

**Children's Services and
HFL Education**

**Education Leadership Team
Hertfordshire County Council
& HFL Education
Postal Point CHO 126
Farnham House
Six Hills Way
Stevenage, Herts SG1 2FQ
www.hertfordshire.gov.uk**

Tel: 0300 123 4040
Email: EducationTeam@hertfordshire.gov.uk
Date: 14 May 2026

Dear Governors, Trustees, Parents and Carers,

Re: Understanding new Ofsted report cards and grades

You may be aware that, in the autumn term, Ofsted confirmed significant changes to its School Inspection Framework and the way in which it inspects and reports on a school's quality of education. Routine inspections under this new framework began in January 2026, with the very first 'new look' reports being published in February 2026.

The new 'report cards' look very different from previous reports, combining a visual summary and a more detailed written explanation of each area. Ofsted has published information (including a short video) for parents and carers to outline these changes [Understanding Ofsted report cards and grades - GOV.UK](#)

The main changes are listed below:

- Ofsted no longer gives schools one overall grade such as "outstanding", "good", "requires improvement" or "inadequate". (*This started for those schools inspected from September 2024*)
- Schools receive separate grades for different areas of their work, and these areas are slightly different for the previous inspection framework
- The areas that are inspected and graded are: Inclusion, Curriculum and Teaching, Achievement, Attendance and Behaviour, Personal Development and Wellbeing, Early Years and/or Post-16 Provision, Leadership and Governance.
- The report card details whether safeguarding responsibilities are 'met' or 'not met'.
- There is a new gradings scale and the report card shows colour-coded grades for different areas of the school's work.

- The report card also contains important data about the school that gives some context and background information on the school, alongside the more detailed description of what it is like to be a child or learner at that school.

The new gradings scale:

It is important for all members of a school community to understand the new gradings and what they mean. Ofsted has been clear that the new grades can't be compared to the old ones: for example, 'Exceptional' is not the same as the previous 'Outstanding', 'Strong' is not the same as the previous 'Good' and 'Needs Attention' is not the same as 'Requires Improvement'. This is a different approach to inspection and a new way of reporting.

Ofsted expects most schools will have a mixed profile to reflect that most schools are stronger in some areas than others. (Expected, Strong and Needs Attention are likely to be the gradings used most frequently).

The grades (and colour coding) are outlined below with a brief explanation of each grade:

- Expected (light green):
The 'Expected' Standard is just that. It means the school is doing everything it should be doing. It is a high standard to ensure pupils are receiving everything they need. Therefore, the green colour coding is used here.
- Strong standard' (dark green)
The 'Strong' standard marks out excellent, consistent work that is making a real difference to children and learners
- Needs attention' (amber)
The 'Needs Attention' grade is an indication that there is work to be done to reach the expected standard. Ofsted is clear that this is not a 'fail', but it highlights where issues can be addressed before they become bigger problems. Ofsted has suggested this is like an MOT 'advisory note'.

And

- Exceptional (blue)
The 'Exceptional' grade is only awarded when Ofsted sees practice that they judge is among the very best nationally and which should be shared with other schools to help them improve.
- Urgent improvement (red)
The 'Urgent Improvement' grade indicates there are significant weaknesses that require immediate action and rapid improvement is necessary.

All report cards will detail what's working well and next steps. Where a 'Needs Attention' grade is awarded, schools will receive regular monitoring from Ofsted and have another visit within two years to check on progress in that area, at which point that grade could be changed instead of the school having to wait for a full inspection.

It is still a relatively new framework, but we have seen several schools nationally receive a Needs Attention grade for Attendance and Behaviour, based purely on attendance figures. This is because a school must show it meets all the criteria listed under each grade to be awarded that grade. In almost all these cases, the text identifies good behaviour, routines and expectations. To this end, we'd like to take this opportunity to remind everyone of their joint responsibility for promoting and ensuring regular attendance at school. We know that good attendance leads to better experiences and outcomes for pupils.

We are immensely proud of our family of schools in Hertfordshire and are confident that they will be well prepared for their next inspection. Schools will generally be inspected within four years of their last inspection, but the statutory framework requires them to be inspected within five school years of the end of the academic year of the previous inspection.

Hertfordshire County Council and HFL Education will continue to monitor the outcomes of inspections and remain committed to supporting schools in their continued school improvement journeys.

Yours faithfully

Tony Fitzpatrick
**Director of Education,
Hertfordshire County Council**



Tania Rawle
**Head of Schools Standards and Accountability,
Hertfordshire County Council**



Anne Peck
**Director of Education Services
HFL (Primary and Early Years)**



Liz Shapland
**Director of Education Services
HFL (Secondary, Special and AP)**

