

Conducting unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment

Guidance for the inspections of contact, assessment and referral arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection

This guidance is designed to assist inspectors in their work. It indicates the main activities that need to be undertaken prior to and during the inspection until the publication of the report.

Age group: All

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Contents

Introduction	4
Scheduling and team deployment	4
Timeframe	5
Pre-inspection activity	5
Deferrals	7
On-site visit	7
Meeting with the manager(s)	8
Interviewing staff	9
Duty room observation and assessment	10
Case tracking	11
Views of users and stakeholders	12
Issues of concern	12
Sharing information	13
Recording evidence	13
Findings	13
Feedback	14
Writing the letter	15
Quality assurance	15
Complaints	16
Annex A. The evaluation schedule for unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment	17
Annex B. Email to the Director of Children’s Services	22
Annex C. Information for staff in agencies being inspected	23
Annex D. Template post-inspection letter	25

Introduction

1. This guidance is designed to assist inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) when conducting unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in local authorities in England. It should be read in conjunction with the *Framework for inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements* and the *Evaluation schedule for unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements* (Annex A). Local authorities, other providers and organisations can use this guidance to see how inspections will be conducted and may find it useful when carrying out their self-evaluation. Ofsted is committed to ensuring that all guidance used by inspectors is published.
2. The purpose of the annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authorities is to assess the effectiveness of front-line practice in managing potential risks to children and young people and to minimise the incidence of abuse and neglect. The focus is primarily on the local authority as lead agency for child protection, but integral to this is the contribution of partner agencies and the effectiveness of multi-agency working. The inspection will inform future inspections, in particular the full inspection of safeguarding and looked after children and the annual children's services rating and may trigger further inspection activity.
3. Inspections are carried out in accordance with the inspection framework for unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment.¹ The principles of inspection and the code of conduct for inspectors are set out in this document. All inspectors should be conversant with these and apply them rigorously.
4. This guidance seeks to balance the need for consistency in inspections with the flexibility required to respond to the individual circumstances of each council to be inspected. It should be regarded as guidance on the procedures normally governing inspection, rather than a set of inflexible rules.

Scheduling and team deployment

5. Decisions on scheduling inspections will take account of the children's services profile, Ofsted inspections and regulatory work, performance indicators, serious case reviews and their evaluation, and information from whistleblowers. No period of notice will be given for these inspections.
6. Unannounced contact, referral and assessment inspections will normally be undertaken over two days on site and by two inspectors. The size of the team may be increased if this is needed, such as to take account of the size of the

¹ *Unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment* (reference no. 090026), 2009; available from: www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090026.

council or the history of previous concerns. The managing inspector responsible for the inspection will make this decision.

- Inspectors will undertake either the role of lead inspector or team inspector in the unannounced inspection. Within each team the lead inspector will allocate tasks, in consultation with the team inspector(s) where possible; for example, different inspectors will visit different sites. Each inspection is an individual event and will require inspectors to be flexible in the roles and tasks allocated to them during each inspection.

Timeframe

- The timeframe for inspection, including preparation, on-site work and the publication of the letter is as follows. Inspectors will normally spend two days on site.

Day	Activity	
1	Preparation	Lead inspector
2	Site visit	Team
3	Site visit	Team
4	Drafting letter	Lead inspector
5 – 8	Quality assurance procedures. Draft letter sent to Director of Children's Services to check factual accuracy (within five days of the end of site visit).	Lead inspector and quality assurance manager
9 – 13	Director of Children's Services responds to draft letter.	
14 – 18	Receipt of comments from Director of Children's Services, amendments and final stages of quality assurance. Pre-publication letter sent to Director of Children's Services, Chair of Local Safeguarding Children Board, local authority Chief Executive Officer and lead member (within 15 working days of the end of the site visit).	Lead inspector and quality assurance manager
19 – 23	Inspection letter published on Ofsted's website (within 20 working days of the end of site visit).	

Pre-inspection activity

- Lead inspectors are allocated one day for the preparation of an inspection. Lead inspectors should carry out an analysis of the available evidence and begin to

scope the inspection, taking account of the pre-inspection briefing prepared by a senior data analyst. This will summarise:

- the Ofsted performance profile
- the National Indicator Set relevant performance indicators
- a summary of judgements made in serious case review evaluations
- Ofsted's fostering dataset
- relevant recommendations and findings from previous inspection reports.

In addition, inspectors will have access to:

- views of social workers and third sector organisations gathered through annual surveys²
 - local area, multi-area agreements and other related published documents
 - evidence from contacts with Ofsted's whistleblowing service
 - findings of relevant serious case reviews
 - any serious incident notifications relating to the council being inspected.
10. Ofsted's inspection support team maintains an updated list of all contact, referral and assessment sites and the arrangements for the provision of out-of-hours services through regular contact with the councils. Details of each site will be provided to lead inspectors prior to the inspection fieldwork. Lead inspectors will use this information and the relevant evidence to decide which site(s) to visit during the course of the inspection. As the inspections are unannounced, it will not be possible to contact the local authority in advance of the inspection for detailed information about issues affecting specific sites.
 11. If contact, referral and assessment services are provided on more than one site, then inspectors would normally visit at least two sites. If more than one site is to be visited, the lead inspector will decide how best to devolve tasks to ensure that team members are supported and risks minimised. Inspectors may work in pairs or individually depending on the size of the team and the number of sites to be visited.
 12. Where a council has a contact centre (for example, a 'one stop shop') or other central referrals or advice points, the lead inspector will decide how best to assess its effectiveness. Contact centres will normally be visited by inspectors. In addition, arrangements for the out-of-hours service will normally be investigated.
 13. In some cases, councils will have more than one team based on a site; in this case, the lead inspector will decide which teams will be the subject of the inspection, depending on issues as they arise and the model of service delivery.

² These new surveys are to be used in these inspections from April 2010.

14. Lead inspectors will draft a plan of the inspection, which will include discussions with relevant staff and scrutiny of evidence provided by managers on site, including case files. This will be confirmed at the initial meeting with the senior manager on site.
15. Lead inspectors will contact their team inspector(s) by telephone and email during day 1 to allocate tasks and provide information about the scoping and key issues arising from the preparatory work, details and location(s) of the site(s) to be inspected and the arrangements and timing for meeting either the evening before or on the morning of the inspection.
16. The lead inspector will prepare a summary of the key aspects of the briefing and focus of the inspection for the team inspector(s).
17. Inspectors must be able to confirm their identities by producing Ofsted Inspector Authorisation and Identification cards and identity badges. It is not necessary to carry paper copies of Criminal Records Bureau checks.

Deferrals

18. As the inspection is unannounced, inspectors are likely to encounter a wide variety of complex situations on the day. Inspections will not normally be deferred. The absence or unavailability of council staff, or accommodation issues such as refurbishment, will not constitute reasons for deferral. Illness or non-availability of an inspector must be reported immediately to the managing inspector with lead responsibility. This may result in rescheduling the inspection, unless a replacement inspector is available. In an extreme circumstance, where a deferral may be warranted, this will be agreed by a regional director. If a deferral is being considered, the quality assurance manager for the inspection should be kept fully informed.
19. Deferrals will only be made where there is a strong reason for supposing that if the inspection went ahead it might place staff at risk, or if the ability to gather secure evidence is severely restricted. Such conditions might be:
 - serious weather conditions make access to sites for inspectors and staff difficult and/or dangerous
 - power failure means that access to electronic records cannot be obtained for a prolonged period.

On-site visit

20. The lead inspector will notify the council of the inspection on the morning that the fieldwork is scheduled to begin and before visiting any of the sites. This will be done by telephoning the office of the Director of Children's Services just before arrival at the inspection site. If the Director is not available, the lead inspector will speak with the most senior manager available and ask the manager to notify the Director or, if that person is not available, the Chief

Executive. If the Director is not contactable prior to the visit, the lead inspector will email notification of the inspection to the Director (Annex B). The non-availability of the Director or a senior manager will not delay the start of the inspection.

21. Wherever possible, the inspectors should arrange to meet in advance and enter the building at the same time.

Meeting with the manager(s)

22. Upon arrival, all inspectors will produce identification and ask to meet with the most senior manager available in the contact, referral and assessment service for an initial meeting.
23. The focus of the meeting will be to explain the purpose, structure and format of the inspection by:
 - outlining the format of the two-day inspection
 - providing copies of the summary of the framework, explaining the purpose of the inspection, for distribution to affected staff (Annex C)
 - arranging a working space including, wherever possible, a room for confidential discussions between inspectors and staff members
 - advising the council of the contact details of the allocated quality assurance HMI.
24. The meeting will assist in planning the inspection by:
 - confirming arrangements for interviewing staff
 - confirming arrangements for contacting the nominated manager, if required, during the inspection process
 - gaining an understanding of how the overall contact, referral and assessment arrangements are structured, including out-of-hours arrangements, and issues specific to the site being inspected
 - agreeing arrangements for access to: files, information technology systems with staff support, staff supervision files, performance monitoring information, procedures manual, service structure chart with staffing details and complaints information
 - clarifying whether there are any outstanding serious incidents that are awaiting notification or have been notified to Ofsted already
 - confirming arrangements for oral feedback of draft findings at the end of day 2 of the inspection and clarifying who from the council will attend.
25. The inspectors will ask for relevant management information. It is expected that councils will maintain this information to inform their oversight and management of the service. It is not expected that councils will need to prepare

any new information for the purposes of the inspection. Information should be made available to inspectors at a suitable and agreed time during the inspection, usually by 12pm on the first day.

26. The information requested will normally include the following:
- any monitoring information available on the outcomes for children and young people referred to the service
 - team composition, including staffing establishment; this includes the number of qualified social workers and their relevant experience, the number of vacancies for permanent staff, the number of locum/agency staff, staff turnover/stability and sickness levels and individual caseloads of staff
 - analysis of Common Assessment Framework activity over the last 12 months
 - analysis of the numbers of contacts and referrals including the number of initial assessments, core assessments, section 47 enquiries and number of open cases over the previous three months
 - number of contacts and referrals awaiting action and/or allocation to a social worker (indicating the length of time involved)
 - arrangements for transfer of cases between different teams and number of cases awaiting transfer
 - arrangements for the quality assurance and monitoring of contact, referral and assessment practices, including their management
 - self-evaluation of the effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements, including an evaluation of the effectiveness of partnerships with other organisations
 - the latest audits and action plans relating to contact, referral and assessment arrangements
 - any evaluation of users' views of the service received
 - records of Criminal Records Bureau and/or Independent Safeguarding Authority checks for staff.
27. If practical, inspectors will agree with managers an appropriate and convenient time for a short meeting with the whole of the staff team to briefly introduce themselves and explain the process of the inspection. Inspectors should have copies of Annex C available, which provides a synopsis of the inspection process, to hand out to staff.
28. Inspectors will seek to minimise the disruption to normal contact, referral and assessment work at all times.

Interviewing staff

29. Inspectors will be sensitive to the potential pressures on, and the apprehension of, staff being interviewed. They will explain that the purpose of the inspection

is to assess the effectiveness of front-line practice in managing potential risks to children and young people and to minimise the incidence of abuse and neglect. It is not to make judgements about individuals.

30. Inspectors will usually interview a representative sample of staff at all levels, including any staff that are seconded or attached to the contact, referral and assessment service from partner agencies. Staff should be interviewed in a surrounding which enables privacy. Staff will be provided with an explanation of the process (Annex C), together with the contact details of the inspectors, should they wish to make contact to discuss any issues outside this interview.
31. Inspectors may ask to attend parts of team meetings, case allocation meetings, strategy groups or focus groups, if they consider this will add value to the inspection and be an effective use of time.
32. Where staff members are not present on either day of the inspection, inspectors should ascertain the reason and may decide to randomly select cases from that person's case load and supervision record.

Duty room observation and assessment

33. Inspectors will spend time in the duty room to:
 - observe practice
 - observe how the duty room is managed and overseen
 - assess the quality of work on active, recently closed and recently transferred cases
 - assess the effectiveness of systems to respond to contacts and referrals
 - look at the range, volume, origins and nature of contacts and referrals to assess how children in need and child protection thresholds are understood and implemented within the team and by referrers
 - assess the effectiveness of partnership working in communicating information, sharing concerns and planning and taking action.

Case tracking

34. Inspectors will examine a number of pieces of work chosen at random from current cases and those that have been closed over the previous six months. At least one case from each of the following categories will normally be included:

Common Assessment Framework	That proceeded/did not proceed to referral
Contacts	That proceeded/did not proceed to referral
Referrals	That proceeded/did not proceed to initial assessment
Re-referrals	That proceeded/did not proceed to initial assessment
Initial assessments	That proceeded/did not proceed to further service or to core assessment
Core assessments	That proceeded/did not proceed to further service
Section 47 enquiries	That proceeded/did not proceed to an initial child protection conference, including strategy meetings
Referrals from and to emergency out-of-hours services	That proceeded/did not proceed to a further assessment or service

35. Wherever possible, case files (either electronic or paper-based) will be examined in the presence of the relevant staff member, using their knowledge of the case, file structure and recording systems. In the absence of the allocated worker, a suitable colleague may be asked to assist. During staff interviews, inspectors may examine and discuss with social workers samples of their case files drawn from the categories in the above table. This will provide the opportunity to assess practice, management oversight and the effectiveness of the recording systems. Inspectors will prioritise their time to focus upon the key issues that emerge from the inspection. It is expected that a minimum number of 20 cases will be examined in the course of each inspection.
36. In examining and discussing cases, inspectors will assess:
- the quality and timeliness of referrals and assessments, including:
 - the impact of decisions and plans on outcomes for children and their families
 - how far the particular needs of children are taken into consideration (disability, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion and language)
 - the extent and effectiveness of partner agency engagement
 - the quality of management and decision-making, including:

- senior management audit of how well workers manage risk of harm
- case allocation and caseload management
- the quality of formal supervision and support
- the quality of case-file recording including evidence of senior management oversight and sign off
- seniority levels, processes and practices for decision-making
- the application of thresholds, their clarity and consistency and how these impact on outcomes for children
- the impact of strategy discussions and enquiries in protecting children and young people
- the effectiveness of out-of-hours provision, including accident and emergency health services, in managing risk of harm
- how well services act on users' views
- the effectiveness of social workers and unqualified staff, including family support and social work assistants, in identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm for children and their families
- the role and responsibilities of support staff
- the extent and quality of staff training.

Views of users and stakeholders

37. Inspectors must take into account the views of the children, young people and their families or carers who are supported by, or make use of, the contact, referral and assessment services. Managers will be invited to provide evidence that demonstrates how the views of the users have been taken into account to secure improved services and outcomes.
38. It is recognised that, due to the focus and timescale of the inspection, it will not normally be possible for inspectors to have direct access to children and families using the service. However, wherever it is possible, inspectors should take the opportunity to gain first-hand views of children, young people and their families or carers.

Issues of concern

39. Where 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 significant harm, the senior manager nominated by the council will be notified as soon as possible. Inspectors should be aware of the *Ofsted safeguarding policy and procedures*³ and contact the national

³ *Ofsted safeguarding policy and procedures* (reference no. 20070046), 2008; available from: www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/20070046.

compliance, investigation and enforcement team via the NBU Helpline (telephone: 0300 123 1231) should they be in need of advice. The quality assurance HMI will also be informed. Where the matter relates to the immediate safety of children, the council will be asked to provide a response and explanation. The concern and request for a response will be confirmed in writing to the Director of Children's Services at the earliest opportunity.

Sharing information

40. During unannounced inspections, inspectors will meet to discuss emerging issues. This may lead to the identification of additional lines of enquiry. Where this occurs, the council will be notified of additional lines of enquiry at the first opportunity.
41. Emerging findings will be shared with appropriate council staff and managers during the course of the inspection.

Recording evidence

42. Throughout the inspection process, inspectors will maintain contemporaneous records, in accordance with Ofsted guidance, of the evidence obtained from all aspects of the inspection process, including the inspection feedback meeting. Evidence may be scrutinised for quality assurance monitoring and will be considered in the event of any complaint.
43. Inspectors should maintain a record in the evidence notebooks using a separate sheet for each aspect of the inspection and a record of all the case files they have seen using the case record sheets within the notebook. Inspectors should take account of the following points:
 - evidence should be clear and legible. The date and time of the meeting/recording of the evidence should be noted
 - as far as possible, evidence should not include anything that could identify individual staff, individual children, young people or family members. Only job titles of staff should be recorded and only case reference numbers and/or initials of cases.
44. All inspections records will be retained by Ofsted in accordance with its published retention policy.

Findings

45. There will be no overall judgement or grade in respect of the quality of the contact, referral and assessment service. Inspectors will formulate their evidence to consider the quality and effectiveness of arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of child abuse and neglect and the contribution of this service to the four safeguarding priorities:

- children are safeguarded and protected
 - child welfare concerns are identified and responded to appropriately
 - safeguarding children is prioritised
 - agencies and professionals work together to safeguard children.
46. The *Evaluation schedule for unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements* (Annex A) sets out illustrative evidence of an effective service. Inspectors will use this to formulate their findings relating to the different strands of the service, to prepare oral feedback to the council and, following discussion, in the preparation of the draft letter to the Chief Executive, Director of Children's Services, Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the lead member.
47. Lead inspectors should bring together the findings of the inspection and prepare for the feedback meeting. They will identify where the council is satisfactorily meeting the required standards of an effective service and where there is provision above this level (an area of strength) or below (an area for development). Where the quality of the service leads to children being, in the judgement of the inspectors, currently at risk of significant harm, inspectors will need to take account of the definition and criteria for identifying areas of priority action outlined in the *Evaluation schedule for unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements*. The record of the collation will be retained as part of the inspection evidence.

Feedback

48. Feedback to the council at the end of the fieldwork will be chaired and managed by the lead inspector. The Director of Children's Services, or their representative, will always be present and will determine who else to invite, which could include other managers, the lead member and the chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The feedback constitutes part of the inspection and the discussion will constitute evidence to inform the outcome of the inspection.
49. The lead inspector will feed back the team findings, affording the opportunity for dialogue and clarification where appropriate. The meeting is not a forum for lengthy discussions on inspection findings. The lead inspector will confirm the process for the post-inspection phases and remind participants that the overall service will not be graded. Evidence from the feedback session may be used to inform inspection findings.
50. A contemporaneous note of attendees and content of the feedback will be compiled by the team inspector in their evidence notebook, which will be passed to the lead inspector for retention.
51. The lead inspector will confirm that the draft letter will be sent to the Director of Children's Service for their comments on factual accuracy.

Writing the letter

52. On day 4, immediately after the site inspection visit, the lead inspector will draft a letter to the council containing the key findings and judgements from the inspection, using the template letter (Annex D).
53. The contents of the letter should reflect the oral feedback and the discussion with the council. The letter must state whether there are any areas for priority action and identify these as potentially limiting judgements for the purposes of the annual rating of children's services.
54. The draft letter will be agreed by the inspection team prior to the quality assurance process at the end of day 4. Following the completion of any revisions identified during the quality assurance process (see below), the draft letter will be sent to the council within five working days of the end of the site visit (on day 8) for comments on factual accuracy.
55. The Director of Children's Services, or a representative, is required to return the draft letter with any comments on factual accuracy within five working days. The lead inspector, in conjunction with the quality assurance manager, will take full consideration of all the comments from the council and the evidence from the inspection. The pre-publication version of the final letter will be sent by email and post to the council within 15 working days of the end of the inspection. The final letter will be published on Ofsted's website within 20 days of the end of the inspection.

Quality assurance

56. The lead inspector, who will be appropriately qualified and experienced in safeguarding and child protection work, will ensure that the inspection is conducted within the expectations of the framework and this guidance.
57. Each inspection will also have an allocated quality assurance HMI. A proportion of inspections will have a site visit by the quality assurance HMI. This will be decided in advance by the managing inspector with operational lead for the programme. In addition, where issues are identified in the preparation for the inspection or significant concerns arise out of the first day of fieldwork, either from the council or from the inspectors, an on-site quality assurance visit may be arranged.
58. If a site visit is not undertaken, the quality assurance HMI will contact the lead inspector on the second day of the fieldwork to discuss the findings and judgements and will make telephone contact with the Director of Children's Services (or senior representative) during the period of fieldwork. If a site visit is made, the quality assurance HMI will arrange to meet with the Director of Children's Services or their representative as well as joining the inspection team members at the collation meeting and, if appropriate, the feedback meeting.

59. The lead inspector will complete the draft letter to the council and this will be subject to a critical read by the quality assurance HMI. The letter will also be subject to national moderation before the draft version is sent to the council for their comments on factual accuracy.

Complaints

60. It is anticipated that the great majority of inspections will be carried out without any concerns on the part of the authority. If concerns do arise during an inspection while it is taking place, the lead inspector should consider the concern and do all that is possible to remedy the problem.
61. If the complainant is dissatisfied with the lead inspector's response, then they should be invited to raise the matter with the quality assurance HMI. Should this remain unresolved, or in any case they wish to take the complaint further, the lead inspector or quality assurance HMI should ensure that the complainant is fully informed of the procedures for making complaints.
62. The complaints procedure, which sets out how providers or users can complain about their inspection and what will happen to their complaint, is available at: www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070080. Lodging a complaint will not normally delay the publication of the final inspection letter.

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

Guidance and illustrative evidence for inspecting 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 and illustrative evidence 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.

Introduction

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

- the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements
- the impact of these arrangements on minimising the incidence of child abuse and neglect
- the contribution of this service to the four safeguarding priorities:
 - children are safeguarded and protected
 - child welfare concerns are identified and responded to appropriately
 - safeguarding children is prioritised
 - agencies and professionals work together to safeguard children.

The unannounced inspection does not identify grades but aspects of satisfactory practice, strengths and areas for development. Where necessary, areas for priority action are recorded and reported to the local authority.

The illustrative evidence is that of an effective service that meets the expectations as laid down in national guidance. As there is a wide variation in service, design and delivery these should be interpreted in the context of the particular service being inspected. It is not exhaustive but intended to guide and support inspectors in formulating their findings.

Illustrative evidence

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, taking account of disability, ethnicity, religion, diversity and equalities issues.
- 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.
- 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.
- There is evidence of good communication and focused multi-agency and partnership working, led by the council or the Local Safeguarding Children Board, leading to improved outcomes for children and families.
- Out-of-hours duty arrangements are clear, robust and linked well to the day referral service.
- 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.
- The experiences and views of children and parents are gathered and used to influence service delivery and development.
- 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.
- 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.
- All 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.
- Performance indicators reflect good and sustained and/or improving practice.

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.

Evidence of a satisfactory service

'Satisfactory service' is defined as the practice and arrangements that meet the requirements of statutory guidance for contact, referral and assessment arrangements.

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 systematic failures or deficits. The evidence contributing to a priority action may be from one or more areas. Examples of situations which could result in a priority action are:

- 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
- 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
- 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.

However, this is not an exhaustive list and any practice that leads to children being at immediate or potential risk of significant harm could lead to a priority action.

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

All areas of priority action will be of sufficient concern to potentially be a limiting judgment for the annual children's services rating. This will be confirmed through the inspection moderation process and reported in the draft feedback letter sent to the council for factual accuracy. A priority action is therefore likely to result in the overall children's services rating being limited to inadequate when considered through the Comprehensive Area Assessment and annual rating process and taken into account with other evidence. The council will be advised of the outcome of the annual rating and Comprehensive Area Assessment judgement in the normal way.

A priority action may also lead to either a safeguarding inspection or an early safeguarding and looked after children inspection. If such an inspection takes place before the decision on the annual rating, the findings and judgement of that inspection will supersede the findings of the unannounced inspection.

Annex B. Email to the Director of Children's Services

Insert date:

Dear **[insert name of Director of Children's Services]**:

Unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment services – [insert name of council]

This letter is to inform you that Ofsted is today beginning a two-day inspection of your contact, referral and assessment services for children in need and children who may be in need of protection. I have tried to contact you by telephone first thing this morning, but this has not proved possible. However, I have spoken to **[insert name and title of manager]** and informed him/her that we are about to begin the inspection, in line with the guidance which you received in May 2009 and which is available on the Ofsted website at www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090026.

The two **[insert number if not two]** inspectors are myself as lead inspector and **[insert name]** as team inspector. We are both suitably qualified and experienced Her Majesty's Inspectors from Ofsted. The inspection will focus on the local authority as the lead agency for child protection, but it will also consider the contribution of partners to achieving good or better outcomes for children.

We will be visiting offices to talk to staff, read files and consider and observe front-line practice. We would like to provide oral feedback about our findings tomorrow afternoon **[insert day and date]**. I should be grateful if you or a relevant senior officer would contact me on **[insert mobile telephone number]** to agree a convenient time and venue for this to take place. If you have any queries about this inspection, please feel free to contact me at any time during the inspection.

In addition, all inspections are subject to a quality assurance process undertaken by a named quality assurance manager. If there are any issues the inspection team cannot resolve, you may wish to discuss these in the first instance with the manager for this inspection. This person is **[insert name]** and can be contacted on **[insert number]**.

Yours sincerely,

[insert name] HMI

Lead Inspector

Annex C. Information for staff in agencies being inspected

Unannounced Ofsted inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements

Introduction

The purpose of the annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authorities is to assess the effectiveness of front-line practice in managing potential risks to children and young people and minimising the incidence of abuse and neglect.

The focus is primarily on the local authority as the lead agency for child protection, but integral to this is the contribution of partner agencies and the effectiveness of multi-agency working. The inspection will inform future inspections, in particular the full inspection of safeguarding and looked after children, Ofsted's annual assessment of children's services and the Comprehensive Area Assessment. It may trigger further inspection activity.

Inspections will normally be carried out by two HMIs, both of whom will have a social work background and experience of child protection and safeguarding services.

Purpose of the inspections

Inspections will normally last for two days and include an evaluation of:

- the quality and timeliness of referrals and assessments, including:
 - the extent and quality of partner agency involvement
 - the involvement of children and their families
 - how this impacts on the services offered to children and their families
- the quality of management oversight and decision-making, including:
 - the senior management audit of how well workers manage risk of harm through effective referral and assessment
 - case allocation and caseload management
 - the quality of direct supervision and support
 - the quality of case-file recording and arrangements for informing and involving senior managers in decision-making
- the application of thresholds, their clarity and consistency and how these impact on outcomes for children
- the impact of strategy discussions and enquiries in protecting children and young people

- the effectiveness of communication, liaison and joint working between agencies
- the effectiveness of out-of-hours provision, including accident and emergency health services, in managing risk of harm through effective information sharing, referral and assessment
- the effectiveness of the service in meeting the needs of children from particular groups
- how well services act on users' views
- the role and responsibilities of support staff, level of training and support received and how this impacts on the quality of service delivery
- the effectiveness of social workers and unqualified staff, including family support and social work assistants, in identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm for children and their families.

The inspectors will undertake the inspection by carrying out the following activities:

- meeting with team manager or manager on duty
- observation of 'duty room' practice and procedures
- interviews with social workers, support and administrative staff
- interviews with staff from other agencies if appropriate
- examination of a sample of case files, usually alongside the responsible social worker
- wherever possible, obtaining the views of children and parents.

Feedback and reporting

The inspectors will provide managers with a summary of the main findings at the end of the inspection and will follow this up with a letter within five days of the end of the inspection.

Thank you for your assistance with this inspection.

Confidentiality will be preserved wherever possible.

Ofsted inspectors are currently conducting an unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in this authority. If you wish to speak to an inspector please contact either:

Name of inspector(s):.....

Mobile number:.....

Annex D. Template post-inspection letter

Dear [insert name]

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within [insert name of council] children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in [insert name of council] council which was conducted on [insert date]. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to the annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year. I would like to thank all of the staff we met for their assistance in undertaking this inspection.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising any child abuse and neglect. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including: electronic case records; supervision files and notes; observation of social workers and senior practitioners undertaking referral and assessment duties; and other information provided by staff and managers. Inspectors also spoke to a range of staff including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

Include one of:

The inspection identified areas of strength and satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

or

The inspection identified area(s) for priority action alongside areas of strength, satisfactory practice and areas for development.

or

The inspection identified area(s) for priority action alongside areas of satisfactory practice and areas for development.

From the evidence gathered, the following features of the service were identified:

Strengths
<i>Example(s) of areas of strength [delete this text]:</i> ▪
Satisfactory practice
<i>Example(s) of satisfactory practice [delete this text]:</i> ▪
Area(s) for development
<i>Example(s) of areas for development [delete this text]:</i> ▪

This visit has identified the following area(s) for priority action:

Area(s) for priority action [delete if no area(s) for priority action identified]
<i>Area(s) for priority action [delete this text]</i> ▪

Any areas for development and priority action identified above will be specifically considered in any future inspection of services to safeguard children within your area.

If an area for priority action is identified add the following:

In addition, it is considered by Ofsted that the findings of this inspection and the identified area(s) for priority action are likely to become a limiting judgement of the annual performance rating for your council's children's services when considered with other evidence. This means the annual rating is likely to be limited to 'performs poorly'.

Yours sincerely

Name of inspector, HMI