



# STRATEGIC

RESEARCH & INSIGHT

Report

Estyn

Stakeholder Perceptions Research

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## 1. Executive summary

<b>Background</b>	<p>This research project helps provide insight to support Estyn on its journey and inform its priorities going forward. The intention is that this may be a three-year contract, to allow for survey results to be benchmarkable in the second and third years of the contract.</p>
<b>Sample size</b>	<p>415 responses were received for the online survey, with 63% coming from respondents who work for an education or learning provider. 23 qualitative interviews were conducted. Participants for these interviews include key contacts provided to SRI by Estyn, and survey respondents who were happy to be recontacted, so that SRI could seek their opinions in more depth.</p>
<b>Coding of open questions</b>	<p>Open survey questions allowed respondents to provide free-text answers. SRI coded these responses into themes. This thematic analysis is not an exact science, but helps highlight key themes and a range of opinions.</p>
<b>Awareness of Estyn</b>	<p>38% of survey respondents state they know about the work of Estyn 'very well', whilst 44% say they 'know it a fair amount', 15% say they 'know it a little', and 4% say they know very little about what they do (with most of these being parents).</p> <p>The majority of respondents are familiar with Estyn's role primarily through inspections, while comparatively few are aware of its other roles, such as informing policy, showcasing effective practices, or offering support and advice.</p>
<b>Overall perception</b>	<p>Perceptions of the organisation are mixed, with half (50%) of survey respondents reporting a positive or very positive opinion, compared to around a quarter (24%) who see Estyn in a negative light, and another quarter (24%) rating their perception of Estyn as 'neutral'.</p>
<b>What drives positive and negative perceptions of Estyn?</b>	<p>All survey respondents were asked to explain the rating they gave of Estyn through an open question. The responses for this open question were coded into themes.</p> <p>The most commonly cited reason for a positive perception of Estyn (10%) was the view that it is "fair, honest, rigorous, and professional." Additionally, 8% of respondents praised positive interactions and communication with Estyn, another 8% valued its supportive role and constructive feedback in driving improvements, and 8% appreciated the organisation's significant and impactful role.</p> <p>Conversely, the primary driver of negative perceptions (16%) was the stress and workload associated with inspections, which affect staff well-being, create anxiety, and distract from teaching. Suggestions for reform (13%) included unannounced inspections, assessing long-term progress rather than relying on snapshot visits, engaging staff in discussions, and improving transparency in reports. Another common concern (11%) was the inconsistency in experiences with different inspectors.</p>
<b>Estyn causes apprehension</b>	<p>While most stakeholders agree that Estyn is fair (61%), transparent (56%) and has a positive impact on education (53%), 84% of respondents say that the organisation causes apprehension. However, 44% also feel that Estyn 'provides reassurance'.</p>

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Qualitative interviews reveal that despite efforts to address this, feeling apprehensive is 'the nature of the beast' when it comes to being inspected, although undoubtedly there will be room for improvement to ease the concerns of settings.

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**Positive changes**

Some research participants, particularly those involved in the qualitative interviews, feel there has been a noticeable shift in the tone of Estyn. Some noted, unprompted, that the 'Ready Already' campaign has been well-received, and stakeholders welcome the removal of the judgements along with sense amongst a few that inspectors are becoming more approachable. These moves are beginning to soften some of the 'coldness' historically associated with Estyn.

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**Communication**

A key strength of Estyn, according to many stakeholders, is its communication. When excluding those who have not received any communication or engagement from Estyn, 66% rate Estyn's communication or engagement as 'very good' or 'good', 26% rate it as 'neither good nor poor', and only 9% rate it as 'poor' or 'very poor'.

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**Some inspectors slower to move with the changes**

Despite a positive and noticeable improvement in inspector behaviour, some stakeholders still perceive inspectors as being "adversarial," which can negatively influence the inspection experience. Additionally, a few interview participants expressed concerns that inspectors who have been out of education for an extended period or lack recent leadership experience may struggle to fully understand the current educational landscape and the challenges faced by senior leaders, settings, and learners.

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**Conclusions in brief**

The research reveals a mixed perception of Estyn, with stakeholders appreciating its professionalism and improved communication. Changes to inspection reports, focusing on insights rather than judgements, have fostered a more collaborative relationship. However, concerns remain regarding stress, workload, and the perceived inconsistency of inspections. Stakeholders have called for more frequent inspections and better-trained inspectors. While recent changes may not be widely recognised yet, and take time to embed in the sector, future feedback will help determine if these reforms lead to more positive perceptions. Addressing these concerns will be key to building greater trust with stakeholders.

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## 2. Background

The education and training landscape in Wales is dynamic; the ever-changing socio-political context in which education and training are delivered is matched by a focus on continual sector-wide development and improvement. As the office of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales, Estyn is a key part of the education and training improvement landscape as encapsulated in its mission statement:

*“Our **mission** is to support education and training providers to develop a self-improving and learning culture through our advice, inspection and capacity building”*

*(Estyn Annual Plan, 2023-2024)*

This dynamic landscape has experienced some particularly large challenges in recent years, including the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, Curriculum for Wales, Additional Learned Needs (ALN) reform, and the establishment of Medr: the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research. These changes and challenges have further stretched an already busy workforce.

Estyn has also been undergoing its own process of change. Historically, Estyn has been seen mostly in the light of its role as the regulatory body that assesses the performance of education and training settings and provides accountability. However, Estyn is on a journey in which it is developing, and raising the profile of, other elements of its remit. These include working with education and training providers to help build capacity and improve the quality of education and training in Wales, as well as taking a leading role in helping to shape Welsh Government policy.

To facilitate improvement, it is important that Estyn builds high quality relationships with its stakeholders, based on trust (e.g. *Listening, Learning and Changing Together: Our Stakeholder Engagement Strategy 2024-2027*). In this way, it is arguable that Estyn will be able to better fulfil its role as a facilitator to the education and training sector, rather than just being seen as an inspectorate.

This research project helps provide insight to support Estyn on this journey and inform its priorities going forward by addressing the following research aims:

- Explore the working relationship we have with our key stakeholders.
- Assess our reputation amongst key stakeholders including their view on who we are, what we do and the impact we have.
- Assess the impact and usefulness of our key reports, publications and campaigns.
- Understand stakeholders preferred methods of communicating and engaging with our organisation.

## 3. Methodology

### Research design and recruitment

#### Scoping interviews and a document review

SRI began the project by conducting scoping interviews with members of Estyn's senior leadership team (SLT). Five interviews were conducted, and the purpose of these interviews was to better understand what information would be of most use to the organisation, and in particular, to the SLT.

In addition to the scoping interviews, SRI also conducted a review of key documents. While our team members have good sector awareness, the document review helped ensure that when conducting the research, team members better understood the key issues facing Estyn.

#### An online survey and qualitative interviews

SRI worked with Estyn to develop a questionnaire for an online survey and a topic guide for qualitative interviews. The online survey was 'live' for five weeks, launching on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> October and closing on Monday 11<sup>th</sup> November, whilst the qualitative interviews were also conducted between October and November

The survey was distributed by Estyn via an e-shot to all providers in Wales which are inspected. Recipients of the e-shot were asked to share the survey with all of their staff, from management to support staff, as well as governors and parents. SRI discussed with Estyn the possibility of including learners, but it was decided not to include learners this year and revisit whether this might be feasible in future years.

SRI built up a database of additional stakeholders who may have had experience of or engagement with Estyn, and promoted the survey with these organisations, primarily through email. Estyn also provided SRI with a list of key contacts, primarily within Welsh Government and the Senedd, for the survey to be sent to.

SRI promoted the survey while it was live, and in particular, during the final weeks of the survey period to try and seek better coverage amongst stakeholder groups that had provided fewer survey responses. Estyn sent a reminder e-shot to providers in the final week in order to boost the response rate.

A key element of this research was that the survey be conducted independently of Estyn. Individuals will not be identifiable to Estyn. SRI arranged for independent hosting of the survey during fieldwork and to hold the resulting data on their own server. Estyn does not have access to the survey data file at any point during the project. As a Market Research Society (MRS) Company Partner, SRI is an independent research company which is required to follow the MRS Code of Conduct. As part of its professional responsibility, SRI protects the anonymity of research participants.

Participants from the qualitative interviews greatly appreciated the ability to provide their views in a confidential manner. However, it should also be noted that one qualitative

interview participant stated that some of their staff were still sceptical as to whether the survey was 'truly independent from Estyn'. SRI will consider whether there is any way to further alleviate these fears for future surveys, perhaps through strengthened wording in the promotion of the survey.

### Sample sizes achieved

We received 415 responses to the online survey, and conducted 23 qualitative interviews, slightly more than what was proposed (20 interviews). Originally, Estyn anticipated a response of up to 100 participants for the online survey, so the response has exceeded initial expectations. The qualitative interviews explored some of the survey questions in more detail, plus covered additional themes and experience of Estyn.

### Qualitative interview participants

Estyn identified key stakeholders they wanted to take part in the qualitative interviews, as well as stakeholders who they felt would be good candidates for interviews, based on their role or experience. Estyn provided 17 contacts for the qualitative interviews and nine of these took part.

A few stakeholders took longer to reply to our invitations to take part in a qualitative interview, and we were keen to honour those requests as they had kindly responded and agreed to take part. Those who did not respond were sent a follow-up email invitation, but we did not pursue any further to avoid them feeling unduly pressured to take part.

As noted, nine of the 23 interviews were from key contacts provided by Estyn; the remaining 14 qualitative interview participants came from the online survey respondents. The final question in the survey asked respondents if they would be happy to take part in a follow-up interview to seek their opinions in more detail. Those who were happy to take part were asked to provide their contact details. Of the 415 survey respondents, 82 (20%) were happy to be recontacted, resulting in plenty of potential sample for these qualitative interviews.

We employed two primary methods to recruit respondents from the online survey: 1) selecting participants from diverse backgrounds to ensure that qualitative interviewees represented a broad spectrum of sectors, and 2) aiming to include respondents with both positive and less positive survey feedback. However, it was challenging to recruit participants with negative perceptions of Estyn, as few were willing to participate in an interview. Of the 82 survey respondents who expressed interest in a follow-up qualitative interview, only 14 had a negative view of Estyn. Despite being invited, many of these individuals did not respond.

### Qualitative interview format

The qualitative interviews lasted 20 minutes and were conducted via Teams or telephone, according to participant preference. Both SRI and Estyn was keen that the interviews did not take up too much of key stakeholders' time, particularly if they had also already completed the online survey.

### Qualitative interview participants

To ensure the anonymity of interview participants, we cannot name those who took part. However, the breakdown below provides an overview of the roles of some of those that took part:

- Key Welsh Government official
- Director of Education
- County Council senior leader
- Governor
- Union representative
- Representative organisation
- Headteacher (primary, secondary, independent, special)
- Non-maintained nursery leader
- Teachers/lecturer
- Teaching assistant
- Peer inspector

### Reporting

In the interest of keeping this report to a readable length, we have attempted to focus on the key findings.

This report combines both the quantitative and qualitative elements of this research, exploring the findings of the survey and the themes coming through the interviews.

Below each chart we refer to the 'base'. This refers to the number of respondents who answered the question. Not all respondents answered every question. This will generally have been because they were intentionally 'routed out' of questions which were not relevant to them.

Not all charts will add up to the total 'base' figure. Some questions were multi-choice, where respondents were able to choose more than one answer and in these cases the number of responses may add up to a higher figure than the base. Similarly, for open questions (questions where respondents are asked for their comments), responses have been analysed and coded into themes. In many instances, respondents made comments which reflected more than one theme.

The base (sample) is small for chapter 11 which reports on findings from questions asked *only* to parents (49 parents completed the survey).

### Coded responses

Some of the questions in the survey were open questions. These are questions with no pre-coded answers, which allow the respondent to give a free-text response. Many gave full responses raising several points.

Open responses were coded by SRI into themes. Responses were often coded into several themes because the respondents' answers covered several topics. As a result, the quotes used in this report may represent several coded themes. In addition, some respondents gave more specific answers than others.

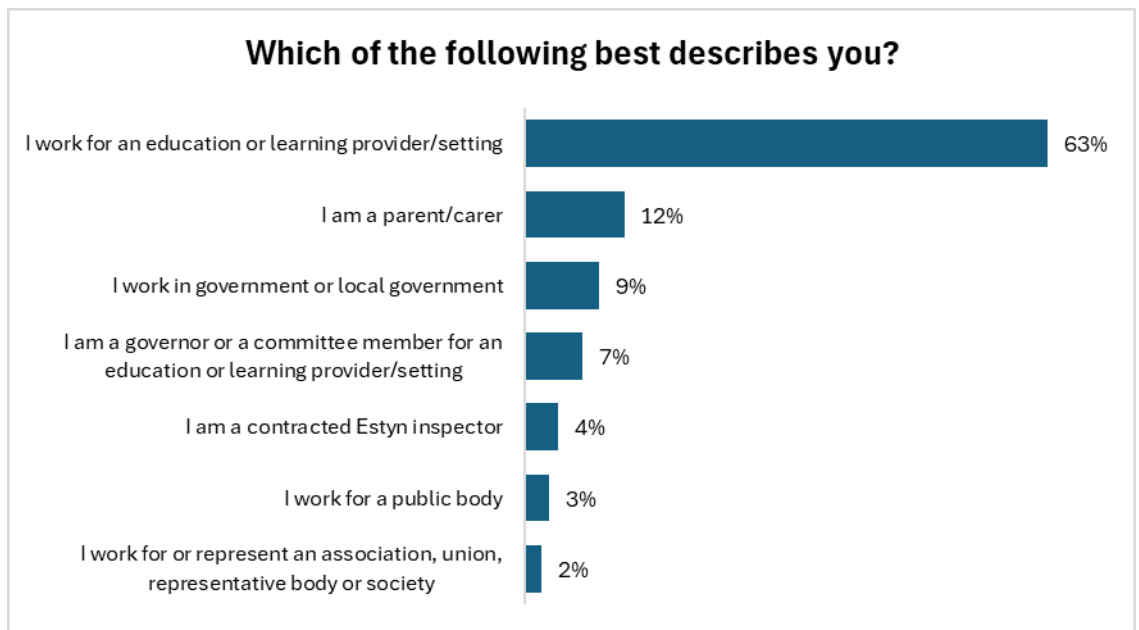


This type of thematic analysis is a valuable tool for extracting meaningful patterns and insights from qualitative data. It is important to acknowledge however that it involves a degree of human interpretation and judgement. It should not be seen as an exact science, but a useful tool to help readers understand the main themes which arose from open responses.

Coded responses can often be similar in nature but represent slightly different points. This again helps the reader to fully understand the full range of opinions expressed in open questions.

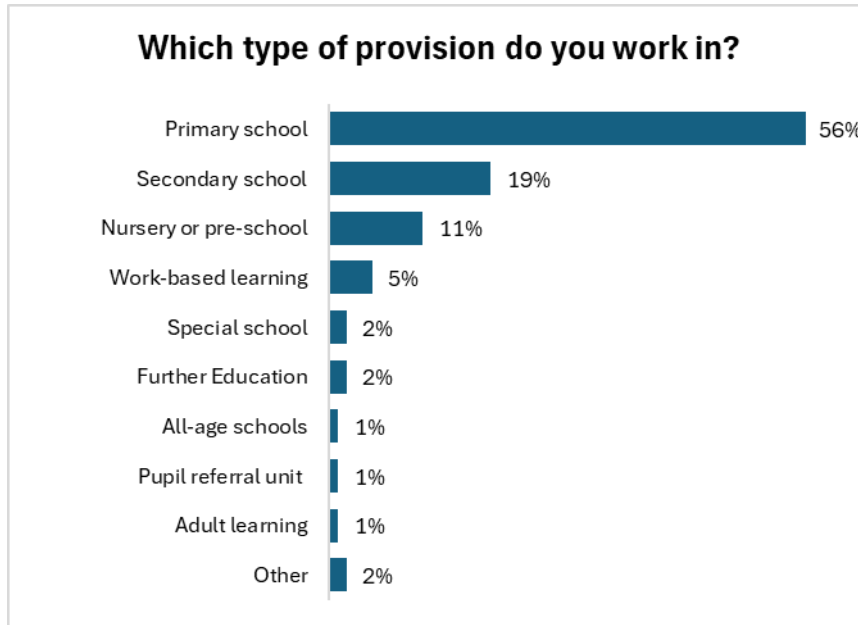
Responses which do not fall within the main themes for each open question have been coded as 'other' responses. We have reported on 'other' responses where we feel this is necessary, for example, because there are meaningful or useful points to highlight. In some instances, we have not reported on 'other' responses to try and ensure the report is as concise and focused as possible.

### Survey respondents



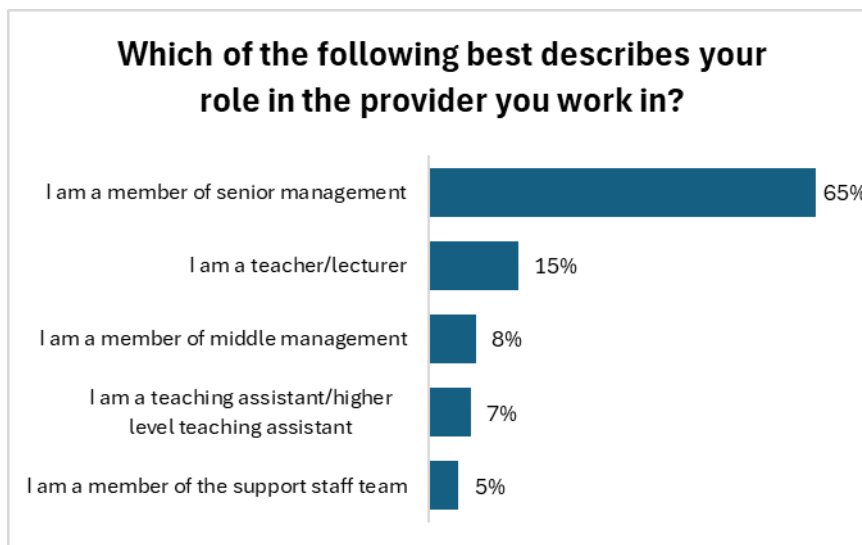
Base: 415 (all respondents)

Nearly two thirds (63%) of survey respondents work for an education or learning provider, making up the majority of the overall sample. Of these, more than half (56%) work in a primary school, and 19% work in a secondary school, as shown in the chart overleaf. Of those providing an 'other' response, that is, a response which was not in the pre-defined list of answer options, most of these were from initial teacher training.



Base: 262 (those who work for education or learning providers)

Those who work for education or learning settings were asked to note their position within their setting. As shown in the table below, around two-thirds (65%) hold senior management roles.

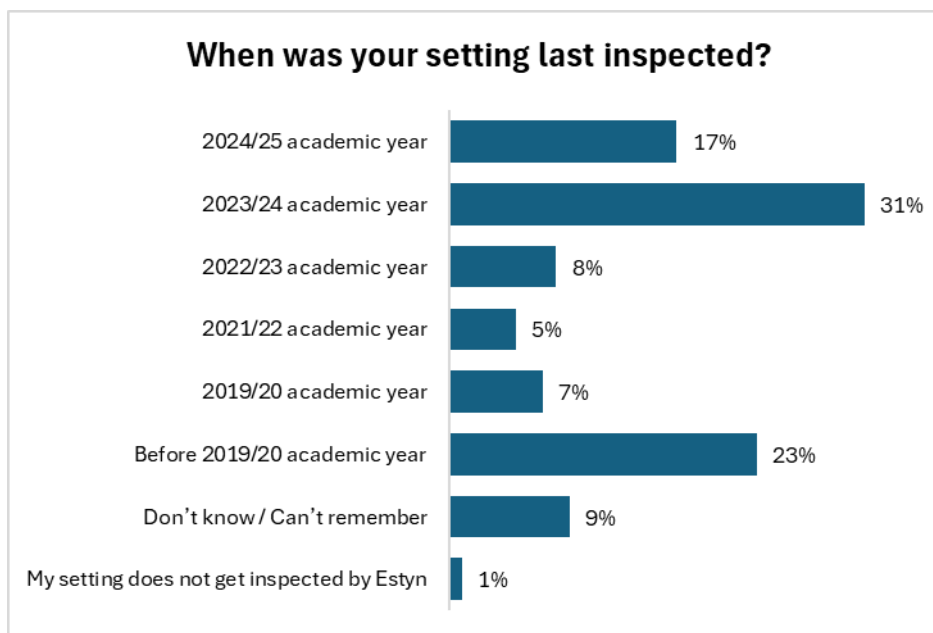


Base: 262 (those who work for education or learning providers)

Those who work for an education or learning provider, as well as governors and committee members, were asked where their setting is based, with the results shown below. It was not appropriate to ask other stakeholders for their location, partly for anonymity, and partly as this question would not be applicable for some types of stakeholder, such as those who work for Welsh Government, or for public bodies as their remit may be Wales-wide.

Local authority	Percentage	Local authority	Percentage
Swansea	15%	Newport	3%
Bridgend	11%	Pembrokeshire	3%
Flintshire	9%	Gwynedd	2%
Wrexham	9%	Merthyr Tydfil	2%
Neath Port Talbot	7%	Torfaen	2%
Rhondda Cynon Taf	7%	Vale of Glamorgan	2%
Caerphilly	4%	Blaenau Gwent	1%
Cardiff	4%	Ceredigion	1%
Monmouthshire	4%	Denbighshire	1%
Powys	4%	Isle of Anglesey	<1%
Carmarthenshire	3%	Refused to disclose	1%
Conwy	3%		

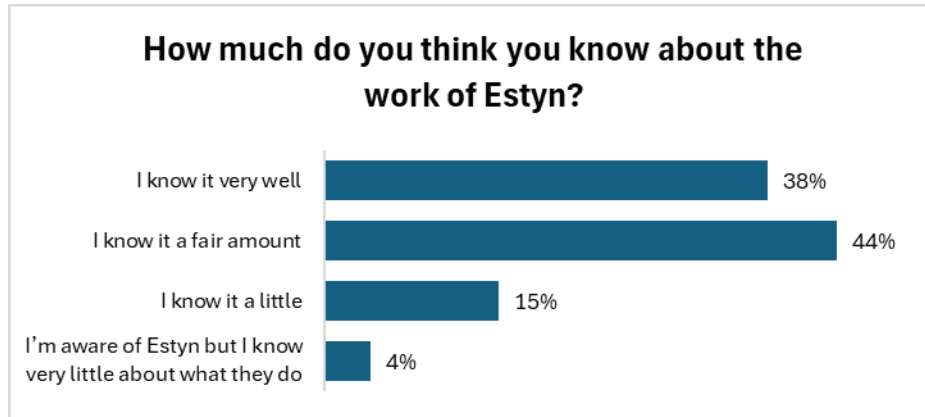
Finally, those working in settings as well as governors and committee members were asked to disclose when their setting was last inspected. This question was partly asked so that we could analyse results by inspection date. The results to this question are shown below.



Base: 262 (those who work for education or learning providers and governors/committee members)

## 4. Awareness of Estyn

### Awareness of Estyn (grading)



Base: 415 (all respondents)

Awareness of Estyn and what they do is fairly strong, among survey respondents. The majority of respondents say they know about the work of Estyn to some degree, with only 4% saying they are aware of Estyn but know little about what they do.

Most of those who say they know very little about Estyn are parents, accounting for 10 of the 15 respondents who provided this response. Parents are more likely to say they know less about Estyn, with 20% saying they are aware of Estyn but know little about what they do.

### Awareness of Estyn (open commentary)

After being asked to indicate their knowledge of Estyn, survey respondents were then asked to describe the roles and responsibilities of Estyn. This was an open question, and the responses have been coded into themes, and are shown in the table overleaf.

How would you best describe the roles and responsibilities of Estyn?	Percentage
Inspections	55%
Maintaining standards / improvement across Wales	37%
Maintaining providers' standards / improvement	31%
Support / advice	20%
Policy / best practice	11%
Safeguarding and wellbeing	8%
Thematic reviews	4%
Training	1%
Other	3%
None / not relevant	6%

Unsurprisingly, the most common role and responsibility of Estyn mentioned by survey respondents was inspections (55%). Also often described were maintaining or improving education standards across Wales (37%) and more specifically of individual providers (31%). Both of these survey responses are linked to inspections, in that survey respondents commented that these improvements are conducted through inspections. Nevertheless, these have been treated as separate 'themes' to better understand the specific points made by survey respondents.

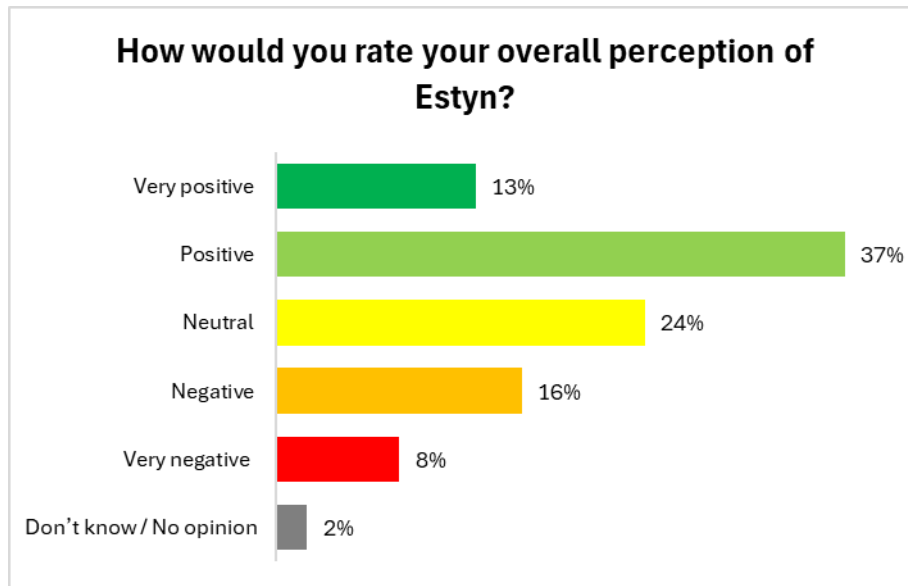
20% of respondents mentioned Estyn's role in providing support and advice to providers, while around 11% mentioned its role in shaping policy, or demonstrating best or 'effective' practice.

8% of comments emphasise Estyn's role in safeguarding and wellbeing, focusing on inspections to monitor safety, policies, and legal compliance, as well as promoting mental and emotional health, alongside academic development.

4% of comments relate to Estyn's role in conducting thematic reviews, and (1%) mentioned training run by Estyn. 3% of responses were unique and could not be grouped together with any other comments, while 6% did not answer the question.

## 5. Overall perceptions of Estyn

### Overall Perception



*Base: 415 (all respondents)*

Overall, perceptions of Estyn are mixed, with half (50%) of survey respondents expressing a positive or very positive view, compared to around a quarter (24%) who hold a negative perception, and another quarter (24%) who hold a 'neutral' view of Estyn.

A degree of caution should be applied when reviewing these results by stakeholder type, as the sample size is small for many of the groupings (e.g. between 8 and 49 respondents for some stakeholder types). The proportion of those expressing a 'very positive' or 'positive' view of Estyn, by stakeholder type, are as follows:

- I am a contracted Estyn inspector (100% positive view)
- I work for or represent an association, union, representative body or society (75%)
- I work in government or local government (71%)
- I work for an education or learning provider/setting (48%)
- I work for a public body (45%)
- I am a governor or a committee member for an education or learning provider/setting (36%)
- I am a parent/carer (31%).

It is worth noting that the qualitative interviews were, on the whole, very positive. These spoke of professionalism, strong communication and often saw Estyn as a necessary agent, holding the education and training sector to account and driving child-first improvements.

*“The people at Estyn are very approachable and can provide very good insight. I would say that my leadership skills have been honed by working with Estyn, and I have also seen the good leadership demonstrated while on inspections myself”*

## What drives positive and negative perceptions of Estyn?

All survey respondents were asked to explain the rating they gave through an open question. The responses for this open question have been coded into themes and are shown in the tables below. We have split the themes into three tables – positive themes, negative themes, and neutral themes. Below each table we comment on the key themes which come from 5% or more of survey respondents.

### Themes driving positive perceptions

Please explain the reasons for your rating (positive themes)	Percentage
Fair / honest / rigorous / professional	10%
Interactions / communication has been positive	8%
Supportive / useful feedback / feedback drives improvement	8%
Play an important role	8%
Progressive organisation / listens to feedback from stakeholders	7%
Inspectors were friendly / approachable	7%
Inspections went well / positive inspection	7%
Happy with recent changes to inspections / framework / changes to approach	6%
Resources are useful (reports, guidance, website etc.) / training has been useful	2%
Being an inspector is rewarding / good CPD	2%

### Estyn is fair, honest, rigorous, and professional

The most common reason (10%) for a positive perception of Estyn was a feeling that Estyn is ‘fair, honest, rigorous and professional’.

*“Having been part of a school that has moved out of special measures, I can only say that the regular multi-agency meetings and monitoring visits had a significant impact on helping the school focus on key priorities for improvement. Estyn team members who visited the school were very honest in their appraisal of the work of the school and delivered their findings in a highly professional fashion. The recent core inspection forensically identified strengths and further areas of development for the school to help with its improvement journey.”*

*"I have had experience of Estyn as a Headteacher and an Executive Headteacher on a number of occasions over the past 5 years, and have found them to be honest, fair, measured and, importantly, rigorous and robust. Their approach is of high integrity balanced with being supportive, yet blunt."*

### **Interactions and communication have been positive**

The next most common response (8%) highlighted positive interactions with Estyn. Many of these comments were general, expressing overall satisfaction with interactions, particularly emphasising effective and positive communication with Estyn.

*"Our experience of working with Estyn has been positive. We have channels to support communication, and they are approachable and open to discussions."*

*"Staff are helpful and communicative, happy to answer any queries that I may have."*

### **Supportive and useful feedback**

The same proportion (8%) felt that Estyn is 'supportive, provides useful feedback, and that their feedback drives improvement'. This theme captures the constructive and supportive role of Estyn inspections in fostering school improvement. For these respondent, feedback provided by Estyn is seen as practical, enabling institutions to identify strengths and areas for improvement. These respondents note that inspections are not only about accountability but are viewed as a partnership that drives progress, enhances teaching quality and ensuring high standards in settings.

*"Whilst scrutiny can be uncomfortable, inspectors quickly cut through to the detail they need, and their findings and recommendations are a very effective way of driving school improvement."*

*"Their thorough inspections and supportive feedback help enhance our practices and ensure that learners receive a high-quality education. Following inspection, there are clear areas for improvement and good practice."*

*"I see Estyn as an opportunity for genuine growth rather than just a judgement... For me, their recommendations are far more than criticism—they provide a structured pathway to improvement."*

### **Estyn plays an important role**

Similarly, 8% of responses highlight Estyn's important role within the education and training sector. Some comments explicitly link their positive perceptions to this role, while in other cases, Estyn's role is mentioned but it is less clear whether it is a primary factor influencing their positive perception.

*"The body is crucial for providing constructive advice and detailed reports on the performance of schools and the overall picture of education in Wales."*



### Estyn listens to stakeholders

7% of responses relate to comments which describe Estyn as a progressive organisation, which listens to and acts on feedback from stakeholders.

*"From my involvement with the heads' reference group, I have seen that Estyn is willing to take on board the views of stakeholders and to make some changes as a result."*

*"From my experience in recent months in the youth work sector, Estyn has been open and transparent in regard to their approach, as well as inclusive and responsive in developing new, bespoke guidance. This has included requests to visit recognised representative networks to both impart information and shape the new inspection framework for the sector. Inspectors leading on this area up to and including Director level have been positive in their approach and open to making necessary amendments to guidance i.e. they have listened to the sector."*

### Inspectors are friendly and approachable

7% of responses note that the inspectors were friendly and approachable. These positive interactions with inspectors were often defined as inspectors being friendly and easy to talk to, which in turn, fosters trust and openness during inspections. Similarly, creating an environment for dialogue and exchange rather than formal interrogation encourages staff to share insights more openly. This kind of positive personal engagement helps to reduce anxiety and ensures the process is seen as collaborative rather than adversarial.

*"This was my first experience of an inspection, and I had got the feeling that it was going to be awful. The inspectors made us feel at ease and we were happy to be observed and questioned."*

*"Ymdeimlad o sgwrs yn hytrach na chyfweliad yn rhoi hyder i rywun siarad yn fwy rhwydd ac yn fwy naturiol. Arsylwadau gwersi teg a realistig." / "A sense of conversation rather than an interview gives someone confidence to speak more easily and more naturally. Fair and realistic lesson observations."*

### The inspection was a positive experience

7% of responses indicated that their inspection was a positive experience. These responses ranged from brief mentions that the 'inspection went well' to more detailed accounts explaining why, such as positive interactions with inspectors or improvements compared to previous inspections (both of which are addressed in other themes).

### Happy with changes to inspections

6% of responses relate their positive perception of Estyn to recent changes to the inspections. Although not one of the more common themes, this is an important theme as

this feedback directly relates to changes made in recent years, of which Estyn is very keen to receive feedback on.

These comments note that the changes have made the inspection process more collaborative, supportive, and focused on improvement rather than solely on fault-finding. Key factors driving this positive shift include:

- **Collaboration and support:** Many respondents feel that the new approach is more about working *with* schools to improve, rather than just evaluating them. Estyn is seen as being more focused on helping schools succeed.

*“An inspectorate is vital and Estyn have a key role in Welsh education. Moving to less judgement outcome is positive. Interim visits are a step in the right direction. There are more steps that could be taken to become a supportive system that drives improvement in standards...”*

- **Positive feedback and focus on improvement:** Respondents note that inspectors now emphasise leaving schools in a better state than they found them, offering clear directives for improvement even when outcomes are negative.

*“I have been involved in many inspections over the 20+ years, however I have noticed a distinct shift in the behaviours and attitudes of inspectors. I feel there is a real emphasis on leaving the school in a better state than when they found it.”*

- **Emphasis on wellbeing and reduced pressure:** The recognition of the stress inspections cause has led to changes aimed at reducing anxiety, with more focus on supporting staff wellbeing and fostering a positive atmosphere.

*“Estyn over the last few years have worked hard to make the experience more beneficial to the school and less stressful which schools do appreciate...”*

- **Increased transparency and communication:** Inspectors are seen as more open to feedback and transparent in their approach, ensuring that schools feel heard and involved.

*“I think the team that came to our school, changed my opinion of Estyn to a positive point of view. ... I felt the changes that have been made to the system have been beneficial for all stakeholders.”*

- **Less judgemental:** The removal of judgemental categories and focus on constructive dialogue instead of fault-finding has been welcomed by many respondents.

*“The new framework is much more about working in collaboration with the school... Estyn’s mindset has changed significantly, with much more emphasis on supporting schools rather than criticising.”*

## Themes driving negative perceptions

Please explain the reasons for your rating (negative themes)	Percentage
Cause stress / huge amount of work	16%
Query over inspection process / suggested changes to inspection process	13%
Experiences differ between inspectors / inspections	11%
Need to be more understanding / compassionate	3%
Feedback is not always useful or lack of feedback	3%
Estyn is viewed negatively / negatively by some	2%
Inspectors were not friendly / approachable / poor interactions	2%
Negative experience of last inspection (other reasons or non-specific)	2%
Poor / lack of communication	1%
Negative comment (non-specific / little detail)	1%
Does not help parents / more engagement with parents	1%
Comments / queries over policy / state of education in Wales	1%

### Stress and workload

The most common theme driving negative perceptions is the stress and workload associated with inspections (16%). These respondents focus on the stress and pressure Estyn inspections can place on schools and staff. While inspections are seen as important for maintaining standards, these respondents report that they generate significant anxiety, workload, and fear, negatively impacting teachers' and leaders' well-being. Many respondents highlight the stigma and public nature of reports, which contribute to further stress. Additionally, the workload required to prepare for inspections often distracts from core teaching tasks, exacerbating stress and reducing morale.

*"The stress the education sector feel due to Estyn is overwhelming and isn't helping the recruitment & retention of school-based staff."*

*"I had a very serious health issue that was triggered by the Estyn inspection process."*

### Suggested changes to inspection process

This theme (13%) highlights the call for reform. In particular, these comments call for:

- **Spontaneous inspections:** Inspections should occur without prior notice to avoid schools preparing a "show" for inspectors.
- **Consideration of long-term progress:** Assess schools over time rather than relying on a brief snapshot during inspections.

- **Greater engagement with staff:** Provide opportunities for staff to directly discuss inspection outcomes and provide feedback.
- **Improved transparency and communication:** Make reports clearer and more accessible to all stakeholders.

*"I think Estyn need to be more spontaneous with the school inspections as when school has the chance to prepare for it and they temporarily fix/ remove/cover up the issues that they have in the school."*

*"We felt they didn't spend enough time in classes to make the observations a true reflection."*

*"Estyn reports are sometimes not transparent and can be difficult to fully understand."*

### **Differences between inspectors/inspections**

The next most common negative theme – ‘experiences differ between inspectors / inspections’ (11%) highlights significant variation in the experiences schools have during inspections, primarily due to differences in individual inspectors and inspection teams. While some inspectors are seen as supportive and collaborative, others are perceived as judgemental, inflexible, or disconnected from the realities of modern education. The variation in approach, tone, and expectations between different teams leads to inconsistent experiences, contributing to stress and confusion for schools. The subjectivity of inspections, influenced by the personal views and experiences of individual inspectors, can result in differing evaluations and outcomes, which may not always accurately reflect the school's situation. The theme also highlights that some inspectors may lack recent classroom experience or understanding of the current challenges in education, which can affect the quality and fairness of the inspection process.

*"It seems to me that it is pot luck on how your inspection goes. It appears that different teams seek different things. Speaking to other schools, each team has a different agenda. It is well known which inspectors are tough! It shouldn't be like this."*

*"Estyn benefits from how badly regarded Ofsted is within the profession in England. Estyn does not seem to attract the same criticism of educational bias or promoting an ideological agenda directed by government. However, there are many anecdotal stories about inspectors rushing to judgement, lacking flexibility, being overbearing. It's the luck of the draw I guess."*

*"The inspection each school receives still seems dependent to a certain extent on the team. I realise that this is difficult to control and the new framework is much more about working in collaboration with the school but I still feel the majority of schools still find inspections quite stressful. Having a peer inspector has helped this situation and the teams do seem far more open to discussion and interaction with the end of day meetings proving extremely useful and informative."*

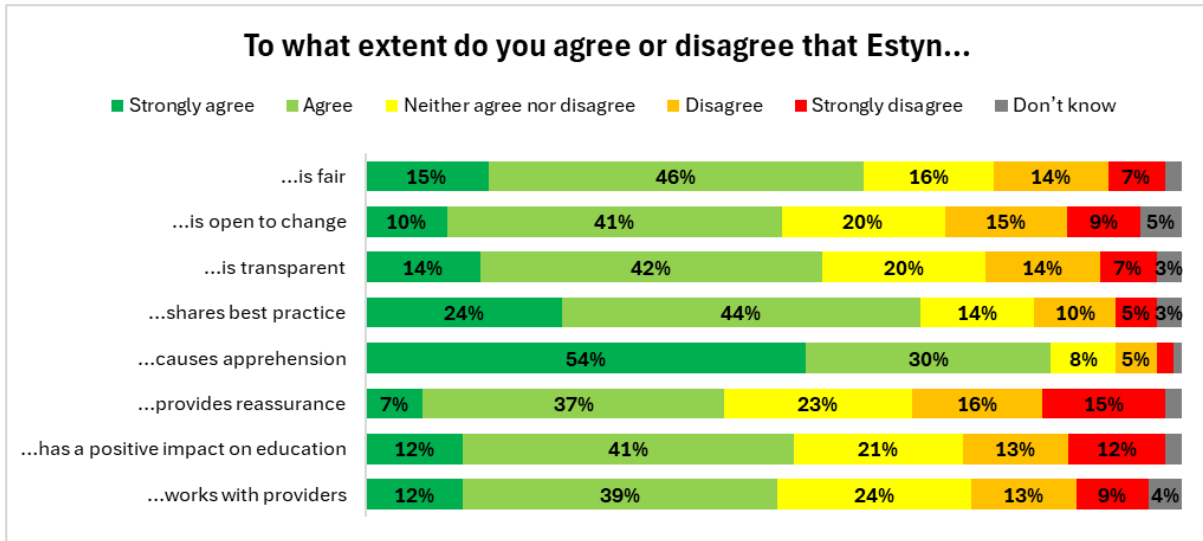
## Neutral themes and other comments

The remaining themes were neutral or represented 'other' comments (3%). By this, we mean comments which could not be grouped together with any other comments.

Please explain the reasons for your rating (Neutral themes)	Percentage
Need a greater focus on supporting settings / sharing best practice	1%
Other	3%
Little interaction / not been inspected recently / no strong opinion / don't know	6%
No answer	7%

## 6. Key attributes and characteristic

### Key attributes



Base: 262 (those who work for education or learning providers)

#### Fairness

Most (61%) survey respondents feel that Estyn is fair (combining the percentage that 'agreed' and 'strongly agreed'), compared to 21% who believe it is not (combining the percentage that 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed').

Respondents who described their last inspection as positive were more likely to view Estyn as fair (82%), while those who had a negative experience with their last inspection were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree (68%) that Estyn is fair.

Fairness, according to some survey respondents and interview participants, means being accurate in their inspections and looking for both the good and the areas needing improvement, whilst being open about report outcomes and explaining judgements or descriptors.

*"It feels like Estyn wants providers to do well, not wanting to trip people up or go out of their way to seek out if something is slightly amiss. It's an open, good discussion"*

*"It seems to me that it is pot luck on how your inspection goes. It appears that different teams seek different things. Speaking to other schools, each team has a different agenda. It is well known which inspectors are tough! It shouldn't be like this. Our team had two HMI inspectors in it. Straight away we had other professionals telling us they felt sorry for us! It shouldn't be like this. Overriding feeling is that it is very unfair and untrue that inspectors work with you and not against you. We had many sleepless nights following our visit."*

*"Ultimately, Estyn has to make judgements on systems, processes, outcomes, whether the message is what you want to hear or not, without fail I've never had*

*the problem of someone not being able to say, 'this is why the judgement is this',  
it's always been backed up by a very clear framework system"*

### Openness to change

Around half (51%) of respondents believe Estyn is open to change, compared to a quarter (24%) who do not.

As noted already, one of the main drivers of overall positive perceptions towards Estyn related to a feeling that Estyn is a progressive organisation, willing to listen and act on feedback from stakeholders.

*"I think Estyn is keen to listen to the views of the sectors and tries hard to communicate this. Inspection is bound to create some anxiety, as with any external accountability process, but there is transparency in most cases. Estyn does evolve and respond to challenges e.g. by reducing writing requirements on PIs"*

### Transparency

According to 56% of respondents, Estyn appears to operate transparently, while 21% disagree.

The responses to this question vary across different staff roles within education providers. While 61% of those in senior leadership positions agree to some extent that Estyn is transparent, only 38% of middle management, 21% of teachers/lecturers, 37% of teaching assistants, and 58% of support staff agree. However, it is important to note the small sample size for positions other than senior leadership.

*"It is understood that Estyn has a job to do and that standards and quality in education are important. However, there are often vast inconsistencies between the strategic vision, the messaging, and the HMI and the team, as well as team to team, that arrive with you to carry out inspection activities. Some HMI/AI simply do not listen and set out to prove their 'hypothesis,' published reports do not reflect the actual conversations that were held or evidence practice shared."*

*"Through peer inspection and my own experience of inspections in schools I feel that they have been fair, transparent and considerate to the schools' needs"*

### Sharing best practice

More than two thirds (68%) of respondents said Estyn shares best practice, compared to 15% who disagreed to some extent.

*"I've always found them incredibly generous with sharing their work, research and processes. It's pivotal: their absolute generosity in willing to share"*



## Causing apprehension

Alongside the positive perceptions, the majority feel that Estyn causes apprehension. 84% 'agree' with the statement that 'Estyn causes apprehension', including over half (54%) who 'strongly agreed'.

On exploring the theme of apprehension further in the qualitative interviews, participants often described it as 'the nature of the beast' and that feeling apprehension when being inspected – particularly when so much is at stake – is a normal human reaction, rather than this purely being associated with negative attitudes towards Estyn.

*"For those who have had limited interaction, only inspections, they can be intimidated. They can worry a lot. We have internal observations every year, some staff get a bit wound up for that, so inspections can be intimidating, but it is right that we are inspected. There is a little bit of a fear factor when they come into the classroom, especially for those who don't have any other interaction with Estyn. It's slightly different when you're being observed by someone in your own institution for internal quality purposes and an Estyn inspector... It's a human trait, people get anxious when Estyn are coming in to observe"*

To alleviate the sense of apprehension, some stakeholders in the qualitative interviews offered suggestions on how to address this issue.

*"I think they should come out more often to make it not such a daunting experience. Come and have a chat and interact with people more, come in as co-workers to develop a relationship"*

*"Call them something else – inspection just sounds grim. I know they provide training and all sorts of things"*

Others suggest that apprehension is an inherent aspect of the 'high-stakes' environment in which Estyn operates.

*"No one likes being inspected but, on the whole, it is as positive experience as it can be"*

Another comment from the interviews, which was a theme throughout the research, is that some of the apprehension felt by staff is based on previous experience, the reputation of inspectorates generally – across the United Kingdom, or the lack of familiarity with Estyn, and that some of these issues have begun to be addressed in the last few years. In fact, one representative from initial teacher training discussed how students fear Estyn, despite never having had any real interaction with them.

*"Reputation is probably historical, they have gone a long way to improve their reputation, doing things with schools not at them. It's school's responsibility to allay students fears over Estyn"*

*"I do a presentation on Estyn towards the end of their teacher training programme, and you can see the dread on their face as they walk into the lecture room. I ask them to give me words to describe Estyn and inevitably they come out*



*with a lot of negatives, and they've kind of been indoctrinated to feel that Estyn can be horrible"*

### Providing reassurance

While the majority acknowledge that Estyn generates apprehension, 44% also report that it provides reassurance, while 31% disagree. This reflects a key point previously mentioned: the nature of inspections inherently causes some level of apprehension among providers and their staff, despite Estyn striving to offer reassurance.

Interview participants who feel that Estyn provides reassurance highlight the clarity of instructions and expectations provided ahead of inspections, as well as their appreciation for the sentiment behind the 'Ready Already' campaign.

*"They are proactive and work hard to reassure on things like expectations of inspections"*

*"They know when you get a call, it is going to be sending the fox into the chicken coop. That staff are going to be anxious. The whole process is explained to allay any fears. They work hard to say you don't need to prepare anything different. They have worked hard on their image and that comms has been excellent"*

However, there does seem to be inconsistency with the experience providers encounter. Commonly through the research, stakeholders say their experience with Estyn can vary greatly according to the inspectors assigned to them.

### Having a positive impact on education

More than half (53%) of survey respondents believe Estyn has a positive impact on education, compared to a quarter (25%) who do not. Comments tended to talk of personal careers and settings, as well as considering broader impacts on raising standards across Wales.

*"It has been very positive in my entire headship. Estyn have been part of the school improvement"*

*"Estyn plays a vital role in ensuring high standards of education across Wales through its thorough and fair inspection processes. The organisation provides valuable feedback that supports improvement and encourages best practices in schools and other educational settings. Their reports are clear, constructive, and focused on the well-being and success of learners. Additionally, Estyn's advisory role to the Welsh Government ensures that education policies are informed by real, on-the-ground insights. Overall, Estyn's work significantly contributes to raising the quality of education and training in Wales" (Survey responses)*

### Working with providers

The last key attribute asked survey respondents whether they thought Estyn works with providers. As with the rest of the question, there was a positive leaning, with half (51%) saying they do, and 22% saying they do not.

The sentiment through the qualitative interviews is that Estyn seems to be working hard to avoid settings feeling like the inspection is happening *to them* but is, where practical, a more collaborative process aimed at identifying areas for further development, with better conversations and a more supportive approach.

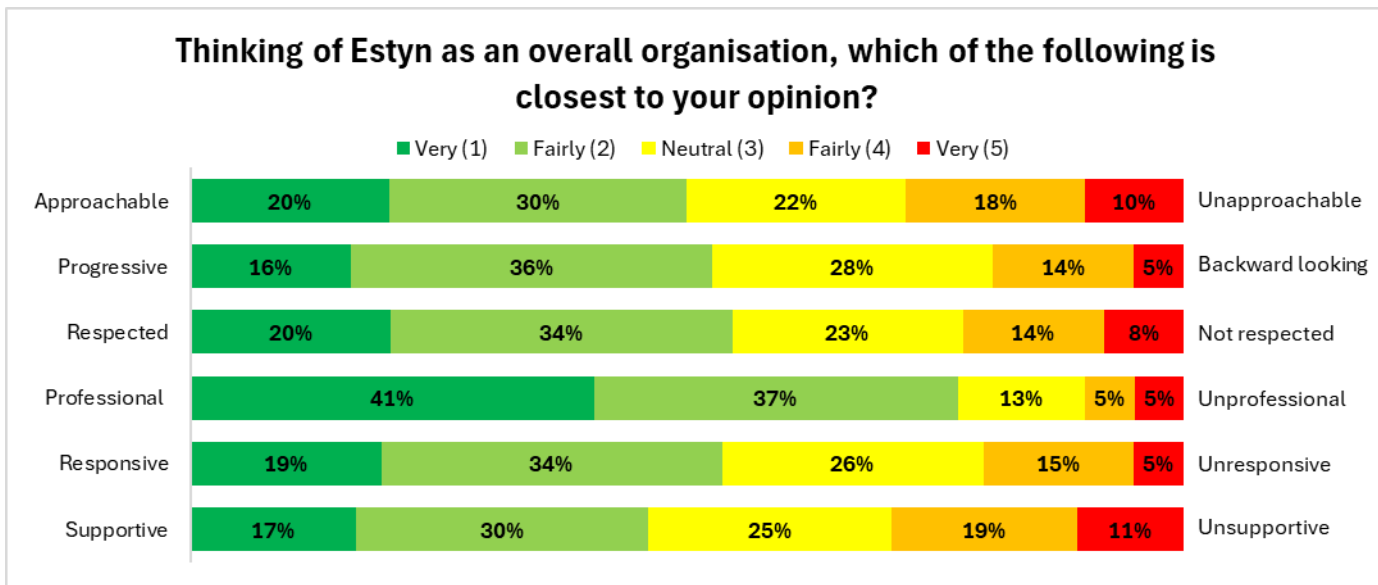
*“They are far more open, the door is always open for a chat with them”*

There is also a feeling that Estyn is listening more to stakeholders than they have ever done before and that they value being heard.

*“They practice what they preach and are constantly working to improve what they do and get it right to help schools be better. They listen an awful lot to us”*

As previously mentioned, one recurring theme in stakeholder perceptions of Estyn is the view that it is a progressive organisation that values and acts on feedback from stakeholders, and as a result, is seen to be ‘working with providers’ rather than against them, which is how some used to view Estyn. This is also perhaps how some still view Estyn, especially if their only engagement was many years ago under the previous inspection frameworks.

### Characteristics



Base: 262 (those who work for education or learning providers)

### Mixed views on Estyn's organisational characteristics

Overall, as described earlier in this report, stakeholders have a positive (50%) perception of Estyn, with a quarter (24%) reporting negatively. However, when considering specific organisational characteristics, opinion is more mixed as shown in the above chart.

The characteristic which received the most positive response was around being 'professional'; 78% of respondents feel that Estyn is 'very' or 'fairly' professional. When combining these responses ('very' and 'fairly') for the remaining characteristics, 54% of respondents feel that Estyn is respected, 53% feel that Estyn is responsive, 52% feel that Estyn is progressive, 50% feel that Estyn is approachable, and 47% feel that Estyn is supportive.

There are high proportions of neutral responses for all but one characteristic which suggests mixed or neutral opinions. Furthermore, there is a significant minority of respondents who consider Estyn to be 'unsupportive' (30%), 'unapproachable' (29%), 'not respected' (22%), 'backward looking' (21%), and 'unresponsive' (20%). These results indicate that there is work to be done in these areas, even if technically more respondents have a more positive view than do not.

Some survey respondents and interview participants elaborated on some of those characteristics. Shining through, was a perception of its unrelenting professionalism remaining steady while it undergoes changes towards how it interacts with stakeholders.

*"I feel like Estyn is rigorous, leaves no stone unturned. They operate with absolute professionalism, they operate as human beings, they show compassion and understanding and they are adept at finding and exposing the issues while making sure they operate with integrity and empathy"*

*"Generally, Estyn are seen as a big deal, increasingly they're seen as far more supportive than before, which was coming in, making a big noise, making everybody feel uncomfortable, I think that has changed. Over the past 5 to 6 years Estyn are seen to be far more approachable and far more reasonable"*

*"I think that Estyn conduct robust thorough inspections, but they do it with us rather than to us, which for me is a real difference in the way that they operate to other inspectorates in the UK"*

A commonly mentioned characteristic valued by stakeholders is the sense that Estyn is responsive when approached. This adds to a feeling of the support, openness and transparency.

*"I find them to be responsive to feedback, they're dynamic and possibly more so with the new HMCI, he's got a fresh vision that is very much predicated upon doing with schools rather than to them"*

*"If I've got any concerns I can go to Estyn, they're really responsive"*

However, positive experiences are not universal, as noted earlier when commenting on the themes driving negative attitudes towards Estyn.

*"Many schools are too afraid to give honest feedback about their inspectors as they feel this may have some influence on the final draft of their report. There is a culture of mistrust with Estyn."*

*"Lies told by the team when we have lodged our serious complaints. The memory of many inspectors appears rather worryingly forgetful. Every incident reported that we are unfortunately still reliving was not 'recalled' by the team."*

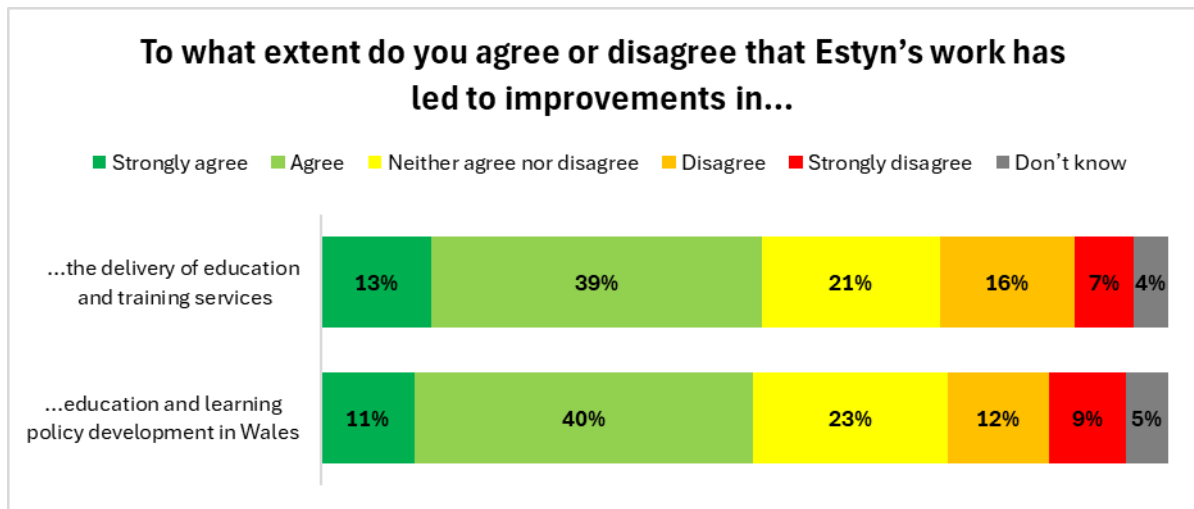
*"There is also still a large degree of nepotism with regard to inspectors and those being inspected. This prevents us being transparent and truly progressive."*

*"In previous inspections (not most recent one) inspectors have been aggressive and not willing to discuss or listen to staff as well as trying to catch people out or read things into a statement that isn't there."*

*"There seems to be a lack of knowledge of evidence-informed practice among inspectors and too many of them do not have recent classroom experience."*

*"How can someone who hasn't taught for 10 years (and more in lots of cases) tell a serving teacher/Head Teacher that what they are doing isn't right/good enough?"*

## 7. Improving education



Base: 262 (those who work for education or learning providers)

### Delivery of education and training services

When asked whether Estyn’s work has led to the improvement of the delivery of education and training services, 52% agreed and 23% disagreed. As noted previously, when asked to describe Estyn’s role and responsibilities, 37% mentioned Estyn’s role of maintaining or improving education standards across Wales and 31% said Estyn works to improve the standards in individual settings.

In the qualitative interviews, stakeholders often highlighted how Estyn's work contributes to improvement in two key ways: the cumulative effect of enhancing individual settings and the ripple effect this has on the wider education system as settings are inspected, but also giving feedback on how they can improve and the sharing of effective practice.

*“Case studies and best practice helps you review your own way of work”*

*“There has got to be accountability in the system. Human nature means you want to meet those standards for an inspection. Knowing Estyn is coming over the hill makes you look under the rocks”*

It is also worth noting that only 1% of respondents mentioned training when asked to describe Estyn’s role and responsibilities. In the qualitative interviews, stakeholders talked of at least knowing that training existed while others said they have benefited from it.

*“Having been part of the groups, like digital competency, they take on board what we’re doing and use that best practice to inform what they do. What I’ve gained from what they’ve said informs and improves my practice”*

### Policy development

There was a recognition that Estyn works to improve education not only from the bottom up (through inspections), as is most commonly expressed, but also from the top down,

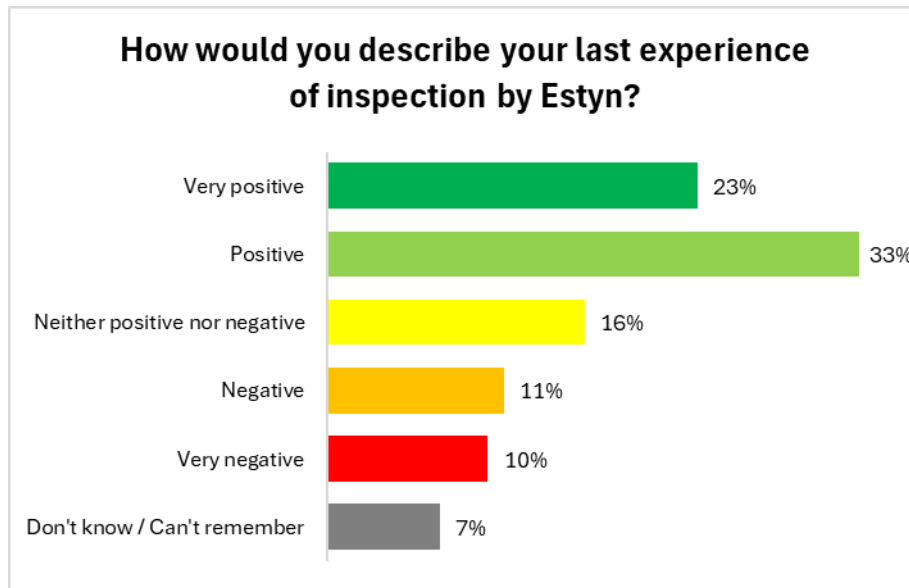
influencing policy development. 51% of respondents agree that Estyn's work has led to improvements in 'education and learning policy development in Wales'.

*"They have a huge helicopter view which must feedback to policy or what's the point? The thematic reviews trigger new guidance coming through, like attendance. It got picked up in inspections, a new guidance document must have been fed into by Estyn"*

## 8. Inspections

### Description (rating) of experience of last inspection

Those respondents working in learning and training providers, as well as governors, were asked to describe (or rate) their last experience of inspection by Estyn, with the results shown in the chart below. They were then given an opportunity to explain why they gave this rating. This was an open question and the responses have been coded into themes, shown in the table below. Commentary on these results is shown below the table.



*Base: 262 (those who work for education or learning providers, excluding those who say they do not get inspected)*

Despite the apprehension around inspections, over half (56%) of stakeholders say their last Estyn inspection was a positive one. Members of senior management are more likely to record a positive experience (67%), compared to other staff<sup>1</sup> (41%). However, over a fifth (21%) noted a negative experience for their last inspection, so the feedback is mixed.

There is a notable difference of opinion between those who have been inspected recently, or during the pandemic, compared to those who were inspected before the pandemic. The results to the above chart, by year of inspection is shown below. Please note we have grouped some years due to the small sample sizes:

- Inspected in 2024/25 academic year: 66% positive
- Inspected in 2023/24 academic year: 62% positive
- Inspected in 2022/23 or 2021/22 academic year: 71% positive
- Inspected in 2019/20 or before: 47% positive

<sup>1</sup> Responses for all other staff combined, due to a low sample. These being: 'middle management', 'teacher/lecturers', 'teaching assistant', 'support staff'.

## Reasons driving positive or negative perceptions around most recent inspection

Why do you say that?	Percentage
Inspectors friendly / approachable / professional	20%
Inspectors / inspection was fair / positive	16%
Supportive / respectful / considerate	16%
Stressful / affect wellbeing	15%
Inconsistent	12%
Worked well with staff / children	12%
Inspectors listened / engaged	11%
A negative experience	10%
Unfair	9%
Rude / unfriendly / unprofessional / confrontational	7%
Rigorous / thorough	4%
Much better experience than last time	3%
Demoralising	3%
Lack of engagement with wider staff / school community	1%
No opinion / little engagement	4%
Other	6%

In the open comments, 20% of respondents say their last experience of an Estyn inspection was positive because of the demeanour of the inspector, using descriptor words like 'approachable' and 'friendly'. 16% felt that the inspection was fair, sometimes describing good engagement with staff and learners during a visit, often also saying the team listened to them, a positive factor mentioned by 11%.

In a similar vein, 16% described feeling supported or respected during the process, or said the inspection team was considerate.

However, 12% mention feeling their most recent inspection was inconsistent, and 10% described it as negative, often with no further explanation.

For 15% of respondents, the inspection was described as a stressful experience or one that negatively impacted on their wellbeing. Sometimes, this was linked with the behaviours of inspectors or inspection team being unapproachable, rude or confrontational.

As reflected in the following subheadings, the attitude and behaviour of inspectors has a huge impact on a stakeholder's feelings about inspection and will determine whether this is positive or negative experience.



## Further insights on inspections

### Inspections are becoming less daunting

Although not a universal experience, some older inspections were a harrowing experience for staff. The anticipation during the build up to the visit, the extra work load and the fear of being inspected were exacerbated by an approach that often felt judgemental and cold, not appreciating the contextual differences and complex issues faced by settings.

*“It (2019/20 academic year) didn't feel like a professional dialogue that could be supportive. It was more a judgemental snapshot of a very complex working environment”*

In the qualitative interviews, there were strong themes of seeing genuine improvements in inspection teams' interactions with settings, offering a more understanding and more collaborative approach.

The table below shares the voices of stakeholders who described positive changes in Estyn in recent years. Some say they have noticed positive changes since Covid-19, others claim changes have become more apparent since the new Chief Inspector joined Estyn.

*“In the recent inspection, teachers were pleasantly surprised that it wasn't the dreadful experience they were expecting”*

*“They used to fill with fear. They never felt positive like a plan to move forward, felt like they were coming in to criticise. From speaking to colleagues from other schools who have gone through an inspection in the last few years feels like things have improved and are more positive”*

*“Last time (2023/24 academic year), the inspectors were available and very focused on wellbeing. They were very approachable, which is not always the case. They were very keen to hear our opinions on the school, its journey and the inspection, which is positive. It used to feel tokenistic, but this time they were involving us in the report and the language of the report. It ran very well. They were at pains to talk about the visit from a personal perspective, how they felt with the children and staff, which we could feed back to the staff”*

*“They have changed so much as an organisation, I remember inspection teams where they would certainly not use their first names, always surnames, whereas now the inspectors are very much on first name terms. I would say that it's a two-way learning process, there's an appreciation that there's a two way offer in terms of what information we can provide to each other at these events”*

*"The last visit was like they were not trying to catch you out with professional dialogue, they gave you a chance to big yourself up and share the good things that you do rather than sitting you down after they watched you teach and questioning you on things they know that will trip you up"*

*"We had an inspection in 2016 and the experience was horrendous for all members of staff, not just me. Members of the team weren't only challenging, they were judgemental. One of the inspectors in a meeting raised her voice at me and banged her hand on the table. I mentioned that to the team that came for this inspection that some of the staff felt they had post-traumatic stress disorder from the last inspection. The inspection this year was completely different, it was like the inspectors were a natural part of the school. There was no threat. Everybody enjoyed the experience, it was so positive"*

*"Estyn has improved in recent years. My first inspection was in 1999 and was a process done at you not to you, there was definitely a fear factor around Estyn. But in the last 4/5 years there has definitely been an improvement in their communication with you, the fact you feel part of the inspection process and the head is included in all the conversations"*

*"I've noticed another change that when they do activities, they do them alongside you rather than just making judgement – that gives it more context and listens to the learners"*

## Inspectors

A common theme running through qualitative interviews was the impact inspectors can have on an inspection experience, and the how their different approaches and level of experience can really affect how well a setting perceives an inspection goes. Based on the open comments coded above, while more respondents report a positive experience with their inspectors, some (7%) say their experience was negative because of a combative or rude inspector.

### **'Adversarial' inspectors stuck in their ways**

Many comments throughout the research, as already highlighted in this report, point to a 'new wave' of inspectors who are open, friendly and collaborative while remaining professional. Stakeholders often report the historical combative style is moving out of the way for a progressive and supportive approach.

*"There always used to be a feeling, that is still out there, that it depends on the team you get. So there were some notorious Estyn inspectors and if you knew that one was coming to you, or going to one of your mate's schools, you'd think*

*oh my God, you'd just know the outcome before they'd stepped over the threshold. I don't think that's so much the case now"*

But while most have embraced the 'turning of the tide', some stakeholders report there remain inspectors that have not yet relaxed that confrontational, combative and disconnected stance.

*"There can be a bit of a disconnect between the message that is coming out of leadership in Estyn and that of some inspectors who might have been with the institution for a long time. Not sure the messages are hammered home, but then that is institutional change and there is always a lag. A few are still in old adversarial mode"*

*"There are issues with how certain inspectors conduct themselves. I feel like there's a turning of the tide with Estyn in that there's new direction of travel and some people have come on board quickly, others maybe less so"*

### **Experience matters: timing**

Another area of discussion in the interviews was how important stakeholders felt it was to have inspectors with recent, direct and relevant experience in education – particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. Some participants described a sector that had undergone huge changes in recent years, and inspectors who have experience of that better understood the challenges currently faced by settings and wider shifts in the landscape.

*"New inspectors who have recently left FE/learning is important – because they've had recent roles in the sectors it does put people at ease, adding to that openness, honesty and transparency"*

*"Post Covid the landscape and ecosystem of education has changed and the demands on schools are so much greater. There are very few in Estyn who have led a school post-Covid and that's an issue"*

*"One thing it is important they continue to do is seek the views and expertise of peer inspectors. Some inspectors have been out of FE / schools for a considerable time. They have spent time and resources supporting peer inspectors, but they need to continue to do that as they really are in the thick of it in their day-to-day job. I would be very nervous if they moved away from having peer inspectors in their structure"*

*"I think there have been real issues around their credibility of some of the HMIs in regard to their currency in education. They have been out of education for a very long time"*

### **Experience matters: Setting type**

A couple of stakeholders said that they face extra barriers when being inspected by HMIs who lack direct experience of specific areas such as ALN or the independent sector. That

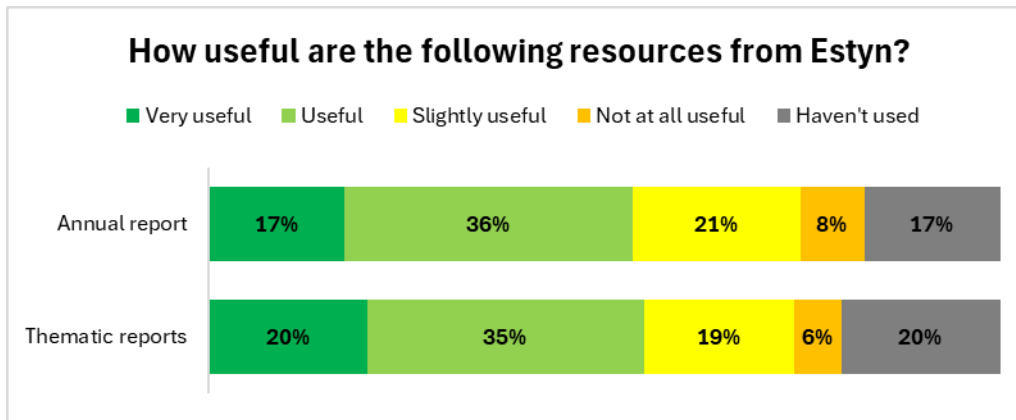
lack of understanding comes through in their questions and comments, so they value having inspectors who are experienced in their field.

*“For inspectors who don’t have ALN background, it’s hard to come up with responses for them – repetition is important for these students, so if you don’t know that it’s tricky. If an inspector comes to look at the job but has not done the job, then that is tricky”*

*“Sometimes there is concern if some of the inspection team are not experienced in the independent sector. Some might feel the HMI might have a bit of an agenda – what has been reported to us and through experience, generally the inspection teams are very understanding of the sector, but occasionally there is an HMI who has not taught or had experience in the sector and might have strange perceptions or have a bee in their bonnet about something which might make it more difficult than it should be”*

## 9. Resources, events and communication

### Resources



Base: 366 (all stakeholder types excluding parents)

#### Estyn's report resources

Over half (53%) of survey respondents say that the annual reports are 'very useful' or 'useful', while a similar proportion (55%) say the same of the thematic reports. When excluding those who have not used the reports, 61% of those who have used the annual reports describe them as useful (again, combining responses), while 70% describe the thematic reports as useful.

Only 17% of survey respondents say they have not used (read) the annual reports, and only 20% say they have not used any thematic reports. Only 12% of senior management have not used the annual reports, and only 11% of senior management have not used thematic reports. It is not possible to analyse results for other staff, due to small sample sizes.

We also asked about these reports in many of the qualitative interviews. For those who do use the reports, most say they find them useful. In particular, stakeholders mention effective practice and case studies as areas of interest in these reports. They can be used as a prompt for settings to reflect on their own provision and pick up on areas that might be improved, or reassurance on things they are doing well.

*"We scrutinise the annual report and thematic reports, Estyn are there to inspect but also to share information. They'll signpost where things are working well"*

*"The case studies are really good and really useful. It's good to see what other people are doing, and seeing how other schools are working things through"*

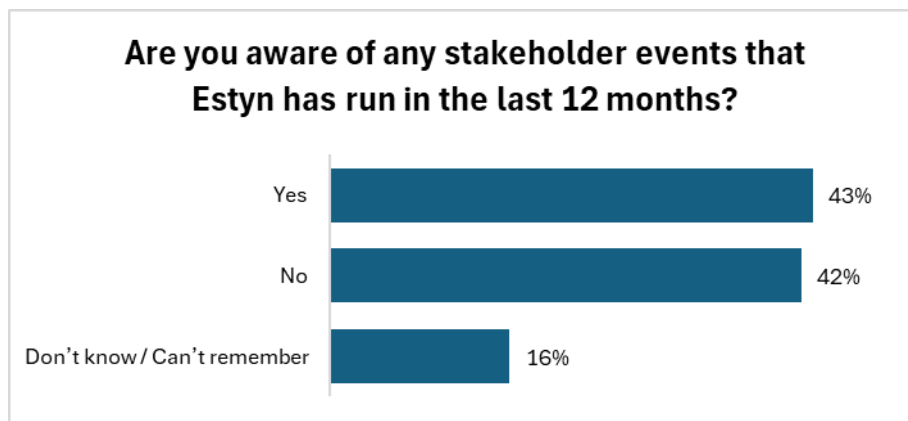
Some stakeholders said they valued the addition of the summary offered in the annual report, which now gave them the opportunity to see an overview of its contents rather than necessarily needing to devote the time to read the whole document to understand its key themes. It also gave them an understanding of whether the report contained any specific areas of interest for them.

*“They now do a summary and an annual report, so they are trying to give bite-sized information to the sector, instead of just a one-off 100–150-page annual report”*

*“They can be heavy. This year they gave bullet points on what would be covered. Summarizing is very useful. By the time you’ve read the full report Estyn has moved on to something else. They’re helpful to schools that are about to be inspected”*

*“The newest report gave a short insight into your sector which was to do with the recommendations which gives you a good insight in what’s going on in the sector”*

## Stakeholder events



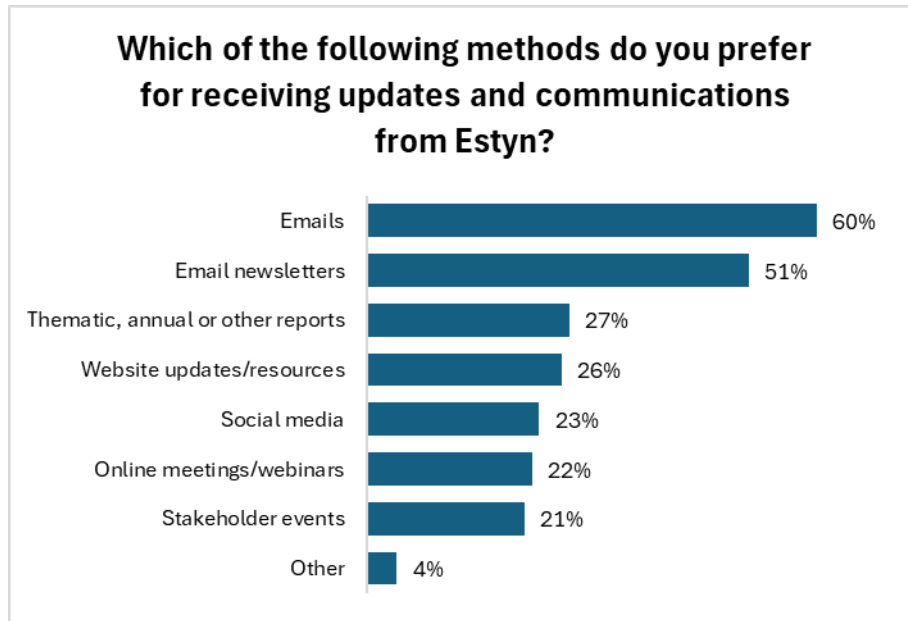
*Base: 366 (all stakeholder types excluding parents)*

### Awareness and usefulness of events

Of the overall 43% aware of recent events, 62% say they have attended an Estyn stakeholder event in the last 12 months, and the vast majority of these (96%) say they were useful.

*“The events are very well organised. I don’t feel that they’re a waste of time, plus there is room to develop a relationship with peer inspectors in those sort of events”*

## Communications



*Base: 366 (all stakeholder types excluding parents)*

### Preference of communication

Email is the most preferred choice of communication channel overall (60%), and for all stakeholders when reviewing the responses by stakeholder type. During the interviews, stakeholders often made it very clear how little time they had. They are much more likely to read communications that come to them directly.

Currently, not all stakeholders receive emails directly from Estyn, but it is the senior leadership team that often holds responsibility for forwarding on appropriate emails to their staff, and believe it should remain that way rather than expecting Estyn to broaden their engagement to the wider education network.

### Newsletters

Email newsletters were also a common preference (51%) for stakeholders, who value the snapshot of information, often finding them ‘useful and informative’.

*“I think their newsletters are informative. They published early insights, which is helpful ahead of the annual report, helping us see where we are in relation to those areas”*

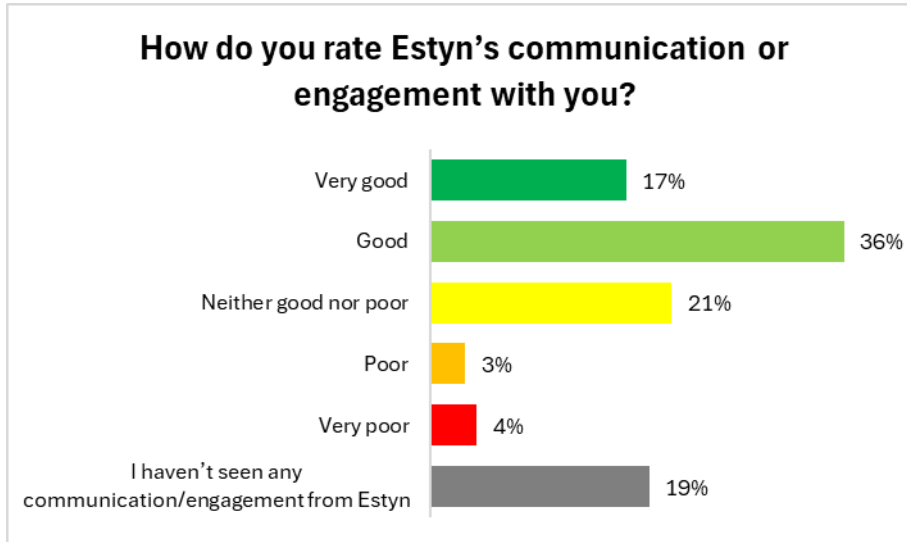
A few stakeholders said a concise newsletter with signposting to items such as news, training, events and reports could help them quickly filter the information to find what they are interested in and what might be useful for their staff.

### An improved website

Some stakeholders noticed and appreciated an improvement on the functionality of Estyn’s website.

*“The website’s a lot better than it was - it was dire – but the new website is better, it’s easier to find stuff. This could continue to develop”*

### Rating Estyn’s communication or engagement



Base: 366 (all stakeholder types excluding parents)

53% of survey respondents rate their communication or engagement with Estyn as ‘very good’ or ‘good’; 21% rate their communication or engagement as ‘neither good nor poor’, and only 7% rate it as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. When excluding those who have not received any communication or engagement from Estyn, 66% rate Estyn’s communication or engagement as ‘very good’ or ‘good’, 26% rate it as ‘neither good nor poor’, and 9% rate it as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.

Nearly one in five (19%) respondents say they have not seen any communication or engagement from Estyn, although this figure reduces to 11% of senior management when looking at responses by role. It is not possible to analyse results for other staff, due to the small sample size, and it would be of little value to split results for some of the roles, such as ‘support staff’.

### Explanations of ratings for communication and engagement

All stakeholders who said they had received communication from Estyn in the online survey were asked to elaborate on their response in an open comment. Their comments have been coded into the table below:



Why do you say that?	Percentage
Regular / consistent / timely communication	17%
Emails / email newsletters particularly good	14%
Communication generally good (non-specific positive comment)	10%
Easy to access / get in contact with / responsive / engaging	9%
Relevant / informative / helpful	9%
Communication irregular / not enough communication / don't hear from Estyn	8%
Clear / easy to understand	7%
Professional / approachable / friendly	5%
Inspections (including pre-inspection information / post inspection feedback) communication is particularly good	5%
Poor experience with Estyn (e.g. inspection process was bad / stressful) / Negative comment about Estyn generally	4%
Content not useful / relevant / engaging / box ticking	4%
Communication generally neutral/no strong feelings / mixed (non-specific neutral comment)	4%
Communication not excessive	3%
Transparent	3%
Social media particularly good	3%
Don't receive much communication (neutral)	3%
Website is particularly good	2%
Events / conferences particularly good	2%
Communication generally poor (non-specific negative comment)	2%
Noticed recent improvement in communication / committed to continuous improvement	2%
Communication is unclear / late / has errors	2%
Website is difficult to navigate / online registration for events an issue	2%
Reports particularly good	1%
Not answered / No opinion	9%
Other	9%

## 10. Further feedback from the qualitative interviews

### Public profile and reputation

Stakeholders who took part in a qualitative interview were asked for their perceptions and opinions of Estyn taking a wider outlook, considering its broad reputation and its public profile. There was a feeling that Estyn is fairly well respected by the public, but that little is known about the organisation outside of its responsibility to inspect schools.

*“I don’t think the wider public really understand what Estyn really does beyond whether their local school is good or bad. I don’t think what they do is publicised or communicated very well”*

Whether more efforts should be put into broadening its public profile was something that split opinion. For some stakeholders, there was a feeling that there should be communication directed at the public, but there was also an acceptance that it would be a challenge to lift engagement outside of people working in the education and training sectors.

*“It’s a public body, they should have more of a profile. Communicating with broader audiences is more of a challenge – great website and well written documents, but not sure about getting people on it”*

Other stakeholders thought that it would be wasted resources, believing that Estyn would be trying to communicate with people who are not interested in being communicated with.

*“Unless you are involved in education, I’m not sure people have that much perception of Estyn, other than knowing they are an educational inspection body”*

*“People are busy. Do they need to raise their profile? What is the purpose of that?”*

*“Don’t think there would be much engagement from parents. I think they are barking up the wrong tree on that one. Parents who are interested will read it, those who are not, it wouldn’t matter if it was communicated in advance, they are not interested”*

However, it had been noted that Estyn had been making more efforts to publicise what they do beyond inspections, especially through social media, showing the work they do beyond inspecting schools.

*“There is far more of a social media than there used to be, showing the positives they do in schools and that it’s not just about judging. Maintaining that and doing more of that would be useful. People take in a lot from social media”*

## Recent changes: reducing apprehension

Qualitative interview participants reported noticing a change in Estyn in recent years – noticeably since Covid-19 – saying the organisation had become more open, supportive and friendlier.

### Humanising their reputation

One of the most frequently mentioned differences was the softening and humanising of Estyn as an organisation and with individual inspectors. Without losing professionalism, some of the historic apprehension caused by Estyn has somewhat been lessened. Inspections, while still causing trepidation for some, are gradually becoming a less negative experience thanks to better communication and new and experienced HMIs who understand the challenge in leading and managing learning providers post-Covid, and who are often reported as being more personable.

*“I’ve seen a marked difference in the last six years or so, and more recently post-pandemic, I’ve found them to be more compassionate, more approachable, now seen as human beings not like outer space people that would land in your school creating a threatening atmosphere, like a cloud, feel like they’ve become a lot warmer and more human”*

*“There has definitely been a sea change in last few years in terms of it being a collaborative approach – I’ve seen that from both sides (SLT and peer inspector). There is more dialogue between the school and Estyn, now”*

In particular, the ‘Ready Already’ campaign has paved the way for settings to shoulder less of a burden after getting a call ahead of an inspection. Stakeholders say the sentiment is there, and is beginning to show.

*“Estyn has recently done campaigns such as 'Barod yn Barod' (Ready Already), used this a lot with the staff before inspection. That kind of campaign is really beneficial”*

### Interim inspections

Another way apprehension is lessening, is through more frequent contact and experience of Estyn, due to interim inspections. Becoming more familiar with the process and expectations of the organisation is generally seen as a positive move.

*“Think the interim inspection will be a benefit to the schools. The sector knows it had to be prepared. Used to be a huge flurry, but that’s not the case anymore and everyone is better informed and knows what to expect. More frequent visits should be a benefit”*

## Removing judgements

Most stakeholders have welcomed the removal of the grade judgements, which often hung heavy on the shoulders of providers for years. The transformation of the language has been a positive move, and is generally considered to be less judgemental, focussing on areas for improvement rather than what might be considered failure.

*“Recent changes move away from cold judgement to a system in place to improve schools in Wales”*

## Data

It was suggested in a few of the qualitative interviews that there had been a noticeable move away from data-driven inspections. Before this transition, some felt that inspectors had already made their mind up about the setting before a visit, but it was felt that reports now include more from inspectors’ visits and discussions with those inspected.

*“Previously it was like the report was written before the inspection based on the data pack and you could do little to change that, but now there is much more focus on what they can see in schools. There is a greater appreciation of context, such as high deprivation issues, and how that might impact schools”*

*“The data is important but it’s good that they are supporting and understanding of the long-term effect of covid on resilience of learners and anxiety levels”*

## Suggested changes: reducing apprehension

Some stakeholders made some suggestions on further ways Estyn could work to reduce apprehension around its inspections and work. These often highlighted previous experiences and ways they would like to see the organisation change.

## Inspections

Following the introduction of interim visits, there was a suggestion that Estyn increase the frequency of inspections a school receives, with the belief that if staff were more familiar with the process there would be less trepidation around them. Some stakeholders feel that settings should undergo Estyn inspections at a more equal rate.

*“There needs to be parity – we had three inspections in ten years, others have gone ten years with none. That seems ludicrous”*

## Inspectors

As discussed in this report, many stakeholders have noticed an improvement in the approach of inspectors visiting their setting, though some remain set in adversarial mode. Further experiences of stakeholders suggest that there is room for improvement – advance

notice if a trainee inspector is joining the inspection, and a relaxing of some choices that make inspectors feel unapproachable, like their choice of formal clothing, depending on the context of the setting.

*“Had an HMI and a trainee without informing there would be two, to tell staff. There was a complete lack of communication. It happened to another college, was fed back but it felt like we weren’t listened to. It has a huge impact on staff”*

*“We don’t have enough role models that reflect us, which is really important. When I’ve had inspectors in the classroom, learners do feel they are an anomaly – they are there in a suit – and it makes them feel uncomfortable”*

## Suggested changes: gathering and sharing information

### Sharing best practice

Some stakeholders said they want to see more effective practice from schools in greater detail, looking at ways they have addressed specific issues or how they have worked with other schools who are facing the challenge they have already been working on.

*“What I would like them to do is to look at case studies where a school has effective practice, but also where they have helped other schools, because you’re then looking at things which can improve the whole system”*

*“If anyone knows about good practice then it’s Estyn. So, what I would like more of are sessions to showcase good practice to schools, especially with the new Curriculum for Wales. Especially to showcase how schools can improve with regards to particular challenges they face, so case studies that can be transferrable to schools who feel they suffer from the same issues as the case study school”*

One interview participant suggested Estyn could be involved in or run ‘best [effective] practice’ stakeholder events.

*“EAS (Educational Achievement Service) do Showcase Days, we’ve just had an email about an early years showcase where settings come together to share best practices. Part of the agenda last year was inspection updates where a representative from Care Inspectorate Wales came to discuss prevalent themes that were being found in recent inspections. What the buzz words and the key themes are. It might be useful if Estyn does something similar”*

### Appreciate the pressures on stakeholders

Stakeholders often talk about being time-poor, so anything that eases time pressures or that values any time and resources they do spend supporting Estyn would be welcomed.

While most feedback points to good, clear communication from Estyn, there are a few areas stakeholders say things could be improved – this is usually to do with instructions and clarity over expectations.

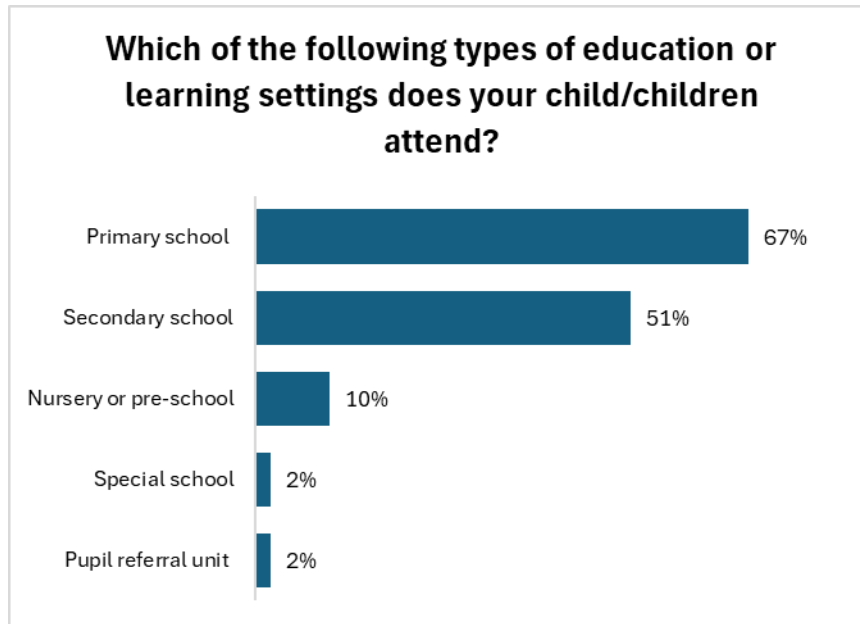
*“When they ask for case studies, the requirement can be quite open-ended. It's not entirely clear what you're supposed to write. A wide range of what a case study is. More guidance for a less experienced person”*

*“Expectation on governors is completely unrealistic. The questionnaire they are required to fill in is unrealistic for governors to fill in, and as the head you get them calling to ask what to write, which defeats the purpose of it. It puts governors off engaging with it”*

Additionally, some stakeholders say they want to know that their time and effort goes into meaningful work that is used to improve education in Wales, and note frustration of repetition and reports / recommendations that do not appear to be acted upon.

*“The thematic reviews require a huge amount of commitment and time on the settings they visit. But a lot of those reports have recommendations and although partly written for government, just sit on the shelf. A frustration that the same recommendations come up time and time again”*

## 11. Parents and carers



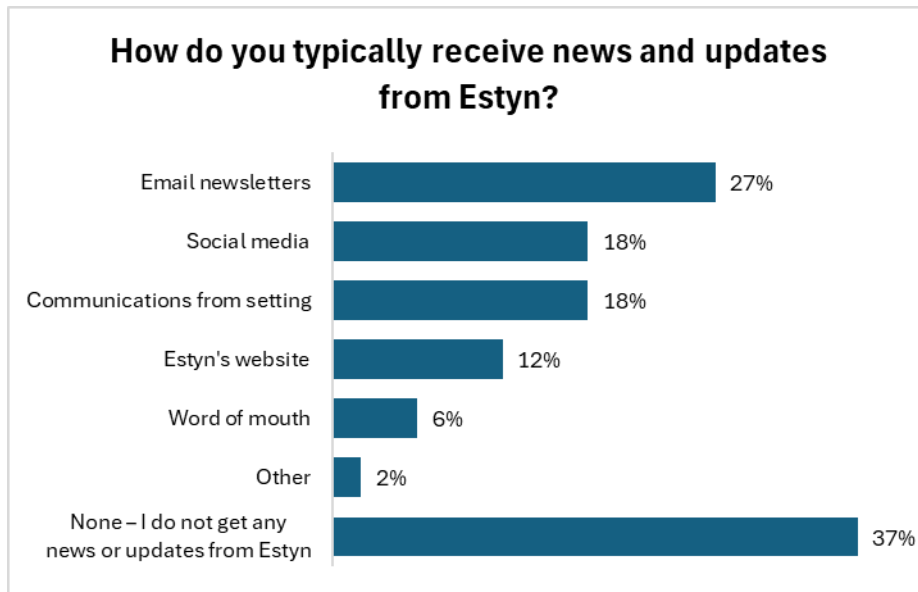
*Base: 49 (parents)*

Parents and carers made up 12% of the overall sample. Around two thirds (67%) had children in primary school and half (51%) had children in secondary school.

A large proportion (41%) of parents and carers said their children attended a learning setting in Swansea. A further 14% represented Pembrokeshire and 10% represented Cardiff. There was at least some representation from each region in Wales.

These results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size of parent responses (49 responses). Additionally, it's important to consider the self-selection bias inherent in online surveys, particularly among parental respondents, as those who choose to participate are likely to have a strong interest in the topic. Parents and carers may also be less inclined to respond to surveys from organisations like Estyn, compared to those working in educational settings, which could further restrict the representativeness of the sample.

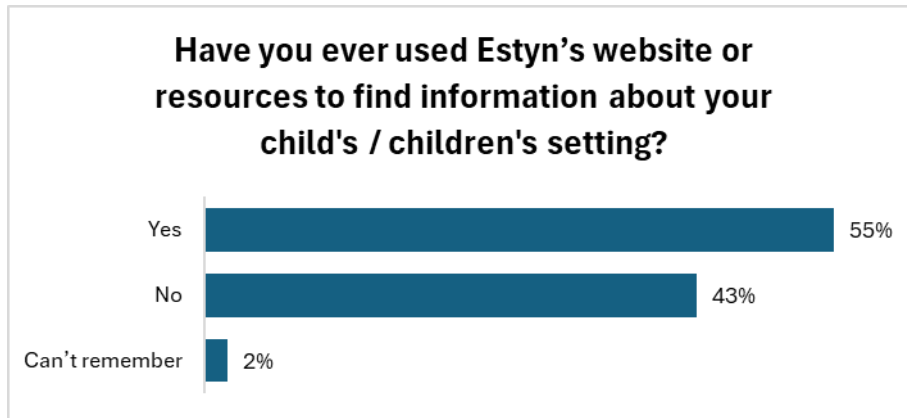
### Preferred communication methods



Base: 49 (parents)

When it comes to receiving news and updates from Estyn, nearly two in five (37%) say they do not get anything from Estyn. Around a quarter (27%) say they get email newsletters, while nearly a fifth (18%) each say they get news and updates from social media and/or communications from their child's setting.

### Using resources from Estyn



Base: 49 (parents)

Just over half (55%) of parents say they have used Estyn's website or resources to find information about their child's setting. Those who said 'yes' were asked how helpful the information was that they found. The vast majority said that the information was helpful – with 7% saying it's very helpful, 41% saying it was helpful, and 44% saying it was slightly helpful. Only 7% said it was not helpful.



## Information and support

Parents were asked in an open-ended question what information or support they would like to receive from Estyn regarding their child's education. The responses were categorised into themes, which are summarised in the table below. It is important to note, however, that the sample size is small, with only a limited number of survey respondents, meaning each theme is based on feedback from just a handful of parents.

What information or support would you like to receive from Estyn regarding your child's education?	Percentage
Better reports	14%
School status	12%
ALN communications	10%
School comparisons	6%
Less jargon	6%
Improvement measures	6%
Child-specific comms	6%
More frequent inspections	4%
Newsletter	4%
Nothing / don't know	20%
Other	31%

- **Better reports:** These parents want more comprehensive and accurate reports that reflect the true performance of schools, including details about specific subjects, teaching standards, and overall school performance.
- **School status:** These parents are interested in knowing how their child's school compares to others, particularly in terms of academic performance, improvements, and addressing areas of weakness.
- **ALN communications:** There is a strong desire from these for clearer communication regarding Additional Learning Needs, including how schools identify and support learners with ALN and the availability of resources for parents.
- **School comparisons:** Parents want to understand how their child's school compares to neighbouring schools in various areas, such as academic performance and extracurricular activities.
- **Less jargon:** Parents want reports and communications in plain language that are easy to understand, avoiding technical jargon that may be confusing.
- **Improvement measures:** Parents are interested in understanding what steps schools are taking to improve, including the effectiveness of interventions and how schools are addressing areas that need development.
- **Child-specific communications:** These parents expressed a desire for more personalised information about their child's progress, including specific feedback on both academic and emotional development, as well as tailored support for

individual needs. However, it should be noted that while these comments reflect these parents' preferences, it is challenging for an organisation like Estyn to provide such individualised communications.

- **More frequent inspections:** Some parents believe that more frequent inspections would help ensure schools are maintaining high standards and addressing issues promptly.
- **Newsletter:** These parents expressed interest in receiving regular updates via newsletters, either monthly or bi-monthly, to stay informed about their child's school and its activities.
- **Nothing/don't know:** Some respondents either felt they did not need additional information or were unsure about what information would be helpful.
- **Other:** This category includes miscellaneous comments or responses that do not fit into the other themes, such as confusion or lack of understanding about Estyn's role.

*"Is it a good school or not?"*

*"Does the school deliver? Are the school's results and statutory information available?"*

*"How the school is doing academically; what's its PE like against other schools"*

*"I would like to know that the school have up to date training on neurodiversity and how that shows up in high masking boys and girls"*

## 12. Conclusion

The research reveals a mixed perception of Estyn among stakeholders and parents, highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement. Positively, Estyn is recognised for its professionalism, fairness, and rigorous approach, with many stakeholders appreciating its supportive role and constructive feedback in driving educational improvements.

Efforts such as the 'Ready Already' campaign have been well-received, setting a more approachable tone and softening the once-daunting image of inspections. Reports have also evolved, shifting away from judgemental language and focusing more on insights from visits and stakeholder conversations. This change has reduced the perception of pre-determined outcomes and fostered a more collaborative and understanding relationship with settings. The inclusion of summaries in reports has been particularly welcomed, offering busy readers a concise overview of key themes and messages.

Estyn's communication efforts outside of inspections are another notable strength. Stakeholders value the clear, well-written, and timely communications, effective events, and practical resources, all reflecting the organisation's commitment to transparency and engagement.

However, challenges remain. The stress and workload associated with inspections continue to be a significant concern, with some stakeholders calling for reforms such as unannounced visits or a shorter gap between the announcement and the inspection itself. Yet, it is worth considering whether such changes might, in fact, increase anxiety for some stakeholders, who could find these suggestions even more stressful.

There is also a desire for a focus on the long-term progress of settings, rather than inspections which can be seen as a 'snapshot in time', as well as greater consistency in inspector behaviour and uniformity in what inspectors look for during reviews.

Apprehension around inspections persists, often attributed to the natural anxiety of being evaluated. Nevertheless, further steps could help mitigate this, including more frequent inspections to normalise the process, reducing perceived 'unrealistic' expectations, and ensuring inspectors have recent leadership experience to better understand modern educational challenges. It is also important that inspectors are aware of how being personable can contribute to a more positive and productive inspection experience for all involved.

It is important to note that not all survey participants may have been aware of the recent changes Estyn has implemented, such as the shift away from summative judgements, the focus on professional dialogue, and the adjustments to the inspection framework. As these changes continue to be rolled out and more stakeholders experience inspections under the new framework, it will be interesting to observe whether attitudes toward Estyn shift in future survey waves. As people become more familiar with these reforms and undergo inspections within this evolved process, their perceptions may become more positive, reflecting the intended improvements in transparency, collaboration, and reduced stress.

Overall, while Estyn's work remains broadly well-respected and improvements in tone, process, and communication have been welcomed, addressing these remaining concerns will be crucial to fostering greater trust and collaboration with stakeholders in the future.