

# Adoption: Conducting inspections of voluntary adoption agencies

Guidance on the inspection of adoption agencies

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This guidance is designed to assist inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) when conducting inspections of voluntary adoption agencies. It should be read in conjunction with the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies, the framework, evaluation schedule and grade descriptors.

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## Introduction

1. This guidance is designed to assist inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) when conducting inspections of voluntary adoption agencies in England. Adoption agencies can use the guidance to understand how inspections are conducted.
2. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the Adoption: Inspection of voluntary adoption agencies, framework, evaluation schedule and grade descriptors.<sup>1</sup>

## Purpose of inspection

3. Inspection of voluntary adoption agencies focuses on the progress and experiences of, and outcomes for, children and young people. It aims to protect children and support voluntary adoption agencies in improving their performance in meeting children's and young people's needs, however complex those needs may be. It should also ensure that decisions made and actions taken by the voluntary adoption agency promote and safeguard children's and young people's welfare.
4. Inspectors will seek to understand the unique characteristics of the agency and the context in which they work, encouraging innovation and improvements but also being tenacious in their identification of failures. They will help agencies understand what they need to do to improve and make recommendations and requirements to support them to do so.

## Scheduling and team deployment

5. Ofsted has a duty to inspect adoption agencies at least once in every three-year cycle.<sup>2</sup> The scheduling of inspections takes account of:
  - legal requirements
  - returned questionnaires from children, young people, adopters, adopted adults, social workers and other stakeholders
  - complaints and concerns about the service
  - notifications and monitoring reports provided to Ofsted
  - previous inspection findings.
6. The inspection of voluntary adoption agencies normally involves one suitably experienced and trained inspector spending five days on site, with one additional day to prepare and two days to write the report.

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<sup>1</sup> *Inspection of adoption support agencies framework for inspection from 1 April 2015*, Ofsted, 2015; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-adoption-support-agencies-framework](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-adoption-support-agencies-framework).

<sup>2</sup> Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) (Children's Homes etc) Regulations 2007 (S.I. 2007/694). As amended by (SI 2011/553).

7. It may be necessary for more inspectors to be involved in the inspection of very large agencies. In these cases, the inspector should request additional support from their line manager. If the request is agreed, it is passed to the Regional Social Care Senior HMI for approval.

8. If there are no adopters approved or in the process of being approved, inspectors should delay the inspection. This should only be done in discussion with the line manager but the inspection should not be delayed if there are any concerns about the agency. Ofsted must also meet the regulatory requirement that an inspection of a voluntary adoption agency takes place within three years of registration and thereafter once in each inspection cycle.

## **Notice**

9. Ten working days' notice will be given of the inspection.

10. When notice is given, we ask the agency to provide a small amount of information and to make arrangements for discussions with key people as set out in the notice letter. An example letter can be found at Annex A. During the inspection, inspectors may identify other people with whom they wish to speak.

11. We ask agencies to allow access to their premises, space for the inspector, access to records through electronic and paper files, if they are used, and someone to support access to relevant electronic files. Inspectors do not routinely ask for files to be provided in hard copy unless these are already used by the agency, but they may ask for specific reports, for example prospective adopters' reports, to be provided in hard copy.

## Timeframe

12. The timeframe for inspection, including preparation, on-site work and the publication of the inspection report, is as follows in working days:

Day	Inspection activity
1	Preparation
2	Site visit
3	Site visit
4	Site visit
5	Site visit
6	Site visit and feedback
7 and 8	Writing the report
8–10	Inspection evidence and report (toolkit) submitted for quality assurance
15	Report sent to the registered provider for any comments on factual accuracy, within 10 working days of the end of the inspection
20	Provider returns the draft report within five working days with any comments on factual accuracy
25	The final report is published on the Ofsted website within 20 working days of the end of the inspection

## Pre-inspection activity

13. Inspectors are allocated one day to prepare for an inspection and identifying initial lines of enquiry. The inspector considers:

- concerns and complaints made to Ofsted
- regulatory notifications made to Ofsted
- any changes to registration and changes of manager
- any enforcement activity since the previous inspection
- completed questionnaires from adopters, children, young people, birth parents, placing social workers and others
- annual quality and data forms submitted to Ofsted by the agency
- data analysis by Ofsted
- case lists and, where relevant, updated data
- reports made under national minimum standard 25
- three sets of panel meeting minutes

- the up-to-date statement of purpose and children's guide
- the content of the provider's website
- previous inspection reports.

14. If information has been received that indicates potential non-compliance with regulatory requirements, Ofsted will investigate. This may be done during the scheduled inspection, taking into account the date of the last inspection and the requirement for 10 days' notice, or separately. If investigated during inspection, the concern is used as a line of enquiry for the inspection. The inspector outlines the concern to the adoption agency at the beginning of the inspection.

15. Inspectors consider at least three sets of panel minutes, submitted by the agency prior to the inspection. These may lead to lines of enquiry in respect of particular children, young people, adopters, the functioning of the central list of panel members or the adoption agency.

16. Agencies may submit additional information and up-to-date data when they return the documentation requested in the letter announcing the inspection. This material must be explicitly relevant to the inspection framework and the associated evaluation schedule, and must enhance or clarify information about the quality of the service provided. Statistical data submitted prior to the inspection must be correct at the time of submission. Amendments or changes to data submitted during the inspection may not be accepted, as any statistical elements of the reports are based on data submitted in the annual returns and immediately before the inspection.

17. The inspector carries out an analysis of the available evidence and information and records their planning notes within the planning section of the Regulatory Support Application<sup>3</sup> (RSA) toolkit. Concerns, complaints and enforcement activity must be noted in the toolkit. The plan for the inspection identifies lines of enquiry, any areas of apparent weakness or significant strengths and areas where further evidence needs to be gathered. If the inspection is subject to an evidence-based review for quality assurance purposes, the inspection plan is considered as part of this, but it may be sampled by managers at any time to ensure the quality of work. The focus of the inspection may change during its course as further evidence emerges. Annex B provides guidance on assessing financial viability.

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<sup>3</sup> The RSA is the electronic system that Ofsted uses to administer and record regulatory inspections.

## Reports under national minimum standard 25

18. National minimum standard 25.6 states the voluntary adoption agency trustees, board members or management committee members should:

- 'receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months
- monitor the management and outcomes of the services provided in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and young people, and/or service users
- satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration'.

19. Ofsted provides a template for these reports in the quality assurance and data form. The completed form provides the data we require for inspection. Agencies do not have to use the quality assurance section of the form and may use their own management reporting formats. We ask that these quality assurance and data forms are submitted to Ofsted once a year based on data for the year 1 April to 31 March.

20. As part of the pre-inspection activity, inspectors consider reports made under national minimum standard 25. Any emerging lines of enquiry are included in the inspection plan.

## Annual questionnaires

21. The views and experiences of children and young people, adult adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents, staff and other stakeholders, such as social workers for children and young people, and independent reviewing officers, inform lines of enquiry for each inspection. They are an important part of the inspection evidence. It should be noted that this is an inspection of the adoption agency and not adopters.

22. Ofsted sends a link to an annual online questionnaire for each group enabling individuals to return them directly to Ofsted. We ask agencies to ensure that they publicise the questionnaires to all adopters, prospective adopters, staff and partners and, where relevant, children and young people. Hard copies are also available on request for children and young people, and birth relatives only, for whom we supply business reply envelopes.

23. We supply all adoption agencies with symbol versions of the questionnaires by email to distribute to children who use Widgit, Makaton and Picture Communication Symbols. There is also a film of the children and young people's version using British sign language (BSL). The responses to the symbol and BSL versions should be returned as hard copy or by email.

24. An analysis of all questionnaire responses is made available to inspectors prior to the inspection. During inspection, the inspector shares the quantitative data with the adoption agency where possible. Any information shared protects the anonymity



and confidentiality of respondents. As questionnaires are issued annually, there may be up to three years of responses for the inspector to take into account and that may highlight trends in service development to pursue during the inspection.

## Deferrals

25. Deferrals of inspections are agreed only in exceptional circumstances, for example where the opportunity to gather secure evidence is severely restricted or where, if the inspection went ahead, it might place people at risk.

26. Decisions about deferrals are agreed by the Regional Social Care Senior HMI.

## Inspection activity

27. At the start of the inspection, the inspector(s) confirm(s) their identity by producing their Ofsted Inspector Authorisation and identification card and identity badge. It is not necessary to carry paper copies of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. The inspector(s) discuss the inspection plan with the manager, confirming whether any further information or meetings have to be arranged.

28. The days on site are used for discussions with managers, children and young people, adopters and staff, and to examine files. Where children and young people have complained or raised concerns, with Ofsted or with the provider, these must be followed up on inspection and recorded in the toolkit. Inspectors seek evidence against the evaluation schedule and take into account issues already identified through pre-inspection data and questionnaires. The organisation of the days on site depends on when meetings and discussions can be held.

29. The inspectors decide who they need to speak to in order to secure sufficient evidence on which to base their judgements. In a few cases that inspectors track they will arrange to visit adopters and the children who are placed with them for adoption in their own homes. The agency will contact the adopter and seek their agreement and ask them to confirm, where it is age appropriate, whether the children are happy to speak with the inspector. However, a significant amount of time is used to examine case files and discuss any issues arising from those files. This may include, for example, discussions or telephone calls with placing social workers, adopters, foster carers and Independent Reviewing Officers. In all inspections, the inspector will ask to meet some children and young people with their adoptive, or prospective adoptive, families.

30. Due to potential sensitivities and vulnerabilities surrounding adoption, it is important that the inspector involves the agency in identifying any children or young people who they may wish to meet and in the final selection of birth relatives and adoptive families who they wish to speak to. Inspectors should also identify other people that they wish to speak to during the inspection.

31. The inspection focuses on gathering evidence against the evaluation schedule. The detail of activities undertaken and discussions held vary depending on the lines

of enquiry for each individual inspection. However, every inspection examines how the agency ensures that delays are minimised for children, young people and adopters, how well the agency helps drive and review plans for children's futures that are in their best interests, and how adoptions are supported and disruptions minimised.

## Case sampling

32. Inspectors aim to access at least six adopter or prospective adopter records that cover the range of the adoption agency's work. Inspectors may access a much larger number of records or specific documents from files to evaluate particular issues that may have arisen during pre-inspection planning or during the inspection, for example practice in relation to matching. The inspector, not the agency, selects the cases to sample from the adopter register and details supplied by the agency. A case record is taken to mean information, electronic or written, that the agency holds on a particular adopter and the children or young people placed with them.

33. Any concerns raised or identified during the inspection are pursued; any concerns indicating risk to children must be discussed with the inspector's line manager and referred to appropriate agencies. The inspector is responsible for checking that matters have been pursued.

34. Where the case record covers a long period of time, judgements about agency performance are based on contemporary practice and take into account evidence of longer term improvements or decline. Inspectors may read historical information to understand the service and its impact on outcomes for children and young people who are placed. Case record sampling may lead to discussions with social workers, adopters and, where appropriate, children, young people and birth relatives.

35. Inspectors access records via electronic systems, if used, with support from the agency. Inspectors may ask for specific documents to be available in hard copy, for example a prospective adopter's report. Providers must ensure that inspectors have access and support to use their system from the first day of the inspection.

36. Inspectors examine, discuss and evaluate cases in line with the criteria set out in the evaluation schedule. In some cases, if possible, it may be helpful to do this with the adoption social worker.

37. Inspectors sample a range of documents from files to support their lines of enquiry. This may include, for example, information and documents relating to the following:

- information provided to adopters prior to placement
- adoption support records
- life story work and support for children who are being adopted
- the suitability of the placement, taking into account the views of the adopters and the needs of the children

- the process of matching children’s needs with the capacity and skills of the adoptive family
- disruption meeting minutes
- panel minutes
- the approval processes for adopters and the records kept
- prospective adopters’ reports, including those who withdrew from the process
- the preparation, training and support of adopters
- the impact of children’s views and feedback on planning for their futures
- support assessments and plans
- referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)
- complaints
- ongoing case recording.

## **Examination of records, policies and procedures**

38. The adoption agency statement of purpose and children’s guide should be available on the agency’s website and form part of the pre-inspection data. We should also hold copies in our database as agencies are required to submit these documents whenever they are changed. If they have not done so, this should be explored during the inspection.

39. Other documents are examined where they are relevant to a line of enquiry for that individual inspection. Inspectors do not routinely examine all policies and procedures.

40. The inspector selects and samples at least two personnel records in respect of anyone working for purposes of the agency (this includes panel members). Where DBS checks are unavailable due to DBS restrictions, for example in respect of administrative staff, inspectors may ask for evidence of how the recruitment decision was made and what has been done to ensure that any risk due to the lack of a DBS check is mitigated. The inspector may sample more records when necessary to pursue lines of enquiry specific to the inspection. If recruitment records are not maintained at the premises where the inspector is based for the inspection, then the provider needs to arrange for the records to be made available on site.

41. These records can be maintained in checklist or spreadsheet formats. The information available for the inspection should reflect schedule 2 of The Adoption Support Agencies (England) and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005, and must include the reference number of the subject’s DBS check. If any lines of enquiry require additional information, then the inspector may request that a small sample of full personnel records are made available at the inspection visit.

## **Interviews and discussions with adopters, children and young people and other interested parties**

42. Adoption agencies are asked to arrange discussions with their own staff, adopters and social workers supporting children and young people. Inspectors will also talk with children and young people, where they are not too young, and with their adoptive family.

43. During their preparation and during the inspection, inspectors identify individuals with whom they wish to speak. This will include:

- the registered provider, nominated person, fostering manager or responsible individual
- social workers or their managers for looked after children who are placed for adoption with agency approved adopter
- adoptive families and their children.

44. It may also include:

- adult adoptees
- birth relatives
- adoptive families, at any stage of the process including those not yet approved
- the chair of the adoption panel or the panel adviser and, if not available, independent members of the central list
- attendance at part of a panel meeting if this falls within the timing of the inspection and is particularly relevant to a line of enquiry
- the agency decision maker
- adoption staff and managers
- other professionals involved with the adoption agency
- children and young people who are living with an adoptive family, who have been adopted or who are receiving adoption support and wish to speak to an inspector
- foster carers who specialise in pre-adoption work and are linked to the case sample.

## **Understanding the experience of children and young people**

45. The experiences of children and young people who are waiting to be or who are adopted or who are receiving adoption support must be at the centre of the inspection and will provide key evidence to support inspectors in assessing outcomes against the evaluation schedule. Inspectors speak with children and young people during the inspection where it is appropriate, with their adoptive family and only with consent from the person with parental responsibility.

46. Discussions with people who know the child or young person, for example adoptive parents, placing social workers, foster carers and the agency itself, are held in order to understand the experiences and progress of children and young people placed. Inspectors always assess how well the adoption agency consults children and young people and what impact this has on their lives and the performance of the agency.

47. Inspectors are expected to demonstrate safe and sensitive practice throughout the inspection. Examples include the following:

- Inspectors see children and young people with their adoptive family and explain that they will not be identified in the inspection report or in the feedback to adopters or the adoption agency
- Inspectors explaining to children and young people that information suggesting that they or another child or young person are at risk of harm will be passed on by the inspector to an appropriate person able to take the necessary action about the concern so that they are helped and protected.

48. Inspectors always take account of privacy and confidentiality when talking to children and young people, be it in person or on the telephone. Where a callback is requested, the inspector should always use a contact number in the agency or Ofsted's national number: 0300 123 1231.

## **Listening and talking to adult adoptees, adopters and birth relatives**

49. Adult adoptees, adopters and birth relatives provide key evidence in assessing outcomes for children and young people against the evaluation schedule. Their views and experiences offer valuable evidence about the operation of the adoption agency, including the approval, matching and placing practices and the availability of support.

50. One of the most efficient ways to gather the views of adopters is to attend meetings for adopters, or adoption applicants, which are taking place during the inspection. The purpose of attendance would be to discuss the operation of the agency, not to observe the group or delivery of training. If no existing groups are available, a focus group should be arranged; it should be set up with an open invitation to all adopters or a group of randomly selected adopters if there are high numbers of adopters. If a group has to be arranged for the purposes of the inspection, the provider must demonstrate that all adopters, prospective adopters, randomly selected adopters or prospective adopters had the opportunity to attend.

51. Inspectors take account of privacy and confidentiality when talking to adopters and birth relatives, be it in person or on the telephone. Where a callback is requested, the inspector should always use the agency's office if appropriate or Ofsted's national number: 0300 123 1231.

52. Inspectors assess how effectively the adoption agency engages with adult adoptees, adopters and birth relatives and what impact this has on service delivery and experiences of the children and young people.

53. Inspectors explain the inspection process and confidentiality. They ask adopters and birth relatives if they received the invitation to complete the online questionnaire and if they completed it. Discussions with adopters depend on any lines of inquiry identified.

### **Gathering views from stakeholders**

54. Inspectors consult with stakeholders to inform the inspection findings. This is usually through a telephone call. Stakeholders may include any of the people listed in paragraph 43 and 44 or others who appear to be able to offer relevant information to the inspection. These people vary depending on the nature of the adoption agency and include children's and young people's social workers and members of the adoption panel.

55. Inspectors always take account of privacy and confidentiality when talking to stakeholders on the telephone. Where a callback is requested, the inspector should always use a contact number in the agency or Ofsted's national number: 0300 123 1231.

## Key meetings

56. Inspectors use any scheduled meetings as opportunities for following lines of enquiry and, if there are no scheduled meetings, may ask to meet with individual or groups of people. The amount of time available is restricted and therefore any attendance must be time-limited and focused on a particular line of enquiry. There is no requirement to attend scheduled meetings, but these might include:

- staff meetings
- adopter meetings
- placement finding and matching activities
- panel meeting if this falls within the timing of the inspection and is particularly relevant to a line of enquiry.

## Discussions with the managers

57. Individual interviews are held with the manager and with the responsible individual and/or registered person.

58. The interview with the manager focuses on gathering evidence of the adoption agency's impact on children's and young people's lives and must include these elements:

- issues that the inspector wishes to explore with the manager that have arisen from pre-inspection information, including any causes of concern
- how the agency involves adopters and children and young people
- how the agency monitors the impact of their service on outcomes for children and young people
- follow-up on progress in response to previous requirements and recommendations
- discuss the plans for future development of the adoption agency
- arrangements for supervision received by the manager
- any further evidence that the manager may wish to highlight with the inspector
- any evidence the inspector may wish to highlight with the manager.

## Safeguarding

59. If serious issues of concern arise, for example in relation to the failure to follow child protection procedures and/or where a child is discovered to be at immediate risk of harm, the adoption agency senior manager is notified as soon as possible unless this compromises the child/young person's safety. If this is the case inspectors must refer the concern to the local authority and discuss matters with their line manager and the Social Care Compliance team. Inspectors should always follow Ofsted's *Safeguarding policy and procedures*,<sup>4</sup> and should contact the Social Care Compliance team if they need advice. Where required, a referral is made by the inspector to the appropriate local authority children's services; the child/young person's allocated social worker and the Social Care Compliance team. The inspector must ensure that the matter is dealt with appropriately. If the referral is not handled appropriately this must be escalated. The Senior HMI for the region should be informed and action will be taken to monitor that children are made safe.

## Recording evidence

60. Throughout the inspection, inspectors maintain a record of their evidence. Electronic evidence is recorded within the RSA toolkit evidence screen. In most circumstances, once the summarised evidence has been placed in RSA, any duplicate handwritten evidence is destroyed by the inspector. In some circumstances, inspectors may be required to keep any handwritten notes they have made during the inspection. This may apply in circumstances where legal action is being considered or a challenge or complaint about the judgement is anticipated. Inspectors need to record all handwritten evidence using black ink so that it can be photocopied or scanned if necessary. All handwritten evidence must be legible and dated. Inspectors must submit all handwritten evidence that has not been summarised or scanned on to RSA and forms part of the inspection evidence base, to the National Quality Assurance team, within five working days of the end of the on-site visit. All inspection records are retained in accordance with Ofsted's published retention policy.<sup>5</sup>

61. Evidence should be clear, evaluative and sufficient for the purpose of supporting the judgements. It should not include anything that could identify individual staff, individual children, young people or family members, unless necessary for the protection of a child/young person or relevant to a concern which needs to be followed up. Inspectors can record direct quotes from children and young people, parents and stakeholders in evidence to support judgements, although evidence should not use individual's names or initials unless they are the

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<sup>4</sup> *Safeguarding children and young people and young vulnerable adults policy*, Ofsted, 2015; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-safeguarding-policy](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-safeguarding-policy).

<sup>5</sup> *Handling and retention of inspection evidence*, Ofsted, 2010; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/handling-and-retention-of-ofsted-inspection-evidence](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/handling-and-retention-of-ofsted-inspection-evidence).



names of the registered person or necessary for the protection of a child or young person.

62. Evidence may be scrutinised for quality assurance and is considered in the event of any complaint, whistleblower or concerns about performance. It may also be randomly sampled by managers.

## **Inspection findings**

63. Failure to meet regulations and national minimum standards that are identified and addressed during the inspection must be reported. In exceptional circumstances where matters are minor and immediately and satisfactorily resolved they may not result in a requirement or recommendation.

64. The adoption framework, evaluation schedule and grade descriptors for the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies sets out illustrative evidence of a good adoption agency. Inspectors use this to formulate their findings and judgements and to prepare oral feedback to the manager.

## **Inspection feedback**

65. During the inspection, inspectors share emerging findings about the adoption agency's key strengths and weaknesses. Shortfalls that could have an immediate impact on the safety of children, young people and/or staff are brought to the immediate attention of the manager or another senior person in the agency.

66. At the end of the inspection the inspector gives oral feedback on the main findings and provisional judgements to the manager; the report and judgements are subject to quality assurance processes and may be subject to change. In exceptional circumstances, an inspector may need additional time after the inspection fieldwork to take advice before giving feedback. The date of the feedback is counted as the last day of the inspection.

67. The feedback should:

- cover the main findings of the inspection against the evaluation schedule, including both strengths and weaknesses
- indicate likely requirements and recommendations with clear reference to the relevant regulation, national minimum standard or adoption guidance, providing a clear agenda for improvement
- use the grade descriptors to indicate how the inspector has arrived at her/his judgements and confirm that the report is sent to the manager in draft for comment on factual accuracy (see 'Timeframe' at paragraph 12 above)
- indicate that the final report and judgements are subject to a quality assurance process and therefore may change

- confirm whether letters outlining the judgements and thanking children and young people for participating are sent for the provider to circulate alongside the final report.

68. Inspectors do not provide a written summary of the inspection or written feedback in advance of the inspection report. Providers may choose to take their own notes during feedback.

## Writing the report

69. Inspection report judgements are supported by evidence and clearly demonstrate the quality of the agency, as well as its impact on children's and young people's experiences and outcomes. Recommendations are clear and help the agency know what they need to do in order to improve.

70. Inspectors are responsible for producing high quality reports. The inspector should ensure that the report is free from errors in, for example, grammar, spelling and punctuation before submitting the report. Reports should be written in the present tense. However, a specific example of evidence from the inspection should be written in the past tense.

71. Inspectors should write their reports with regard to the *Guide to Ofsted's house style*.<sup>6</sup>

72. The report should be succinct and evaluative but tell the story of the experiences of children and young people and the contribution of the provider. Inspectors should make clear and unequivocal judgements about the service provided and progress of children and young people rather than describing processes. Inspectors should make appropriate professional judgements about the extent of detail required to 'tell the story' of the experience of children and young people who are placed for or have been adopted.

73. The 'Overall effectiveness' section should include an evaluation of the trends in agency performance and compare them to those found nationally. The quality of inspection reports is enhanced when feedback from children, young people, adult adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents is quoted within the report and used to illustrate evaluation about the quality of the adoption agency. However, in smaller agencies, the potential to identify children and young people is high and should be taken into account.

74. There is no specified word length for the report or the individual sections. Inspectors should use their professional judgement to ensure that the reports are long enough to say what needs to be said and no more. It is likely that reports for

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<sup>6</sup> *Guide to Ofsted's house style*, Ofsted, 2014; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-ofsteds-house-style](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-ofsteds-house-style) .

adoption agencies with a number of weaknesses or agencies found to be outstanding require more detailed explanations of the reasons for the judgement.

75. We send a copy of the report to the provider and publish it on our website.

## Letters to children and young people

76. Inspectors complete a letter for children and young people following the inspection of an adoption agency where children and young people were directly involved. This tells them the overall judgement and briefly outlines the main findings. This letter is also available in symbol versions. Providers should forward this letter to all children and young people for whom they have responsibility.

## Quality assurance

77. The inspector is responsible for the quality of the report, and checks the completed report carefully before submitting it to the National Quality Assurance team for sign-off for publication.

78. Inspectors must use the *Guide to Ofsted's house style* for reference when quality checking their own reports.

79. Ofsted's National Quality Assurance team assures the quality of inspection reports and the evidence base that underpins inspection judgements.

80. The National Quality Assurance team discuss with the relevant team manager on any proposed change of judgement from the provisional judgement given at verbal feedback during the inspection. On these occasions, the inspector must inform the agency of the revised judgements and provide reasons for the changes before the provider receives the draft inspection report.

81. Ofsted sends an evaluation form following each inspection to the manager of the adoption agency to complete, which is used to improve the quality of inspections.

## Concerns

82. The great majority of Ofsted's work is carried out smoothly and without incident. If concerns arise during an inspection, these should be raised with the inspector as soon as possible during the inspection visit. This provides an opportunity to resolve the matter before the inspection is completed. Any concerns about the factual accuracy of the findings in the report can be raised after the inspection and will be considered as part of the quality assurance process.

## Complaints

83. If it has not been possible to resolve concerns through the process detailed in paragraph 82, a formal complaint can be raised under Ofsted's complaints

procedure: [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/complaints-procedure](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/complaints-procedure).

84. Lodging a complaint does not normally delay the publication of the final inspection report.

## Annex A: Notice of inspection

Dear

### Notice of inspection

>URN< >Name of voluntary agency<

This letter is to confirm that Ofsted will carry out an inspection of your voluntary adoption agency commencing on >inspection due date< and ending on >last inspection day<.

The name of the inspector who will lead this inspection is >name<.

The inspector will telephone you shortly to discuss the inspection.

We want the inspection to proceed as smoothly as possible for both you and the inspector. Please can you provide us with some information in advance of your inspection.

1. Details of meetings that will occur during the inspection that the inspector may be able to attend. The inspector will discuss with you whether they wish to do so.
2. Information about your current approved adopters and applicants, those being assessed and those who have applied; so the inspector can choose which records and cases to sample.
3. The last three sets of adoption panel minutes.
4. Updated data. Although we hold data that you have previously provided you are given the opportunity to update this.

The following provides more detail on the information we are requesting.

#### 1. Meetings

To disrupt your agency as little as possible inspectors will attend any existing, appropriate groups that are running during the inspection site visit. The inspector does not want to observe the meeting, but to use this time to talk with attendees about the adoption agency.

We would be grateful if you would also arrange meetings with:

- the manager
- the registered provider
- the chair or vice-chair of the adoption panel

- a group for adopters, prospective adopters or a preparation course that is already running during the course of the inspection
- a group for children and young people if one is already running during the course of the inspection
- the agency decision maker.

Discussions with individuals may be held by telephone.

Please arrange, where possible, for the inspector to attend meetings on the site where they will be based and provide a contact name, date and time for each meeting. The inspector will contact you during the notice period to confirm which meetings they wish to attend. Please allow at least 30 minutes between meetings and, if possible, do not arrange meetings on the first day or the last day of the inspection. Please do not organise any additional meetings unless the inspector has agreed this with you.

The inspector will visit children and young people and their adopters selected from the case list in discussion with you.

## 2. Case list

The records that the inspector generally needs to see are those you keep for adopters and of the children and young people placed with them, this includes any assessment reports. The inspector may also wish to see supervision notes, team meeting notes, staff recruitment files, panel member records and additional panel meeting minutes. Please provide the case details requested. The inspector uses this to select the records that they will examine during the inspection. The inspector will ask you to arrange telephone calls with the individuals who they would like to consider in more detail.

If you have adopters'/staff records stored electronically please ensure that there will be a member of staff available to support the inspector in accessing them. If these records are only hard copy and stored off-site you will need to arrange to deliver them to the location of the inspector.

The inspector will sample records throughout the inspection. Please allow time in the inspection programme for them to be able to do this.

To allow an inspector time to consider which records to sample, please supply a list of adopters and potential adopters.

## 3. Panel meeting minutes

Please provide the minutes from the last three panel meetings.

#### 4. Data

The inspector already has the data you submitted on the annual quality assurance and data form and from completed questionnaires. You do not have to re-submit your quality and assurance data form.

If you wish to provide any updated, brief, relevant statistical data or information, it must be returned with the attached forms. You may provide this in a format you already use as long as this provides only succinct and relevant information. Additional information or data, other than updates to what you have previously provided, should only be supplied during the inspection at the request or with the agreement of the inspector.

This material must be explicitly relevant to the inspection framework and associated evaluation schedule and enhance or clarify information about the quality of service provided. Statistical data submitted prior to the inspection must be correct at the time of submission. Amendments or changes to data submitted during the inspection may not be accepted.

### **Returning documents to Ofsted**

All information should be returned within five working days of the date of this letter by email to the lead inspector at >inspector email address< and copy in >IMS name email address<. Please note that any sensitive information that you send by email should be anonymous or encrypted. You can find out more information about encryption at [www.getsafeonline.org](http://www.getsafeonline.org).

### **Additional information**

The inspector will feed back their findings at the end of the inspection to key people in the agency that you identify. Please keep this number to a minimum.

Further information about the inspection is available in *Adoption: Conducting inspections of voluntary adoption agencies* at [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130206](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130206).

Thank you for your assistance. If you have any further questions, please contact me on 0300 123 1231.

Yours sincerely

>Name<

Inspection Support Team

## Return slip: For information a voluntary adoption agency submits after notification of an inspection

I confirm that I have enclosed:

- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| ■ the details about arranged meetings  | Yes / No |
| ■ a completed case list                | Yes / No |
| ■ the last three panel meeting minutes | Yes / No |
| ■ any updated data                     | Yes / No |

Signed:

Print name:

Job title:

Agency: >add name of agency<

URN: >add URN<

Date:

The case list is available on the Ofsted website:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-adoption-agencies-case-list-form](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-adoption-agencies-case-list-form).



## Annex B: Assessing financial viability

The adoption regulations state that the 'registered provider must carry on the agency in such manner as is likely to ensure that it will be financially viable for the purpose of achieving the aims and objectives set out in its statement of purpose.'<sup>7</sup>

Inspectors are only expected to undertake a lay person's assessment of the financial information. Where, during the course of a routine inspection, the inspector has concerns about the financial viability of a provider - due for example to insufficient staff to provide contracted support or insufficient accommodation to storing secure records - they should follow the guidance set out in Annex K of the *Social Care Registration Handbook*.<sup>8</sup> Paragraph 42 of Annex K applies where an organisation is already registered.

The financial information Ofsted can request ranges from professionally produced business plans to a collection of accounts and balance sheets.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Regulation 20(1) of The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003.

<sup>8</sup> *Social care registration handbook*, Ofsted, 2015; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-registration-handbook](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-registration-handbook).

<sup>9</sup> Regulation 20(2) of The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003.

## Annex C: Checks on responsible individuals

1. An organisation which applies to register a voluntary adoption agency is required by The Adoption Support Agencies (England) and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005, to have a responsible individual.<sup>10</sup> The responsible individual is the person within an organisation who is responsible for supervising the management of the agency: he or she is the link between the organisation and the registered manager and, the organisation and Ofsted.
2. The role of the responsible individual is to:
  - supervise the management of the agency and particularly to ensure that the agency operates in a manner which protects and promotes children and young people's safety and welfare
  - report on the operation of the voluntary adoption agency to the registered provider and Ofsted.
3. When an organisation applies to be registered in respect of a new voluntary adoption agency Ofsted assesses the responsible individual's suitability as part of that application. From 1 April 2014, Ofsted's inspectors will scrutinise the steps providers have taken to determine that a responsible individual who has been appointed is fit to supervise the management of a voluntary adoption agency.
4. A provider must demonstrate to Ofsted that the responsible individual they appoint:
  - has an effective knowledge and understanding of:
    - law and practice relating to looked after children
    - safeguarding and child protection
    - law and guidance in relation to the establishment or agency that he or she will be responsible for including: applicable regulations; national minimum standards; and, statutory guidance.
  - has the skills, knowledge and ability to carry on the establishment or agency in a way which promotes both good practice and continuous improvement

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<sup>10</sup> The Adoption Support Agencies (England) and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005, Regulation 7; [www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/2720/regulation/7/made](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/2720/regulation/7/made)

- has the business and management skills to supervise the management of the establishment or agency efficiently and effectively
  - can demonstrate that she or he, or another official within the organisation, has the necessary financial skills and expertise to ensure the establishment or agency is run on a sound financial basis. This includes the long-term financial viability of the establishment or agency.
  - has completed all checks required under regulations and these were satisfactory.<sup>11</sup>
5. When we become aware that the responsible individual of a voluntary adoption agency is changing or has changed, we will ask the provider to provide us with information that demonstrates:
- the person they appoint as a responsible individual satisfies the legal obligation relating to their fitness in the relevant regulations
  - the length of time registered establishments or agencies remain without a responsible individual is minimal.
6. There is more information in our guidance *Changes to children's social care services that are registered and/or inspected by Ofsted*.

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<sup>11</sup> The Adoption Support Agencies (England) and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005, Schedule 2; [www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/2720/schedule/2/made](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/2720/schedule/2/made)

## **Annex D: Changes to who manages the agency or a branch of a voluntary adoption agency**

### **A manager gives notice that he or she will cease managing the agency or branch of the agency**

1. Whilst voluntary adoption agency providers do not have to register managers with Ofsted they must have appropriate plans in place when it is known that the agency manager, or manager of any branch, intends to stop managing.<sup>12</sup> Plans should ensure that there is a proper transition of responsibilities from one manager to another, including a period of handover for the incoming manager by the outgoing manager. Detail of the arrangements should form part of the notification that providers are required to make to Ofsted as soon as is practicable to do so if a manager intends to cease managing the agency or a branch of the agency.<sup>13</sup>

2. If we have information that providers did not manage a change of manager well, inspectors will take this into account when planning and undertaking their inspections. Inspectors will also take into account any indication that Ofsted has not been told about a change of manager. Examples of actions we may take include, but are not limited to, bringing the date of the inspection forward and using this information to inform our judgement about the leadership and management of the agency. We may make requirements the provider must meet and where concerns exist we may consider whether further compliance action is necessary. For further information about the compliance action we may take please refer to our social care compliance handbook.<sup>14</sup>

### **A manager unexpectedly stops managing an agency or branch of an agency**

3. There are circumstances where a manager leaves suddenly or has to be absent for 28 days or more and the provider is unable to give notice. Some examples are, but not limited to: unexpected illness; illness of a dependent; or suspension. In these circumstances the provider must ensure appropriate interim arrangements are in place whilst they appoint an appropriate person to manage the agency or branch of the agency.

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<sup>12</sup> The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation 22(1)(b)

<sup>13</sup> The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation 22(1)(b)

<sup>14</sup> Social Care Compliance Handbook, Ofsted, 2015; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-compliance-handbook-from-september-2014](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-compliance-handbook-from-september-2014) .

4. We expect the provider to act without delay to appoint a person to manage the agency or branch and notify Ofsted of their appointment.<sup>15</sup>

### **Known absences of the agency manager or a branch manager**

5. Managers may have to take a planned short absence from managing the agency or branch of the agency. Regulations provide that if the absence is to last for 28 continuous days or more<sup>16</sup> providers must give Ofsted a range of information about the absence. Providers must also tell Ofsted of any interim arrangements they will have in place to ensure the branch is managed effectively whilst the manager is away. If the manager is to be absent for more than 90 days Ofsted expects the provider to appoint someone to take full responsibility for managing the agency or a branch of their agency and notify Ofsted of this person.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation (6)(1)&(2)

<sup>16</sup> The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation 21

<sup>17</sup> The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation (6)(1)&(2)

## **Annex E: Children and young people who are missing and children who are at risk from sexual exploitation**

1. Providers and managers of voluntary adoption agencies and, their staff must:
  - demonstrate effective knowledge about children and young people who go missing and those at risk of sexual exploitation
  - know what to do if concerned that a child or young person is missing or at risk of being sexually exploited
  - have effective procedures in place regarding children and young people who are missing and those who are at risk of sexual exploitation
  - train staff effectively regarding issues relating to children and young people who are missing or at risk of sexual exploitation.

### **Inspection**

2. Inspectors will track:
  - at least one child or young person who has gone missing in the 12 months prior to the inspection or a child or young person who goes missing at time of inspection if applicable
  - at least one child or young person who is identified to be at risk of sexual exploitation in the 12 months prior to the inspection or a child or young person who is at risk of sexual exploitation at time of inspection if applicable.
3. Inspectors will:
  - evaluate the effectiveness of a provider's training in respect of both children and young people who go missing and those at risk of sexual exploitation
  - assure themselves that, where relevant, the agency identifies where children are at risk of sexual exploitation and understands the risks associated with going missing
  - takes the appropriate and necessary action in accordance with local procedures and statutory guidance.

## Annex F: Extremism

1. Voluntary adoption agencies are a 'specified authority' listed in Schedule 6 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015.<sup>18</sup> As such providers have a duty<sup>19</sup> to work in ways which prevent people, including children, from being drawn into terrorism.
2. Extremism is however, unlikely to be a routine line of enquiry during voluntary adoption agency inspections. Inspectors must however, remain alert to the prospective that children and young people are at risk of being drawn into terrorism and how well the agency remains alert to this possibility. All initial enquiries should be directed to the manager of the agency.
3. For further advice on extremism during, or after an inspection, inspectors can contact their Regulatory Inspection Manager who will be able to access specialist advice. If inspectors are unable to contact their manager and remain concerned, they should follow Ofsted's Safeguarding children and young people and vulnerable adults' procedures.<sup>20</sup>
4. If inspectors have concerns that a voluntary adoption agency provider is not meeting their responsibilities under the Prevent duty they should pursue this as a line of enquiry. If inspectors' decide a line of enquiry is necessary providers and staff must demonstrate they are aware of, and know how to, contribute to Prevent-related activity, have the appropriate knowledge to both identify children at risk of being drawn into terrorism and about referral arrangements for when children require further help.
5. If a concern arises about a child or young person being drawn into terrorism provider have specific duties to perform:
  - Risk Assessment
 

Specified authorities are expected to assess the risk of children being drawn into terrorism. This should be based on shared understanding with partners, of the potential risk in the local area where the child or young person lives. The agency must demonstrate they are protecting children and young people from being drawn into terrorism by having robust safeguarding policies in place to identify children at risk, and intervene as appropriate. Policies and procedures must be in place which are understood

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<sup>18</sup> Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 A voluntary adoption agency is a specified authority because its provider is 'a person entered on a register kept by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills under Part 2 of the Care Standards Act 2000.' (Schedule 6 of the Counter-terrorism and Security Act 2015)

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/6/contents/enacted>

<sup>19</sup> Prevent duty guidance <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance>

<sup>20</sup> Concerns about children: guidance for all Ofsted staff, Ofsted, 2015;

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/concerns-about-children-guidance-for-all-ofsted-staff>

by staff, and identify the most appropriate referral route, for example, Channel Authorities or children's social care.

- Working in partnership  
An agency's safeguarding arrangements must take account of the Local Safeguarding Children Board's policies and procedures. Providers are expected to incorporate the duty into their existing policies and procedures so it becomes integral to their overall safeguarding responsibilities.
- Staff training  
Agency staff must have the knowledge to identify children at risk of being drawn into terrorism. They must also know about referral arrangements for children and young people who require further help.
- IT policies  
A provider's arrangements for access to IT, including filtering, must ensure that children and young people are safe from terrorist and extremist material when accessing the agency's internet. They must support prospective and adoptive parents to understand how to best protect children from accessing, or exposure to, terrorist and extremist materials.