent school inspections are considered essential by the majority. HMI are not the designers of inspections, but they are the ones who ensure that they are implemented to the highest and most accurate standards – in service of the public and their children.

As a union that represents civil servants and public sector professionals, we support reforms to the processes by which inspections are carried out. But we must ensure that these reforms carry the confidence of parents and teachers, and HMI have a vital role in ensuring that this is recognised. The success of any reform to the inspection process is reliant upon addressing the resourcing and workload issues highlighted in this report.

We now have quantifiable and qualitative evidence of the challenging working conditions that HMI have to face, week in and week out. Almost all (98%) of HMI work more than their contracted 37 hours per week, and the majority (59%) report workloads exceeding 47 hours per week.

It is not just the hours that are negatively impacting the lives of HMI; it's the intensity of inspections and the additional pressures placed upon them due to frequent travel and overnight stays, and the challenging nature of some intense inspection schedules. We also know that there is sometimes a disparity in complexity of inspection types, particularly between smaller and larger schools. The heightened physical and emotional toll of larger inspections, as well as the extra time that they take to complete and review, are not currently acknowledged in workload planning.



“I love my job and I love being one of His Majesty’s Inspectors

no matter what is happening at an organisational level.”

– an anonymous HMI

RECOMMENDATIONS

By improving the working conditions of HMI, inspection results can be delivered at an even higher level of accuracy which will, ultimately, enhance the lives of children and rebuild trust in the system. Furthermore, by shifting the organisational focus from quantity to quality, Ofsted has an opportunity to ensure the reformed framework is successful and produce better experiences and outcomes for educators. To achieve this and progress towards a future that benefits all, we have made the three following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Ensure the inspection fits the setting

Our research suggests that educators prefer a more personal inspection with one-on-one time with HMI. On more complex inspections, this can be challenging to deliver owing to the volume of activities that are required. Improvements could be made through constructing a system that recognises the varying demands of different inspection types (e.g. size of school, complexity of setting, safeguarding concerns). Ofsted could deliver benefits for educators and protect HMI wellbeing by ensuring that inspection tariffs are sufficiently high and that inspections of significant complexity are not assigned to the same inspector back-to-back.

The goal is not to make all inspections identical, but to make workloads manageable and equitable across different contexts. This would, therefore, mean that each school is able to benefit from more unfiltered communication with the HMI leading their inspections, providing a better experience for teachers, school leaders and HMI.

Recommendation 2: Introduce a fair workload pledge

Ofsted should develop a fair workload pledge that sets maximum weekly hours and minimum rest periods for all HMI. The pledge's compliance should be reviewed quarterly, with breaches reported on publicly.

Inspection reforms cannot succeed off the backs of an already overstretched HMI workforce. The new

framework may place increased demand on Senior HMI and their wellbeing must also be protected throughout. Monitoring workloads in this way will allow Ofsted to identify stress points and direct resources to ensure the high-quality inspection that parents expect is maintained through the introduction of the new framework.

Recommendation 3: Enhance inspector wellbeing and professional development

While this report highlights that parental confidence in HMI remains relatively high, this trust could be strengthened by addressing inspector fatigue and supporting professional growth, both of which are key to maintaining high-quality inspections.

Ofsted should explore more flexible and innovative approaches to workload management, including the use of emerging technologies such as AI to streamline administrative tasks and reduce unnecessary burdens on inspectors. Alongside this, there is a clear opportunity to enhance the training and development offer for HMI. This should be designed in close collaboration with education professionals to ensure it reflects current classroom realities and maintains credibility across the sector.

Regular monitoring of staff wellbeing and professional satisfaction through mechanisms such as annual surveys would help assess the impact of these changes. By investing in both wellbeing and professional development, Ofsted can support inspectors more effectively, improve retention, and reinforce the quality and credibility of inspections.



We believe that these recommendations would significantly improve the lives of HMI, which will enhance the quality of inspections and rebuild trust in Ofsted as an organisation. We hope that Ofsted will consider our suggestions, and we look forward to working together with the organisation in pursuit of enhancing education for all school age children.

Survey data

HMI: Data compiled through an internal survey of FDA Union HMI and Senior HMI members. Survey was conducted in May 2025 and received 191 responses. In the UK, there are approximately 343 working HMI and 88 Senior HMI.

Parents: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1003 UK parents of children aged under 18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 3rd - 8th April 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK parents of children aged under 18 (not adults).

Teachers: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 880 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th - 21st April 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of teachers in England.

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