Guidance

Cafcass inspection framework: April 2021

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Introduction

This framework sets out how Ofsted inspects Cafcass through:

- a full inspection of the national organisation in a 3-year window
- focused visits
- monitoring visits (only if Cafcass is judged to be inadequate)
- activity outside inspection

This framework and guidance are to help inspectors carry out inspections of, and visits to, Cafcass. We will periodically review and amend this framework and evaluation criteria.

Inspections of Cafcass (including focused and monitoring visits) are delivered under Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's (HMCI) duty to inspect as set out in sections 143–145 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Inspection principles

Ofsted's corporate strategy outlines how we will carry out inspection and regulation that is:

- intelligent: all of our work will be evidence-led, and we will work to ensure that our evaluation tools and frameworks will be valid and reliable
- responsible: our frameworks will be fair. We will seek to reduce inspection burdens and make our expectations and findings clear
- focused: we will target our time and resources where they can lead directly to improvement

Our approach to inspecting Cafcass is further underpinned by 3 principles that apply to all social care inspections. Inspection should:

- focus on the things that matter most to children's lives
- be consistent in our expectations of providers
- prioritise our work where improvement is needed most

Inspection approach

This framework includes:

- Cafcass sharing an annual self-evaluation of the quality and impact of its social work practice
- an annual engagement meeting between Ofsted and Cafcass to review the self-evaluation, to reflect on what is happening in Cafcass and to inform how we engage with each other in future
- focused visits that look at a specific area of service or cohort of children
- a full inspection in a 3-year window, when we will make judgements using our 4-point scale

We have described each part of this approach in more detail later in the framework.

Applying a proportionate and risk-based approach to inspection

There is no fixed cycle or end date for the inspection programme. Under this framework, we use the intelligence and information we have to inform decisions about when and how to inspect.

There will be times when concerns arise about Cafcass. We will decide on a case-by-case basis how to respond. This will include considering whether to carry out an inspection, at which we make a graded judgement, or whether a focused visit would be more appropriate. A focused visit gives Cafcass and us the opportunity to identify what is going well and what needs to improve before the next judgement inspection. The timing and outcome of any previous inspection activity will influence our decision-making.

We will publish the focused visit letter setting out the areas that Cafcass needs to address. We will review the progress in these areas through the self-evaluation and the annual engagement meeting until the next inspection happens.

This approach aims to support improvement, while still holding Cafcass to account in meeting its legal responsibilities to children and families involved in family court proceedings.

Inspections will not usually begin over the Christmas and New Year period. The only activities that might take place in August would be focused visits by agreement, or if concerns arise such that agreement is not needed.

Deferring an inspection

We will not usually defer inspections or visits, as set out in our deferral policy.

Activity outside of inspection

Cafcass self-evaluation of social work practice

Each year, we will ask Cafcass to share a self-evaluation of social work practice within family court proceedings and to meet with our representatives to discuss it. This part of the framework is voluntary, but it plays an important role in our understanding of Cafcass and how it works.

Engagement between Ofsted and Cafcass outside of inspection will help us to apply the risk-based and proportionate approach that this framework offers. It will help us to carry out our inspections and visits more efficiently. It will also help ensure that inspection frequency and arrangements are appropriate for Cafcass as the inspected body.

There is no set time each year that we ask Cafcass to share a self-evaluation. To be most effective, this should happen before the planned annual engagement meeting, but there is no expectation that Cafcass schedule its work around our timelines. Ideally, we ask Cafcass to share this early enough for us to analyse its content, but not so far in advance that the information is out of date by the time of the annual engagement meeting.

The self-evaluation should answer 3 questions:

- What do you know about the quality and impact of social work practice in private and public law family court proceedings?
- How do you know it?
- What are your plans for the next 12 months to maintain or improve practice?

Cafcass's response to these questions will help us to see whether leaders and managers have a grip on practice and are taking suitable action.

There is no prescribed format or content for the self-evaluation. Cafcass should apply the following principles. The self-evaluation:

- should answer the 3 questions set out above
- should set out the main themes and learning
- should make sense as a standalone document (appendices can be included, but should be kept to a minimum)
- may be an existing document or combination of documents
- should be succinct, focused and evaluative; overly long self-evaluation is unlikely to be helpful to Cafcass or inspectors

The self-evaluation should draw on existing documentation and activity. It should reflect Cafcass's business as usual so as to avoid additional burden. We do not expect Cafcass to carry out additional work to inform the self-evaluation. It is for Cafcass to determine which documentation and information to draw on for the self-evaluation.

The following list offers some suggested sources:

- an overview of how Cafcass evaluates the impact of social work practice with children and families in family proceedings
- high-level performance reports that give the most recent position of case audit plans
- case audit summaries of learning
- recent learning about frontline private and public law practice, for example from complaints or child safeguarding practice and management reviews
- feedback from children and families

If the self-evaluation identifies weaknesses in practice and Cafcass has credible plans to take clear, appropriate and effective action in response, we will treat this as effective leadership rather than an automatic trigger for an inspection or focused visit.

Annual engagement meeting

The meeting should be carried out in the spirit of transparency and benefit everyone involved.

The meeting is not an opportunity for inspectors to evaluate direct social work practice with children and families. The intelligence gathered from the meeting will inform any plans for future inspection activity and focused visits.

The meeting should cover:

- the content of the self-evaluation – what leaders know about practice and outcomes, and the evidence that supports this
- the impact of the self-evaluation – what leaders are doing to address weaknesses in practice and maintain or improve good practice, including evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of their actions
- actions taken in response to previous inspections
- Cafcass's current financial and professional practice context within the wider family justice system
- the possible scope of a focused visit
- the approximate timing of the next self-evaluation and annual engagement meeting

A representative from Ofsted will chair the meeting. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Cafcass will determine who else attends from Cafcass. For the meeting to be effective, those attending the meeting should have a clear reason to be there.

Ofsted and the CEO will agree the agenda in advance of the meeting and ensure that there is sufficient time to discuss the relevant issues.

We will write to the CEO within a month of the meeting. The letter will not be published nor contain any judgements about practice. It will set out:

- the date of the meeting and who attended
- a factual summary of the agenda items discussed
- the possible scope of a future focused visit
- the approximate timing of the following year's self-evaluation and annual engagement meeting
- any next steps agreed for either Cafcass or us

Scope

Within the scope of the inspection, we will look at the experiences of children and families for whom Cafcass has a role in family proceedings. This includes children and families who are the subject of:

- public family law care and supervision applications where a local authority is the applicant
- private family law applications related to contact or residence proceedings
- applications for children to be placed in secure accommodation under section 25 of the Children Act 1989
- adoption proceedings, including adoption from care, a step-parent adoption, inter-country adoption, or adoption of a relinquished baby
- application for leave to remove a child from the UK jurisdiction
- application for parental orders linked to surrogacy arrangements

Inspections

Inspections will focus on family court advisers' direct practice with families. Inspectors will:

- evaluate and consider a sample of public and private law cases where children are involved in order to judge the quality of frontline practice and management and the difference it makes to the lives of children and their families and carers. This will include discussions with family court advisers, including their managers and other professionals working with the child; in the case of children in care, this may include the independent reviewing officer
- with their agreement, meet as appropriate with children, parents and carers
- shadow practitioners in their day-to-day work, for example by observing practice in court and work with children and families
- speak to key partners, for example local authorities, HM Courts & Tribunals Service and the family judiciary
- review copies of quality assurance activity, case audits from the 6 months before the inspection and any associated action plans derived from the audits
- review data that Cafcass uses to manage the delivery of its service
- review responses to complaints

Inspectors will gather evidence across the scope of this framework. We will usually give 5 working days' notice of the inspection. The inspection team will be a lead inspector and usually up to 10 social care inspectors working in teams of 2 in different geographical areas.

Inspection teams may also include an additional inspector who will be shadowing the work of their colleagues. Any activity they carry out will be for the purpose of their training and development or to evaluate the inspection framework and methodology. They will not carry out any inspection work independently or gather evidence that will inform the inspection judgements.

Notice period (off site)

Usual day of the week	Activities
Monday	Lead inspector phone call to the CEO to announce the inspection Afternoon 'set-up' discussion between lead inspector and CEO (by telephone or in person)
Tuesday	Off site preparation
Wednesday	Cafcass shares child-level data, information about audits and performance and management information
Thursday	Cafcass provides access to case materials for off-site analysis
Friday	Telephone conference inspection team meeting (including an Ofsted analytical officer)

Pre-fieldwork analysis week (off site)

Usual day of the week	Activities
Monday to Thursday	Full team off site evaluating case materials and other evidence
Friday	Full inspection team meeting

Week 1

Usual day of the week	Activities
Monday	Full team on site from lunchtime gathering evidence
Tuesday to Thursday	Full team on site gathering evidence
Friday	Feeding back inspection findings so far

Week 2

Usual day of the week	Activities
Monday	Full team on site from lunchtime gathering evidence
Tuesday to Thursday	Full team on site gathering evidence
Friday	Feeding back inspection findings

Inspecting against the scope and making judgements based on the evaluation criteria

Inspectors inspect across the scope of the inspection and record their evidence under the judgement area. Each judgement area has several criteria that describe a good service and what good experiences and progress for children look like.

Inspectors do not have to gather evidence against each individual criterion

The evaluation criteria (see below) help the inspection team arrive at an agreed judgement on the 4-point grading scheme.

Off-site evaluation

Off-site evaluation and planning are important parts of all inspections. All inspectors will have access to all data and case materials provided by Cafcass. An Ofsted senior analytical officer will coordinate the data, provide a pre-inspection analysis (PIA) and agree priorities for the inspection with the inspection team.

The senior analytical officer will ensure that the PIA contains the information the lead inspector and team will need to inform the inspection planning and on-site activity. This will summarise:

- a contextual overview of Cafcass
- findings from relevant inspections (including previous focused visits)
- regional intelligence about the effectiveness of the local family justice area
- findings from published child safeguarding practice reviews
- analysis of published statistics and regional comparisons
- evidence from whistleblowing or complaints to Ofsted
- intelligence held by Ofsted, including events of public concern, such as high-profile court cases or media issues
- search and review of recently published documentation, such as the Cafcass annual report

The PIA will include any analysis of the most recent self-evaluation and annual engagement meeting with Cafcass.

Annex A lists the information that we request from Cafcass at the start of the inspection.

The lead inspector will have time allocated, before fieldwork begins, to review the pre-inspection analysis and the information from Annex A. They will use this information to:

- ensure that the fieldwork is properly focused and used to the best effect in collecting first-hand evidence
- decide which site(s) within Cafcass to visit during inspection
- identify initial lines of enquiry for the inspection
- allocate information to the inspection team for them to analyse

Only initial lines of enquiry will be generated at this point. These will be few in number and themed around priority areas. The lead inspector will share verbally the lines of enquiry with Cafcass at the beginning of the inspection. The lead inspector will explain to the CEO how these lines will be pursued and what, if any, specific information is required from them as a result.

We do not expect Cafcass to produce documents and data in response to these initial lines of enquiry unless specifically requested by the lead inspector. During the inspection, additional requests for further documentation will be kept to an absolute minimum and agreed by the lead inspector.

All inspectors have time allocated to prepare for the inspection. All team inspectors must read the PIA and familiarise themselves with the relevant material and profile of Cafcass before arriving on site. The lead inspector is likely to identify other documents for inspectors to read before the on-site activity.

Inspectors must review the information in Annex A provided by Cafcass. The lead inspector may decide that some documents must be read by all team members; others will be read by only one inspector and then summarised for the team. Some documents may be used as reference material and read only when required. The lead inspector will ensure that key points of analysis are collated and disseminated to the inspection team to inform the inspection.

Notifying Cafcass and requesting information

The lead inspector will ensure that Cafcass (usually the CEO) is notified by telephone of the inspection by 9.30am 5 working days before the fieldwork starts. As part of this telephone call, the lead inspector will also arrange to meet with the CEO or the most senior manager available at the earliest opportunity when they arrive on site. Immediately following the telephone call to Cafcass, the lead inspector will email the CEO to confirm the start of the inspection and ask them to share information set out in Annex A. Annex A lists information we think Cafcass will already maintain to inform its oversight and management of its service. On this basis, we do not consider that the information we request is unreasonable.

The lead inspector will offer the CEO an opportunity for a conversation later the same day to give the CEO time to bring together the relevant staff. This conversation will usually be by phone, but the lead inspector may meet with the CEO in person if it is practical to do so.

If the CEO is not available, the lead inspector will speak with or email the most senior manager available and ask them to notify the CEO. The non-availability of the CEO or a senior manager will not delay the start of the inspection.

The lead inspector will ask the CEO to identify a link support person for the inspection. It is important that the link person has ready access to the CEO and senior leaders and sufficient authority to be able to respond to the lead inspector's requests.

In the time before inspectors are on site, the lead inspector will work with the link person and/or CEO to prepare for the on-site activity. Together, they will:

- answer questions about the scope of the inspection
- outline the format and methodology of the inspection, which will focus almost exclusively on practice with children and families. Meetings will be kept to a minimum, will only look into matters arising from case evaluations and will only take place at the lead inspector's request
- discuss how inspectors will directly consider the experiences of children and families as an integral part of the inspection. When opportunities arise during the fieldwork to speak with or observe contact with children and families, the local Cafcass staff will be asked to obtain their agreement to observe any meetings and speak to inspectors
- agree practical arrangements, such as workspace, access to files and information technology systems, and any staff support required to access these files and systems
- agree arrangements to meet with the CEO and their senior leadership team for regular keep-in-touch meetings and the feedback meeting
- provide contact details for the lead inspector, inspection team members and the allocated Senior HMI responsible for quality assurance
- provide information for affected/relevant staff, such as copies of the summary of the framework explaining the purpose of the inspection
- gain an understanding of how the local area services are structured, as well as any issues specific to the site(s) being inspected
- provide an opportunity for Cafcass representatives to explain their local and national context, key strengths and challenges
- clarify whether there are any serious incidents that are awaiting investigation. This should include significant and current investigations (including police investigations), national or local learning reviews and local issues of high media interest

During the week before inspectors arrive on site, an Ofsted analytical officer will ask to speak with an analyst at Cafcass. This is to discuss issues about data quality, performance documents, the performance reporting process and the types and breadth of management information produced.

On-site inspection

The lead inspector and up to 10 team inspectors will arrive on sites across the national organisation on Monday. All inspectors will show their inspector identity badges. They do not need to carry copies of their DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks.

The lead inspector will meet with the CEO or deputy at Cafcass's headquarters or another prearranged venue. At this meeting, the lead inspector will review the matters and arrangements discussed in the previous week. The lead inspector will answer any remaining questions and ask leaders to confirm that the practical arrangements inspectors requested are in place.

The team inspectors will work in teams of 2, each led by a deputy lead inspector. When the deputy lead inspector arrives on site, they will meet with the assistant director and/or the most senior manager available. At this meeting, the deputy lead inspector will explain the inspection team's plans while on site in that location.

When planning the on-site aspect of inspection, the deputy lead inspectors should ensure that:

- support is provided to facilitate communication with children, care leavers, carers and parents who require additional support
- the plan allows realistic travel time for inspectors between activities
- the plan allows sufficient time and flexibility for inspectors to pursue lines of enquiry
- staff are given the opportunity to provide their evidence separately to those who manage them
- if the need for any meeting arises as a result of evaluating children's experiences, the lead inspector asks for this as soon as the need becomes apparent; these meetings may be held by telephone as well as in person
- the way inspectors' time is planned includes opportunities for team members to reflect on, record and analyse evidence, individually and as a team

The schedule for the inspection will develop throughout the inspection in response to issues emerging from evaluating children's experiences. The lead inspector has overall responsibility for the schedule, working in conjunction with the deputy lead inspectors.

On-site inspection activity will not normally continue after 6pm on any fieldwork day.

Making judgements at inspections

Inspectors will make a graded judgement on the overall effectiveness of Cafcass, which derives from:

- the quality and effectiveness of Cafcass private law practice with children and families
- the quality and effectiveness of Cafcass public law practice with children and families
- the impact of leaders on private and public law practice with children and families

Inspectors will make their graded judgements on a 4-point scale:

- outstanding
- good
- requires improvement to be good
- inadequate

Inspectors will evaluate the experiences of children and families involved in family court proceedings using the evaluation criteria as a benchmark. Inspectors will use professional judgement to determine the weight and significance of their findings. A judgement of good will be made if the inspection team concludes that the evidence overall sits most appropriately with a finding of good. This is what we describe as 'best fit'.

The overall effectiveness judgement is derived from findings in each of the 3 other judgement areas. Inspectors will use both evidence and their professional judgement to award the overall effectiveness grade.

The overall effectiveness judgement will take account of any widespread or serious failures that led to children's welfare not being safeguarded and whether leaders and managers have been ineffective in challenging such weak practice and making the necessary improvements.

It is possible for the impact of leaders to be judged good or requires improvement to be good even if any of the other judgements given are inadequate. Inspectors will make this judgement if leaders and managers show sufficient understanding of the widespread or serious failure and have taken effective action to prioritise, challenge and make sustained improvement to services. Inspectors will acknowledge this in the report. The overall judgement will be inadequate when the quality and effectiveness of either private or public law practice with children and families is inadequate.

If, at the end of fieldwork, Cafcass is judged inadequate, inspectors will follow the section in this guidance on monitoring visits.

Focused visits

Focused visits will happen between inspections. We will usually give 5 working days' notice of the visit. Usually, 6 inspectors will be on site in teams of 2 in up to 3 locations for 2 days contained within 1 week. Focused visits will include some or all of the same inspection activity as an inspection.

Notice period – off site

Day of the week	Activities
Monday	Lead inspector off-site evaluation of information
Tuesday	Lead inspector and specialists in their areas focused inspections Lead inspector and specialists in their areas focused inspections
Wednesday	Cafcass shows Ofsted leaders, Ofsted leaders shadow audits and performance and management information
Thursday	Full team off-site evaluation of evidence
Friday	Preparation for feedback and presentation

This is an indicative timetable and actual days on site may vary. Therefore will be adjusted to reflect what actually happens.

A focused visit will look at one or more aspects of service, themes or cohorts of children. Inspectors will use evaluation frameworks for the inspection.

We will make the final decision about the focused visit topic to be covered. The decision will be based on one or more of the following:

- If a specific area of service has been identified by Cafcass as an example of good or outstanding practice
- If a specific area of service has been identified as one that needs to improve or area where themes, trends and issues are identified
- If a specific area of service where Cafcass has been made aware of a specific focus will support Cafcass's improvement journey
- If we decide to carry out a thematic programme in a particular area of service, which will then lead to a thematic overview

Focused visit topics

Each focused visit will cover part of the scope of an inspection. The principal focus will be the quality and impact of practice (either public law, private law or both) with children and families. We will consider the following factors when deciding the focus of a focused visit:

- a case file or Cafcass information/intelligence
- previous inspection outcomes and Cafcass's current improvement priorities
- information and intelligence received that raises concerns about the local area

In each focused visit, inspectors will evaluate the effectiveness of:

- performance management
- management oversight
- supervision
- quality assurance
- continuous professional development of the workforce

Findings at focused visits

Inspectors will not make graded judgements at the outcome of a focused visit. Nor will they be able to indicate what the grade may have been if it were an inspection. Focused visits do not cover everything that would be considered at an inspection. The scope of work, the findings about strengths and areas for improvement, will be published letter.

If inspectors find serious weaknesses, they will identify areas for priority action. An area for priority action is when:

- an area of service weakness that is placing children at risk of inadequate protection or inadequate promotion of their welfare, including their safety
- an unnecessary delay in progressing children's cases that results in them remaining in being safeguarded and promoted

Priority actions may result from particular or localised failings to protect or care for children as well as from systemic failures or deficits. Some examples of areas for priority action are:

- undetected children's cases and/or significant delays in safeguarding the welfare of a child
- systemic failure or significant weakness in practice that affect vulnerable children, significant risk of harm to safeguard and promote the child's welfare
- a failure to ensure that children's cases are allocated to a practitioner with the expertise and/or skill in management oversight and supervision that impacts adversely on children, families or the quality and appropriateness of advice to the family court

Inspectors will consider the impact of the priority action on children and families. Inspectors will also consider the local authority's plans and progress to fix any notable inspection to target their evidence-gathering more effectively.

Monitoring Cafcass following an overall inadequate inspection judgement

If Cafcass is judged inadequate, we will carry out monitoring activity that includes an action planning visit, monitoring visits and a re-inspection. The lead inspector will provide a letter to the Cafcass leadership for the inspection where the inadequate judgement is given.

Monitoring visits will focus on where improvement is needed the most. Inspectors will monitor and report on Cafcass's progress since the inspection. Inspectors will check that performance in other areas has not declined since the inspection. If new concerns arise, inspectors are likely to focus on the monitoring visits.

The timetable for a monitoring visit will mirror that of a focused visit.

Inspection methodology

Our inspection work that includes inspection activity to gather and evaluate evidence and report their findings.

Inspection activity and gathering evidence

Almost all inspection evidence will be gathered by looking at individual children's experiences. This will be a people-through meeting with practitioners to understand the child's circumstances and the work done with the family, including scrutinising electronic records.

Evaluating individual children's records that have always been judged by Ofsted to be an effective way for inspectors to understand practice and target their evidence gathering. We will also look at how well the child's voice is being heard. We will also look at how the team has worked with children who have been in that part of the inspection. When evaluating individual children's experiences, inspectors will not grade individual pieces of work.

When inspectors select the children whose experiences they will evaluate, they will take into account the factors set out below:

- age, gender, disability and ethnicity
- the factors that have led to the family court proceedings, for example abuse, neglect or parental mental ill health, learning disability or substance misuse, parental alienation and parental conflict connected to court proceedings

The lead inspector will take into account any lines of enquiry identified before arriving on site and any other information or intelligence they receive from information, such as children who appear to have experienced significant delay.

It is important that inspectors examine good practice as part of the inspection. We encourage Cafcass to provide examples of cases that demonstrate good practice that it has identified through its case audit activity.

In all inspections where the child's case is based on retrospectively, inspectors will look at the current situation of the child. This will be a people-through meeting with practitioners usually not older than 6 months before the inspection. Inspectors may also look at cases where the child's case is closed if it is in the interest of the child and generally be based on a period that has an impact on the child's current situation. However, where necessary, for example in repeat applications, inspectors will need to look back further to understand the current child's journey. Inspectors will take into account the factors set out above.

Cafcass should arrange for each inspector to have individual access to all relevant electronic systems.

Inspectors will review a sample of practitioners' supervision records, including those related to the sample of children.

Protecting personal data

During inspections and visits, inspectors will gather personal information that is necessary, proportionate and relevant to our inspection purpose and will be able to collect, what we do with it, how long we keep it and our people's rights under the Data Protection Act 2018.

Hearing the views of children and their families

There are various opportunities for how to the views of children and their families. Inspectors will use these otherwise possible. These include:

- direct testimony – for example, speaking to those whose cases we are looking at closely; inspectors will gather views sensitively, in a way that does not impact on ongoing family court proceedings
- other representative groups – for example, from the Family Justice Young People's Board
- views directly recorded in case files and meeting minutes
- Cafcass's feedback mechanisms
- views expressed by other advocacy bodies to children and their families
- analysis of the views of children routinely gathered by Cafcass
- reviewing complaints letters

Inspectors will talk to children whenever possible during the inspection, although these conversations will not be formal. We will not use the formal powers of inspection. Inspectors are interested in learning from the children's lights and lowlights of how their actions and feelings are being taken into account in formulating Cafcass's advice to the family court.

Inspectors will provide Cafcass with guidance to help prepare children, carers and families for the inspection. Inspectors will explain to children and families who have been the focus of their inspection and their involvement in the inspection process before speaking to them about their experiences.

Inspectors will discuss any other issues concerned with meeting children and birth family members with the Cafcass family court adviser.

Inspectors will be sensitive to the potential impact of contact with communication difficulties has access to the resources support to facilitate their full participation in the inspection.

We will also want to see and hear what the impact of Cafcass's own consultation with children. We will want to see how children's feedback has been asked for, both individually and collectively, and what impact has been made to improve practice and services.

Documentation

The inspection team will review the documentation requested in Annex A. If Cafcass wants to share any additional information after it has provided Annex A, it must discuss this with the lead inspector first. Cafcass must be clear why it believes the information is relevant to the inspection. The lead inspector will make the final decision on whether to accept the information as part of the inspection evidence.

When inspectors are seeking further information

We sometimes have to ask for further information. This may be about a service or strategy or about an individual child's experiences.

Requests for further information about an individual child's experiences should not be seen as a negative. Sometimes it is because inspectors have insufficient information to be able to make a judgement about the child's experience. It may be because the information that inspectors do have has been recorded. After the 12 years since the leadership team has responded to the request, inspectors are able to make a more informed judgement about the child's experience. It may be because, in relation to some cases, requests for further information enable inspectors to explore good practice.

Engaging with leaders and staff

Interviews with practitioners, managers and stakeholders

Inspectors will interview practitioners, team managers and senior managers, either by telephone or in person. Lead inspectors will only request that groups of people are brought together for discussions or meetings if this is the only way to triangulate evidence and is required to explore areas of enquiry arising from case reviews.

When talking to family court advisers about practice, inspectors are likely to ask questions about the following areas of practice:

- the quality and impact of supervision and management oversight
- the ways in which they are helped to strengthen families and minimise risk
- workloads and emotional management
- the availability, quality and impact of training and development opportunities
- the quality of the relationship between Cafcass and the family court and other agencies (learning from national and local learning reviews)

Inspectors will usually speak about these issues alone with family court advisers. They may ask for the practitioners' views on the potential.

If these individuals are not available, inspectors may talk to those who are deputising for them in their absence.

Engaging the senior leaders during an inspection visit

The lead or deputy lead inspector will meet the CEO or another member of the senior staff of emerging findings throughout the inspection process. This is likely to be on a daily basis. The lead inspector will also meet the senior leadership team to discuss the emerging findings.

Inspectors will also be short and focus on the main findings, arising from the inspection. They will not be a description of inspection activity. The lead inspector and the inspection should check that the senior leaders are clear about the relationship between the evidence and the emerging and it understandable findings.

Although the lead or deputy lead inspectors will always offer senior leaders opportunities to discuss the emerging findings, they may not always be required. For example, they may not be required to meet with inspection due to other commitments. The extent to which senior leaders engage with the inspection team will not, in itself, influence inspection judgements.

Local family justice system

Inspectors will look at how Cafcass is important to understand Cafcass's performance in the context of the wider family justice system and to gather a wider range of evidence. Inspectors may contact local authorities to hear their experience of Cafcass's performance and gather their views on how Cafcass's work impacts on children.

Inspectors will usually speak with the local judiciary (likely to be the local designated family judge and the local designated family magistrate), the local Children's Services administration (court manager, family court listing officer or clerk to family justice), interviews will usually be by telephone.

We will not make judgements about other local agencies or organisations or the judiciary. We will use the information we receive from them to triangulate our evidence. The information gathered will vary according to the time of enquiry in each area and will be proportionate.

Recording evidence

Throughout an inspection or visit, inspectors will maintain a record of the evidence they gather. The record will include their individual and team analysis of the evidence. Inspectors will use an electronic recording system for this.

Each inspector will maintain records of the evidence they gather throughout the inspection. Inspectors must record the source, date and time of the evidence they gather. Inspectors will record their analysis of the evidence they have gathered. The inspector will use it to substantiate their judgements.

The lead and deputy lead inspector must allocate time for team inspectors to analyse their record and add individual evaluations summaries to the team's evidence.

Inspectors should record at least once a day to discuss their individual findings and record shared evaluative summaries. Their shared summaries will usually draw on findings from multiple sources of evidence gathered by more than one inspector – they will be more overarching feedback of what inspectors have found and what it means to the inspection.

Evaluative summaries must set out the inspector's or team's view about the quality, effectiveness and extent of practice. They must not simply describe the practice that is in place. A SWOT analysis can help to achieve summaries that are clear and concise and focused on what matters most to children and families.

- each left or scored evaluative statement should be sources of evidence being considered
- it will by summarise the evidence underpinning this statement
- and with a comment on the difference this makes to children

Inspectors will use their professional judgement to make decisions about practice with children and families from about the impact of Cafcass leaders.

When considered as a whole, the team's shared evaluative summaries must cover the scope of the inspection and will be clearly linked to the relevant findings in the evaluation criteria. They must reflect strengths and areas for improvement found across the scope. The number of summaries is less important than their quality.

All inspectors are responsible for reviewing the evidence record to identify gaps and inconsistencies in the team's evidence. They will do this at least once a day. Inspectors will where sufficient evidence has been recorded about an issue or theme in the scope.

Inspectors should record individual summaries in the evidence record if they have evidence that is significant to the inspection. Inspectors should use their judgement to be aware of what is not responding to appropriately. Inspectors should record also record summaries of examples of outstanding practice.

Inspectors should not use the evidence of individual children or family members in their evidence records. They should use case reference numbers and/or initials. Inspectors should not include any personal data in their evidence records.

The quality assurance manager will review the inspection record and discuss the team's findings to make sure that the 2 page. They will add their analysis to the evidence record, which may include recommending areas for further investigation by the inspection team.

Finalising evidence

Towards the end of the inspection or focused visit, the inspection team will complete its evidence record and prepare for the feedback to the senior leadership team. This meeting should be informed by a clear and aligned evaluation of the evidence.

At the end of a focused visit, the team will agree the main strengths and areas for improvement and whether there are any priority areas.

Before formal feedback at the end of an inspection, the lead inspector and quality assurance manager will usually inform the CEO of the provisional judgements from the inspection.

Feedback at the end of the inspection/visit

On the first day on site, the team inspectors will invite the CEO and senior leaders to meet with the inspection team to hear the provisional findings and/or judgements and, where appropriate, to discuss the evidence. The CEO may also invite other senior managers to engage between the inspection team and Cafcass about the evidence.

Because the strengths and areas for development should have been discussed in the daily meetings, there should be no surprises on the final day.

Senior leaders are invited to engage in this final discussion about the evidence supporting the provisional judgements and findings to:

- understand the evidence that the team used to reach findings and/or judgements to ensure that the evidence is accurate and that it does not include evidence that is factual in error or has been judged outstanding
- participate in a dialogue about the areas for development that are likely to follow the inspection to ensure that senior leaders fully understand the issues that have been identified
- understand what will make the most difference for Cafcass and the children and families they serve
- support understanding of the evidence so that the findings and judgements of the inspection can be disseminated accurately and inform internal discussions about improvement

To make findings and/or judgements clear and to inform the discussion with Cafcass, inspectors will use a SWOT analysis to summarise the evidence they have gathered. They will highlight strengths and areas for development across the scope of the inspection/visit. This is an opportunity for dialogue with senior leaders to help them understand the evidence. It is not a negotiation about the judgements. Senior leaders will usually join no longer than 60 minutes. Inspectors will provide a written feedback report or letter at this stage of the inspection.

The lead inspector and the quality assurance manager will set out the procedures for sharing the draft inspection for any comments about the draft report, publishing the report/letter and for making a complaint.

Inspection reports and letters

The following tables sets out the kind of report we publish after each type of inspection or visit:

Type of inspection	Report
Inspection	Inspection report with judgements on the Ofsted Ofsted scale, plus a stand-alone summary letter to Cafcass
Focused visit	Letter setting out narrative findings about strengths and areas for improvement
Monitoring visit	Letter setting out narrative findings about strengths and areas for improvement

The lead inspector will write the inspection report/letter. The lead inspector is responsible for the quality and accuracy of the report. A Ofsted quality assurance manager will also be responsible for the quality of the report.

Reports/letters should:

- be concise, evaluative documents, written in clear, straightforward language and be free of jargon
- be a fair and accurate reflection of the areas being inspected, with both balance and tone that reflects the quality of Cafcass's practice
- be clear about what Cafcass's current improvement planning practice and identify clear areas of strength and improvement for Cafcass
- ch-like a balance between being accessible to a wider audience and being of value to Cafcass
- be sufficiently clear, precise and detailed about areas that need to improve so Cafcass has a basis for subsequent action to lead to improvement

Sections in the report/letter

The first page of the inspection report will include the graded judgements and a brief summary that answers these questions:

- What do we know about the overall experiences of children and families supported by Cafcass and their overall outcomes?
- To what extent do leaders know about the quality of frontline practice?
- How well do they support practice to help it stay or become good?
- What has changed for children and families since the last inspection?

The report will then identify areas where improvement is needed most. The rest of the report will include a section on each of the inspection areas.

Letters following focused visits will set out the findings from the visit. The letter may include a section on the impact of Cafcass's improvement activity since the last inspection or inspection report. If inspectors find serious weaknesses, they will include a section that identifies areas for priority action. If inspectors identify an area for priority action, they will set out what Cafcass should do to address it. Cafcass will be expected to be providing comments and implementation milestones, we will ask for Cafcass to comment.

Letters, or a monitoring visit, the inspector will write a brief report about their findings, and in particular, their evaluation of Cafcass's progress.

Summary for children

After each inspection, we will provide a summary of the inspection findings for children. We will also do this after a monitoring visit.

We will not publish this summary. We will send it to Cafcass at the same time that we send the pre-publication version of the main report. It will be for Cafcass to decide how best to share the summary with children.

Writing the report/letter

The things that reviews/inspection must must be proportionate to the overall grade in inspection reports and to the findings in letters. This section of the report/letter must be clear, fair, balanced and evidence-based. Inspectors and quality assurance managers need to ensure that evidence reviews or continue to receive a good or outstanding rating will set out the area of service or practice that needs to improve but will not make a judgement about what the grade would have been if it was inspected.

In the rest of the report/letter, inspectors will only report on areas of inspection that need to improve. Inspection reports do not need to report on every aspect of what Cafcass does. Letters will focus on the areas of practice. We will be expected to write neither a strength nor an area of improvement for inspection.

Inspectors must make clear the extent of all the issues reported. If any specific group of children is particularly affected – such as those from a specific age, disability, ethnicity or ethnic group or disabled children – inspectors should include this in the report.

Checking and publishing reports/letters

The quality assurance manager allocated to the inspection will review the report/letter before it is published. The quality assurance manager will also check the report/letter. Director, Regulation and Social Care, will review the report/letter.

Cafcass will be given an opportunity to make any comments on the report/letter before we publish it.

We will send the final version of the report to Cafcass. We will also send it to the Ministry of Justice. We will publish the final version on our reports website.

Quality assurance stage	Inspection	Focused visit/monitoring visit
Draft report/letter sent to Cafcass for any comments	10 working days after completion of fieldwork	5 working days after completion of fieldwork
Cafcass's first working days to send any comments	5 to 10 working days after receipt	3 to 5 days after receipt
Final version of the report/letter sent to Cafcass and published on our website	20 working days after receipt	10 days after receipt
Cafcass to: Complaints Manager, Cafcass to complain	Within 2 working days of receipt	2 to 5 days after receipt
Report/letter published on Ofsted's reports website	40 working days after receipt	20 days after receipt

Quality assurance

The principles of quality assurance for all inspections, focused visits and monitoring visits are based on the assumption that the lead inspector takes overall responsibility for the quality of the inspection. The quality assurance manager is responsible for the quality of their work, with lead inspectors being responsible for the quality of their work.

Quality assurance arrangements will be flexible and proportionate depending on the type of inspection activity carried out. The level of quality assurance will be influenced by:

- whether it is an inspection resulting in a judgement or a visit resulting in a letter
- the experience of the team
- Ofsted intelligence held by us

After the inspection

This section covers about submitting an action plan in response to an inspection and making a complaint to us about the inspection.

Action plan after an inspection or visit

After an inspection, we will ask Cafcass to write an action plan that responds to the findings in the report. We will ask Cafcass to share its action plan with us by sending it to the inspection team at inspection@ofsted.gov.uk, copied in the lead inspector and the lead inspection report.

After a focused visit, we will ask Cafcass to update any existing action and/or improvement plan from previous inspection. We will ask Cafcass to share the updated action plan to us when it shares its self-evaluation in preparation for the next monitoring visit or inspection.

If a visit highlights an area for priority action, we will ask Cafcass to submit a standalone action plan that responds to the priority action within 70 working days of receiving the letter. We will ask Cafcass to share the action plan with us by sending it to the inspection team at inspection@ofsted.gov.uk copied in the lead inspector.

Although there is no legal obligation to do so, we ask Cafcass for its cooperation in this, as this approach represents a straightforward means of encouraging improvement. The purpose is to provide assurance that Cafcass is taking appropriate action with urgency commensurate to the seriousness of the findings.

Cafcass does not need to submit an action plan to us after a monitoring visit.

Complaints

Most of our work is carried out smoothly and without incident. If concerns arise during our work, we will try to resolve them informally with the provider's staff and management as soon as possible during the inspection visit. This provides an opportunity to resolve the matter before the inspection is completed. Any concerns about comments made in the draft inspection report should be raised with the inspection lead as soon as possible as part of the quality assurance process.

If it has not been possible to resolve concerns through these means, a formal complaint can be raised under our complaints procedure.

Evaluation criteria and grade descriptors

This section sets out our description of what a good experience for children looks like. Inspectors use this to make their judgments.

Overall effectiveness

Inspectors will determine the overall effectiveness graded judgement by taking account of the grading of the other judgements that have been agreed during inspection.

- the extent of good practice across the service
- the impact of leadership and management
- whether areas for improvement have been identified and the extent to which leaders and managers understand the issues and are working to resolve them

The overall judgement will be inadequate if the quality and effectiveness of other private or public sector provision with children and families are inadequate

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass private law practice with children and families

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass private law practice with children and families are likely to be judged as 'Outstanding' if the following apply:

Cafcass's leaflet is safeguarded and promoted through the actions and recommendations of Cafcass.

The family court is given high-quality advice and information about applications made to it in private law proceedings, at first and all subsequent hearings, where appropriate

Children and their parents, carers and families are provided with appropriate information, advice and support during proceedings.

Delays are avoided in allocation, work carried out with families and filing with the court, in line with current hearing dates.

Effective initial risk assessments and screening of cases are carried out. Safeguarding letters are timely, proportionate, and focused on the safety and welfare of children. The letters provide sufficient information for the court to assess, about the child's current circumstances and about the need for future Cafcass intervention.

Effective assessment and planned direct work with children and their families/carers are carried out promptly. Children know what is happening to them and why, and their views are sought and taken into account. Risks are proportionate and focused on the issues identified by the court.

Children who are the subject of orders of the court are seen, and seen alone, provided this is in their best interests and taking account of the complexity of the case.

Effective initial risk assessments and screening of cases are carried out. Safeguarding letters are timely, proportionate, and focused on the safety and welfare of children. The letters provide sufficient information for the court to assess, about the child's current circumstances and about the need for future Cafcass intervention.

Cafcass practitioners' practice is court is consistent with the Child Arrangements Programme (Practice Direction 12B - Child Arrangements Programme) (Practice Direction issued by the President of the Family Division) and Cafcass practitioners are knowledgeable about the duties of a Cafcass officer, and is accountable to each party and recognises the distinct role of Cafcass within the family court.

Reports to the court, including oral reporting, include information relevant to the proceedings, appropriate analysis and recommendations. Written recommendations flow from the body of the report and are made by Cafcass practitioners with suitable social work qualifications and experience, and by student social workers who carry out assessments under the required level of supervision.

If it is appropriate and in children's interests, and when it supports and promotes the welfare of children, recommendations to the court are shared with all parties in advance of the day and this is recorded.

Case recording is coherent, timely and sufficiently comprehensive to reflect the work carried out, including the outcome of the assessment. It equitably reflects the views of families and children.

Information sharing between agencies and professionals is lawful, timely, specific and effective.

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass private law practice with children and families are likely to be judged 'Good' if they meet the criteria for good and the following applies:

Practice consistently exceeds the standard of good so that the court is given the best possible advice to inform about the decision-making for children. Practitioners are knowledgeable about the duties of a Cafcass officer and know how to develop from a strong and confident base, making an exceptional difference at a local and national level to children's experiences.

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass private law practice with children and families are likely to be judged 'requires improvement' if the following applies:

'Good' private law practice is not sufficiently in place. However, there are no widespread or serious failures or unnecessary delays attributable to Cafcass that result in children's welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass private law practice with children and families are likely to be judged 'Inadequate' if the following applies:

There are widespread or serious failures, including unnecessary delays in children's cases, attributable to Cafcass, in identifying plans for children and that result in children's welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass public law practice with children and families

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass public law practice with children and families are likely to be judged 'Outstanding' if the following apply:

Cafcass's leaflets is safeguarded and is promoted through the actions and recommendations of children's guardians.

Children's best interests remain central to the proceedings.

Children's guardians give the family court high quality advice on any application made to it in public law proceedings – at the first case management hearing and subsequent hearings – where the guardian's advice is required by the court.

Children are appropriately represented in family proceedings or, if appropriate, enabled to instruct their own legal representative.

Children and their parents, carers and families are provided with appropriate information, advice and other support during proceedings.

Cafcass does not contribute to avoidable delays. If challenges arise Cafcass serves when delays are identified

Cafcass involves independent reviewing officers regularly to improve the plans for children and ensures that children's needs and wishes have been properly understood

When children's guardians are involved in local authority pre-proceedings work, they provide appropriate advice and monitoring.

Children's guardians quickly establish an understanding of the child's needs, wishes and feelings. They provide the court with analysis of the child's best interests and recommendations that are timely and clear. Children are supported to understand what is happening to them and why.

Effective assessment and planned direct work with children and their families/carers are carried out. This adds value to the work of the local authority and the courts.

There are effective working relationships between children's guardians and social workers and all parties.

Children who are the subject of care and supervision proceedings are seen alone by their children's guardian, proportionately to the needs and complexity of the case (if the child is not seen, the reasons are recorded). Children's guardians have effective working relationships with the child in accordance with Cafcass's functions and duties.

Cafcass practitioners' practice is court is consistent with the Public Law Outline (Practice Direction 12A - Care, Supervision and Other Part 8 Proceedings) and Cafcass practitioners are knowledgeable about Case Law Updates (CLU) (GOV.UK), demonstrates constructive working relationships with the judiciary and court officers and is accountable and explicable to all parties

Reports to the court, including oral reporting, include information that is relevant to the proceedings, appropriate analysis and clear and timely recommendations. Written recommendations flow from the body of the report and are made by children's guardians who are skilled and suitably qualified in social work.

The recommendations and advice of children's guardians in care, supervision and other proceedings are based on a clear understanding of the child's current expert advice to the court. Expert advice from children's guardians reduces the need for appointments of further experts.

Case recording is coherent, timely, sufficiently comprehensive to reflect the work carried out and the outcome of the assessment, and balanced and fair to the adult parties.

Information sharing between agencies and professionals is lawful, timely, specific and effective.

Children's guardians liaise and work effectively throughout proceedings with independent reviewing officers and provide a handover at the end of proceedings to ensure continuity of challenge to the local authority's future planning for children

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass public law practice with children and families are likely to be judged 'outstanding' if the following applies:

The response to the needs of children and families involved in public law proceedings and the quality of advice to the family court consistently exceed the criteria for 'good' and consistently ensure that the court is given the best possible advice to inform about the decision-making for children. Exceptional practice, some of which will be innovative, contributes to developing a strong and confident base, making an exceptional difference at a local and national level to children's experiences.

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass public law practice with children and families are likely to be judged 'requires improvement' if the following applies:

'Good' public law practice is not sufficiently in place. However, there are no widespread or serious failures or unnecessary delays attributable to Cafcass that result in children's welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.

The quality and effectiveness of Cafcass public law practice with children and families are likely to be judged 'Inadequate' if the following applies:

There are widespread or serious failures, including unnecessary delays that are attributable to Cafcass, in identifying plans for children and that result in children's welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.

The impact of leaders on private and public law practice with children and families

The impact of leaders on private and public law practice with children and families is likely to be judged good if the following apply:

Accountability and governance

Leaders at all levels prioritise, identify and implement ambitious strategies to improve practice with children and families, and demonstrate accountability to the national policy agenda, and to drive improvement in practice.

Leaders use their influence externally to effectively promote the best interests of children in the national family justice system, including tackling delays in making permanent arrangements for children.

The Cafcass Board provides effective strategic leadership, which delivers a clear vision that informs the organisation's strategic direction and priorities and holds the organisation to account.

Cafcass senior and local leaders implement policy that maintains the best interests of children and the 'paramountcy principle' while ensuring that there is a balance between the requirements of children and families and the wider public. They exercise effective management oversight and are effective in facilitating awareness and overcoming barriers to improvement.

Leaders demonstrate that there are clear lines of accountability between local delivery and the national organisation.

Leaders are proactive and engaged effectively with all relevant partnership organisations, including the family court, judiciary of all levels, local authorities, groups that represent child and adult Cafcass users, local safeguarding partnership arrangements and local and national family justice boards.

There is an effective response to equality issues such as race, religion and sexuality, and to the needs of children and families who are from ethnic minorities and to their Cafcass facility for statutory functions, including the public sector equality duty.

Commissioning of services is intelligence-based, is supported by robust needs assessments, is monitored effectively and provides services that local courts and families need and promotes the welfare of children who are the subject of family proceedings.

Learning culture

Staff at all levels work in a culture that is challenging as well as supportive and promotes continuous improvement, safeguards the welfare of children and promotes diversity and inclusion.

Cafcass responds appropriately, effectively and quickly to areas for development, serious deficiencies and new demands, and is informed when presented with new challenges. The organisation's self-evaluation of practice is accurate.

Cafcass can demonstrate evidence of practice that is informed and sustainably improved by feedback, research and intelligence about the quality of services. Cafcass learns from children's and families' complaints and feedback.

Performance management

Performance management supports improvement of the quality of practice across the organisation, including the quality assurance of reports to the court. Delays for children are regularly reviewed and action taken when it is needed.

Cafcass's performance targets are interchanged and shelve the organisation's ability to meet the needs of children and families involved in family court children. Leaders identify and address negative trends in performance and sustain improvement. The organisation successfully achieves performance targets and ensures that performance management supports improvement and quality in the short term. There is demonstrable capacity to sustain this improvement.

Staff are suitably skilled, trained effectively and supervised, and the quality of their practice improves. Management oversight of practice, including senior management, is effective and ensures that practice is consistently of a high standard, quality of assessment and advice to the courts, and effective in tackling weaknesses and overcoming barriers to improvement.

Workforce

Organisational development and the national improvement service (which supports practice improvement through a team of improvement managers) provides a sufficient, skilled, diverse and suitably experienced workforce able to respond to the demands placed on Cafcass.

There is strong leadership on issues of race, religion and belief, sex, age, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, marriage, gender reassignment and disability, and diversity of the workforce enhances Cafcass's ability to statutory functions, including the public sector equality duty.

Cafcass's practice is timely, proportionate to need, fair, balanced and delivered in accordance with professional social work standards.

The impact of leaders on private and public law practice with children and families is likely to be judged outstanding if the following applies:

In addition to meeting the requirements of a 'good' judgement, there is evidence that leaders and managers are confident, ambitious and effective in changing the lives of children in family proceedings. They innovate and generate ideas that improve services for children and families involved in family court. They know their strengths and weaknesses well and both respond to and are resilient to new challenges. Professional relationships between Cafcass and its partnership organisations are strong and effective. Organisational culture is embedded and result in confident, regular evaluation and improvement in the quality of advice given to the family courts.

The impact of leaders on private and public law practice with children and families is likely to be judged inadequate if the following applies:

Either of the 2 practice judgements is inadequate and leaders and managers are not effective in securing improvement in the quality of practice. Leaders and managers have been ineffective in prioritising challenging weak practice and making improvements.

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