

# Inspections of looked after children services

Framework for inspection and guidance for local authorities

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This document sets out the framework and guidance for the inspections of services for looked after children.

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**361**

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## **Introduction**

1. This document sets out the framework and guidance for the inspections of services for looked after children.
2. These inspections focus on evaluating outcomes for children and young people and the impact that practice and services have on improving outcomes. The programme of inspections of looked after children services and outcomes will be carried out by suitably experienced inspectors from Ofsted under section 136 of the Education and Inspection Act 2006.
3. Regulatory inspections of local authority children's homes, fostering and adoption will continue separately. Alongside other evidence, such as that arising from serious case reviews, findings from these inspections will help determine the scope and timing of inspections of looked after children inspections.
4. The framework and guidance has been reviewed following the completion of the full safeguarding and looked after children inspection programme to ensure that they are sharply focused on improving outcomes for children and young people looked after.
5. This framework and guidance remain subject to periodic review.

## **Frequency of inspection**

6. The framework will be targeted on those authorities who currently have an inadequate rating either following an inspection of arrangements for the protection of children or following an inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services. Timing of inspections will also be influenced by evidence from other inspection and regulation activity and information such as whistleblowing. Where the inspection judges overall effectiveness to be inadequate a further inspection may follow.

## **Notice given for inspection**

7. The maximum notice period for the inspections of a looked after children service is usually 10 working days.
8. Inspections will not normally be deferred because of staff absence or staff shortages in the local authority.

## **Inspection teams**

9. Suitably experienced inspectors from Ofsted will carry out the inspection of looked after children services.
10. Inspection teams will normally consist of at least four Ofsted inspectors. Inspectors will usually be on site for up to five working days.

## User and partner views and surveys

11. In this context, users are the children, young people and their families or carers who are supported by, or who make use of, services.
12. Inspectors will take account of the extent to which service providers have sought and acted on the views of children, young people looked after and carers in reviewing and improving services and outcomes generally. They will also consider the views of those users and partners they speak to during on-site evidence gathering.
13. For each inspection, surveys of children in the authority's care and recent care leavers will be carried out through the Office of the Children's Rights Director at Ofsted. These will involve children aged eight years and over and will be web-based, with alternative paper completion as required.

## Scope of the inspection

### Looked after children inspection

14. As set out in *Care matters*,<sup>1</sup> inspection must contribute to improved and sustainable outcomes for looked after children and their families. The looked after children inspection will focus on:
  - outcomes achieved
  - impact of services
  - quality of risk management and decision making in identifying which children need to be taken into care
  - quality of care planning, review and support for children in care and care leavers
  - placement stability
  - safeguarding of looked after children
  - access to, and attendance at, suitable schools
  - support for families and carers
  - the effectiveness of corporate parenting approaches
  - preparation for leaving care and adult life and the subsequent support.

## Evaluation schedules for inspection

15. The evaluation schedules are set out in a separate document which outlines the main aspects of the services and outcomes against which inspectors will make

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<sup>1</sup> *Care matters: time to deliver for children in care* (DCSF-00279-2008), HM Government, 2008; [www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications).

judgements. The schedules also outline the grade descriptors that inspectors will use in arriving at their judgements. The team of inspectors will gather evidence across the evaluation schedule and all inspectors will contribute to the final judgements made.

## **Summary evaluation schedule for the looked after children inspection**

16. The summary evaluation schedule for the looked after children inspection is set out below.
  - Overall effectiveness including areas for development
  - Capacity to improve
  - Leadership and management taking into account:
    - ambition and prioritisation
    - performance management and quality assurance
    - workforce development
    - partnerships
    - effective use of resources
  - Quality of provision taking into account:
    - service responsiveness
    - quality of assessment and direct work with children and families
    - quality of case planning, reviews and recording
  - Outcomes for looked after children and young people
17. Equality and diversity issues will be considered and reported on in all aspects of the evaluation schedule and will contribute to all judgements.

## **Grading inspection findings**

18. Inspectors will make judgements against the evaluation schedules using a four-point scale.

Outstanding

Good

Adequate

Inadequate

## Inspection activity

19. Inspectors will undertake activities that focus on evaluating the outcomes for children and young people looked after and the quality and impact of services in helping to improve outcomes.
20. In preparation for inspection, Ofsted will request a number of documents to help plan the areas for inspection. This list provides primary inspection evidence. It focuses on documents that the local authority will already have in place to support its own functions. It is important that this documentation provides evidence against specific aspects of the evaluation schedule. Where possible, it is helpful to direct inspectors to the particular part of the document that provides the best evidence the authority wishes to be taken into account.
21. Wherever possible the expectation is that local authorities will provide copies of existing documents. This will allow easy access after the letter announcing the inspection is received. Documentation that should be made available is detailed below.

### *Evidence of effectiveness of looked after children services*

- the strategic plan for the services for looked after children
- any available needs analysis and commissioning plan
- details of placements in local authority, voluntary or private children's homes, fostering or adoption agencies, identifying those that are out of authority, where they are and date of placement.

Where available:

- management report of the independent reviewing officers.

### *Leadership and management information*

- organisation charts for local authority and partner agencies.

Where available:

- the most recent relevant performance management information at team and senior management level and any relevant management reviews conducted in the last year
- summary reports of case file audits in social care over the last year
- workforce strategy and summary of current pressures and priorities.

### *Access to the views of service users*

- details of existing groups of service users and their parents/carers that provide ready-made opportunities to meet with children and young people.

Where available:

- summaries of the views of service users and other stakeholders, as collected by the local authority.
22. In addition, inspectors will have access to information that Ofsted already holds such as:
- performance information held by Ofsted
  - findings from other relevant Ofsted inspection and regulatory activity, including notifications
  - information in relation to serious case reviews and serious incident notifications
  - Ofsted's fostering and adoption datasets (completed by providers)
  - summary of substantiated complaints about the local authority and its partners made to Ofsted that relate to looked after children.

### **Set-up meeting**

23. A meeting will normally be held between the lead inspector and a representative(s) of the local authority four days after notification of the inspection. It is for the local authority and its partners to determine who is present at the meeting.
24. The purpose of the meeting is to:
- provide further information about the scope of the inspection
  - discuss the indicative timetable. The agenda for enquiry may evolve over the course of the inspection
  - agree practical arrangements, including survey arrangements, initial interviews and scrutiny of case files with appropriate workers, and provide other clarification as necessary
  - provide an opportunity for inspectors to discuss any issues or concerns which have arisen from the pre-inspection reading
  - discuss how service users and their families can be directly engaged in the inspection.

### **Inspection activities**

25. Inspection activities will include:
- evaluating the documentation already held by Ofsted
  - reviewing the evidence provided by the local authority in advance of the fieldwork element of the inspection
  - reviewing case files



- meetings with users, managers, staff and partners.

Meetings will specifically focus on gathering evidence against the evaluation schedule and may be based on themes or specific areas of work. The interviews and groups may vary depending on the lines of enquiry for each individual inspection.

26. Where relevant, inspectors will evaluate the progress made in implementing any recommendations arising from serious case reviews.
27. During the inspection, inspectors will always speak with children and young people and seek views of their parents and carers.

### **Case file identification, analysis and discussion**

28. At the set-up meeting the lead inspector will explain how inspectors will identify and analyse case records with, and alongside, key professionals who have oversight of the decision-making process. The main purpose of this activity is to assess how effectively children looked after are safeguarded and cared for.
29. Case-file scrutiny and discussion will consider:
  - the extent to which the welfare concerns of looked after children are identified, assessed and responded to appropriately
  - the extent to which agencies and professionals work together to safeguard and promote the welfare and development of children and young people looked after
  - the effectiveness of practice in relation to children and young people entering and leaving care
  - the quality of support and care received by looked after children, including placement stability
  - the outcomes achieved for looked after children as a result of these services, including health, attendance and progress at school, numbers in full-time education, employment and training and rates of offending
  - the provision and monitoring arrangements for looked after children and young people who have been excluded from school.
30. In most instances, case-file analysis will consist of three key elements.
  - At least eight cases (three of which will be care leavers) selected by inspectors from the local authority case load before fieldwork begins. The local authority will be expected to carry out an audit of the eight or more selected and share this with inspectors as fieldwork begins (or share the outcomes of recent audits they have undertaken of the eight cases). Inspectors may ask the key worker, manager or a representative to discuss aspects of the case which relate to the lines of enquiry.

- At least a further 12 cases (four of which will be care leavers) will be selected by inspectors at the start of the fieldwork element of the inspection. Where needed, inspectors will consult with the local authority to ensure that they consider a balance of cases. Where available, managers and key workers will be invited to assist inspectors in their analysis of the selected cases.
  - Scrutiny of analysis and evaluation of the case file audit undertaken by the local authority.
31. Following notification of the date of the inspection, the local authority will be required to provide the lead inspector with a list of the following cases:
- all looked after children and young people and care leavers, including those in external placements
  - any unallocated looked after or care leavers cases or cases awaiting transfer to another team.
32. For all children looked after and care leavers, the local authority will be asked to supply the following information, as recorded on the integrated children's system:
- child's unique identifier
  - date of initial referral
  - date of birth
  - gender
  - ethnicity
  - legal status
  - details of any disability.
33. The local authority will be asked to clarify the current placement using the categories:
- placement with parent(s)
  - placement with relatives/friends
  - foster placement with relatives/friends
  - foster placement
  - placement with adopters
  - residential placement (children's home)
  - specialist residential placement (therapeutic)
  - specialist residential placement (residential school)
  - specialist residential placement (health, including child and adolescent mental health services)

- secure accommodation
- supported lodgings
- out-of-authority placements
- other – please specify.

## Reporting findings

34. The report will set out the inspection findings using text and grades, organised under the headings below.

### Report contents

About this inspection	Information about the inspection, including evidence base
Service information	Brief contextual information about the services provided in the area

### Services for looked after children

Overall effectiveness	Grade
Capacity to improve	Grade
Areas for improvement	No grade

Leadership and management taking into account:

- ambition and prioritisation
- performance management and quality assurance
- workforce development
- partnerships
- effective use of resources

Quality of provision taking into account: Grade

- service responsiveness
- quality of assessment and direct work with children and families
- quality of case planning, reviews and recording

Outcomes for looked after children and care leavers Grade

35. The draft report will be sent, within 10 working days of the end of the inspection, to the Director of Children’s Services for a factual accuracy check.

36. The Director of Children’s Services or representatives must return the draft report with any comments on factual accuracy within five working days (15 working days after the end of the inspection).

37. Following this, the final report setting out the inspection findings will be sent to the Director of Children's Services within 20 working days of the end of the inspection, copied to the Lead Member for Children's Services, and the Chief Executive of the local authority.
38. The final report will be published on the Ofsted website within 25 days of the end of the inspection (irrespective of appeals or complaints).

## **Communication and feedback**

39. Inspectors will provide regular opportunities for dialogue and feedback during the inspection. Should any unresolved issues of significant risk of harm to a child be identified during the inspection, inspectors will immediately inform the Director of Children's Services and confirm this in writing at the earliest opportunity. It is expected that any significant risk will be addressed immediately by those responsible.
40. Oral feedback about draft findings, including strengths and weaknesses in practice, will be given to the Director of Children's Services at the end of the inspection.

## **Confidentiality**

41. Ofsted will take all appropriate steps to ensure that information provided to inspectors remains confidential, as required by statute. However, evidence gathered during inspections may be subject to disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, although the identity of named individuals will not be disclosed. Where Ofsted considers that any information provided by children indicates the likelihood of harm, the necessary information will be passed to the local authority's child protection staff for action.

## **Quality assurance**

42. Quality assurance is the action taken to ensure that an inspection is of the quality needed and expected by users, providers and Ofsted itself. As part of this, we will ensure inspectors are suitably experienced in the areas they are inspecting and ensure quality assurance managers are suitably experienced and skilled to undertake this aspect of work.
43. All inspectors are expected to undertake quality assurance of their own and other inspectors' work during inspections. The lead inspector has overall responsibility for ensuring all evidence gathered is robust, reliable and secure. This approach ensures all judgements reached by the inspection team are fully supported by the available evidence.
44. To ensure national consistency, some inspections will be visited by an inspector from Ofsted to support the quality assurance processes undertaken by the inspection team. During these visits, the visiting inspector will speak to the lead

inspector, inspection team members, managers and other staff, and where possible users and other stakeholders. They will also attend any inspection team meetings taking place during their visit. This inspector will always seek views from the local authority and/or partners on the conduct of the inspection and sample the way evidence is being gathered and used.

45. Ofsted will ask the local authority to complete a short evaluation form following each inspection, which will be used to improve the quality of inspections.
46. All inspection reports will be subject to quality assurance procedures.

## **Conduct during the inspection**

47. Inspectors must uphold the highest professional standards in their work, and ensure that everyone they encounter during inspections is treated fairly and with respect. The code of conduct requires inspectors to:
  - evaluate objectively, be impartial and inspect without fear or favour
  - evaluate provision in line with frameworks, national standards or requirements
  - base all evaluations on clear and robust evidence
  - have no connection with the provider which could undermine their objectivity
  - report honestly and clearly, ensuring that judgements are fair and reliable
  - carry out their work with integrity, treating all those they meet with courtesy, respect and sensitivity
  - endeavour to minimise the stress on those involved in the inspection
  - act in the best interests and well-being of service users
  - maintain purposeful and productive dialogue with those being inspected, and communicate judgements clearly and frankly
  - respect the confidentiality of information, particularly about individuals and their work
  - respond appropriately to reasonable requests
  - take prompt and appropriate action on any safeguarding or health and safety issues.

## **Expectations of providers**

48. In order that inspection and regulation are productive and beneficial, it is important that inspectors and providers establish and maintain a professional working environment based on courtesy and professional behaviour. Inspectors are expected to uphold the code of conduct but Ofsted also expects providers to:

- be courteous and professional
- apply their own codes of conduct in their dealings with inspectors
- enable inspectors to conduct their visit in an open and honest way
- enable inspectors to evaluate the provision objectively against the standards/framework
- provide evidence that will enable the inspector to report honestly, fairly and reliably about their provision
- work with inspectors to minimise disruption, stress and bureaucracy
- ensure the health and safety of inspectors while on their premises
- maintain a purposeful dialogue with the inspector or the inspection team
- draw any concerns about the inspection to the attention of inspectors promptly and in a suitable manner
- respect that inspectors will need to observe practice and talk to staff and users without the presence of a manager or registered person.

## Complaints

49. The great majority of our work is carried out smoothly and without incident. If concerns do arise during an inspection, they should be raised with the lead inspector immediately so that they can be resolved while the inspection is taking place. Any concerns about the factual accuracy of the findings in the report may be raised with the inspector after the inspection as set out in *Conducting looked after children inspections*.<sup>2</sup> If it has not been possible to resolve concerns through these means, a formal complaint may be lodged.
50. Normally, a complaint can be made at any stage during an inspection or up to 30 calendar days from the date of publication of any report or letter. Lodging a complaint will not normally delay publication of the report.
51. All complaints will be initially assessed by a designated Ofsted representative and early contact will be made in order to resolve any complaints without delay. Where this is not possible, complaints will be investigated in accordance with Ofsted's published complaints procedure. 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/resources/130128](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130128).
52. Complaints should be made in writing (including by email to [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)) to:

Sue Aldridge

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<sup>2</sup> Conducting safeguarding and looked after children inspections (100173), Ofsted, 2010;  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130143](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130143).

Principal Officer, Complaints  
Ofsted National Business Unit  
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## Further information

53. We hope that you find this document useful in helping you prepare for your inspection. If you have any queries about your inspection, please discuss them with your lead inspector when they contact you.
54. If you have any other general queries about the inspections of looked after children, please contact Jeremy Gleaden on 0300 123 1231 or [jeremy.gleaden@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:jeremy.gleaden@ofsted.gov.uk).