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Guidance

Social care common inspection framework (SCCIF): voluntary adoption agencies for April 2022

Updated 11 March 2022

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This guidance applies from 1 April 2022. See [guidance on inspections carried out until 31 March 2022](#).

Introduction

The social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) applies to inspections of:

- children's homes
- secure children's homes
- independent fostering agencies
- boarding schools and residential special schools

[Making requirements and recommendations](#)

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- voluntary adoption agencies
- adoption support agencies
- residential family centres
- residential holiday schemes for disabled children
- residential provision in further education colleges

The SCCIF means that:

- we apply the same judgement structure across the range of settings listed above
- the experiences and progress of children and other service users, wherever they live or receive help, are central to inspections
- there are key areas of evidence that we usually report on at each inspection

The SCCIF is not a 'one-size-fits-all' framework. Where necessary, the SCCIF reflects and addresses the unique and distinct aspects of each type of setting. However, the evaluation criteria we use to make judgements and the accompanying guidance are, wherever possible, consistent across settings.

The inspection principles

[Ofsted's corporate strategy](#) outlines how we will carry out inspection and regulation that are:

- intelligent
- responsible
- focused

Our approach is further underpinned by the following 3 principles that apply to all social care inspections.

To focus on the things that matter most to children's lives

We have reached a general consensus with the main social care stakeholders that social care inspections should focus on the experiences and progress of children. We regularly ask children, and the adults who look after them, what matters most about children's experiences and progress.

Using this to guide us, we focus the criteria for our judgements on the difference that providers are making to children's lives. Adults can only support children well if they're given the time, resources and information they need to do this, so we also take account of the quality of the support that the adults who care for children receive.

To be consistent in our expectations of providers

It's important that professionals and members of the public can compare services that do similar things. We make this possible by being consistent in what we expect from providers. We use the same judgement structure and the same evaluation criteria, wherever possible, irrespective of where children live or receive help.

Our inspection methods and published guidance only differ when there is a good reason. This includes taking a similar approach to deciding on the frequency of

inspections.

To prioritise our work where improvement is needed most

We are committed to inspecting in a way that focuses our resources where they are needed most. If leaders and managers have shown they can consistently deliver services for children well, we may decide to return less often or do a more proportionate inspection.

However, we always take into account the risk to children of not inspecting as frequently. We use a broad range of information to tell us whether standards are slipping. We are always able to go back to good and outstanding providers more quickly if we have concerns.

The focus of inspections

The SCCIF has a consistent and clear focus on evaluating the impact of care and support on the experiences and progress of children, largely through case tracking and sampling. This means that:

- inspectors spend less time looking at policies and procedures and more time looking at the impact of services on children's lives
- we give the minimum notice of inspection, so that we can see settings as they are on a day-to-day basis, and so that the time providers may spend preparing for inspection is reduced as much as possible; we will be reviewing whether to reduce the notice period for settings that still have relatively lengthy notice arrangements
- we have set out as clearly as possible the details of the information required by inspectors to assist their inspection; this will enable providers to produce their best evidence whenever we give notice of inspection

How inspectors make judgements under the SCCIF

Judgement structure

Our judgement structure stems from our first principle of inspection – to focus on the things that matter most to children's lives – and places the progress and experiences of children and other people who use children's services at the core of inspections.

All SCCIF inspections follow the 4-point scale (outstanding, good, requires improvement to be good and inadequate) to make judgements on the overall experiences and progress of children, taking into account:

- how well children are helped and protected
- the effectiveness of leaders and managers

Inspections of adoption support agencies, voluntary adoption agencies and residential family centres also look at, as appropriate, the experiences of adult

service users.

The judgement about how well children are helped and protected is a limiting judgement. This means that, if inspectors judge this area to be inadequate, then the 'overall experiences and progress' judgement will always be inadequate.

The judgement of the impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers is a graded judgement. If inspectors judge this area to be inadequate, this is likely to lead to a judgement of inadequate, and certainly no more than requires improvement to be good, for 'overall experiences and progress'.

Inspectors will make the limiting and graded judgements first so that they can take these into account for the 'overall progress and experiences' judgement.

How inspectors use the evaluation criteria

Inspectors will use the descriptions of what good looks like as the benchmarks against which to grade and judge performance. The judgement, however, is not derived from a checklist. It is a professional evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of the care and support provided on the experiences and progress of children. Failure to meet all of the criteria for 'good' will not automatically lead to a judgement of 'requires improvement to be good'.

Some criteria will have less relevance than others in some settings because of the nature of the setting and the needs of the children.

Even when all the criteria are relevant, there is always a degree of professional judgement in weighing and balancing evidence against the evaluation criteria.

The inspector judges a setting to be good if they conclude that the evidence sits most appropriately with this finding. We call this the 'best fit'.

The evaluation criteria for SCCIF inspections are broadly consistent across different types of setting but, when necessary, they have been adapted to reflect the varying and unique nature of each type of provision.

Required evidence

Inspectors look at several areas of required evidence for each judgement. Some areas are common to all SCCIF inspections, but others are specific to the specific type of provision. The areas of required evidence are set out in the bullet points at the beginning of the evaluation criteria for each judgement.

Evaluation criteria

Inspectors use the following criteria to make judgements, including benchmarks of what good looks like.

The overall experiences and progress of service users

Areas of required evidence are:

- the quality of individualised care and support provided and the influence and impact of the agency on the progress and experiences of children
- the quality of relationships between professionals and prospective adopters and children
- how well prospective adopters are prepared and supported to promote the progress children make in relation to their health, education, and emotional, social and psychological well-being
- how well children's views are understood and taken into account and how their rights and entitlements are met
- how well prospective adopters are welcomed, prepared and assessed
- the quality and impact of adoption support, if provided

Good

The experiences and progress of service users are likely to be judged good if there is evidence of the following:

Children are enabled to build trusted and secure relationships with their adopters. Children are able to develop an appropriate sense of permanence and belonging in safe, stable and secure adoptive placements. They make progress and have a range of positive experiences.

Children, including those who communicate non-verbally, are supported to actively participate in decisions about their lives. They are sensitively helped to understand where it may not be possible to act on their wishes and why other action is taken that is in their best interests.

Children, prospective adopters, adopters and other service users know how to complain. The agency's complaints policy is easy to understand, accessible and child-focused. Children, prospective adopters, adopters and other service users understand what has happened as a result of their complaint. Their complaints are treated seriously and responded to clearly. Urgent action is taken and practice and/or services improve accordingly.

Children attend school or other educational provision. They are learning and making good progress from their starting points. Adopters and staff are ambitious for children and support children to attend and do well in their education. There is effective liaison with schools and where appropriate, the virtual school headteacher.

Children have access to a range of social, educational and recreational opportunities, including activities in the local community, where appropriate. They are able to participate in after-school activities or community-based activities and school trips and holidays. They are supported to engage in faith-based activities if they wish.

Children are supported to develop their independence while protecting themselves from being in unsafe situations or with unsafe people. The agency challenges the local authority when it has concerns about the future plans for children.

Children are in good health or are being helped to improve their health or to manage lifelong conditions. Children's health needs are identified (including their mental and sexual health needs, as appropriate). They have access to local health services when they need them.

Specialist help is made available according to the individual needs of children, including those who live away from their 'home' authority. The help is available as soon as it is needed, at the intensity required and for as long as it is required. Where specialist services from elsewhere are not available, or children are waiting for a long time for help, the agency is proactive in challenging and escalating concerns with the placing authority and/or other partners.

Any specific type or model of support delivered or commissioned by the agency is provided by staff who are suitably trained, experienced, qualified and supervised. The benefits of this to children and adult service users are clearly evident. The support is reviewed regularly.

Children are introduced to their prospective adopters sensitively and with careful and considered planning that promotes attachment. When endings are unplanned, then the welfare and well-being of children remain paramount and agency staff act at all times with this in mind.

Children and adult service users develop skills and strategies to manage their own conflicts and difficult feelings through developing positive relationships with adopters and staff. There are clear, consistent and appropriate boundaries for children.

Children, prospective adopters, adopters and other service users are treated with dignity and respect. They experience help and assessment that are sensitive and responsive to their identity and family history including age, disability, faith or belief, sex, gender identity, language, race and sexual orientation. The agency helps prospective adopters and adopters to support children to develop a positive self-view and to increase their ability to form and sustain attachments and build emotional resilience and a sense of their own identity. It also helps children to overcome any previous experiences of

neglect and trauma.

Children have appropriate, carefully assessed, supported contact (direct and/or indirect) with their birth relatives, including their brothers and sisters, and other people who are important to them, such as previous carers, where this is in their best interests.

People contacting the agency who are considering adoption feel highly valued and welcomed by the agency. They are sent clear and comprehensive written information and are offered an interview (which may be by telephone) or invited to an information event within set timescales.

Preparation, assessment and support of prospective adopters are effective. This enables them to consider a wide range of children, to manage the tasks of adoption and to help children to recover from the impact of their early life experience of loss and trauma.

Assessments that identify adopters as suitable for a child are informed by a clear understanding of that child's needs and of the skills necessary to help and support them. The agency works well with local authorities to ensure that full information is always shared with adopters prior to a placement so that appropriate care can be provided. If information is not shared, the agency can provide evidence that it has pursued it. Careful matching contributes to the stability of placements.

Prospective adopters are subject to an agency decision on suitability within the timescale set out in the regulations, unless the delay is instigated by the adopters or is beyond the control of the agency. They are referred to the adoption register within 3 months of approval unless they are already linked with a child.

Adoption support, including intermediary and birth records counselling and services for birth families and adopters' own children is sensitive to their individual circumstances and meets their needs, is well organised and accessible, and has a positive impact on their lives. Adopted adults and birth relatives are appropriately supported to understand their experiences.

Requires improvement to be good

The experiences and progress of service users are likely to be judged requires improvement to be good if there is evidence of the following:

The agency is not yet delivering good care and support for children and adults. The weaknesses identified need to be addressed to fully support children and adult service users' progress and experiences and to mitigate risk in the medium and long term. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate

The experiences and progress of service users are likely to be judged inadequate if there is evidence of the following:

There are serious or widespread failures that mean children and adults are not protected or that result in children's and adult's welfare not being promoted or safeguarded or that mean their care, support and experiences are poor and they are not making progress.

Outstanding

The experiences and progress of service users are likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a good judgement, there is evidence of the following.

Professional practice consistently exceeds the standard of good and results in sustained improvement to the lives of children and adult service users, even where they have complex or challenging needs. There are examples of excellent practice that are worthy of wider dissemination.

There is significant evidence of change and improvement for children and adult service users because of the agency's practice. The progress of children and adult service users is exceptional, taking into account their starting points. The care and support received enhances their life chances. Staff are able to evidence the sustained benefit they have had in making a difference to the lives of children with the most complex needs.

Research-informed practice, some of which may be innovative, continues to develop from a strong and confident base, making an exceptional difference to the lives and experiences of children and adult service users.

How well children and adults are helped and protected

Areas of required evidence are:

- how well prospective adopters are prepared and supported to understand the potential impact of abuse and neglect
- how well adopters are prepared and supported to respond to children who may go missing or may be at risk of harm, including from exploitation, neglect, abuse, self-harm, bullying and radicalisation
- whether safeguarding arrangements to protect children meet all statutory and other government requirements, promote their welfare and prevent radicalisation and extremism

Good

The help and protection offered to children and adults are likely to be judged good if there is evidence of the following:

Children feel protected and are protected from harm, including neglect, abuse, sexual exploitation, accidents, bullying and radicalisation. There is a strong and proactive response from all those working with children that reduces actual harm or risk of harm to them, including from self-harm. Preparation of adopters explains the potential impact of abuse and neglect on the behaviour and needs of children and helps prepare them for the developing needs of any children placed.

Children and adults who use the service report that staff listen to them, take their concerns seriously and respond appropriately.

Adopters, and prospective adopters, are helped to understand the risks associated with children offending, misusing drugs or alcohol, self-harming, going missing, being affiliated with gangs or being sexually exploited. Individual up-to-date risk assessments address effectively any known vulnerabilities for each child and set out what action should be taken to address the risks. There are plans and help in place that are reducing harm or risk of harm and there is evidence that these risks are being minimised.

Adopters and prospective adopters are helped to protect children and help them to keep themselves safe from bullying, homophobic behaviour, racism, sexism, radicalisation and other forms of discrimination. Any discriminatory behaviours are challenged by agency staff. Help and support are given to adopters and children about how to treat others with respect.

Adopters and prospective adopters are helped to establish clear boundaries about what is safe and acceptable and to understand the triggers for children's behaviour.

Adopters and prospective adopters are helped to understand the risks that

use of the internet may pose for children, such as bullying, sexual exploitation and radicalisation. They are helped to develop effective methods to keep children safe and to support them in learning how to keep themselves safe.

Careful recruitment and regular monitoring of staff and panel members prevent unsuitable people from being recruited and having the opportunity to harm children or to place them at risk. The relevant authorities are informed of any concerns about inappropriate adults.

Staff and adopters are clear about, and follow, procedures for responding to concerns about the safety of a child. Any child protection concerns are immediately shared with the placing and/or host local authority as required and a record of that referral is retained.

There is evidence that staff follow up the outcome of the referral quickly and that appropriate action has been taken to protect the child from further harm. Where the agency is not satisfied with the response from either the local authority where the adoptive family lives or the placing authority for the child's pre-adoption order, they escalate their concerns by writing to the director of children's services (DCS) in the local authority placing the child.

Allegations or suspicion of harm, including those relating to historic abuse, are shared with the appropriate agencies and are handled fairly, quickly and in accordance with statutory guidance. Children and vulnerable adults are supported and protected. Support is given both to the person making the allegation and the person who is the subject of the allegation.

The agency has effective links with local authorities, designated officers and other safeguarding agencies. There is good communication about safeguarding issues, such as any allegations against staff and concerns relating to historical abuse. The agency has good relationships with relevant local voluntary sector organisations that may be able to offer specialist support to children in keeping themselves safe.

Recruitment, assessment and support of adopters have a very strong focus on child protection, including help to ensure that children are safe and feel safe. Preparation of adopters explains the potential impact of abuse and neglect on the behaviour and needs of children and helps prepare them for the current and changing needs of any children placed.

Ongoing appropriate adoption support ensures that adopters continue to understand the potential impact of abuse and neglect on their adopted child's behaviour as they grow older and equips them to provide stable and secure

attachments.

Requires improvement to be good

The help and protection offered to children and adult service users are likely to be judged requires improvement to be good if there is evidence of the following:

Children and adults are not yet receiving good help and protection, but there are no serious failures that leave them either being harmed or at risk of harm.

Inadequate

The help and protection offered to children and adults are likely to be inadequate if there is evidence of the following:

There are serious and/or widespread failures that leave children and adults being harmed, at risk of harm or with their welfare not being safeguarded.

Outstanding

The help and protection offered to children and adults are likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to the requirements of good, there is evidence of the following:

The agency consistently exceeds the requirements of a good judgement for the help and protection of children and adults. Professional practice results in sustained improvement to the lives of children and adults.

Proactive and creative safeguarding practice means that all children and adults, including the most vulnerable, have a strong sense of safety and well-being as a result of the support received.

Research-informed practice, some of which may be innovative, continues to develop from a strong and confident base, making an exceptional difference to the lives and experiences of children and adults receiving support.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Areas of required evidence are:

- whether leaders and managers show an ambitious vision, have high expectations for what all children can achieve and ensure high standards of work with children, prospective adopters, adopters and birth families

- how well leaders and managers prioritise the needs of children
- the extent to which prospective adopters are prepared to support children in continually making progress from their starting points across all aspects of their development
- whether leaders and managers provide the right supportive environment for staff through effective supervision and appraisal and high-quality induction and training programmes, tailored to the specific needs of the children
- how well leaders and managers know and understand the agency's strengths and weaknesses, prevent shortfalls and take decisive and effective action
- whether the agency is achieving its stated aims and objectives
- the quality of professional relationships to ensure the best possible all-round support to children in all areas of their development
- whether leaders and managers actively challenge when the responses from other services are not effective
- the extent to which leaders and managers actively promote tolerance, equality and diversity

Good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers is likely to be judged good if there is evidence of the following:

The agency is managed effectively and efficiently by a permanent, suitably experienced and qualified adoption agency manager. Urgent action is taken to address any vacancy of any manager post.

The agency is properly staffed and resourced to meet the needs of the children, prospective adopters and adopters. The staff team is suitably vetted, qualified and able to deliver high-quality services to children, adopters and other service users. Arrangements for staff recruitment and appraisals are robust.

Leaders and managers actively and regularly monitor the quality of the assessment, matching and support provided. They use learning from practice and feedback to improve the experiences of children, adopters, and other service users. This includes, for example, direct testimony from children, parents, adopters and other professionals.

The agency learns from complaints, staff feedback, placement successes and breakdowns, and any serious events. It identifies strengths and areas for improvement and implement development plans that continually improve the experiences of those receiving adoption support. Proper investigations are carried out. Where appropriate, placing and host authorities are engaged as necessary.

Effective action has been taken to address all requirements and recommendations from previous inspections. The agency's responses to recommendations from the Independent Review Mechanism are timely and appropriate.

Leaders and managers take steps to ensure that the work with individual children, adopters and those receiving adoption support comprehensively addresses their needs. Work to support looked-after children takes into account the local authority care plan for each child.

Leaders and staff work proactively and positively with commissioners, partner organisations and other adoption agencies. They build effective working relationships with the courts, social workers from placing authorities and with the local authority where adoptive families live to secure positive outcomes for children.

Where children are not settling into their adoptive placements, leaders and managers take steps to ensure that the plan is reviewed with adopters and the placing authority to consider the best steps to take next. They challenge effectively and take action when they are concerned about children's welfare.

Leaders and managers monitor the progress that individual children placed for adoption make and can demonstrate the positive impact that the adoption agency has had on individual children's progress and life chances.

Managers and staff receive regular and effective supervision that is focused on the experiences of children and adults. Supervision is recorded.

Staff and leaders receive effective support and challenge, including through team and management meetings, to ensure that the professional development of staff and leaders results in the right environment for good practice to thrive.

Training, development and induction activities are effective and are focused on ensuring that staff and carers meet the specific needs of children and other service users. The activities are evaluated to ensure that they lead to effective practice. Leaders, managers and staff are up to date with current practice in their specialist area.

Staff work collaboratively to provide consistency and stability. There are clear responsibilities and accountabilities and staff have a sense of shared ownership about its practice. Staff report that they are well led and managed and there is other evidence to support this.

Leaders and managers make child-centred decisions about assessment, matching and the help provided. They prioritise the safety and stability of children's lives.

The statement of purpose and children's guide, which are kept under review, clearly set out the ethos and objectives of the agency.

The registered provider is financially viable and can deliver high-quality, stable care and support to children and other service users.

Case records reflect the work that is carried out and clearly relate to the experiences of children and other service users. The style and clarity of records increase the understanding that children and adults have about their histories, background and experiences. The records are available to children and other service users who are able to see or contribute to them as they wish, with appropriate support.

All significant events are notified by the registered person to the appropriate authorities. Necessary action is taken following the incident to ensure that the child's needs are met and that they are safe and protected.

The culture of the agency is characterised by high expectations and aspirations for all children. The ethos and objectives of the agency are demonstrated in practice.

Leaders and managers regularly review and act on any known risks to children and vulnerable adults, taking advice and guidance from local partners and agencies.

The agency demonstrates a sense of urgency and care in all its work, which contributes to children being able to live at the earliest opportunity with an adoptive family that is able to meet their needs.

The agency recruits a range of adopters, in line with its statement of purpose, who can meet the diverse needs of children who require adoption. Managers review and act on the trends and patterns in the recruitment of adopters.

The adoption panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements through active engagement with the adoption agency. It carries out a rigorous quality assurance function and promotes thorough assessments, support and training for prospective adopters and adopters. The panel members are recruited from a range of diverse backgrounds. They have the necessary knowledge and expertise to support the agency to make effective child-centred decisions about the cases before them.

Requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers is likely to be judged requires improvement to be good if there is evidence of the following:

The characteristics of good leadership and management are not in place. Where there are weaknesses in practice, leaders and managers have identified the issues. They have plans in place to address them or they are less serious and there is capacity to take the necessary action.

Inadequate

The effectiveness of leaders and managers will be judged inadequate if there is evidence of the following:

The experiences, progress or protection of children are inadequate and leaders and managers do not know the strengths and weaknesses of the agency. They have been ineffective in prioritising, challenging and making improvements.

The agency fails to work effectively in partnership with others in the best interests of children and adults.

Outstanding

The effectiveness of leaders and managers is likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a good judgement, there is evidence of the following:

Leaders and managers are inspirational, confident and ambitious for children and adult service users.

Leaders and managers create a culture of high aspiration and positivity and have high expectations of their staff.

Leaders and managers lead by example, innovate and generate creative ideas to sustain the highest quality care for children.

Leaders and managers know their strengths and weaknesses well and can provide evidence of improvement over a sustained period.

Leaders and managers develop and maintain professional relationships between the agency and partner agencies to ensure the best possible care, experiences and futures for children and adults.

Legal context

Under the [Education and Inspections Act 2006](#), Ofsted carries out its work in ways that encourage the services it inspects and regulates to:

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

Section 5(1A) of the [Care Standards Act 2000](#) provides that Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) is the registration authority for voluntary adoption agencies and other establishments and agencies to which Part 2 of that Act applies.

The Care Standards Act 2000 and the [Adoption and Children Act 2002](#) set out Ofsted's powers to regulate, inspect and enforce compliance with the statutory requirements and relevant regulations. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 defines a voluntary adoption agency (section 1).

When inspecting voluntary adoption agencies, Ofsted considers the knowledge and understanding gained from previous inspections, and the:

- [Care Standards Act 2000](#)
- [Adoption and Children Act 2002](#)
- relevant regulations and [adoption national minimum standards](#)
- [adoption statutory guidance](#)
- [Adoption and Care Planning \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2018](#)

How inspectors use national minimum standards

Voluntary adoption agencies must meet the requirements of the regulations. If they do not, inspectors identify clearly what they must do by setting out requirements or compliance or enforcement action.

The Department for Education (DfE) has published [national minimum standards \(NMS\)](#). If providers do not meet these, it may indicate a failure to meet the

regulations.

Inspectors consider:

- the impact on children and other service users
- how it should influence the judgements and outcome of the inspection, including any enforcement action

A failure to meet a regulation does not automatically lead to a requires improvement to be good judgement.

Requirements may still be made when providers are judged to be good.

We use recommendations to indicate where practice can improve. These are always related to the relevant NMS and regulations.

Notice of inspection

Voluntary adoption agencies are notified of an inspection 2 working days before the inspection. Notice will usually be given on a Thursday before the fieldwork starts on the next Monday morning.

We email the [letter of notice](#) to the agency, usually before by 9am. The lead inspector will follow up the next morning with a telephone call to the agency. The letter sets out practical arrangements for the inspection, including the information requirements. The inspector's follow-up telephone call (and other calls between the agency and inspector that may be necessary during the period of notice) will provide the opportunity to discuss further the plans for the inspection, including the inspection timetable.

We ask agencies to give the inspector access to premises, records and space for the inspector to work. Inspectors may need some help to navigate the system if records are electronic. Agencies do not need to provide files in hard copy unless these are already used by the service, although the inspector may ask for specific reports or documents to be printed.

Request for information from agencies

When notification of an inspection is given, inspectors request the following information from the agency:

- details of meetings that will take place during the inspection that the inspector may be able to attend
- a completed [Adoption Annex A](#) to include information about the agency's current approved adopters and applicants, those being assessed and those who have applied, so that the inspector can choose which records and cases to track and sample
- the last 3 sets of adoption panel minutes

The agency may choose to update any data previously given to Ofsted.

This information is requested under [section 31 of the Care Standards Act 2000](#). The information supports the inspection process and informs the inspection findings. It may generate supplementary lines of enquiry. All information should be returned to the inspector by 4pm on the day the inspection is announced.

Agencies can download a copy of [Adoption Annex A](#), keep it updated in preparation for their inspection and send it electronically to the inspector during the inspection. Some of the information is stored by Ofsted for data analysis purposes. No personal data is stored.

The inspector will also provide a letter, which is for the provider/manager to email/send to all staff who work at the agency. It provides contact details of the inspector(s) should staff wish to contact them during the inspection.

Scheduling and the inspection team

Frequency of inspection

We inspect voluntary adoption agencies at least once in every 3-year inspection cycle as set out in ([Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills \(Fees and Frequency of Inspections\) \(Children's Homes etc.\) Regulations 2015 \(SI 2015/551\)](#)).

We operate a rolling 3-year programme of inspection for each voluntary adoption agency. This means that, rather than a static 3-year cycle where all agencies are inspected within each 3-year window, each agency will usually be inspected in the 3-year period following its individual inspection. The 3-year period begins on the 1 April in the year following its individual inspection. For example, for agencies inspected between April 2021 and March 2022, a new 3-year cycle begins on 1 April 2022.

Since April 2018, all voluntary adoption agencies receive 1 inspection within the cycle and 1 overall judgement irrespective of the number of premises they use.

We usually reinspect agencies that are inadequate within 6 to 12 months of their previous inspection. We usually return to inspect agencies that require improvement within 12 to 18 months.

We normally inspect all voluntary adoption agencies for the first time between 7 and 12 months from the date of registration, unless there are no children placed by the agency.

Scheduling

The scheduling of inspections takes account of:

- legal requirements
- previous inspection findings
- complaints and concerns about the service
- questionnaire responses from children, foster carers, social workers and other stakeholders notifications
- reports submitted under NMS 25
- monitoring reports given to Ofsted by voluntary adoption agencies under regulation 24 of the [Adoption Support Agencies \(England\) and Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2005](#)

If possible, the same inspectors will not inspect an agency for more than 3 consecutive inspection cycles. However, in certain instances, for example, if Ofsted is taking enforcement action, it may be important for continuity purposes to retain the

same inspectors until the enforcement action has been finished.

Length of inspection

For a full inspection of a voluntary adoption agency, one inspector usually spends 5 days on site.

The inspector and the regulatory inspection manager (RIM) should decide how best to allocate resources for inspections. If it is necessary, the RIM should agree to either the inspector spending additional days on site or additional inspectors being deployed on the inspection.

Inspectors should determine whether:

- the amount of time on site should be reduced for inspections of small voluntary adoption agencies
- additional resources, such as more inspectors or more time, or both, should be deployed for inspections of larger agencies, for agencies with a wide geographical spread or where there are specific issues, such as a serious incident, to consider

Deferrals

We will grant deferrals in line with our [deferral policy](#).

Timeframe

Day	Inspection activity
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1	Preparation
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2	Site visit
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3	Site visit
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4	Site visit
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5	Site visit
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6	Site visit and feedback
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7	Writing the report
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and

8

8 to	Inspection evidence and report submitted for quality assurance
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24	Draft report sent to the registered provider for any comments within a maximum of 18 working days from the end of the inspection
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29	Provider returns the draft report within 5 working days with any comments
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36	Final report sent to the registered provider within 30 working days of the end of the visit
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- 41 Provider may submit a formal complaint within 5 working days of the issue of the final report
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- 44 The final report is published on the [Ofsted reports website](#) within a maximum of 38 working days from the end of the inspection
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Preparing for an inspection

Analysis and planning

Inspectors are allocated 1 day to prepare for an inspection of voluntary adoption agencies. Lead inspectors are allocated 2 days to prepare for an inspection of agencies with additional premises. They should use this time to review the information held by Ofsted and to ensure that the fieldwork is properly focused and used to best effect in collecting first-hand evidence.

Inspectors will look at the information that Ofsted already holds about the agency, including:

- previous inspection reports
- completed questionnaires from adopters, children, birth parents, placing social workers and others
- information from the agency's own website
- the up-to-date statement of purpose and children's guide
- any concerns and complaints received
- regulatory notifications made to Ofsted
- any changes to registration, including change of manager or the responsible individual
- any enforcement activity that has happened within the last inspection year
- annual quality and data forms submitted to Ofsted by the agency
- data analysis by Ofsted

Some of this information is drawn together in the provider information portal and in the pre-inspection briefing.

In addition, the inspector takes account of relevant background and context information, such as the most recent inspection of the local authority where the agency is situated.

If we have received information that indicates potential non-compliance with regulatory requirements, we may use the information as a line of enquiry during the inspection. The inspector usually outlines the concern to the registered person(s) or person in charge of the adoption agency at the beginning of the inspection. There may be circumstances when it is not appropriate to share all the information about a concern: for example, when the allegation is about the registered person or person in charge themselves, or when sharing the information could compromise an investigation being carried out by another agency, such as the police.

The inspector carries out an analysis of the available evidence and information and must record their planning notes in the inspection database.

The plan for the inspection should identify

- lines of enquiry

- any areas of apparent weakness or significant strength
- areas where further evidence needs to be gathered

The focus of the inspection may change during its course as further evidence emerges.

Questionnaires

Each year, Ofsted uses [online questionnaires](#) to gather a range of views about different types of setting. Where relevant, this includes the views of:

- children
- parents and carers
- staff
- foster carers
- adopters
- adult service users
- other interested parties such as placing social workers and independent reviewing officers

We send links to the questionnaires annually to each provider by email and ask them to distribute those links on our behalf. The responses are submitted directly to Ofsted.

We share responses with the inspector for the service or setting and use them to inform the planning and scheduling of inspections.

Where there are no responses for a service or setting, this also forms a line of enquiry for the inspection.

Notifications and reports made under national minimum standard 25

Inspectors must regularly review notifications and reports under [NMS 25](#). Inspectors must focus on both the content and quality of these notifications and reports as part of their evaluation of how well the agency monitors its impact on the experiences of children and other service users.

Information from any of these sources may lead to:

- further activity, such as speaking to the responsible individual or other stakeholders
- inspections being rescheduled based on either identified concerns within reports and/or notifications or based on a failure to submit reports or notifications
- lines of enquiry for the next inspection

Any emerging lines of enquiry must be recorded in the inspection database and inform pre-inspection planning.

Notifications

The responsible individual must notify Ofsted without delay about specific events and incidents as set out in regulation 19(1) of [The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2003](#). Schedule 4 lists the events to be notified. Our [online forms](#) have further guidance on this.

Providers should always seek advice from their link inspector about individual cases if they are uncertain how to proceed.

If the inspector identifies issues that give them cause for concern about the welfare of children, they should ask for evidence that shows what has been done to help and protect the child.

If notifications are incomplete, the inspector should always contact the agency to ask for more information.

Whenever there are concerns about the safety or welfare of a child or adult, the inspector must contact the responsible individual so that Ofsted is fully aware of the actions being taken by the agency and other relevant parties, such as the host authority and police, to promote and safeguard the welfare of the service user.

Managers and staff should take into account the appropriate parts of the statutory guidance outlined in [Working together to safeguard children](#).

If the inspector has any concern about the practice of either the commissioning local authority (where relevant) or the host local authority, this is managed in line with [Ofsted's safeguarding policy](#).

The DCS must be notified immediately of the concerns so that they can review the situation. This information will also inform planning for any forthcoming local authority inspection.

Inspectors monitor closely whether Ofsted is informed of the outcome of any child protection enquiry in line with regulations and statutory guidance. If this has not been received promptly, the inspector should contact the agency. Inspectors must follow up any failure to notify Ofsted of the outcome.

Reports made under national minimum standard 25

NMS 25.6 states that the voluntary adoption agency trustees, board members or management committee members should:

- receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every 6 months
- monitor the management and outcomes of the services provided in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children a/or service users
- satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration

We ask for these reports to be submitted to Ofsted once a year based on data for the year 1 April to 31 March.

Agencies can submit reports by email to enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk. They must include Ofsted's unique reference number (URN) and the date on which the visit occurred.

The on-site inspection

Inspectors will prioritise carrying out inspections on site wherever possible.

Inspectors will plan for inspections to be on site. However, agencies' ways of working (for example, staff working from home and/or offices being temporarily closed) are likely to lead to some off-site inspection activity. This may include conversations with staff, children and adopters.

The timing and the proportion of off-site and on-site activity are determined by the agency's working arrangements and by the information we already hold about the agency. Whatever the working arrangements may be, inspectors will arrange face-to-face meetings when this is necessary to secure the best evidence.

The start of the inspection

At the start of all inspections, the inspector confirms their identity by producing their Ofsted inspector identification. They do not need to carry paper copies of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks.

The inspector will always meet with the responsible individual/person in charge at the beginning of the inspection to:

- outline the plan for the inspection
- arrange to interview the responsible individual during the course of the inspection, or a nominated senior member of staff if they are unavailable
- outline any lines of enquiry for the inspection
- provide the opportunity for the agency to share any current information or personal issues relating to any children, adult service users or staff members that the inspector needs to be aware of during the inspection
- ensure that Ofsted holds the correct details in the inspection database, including email addresses and contact telephone numbers for the manager, responsible individual, any other partners, or directors or trustees
- arrange the approximate time that verbal feedback at the end of the inspection will be given and who is to receive this; feedback is normally given to the responsible individual or senior member of staff present; additional senior staff linked to the agency may also attend at the discretion of the inspector if agreed in advance

If the inspection has been prompted by our receiving information about a concern or allegations, the inspector should explain to the registered manager or person in charge of the agency the nature of that information. This is so that the manager is fully aware of the concerns. This also provides an opportunity for the manager to provide additional information and for the inspector to be as open with them about the information as possible. If the information is from a whistle-blower or from someone who wishes to remain anonymous, then the inspector must take the utmost care to ensure that the person's identity is not revealed.

Case tracking and sampling

Evaluating the experiences and progress of children and adults is a core inspection activity. This is largely based on evidence from case tracking and sampling.

For tracked cases, inspectors take an in-depth look at the quality of the help, care and protection that individual children and other service users have experienced. For sampled cases, inspectors look at elements of practice within individual cases, usually to follow lines of enquiry.

We take into account individuals' starting points and circumstances during inspections. We recognise that even slight progress in a particular aspect of their lives may represent a significant improvement for some children and adults. We also recognise that for some service users, because of their experiences of trauma, abuse or neglect, progress is not always straightforward. Progress in one area may result in deterioration in another as they work through the impact of their past experiences.

Children and adults' overall experiences and progress are, in part, a result of how well they are helped and protected and the effectiveness of leaders and managers. Inspectors consider the 'help and protection' and 'leadership and management' judgements first so that they can take these into account when reaching the 'overall experiences and progress' judgement.

Inspectors track experiences and progress of at least 4 children and/or adults across the range of the voluntary adoption agency's work. This may not be possible where providers have worked with fewer than 4 service users, or agencies with additional premises.

Inspectors also sample elements of other cases to follow specific lines of enquiry.

The size of the agency and the nature of any line of enquiries determine how many cases are sampled.

Tracked and sampled cases are selected by the inspector from the completed Adoption Annex A provided.

When tracking and sampling cases, the inspector usually reviews:

- the preparation, training and support of adopters
- prospective adopters' reports, including those who withdrew from the process
- the approval processes for adopters and the records kept
- the effectiveness of matching children's needs with the capacity and skills of the adoptive family, taking into account the views of the adopters and the needs of the children
- information provided to adopters before placement
- panel minutes
- the impact of children's views and feedback on planning for their futures
- support assessments and plans
- adoption support records
- life story work and support for children who are being adopted
- disruption meeting minutes
- referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism
- complaints
- ongoing case recording

Case files (either electronic or paper-based) are usually discussed with the allocated social worker (unless on leave), using their knowledge of the case, file structure and recording systems. In the absence of the allocated worker, a suitable colleague will be asked to assist.

Case records are only one aspect of tracking children and adults' journeys. Inspectors increase their understanding of service users' experiences through evidence from other sources, such as by observing practice and discussions with individuals involved, including children and adopters where appropriate.

When inspectors speak with children during the inspection, it is usually with their adoptive family present and only with consent from the person with parental responsibility.

Inspectors examine, discuss and evaluate cases in line with the evaluation criteria. Inspectors look for evidence that the agency has had a positive impact on the experiences and progress of service users and that managers and staff know they are making a difference to the lives to children and adults.

The detail of activities carried out and discussions held varies depending on the lines of enquiry for each individual inspection.

Inspectors must record the initials of children, professionals or carers who have been tracked, sampled and/or interviewed as part of an inspection within the evidence base.

Listening and talking to children and adult service users

The views of children and adult service users provide important evidence of their experiences and progress.

Adult service users who inspectors may wish to speak will usually include:

- adult adoptees
- birth relatives
- adoptive families, at any stage of the process, including those not yet approved

Inspectors assess how well the agency consults with children and other service users. Children's views gathered by the agency are taken into account as part of the inspection evidence.

Inspectors always try to meet with children and other service users during the inspection. Inspectors may make alternative arrangements, such as telephone calls at a pre-arranged time. Sometimes, inspectors will spend time observing activities and situations where children are present rather than engaging in direct communication with them. This is to limit any stress caused to children. These approaches will be discussed throughout the inspection as necessary.

Many of the experiences of children and other service users take place after the normal school, college or work day and it is essential that inspectors are able to speak to them at this time.

Inspectors should involve service users in inspection activity where possible. Opportunities to gather the views and experiences of children and adults may include:

- meeting them during pre-arranged meetings, such as review meetings or placement agreement meetings
- speaking to them on the telephone or where they live
- attending service user groups that may run during the inspection

Communication methods

Inspectors should bear in mind the limits of verbal consultation with some children, particularly those who are disabled or have complex health care needs, and they should take this into account in their evaluation. In these cases, they would expect to see the agency using appropriate alternative means of gathering children's views and providing them with feedback about the impact of their consultation.

Inspectors must take into account the specific communication needs of individual children. For some children, the inspectors may request the assistance of staff, carers or an independent person who know and understand the child's preferred means of communication, particularly if this is unique to the child. It may also be appropriate for inspectors to spend time observing children and other service users and how they interact with carers and professionals and respond to their environment.

Inspectors can request the services of an interpreter to join the inspection. This is helpful when the children or adults are fluent in British Sign Language. Inspectors request this service through the inspection support team and give 2 weeks' notice where possible.

Children or adults, including those with limited or no verbal communication, may wish to share their views in a letter to the inspector.

Practice when gathering the views of children and adult service users

Inspectors demonstrate safe and sensitive practice by:

- telling staff and carers when and where conversations with children and adult service users are taking place and who is involved
- being sensitive to the fact that some service users, including children, may not want to be involved in the inspection
- explaining to children and adults that they will not include comments that will identify them in the inspection report or in feedback to staff without their permission
- ensuring that staff are aware of any arranged meetings between inspectors and service users, and that children or adult service users may leave the meeting at any time
- where appropriate, explaining to service users that information suggesting that they or another child or adult is at risk of harm will be passed by the inspector to an appropriate person who can take necessary action about that concern

Observing activities

Inspectors can use the agency's previously scheduled activities as opportunities for observing and following lines of enquiry. These activities could include:

- adoption panel meetings
- placement planning meetings
- support groups

Inspectors respect the privacy and confidentiality of personal information at all times. They always involve the agency in any decisions about service users' involvement in the inspection.

Inspectors will always try to strike a balance between the time taken to observe an activity and the significance of the likely evidence to be gained.

Gathering views of other professionals

Inspectors consult with professionals to inform the inspection findings. This is usually through a telephone call during the inspection and may not take place on site. These professionals may include:

- the chair of the adoption panel or the panel adviser and, if not available, independent members of the central list
- placing social workers
- the agency decision-maker
- independent reviewing officers
- foster carers who specialise in pre-adoption work

Inspectors ask agencies for the relevant contact details.

Inspectors should always take account of privacy and confidentiality when talking to stakeholders on the telephone during the inspection.

Discussions with managers and staff

Individual interviews are held with the agency's manager and, where relevant, other staff. The number of staff interviewed depends on the size of the adoption agency, but includes a sample of staff working at the agency at the time of inspection.

Where the manager is not available, the inspector usually asks to interview the responsible individual.

The inspector always asks to interview the responsible individual where:

- there is no manager in post
- there are concerns about the quality of care and support and/or the effectiveness of monitoring arrangements, or the quality of leadership and management of the scheme or
- evidence indicates that the agency is failing to protect children or
- there are concerns about staffing, the premises or resources to manage and run the provision

The interview with the manager usually covers:

- issues that have arisen from pre-inspection information and/or emerging lines of inquiry
- how the manager involves service users
- follow up on progress in response to previous requirements and recommendations
- the plans for future development of the voluntary adoption agency
- the arrangements for supervision received by the manager
- any further evidence the manager may wish to highlight with the inspector

During the inspection, the inspector shares emerging findings about the provision's important strengths and weaknesses with the provider so that they fully understand the issues.

The inspector usually meets with the manager at the end of day 1 to share emerging findings. The inspector normally sets out for the manager what they intend to consider later in the inspection. The manager then has the opportunity to prepare and direct inspectors to any specific information or evidence required.

Shortfalls that could have an immediate impact on the safety of staff or children are brought to the attention of manager as soon as the inspector has identified the problem.

Inspectors should be ready to alter interview arrangements if staff have to attend to the needs of children or other service users.

Assessing financial viability

The adoption regulations state that the: 'registered provider must carry on the 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' (regulation 20(1) of [The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2003](#)).

Inspectors are only expected to carry out a lay person's assessment of the financial information. If, during the course of a routine inspection, the inspector has concerns about the financial viability of a provider due to, for example, not enough staff to provide contracted support or not enough accommodation for storing secure

records, they should follow the guidance set out in the [social care registration handbook \(2015\)](#).

The financial information Ofsted can request ranges from professionally produced business plans to a collection of accounts and balance sheets (regulation 20(2) of [The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2003](#)).

Examining of records, policies and procedures

The voluntary adoption agency's statement of purpose and, where relevant, children's guide, should be available on its website and form part of the pre-inspection data. We should also hold copies in our database because agencies are required to submit these documents to Ofsted whenever they are changed.

Inspectors do not routinely examine all policies and procedures. Inspectors examine documents when they may inform a line of enquiry for that individual inspection.

Inspectors focus on the impact of documents such as risk assessments and how they work in practice, rather than the format. What matters is that they are fit for purpose and provide enough information to all relevant people so that they can provide care and support safely and appropriately.

Inspectors may ask to look at the personnel records of anyone working for the purposes of the agency, which can be maintained in checklist or spreadsheet format. The information available for inspection should reflect schedule 2 of [The Adoption Support Agencies \(England\) and Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2005 \(SI 2005/2750\)](#), and must include the reference number of the subject's DBS check.

If the agency uses the [DBS update service](#) to check the status of an individual's DBS certificate, the agency should be able to demonstrate how it manages and records details of any check it carries out. If any lines of enquiry require additional information, then the inspector may request that a small sample of full personnel records is made available at the inspection visit.

Where members of staff are subject to transfer of undertakings (protection of employment) (TUPE) arrangements, we recognise that the new employer is reliant on the previous employer for all recruitment records relating to those staff and in some instances may not be able to access all the information including documents required by the regulations. If this is the case, we still expect the new employer to hold enough relevant information to make sure staff are suitable, including DBS checks or vetting records. If there are any gaps in requirements, the new employer should have taken steps to assure themselves that the person is suitable to work in their role. This should include reference to employment records such as appraisals.

Finding evidence of possible offences

If, during the course of the inspection, the inspector thinks that an offence may have been committed, they should contact a social care compliance inspector or RIM immediately to discuss whether the inspection (or monitoring visit) should continue and to take advice.

If, during the course of the inspection, the inspector finds evidence of an unregistered children's home or any other unregistered provision being operated elsewhere, they should record the details, including the provider's name, the address and any other evidence that indicates there is an unregistered service operating. The

inspector should inform the provider/manager that they have recorded this information and will pass this on to their regional team to investigate.

The inspector should make it clear that any information they gather on unregistered provision being operated elsewhere will not form any part in determining the outcome of the inspection or inspection judgement. Further guidance is available in the [social care enforcement policy](#).

Implications of the Equality Act

The [Equality Act 2010](#) came into effect on 1 October 2010. The Act makes it unlawful for an employer to ask a potential employee questions about their health or disability before they are offered employment, whether on a conditional or unconditional basis.

Social care providers must comply with both the Equality Act and the remit-specific regulations that require them to employ people who are fit, both physically and mentally, for the work.

To comply with both laws, providers may give conditional offers of employment to potential employees after the recruitment process, subject to appropriate medical and health checks.

There are a number of exemptions to the provisions in the Act. If a provider believes that an exemption applies to its recruitment of staff, it should take its own legal advice on the matter.

Inspectors will assess whether providers have a rigorous recruitment and vetting process in place, including ensuring that their employees are mentally and physically fit before they begin work as part of their inspection.

How inspectors record the evidence

Inspectors must analyse the information they gather on inspection and use their professional judgement to assess the impact on the experiences and progress of children and other service users.

Inspectors' evidence should be clear, evaluative and sufficient to support the judgements.

The evidence should tell the story of the experiences and progress of children and other service users, as appropriate. Evidence should not include information that could identify individuals unless it is necessary to protect a child or to support further action. In these instances, inspectors can use individuals' initials.

Inspectors can record direct quotes from children, adult service users and other interested parties in evidence to support judgements.

The record should clearly indicate the source of the evidence (for example, whether the evidence is from observation, a written record or a face-to-face interview). If evidence comes from an interview, the record must indicate the time of the interview and the interviewee's job title or relationship to the child.

Throughout the inspection, inspectors maintain a record of their evidence. Electronic evidence is recorded within the inspection database. Summarised evidence must be sufficient to support the judgements and any recommendations or requirements. Inspectors must ensure that the provider understands the evidence that the

judgements are based on and any requirements that stem from the judgements.

After the summarised evidence has been placed in the inspection database, inspectors should not destroy any duplicate handwritten evidence until at least 10 days after the inspection. In some circumstances, inspectors will be required to keep any handwritten notes they have made during the inspection for longer. This may, for example, be necessary when legal action or a complaint about the judgement is being considered.

All handwritten evidence should be legible and dated. Handwritten evidence that has not been summarised forms part of the inspection evidence base and should therefore be scanned and added into the inspection database within 5 working days of the end of the on-site visit.

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

End of the inspection and feedback

The inspector will give verbal feedback of the main findings and provisional judgements. This feedback will usually be given to the responsible individual. Additional senior staff from the provider may also attend, if agreed in advance with the inspector. In some circumstances, an inspector may need extra time after the inspection fieldwork to take advice before giving feedback. The day of feedback is counted as the last day of the inspection.

The inspector should:

- cover the main findings of the inspection, including both strengths and weaknesses
- clearly communicate the likely judgements
- indicate likely recommendations, with clear reference to the relevant national minimum standard or quality standard (where relevant), providing a clear direction for improvement
- use the grade descriptors and the evidence to clearly indicate how the judgements have been reached
- confirm [when the draft report](#) will be sent to the manager for comments

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

Making requirements and recommendations

Requirements

Inspectors impose requirements when there has been a breach of a regulation.

When imposing a requirement, inspectors must ensure that there is enough evidence to support the breach and that they are able to show that this is having an impact, or is likely to have an impact, on children and adults' experiences and progress. They

must weigh up and balance evidence from more than one source to support making a requirement.

The requirement should refer to the specific regulation and should be detailed enough for the registered person to be clear about what they need to do to correct the breach of regulation and a date by which they should achieve this.

In deciding whether to impose a requirement, the inspector must assess the extent of the impact, or potential impact, on the experiences and progress of children and other service users, and whether the matter could be dealt with more appropriately by making a recommendation.

The inspector will always impose requirements where there are significant concerns for the welfare, safety and quality of care for children and other service users.

Sometimes, the registered person needs to take action to meet a requirement that they can complete quickly. Inspectors can impose a requirement with a date that is likely to be before the registered person will receive their inspection report. Here, the inspector must be clear at the inspection feedback what the requirement and its deadline is.

Recommendations

Inspectors make recommendations when necessary to improve practice.

In making a recommendation, inspectors should refer to the [NMS for voluntary adoption agencies](#). They should always give enough detail for the manager in charge to be clear what they need to do. The relevant part of NMS should be summarised. Inspectors may also make recommendations in relation to other relevant statutory guidance such as:

- [Working together to safeguard children](#)
- [Statutory guidance for children who run away or go missing from home or care](#)

If, during an inspection, the agency rectifies a minor administrative error that has minimal impact on the experiences and progress of children and adult service users, an inspector may not need to make a requirement or recommendation about that matter. However, they may refer to it in the leadership and management section of the report.

If the agency has failed to comply with a requirement within the timescale set by the inspector, we consider carefully whether it is necessary to take any enforcement action to address the breach and the associated risks to children or adults. Enforcement action may include, but is not limited to, issuing a compliance notice.

If the agency has not acted on recommendations made at a previous inspection, the inspector considers carefully the impact of this on children and adults and may impose a requirement.

Compliance notices and enforcement action

Ofsted's compliance powers are set out in the [Care Standards Act 2000](#) and associated regulations. Ofsted's [social care enforcement policy](#) has the details.

We serve a compliance notice following an inspection if:

- we consider that this is the most appropriate way to promote the welfare of

- children or we believe that they are at risk of harm or being harmed or
- a registered provider has failed to comply with a requirement made at an inspection and we consider that this is the most appropriate way to deal with this concern

Inadequate judgements: next steps

Post-inspection debrief and case reviews

When a voluntary adoption agency is judged inadequate for the 'overall experiences and progress of children and adults' at a full inspection, this leads to a post-inspection debrief 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 inspection.

The inspector and their manager have the post-inspection debrief. It provides an opportunity for them to discuss the inspection and the quality of the evidence, and to consider a recommendation for further action to take to the case review. The recommendation of further action should include the scheduling of future inspections and/or compliance action. The [social care enforcement policy](#) 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 what action to take.

We usually carry out a full inspection of agencies that have been judged as inadequate within 6 to 12 months of the previous inspection.

Subsequent inspection activity

The timing and nature of subsequent inspection and monitoring visits following a judgement of inadequate are set on a case-by-case basis and depend on any improvement made. If the concerns are serious, we are likely to return to carry out a monitoring visit to check that the responsible individual has taken appropriate steps to safeguard and protect the welfare of service users. Monitoring visits usually result in a published report, although regional directors can decide not to publish monitoring reports in exceptional circumstances.

An inspection visit takes place sooner if:

- further significant concerns arise during the period
- it is necessary to make statutory requirements to safeguard and protect the welfare of service users

The inspection report

The report should be succinct and evaluative. Inspectors' analysis must include clear evidence for their professional judgements.

Published reports will usually be between 10 and 12 pages long but may be shorter.

Reports for agencies that have several weaknesses or that are found to be outstanding may require more detailed explanations for the judgements. Inspectors should ensure that the reports are long enough to say what needs to be said and no longer.

Content of the SCCIF report

Section of report	Details
Information about this service	Brief contextual information about the service
Date and judgement of last inspection	The date and overall judgement of the last inspection
Enforcement action since the last inspection (registered providers only)	A brief summary of any enforcement activity we have taken since the last inspection
Inspection judgements	The judgements made and accompanying text
Areas for improvement	Any recommendations and statutory requirements (where relevant)
Information about this inspection	What we have looked at and information about the legal basis for the inspection
Service details	Information on the provider running the service

Quality assurance and arrangements for publishing the report

The inspector is responsible for the quality of the report. The inspector will check the completed draft report carefully before submitting to their manager for pre-publication quality checks before it is shared with the provider.

Any proposed change of judgement from the provisional judgement given at verbal feedback during the inspection will be discussed by the appropriate managers within Ofsted. On these rare occasions, the inspector must inform the provider of the revised judgements and provide reasons for the changes before the provider receives the draft report.

We will send the draft inspection report to the provider within 18 working days of the end of the inspection.

The provider will have 5 working days to comment on the draft report, process and findings.

We will consider all comments and we will respond to the comments when we share the final report with the provider. This will be within a maximum of 30 working days after the inspection.

Following the inspection, we will ask providers for feedback about the inspection through a post-inspection survey. This is sent to the provider at the same time as when they receive both the draft and final inspection reports. Feedback from providers will be used to improve the quality of inspections.

Conduct during inspections

It is important that inspectors and providers establish and maintain a positive working relationship based on courteous and professional behaviour. Both must follow guidance in [Ofsted's conduct during inspections](#) policy.

Concerns or complaints about an inspection

Concerns

Most of Ofsted's work is carried out smoothly and without incident. If concerns do arise during an inspection, they should be raised with the inspector as soon as possible during the inspection visit. This provides an opportunity to resolve the matter before the inspection is completed.

If the provider is unable to resolve the matter with the inspector, they should contact the inspector's RIM for further discussion.

Providers also have another opportunity to raise concerns about the draft inspection report, process and findings when they receive the draft report.

Complaints

If it has not been possible to resolve concerns, a formal complaint can be raised under [Ofsted's complaints procedure](#) before the final inspection report is published.

If the provider wishes to submit a formal complaint, it will have until the end of the fifth working day after receiving the final report to do so.

Monitoring visits

Monitoring visits are carried out according to the general principles of the SCCIF.

Monitoring visits are usually carried out for any of the following reasons:

- to follow up concerns
- following an inadequate inspection
- to monitor compliance with a notice

Timing and frequency

The decision to carry out a monitoring visit is usually taken at a case review. The frequency of monitoring visits is decided on a case-by-case basis and may be as frequent as weekly if that is what is needed. Timing and frequency are determined by any dates included in compliance notices and the nature of the concerns.

A compliance notice sets out the actions a provider must take by a certain date to meet the relevant service-specific regulations for children's social care providers. This is agreed and recorded at the case review.

The inspector will tell the provider that it is the subject of monitoring following enforcement action or an inadequate inspection judgement. Monitoring visits are usually unannounced.

Compliance notices

Where we establish a number of actions on a statutory notice, or serve multiple statutory notices with different completion dates, then we schedule follow-up visits for each date or notice to ensure that the provider has met each specified action within the prescribed timescale.

We aim to complete follow-up visits the day after the required completion date for each notice or, at the very latest, within 5 working days of that date. In some instances, we may timetable the monitoring visit so that we can assess compliance with more than one notice.

We may decide, in exceptional circumstances, not to carry out a follow-up visit to check that the provider has met a specific requirement in a notice. In these cases, we will accept written confirmation that the provider has taken the required action, if the written confirmation is accompanied by documentary evidence such as a photograph or a copy of a required procedure.

We make a note on the inspection database of the reasons why it was not necessary to visit, for example if a fire officer has carried out a visit and given written confirmation of action taken, copied to Ofsted.

Monitoring visits are also likely to be agreed as part of the plan for the provider once the notice of proposal to cancel has been issued.

Other circumstances where we might carry out monitoring visits include when a 'restriction of accommodation' notice is in place or when we have suspended a provider from continuing to operate.

Following the monitoring visit, we will send a report detailing the outcome of the visit. We will publish it on [our reports website](#) alongside the agency's inspection reports.

Preparing for the monitoring visit

When preparing for a monitoring visit, inspectors take into account:

- the last inspection report
- requirement(s) set out in the last inspection report
- requirement(s) set out in any compliance notice
- letters from previous monitoring inspections
- any notifications received since the last inspection
- any action plan provided by the setting
- any other information recorded on the inspection database, such as information from other agencies or complaints
- any enforcement action that should be monitored (for example, restriction of accommodation)

How inspectors carry out monitoring visits

Where the monitoring visit is carried out following an inadequate judgement, or to monitor the agency's response to compliance notices, or to determine whether requirements have been completed, it should:

- determine whether the requirements have been completed, and the impact of any completed requirements on the welfare and outcomes for children and other service users
- identify whether any additional concerns exist
- determine the capacity of the responsible individual to sustain the changes required
- consider any further action that may need to be taken
- review the evidence in order to determine whether a new inspection judgement can be made

Where the monitoring visit is to monitor other concerns or issues, it should:

- determine whether the effectiveness of the setting has declined or improved
- determine the impact of any improvement or decline in practice on the welfare and outcomes for children
- set out any further action that may need to be taken

The inspector must notify the responsible individual when they arrive on site.

The inspector should judge how effective the improvement is and how, by tackling the requirements or issues, the setting has improved the experiences and progress of children and other service users.

To demonstrate the necessary improvement, providers and managers need to show that their actions have had a significant impact in achieving clear and sustainable progress. Good intentions and an inspirational outlook, or a recent change of manager following a period of poor leadership, do not in themselves give enough proof of the ability of the provider to sustain improvement.

Finding further concerns during monitoring visits

If it becomes clear that there are new or further issues of concern or that in tackling the actions from the last inspection the provider has let other aspects slip so that children and/or vulnerable adults are at risk of harm or are not making sufficient progress, then the inspector should decide what further action needs to be taken. This includes new requirements and/or recommendations and compliance notices or other enforcement action or imposing of conditions.

If the inspector is concerned or unsure about any aspect of the visit, they can contact their RIM or a social care compliance inspector.

How inspectors gather evidence in a monitoring visit

The inspectors will question how effective the provider's actions are in:

- meeting the requirements set at the last inspection
- improving the experiences and progress of children

Evidence should be recorded in the inspection database. The evidence should reflect the areas for improvement that were identified in the inspection report. This

section should include evidence of the most significant strengths and weaknesses and any new areas of improvement or breaches of requirement that need to be taken forward. The inspector must decide whether the agency has let other aspects slip so that there is now cause for concern in different areas.

Inspectors must decide whether the provider demonstrates its capacity to sustain any improvements it has made. Inspectors should also decide whether the improvements are having a marked and sustained impact on all areas of weakness.

Feedback at the end of the monitoring visit

The inspector provides verbal feedback to the provider at the end of the visit. The inspector must:

- be clear about the evidence base that the judgement of improvement or continued concern is based on
- make clear any new issues to take forward
- ensure that the provider is clear about the outcome of the visit and what the next step will be, especially if a new issue has arisen or improvement is inadequate
- be clear with the provider when the next steps will be confirmed if the inspector requires further advice
- explain that the outcome of a monitoring visit is published in the form of a report on the [Ofsted reports site](#) alongside the last report
- make clear that the text of the report may differ slightly from the oral feedback, but that the substance of the issues will not change
- ensure that the provider understands that the overall judgement of inadequate has not changed (where relevant), although progress and improvements may have been made
- be clear, if a new inspection judgement has been made why this is the case and what the new judgement is or why no change to the judgement has been made

The inspector must contact the DCS of the placing authorities (where relevant) to advise them whether:

- there has been a change of judgement and what that new judgement is and the nature and effectiveness of any improvements
- there has been no change of judgement and either the original concerns remain or new ones have emerged

Monitoring reports

Ofsted will publish all monitoring reports on its [reports website](#), although RIMs can decide not to publish monitoring reports in exceptional circumstances.

At the beginning of the report, inspectors should provide a concise, clear explanation of the issues that we monitored at the visit. This explanation should accurately reflect the message given to the registered manager/person-in-charge when we announced the visit.

The next sentence should then state when we last visited the setting, and for what reason.

Monitoring reports should outline the significant developments and evidence of progress that has occurred since the last visit. They should clearly explain the action the provider has taken to address the requirements and the impact of any

improvement, or not, on the care, experiences and progress of children and any other service users.

The report must:

- set out the reason(s) for and purpose of the visit (if the visit is to follow up enforcement activity, the letter should clearly set this out, for example, 'We are concerned that... In order to evaluate the progress the agency has made in addressing these concerns, we carried out a monitoring visit on...'; where this relates to compliance notices, there should be a short summary of the number of notices and an overview of the areas for concern)
- outline any significant developments and clearly explain the action the provider has taken to address the requirements and the impact
- evaluate where progress has been made and where progress has not been made
- clearly state the impact of continued concerns on children, alongside any action that Ofsted will be taking to notify placing local authorities and/or to protect children
- set out clearly where and what further action is needed
- set out why a new judgement has been made or the reasons why the judgement will not be changed, if appropriate

Inspectors must use clear language to indicate the level of concern; for example, 'this visit has raised serious concerns about care and practice in [the agency]'.

Inspectors can clearly state that the provider is likely to be subject to further enforcement action where this is the case. The details of intended action cannot be included as this may prejudice any action we are likely to take and could be seen to impede the provider's right of appeal, where relevant.

Review of the monitoring report and evidence base

The monitoring visit report and evidence base will be reviewed by the inspector's manager before the draft report is sent to the provider for comment. This is to ensure that they accurately reflect the improvements made and that the evidence base supports any further enforcement action we may wish to take.

The draft monitoring report is then shared with the provider and finalised using the same process and timescales as a standard inspection report (see the ['Quality assurance and arrangements for publishing the report' section](#)).

Checks on responsible individuals

Regulation 34 of the [Adoption Support Agencies \(England\) and Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2005](#) requires voluntary adoption agencies to have a responsible individual.

A provider must demonstrate to Ofsted that the responsible individual it appoints is able to meet the requirements of regulation. Ofsted's inspectors scrutinise the steps providers have taken to determine that a responsible individual who has been appointed to a registered agency is fit to supervise the management of an agency.

For further information, see [Changes to children's social care services that are registered and/or inspected by Ofsted](#).

Agencies with no manager

Although voluntary adoption agency providers do not have to register managers with Ofsted, they must have appropriate plans in place when it is known that the responsible individual, or manager of any branch, intends to stop managing (as set out in regulation 22(1)(b) of the [Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2003](#)).

Plans should ensure that there is a proper transition of responsibilities from one manager to another, including a period of handover for the incoming manager by the outgoing manager. Details of the arrangements should form part of the notification that providers must make to Ofsted as soon as is practicable to do so if a manager intends to cease managing the agency or a branch of the agency.

If the agency did not manage a change of manager well or notify Ofsted of a change of manager, this will inform our inspection planning and our findings. We may decide to bring the date of the inspection forward. We may decide to make requirements on the provider and, if concerns continue, consider whether further compliance action is necessary. For more information about what compliance action we can take, you should refer to our [social care enforcement policy](#).

Incomplete inspections

We will apply [Ofsted's policy on incomplete inspections](#) where appropriate.

Fostering for adoption

Registered voluntary adoption agencies carrying out fostering for adoption services and seeking to approve carers as both adopters and foster carers are also required under the Care Standards Act 2000 to register as an independent fostering agency. Ofsted is required to inspect these agencies both as an independent fostering agency and as a voluntary adoption agency.

How we inspect voluntary adoption agencies and independent fostering agencies that provide fostering for adoption services

In line with our strategy and principles for inspection, we try to minimise the burden of inspection on agencies. We also want to make the best use of our inspection time and resources.

Some agencies provide fostering for adoption services as their only fostering activity. For these, we usually inspect the voluntary adoption agency and the independent fostering agency at the same time rather than as 2 separate inspections.

After these simultaneous inspections, we publish one combined inspection report.

We make judgements on the voluntary adoption agency using the 4-point scale and covering the overall experiences and progress of children and adults, taking into account:

- how well children and adults are helped and protected

- the effectiveness of leaders and managers

The combined report will include a narrative judgement on the independent fostering agency.

For these inspections, inspectors follow the SCCIF guidance for voluntary adoption agencies and independent fostering agencies. We notify agencies that they are going to be inspected 2 working days before the combined inspection. We will usually give this notice on a Thursday before the fieldwork starts on the next Monday morning. The overall timeline for VAA inspections usually applies.

If it is necessary (for example, because of the size of the agency), the RIM can agree to either the inspector spending additional days on site or additional inspectors being deployed on the inspection. To ensure that the selection of tracked or sampled cases is representative of the agencies' work, inspectors always include some fostering for adoption cases.

Inspectors use the evaluation criteria, including specific criteria relating to fostering for adoption, to help them reach their judgements. These criteria are set out within the SCCIF guidance for independent fostering agency inspections.

Ofsted imposes a condition on the registration of independent fostering agencies that provide fostering for adoption services as their only fostering activity is related to fostering for adoption. Agencies must apply for the condition to be lifted if they wish to expand their fostering activity.

Independent fostering agencies that are not subject to the fostering for adoption condition will have a full inspection scheduled as an independent event.

We always report our findings on the quality of fostering for adoption arrangements, either:

- as a narrative judgement for the independent fostering agency as part of a combined report
- in the separate inspection report for independent fostering agencies that carry out a wider range of fostering activities

Although we have the ability to carry out combined inspections of voluntary adoption agencies and independent fostering agencies that provide fostering for adoption, this does not prevent us carrying out separate inspections of individual agencies. We will do this if it is the most effective way of addressing matters that are only relevant to an individual voluntary adoption agency or independent fostering agency.

If there is a need for a monitoring visit of an independent fostering agency with a fostering for adoption condition, we will carry this out independently if there is no need to do a monitoring visit of the voluntary adoption agency.

If agencies have any questions about how we inspect fostering for adoption services, they should contact their allocated inspector.

Safeguarding and child protection concerns

If serious issues of concern arise during the inspection, such as a failure to follow child protection procedures or if a child is discovered to be at immediate risk of harm, the inspector must notify the responsible individual (where relevant) or the person in charge must be notified as soon as possible. If that may compromise a child or adult's safety, the inspector must ensure that the appropriate authorities are

notified immediately.

Inspectors should always follow [Ofsted's safeguarding policy](#).

Inspectors should contact their manager or regional social care compliance inspector if they need advice. The inspector ensures that the referral is made to the relevant local authority children's services and the child's allocated social worker and/or the relevant local authority adults' services and, where appropriate, the vulnerable adult's allocated social worker. You can find further guidance in [Safeguarding concerns: guidance for inspectors](#). If the concerns relate to allegations against staff, they are referred to the designated officer.

Inspectors must ensure that concerns about the safety and welfare of a child are communicated immediately to the DCS for the responsible placing local authority, where this is relevant. A record that this has been done must be kept. The regional Senior Her Majesty's Inspector should follow up the action that has been taken by the local authority.

The 'Prevent' duty

Extremism is unlikely to be a routine line of enquiry during SCCIF inspections. Inspectors should, however, be alert to signs of risks of extremism, such as literature, posters, videos or DVDs, or regular visitors to the setting where the purpose of their visit is not clear. Initial enquiries about the possibility of extremism must be directed to the responsible individual or person in charge.

Inspectors should note the detail of any relevant concerns or referrals made by the responsible individual and how effective the multi-agency response has been. The DfE has published [advice for schools and childcare providers on the 'Prevent' duty](#), and inspectors should note where this applies to the type of setting inspected.

Inspectors can contact their RIM, who may seek specialist advice. If inspectors are unable to contact their RIM and remain concerned, they should follow [Ofsted's safeguarding policy](#).

Female genital mutilation: the duty to notify police

Since 31 October 2015, when [section 74 of the Serious Crime Act 2015](#) inserted new section 5B into the [Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003](#), specified regulated professionals (including social workers) must report to the police any cases of female genital mutilation in girls under 18 that they come across in their work.

The duty applies where the professional either:

- is informed by the girl that an act of female genital mutilation has been carried out on her
- observes physical signs that appear to show an act of female genital mutilation has been carried out and has no reason to believe that the act was necessary for the girl's physical or mental health or for purposes connected with labour or birth

If a child discloses information regarding female genital mutilation to an inspector, the inspector should follow Ofsted's [guidance for inspectors on safeguarding concerns](#).

Reporting concerns about the administration and

management of controlled drugs

If inspectors come across concerns or incidents about the safe management of controlled drugs during their normal inspection duties, or receive information through any other source, they should email an outline of the concern and action taken to the social care policy team: socialcare@ofsted.gov.uk.

This action is in addition to any regulatory action or recommendations made as a result of the concern. Referrals should be made even when no requirements or recommendations are to be made. The social care policy team will collate all such referrals and share these with the Care Quality Commission (CQC)'s Controlled Drugs National Group.

The CQC provides [detailed information about controlled drugs](#) (examples include morphine, pethidine, methadone and Ritalin).

Use of personal data

As part of our inspection activities under the SCCIF, we may gather personal data that is necessary to help us evaluate children's social care services.

Our [personal information charter](#) sets out the standards you can expect from Ofsted when we collect, hold or use personal information, and that we will follow all applicable data protection legislation in how we treat personal information.

Our [privacy notice for social care](#) sets out in more detail what data we collect and our powers to do so, what we do with it, how long we keep it for and people's rights under data protection legislation.

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