Parents' Perceptions of OFSTED's Work

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A report by the National Foundation for Educational Research for the Office for Standards in Education

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Summary

The Study

- Between September 1994 and March 1995, the NFER was commissioned by the Office for Standards in Education to undertake a series of surveys of parents' perceptions of OFSTED. The surveys involved secondary, primary and special schools which had been inspected during the first four terms of the new inspection arrangements established as part of the Education (Schools) Act, 1992.

- In total, the perceptions and views of 7108 parents were surveyed by questionnaire and analysed. Follow-up interviews by telephone took place with 642 parents and additional face-to-face interviews were held with parents in eight schools.

- The study was substantially larger than other parental studies. The response rate was in keeping with similar parental surveys. Checks made on the characteristics of schools taking part in the study revealed no marked skew in the responses.

Parents' perceptions of inspection

- More than three quarters of parents felt fully or quite well informed throughout the inspection of their schools.

- Most parents recalled receiving information before the inspection. High percentages of parents recalled receiving advance notice, an invitation to the pre-meeting with parents, and a letter and/or brief questionnaire from the Registered Inspector asking for their views on the school. A few suggestions were made by parents for more information and for better meeting arrangements.

- Small numbers attended the pre-meetings for parents, except in special schools where one in three parents indicated that they had attended. Approximately nine out of ten parents in all types of school found the meetings very or quite valuable. The responses indicated that there was a very high degree of consistency in the range of issues that Registered Inspectors raised in these meetings, in keeping with OFSTED's requirements.

- Approximately nine out of ten parents found the summary of the inspection report very or fairly clear. Many parents referred to the professional nature of the inspection process and the summary for parents. On the other hand, a few parents were critical of their inspection summary, usually for being too vague or for not offering sufficient praise.

- Approximately one in four parents subsequently saw coverage of their school's inspection in the press or media. The very large majority of those parents who offered an opinion of the coverage indicated that it was both fair and accurate.

- Many parents could not recall having seen the governors' action plan. More than eight out of ten who recalled the action plan said they found it clear. More than seven out of ten said they found it appropriate. By the time of the survey, however, fewer than one in four parents had received news of progress on the action plan.

- Most parents were unsure, or felt it too early to say, if the school had been affected by the inspection and if there was a positive contribution to improvement. Parents' comments about the impact ranged fully from the very negative to the very positive. Positive

comments out-numbered negative by about three to one. Approximately one in four parents felt that there had been, or would be, a positive contribution to the school's improvement.

- Parents made suggestions for improving inspection, for example by providing further information, more regular review and reinspection, full reports to parents, and more comparative information which would enable them to contrast their schools with others locally and nationally.

Parents' perceptions of OFSTED

- Approximately one in three parents had heard about, or received, publications from OFSTED itself. About half the parents who responded indicated that they had heard about OFSTED in the press, on radio or on television.

- More than half the parents who responded felt that they were not clearly enough, or not at all, informed about OFSTED in general. Parents in primary schools felt slightly better informed. Parents of pupils in special schools felt least well-informed about OFSTED in general.

- Parents made suggestions for ways in which OFSTED could better inform them about their child's education, for example by providing more information about standards expected and more comparative information about their school.

Issues and conclusions

- The evidence indicates that OFSTED has made very good progress in addressing the needs of parents as stakeholders in the inspection process. At this early stage in OFSTED's existence, the large majority of parents were positive about the information and involvement they received during their school's inspection. Primary parents were slightly more positive than secondary and special parents.

- Most parents judged OFSTED on the immediate experience of the independent team inspecting their school. The positive responses largely reflected the professional manner in which inspection teams have been perceived to operate. Future judgements are likely to be made on the basis of the lasting impact of the local inspection and, on this matter, parents are more uncertain. The balance of expectations is clearly positive.

- Parental perceptions of OFSTED will increasingly become a hostage to the success of the inspection team, to the success of the school in acting on advice and in implementing change effectively, to the visibility of those improvements, and to the school's willingness to attribute its success at least in part to the inspection that took place.

- Consequently, it is important for OFSTED not only further to improve parental involvement in, and immediately after, the inspection process. It is also important for OFSTED to take up parental suggestions for direct ways to improve parental awareness and understanding of it as an organisation.

Introduction

In August 1994, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out a series of surveys of parents' perceptions of OFSTED as an organisation.

OFSTED has clearly recognised the importance of parents as stakeholders in inspection and in improving schools. The OFSTED 1994 Corporate Plan (OFSTED, 1994a)[1] indicates that OFSTED is committed to the Government's Citizen's Charter Initiative and to the Department for Education's (DFE) Parents' Charter. Its Corporate Plan commits OFSTED to 'developing and maintaining good channels of communication' with parents as the first of a number of stakeholder groups 'who are involved in or concerned about issues of educational standards and quality'.

The Framework for the Inspection of Schools (OFSTED, 1994b)[2] gives guidance to Registered Inspectors concerning consultation with parents as part of the inspection process. Registered Inspectors are required to hold a meeting with parents before the inspection starts, to seek parents' views on aspects of the school specified in the Inspection schedule, and to give those parents who attend the clear indication that their views will be taken into account and may influence the inspection.

The Handbook for the Inspection of Schools (OFSTED, 1993)[3] also provides detailed guidance to Registered Inspectors on relations with parents. The guidance states that inspectors should gain the confidence of parents by the professionalism of their conduct in schools and by the clarity with which they express their judgements. The Handbook makes the following specific points:

'In particular, inspectors should:

i ensure that parents know that inspection is based on a thorough and fair collection of evidence and that the inspectors will not pre-judge any issue;

ii decline to be drawn by parents into discussion of the merits or failings of individual teachers; make clear that any dissatisfaction they may have should be taken up with the headteacher or appropriate authority;

iii manage the parents' meeting so as to allow parents to contribute in an open and relaxed manner;

iv respect the confidentiality of views expressed by individual parents at the parents' meeting or in the response form circulated before the inspection; ensure that parents' general view of the school and any concerns raised are reported to the headteacher and appropriate authority, without ascribing views to individuals;

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[1]OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (1994a). *Corporate Plan 1994-95 to 1996-97. Improvement Through Inspection.* London: OFSTED.
[2]OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (1994b). *Framework for the Inspection of Schools.* London: OFSTED.
[3]GREAT BRITAIN. OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (1993). *Handbook for the Inspection of Schools.* London: HMSO.

v avoid expressing judgements prematurely in response to questions by parents. It is, however, perfectly proper to relate issues raised by parents to local and national trends or to explain elements of the statutory basis upon which schools work.'

OFSTED also promotes openness in the inspection process and requires schools to distribute the inspectors' summary of the report to all parents, together with the governors' subsequent action plan. It requires that copies of the full report be made available to parents on request; schools may make an appropriate charge for reproducing the report for this purpose.

A recent publication from OFSTED on school improvement further underlines the importance that is attached to keeping parents "in the know" about the school's strengths and weakness, and to providing parents with ample opportunities to offer their views and suggestions in order to support school improvement (OFSTED, 1994c)[4]. The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (OFSTED, 1995)[5] indicates that the great majority of primary and secondary schools have effective links with parents; links with primary schools appear to be especially effective since most primary schools involve parents in their daily work.

Against this background of commitment to involving parents as stakeholders in inspecting and improving schools, OFSTED had reason to explore how parents perceived them.

Aims of the Research

The prime aim of the project was to provide detailed information concerning parents' perceptions of OFSTED's role, functions and effectiveness.

The main objectives of the research were to collect:

(i) information concerning parents' perceptions of OFSTED's role and functions, including data regarding:

- the proportion of parents receiving different types of information about the inspection, before, during and after the inspection process;
- the proportion of parents who saw the inspection summary;
- how well informed parents felt about inspection;
- whether parents who attended the meetings with the Registered Inspector found them valuable;
- parents' responses to these meetings;
- how widely OFSTED publications were known or recognised;
- parents' judgements about the clarity and accuracy of inspection reports.

(ii) information concerning parents' perceptions of OFSTED's effectiveness, including data regarding:

- the impact that parents believed the inspection had on their school;
- whether parents felt inspection led to changes;
- parents' perceptions of the nature of the impact and the changes.

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[4]OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (1994c). *Improving Schools*. London: HMSO.
[5]OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (1995). *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools. Part 1 Standards and Quality in Education 1993/94*. London: HMSO.

The Scale of the Study

Four distinct surveys by questionnaire were undertaken within the project (see *Table A*). In autumn 1994, the first survey addressed secondary schools only (coded: S1). In spring 1995, three separate surveys took place in parallel, one of secondary schools (coded S2), one of primary (coded P) and one of special schools (coded Sp). The same questionnaire was designed and used for each survey.

Table A: parents' responses to each of the four surveys

Survey number	**code**	**date administered**	**target population**	**number of parent responses**
Secondary 1	S1	October - November 1994	Those schools taking part in the first year (i.e. autumn 1993 to summer 1994) of the OFSTED inspection programme for secondary schools	3411
Secondary 2	S2	January - February 1995	Those schools taking part in the fourth term (autumn 1994) of the OFSTED inspection programme for secondary schools	1612
Primary	P	January - February 1995	Those schools taking part in the first term (autumn 1994) of the OFSTED inspection programme for primary schools	1686
Special	Sp	January - February 1995	Those schools taking part in the first term (autumn 1994) of the OFSTED inspection programme for special schools	399

As *Table A* demonstrates, the project received 7108 replies from parents to the postal questionnaire. The response rate was 22%, in keeping with other parental studies, but the scale of the study was very large. Further to the postal questionnaires, 642 parents were interviewed by telephone and face-to-face interviews with parents were held in eight schools. Further details of the project's design, methodology and timetable are provided in Annex A.

In producing this report, it has been decided first, to bring together information from all the data sources in order to answer key questions about OFSTED's activities and second, to raise some more general issues that arose in particular from face-to-face interviews with parents. This has made it easier to provide a concise and clear report on parents' perceptions.

Survey Findings

How well is prior information about inspection getting to parents?

The large majority of parents who responded was aware that an inspection had taken place but it was notable that small proportions of parents, especially in secondary schools, did not know that their child's school had been inspected. *Table U* presents the proportions for each of the four surveys undertaken.

Table U: percentages of parents in different schools who knew that their school had been inspected

Survey number	code	percentage	total respondents
Secondary 1	S1	85	3411
Secondary 2	S2	88	1612
Primary	P	93	1686
Special	Sp	86	399

Largely, parents recalled receiving information before the inspection. Most parents recalled receiving advance notice of the inspection, invitations to the parents' pre-inspection meeting with the Registered Inspector, and a letter or brief questionnaire asking for their views about the inspection. *Tables D, E* and *F* present the respective data. It is notable in each case that primary parents were best informed, which appeared to reflect their greater involvement in their schools.

Table C: percentages of parents receiving advance notice of the inspection

Survey number	percentage	total respondents
S1	86	2897
S2	87	1422
P	92	1566
Sp	88	344

Table D: percentages of parents receiving an invitation to the parents' meeting with the inspectors

Survey number	percentage	total respondents
S1	72	2897
S2	74	1422
P	84	1566
Sp	79	344

Table E: percentages of parents receiving a letter and/or brief questionnaire from the Registered Inspector asking for their views on the school

Survey number	percentage	total respondents
S1	64	2897
S2	69	1422
P	76	1566
Sp	68	344

There were instances, albeit rare, where parents' first experience of the inspection was when they unexpectedly met one of the team. For example, a secondary school parent reported: 'I only knew of the inspection when I requested to speak to a member of staff and was told he was with the inspectors.'

Parents were asked in which ways they might be better prepared for an inspection. Many suggestions were made, examples of which are provided in *Figure 1*. Most of the information extras they wanted in advance were to do with how OFSTED works, rather than current practice in schools or details of outcomes of other schools' inspections. There was evidence that parents, like many of their schools, only began to understand the process fully once they had taken part in it. A primary school parent commented: 'I did not realise the importance and extent of the inspection last time. Next time, I will take it more seriously and complete the questionnaire.'

Figure 1: parents' comments on ways to improve preparation for an inspection

some parents wanted more information

'More explanation and greater detail of what was to happen.'

'Give parents more information about what they are inspecting. I am very concerned about the future of the building, about the quality of meals and about discipline. Are these going to be dealt with? How?'

'There should be a second meeting for parents, run by inspectors. Inspectors should tell parents what their standards are: what measurements they are using.'

'Standards used in inspection, how do the inspectors measure what they are looking for?'

'More details about inspection procedure [perhaps at pre-meeting].'

'Would like more information on how inspectors would work in the school [perhaps at pre-meeting].'

'Make clearer to parents why inspection is happening.'

'Want to discuss more about the processes of inspection, how inspectors would judge performance of teachers, how they'd decide if the school was delivering the most suitable education for the children.'

'More information on what was happening, what the inspectors were actually doing, how they were allocating their time.'

'Not many improvements are needed, just a little more detail about what would happen.'

'More information about their authority to enforce measures.'

'Would like more information about the possible outcomes of an inspection, what sort of timescale to implement any suggested changes.'

some made suggestions to improve meeting arrangements

'Be more considerate towards parents who work shifts regarding organisation of meetings'

'Is it possible to have daytime (or 4 to 6 pm) meetings for shift and night workers?'

'Better notice of parents' meeting: three or four weeks.'

Inspectors should be able to talk to parents who could identify specific problems'. [from the parent of a dyslexic child, who felt that the school was not tackling her child's needs]

other comments and suggestions were made

'The questionnaire to parents could have attempted to be more specific, giving a wider range of choice of answers.'

'We were invited to provide written comments to inspectors via the school. We did not receive the courtesy of an acknowledgement, nor do we feel our comments were considered by the inspectors.'

'Children should receive more information about what is involved.'

How well are pre-meetings for parents working?

Of the parents who knew about the inspection, a small number attended the pre-meeting that the inspectors held for parents. Proportions of parents involved in special schools were notably higher (see *Table F*). Many parents noted that the major obstacle that OFSTED had to overcome was parents' reluctance to attend meetings.

Table F: percentages of parents who attended the meeting that the inspectors held for parents

Survey number	percentage	total respondents
S1	17	2897
S2	14	1422
P	23	1566
Sp	35	344

Figure 2 contains examples of comments made by parents in both primary and secondary schools:

Figure 2: parents' comments concerning attendance at pre-meetings

'Try to encourage more people to come. The turn out was poor.'
'Full note was taken of parents' views though the meeting was not well attended.'
'It would be nice if more parents were encouraged to attend the meeting - very few parents were present.'
'Try to get more parents to respond.'

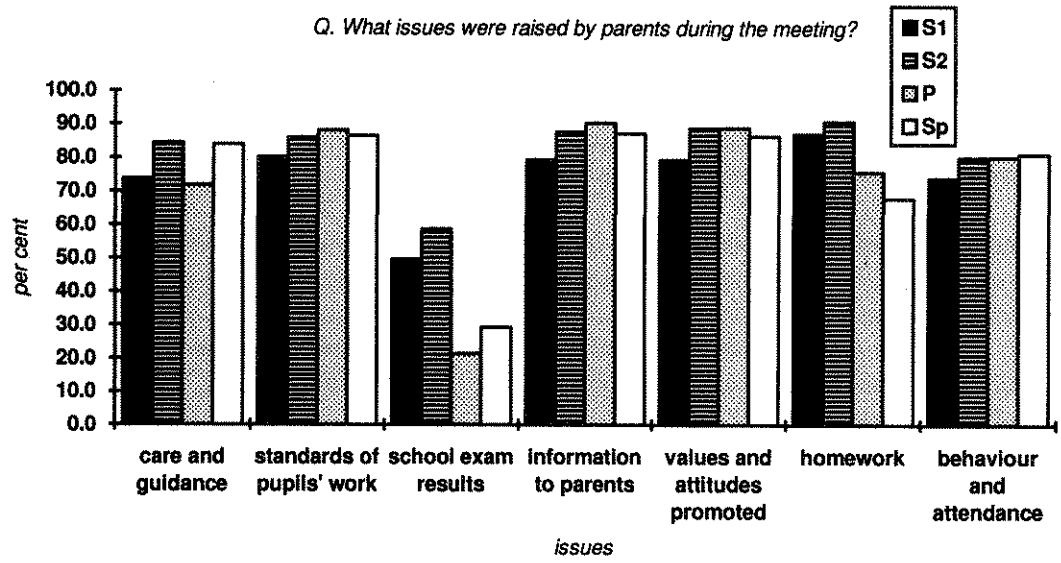
Registered Inspectors are given clear guidance about the issues which should be addressed at the pre-meeting. Parents' responses strongly suggested that Registered Inspectors were adhering closely to the recommended agenda, because most of the topics they were asked to cover were identified by parents among the main issues that they or other parents raised (see *Table G*).

Table G: percentages of parents indicating that specific issues were raised during the pre-meeting

Issues	S1	S2	P	Sp
the care and guidance available to pupils	74	84	72	84
the standards of pupils' work	80	86	88	87
the school's examination results	50	59	21	29
the information which the school provides to parents	80	88	90	87
the values and attitudes that the school promotes	80	89	89	87
homework	87	91	76	68
pupil behaviour and attendance	74	80	80	82
Number of respondents (N)	(489)	(199)	(365)	(344)

The most commonly raiséd issues in secondary schools were: homework, standards of pupils' work, the information which the school provides to parents and the value and attitudes that the school promotes. In primary schools, the major difference was that homework featured less commonly. In special schools, homework was again less commonly mentioned, while the care and guidance available to pupils understandably featured more prominently. Even in the secondary schools, examination results were not raised as frequently as other issues at parents' pre-meetings with the inspectors, although the issue did appear to be of greater moment during the autumn term than at other times of year. Examination results were even less commonly mentioned within primary and special schools, and in secondary schools which did not teach pupils up to GCSE. *Figure 3* provides a further illustration of the patterns indicated by *Table G*.

Figure 3: percentages of parents indicating that specific issues were raised during the pre-meeting



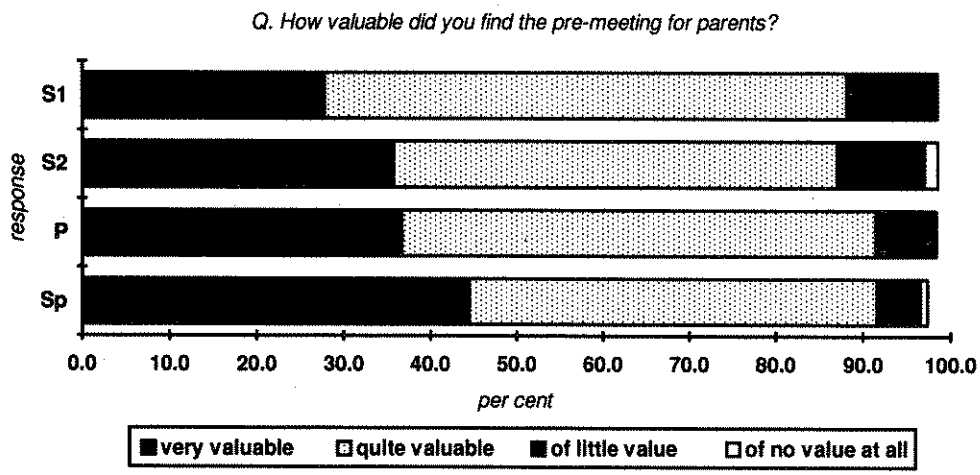
Very high proportions of parents attending found these meetings valuable. *Table H* indicates the numbers and percentages of parents who found the meetings either very valuable or quite valuable.

Table H: percentages of parents finding the pre-meeting very or quite valuable

Survey number	percentage	total respondents
S1	88	489
S2	87	199
P	92	365
Sp	92	119

Figure 4 further illustrates the positive inclination of parents toward these meetings. Only low percentages of parents in each type of school found the meetings of no value. Responses were marginally more positive from parents in primary and special schools.

Figure 4: responses of parents to question concerning value of the pre-meeting for parents



Low proportions (between 7% and 11%) of parents responded yes, when asked if there were any other issues that should have been raised in the pre-meeting. Several parents expressed a wish to debate the value of the inspection. For example: 'I wanted to discuss and explore the question of how valuable the inspection is, as there is no follow up of relevant points, for example a reinspection'. A few others wanted to discuss 'the qualifications of the inspecting team and the length of time for the inspection.' One respondent commented: 'I think the inspection team should have been appointed from another Authority. The one performing the inspection at our son's school was from the "home" Authority.'

Indications were that some of these topics indeed had come up at schools' pre-meetings. Positive comments about the inspectors' professionalism again featured regularly among questionnaire respondents and interviewees: 'We had ample opportunity to say anything pressing. I am well pleased with the school so had nothing pressing to say and feel I could say it anyway.' Other parents suggested more time could be spent discussing 'the many positive things the school does'.

Most parents restricted themselves, however, to suggestions for specific topics they would have liked to have raised (see *Figure 5*).

Figure 5: parents' suggestions of additional topics they would have liked to discuss at the pre-meeting

'The school educational structure and parent/teacher relationships.'
'Resources available to children.'
'What the inspectors were looking for and if they had any bias towards certain teaching methods.'
'Special needs.'
'Out of school activities.'
'Quality of management of the school and employer/indusrial liaison.'
'Discipline.'
'Organisation of classes in terms of setting and high flyer classes.'
'Issues regarding school uniform.' [suggestion from a local councillor]
'Parents Association Activities.'
'The threat of being closed.' [a special school]

Parents were asked in which ways the pre-meeting for parents might be improved. Examples of their suggestions are given in *Figure 6*. As elsewhere, it should be remembered that the substantial majority of parents were more than satisfied with the current information. Positive comments, for example concerning the professional handling of the meeting, were common. For example: 'The meeting was well managed by a good chairperson.'

In face-to-face interviews, some parents commented on the special constraints that they felt when in public meetings regarding the school. They did not wish to appear over-critical of the school, nor to let the school down. In the face of an inspection which several perceived to be undertaken on behalf of the Government rather than on their behalf, they preferred to defend their school, not to open it up to attack. In group discussions with parents, the research team found that a few parents tended to respond quickly with positives whenever others offered what could be interpreted as criticisms of the school. This phenomenon was reported to us by Registered Inspectors as well. A further constraint that some parents mentioned was that they felt ill at ease speaking to a large group; it was not part of their experience and they considered it a skill that others possessed in far greater quantities.

Figure 6: parents' comments on ways to improve the pre-meeting with inspectors

suggestions for the meeting to be better chaired
'It could have been better chaired.'
'Some issues took too long; unimportant matters were raised by some parents.'
'I thought teachers being there restricted what some people might have said - however the teachers were also parents, so had a right to be there.'
'The meeting tended to be dominated by a few people and some shyer people did not have the opportunity to explain their views.'
'As some people are nervous about speaking in public, maybe written questions could be handed in beforehand.'

comments that further or smaller meetings should be held
'Two smaller meetings might have been better - the school is a large one so the meeting was rather lengthy - lots of people with lots of questions.'
'It was assumed everyone could attend one meeting.'

suggestions for changing the constituency of the meeting
[In primary] 'The fact that governors can't automatically come to the parents meeting creates an unnecessary area of conflict. It seems to put a wedge between parents and governors, especially when it comes to the later governors' meeting for parents. People didn't have the same history.'
'Parents' evenings could be held where pupils could accompany their parents and take part in informal discussion about issues involved in inspection.'

suggestions for better information in advance
'Parents should be told in advance the format of the pre-meeting, then they would be better prepared with questions to ask. Parents had expected to be given information, rather than be asked if they had any questions.'

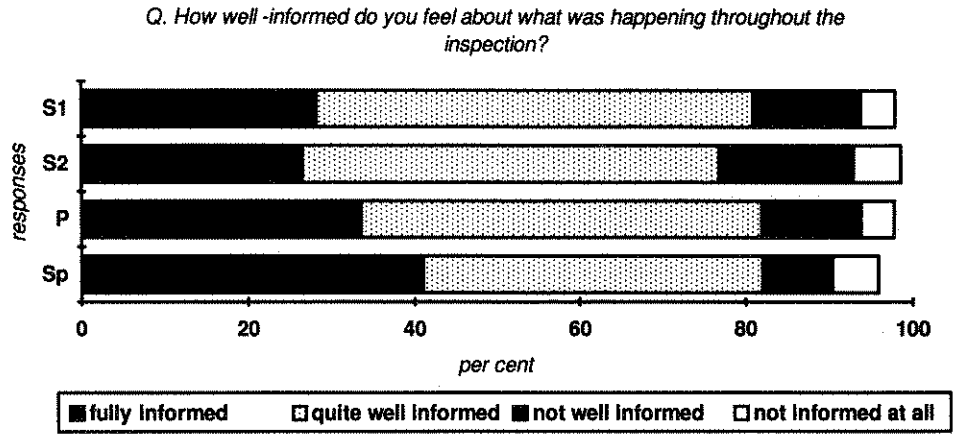
How well-informed do parents feel throughout the inspection process?

In each survey, more than three quarters of respondents indicated that they felt quite well or fully informed about what was happening throughout the inspection (see *Table I*). These were high proportions. *Figure 7* demonstrates the strong positive distribution of parent responses on each of the four sets of data.

Table I: percentages of parents responding to question about how well-informed they felt throughout the inspection

Survey number	fully informed	quite well informed	not well informed	not informed at all	total respondents
S1	28	53	13	4	2897
S2	26	50	16	6	1422
P	34	48	12	4	1566
Sp	41	41	8	6	344

Figure 7: percentages of parents responding to question about how well-informed they felt throughout the inspection



Parents made various suggestions for ways in which information could be improved, some of which were highly demanding. One parent suggested that she should have been given a timetable of what was happening, a note of how many children would be approached and an indication if her own child would be asked questions. Further parental suggestions for ways to improve information during the inspection process are summarised later.

Telephone and face-to-face interviews revealed that often children provided some information to the home during the inspection itself. Children talked about having inspectors in or having their work examined by an inspector, about talking to an inspector or joining a group discussion with an inspector:

'My child was spoken to by an inspector in two lessons.'
'I received an account from children of their conversations with inspectors.'
'Some kids told their parents and admitted to nervousness, but this was soon overcome.'

Children occasionally proved a good source of information about the school's preparation for inspection as well:

'My daughter said that they were all being prepared for the inspection and told me how everything was smartened up. They were all keyed up for inspection.'
'My daughter said that everyone had to behave well as the inspectors were in school.'

Some more worrying comments were raised by one parent interviewed:

'My daughter found the inspection stressful, it worried her. Especially nerve-wracking was the shadowing of pupils.'

But it was far more common for parents to be positive or amused about what their children had to say: 'It didn't bother the children. They weren't concerned about the people going in and out of the classroom.'

How well is the summary working and what is the press response?

The large majority of parents recalled receiving the summary of the final report and said that they found it either fairly or very clear. *Table J* indicates the number of parents who said they had received the summary by the time the survey questionnaire was administered. These

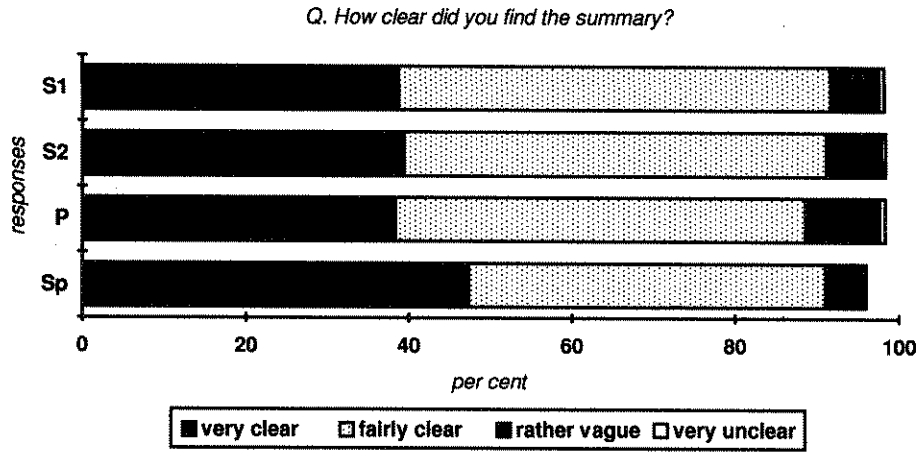
totals are used in the subsequent section for assessing parents' responses to the summary and action plan.

Very high proportions of parents were positive about the summary's clarity. *Table J* additionally provides details of the percentages of parents judging the summary "very clear", "fairly clear", "rather vague" and "very unclear". *Figure 8* gives a graphical representation of the distribution of positive responses.

Table J: percentages of parents finding the summary clear or unclear

Survey number	very clear	fairly clear	rather vague	very unclear	total respondents
S1	39	53	6	1	2663
S2	39	52	7	0	1192
P	38	50	9	1	1338
Sp	47	44	5	0	283

Figure 8: proportions of parents finding the summary clear or unclear



Parents were asked to comment and make suggestions concerning the summary. Despite the very substantial positive response to the summary indicated above, parents who were dissatisfied were a very vocal minority (see *Figure 9*). For example, several parents felt that there was more scope to praise schools in inspectors' reports.

One parent-governor raised a concern about the gap between the oral report at the end of the inspection and the subsequent written summary and report:

"The inspectors clearly carried out the inspection very professionally with attention to detail. The very high standards which were identified by the inspectors in reporting verbally to governors did not come across in the formal report. In terms of improving the education in the school a better strategy would be to praise successful departments/aspects and criticise more strongly the weak ones. The report was too bland.'

A further issue raised by parents in a small number of schools was that of gaining access to the summary report. The majority appear to get copies by request, and at a price, albeit variable. According to a few parents, however, some reports never seemed to appear. Occasionally, a parent commented:

'I was told I could get a copy of the full report from the library or borrow the head's copy. That wasn't helpful to a parent who wants a full copy.'

Figure 9: parents' comments and suggestions concerning the summary

comments that the summary was vague
'Too generalised'
'It was all waffle and therefore counter-productive. It should be short and succinct, making clear points. Couldn't find what was hidden by the vague general terms.'
'More precise comments: "sound education" means nothing to me.'
'Phrasing was poor in places. Also variation in standards - vague on some topics, specific on others.'

comments that the summary contains jargon
'There is too much avoidable jargon.'

suggestions to provide more praise
'I feel that good standards of teaching should have been more highly praised and brought to the fore rather than minor weaknesses.'
'Parents fell that exam results and pastoral care are excellent yet inspectors just said "satisfactory". This created a feeling of inspectors not praising enough.'
'Too general. I was surprised that comment was "satisfactory" whereas parents feel that the school is excellent.'

suggestions to provide more detailed information
'It was too concerned with issues such as exams. I feel it ignored issues such as drugs, pupil welfare... It was too generalised.'

suggestions to provide clearer indicators
'Rather than just saying something was "good", give it a number rating on a scale of 1 to 5 or 1 to 10.'

comments where a school sent a full report to everyone
'All parents were sent a full report'
'Full report was sent to everyone.'

suggestions to make it easier to get hold of copies
'Ensure that parents can access the full inspectors' report. I have been unable to do so unless I am prepared to pay £5 to school for a copy.'

A substantial minority of parents had seen or heard some coverage of the inspection report in the local press, or on radió or television (see *Table K*). Again, primary school parents were most aware of such coverage. Special school parents, higher numbers of whom lived outside the immediate district, were least aware.

Table K: percentages of parents seeing or hearing coverage of the inspection report in the local press, radio or television

Survey number	percentage	total respondents
S1	30	3411
S2	25	1612
P	32	1686
Sp	18	399

Parents were invited to comment on the fairness and accuracy of press and media coverage. The overwhelming response was that coverage was both fair and accurate, with many local press and other media taking sections straight from the summary for their stories. Positive comments included:

'I was pleased to see that it went in the paper. Whether good or bad, we have a right to be told. I was very pleased.'
'Not specific enough, but fair.'
'Local press coverage was very fair - most of it was direct quotation from the report.'
'The coverage in the press stated exactly the same as the report we received from the school.'

Other parents appeared understanding and realistic about what they could expect from their local press:

'As accurate as any press coverage can be.'
'These snippets in the press are very brief and consequently selective rather than accurate.'

Again, those who were disappointed with the coverage were very vocal about it.

'The Press gave negative coverage, focusing on art. As a parent, I felt that art is not a major issue and that the Press could have been more positive.'
'There was a balanced coverage except the comments made about religious education which were not helpful.'

There were several comments pointing out that press and media coverage could also be more than fair:

'The newspaper coverage was very fair on the school's good points although not much was mentioned on the points where the school is lacking.'
'The newspaper highlighted all the good aspects. Very little was said about any problems the school encountered.'

What did parents think of the action plan?

Many parents were unsure that they had received the governors' action plan. Interviews suggested those who were unsure were not familiar with the idea. The differences represented in *Table L* suggest that awareness of the action plan element of the inspection process grows with time. Of the parents who had received the plan, the large majority found it both clear and appropriate (see *Table M*). Relatively few parents indicated that they had news of progress on the action plan by the time they were questioned, but there were many suggestions provided by parents for more stringent follow-up (see *Table O*).

Table L: percentages of parents indicating that they had received the action plan

Survey number	percentage	total respondents
S1	43	3411
S2	22	1612
P	32	1686
Sp	23	399

Table M: percentages of parents who found the action plan clear and appropriate

Survey number	clear per cent	appropriate per cent	total respondents
S1	84	73	1454
S2	83	70	351
P	86	76	544
Sp	88	74	90

Table N: percentages of parents who had received news of progress

Survey number	percentage	total respondents
S1	25	1454
S2	14	351
P	23	544
Sp	20	90

Parents made comments on the action plan and suggestions for improvements to it. Comments varied markedly, from those who thought their action plan concise and useful to those who thought very little of it. The comments included:

'It was comprehensive and did not talk down to parents.'
'The school had been very honest and put some thought into it.'
'As there seemed to be little at fault with the school, they had set out to find something to put right. Rather nit-picking and a waste of time and money.'
'Very detailed. Bit off-putting. Almost a research project. Good piece of work but too much.'

Two parent-governors from one school admitted in interview to contriving to make the action plan imprecise, to allow them more flexibility in implementing particular actions. One governor commented that the action plan ended up 'too bland' and said that 'we [the governors] got away with too much.' His colleague said, 'it felt a bit woolly'. *Figure 10* contains comments and suggestions.

Figure 10: parents' comments and suggestions about the action plan

comments about the way the plan was written
'It was difficult to understand. Write in Plain English and use less jargon.'
'It should have been written in plain English - far too jargonistic - found this to be antagonising.'
'I thought it was a little vague.'
'It lacked specific detail - and was rather general.'
'The action plan was also waffle. I couldn't see the aims/objectives. It needs to be short and clear with objectives clearly stated, not hidden behind waffle.'
'It is not clear to all parents. Is it drawn up more for staff and governors than for parents?

suggestions for improvements
'We want a timescale for its implementation, of course.'
'I am concerned that the inspection and the action plan were "looking at the provider, not at the service".'

What do parents consider is the impact on the school?

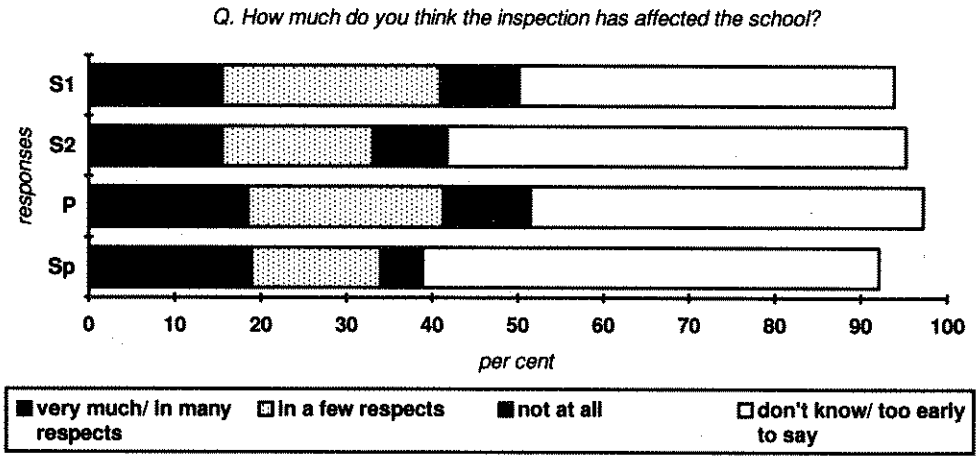
In order to assess the general impact of the inspection on schools, parents were asked both about the effect of the inspection on their school and the contribution they considered it had made, or would make. *Table O* and *Figure 11* indicate parents' impressions of the degree to

which their school was affected by the inspection. *Table O* demonstrates that parents found it difficult to gauge the effect, a finding that was strongly supported within the case studies. Parents of children in primary and special schools again found it easier to judge, which reflected their closer connection with the school. Of those who registered an effect, the majority commented on the added pressures that were created for the school.

Table O: parents' perceptions of the degree to which their school was affected by the inspection

Survey number	very much/ in many respects	in a few respects	not at all	don't know/ too early to say	total respondents
S1	16	26	9	44	3411
S2	16	18	9	54	1612
P	18	23	10	46	1686
Sp	19	15	5	53	399

Figure 11: parents' perceptions of the degree to which their school was affected by the inspection



Parents' comments about the effect of the inspection ranged fully from the very positive to the very negative. On the positive side, for example, two parents gave clear accounts of the value they perceived in inspection:

'The inspection has involved a systematic appraisal of the effectiveness of the school and highlighted the many positive experiences of the school.'
'Schools with a very good reputation such as ours become complacent and an outside view can highlight their strengths and weaknesses and in this way go forward.'

On the negative side, parents made such comments as:

'It seemed to dominate teaching staff's time and thinking. How did that affect the children?'
'I get the impression that it caused the staff a lot of stress and interrupted normal teaching.'
'Most effort seems to have been put into superficial improvements, and not necessarily those of most relevance to pupils and the wishes of parents.'

Many parents appeared to appreciate that their school put a lot of work into preparing for the inspection. Primary parents seemed even more aware than other parents that their school was dressing its best to suit the inspectors. The comments in *Figure 12* illustrate the range of parents' perceptions.

Figure 12: parents' perceptions of the effect that the inspection had on their school

comments that schools had put considerable effort into preparation
'The school has been gearing itself up for the inspection for ages. I am not sure they have been doing much else, and there's not been a lot happening since.'
'A flurry of letters came from the school to ensure everyone was aware and all went well before the inspection, and a lot of effort went into making sure it went well.'

comments on specific effects
'Homework policy has been updated. Steps are being taken to raise standards.'
'Pressure to provide foreign languages in this special school.'
'I think that they were probably surprised at the comments in the report about history and science. I hope that they will do something about music and drama!'
'They are more likely to go ahead with building improvements.'

Sometimes the impact of inspection was great and, on such occasions, continuing communication with parents was even more important:

'The school has not passed the inspection and therefore its whole existence is now dependent on meeting the criteria laid down in the report.' [special school]

In other cases, parents suggest the impact cannot be great enough. For example:

'Some "kneejerk" reactions [were made by the school] to some of the more critical comments, but it would take a semtex explosion to change the hearts and minds and approaches of many of the older, more "entrenched" staff. This school still uses exam results as the all-powerful yardstick and, as long as the clientele continue to "come up with the goods", necessary changes will not take place.'

A final observation, introduced by one respondent, provided a useful reminder that inspection has an as yet unexplored impact on pupils as well as the school and the parents:

'The children feel their school has been criticised and therefore is not such a good school as they thought it was. It's brought things to their attention that they didn't worry about before.'

Parents were asked separately about the inspection's contribution to improvements and many responses reflected the comments above on the inspection's effects. *Table P* indicates that few parents believed at this early stage that there would be no contribution and a substantial minority of parents were optimistic. Most parents again did not know or considered it too early to say if the inspection had contributed, or would contribute to any improvements.

Table P: percentages of parents who think the inspection has contributed, or will contribute to any improvements in their school

Survey number	yes	no	don't know/too early to say	total respondents
S1	27	9	57	3411
S2	29	6	59	1612
P	34	7	55	1686
Sp	26	8	59	399

The comments and suggestions that parents made largely reflected a measure of confidence that inspection would in time contribute to improvements. On the other hand, there were sufficient questioning comments made to suggest that these improvements would have to be realised and demonstrated to parents before inspection receives even broader approval.

Figure 13 provides examples of some of the important comments that parents had to make about the contribution of inspection to improvement.

Figure 13: parent's comments and suggestions regarding ways in which inspection has contributed to, or will contribute to, school improvements

positive comments about improvements
'It has highlighted ways in which the school can improve, especially in raising standards and improving ways in which homework is set.'
'The inspection has given the new headmaster details of the many shortcomings of the old regime.'
'Parents now know the full problems and also the points on which the school excels.'

comments suggesting confidence about a positive general impact
'I am sure that the key issues for action will be thoroughly scrutinised and acted upon.'
'I am sure that the school and its governing body will take full note and action where necessary regarding the matters set out in the key issues.'
'I feel that [the inspection] will heighten the awareness of the school that by being inspected they will be kept on their toes.'
'Faults will be acted upon.'

comments about improving the school's focus or aiding its development
'It will make them focus on poor facilities and inconsistent performance in certain subjects.'
'It highlighted the poor performance of some subjects given the quality of the school.'
'The inspection has clarified the action needed. It may help for arguments for more LEA funding and with reorganising budgets.'
'Although the headmaster and governors were aware of some of the staff's shortcomings, this report lets individual subjects know where they stand and helps the headteacher and governors, by setting guidelines for action plans to be under way.'

comments about specific improvements
'It could encourage the school to deal with the increasing problem regarding bullying.'
'Immediate response to safety hazards, for instance in the relocation of lockers.'
'The OFSTED inspection highlighted the lack of cohesive policy within the area of worship and religious education.'
'Some children (Year 2) go into school earlier and the school now has a system for children to go up and down the stairway on the right hand side, for safety.'
'I feel that the school will think about and act upon specific recommendations such as playground behaviour.'
'The inspection will make the school examine their teaching methods more closely. In particular, those that have been highlighted by the inspectors.'
'The school will be looking into safety aspects and health hazards which affect pupils and teachers.'
'They will hopefully raise the standards, especially in history.'
'They are bringing the curriculum up-to-date and standardising homework.'
'The plan of action will hopefully remedy the shortcomings in the mathematical department.'

How else might OFSTED improve the inspection and the information that inspection provides to parents?

Specific suggestions were sought from parents concerning the improvements that OFSTED might make to the inspection process and to their information about it. Many of the comments in the previous sections help to give guidance and ideas in specific areas, for example for the pre-meeting with parents, the summary and the action plan.

Many parents expressed themselves content with information both from their school and from OFSTED:

'I personally feel that the school provides me with adequate information about my child's education. I am very satisfied with the attitude and effort it provides.'

This response was generally even stronger from primary school parents:

'I feel I know the school quite well anyway. The children bring work home. There are open nights when we see all their work. I know several of the teachers well. You can go in and discuss any problems. I have sometimes helped out with reading and so on, so it's easy to get a good idea about what's going on.'

Figure 14 gives examples of the more positive and more negative comments made about OFSTED's role in inspection.

Figure 14: positive and negative responses to OFSTED's role in inspection and to its role in providing information through inspection to parents

positive comments about the OFSTED inspection process
'Current information is satisfactory'
'I am well satisfied with OFSTED.'
'As our son is in a residential school for children with special needs it is easy to feel isolated and marginalised when it comes to issues like the National Curriculum. I welcome this inspection and report and would like to see closer inspection and monitoring of schools of this type.'
'OFSTED inspections will help to identify the positive and negative in the service delivery of education for my child, and help the school to rectify these issues, and enable the school to receive feedback which is fair and objective.'

negative comments about the OFSTED inspection process
'As a parent, I don't we need OFSTED to tell us about the school at all. I think OFSTED's role should be to respond to parents' or teachers' calls for help when they are dissatisfied with a school. Otherwise it is a complete waste of public money. '

One parent who was interviewed lucidly expressed the importance he felt in ensuring that inspectors maintained the highest possible expectations of the schools they inspected:

'School inspectors must have high standards and expectations. There is almost a cosy relationship within components of an inspection system. For example: "facilities are poor, standard of teaching too, but inspectors understand that given the hard economic times and inner city, etc., etc., the school is doing OK." This is wrong. Bad facilities and practices must be reported in order to improve the school.'

Figure 15 indicates the range of comments and suggestions parents made about the inspection in general. The comments offer a summary of the range of parents' perceptions of OFSTED that derive from parents' association of OFSTED directly with their own inspection experience.

Figure 15: parents' comments and suggestions concerning how OFSTED might improve inspection or the information parents receive from the inspection process

requests for reinspection and review
'I would be interested to know what follow-up procedures were in place to check whether their criticisms were valid.'
'Return after one year to see if their recommendations had been carried out.'
'I would like reinspection on specific points outlined or weak in the report, to see if any corrective action has been instigated and is effective.'
'Review the impact of the inspection on the performance of the school.'
'I would like to see regular action plans and lists of actions achieved, with the relevant attention to children and their school life, as well as the long term and for the community.'

requests for more frequent inspections or reports
'Four years between inspections is too long. I would like to think that my child in the school would go through the process twice.'
'Send us annual reports direct to every parent.'
'Give us half yearly reports in order to maintain or improve standards and to keep on top of any situations which may need regular monitoring.'

requests for unannounced inspections
'Inspectors should not inform schools in advance of their coming so that they can see what really happens.'
'I think only a few days' notice should be given before an inspection takes place.'

requests for more information
'I want to have a regular meeting to discuss with parents any future problems and how the problems already discussed have been effective within the school.'
'I found the meeting before the inspection useful and would like parents to have the opportunity to have a meeting with OFSTED after the inspection.'
'Possibly liaise with older pupils regarding their views and let the parents know these findings.'
'Report on the changes made as a direct result of inspection.'
'More simplified, detailed reports to everyone with children in that school'
'Explain to us what happens when parents and inspectors do not concur.'
'What now happens to put the school right?'

requests for direct information
'My son, like many others, isn't very good at remembering to hand over letters from school. Direct contact via the post office would be better.'
'At the end I wanted a PLAIN ENGLISH report POSTED to each parent.'
'Please give us direct mail to parents, not via pupils. We need direct mail and direct contact.'

requests for more comparative information
'I feel I still don't know the standard of work my child is achieving or receiving, compared to other schools, in the surrounding area or nationwide.'
'Give a ranking and comparison of schools.'
'Most reports are qualitative and as such open to interpretation. I would like to see a more quantitative assessment.'
'I would like to know how standards attained by children at this school compare with other schools in the area.'

requests for more praise or less prescription
'Change culture from fear to support.'
'It could be improved by making the inspection less prescriptive, it lacks flexibility and has too much of a civil service approach.'

requests for focus on "poor" schools
'Leave the good schools alone and let them get on with the already excellent work they do and concentrate on the bad schools. We already know about the quality of education at our daughter's school. That is why she goes there. We don't need a report or valuable teachers' time spent on having an inspection done.'

Among some, expectations of OFSTED were very high:

'I would like OFSTED to assure me that the educational standards and the general lack of interest in the child's welfare at my boy's school will be rectified in the very near future.'
'OFSTED should offer more information to parents as they give an unbiased opinion of the school.'

It is salutary to recognise that not all of the expectations, low or high, that parents have of OFSTED will necessarily be reported to them. One parent gave an example:

'We need more help for children with specific learning difficulties, not bad enough for a statement, but needing some support. This was not taken sufficiently into account in the inspection. It did not appear sufficiently in the summary either. I wrote a letter to the inspectors about it but the headteacher persuaded me not to send it.'

There were a few specific concerns raised by parents in the special schools included in this study which suggest that further information needs to be made available to clarify both for inspectors and parents what can reasonably be expected from the inspection. For example:

'We feel that OFSTED needs to be reviewed regarding special schools. For example, if a child is unable to speak one word in English, how can they be expected to speak a foreign language?'

Finally, two questions needs to be raised about the longer term link between OFSTED, or those it contracts, and the school. The first question is, should it remain solely the headteacher's and governors' responsibility to communicate with parents following the inspection? There were parents who wanted to talk to, and seek clarification from, the inspectors or OFSTED, just at the point where their direct involvement in the school was diminishing. Where this appetite remains unsatisfied, parents are likely to associate the failing with OFSTED.

The second question is, should OFSTED in some way become more involved in supporting the school beyond the inspection? At the moment, there is no widespread parental expectation or direct wish that OFSTED should become more closely involved in longer term support.

Yet parents' perceptions of OFSTED's usefulness are currently determined or constrained by the success or failure of individual schools in meeting the challenges that their inspection poses. More precisely, parents' perceptions of OFSTED largely remain hostage to perceptions of the inspection that took place in their school, to parents' perceptions of the improvements that the school will make, and then in due course to the how the school will attribute the progress it makes. On the available evidence, parents appeared both satisfied and confident about the prospects. In the longer term, and especially in cases where inspection does not lead to improvement, parents may not understand to quite the same degree why recommendations that appear to emanate from OFSTED are not enacted.

What do parents have to say specifically about OFSTED?

Are parents receiving information about OFSTED itself?

Parents were asked if they had heard about or received any of OFSTED's publications. A substantial number of parents said that they had, as is indicated in *Table Q*.

Table Q: percentages of parents indicating that they had either heard about or received publications from OFSTED

Survey number	parents who had	parents who had not	parents who were not sure	total respondents
S1	33	48	17	3411
S2	34	47	17	1612
P	30	51	17	1686
Sp	24	59	14	399

Parents were additionally asked if they had read or heard anything about OFSTED in the Press, on radio or on television. *Table R* indicates that in the secondary and primary school sector, parents' awareness of OFSTED had grown quickly, but awareness among special school parents was markedly lower, counter to the apparent trend elsewhere in the data for special school parents to be more closely involved in their schools and more highly informed about what was taking place in them.

Table R: percentages of parents indicating that they had either read or heard anything about OFSTED in the Press, on radio or on television.

Survey number	parents who had	parents who had not	parents who were not sure	total respondents
S1	50	38	10	3411
S2	50	38	10	1612
P	49	39	10	1686
Sp	34	56	9	399

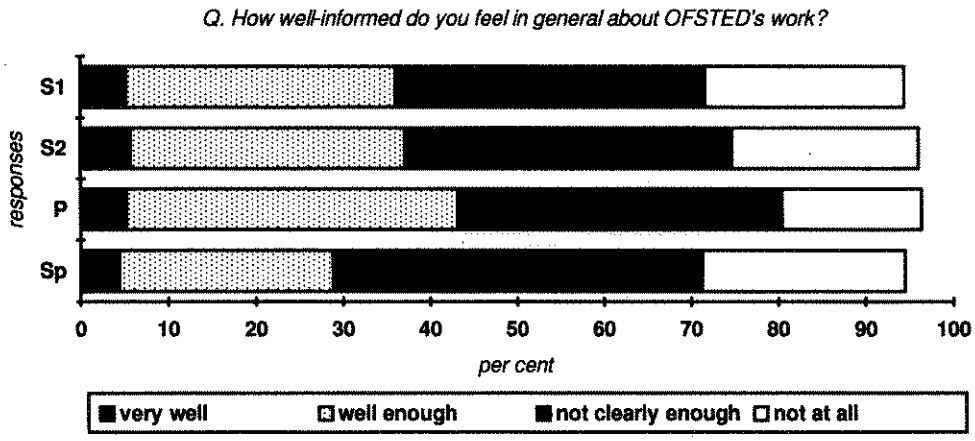
How well-informed are parents about OFSTED in general?

The distribution of responses to a question about how well-informed parents felt about OFSTED provided further positive indications, although there was a significant minority of parents who felt that they were not clearly enough, or not at all, well-informed (see *Table S*). It should be assumed that, because of the low response rate on the survey questionnaires, this is likely to under-estimates OFSTED's task in clarifying with parents its role, authority and areas of activity. The evidence suggests that information should be targeted in particular on parents in special schools and secondary schools. *Figure 16* illustrates this point more clearly.

Table S: parents' perceptions of how well-informed they were in general about OFSTED's work

Survey number	very well	well enough	not clearly enough	not at all	total respondents
S1	5	31	36	23	3411
S2	6	31	38	21	1612
P	5	38	37	16	1686
Sp	4	24	42	23	399

Figure 16: parents' perceptions of how well-informed they were in general about OFSTED's work



What more can be done?

What more can OFSTED as a body do? At each stage of the project - in the questionnaire surveys, in the telephone interviews and in the case study schools - parents were asked for suggestions about what more OFSTED could do to let parents know about the quality of education in their child's school. Many of the suggestions made were for improvements to the inspection process and these have been incorporated in the appropriate sections, above. Many of the suggestions parents made very clearly exceeded OFSTED's remit, for example in terms of making additional resources available for education in general.. *Figure 17* reflects the range of suggestions made in the areas most closely associated with OFSTED's stated purposes and established programme of work.

Again, some expectations are high: 'Our problem is the quality of education. Standards are much lower than when I was at school in the 1960s. These must be raised significantly all around the country and children must be encouraged, if not forced, to attain these standards. The fact that 34.4% achieved 5+ A-C grades is pathetic and I would expect at least 50%.'

If the above is a simple but eloquent statement about the importance of the goals that OFSTED has set itself in its commitment to "improvement through inspection", the following is equally succinct in its analysis of the main difficulty OFSTED will encounter as it endeavours to maintain and improve parents' perceptions of its educational role:

'I think if a parent or guardian is interested in finding out about OFSTED, the information is available. The problem is getting more parents interested.'

Figure 17: parents' comments and suggestions for what more OFSTED can do

suggestions for more information
'I want to know how OFSTED assesses teachers, what OFSTED regard as a good thing, what standards are required of teachers.'
'Explain what key stages are, especially in relation to ages and expectations of children's abilities.'
'Explain the words, "sound", "average" and "satisfactory", which are used a lot by OFSTED. Perhaps a summary of what these words mean in context would help.'

suggestions for more publicity
'More publicity on television.'
'Monthly newsletter.'
'Advertise in press and TV.'

suggestions for more information to help make comparisons
'An easier breakdown of exam results so parents can compare schools when choosing a secondary school for their children.'
'I'm not sure if it's possible but I would like to have other school OFSTED reports so that I could make some comparisons.'

suggestions for more monitoring
'I feel a lot more monitoring should be carried out; in particular I feel it is disgusting that children in the first year [Year 7] are not provided with text books on all subjects.'

other suggestions for what OFSTED can do
'A booklet setting out the parameters of OFSTED's authority.'
'Information about how often OFSTED will survey parents' views.'
'Send more information direct to parents.'

Changes over time

The two secondary surveys could be further subdivided to provide parent data relating to inspection in each of the first four terms of OFSTED's programme. This enabled the project team to carry out analysis of changing responses to OFSTED over time and, thereby, to comment on apparent trends in parents' responses. For the first four terms, the sizes of the subdivided data sets were as given in *Table T.*

Table T: numbers of parent responses according to the term in which secondary schools' inspection took place

Term of inspection	number of parents
Term 1	1078
Term 2	1459
Term 3	874
Term 4	1612

This analysis revealed some anticipated trends, for example towards greater awareness in Term 4 (88%) than in Term 1 (82%) of inspections taking place. Awareness of advance notice of the inspection, of invitations to the parents' meeting and of the letter or questionnaire to parents concerning their views, was consistently higher in Term 4.

Attendance at parents' meetings was relatively consistent across the four terms (varying between 14% and 18% of respondents), although parents' appreciation of their value rose slightly after Term 1. The pattern of issues raised in the pre-meetings became more even over the four terms; in other words, higher percentages of parents indicated that each of the key issues set out in OFSTED guidance were addressed.

The response to summaries of the final report largely remained constant over the four terms: parents' assessments of the reports as "very clear" or "fairly clear" were in the very narrow range between 91% and 93%. Parents from Term 4 were, unsurprisingly, less aware of action plans by the time they were surveyed early in 1995, but those parents who saw the plans gave relatively consistent responses to them in terms of their clarity (between 80% and 85% considered them clear) and appropriateness (between 70% and 76%). News of progress on the action plan was received by higher numbers of parents from Term 1, but the level was still only at 30% (of 423 respondents who had seen the original plan) for parents who were surveyed between eight and twelve months after their schools received their written inspection reports. This is evidence that parents' awareness of action plans, and the impact of plans on parents, is still very low in secondary schools.

Parents' responses regarding the effect of the inspection and the contribution to improvement remained relatively constant over the four terms although there was evidence that, as time passed, parents became slightly clearer about the impact. For example, more parents in Terms 1 and 2 answered that their schools were affected "in a few respects", rather than they "don't know" or it was "too early to say". The percentages of parents feeling that the school had been affected "very much" or "in many respects" ranged little over the four terms: only between 16% and 19% . The distribution of parents feeling that the inspection had contributed to improvements was very stable across the four terms. For example, the percentages of parents saying that there had been a contribution to improvement ranged only between 29% and 30%.

Knowledge of OFSTED through publications and the media was slightly higher at the time of the surveys among parents from Term 1 but, in general, the degree to which parents felt well-informed about OFSTED itself remained constant.

The important points that emerged from this analysis with regard to inspection were that:

- parents' perceptions of inspection became stronger as the inspection programme developed
- the information to parents in terms of advance notice, pre-meetings and letters from the Registered Inspector appeared to become more even
- coverage of issues in the pre-meeting became more even
- awareness of action plans remained quite low

Additionally, parents' awareness of OFSTED itself was raised over time by being involved in inspection but there was no marked change in how well-informed people felt about the organisation.

Parents' perceptions of OFSTED: evidence from face-to-face interviews

In interviewing parents at length about the many aspects of OFSTED and the inspection process, the project team reached a several, more general conclusions about OFSTED and inspection, about parents' information needs and about the kinds of information parents more readily use. The following points briefly summarise that experience and provide some important markers for future development:

Parents' language needed to be straightforward
Parents were slow to respond to educational jargon and technical language, even the most fundamental. Terms such as "standards", "values", "special needs", and "(pastoral) care" frequently had little or a distorted meaning for parents. There were particular problems where parents' awareness did not correspond with OFSTED's categories and what OFSTED considers to be evidence within that category. For example, parents did not necessarily see option evenings as an element of care and guidance. Therefore, there was scope for considerable misunderstanding between parents and inspectors concerning a school's strengths and weaknesses. This problem was less serious in primary schools.

Parents found it easiest to express views where they were asked questions which related directly to their experience
This is linked to the above issue. Asked about their views on their school's academic strength (are you satisfied with the academic side of your child's school?), parents needed prompting with questions about whether or not they felt their child could work faster or do better. Questions about differentiation (do you think the work your child is doing matches his/her ability) did not work well. Parents found it easier to answer questions about too much or too little work.

Many perceptions were not strongly supported by evidence
Parents frequently rehearsed general views about the school which did not reward much probing. Discussions about inspection tended to move quite slowly. When pressed for responses beyond their initial observations, parents often found it difficult to give extended comments or evidence to support their observations. The problem was greater in the secondary schools, where parents often possessed little detail about what happened. Some parents were confused by how schools worked, for example in the variety of parents' meetings for different purposes as their children went through the school. Sometimes parents felt that when the information they got was worrying, they did not know how to deal with it.

Primary parents readily discussed the school, the teachers, homework and "being stretched"
Primary school parents were prepared to share views about the general value of their child's school, about the general quality of the head and teachers, to some extent about homework (usually, criticisms were offered that it was "too little" or "uneven"), and about their child 'not being stretched', especially if it was a bright child. Discipline did not figure as a major issue.

Secondary parents shared views about the school, the teachers, the look of the pupils as a whole, homework (much more than primary), "being stretched" ,and discipline
Secondary school parents readily discussed the general quality of the school and its staff , often in terms of particular subjects. Secondary parents more commonly discussed homework (usually for being "too little" or "uneven", sometimes for being "too heavy" or "sometimes too heavy"). Parents felt their children could do with

more help managing homework and there were some comments about the load in particular subjects. Discipline did not figure as a major issue. Parents had general views about levels of resource provision in the school but little or no grasp of detail.

Some parents commented that they tried to keep in touch with the school but found the meetings and contacts uninteresting.

Most parents were protective of their school and generally quite clear that their own school was fine
Some parents said they were reluctant to offer negative comments both to inspectors and to the research team. Mostly, parents presented positives about their school and, certainly in open meeting, responded to apparent criticisms from another parent with comments which would immediately present a balance or the other side of an argument. Comments from primary parents in particular indicated that involvement in school activities as a governor or helper created some feeling of "ownership" of the school, whereas the inspection was owned by the visiting team. Views were offered that this might improve with a second or further experience of inspection.

Parents had begun to ask more searching questions of inspection and the inspectors
Parents, especially in primary schools, often questioned the inspection team's capability to inspect their schools. Some parents may have responded to schools' own questions in this area. Parents of some of the earlier secondary inspections asked searching questions about the value of the inspection, but they were not clear whether their lack of knowledge reflected no impact or incomplete information from the school.

There were clear indications that schools where the headteacher managed parents well got more positive parental responses at pre-meetings
There were two parts to managing parents well: the first was to get information out to parents and the second was to make it easy to follow. For example, some parents felt that they received a lot of information that was either unclear or unimportant. Most parents said that they would welcome more information about the inspection, about what happened afterwards, and about OFSTED itself.

Parents' interest in inspection tended to fall off quickly
The take-up of full reports by parents was very low. Several parents offered the view, or appeared to assume, that the information collected was primarily for the government and for the school to act on if important. A few suggested that, because the final report had not been sent to them immediately it was produced, they treated the inspection as less important and let the event pass them by.

Conclusions

This report has provided an account of parents' perceptions of OFSTED at a relatively early stage in its existence. The secondary schools taking part were in only their fourth term of the four year inspection cycle and the primary and special schools were in their first term. The scale of the study, which secured responses from some 7108 parents, has ensured that the picture that emerged of how parents perceived OFSTED and inspection is likely to be a fairly accurate one.

Parents have mainly experienced OFSTED through the inspection of their school. A fairly high number of parents claimed to have seen OFSTED publications and heard about or seen OFSTED in the news, but parents' perceptions were primarily formed through the inspection process. Most parents judged OFSTED on the immediate impact of their local inspection and future judgements are likely to be based on the lasting impact of the inspection. OFSTED is therefore to a large extent a hostage of its inspectors' competence and of schools' success in enacting improvements once the inspection is completed.

Nevertheless, many of the judgements that parents made were very positive. There was no strong reaction or disaffection or towards OFSTED. Most parents approved of the inspection activities that impinged on them: the preparation for inspection, the pre-meeting with parents, the information they received throughout the process, the summary of the final report, the action plan they saw later, and even the press coverage that followed.

Many suggestions were made for ways to extend OFSTED's inspection activities and direct involvement in schools: for example, parents suggested more meetings with parents, reinspections, regular reviews, inspections without notice, and continuing and more detailed information about their school. There was also a range of parental comments which reflected points that have been raised by teachers and schools about the inspection process: for example, comments about stress and anxiety, about needing to get used to the idea of having an inspector in their school, about insufficient praise, about needing to take the school's background and history more fully into account, and about apparent differences between oral and written feedback.

A small number of parents were stronger in their comments about inspection under OFSTED. For example, there was concern that a few schools were trying to "pull the wool over" the inspectors' eyes. In such cases, some parents wanted more frequent and more challenging inspection as a remedy. This would be difficult to deliver, however, because the research also revealed that, when pressed, many parents defended their school and resisted criticism. They quickly adopted positions where the inspection became characterised as something done to them by government rather than something done on their behalf. There is still much to be done to move beyond this positive response to inspection towards, what is fashionably called, "ownership" by parents of their schools' inspection. Certainly, parents involved closely in primary schools appeared likely to feel more ownership of their school than of the inspection.

The research study underlined that parents were more involved in primary than in secondary and special school inspection. There were more positives from primary parents about the information they received and the impact that the inspection had. Parental involvement in the school appeared to lead to more parental awareness of OFSTED. There is clearly a particular task to improve contacts with, and information to, parents in secondary and special schools.

This study has provided a snapshot. Parents' perceptions of OFSTED can generally be characterised as optimistic and reasonably confident, especially about inspection processes.

Most parents have been given sufficient information to avoid anxiety; most who have met inspection teams have been sufficiently impressed with their professional handling of events.

There are now some high expectations too. Most parents were unsure, or thought it too early to say, what was the effect and the positive contribution that OFSTED had made to their school. Those who expressed an opinion again tended quite strongly to the positive but there are many parents who remain undecided at this early stage.

Questioning is likely to turn in the future to matters of outcome: is the inspection process delivering school improvements, and is it value for money? The evidence from the secondary schools was that parents did not very quickly discover whether or not the inspection made a positive contribution. Most who offered an opinion perceived the effect to be in a few rather than in many respects. There is as yet no comparable data on primary schools.

This is not an area where OFSTED alone can determine success. Visible outcomes for schools will depend on schools' own success in determining priorities and meeting them, in identifying and calling on local support, and in deploying funding and other resources to effect school improvement. Schools will have both to succeed and to be prepared to attribute part of their success to inspection, for parents' perceptions of OFSTED to be improved by this route.

Annex A: Methodology

The design of the study

There were three major obstacles to be overcome in undertaking a study which would meet OFSTED's requirements for an early indication of parents' perceptions of their organisation.

First, there was the real possibility that parents' knowledge of OFSTED would be limited. OFSTED had not long existed and, in the context of many other educational changes affecting schools, may not yet have been known by many parents. The research study would itself demonstrate whether or not this was true, but the research design had to anticipate difficulties which could lead to potentially low response rates. Parents who would receive postal questionnaires about OFSTED might believe that they knew too little to be of value and not respond. Additionally, the best-informed parents were the most likely to reply, which risked biasing the results.

To overcome this first obstacle, the study focused on inspected schools. Parents in these schools were more likely to have some awareness of OFSTED and parents would therefore be less likely to be non-respondents simply out of ignorance. This made the study largely *prototypical*: it indicated how parents' perceptions of OFSTED were developing as they began to experience the inspection programme.

To ensure the study produced a sufficiently broad set of parents' views, four large scale surveys of parents in different inspected schools were organised. Each involved a brief postal questionnaire (of not more than four sides of A4 paper) to a large population of parents, who were additionally invited to take part in follow-up interviews by telephone. A small number of case study schools were later visited for face-to-face interviews with parents. The postal questionnaires were designed to start from what parents would be most likely to know, namely the inspection process and its perceived outcomes, before broader questions were asked concerning OFSTED and its publications. In order to minimise loss and delays, questionnaires were designed to be returned by mail, directly to NFER, rather than via the school. Returns were then checked to clarify how representative the responses were in terms of the whole sample.

The second main obstacle was that most parents' experience of OFSTED would be through meeting a Registered Inspector, hearing about the actions of the inspection team, seeing the inspectors' report and reading the subsequent governors' response. Fewer parents were likely to recall reading about specific OFSTED publications or press stories. The proposed study was likely to get views of OFSTED which in practice reflected experience of contracted, independent inspectors. As a consequence, the study consciously included experience of the school inspection as a proxy for experience of OFSTED. This approach was subsequently justified by parents' responses, which indicated strongly that parents drew no distinction between OFSTED as an organisation and an "OFSTED inspection" of their school. The further benefit was that the study produced useful indicators of areas that OFSTED might consider in further improving the inspection process itself.

The third obstacle was that schools were already indicating that their normal activities had to some degree been disrupted by inspection, so the impact of the research study on schools was minimised. Questionnaires were distributed with the minimum of additional work for the schools involved; administration arrangements were made as simple as possible, even where this made follow-up of individual respondents difficult and, therefore, response rates lower.

The programme of surveys and interviews

In September 1994, initial interviews took place with parents, registered inspectors, HMI and others to clarify aspects of the parents' perspective on OFSTED and the inspection process. This pilot activity helped the researchers quickly to develop a questionnaire instrument which in practice applied equally well to parents of children in primary, secondary and special schools.

As LEAs gave permission for schools to be approached directly, the schools were invited to take part in the study and, as they in turn agreed, copies of the questionnaire were distributed for them to send out to parents. Returns were received in between October and early December, 1994.

A first round of telephone interviews was organised and an interview schedule developed. Sufficient parents indicated their willingness to take further part in the study and parents were selected for the telephone interviews from the first questionnaire responses received. The interviews were designed to clarify the areas of improvement parents wish to see generally from OFSTED and specifically during inspections, parents' ideas of what constituted important or effective information from OFSTED, and any evidence of pupils' responses during the inspection.

NFER made an interim report to OFSTED in November 1994, which helped to clarify progress and agree priorities for the remainder of the study.

Further telephone interviews took place with parents of children in secondary, primary and special schools, who returned their questionnaires from the second survey. In the two telephone interview programmes, 642 parents were interviewed: 385 parents of children in secondary, 211 primary and 46 special.

Further face-to-face interviews were held with parents in eight schools, four primary and four secondary. The schools had been inspected between two months and six months before the interviews took place and the research team sought not only to explore parents' views more deeply but also to explore if perceptions of OFSTED and the inspection changed over time (for example after the action plan was distributed or after the annual governors' meeting with parents). Particular questions were asked to discover how parents might become more involved in the inspection process or in acting on the inspection findings.

The parents' sample and the response from parents

A sample of secondary schools inspected in the academic year 1993/4 was drawn from the list of schools provided by OFSTED in September. LEAs containing schools included in the sample were notified, according to protocol. Some 250 schools were identified in the sample, in order to ensure that there would be sufficient returns to meet the project's target figures. In practice, 125 schools had agreed to take part in the study by the start of November. Year groups in each school were randomly selected to take part in the study.

The list of secondary, primary and special schools for the second set of surveys was received from OFSTED in November, 1992. A sample of 60 schools was drawn from the secondary list. All the primary schools inspected in the autumn term, 1994 were approached to ensure that a sample size of 200 could be achieved. All special schools inspected in the autumn term, 1994 were approached to take part. Schools were approached and took part, as planned, in January 1995. Again, samples of parents were selected randomly within each school.

Although the numbers of parents who completed survey questionnaires was large, the overall response rate to the survey by questionnaire was low, at approximately 22% overall. The response rate for primary and special schools was slightly higher, and that for secondary schools slightly lower. The response rate was low partly because some schools did not wish to take part in the study so soon after their inspection and partly because the research team was unable to follow-up the mail-out to parents with reminders and requests for late returns. Schools distributed the individual instruments to parents and it is likely that some were lost in the distribution and others were simply not completed. The response rate was in keeping with other parents' surveys by questionnaire.

The important question that arises concerns the potential bias in the responses received. An analysis made of the response rate from different schools indicated that there was no bias evident in returns from metropolitan as opposed to non-metropolitan areas, or from schools with high as opposed to low percentages of pupils taking free school meals, the crude but traditional measure of social disadvantage. Responding schools appeared to be slightly higher achieving than non-responding schools, and schools in the south were more likely to respond and schools in the midlands less likely, although the differences were only marginally significant. The responses were not therefore unduly skewed according to school type.

This does not support the common sense expectation that responses would be more likely from parents in prosperous areas. Another potential bias that must be recognised is that the responses would be higher among those parents who had a good recollection of the inspection and a strong (or positive) response to the inspection that had taken place in their school. Because of the administration procedures used, these reasons for non-response could not be examined.

Exploring hidden bias

One initial concern was that parents' experience of the school and of OFSTED would be influenced by their experience as a governor, helper, teacher or other member of staff. In practice, very few of the respondents in the secondary surveys were governors, helpers or members of staff (see *Table U*). The contrast with primary schools was marked: 19% of parents who responded provided help in the school during the school week. It is important to recognise that this greater proximity with the school appeared to lead throughout the primary (P) parents' responses to higher levels of knowledge about inspection and about OFSTED.

Table U: percentages of parents in each school type who were governors, members of staff or helpers

Survey number	governors	members of staff	helpers	number of respondents
S1	2	1	2	3411
S2	1	1	1	1612
P	3	3	19	1686
Sp	5	2	10	399

This was the first suggestion in the study that knowledge of the school helped to ensure knowledge and understanding of OFSTED, its purposes and its activities. There was also a relatively high level of help in the school given by parents of children in special schools (Sp): 10% of respondents indicated that they provided help during the week. Consequently, in many respects, special school parents again demonstrated a higher awareness of the

inspection but they raised a number of their own concerns about the appropriateness of OFSTED's inspection programme for their school.

Missing data

In any survey, some respondents make incomplete or unexpected responses, which leads to cases of missing data. Overall, missing cases were few and this itself is an indicator that the questionnaire instrument worked well. Specific figures for missing data on each question are not included with the individual tables in this report, since rarely did the level of missing data exceeded 5% and then only slightly.

To facilitate comparisons between the data sets, in most cases simple percentages are reported. The percentages relate to different reference groups in different contexts, however, and clear indications are given in each instance about the appropriate reference group size. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number because to report percentages to one decimal place would suggest a level of accuracy in the data which the low response rate does not adequately justify. Where percentages do not add up to 100, this can be explained by the missing data.