

# Conducting inspections of local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies

Guidance for the inspections of fostering services

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This guidance is designed to assist inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) when conducting inspections of local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies. It should be read in conjunction with the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule.

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Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

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## Introduction

1. This guidance is designed to assist inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) when conducting inspections of local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies in England (referred to as fostering services). The inspection is of the service and its impact on outcomes for children and young people; it is not a direct inspection of the foster care given to individual children. Fostering services can use the guidance to see how inspections are conducted.
2. This guidance should be read in conjunction with *Inspection of local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies*<sup>1</sup> and *Inspections of fostering services: evaluation schedule and grade descriptors*.<sup>2</sup>
3. We have a duty to inspect fostering services once in every three-year cycle.<sup>3</sup> The scheduling of inspections takes account of legal requirements; previous inspection findings; complaints and concerns about the service; performance information held by the Department of Education, the timing of other inspections in local authorities and notifications and monitoring reports provided to Ofsted by registered fostering services under regulation 35 of The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.
4. Local authority fostering service inspections will involve two suitably experienced and trained inspectors spending three days on site (usually spread over four days) with an additional day each to prepare and a day for the lead inspector to write the report. The inspection of independent fostering agencies will involve one suitably experienced and trained inspector spending four days on site (usually spread over five days) with one additional day to prepare and one additional day to write the report.
5. In some circumstances it may be necessary for additional inspectors to be involved in the inspection of very large local authorities and independent fostering agencies, for example large national organisations with a large home-based workforce. In these cases, the inspector will request additional resources from their line manager. If the request is agreed by the line manager, it will be passed to the Managing Inspector for fostering, for approval.
6. In other circumstances, for example services where there are fewer than 15 approved foster placements, a reduction in fieldwork time will be negotiated between the inspector and team manager at the beginning of the inspection year.

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<sup>1</sup> *Inspection of local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies* (120006), Ofsted, 2012; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120006](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120006).

<sup>2</sup> *Inspections of fostering services: evaluation schedule and grade descriptors* (120005), Ofsted, 2012; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120005](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120005).

<sup>3</sup> Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) (Children's Homes etc.) Regulations 2007 (S.I. 2007/694). As amended by (SI 2011/553).

7. If there are no foster carers approved or in the process of being approved, and therefore no children or young people in placement, inspectors will discuss whether to inspect with the Managing Inspector for fostering.

## Notice

8. Ten working days' notice will be given of the inspection.
9. When notice is given we will ask the provider to provide a small amount of information and to make arrangements for meetings with key people and groups of stakeholders. An example letter can be found at Annex A. During the inspection, inspectors may also identify other people to whom they wish to speak.
10. We ask providers to allow access to premises, space for the inspector, and access to records through paper files, if they are used, or electronic files with some support for the inspectors to enable access to relevant files. Inspectors will not ask that files are provided in hard copy unless these are already used by the service.

## Timeframe

11. The timeframes for inspection, including preparation – which if two inspectors are involved should be on the same day – on-site work and the publication of the inspection report, are as follows in working days.

<b>Day</b>	<b>Inspection activity Local authorities – two inspectors (The tariff may be reduced for very small fostering services or increased for exceptionally large services)</b>	<b>Inspection activity Independent fostering agencies – one inspector (The tariff may be reduced for very small fostering services or increased for exceptionally large services)</b>
1	Preparation for each inspector	Preparation
2 – half day	Afternoon site visit	Afternoon site visit
3	Site visit	Site visit
4	Site visit	Site visit
5 – half day	Morning site visit and feedback	Site visit
6	Drafting report – lead inspector	Morning site visit and feedback
7		Drafting report
7–10	Inspection evidence and report (toolkit) submitted for quality assurance	Inspection evidence and report (toolkit) submitted for quality assurance
15	Report sent to the registered provider for any comments on factual accuracy, within 10 working days of	Report sent to the registered provider for any comments on factual accuracy, within 10 working days of

	the end of the inspection	the end of the inspection
20	Provider returns the draft report within five working days with any comments on factual accuracy	Provider returns the draft report within five working days with any comments on factual accuracy
25	The final report will be published on the Ofsted website within 20 working days of the end of the inspection	The final report will be published on the Ofsted website within 20 working days of the end of the inspection

## Pre-inspection activity

12. Inspectors are allocated one day for preparing for an inspection. Where two inspectors carry out the inspection, the lead inspector will divide the preparation tasks between them on a basis that takes account of their skills, experience and preferences. Lines of enquiry will be identified together beforehand.

The inspectors will consider:

- previous inspection reports, including the children’s services assessment letter and reports of safeguarding and looked after children inspections
- annual data submissions from the service
- data analysis by Ofsted
- updated data and details from the foster carers’ register to enable the selection of files for case sampling submitted by the fostering service following notice of the inspection, including:
  - reports made under national minimum standard (NMS) 25
  - three sets of panel meeting minutes
  - completed questionnaires from children, young people, parents, foster carers and others
  - the up-to-date statement of purpose and children’s guide
  - concerns and complaints made to Ofsted
  - notifications of significant events made to Ofsted (only required from independent fostering agencies)
  - any changes to registration, including a change of manager
  - any enforcement activity since the previous inspection
  - the content of the provider’s website.

13. If information has been received that indicates potential non-compliance with regulatory requirements, Ofsted may decide to investigate compliance issues at an inspection, taking into account the date of the last inspection and the requirement for 10 days’ notice. In these cases, the concern will be used as part of the lines of enquiry for the inspection. The inspector will outline the

concern to the fostering service at the beginning of the inspection. Annex B contains guidance on the content of the inspection report and covers how inspectors will report on concerns that have been investigated during an inspection.

14. Inspectors will consider at least three sets of panel minutes, submitted by the service prior to the inspection, which may lead to lines of enquiry in respect of particular children, young people, foster carers, the functioning of the central list of panel members or of the fostering service.
15. Services may submit additional information and up-to-date data when they return the documentation requested in the letter announcing the inspection. This material must be explicitly relevant to the inspection framework and associated evaluation schedule and enhance or clarify information about the quality of service provided. Statistical data submitted prior to the inspection must be correct at the time of submission. Amendments or changes to data submitted during the inspection may not be accepted as any statistical elements of the reports will be based on data submitted in the annual returns and immediately before the inspection.
16. The inspectors will carry out an analysis of the available evidence and, following discussion with the second inspector in local authority inspections, the lead inspector will record their planning notes within the planning section of the Regulatory Support Application (RSA) toolkit.<sup>4</sup> The plan for the inspection will identify lines of enquiry, any areas of apparent weakness or significant strength and areas where further evidence needs to be gathered. If the inspection is the subject of an evidence-based review for quality assurance purposes, the inspection plan will be considered as part of this. The focus of the inspection may change during its course as further evidence emerges. Annex C provides guidance on assessing financial viability.

## **Regulation 35 reports and reports under national minimum standard 25**

17. Regulation 35 of The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 requires the registered person to report upon the matters set out in schedule 6 of those regulations. The reports form part of the provider's quality assurance procedures, and registered fostering services are required to forward these reports to Ofsted within 28 days of completion.<sup>5</sup>
18. NMS 25.7 states that the executive side of the local authority or the independent fostering service provider/trustees, board members or management committee members should:

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<sup>4</sup> The RSA is the electronic system used by Ofsted to administer and record regulatory inspections.

<sup>5</sup> *The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 4: fostering services*, Department for Education, 2011; <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00023-2011>.

- 'receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every three months'
  - 'monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children'
  - 'satisfy themselves that the provider is complying with the conditions of registration'.
19. Ofsted provides a template for these reports, which contains data we require for inspection and supplements/replaces the fostering dataset. We ask that these data and quality assurance reports are submitted to Ofsted once a year based on data for the year 1 April to 31 March.
20. As part of the pre-inspection activity on the inspection planning day, inspectors will check the regulation 35 and NMS 25 reports and any emerging lines of enquiry will be included in the inspection plan.

## **Gathering views of children, young people, parents, foster carers, staff and partner organisations prior to inspection**

21. The views and experiences of children and young people and their parents, foster carers, staff and other interested parties – such as placing social workers and independent reviewing officers – inform lines of enquiry for each inspection and are an important part of inspection evidence. It should be noted that this inspection is an inspection of the fostering service, not foster carers.
22. Ofsted will send out a link to online questionnaires for all these groups at a point of time during the inspection year. They will be available for one month each year (although in the first year they will be available for two months), at the same time as the data and quality assurance template. This is in an electronic format and allows those with internet access to respond directly to Ofsted. We will promote online responses to our questionnaires and will ask services to ensure that they publicise the questionnaires to all children and young people who are in foster placements they provide and all foster carers, prospective carers, staff and partners. Hard copies will also be available on request. Business reply envelopes will be supplied to children and young people only.
23. We will supply all fostering services with symbol versions of questionnaires by email to distribute to children who use the following alternative means of communication: Widgit; Makaton; and Picture Communication Symbols. There are also film clips of the children and young people's version using British sign language (BSL). The responses to the symbol and BSL versions should be returned as hard copy; providers can contact Ofsted for a supply of business reply envelopes.



24. An analysis of the online questionnaires and copies of all symbol versions received will be made available to inspectors prior to inspection.

## **Deferrals**

25. Inspections will not normally be deferred. If on arrival it is found that key staff are absent or unavailable, or there are accommodation issues, these will not normally constitute reasons for deferral.
26. Deferrals will only be made in exceptional circumstances, for example if the inspection went ahead it might place people at risk or if the ability to gather secure evidence is severely restricted.
27. Decisions about deferrals are agreed by the Managing Inspector with responsibility for fostering.

## **Inspection activity**

28. At the start of the inspection the inspector/s will confirm their identity by producing both their Ofsted Inspector Authorisation and Identification card and their identity badge. It is not necessary to carry paper copies of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. The inspector/s will discuss the inspection plan with the manager, confirming if any further information or meetings need to be arranged.
29. The days on site will be used for discussions with managers and with groups of children, young people, foster carers and staff and to examine files. Evidence will be sought against the evaluation schedule and will take into account issues already identified through pre-inspection data and questionnaires. The organisation of the days on site will depend on when meetings and discussions can be held and what evidence is required to make secure judgements. However, a significant amount of time will be used to examine case files and to discuss issues arising from those files. This may, for example, include discussions/telephone calls with children, young people, birth families, placing social workers, foster carers, commissioners and Independent Reviewing Officers.
30. Inspectors may identify additional people that they wish to speak with during the inspection. It is important that the service is involved with this so they can explain any reasons why the inspector should not contact particular children, young people and birth relatives. The inspector should also identify foster carers themselves and seek confirmation that there is no reason not to contact them, for example a death in the family.
31. The inspection will specifically focus on gathering evidence against the evaluation schedule. The detail of activities undertaken and discussions held will vary depending on the lines of enquiry for each individual inspection.

## Case sampling

32. Inspectors will usually access at least six case files, and taking account of the size of the fostering service often more, across the range of the fostering service's work. In local authorities this will include a child or young person placed with a 'family and friends' foster carer. Inspectors may access a much larger number of files to evaluate particular issues, for example practice in relation to placement planning, which may have arisen during pre-inspection planning or during the inspection. The inspector will select cases from the foster carer register and details supplied by the service.
33. While the case files may cover long periods of time, judgements will be based on contemporary practice and the impact of the service on the progress of and outcomes for children and young people. Case file sampling may lead to discussions with social workers, children, young people and their carers and birth families.
34. Inspectors access files via electronic systems, if used, with support from the service. Providers must ensure that inspectors have access and support to use their system from the first day of the inspection.
35. Inspectors will examine, discuss and evaluate cases in line with the criteria set out in the evaluation schedule. In some cases, if possible, it may be helpful to do this with the fostering social worker.
36. Inspectors will sample a range of documents from files to support their lines of enquiry. This may include, for example, information and documents relating to the following:
  - the assessment of the child's or young person's needs
  - looked after children (LAC), including children's LAC reviews
  - placement plans
  - matching
  - notifications under schedule 7 of the fostering regulations of missing children and young people and of criminal offences
  - foster care agreements
  - plans for introductions
  - information provided to children and young people
  - information provided to foster carers prior to placement
  - minutes of disruption meetings
  - foster carers' assessments and records kept under schedule 3 of The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011
  - foster carers' reviews
  - records of all placements – regulation 30(3)

- records of unannounced visits, supervision, support and training of foster carers
- referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)
- foster carers who have been de-registered.

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

37. The fostering service's statement of purpose and children's guide should be available on the internet and form part of the pre-inspection data. We should also hold copies in our database as agencies are required to submit these documents to us whenever they are changed.
38. Other documents will be examined where they are relevant to a line of enquiry for that individual inspection. Inspectors will not routinely examine all policies and procedures.
39. The inspector will select and sample at least two personnel records in respect of anyone working for purposes of the agency (this includes panel members). The inspector may sample more records when necessary to pursue lines of enquiry specific to the inspection. If recruitment records are not maintained at the premises where the inspector is based for the inspection then the provider will need to arrange for the files to be made available on site.
40. These records can be maintained in checklist or spreadsheet formats. The information available for inspection should reflect schedule 1 of The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, and must include the reference number of the subject's DBS check. If any lines of enquiry require additional information, then the inspector may request that a small sample of full personnel records are made available at the inspection visit.

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

### **Focus groups**

41. All fostering services will be asked to arrange focus groups with children and young people, their own staff and foster carers. Local authorities will also be asked to arrange a focus group with children's and young people's social workers and/or their managers.
42. During their preparation and during the inspection, inspectors will identify individuals with whom they wish to speak and, depending on the makeup of any focus groups, this may include:
  - children and young people who are fostered or who have recently been fostered
  - Children in Care Councils

- foster carers
- prospective foster carers
- the chair of the local foster carer association and members
- the chair of the fostering panel or, if not available, the vice chair
- the agency decision maker
- Independent Reviewing Officers
- fostering staff and management
- the manager/registered manager and the responsible individual and/or registered person
- the registered provider, nominated person, fostering manager or responsible individual
- staff identifying and making placements
- social workers and managers for looked after children
- relatives of children and young people who are fostered
- commissioning officers
- advocacy services
- members of the fostering panel
- the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB)
- virtual headteachers/agency representative for education
- the looked after children's nurse/nursing team
- representatives of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)
- guardian *ad litem*.

## **The involvement of children and young people**

43. The experiences of children and young people who are fostered or have been fostered are at the centre of the inspection and provide key evidence in assessing outcomes against the evaluation schedule.
44. Inspectors will scrutinise how the fostering service listens to and engages with children and young people and what impact this has on service delivery. The views of children obtained by the service are an important element of the inspection and will be taken into account as part of the inspection evidence.
45. Inspectors will always try to speak with children and young people during the inspection and providers are asked to set up a focus group for this purpose using existing groups if already established. In addition, the inspector may speak, if appropriate and with their consent, with other children and young people identified during the inspection. This is likely to be by telephone or in the office. It should be noted that children and young people often want to talk

to the inspector and it should be presented as a positive opportunity that will add to the inspector's understanding of the way the service functions.

46. Inspectors must take into account the specific communication needs of the children and young people. The inspectors may request the assistance of foster carers or staff who know and understand the child/young person's preferred means of communication.
47. Inspectors will explain the inspection process and confidentiality and also ask children and young people if they received the invitation to participate in the online questionnaire and if they completed it. Discussions with children and young people will depend on any lines of inquiry identified.
48. Inspectors will demonstrate safe and sensitive practice throughout the inspection. Examples include:
  - explaining to children and young people that they will not include comments that will identify them in the inspection report or in feedback to foster carers or the fostering services unless they ask for this to be done
  - explaining to children and young people that information suggesting that they or another child or young person is at risk of harm will be passed by the inspector to an appropriate person able to take necessary action about that concern.
49. Inspectors should always take account of privacy and confidentiality when talking to children and young people, be it in person or on the telephone. Where a call back is requested, the inspector should always use a contact number within the service or Ofsted's national number: 0300 123 1231.

## **The involvement of foster carers**

50. Foster carers will be able to provide key evidence in assessing outcomes for children and young people against the evaluation schedule. Fostering services are asked to set up a focus group of foster carers to meet with the inspector. The inspector will also speak to the chair or members of the foster carers' association, if one is operating, and make telephone calls to foster carers during the inspection.
51. Inspectors should always take account of privacy and confidentiality when talking to foster carers, be it in person or on the telephone. Where a call back is requested, the inspector should always use a contact number within the service or Ofsted's national number: 0300 123 1231.
52. Inspectors will explain the inspection process and confidentiality and also ask foster carers if they received the invitation to participate in the online questionnaire and if they completed it. Discussions with foster carers will depend on any lines of inquiry identified.
53. Inspectors will also assess how well the fostering service effectively engages with foster carers and what impact this has on service delivery.

## Gathering views from stakeholders

54. Inspectors will consult with stakeholders to inform the inspection findings and will focus on how the fostering service supports progress and makes a positive difference to children and young people's lives. This will usually be by telephone. Stakeholders may include any of the people listed in paragraph 42 or others who appear to be able to offer relevant information to the inspection. These people will vary depending on the nature of the fostering services provided; they will include children and young people's social workers and may include: commissioners, education staff, health services, independent visitors and advocates, among others.
55. Inspectors should always take account of privacy and confidentiality when talking to stakeholders on the telephone. Where a call back is requested, the inspector should always use a contact number within the service or Ofsted's national number 0300 123 1231.

## Key meetings

56. Inspectors will use focus groups and, on occasion, any scheduled meetings as opportunities for following lines of enquiry. The amount of time available is restricted and therefore any attendance must be focused on that line of enquiry and time limited. The scheduled meetings that may be attended include:
  - staff meetings
  - foster carer meetings
  - children's and young people's meetings
  - placement finding and matching processes.

## Discussions with the managers

57. Individual interviews will be held with the manager/registered manager and the responsible individual and/or registered person.
58. The interview with the manager will focus on gathering evidence of the fostering service's impact on children's and young people's lives and will include these elements:
  - issues that the inspector wishes to explore with the manager that have arisen from pre-inspection information
  - how they involve children and young people in the development of the service
  - how they monitor the impact of their service
  - consideration of how safeguarding is managed
  - follow up on progress in response to previous requirements and recommendations

- the plans for future development of the fostering service
- the arrangements for supervision received by the manager
- any further evidence the manager may wish to highlight with the inspector
- any evidence the inspector may wish to highlight with the manager.

## Safeguarding concerns

59. If serious issues of concern arise, for example in relation to the failure to follow child protection procedures and/or where a child is discovered to be at immediate risk of harm, the fostering service's senior manager will be notified as soon as possible unless this compromises the child/young person's safety. Inspectors should always follow Ofsted safeguarding policy and procedures<sup>6</sup> and should contact the national compliance, investigation and enforcement (CIE) team on 0300 123 1231 if they need advice. Where required, a referral will be made to the CIE team, the appropriate local authority children's services and the child/young person's allocated social worker.

## Recording evidence

60. Throughout the inspection, inspectors will maintain a record of their evidence. Electronic evidence is recorded within the RSA toolkit evidence screen. In most circumstances once the summarised evidence has been placed in RSA any duplicate handwritten evidence will be destroyed by the inspector. In some circumstances inspectors will be required to also keep any handwritten notes they have made during the inspection. This may apply in circumstances where legal action is being considered or a challenge or complaint about the judgement is anticipated. Inspectors need to record all handwritten evidence using black ink so that it can be photocopied or scanned if necessary. All handwritten evidence must be legible and dated. Inspectors must submit all handwritten evidence that has not been summarised or scanned on to RSA that will form part of the inspection evidence base to the national quality assurance team within five working days of the end of the on-site visit. All inspection records will be retained in accordance with Ofsted's published retention policy.<sup>7</sup>
61. Evidence should be clear, evaluative and sufficient for the purpose of supporting the judgements. It should not include anything that could identify individual staff, individual children, young people or family members, unless necessary for the protection of a child/young person. Inspectors can record direct quotes from children and young people, parents and stakeholders in evidence to support judgements, although evidence should not use individual's names or initials unless they are the names of the registered person or necessary for the protection of a child or young person.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ofsted safeguarding policy and procedures* (100183), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100183](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100183).

<sup>7</sup> *Handling and retention of inspection evidence* (100122), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100122](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100122).

62. Evidence may be scrutinised for quality assurance and will be considered in the event of any complaint.

## Inspection findings

63. Failures to meet regulations and national minimum standards that are identified and addressed during the inspection must still be reported even if they do not lead to a requirement or recommendation.
64. The *Evaluation schedule for the inspection of local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies* sets out illustrative evidence of an outstanding, good, adequate and inadequate service. Inspectors will use this to formulate their findings and judgements and to prepare verbal feedback to the manager.

## Inspection feedback

65. During the inspection, inspectors will share emerging findings about the fostering service's key strengths and weaknesses. Shortfalls that could have an immediate impact on the safety of children, young people and/or staff will be brought to the immediate attention of the manager or another senior person in the agency.
66. At the end of the inspection the inspector will give verbal feedback of the main findings and provisional judgements to the manager. It should be noted that the quality assurance process may, on occasion, result in changes to the judgements or draft report. In exceptional circumstances, an inspector may need additional time after the inspection fieldwork to take advice before giving feedback. The date of feedback is counted as the last day of the inspection.
67. The feedback should:
  - cover the main findings of the inspection against the evaluation schedule, including both strengths and weaknesses
  - indicate likely requirements and recommendations with reference to the relevant regulation, national minimum standard or statutory guidance, providing a clear agenda for improvement
  - use the grade descriptors to indicate how the inspector has arrived at her/his judgements and confirm that the report will be sent in draft to the manager for comments on factual accuracy (see 'Timeframe' at paragraph 11)
  - confirm that letters thanking children and young people who participated in the inspection and outlining the judgements will be sent for the provider to circulate alongside the final report.



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

## Writing the report

69. Inspectors are responsible for producing high-quality reports. In local authority inspections the lead inspector writes the report. The inspector should ensure that the report is free from errors – for example grammar, spelling and punctuation errors – before submitting the report. Reports should be written in the present tense. However, a specific example of evidence from the inspection should be written in the past tense.
70. Inspectors should write their reports with regard to the *Guide to Ofsted's house style*.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a quality checklist is included within Annex C of this guidance to help authors and readers of Ofsted's reports.
71. The report should be succinct and evaluative. Inspectors should make appropriate professional judgements about the extent of detail required to 'tell the story' of the experience of children and young people who are, or have recently been, fostered.
72. The overall effectiveness section should include an evaluation of the trends in agency performance and compare those to those found nationally.
73. The quality of inspection reports is enhanced when children's, young people's and foster carers' feedback is quoted within the report and used to illustrate evaluation about the quality of the fostering service. However, in smaller services, the potential to identify children and young people is high and should be taken into account.
74. There is no specified word length for the report or the individual sections. Inspectors should use their professional judgement to ensure that the reports are long enough to say what needs to be said and no more. It is likely that reports for fostering services with a number of weaknesses or services found to be outstanding will require more detailed explanations of the reasons for the judgements.
75. Ofsted will send a copy of the report to the provider and publish it on the Ofsted website.

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<sup>8</sup> *Guide to Ofsted's house style* (080230), Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080230](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080230).

## Letters to children and young people

76. Inspectors will complete a letter for children and young people following every inspection of a fostering service, which tells them what the overall judgement is and briefly outlines the main findings. This will be available in symbol versions to fostering services where children and young people have returned questionnaires using symbols. Services should make this letter available to all children and young people who are fostered.

## Quality assurance

77. The inspector is responsible for the quality of the report. The inspector will check the completed report carefully before submitting to the national quality assurance team for sign off for publication.
78. The inspector must use the *Guide to Ofsted's house style* for reference when quality checking their own reports. Inspectors and the national quality assurance team should also refer to Annex C.
79. Ofsted's national quality assurance team quality assures:
- inspection reports
  - the evidence base underpinning inspection judgements
  - inspection fieldwork through a programme of accompanied visits.
80. The national quality assurance team will discuss with the Divisional Manager, Inspection Delivery any proposed change of judgement from the provisional judgement given at verbal feedback during the inspection. On these occasions, the inspector must inform the service of the revised judgements and provide reasons for the changes before the provider receives the draft report.
81. Ofsted will send an evaluation form following each inspection to the manager of the fostering service to complete, which will be used to improve the quality of inspections.

## Concerns

82. It is anticipated that the great majority of inspections will be carried out without any concerns on the part of the fostering service.
83. Inspections are carried out in accordance with the principles of inspection and code of conduct set out in the *Framework for the inspection of local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies*.
84. During an inspection, those with concerns are strongly encouraged to raise issues with the inspector as soon as they arise, so that they can be resolved as quickly as possible while the inspection is taking place. If concerns do arise

during an inspection, the inspector should consider the concern and do all that is possible to remedy the problem.

85. If resolution of the concerns is not possible, or the person expressing the concerns does not feel that adequate weight is being given to them, or an independent view is sought, then the person raising the concerns, or someone acting on her or his behalf, should contact the Ofsted helpline on 0300 123 4666.

## Complaints

86. If it has not been possible to resolve concerns then individuals or providers may decide to lodge a formal complaint. 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. Complaints should normally be made in writing – by post or email. However, we will also accept complaints by telephone; where we accept complaints in this way we will not normally take any formal action until we have agreed a written account of the complaint with the complainant.
87. 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/070080](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/070080).
88. Lodging a complaint will not normally delay the publication of the final inspection report.

The National Complaints Team  
Ofsted National Business Unit  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

Or email us at: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)

Or telephone: 0300 123 4666.

## **Annex A. Notice of inspection**

Dear

### **Notice of inspection**

This letter is to confirm that Ofsted will be carrying out an inspection of your fostering service commencing on >inspection due date< and ending on >last inspection day<. The name of the lead inspector is >name< and the second inspector is >name<. The lead inspector will contact you to discuss the inspection.

To ensure that inspector time is used effectively we ask that you provide us with some information in advance of your inspection. This is explained below.

### **Focus groups and discussions**

Please find enclosed a list of focus groups and discussions that we would like you to arrange. If there are existing appropriate groups running, please do use these. Please also ensure there are at least 30 minutes between meetings and that there are no meetings arranged for the first day or the last day of the inspection. Focus groups should be on-site wherever possible and may last between 45 and 90 minutes, depending on attendance. Discussions with individuals may be held by telephone. >As there will be two inspectors some meetings can be held at the same time<. No additional meetings should be arranged unless agreed with the inspector.

### **Case list**

The records that the inspector will generally need to see are children's fostering files and foster carer files (including assessment reports and reviews), supervision notes, team meeting notes, staff recruitment files, panel member files and panel meeting minutes. Please provide the details requested in the enclosed case list. The inspector will use this to select the files they will look at during the inspection.

If you have children's/staff records stored electronically please ensure that there will be a member of staff available to support the inspector in accessing these. If these records are stored off-site please be prepared to deliver them to the location of the inspector.

The inspector will be sampling and reading files throughout the inspection and will need time to incorporate this into their inspection programme.

### **Panel meeting minutes**

Please provide the minutes from the last three panel meetings.

### **Data**

The inspector will have the data you submitted on the annual quality assurance form and from completed questionnaires. If you want to provide any updated, brief, relevant statistical data or information it should be returned with the attached forms.

Additional information or data should only be supplied during the inspection at the request or with the agreement of the inspector.

### **Returning documents to Ofsted**

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

### **Additional information**

The inspector may ask you to arrange telephone calls with children and young people, placing social workers, commissioners or independent reviewing officers.

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

Further information about the inspection is available in *Conducting inspections of local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies* at [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120036](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120036).

If you have any further questions, please contact me on 0300 123 1231.

Yours sincerely

>Name<

Inspection Support Team

## Information for inspection

Have you returned:

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

Signed:

Print name:

Job title:

Agency or service:

URN:

Date:

### Meetings/focus groups/telephone calls

Please arrange the below meetings, focus groups or telephone calls and provide a contact name, date and time.

Meetings/focus groups	Contact name	Date and time
A focus group of social workers for looked after children in foster care (local authorities only)		
A focus group of staff who work with foster carers		
A small focus group (up to eight) of children and young people who have been or are fostered, or a meeting with the Children in Care Council (local authorities only)		
A focus group of foster carers		
A telephone call with the Foster Carer Association or equivalent (if you have one)		
A meeting with the registered manager of the service on each day of the inspection		

<b>Discussions</b>		
With a relevant commissioner in the local authority		
With the panel chair or vice-chair (or panel members if the chair is not available)		
With the agency decision-maker		
With the registered person (independent fostering agencies only)		
With the local authority children's nurse		
With the virtual headteacher for looked after children		

### **Case list**

Please could you provide a list of children and young people who are currently placed with your fostering service and include:

- their age
- type of placement (family and friends, short breaks, living with foster carers, emergency)
- disability status (learning disability, physical disability, sensory impairment)
- ethnicity
- whether a child is placed with all their siblings (where appropriate)
- date of placement
- number of previous care placements (including residential placements)
- if the placement is over the normal fostering limit
- name and telephone number of the child's local authority social worker.

## **Annex B. The content of the inspection report**

### **Brief description of the service**

This is a brief factual description of the service and should not include judgements or evaluation. It should describe:

- the size of the fostering service, numbers of children and numbers of carers
- whether the fostering service is privately owned, a charitable organisation or local authority managed
- the range of fostering services provided
- any other relevant registration information such as whether the service is one of several fostering services registered with Ofsted.

### **Overall effectiveness**

This section should be a brief summary of the outcome of the inspection, explaining the main reasons for the overall effectiveness judgement. It should highlight any outstanding practice and the fostering service's strengths. It must include reference to any areas for improvement but should not list the requirements and recommendations. Inspectors must evaluate trends in service performance and compare the trends with those found nationally. This section should provide the reader with a clear picture of the quality of the fostering service

### **Statutory requirements and recommendations**

Requirements and recommendations must arise from any weaknesses identified in the report.

#### **Requirements**

Requirements must link clearly to regulations. Inspectors must consider the wording of the requirements to ensure that providers are not asked to do something they do not have to do. Inspectors should, wherever possible, use the wording of the regulation. However, the requirement should be sufficiently detailed so that it is clear what is being asked of the provider: on occasion this may require more explanation. The wording should be followed by the regulation in the form of (regulation 31(2)(c)). Requirements cannot be made in inspection of local authority services.

#### **Recommendations**

Where a recommendation made to a local authority relates to a regulation, the recommendations should be written in the same format as a requirement (see above).

Recommendations, although not enforceable, promote good practice, always relate to a national minimum standard and help the service to improve outcomes for children and young people. Recommendations can also be made against statutory



guidance. Any recommendation should be sufficiently detailed so that it is clear what is being asked of the provider.

Requirements and recommendations should start with a verb. Commonly used verbs are: ensure, update, implement, improve, create, devise, keep, maintain and revise. They should follow on from the stem 'the provider must/should'.

Requirements and recommendations should start with a lower case letter as they follow on from a stem in the inspection report. There should be no full stops at the end of the requirement/recommendation except for the final one. This should have a full stop at the end of the wording, but before the regulation or national minimum standard it is related to. The relevant regulation or national minimum standard will be included within brackets – in the case of statutory guidance, in the form (Volume 5, statutory guidance).

In all cases where an independent fostering agency is judged inadequate, the inspector will set requirements so that the registered person/s meets the requirements of the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Services Regulations 2010. They may also make recommendations to help the registered person/s to improve the quality and standards of care further.

## **All sections of the report**

Inspectors need to inspect against the full evaluation schedule but it is not necessary to report against each aspect of the evaluation schedule. Text should provide a brief commentary on the key strengths and weaknesses that support the judgement given and, most importantly, tell the unique story of each fostering service and the experience of and outcomes for children and young people.

Inspectors do not need to write a section of the report about each area they have evaluated but must include enough in the report to support their judgement and make it clear to the reader. While the evidence will confirm that the whole evaluation schedule has been inspected, the report will focus on the key strengths and weaknesses that support the judgements made.

There will be references to equality and diversity throughout the report. In addition, there are specific parts of the evaluation schedule that relate to equality and diversity. Inspectors will make comments relating to equality and diversity linked to the evaluation schedule.

## **Outcomes for children and young people**

This section should focus on the experiences of children and how they progress in foster care. What helps them to progress should generally appear in other sections of the report.

## **The quality of service provision**

This section should focus on service provision and how, through the recruitment, assessment, supervision and training of foster carers, positive outcomes for children and young people are promoted.

## **Safeguarding**

This section focuses on how the service puts safeguarding at the centre of all it does.

## **Leadership and management**

This section should identify the key aspects of practice that support the judgement for leadership and management including strengths and weaknesses.

Inspectors should evaluate and report on how the steps taken to tackle requirements and recommendations or key issues raised at the last inspection have improved outcomes for children and young people and the organisation of the provision.

Inspectors should not write out previous requirements, recommendations or key issues in full but should report on the service's progress in achieving the requirement or recommendations. For example, inspectors can say that the quality and impact of training has improved, or children's access to health services is promoted.

## **General report writing guidance**

A well-written report:

- contains more evaluation than description
- has judgements that are clearly supported by good evidence
- is clear on the outcomes and experiences for children and young people
- is unique and captures the character of a fostering service
- states findings in the present tense but may use the past tense to refer to specific pieces of evidence
- has short sentences
- is simple and easy to understand
- does not identify or contain sensitive information about individual children and young people, staff or others
- includes quotes from children, parents, staff and other professionals where appropriate and possible
- follows the *Guide to Ofsted's house style*.

Reports should be written using the 'active voice'. This is likely to make sentences shorter and more easily understood. For example:

- Passive voice: 'Understanding the children's past and the impact this has on their behaviour is supported by the staff with foster carers.'
- Active voice: 'Staff support foster carers to understand the children's past and the impact this has on their behaviour.'
- Passive voice: 'A good level of enthusiasm is shown by the young people about the activities available.'
- Active voice: 'Young people are enthusiastic about the activities available.'

### **Reporting on inspections where compliance issues have been investigated**

If concerns are raised and it is agreed that issues of compliance should be investigated at the inspection, the inspector will discuss the concern with the provider. However, they will not refer to the concern in the inspection report, or report whether the concern was substantiated. The inspector will, however, report any non-compliance under the relevant judgement area.

The inspector will raise requirements where there is a breach of regulation. If a higher level of enforcement is required inspectors will consult with Ofsted's Compliance, Investigation and Enforcement team.

## Annex C. Assessing financial viability

The fostering regulations state that the `registered provider must carry on the fostering agency in such manner as is likely to ensure that it will be financially viable for the purpose of achieving the aims and objectives set out in its statement of purpose.<sup>9</sup>

Inspectors are only expected to undertake a lay person's assessment of the financial information. Where, during the course of a routine inspection, the inspector has concerns about the financial viability of a provider; due for example to lack of payments to foster carers, s/he should follow the guidance set out in Annex K of the *Social Care Registration Handbook*.<sup>10</sup> Paragraph 42 of Annex K applies where an organisation is already registered.

The financial information Ofsted can request ranges from professionally produced business plans to a collection of accounts and balance sheets.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Regulation 37(1) of The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.

<sup>10</sup> *Social care registration handbook* (110171), Ofsted, 2012; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/110171](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/110171).

<sup>11</sup> Regulation 37(3) of The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.