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Guidance

Assurance visits: children's homes

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Contents

Introduction
Guiding principles
The legal context
Length of visit
Timeframe
The focus of assurance visits
What happens during an assurance visit
Serious and widespread concerns: next steps
Post-visit surveys
Further guidance

Print this page

Introduction

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. We have continued our regulatory work to help maintain social care provision for the most vulnerable children. This includes:

- reviewing notifications from providers and other information we receive
- progressing applications for registration, variation and voluntary cancellation
- carrying out off-site activity, including risk assessments
- taking enforcement action, such as restriction of accommodation, suspension or cancellation
- carrying out urgent visits when we have serious concerns about children

As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are carrying out assurance visits to as many settings that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) as possible during the current inspection year (which ends on 31 March 2021).

We will prioritise visits based on the most recent inspection judgements, other information we hold about the provider, the amount of time since the last inspection and whether the provider is newly registered and therefore has not yet been inspected.

This guidance is applicable from 1 September 2020.

Guiding principles

Inspectors will be sensitive to the challenges presented by COVID-19; we will always take that context into account.

We will prioritise the safety and welfare of everyone involved in the visits, including children, carers, staff and inspectors; we will follow the most up-to-date guidance from Public Health England.

We continue to be guided by existing principles for inspection as set out in the SCCIF.

The legal context

Under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, Ofsted carries out its work in ways that encourage the services it inspects and/or regulates to:

- improve
- be user-focused
- be efficient and effective in the use of resources

Section 5 of the Care Standards Act 2000 provides that Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is the registration authority for children's homes and other establishments and agencies to which Part 2 of that Act applies.

The Care Standards Act 2000 sets out our powers to register, inspect and where necessary enforce compliance with the Act and the relevant regulations.

Further information about the legal context of our inspection and regulatory activity can be found in the relevant section of the SCCIF.

Length of visit

The usual length of an assurance visit is 2 days for one inspector. This includes all off-site and on-site activity. The inspector has a further day to draft the report. A regional inspection manager (RIM) may agree that the length of the visit should be reduced for assurance visits to small children's homes or increased for visits to larger homes.

Timeframe

The usual timeframe from the announcement of the visit to publication:

Day	What happens
Day 1	Visit announced and is 'live' immediately
Day 2	Visit completed and verbal feedback given
Day 3	Draft report completed and submitted for quality assurance
Day 4 onwards	Report sent to the registered provider for any comments within 18 working days of the end of the visit
	Provider returns the report within 5 working days with any comments
	Ofsted sends the final report to the provider within 30 working days of the end of the visit
	Provider may submit a formal complaint within 5 working days of the issue of the final report
	The final report is published on the Ofsted reports website within 38 working days of the end of the visit

The focus of assurance visits

Inspectors will use the following descriptors as the benchmarks against which to evaluate performance. Our findings, however, are not derived from a checklist. Some criteria will have less relevance than others in some settings because of the nature of the setting and the needs of the children and young people.

Inspectors will look for evidence of the following:

Children are well cared for

- Children have trusted and secure relationships with staff.
- Children are supported to keep in touch with family, friends and other people who are important to them.
- Children's views are understood and taken into account and their rights and entitlements are met.
- Children's social, physical, emotional and mental health needs are well understood and effectively promoted.

- Children's educational needs are identified and effectively promoted.
- Children have access to specialist help according to their individual needs.

Children are safe

- Risks are identified, understood and managed effectively.
- Staff are well prepared and supported to respond appropriately to children who may go missing or may be at risk of harm.
- Staff are well prepared and supported to manage challenging situations and behaviour effectively.
- Clear and consistent boundaries contribute to a feeling of well-being and security for children and young people.
- Staff understand the potential indicators and impact of abuse and neglect, and respond appropriately.

Leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership

- Managers and staff place the well-being of individual children at the centre of their practice, however complex their needs may be.
- Decisions to divert from usual practice during the COVID-19 outbreak are made in the best interests of individual children and are appropriately overseen by senior leaders and managers; the 'flexibilities' permitted by the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 or by any subsequent changes to regulations have only been used when absolutely necessary, and the rationale for these decisions is recorded effectively.
- Plans for children are reviewed effectively and meet their individual needs; plans as restrictions change are coherent and effective.
- Leaders and managers actively use the findings from internal and external monitoring to improve the experiences of children.
- Positive partnerships are in place, for example with police, placing local authorities and schools.
- Robust action is taken to address complaints or issues of concern.
- The staff team works collaboratively to provide consistency and stability for children.
- Staff and managers receive strong, individualised support, including effective training and supervision.
- Leaders and managers ensure that there are sufficient staff to meet children's individual needs.
- Leaders and managers have responded effectively to the requirements and recommendations made at the home's last inspection.
- The home is effectively and efficiently managed by a permanent, suitably experienced and qualified registered manager. Urgent action is taken to address any vacancy of the registered manager post.

What happens during an assurance visit

The start of the visit

The inspector contacts the provider at approximately 9am on day 1 to announce the beginning of the assurance visit. The visit is 'live' from the point of this call.

The inspector will always speak to the registered manager (or, if they are unavailable, the responsible individual) at the beginning of the visit to:

- outline the plan for the visit
- arrange to interview the registered manager (or their deputy, if they are unavailable) during the visit
- provide the opportunity to share any current information or personal issues relating to any of the children or staff that the inspector needs to be aware of during the inspection – in particular, the inspector should find out whether any staff or children have been diagnosed with, or have symptoms of, COVID-19
- ensure that Ofsted holds the correct details on the inspection database (as required by regulations), including email address and contact telephone numbers for the manager, registered provider and/or responsible individual, any other partners, or directors or trustees
- arrange the approximate time when the inspector is likely to arrive on site and when verbal feedback will be given

The inspector will request a completed Annex A form to be shared by 2pm on the day of the announcement.

Following this call, the inspector will send the provider an email letter that confirms the practical arrangements for the visit and the information requirements.

There is likely to be a mixture of off-site and on-site activity. We expect that there will always be some on-site activity during visits to children's homes.

The timing and the proportion of off-site and on-site activity are determined by the developing lines of enquiry and by the information we already hold about the home, including:

- previous inspection report(s)
- completed questionnaires from children, parents, placing social workers and other stakeholders
- the statement of purpose and children's guide
- any concerns and complaints received
- notifications of serious events

In exceptional circumstances (for example, if we have serious concerns about the immediate safety of children), we will arrive on site to announce the beginning of the assurance visit.

Case sampling

Evaluating the experiences of children at the home is a core activity during the visit. This is largely based on evidence from case sampling. The detail of the inspector's activity will vary according to the lines of enquiry for each individual visit but is likely to include a combination of the following:

- listening and talking to children and young people
- listening and talking to managers and staff
- observing activities, including the interaction between staff and children
- gathering views of other professionals
- examining records, policies and procedures when this is a key line of enquiry; during the visit, inspectors will look at documents in order to follow a line of enquiry

The end of the visit

Feedback

At the end of the visit, the inspector will give verbal feedback of the main findings. This feedback will usually be given to the registered manager or responsible individual.

Reporting our findings

Assurance visits will lead to a concise narrative report, with no graded judgement.

Each report will clearly state whether inspectors identified any serious or widespread concerns as a result of practice that:

- places children at risk of inadequate protection or significant harm
- leads to children's welfare not being safeguarded and promoted

The report will clearly identify and describe any serious or widespread concerns.

It will make requirements and recommendations for improvement, as necessary.

The report will be published on Ofsted's reports website.

Summary report for children

Inspectors also complete a brief, child-friendly summary following every assurance visit to a children's home. If we know that children need an adapted form of summary, we will send the report to the provider with a request for the document to be adapted into a suitable format.

If we know that children use individual, alternative systems of communication to verbal communication, or that children have limited receptive and expressive language skills, we still provide a child-friendly summary. It can be short, include pictures and be set in simple, concrete sentences.

We anticipate that the children's home staff will translate the child-friendly summary, if necessary, for those children who speak English as an additional language and for those who use alternative systems of communication.

Serious and widespread concerns: next steps

Any serious or widespread concerns will lead to a post-visit debrief between the inspector and their manager as soon as possible, and then a case review. The timing of the case review should be proportionate to the risk and certainly no later than 5 working days following the visit.

The inspector must alert the placing authority for any child currently placed in the home to the concerns that have been identified. The inspector must also notify the local authority where the home is based. The inspector sends an email to the directors of children's services in the relevant local authorities by the end of the next working day following the visit. The inspector follows this email up with a telephone call to ensure receipt. The inspector should also ensure that the email to local authorities is forwarded to the provider.

The post-visit debrief should consider the evidence and consider a recommendation for further action to take to the case review. The recommendation of further action should address the scheduling of future inspections/visits and/or enforcement action.

The social care compliance handbook has detailed information about the enforcement options available and the arrangements for following up enforcement activity.

The case review considers the recommended future action and allows the manager to decide which action to take.

If concerns are serious, we are likely to return to carry out a monitoring visit within 6 to 8 weeks to check that the manager and responsible person have taken sufficient steps to safeguard and protect the welfare of children. All monitoring visits result in a published report.

Post-visit surveys

Following visits, we will ask providers for feedback about the process through a survey. We use the feedback we receive to review and make improvements to how we work.

Further guidance

- Deferring inspections
- Incomplete visits
- Conduct during visits
- Ofsted's complaints procedure
- Use of personal data

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