

The evaluation schedule for unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment

Guidance for the evaluation of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection and guidance of local authorities and partners

The evaluation schedule provides outline guidance for inspectors to use when considering the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of child abuse and neglect.

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Introduction

The purpose of the unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements is to assess:

- the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements
- the impact of these arrangements on minimising the incidence of child abuse and neglect.

Inspectors will report on areas in which services have been assessed as meeting the requirements of statutory guidance, areas of particular strength, areas for development, and any areas for priority action. Inspection judgements will not be graded.

Meeting the requirements of statutory guidance

In considering the extent to which a service meets the requirements and expectations of statutory guidance, inspectors will evaluate the extent to which local authorities ensure the following.

- Practice and procedures manage risk of harm and ensure the best possible outcomes for children and young people.
- Good attention is given to the diverse needs of children and there is respect for diversity and sensitivity to age, race, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability.
- Practice and procedures comply with statutory requirements and associated guidance. They are implemented efficiently and effectively and ensure that referrals are responded to promptly.
- Decisions are made in accordance with the timescales set out in statutory guidance. Children suffering or at risk of harm are identified and receive a prompt and appropriate response.
- Agreed inter-agency thresholds (or arrangements for access to services) and responsibilities for safeguarding children are applied and regularly reviewed, including the establishment of early intervention through the Common Assessment Framework.
- Assessments are clear and analytical. Risk and protective factors that impact on children's safety and welfare are identified. Conclusions flow logically from analysis and include judgements about standards of care, allowing assessments to be translated into effective plans.
- Children and family members are involved in assessment or planning to meet the child's needs, and the views and feelings of children and the views of family members are taken into account.

- Section 47 enquiries are thorough and timely and always carried out by a qualified and suitable experienced social worker. Findings in relation to significant harm are clear. Action needed to ensure children's safety is identified and implemented promptly.
- Record-keeping is up to date and demonstrates effective management of risk of harm, sound decision-making and effective planning.
- Out-of-hours duty arrangements are clear, robust and linked well to the day referral service.
- The experiences and views of children and parents are gathered and used to influence service delivery and development.
- Senior managers take appropriate measures to assure themselves that referral and assessment processes in their area are effective at identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm, and effectively challenge casework and decision-making.
- Critically reflective supervision, management audit and oversight are provided for all staff and are resulting in improving practice. Suitable training for staff is available, including lessons from serious case reviews where appropriate, and is contributing to improving practice.
- Staff in referral and assessment work are suitably qualified and experienced for their role in child protection and wider safeguarding. Staff can demonstrate that they have attended relevant training courses and programmes to update their knowledge.
- Staff workloads are manageable, which enables work to be completed in a timely way to safeguard children.

Areas of strength

The definition of an area of strength in unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements is an area of practice or management oversight that exceeds the requirements of statutory guidance and demonstrates good practice in safeguarding.

Areas for development

An area for development is an area of weakness that should be addressed to ensure better safeguarding but is not placing children at immediate risk of harm.

These areas can relate to aspects of direct practice or weaknesses in resource allocation, performance management and decision-making. Areas for development might include aspects of service delivery or management oversight that could lead to children being potentially at risk of harm in the future if they are not addressed.

Areas for priority action

An area for priority action concerns an area of serious weakness that is placing children at risk of inadequate protection and of significant harm.

Priority actions may result from particular or localised failings to protect children as well as from systematic failures or deficits. The evidence contributing to a priority action may be from one or more areas. The examples below are not an exhaustive list but are intended to provide illustrations of potential areas for priority action.

- systemic failure or significant weakness in processes, decision-making and practice to respond to and investigate child protection referrals
- unrecognised or unallocated child protection cases and/or significant delays in addressing child protection concerns
- systemic failure or significant weakness in practice, processes, managing the timeliness or quality of assessment and planning for children and young people in need of protection, exposing children to significant risk of harm
- failure to address practice deficits in referral and assessment processes which have been identified as areas for action and learning from previous serious case reviews or previous inspection findings, and which expose children to risk of significant harm
- a significant shortfall in capacity (front-line staffing numbers, qualifications and expertise) or deficit in management oversight and supervision that impacts adversely on delivery of assessments and support to children in need of protection
- significant delays in the allocation or assessment of a large number of children in need cases, which exposes those children to potential and unquantified risk of harm
- ineffective partnership working and/or poor information sharing which impacts on the arrangements to protect children from significant harm, contributing to risk for children and young people.

The impact of contact, referral and assessment inspection judgements on the scheduling of inspections and the annual assessment of children's services

Given that an area of priority action relates to an area of serious weakness that is placing children at risk of inadequate protection and of significant harm, any area of priority action may have a significant impact on the annual children's service assessment. If an area for priority action is identified in an inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements, and that concern is not resolved by the findings of a subsequent inspection, the overall assessment of the local authority's children's services is unlikely to be better than 'performs poorly'.

The identification of an area for priority action is likely to lead, at an appropriate time, to a further inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements, a full safeguarding inspection, or a full safeguarding and looked after children inspection. If such an inspection takes place before the publication of the annual children's services assessment, the findings and judgement of that inspection will supersede the findings of the unannounced inspection.