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Guidance

Inspecting local authority children's services

Updated 2 February 2024

Applies to England

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Introduction

1. This document sets out the framework for inspecting local authority children's services (ILACS). We first published this framework in November 2017. We last updated this framework in February 2024. There is a [summary of the changes](#) available.

2. This framework and guidance are to help inspectors to be consistent in inspections while being flexible enough to respond to the individual circumstances of each local authority. We will periodically review and amend this framework and evaluation criteria.

3. These inspections focus on the effectiveness of local authority services and arrangements:

- to help and protect children
- the experiences and progress of children in care wherever they live, including those children who return home
- the arrangements for permanence for children who are looked after, including adoption
- the experiences and progress of care leavers

We also evaluate:

- the effectiveness of leaders and managers
- the impact they have on the lives of children and young people
- the quality of professional practice

4. In law, the term 'children in care' refers to those who are subject to a care order. However, in this framework and the associated inspection reports we have chosen to use 'children in care' to refer to all looked after children and young people because it is what this group have told us they prefer.

5. Certain children and young people are legally entitled to leaving care support from their local authority. In this framework we refer to them as 'care leavers' to reflect their legal status and to make the scope of this framework clear. However, we may also use the term 'care experienced young people' in our inspection reports because this reflects what many young people have told us they prefer.

Inspection principles

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

- intelligent
- responsible
- focused

7. Our approach to ILACS is further underpinned by 3 principles that apply to all social care inspections. Inspection should:

- focus on the things that matter most to children's lives
- be consistent in our expectations of providers

- prioritise our work where improvement is needed most

Whole-system approach

8. ILACS is a system of inspection. Under this system, we use the intelligence and information we have to inform decisions about how best to inspect each local authority. [Local area arrangements for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities \(area SEND\) inspections](#) are inspections of the local area that sit outside ILACS, but we will take them into account when we schedule inspections.

9. The ILACS system includes:

- local authorities sharing an annual self-evaluation of the quality and impact of social work practice
- an annual engagement meeting between our regional representatives and the local authority to review the self-evaluation and to reflect on what is happening in the local authority and inform how they would engage with each other in future
- our local authority intelligence system (LAIS) (which brings data and information into a single record)
- focused visits that look at a specific area of service or cohort of children
- standard and short inspections where we make judgements using our 4-point scale
- [joint targeted area inspections \(JTAI\)](#)

We have described each part of this system in more detail later in the framework.

Applying a proportionate and risk-based approach to inspection

10. There is no fixed cycle or end date for the ILACS programme. We use the intelligence and information we have to inform decisions about how best to inspect each local authority.

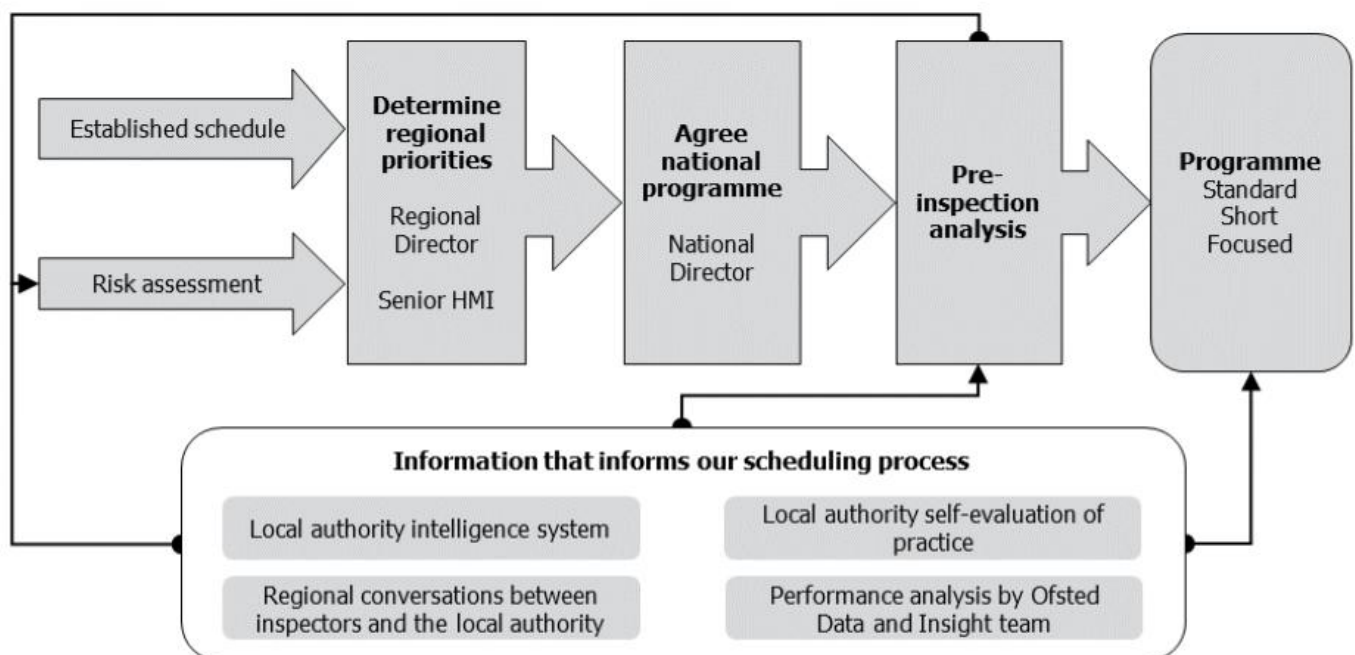
11. There will be times when concerns arise about a local authority. The regional

director will decide whether to carry out an inspection (standard or short inspection), at which we make a graded judgement, or whether a focused visit would be more appropriate. In most cases, if the next standard or short inspection is not due, we will carry out a focused visit. This gives the local authority and us the opportunity to identify what is going well and what needs to improve before the next judgement inspection.

12. After a focused visit, we will not usually follow up with an urgent inspection. We will publish the focused visit letter setting out the areas that the local authority needs to address. We will review the progress in these areas through the local authority's self-evaluation and the annual engagement meeting until the next judgement inspection happens. This approach aims to support improvement, while still holding the local authority children's services to account in meeting their legal responsibilities to children in need of help, protection and care.

13. Within the ILACS system, deciding which type of inspection to deploy in which local authority is a complex and dynamic process. Figure 1 sets out this process.

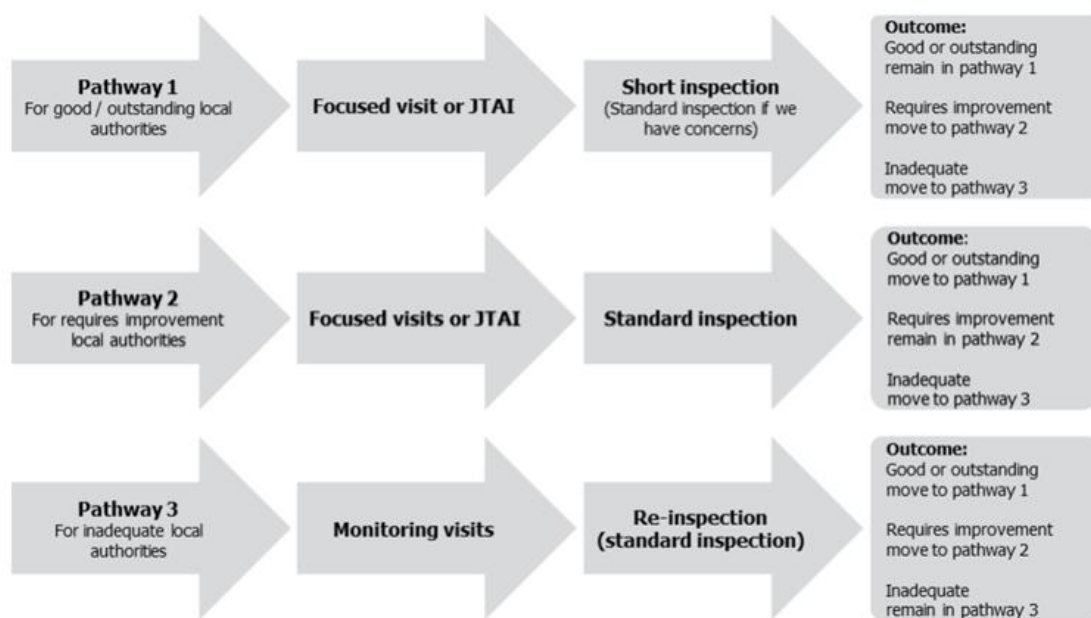
Figure 1. Steps for agreeing the ILACS inspection programme



Proportionate timing of inspection

14. We will inspect local authorities based on the intelligence we have about them and their most recent inspection judgement. Standard and short inspections will usually happen once every 3 years, plus or minus 6 months. Figure 2 summarises the different inspection pathways we use depending on the most recent inspection judgement.

Figure 2. The proportionate inspection pathways for ILACS



15. Inspections will not usually begin over the Christmas and New Year period. The only activities that might take place in August are planned monitoring visits and focused visits by agreement, or if concerns arise.

16. Each [Ofsted region](#) will decide when to inspect each local authority and whether to carry out a standard inspection, short inspection or focused visit. The national programme will be agreed by the national director, regulation and social care.

Deferring an inspection

17. While it is important that we carry out our planned inspections wherever

possible, we understand that sometimes there may be reasons that this is not possible. The local authority can request a deferral of an inspection or visit after they have been notified and before fieldwork starts. We will decide whether a deferral should be granted in accordance with [our deferral policy](#).

Pathway 1: local authorities judged good or outstanding at their most recent inspection

18. Local authorities judged to be good or outstanding at their most recent inspection will usually receive a short inspection. The short inspection will usually take place about 3 years after the previous inspection. If that short inspection results in the local authority being judged requires improvement to be good, it will move to pathway 2.

19. In between inspections, the local authority will usually receive one focused visit or a JTAI.

20. If we hold intelligence suggesting a significant deterioration in performance before a short inspection, including any areas of concern identified at a focused visit, we may decide to carry out a standard inspection.

Pathway 2: local authorities judged requires improvement to be good at their most recent inspection

21. Local authorities judged to require improvement to be good at their most recent inspection will receive a standard inspection. The standard inspection will usually take place about 3 years after the previous inspection. If that standard inspection results in the local authority being judged good or outstanding, it will follow the process described in pathway 1.

22. In between inspections, the local authority will receive up to 2 focused visits. A focused visit may be replaced by a JTAI.

Pathway 3: local authorities judged inadequate at their most recent inspection

23. Local authorities judged inadequate at their most recent inspection will receive monitoring visits followed by a re-inspection. We will usually carry out between 4 and 6 monitoring visits before the re-inspection. We will re-inspect an inadequate local authority using a standard inspection.

24. If, at the re-inspection, its overall effectiveness grade improves, that local authority will then enter the relevant pathway. Should it remain inadequate, it will

remain in pathway 3.

The table below summarises the range of events that will exist under the ILACS system by the Ofsted inspection grade.

Most recent inspection judgement	ILACS events
Good or outstanding local authority	Short inspection (once in a 3-year period) Usually 1 focused visit in between inspections Possible JTAI (would replace a focused visit) Shared self-evaluation Annual engagement meeting
Requires improvement to be good local authority	Standard inspection (once in a 3-year period) Up to 2 focused visits in between inspections Possible JTAI (would replace a focused visit) Shared self-evaluation Annual engagement meeting
Inadequate local authority	Monitoring visits Standard inspection (after we have completed monitoring visits) Shared self-evaluation Annual engagement meeting

ILACS and other joint inspections

25. We will coordinate the scheduling of the ILACS, JTAI and area SEND programmes to avoid any clash of timing and to minimise the burden on local authorities. The scope of ILACS does not replicate that of the area SEND inspection.

26. The 4 inspectorates (Ofsted, Care Quality Commission (CQC), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and, when applicable, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP)) remain committed to carrying out up to 12 JTAs a year. The scheduling of the JTAs is a complex task.

We try to avoid any unnecessary clash of timing and minimise the burden on each of the inspected bodies.

Activity outside of inspection

Local authority self-evaluation of social work practice

27. Each year, we will ask local authorities to share a self-evaluation of social work practice with us and to meet with our regional representatives to discuss it. This part of the framework is voluntary but it plays an important role in our understanding of local authorities and how they work. We have developed this section in conjunction with the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the Local Government Association (LGA).

28. Engagement between us and local authorities outside of inspection will help us to apply the risk-based and proportionate approach that ILACS offers. It will help us to carry out our inspections and visits more efficiently. It will also help ensure that inspection frequency and arrangements are appropriate to that local authority.

29. We ask local authorities to share an annual self-evaluation of social work practice with us. This will help us to see whether leaders and managers have a grip on practice and are taking suitable action.

30. We will not ask local authorities judged inadequate to share a self-evaluation until the monitoring visits in the first 12 months are complete. Engagement (outside the monitoring visits) will focus on the quality of the local authority action planning.

31. The self-evaluation should draw on existing documentation and activity. It should reflect the local authority's business as usual in order to avoid additional burden. We do not expect local authorities to carry out additional work to inform the self-evaluation.

32. Inspectors look at a local authority's most recent self-evaluation when preparing for the next inspection or focused visit.

33. The self-evaluation should answer 3 questions:

- What do you know about the quality and impact of social work practice in your local authority?
- How do you know it?
- What are your plans for the next 12 months to maintain or improve practice?

34. There is no set time each year that we ask local authorities to share a self-evaluation. The timing should take into account any planned regional peer review and challenge activity. To be most effective, this should happen before the planned annual engagement meeting, but there is no expectation that local authorities schedule their work around our timelines. Ideally, we ask the local authority to share this early enough for us to analyse its content, but not so far in advance that the information is out of date by the time of the annual engagement meeting.

35. When there is a significant gap between sharing the self-evaluation and the annual engagement meeting, it is helpful if the local authority can refresh the self-evaluation with the most up-to-date data and information. A regional representative will contact the director of children's services (DCS) to agree appropriate arrangements.

36. There is no prescribed format or content for the self-evaluation. Local authorities should apply the following principles. The self-evaluation:

- should answer the [3 questions outlined above](#)
- should set out the main themes and learning
- should make sense as a standalone document (appendices can be included, but should be kept to a minimum)
- may be an existing document or combination of documents
- should be succinct, focused and evaluative; overly long self-evaluations are unlikely to be helpful to the local authority or inspectors

37. It is for the local authority to determine which documentation and information to draw on for the self-evaluation. The following list offers some suggested sources:

- an overview of how the local authority evaluates the impact of social work practice with children and families
- high-level performance reports that give the most recent position of the local authority case audit plans
- case audit summaries of learning
- outcome of multi-agency section 11 audit work
- recent learning about frontline social work practice, for example from complaints,

rapid reviews, child safeguarding practice reviews or management reviews

- feedback from children and families

38. If the self-evaluation identifies weaknesses in practice and the local authority has credible plans to take clear, appropriate and effective action in response, we will treat this as effective leadership rather than an automatic trigger for an inspection or focused visit. Our regional representatives will discuss these issues with the local authority at the annual engagement meeting.

Annual engagement meeting

39. This meeting may be solely about children's social care or part of a broader meeting covering education and early years. This will be determined by the region.

40. The meeting should be carried out in a spirit of positive transparency and benefit everyone involved.

41. The meeting is not an opportunity for inspectors to evaluate direct social work practice with children and families. The intelligence gathered from the meeting will inform any plans for future inspection activity and focused visits.

42. The meeting should cover:

- the content of the self-evaluation – what leaders know about practice and outcomes, and the evidence that supports this
- the impact of the self-evaluation – what leaders are doing to address weaknesses in practice and maintain or improve good practice, including evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of their actions
- actions taken in response to previous inspections
- the local authority's current financial, political and professional practice context
- the broader issues that affect delivery of children's social care services, for example schools and early years provision
- the possible scope of a focused visit
- the approximate timing of the next self-evaluation and annual engagement meeting

43. The annual engagement meeting will be planned for a mutually convenient time but does not need to be at exactly the same point in time every year. Its timing will usually be linked to when the local authority shares its self-evaluation so that the

information is up to date.

44. The timing of the annual engagement meeting should take into account planned peer review arrangements and activity relating to a regional improvement alliance.

45. A regional representative from Ofsted will chair the meeting. The meeting may focus on other local authority duties, for example in relation to school inspection, but it should include the appropriate personnel and allow sufficient time for children's social care issues to be explored.

46. The DCS and our regional director and/or social care Senior His Majesty's Inspector (SHMI) or His Majesty's Inspector (HMI) will attend. The DCS has professional responsibility for children's services, including operational matters, as set out in the ['Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services'](#). It is for the DCS to determine who else attends from the local authority, for example the assistant director responsible for social care or the practice leader. For the meeting to be effective, those attending the meeting should have a clear purpose for being there. The regional SHMI and the DCS will agree the agenda in advance of the meeting.

47. We will write to the DCS within a month of the meeting. The letter will not be published nor contain any judgements about practice. It will set out:

- the date of the meeting and who attended
- a factual summary of the agenda items discussed
- the possible scope of a future focused visit
- the approximate timing of the following year's self-evaluation and annual engagement meeting
- any next steps

Scope

48. This section sets out the children whose experiences inspectors will evaluate during inspections and visits.

49. In standard and short inspections, inspectors will evaluate the experiences of the children and young people listed below. On focused and monitoring visits, they will evaluate the experiences of one or more of these groups of children and young

people:

- who are at risk of harm (but who have not yet reached the 'significant harm' threshold) and for whom a preventative service would provide the help that they and their family need to reduce the likelihood of that risk of harm escalating and to reduce the need for statutory intervention (these children may be known by any person with a duty under the [Children Act 2004](#); the [Childcare Act 2006](#); section 175 or any regulations made under 157 of the [Education Act 2002](#); the [Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009](#), a member of the local safeguarding partnership; or a person associated with a commissioned service, including local voluntary services)
- who have been referred to the local authority, including those for whom urgent action has to be taken to protect them; those subject to further assessment (including children subject to private fostering arrangements, including kinship care), those subject to child protection enquiries and 16- and 17-year-olds subject to a joint accommodation assessment as set out in [Provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation](#)
- who become the subject of a multi-agency child protection plan that sets out the help they and their families will receive to keep them safe and promote their welfare
- who have been assessed as no longer needing a child protection plan, but who may need continuing help and support
- who are receiving (or whose families are receiving) social work services because there are significant levels of concern about their safety and welfare, but these have not reached the significant harm threshold or the threshold to become looked after. This may include young carers.
- who are missing from education or are being offered alternative provision
- looked after either by being accommodated under section 20 or by being placed 'in care' during or as a result of proceedings under section 31 of the Children Act 1989 and those accommodated through the police powers of protection or emergency protection orders (including children and young people who are detained, unaccompanied child migrants or asylum seekers)
- aged 16 or 17 who are preparing to leave care and meet the [definition of 'eligible'](#); those aged 16 or 17 who have left care and are ['relevant'](#); young people aged 18 and above and are ['former relevant'](#); and young people aged 18 to 25 who qualify as ['former relevant children pursuing further education or training'](#), including children in houses of multiple occupation
- who have left care to return home or who are living with families under a special guardianship order, [child arrangements order](#) or an adoption order

50. In addition, inspectors will evaluate:

- the impact of leaders and managers on social work practice with children and families
- whether the local authority's own evaluation of the quality and impact of its performance and practice is accurate.

Standard and short inspections

51. HMI carry out these inspections under section 136(2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA). His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) has the power to carry out ILACS functions as listed in section 135 of the EIA.

52. Inspections will focus on social workers' direct practice with families by:

- scrutinising and discussing the sample of children's cases that reflect the scope of the inspection alongside discussions with practitioners working with the child or young person – this will include social workers and may also include other professionals and providers; these discussions do not have to be in person and in some cases will be by telephone during the notice period when practicable
- when possible and appropriate, meeting with children, young people, care experienced young people, parents and carers, foster carers and adopters
- shadowing staff in their day-to-day work
- when possible and appropriate, observing practice in multi-agency/single-agency meetings or, more likely, parts of meetings that relate to the protection of children and young people and in reviews for children in care; inspectors will take opportunities for observing practice as they arise

Standard inspection arrangements

53. On a standard inspection, inspectors will gather evidence across the ILACS scope.

54. We usually give 5 working days' notice of the inspection.

55. The inspection team for a standard inspection will usually be 4 social care

inspectors, but for some smaller local authorities, we may send fewer inspectors. In addition, a social care regulatory inspector and an education inspector (usually a schools HMI) will carry out 2 days of fieldwork.

56. Inspection teams may include an additional inspector who will be shadowing the work of their colleagues. Any activity they carry out will be for their training and development or to evaluate the inspection framework and methodology. They will not carry out any inspection work independently or gather evidence that will inform the inspection judgements.

Week 1: notice period – off site

Usual day of the week	Activities
Monday	Lead inspector phone call to DCS to announce the inspection Afternoon 'set-up' discussion between lead inspector and DCS (by telephone or in person)
Tuesday	Local authority shares child-level data and information about audits
Wednesday	Local authority shares performance and management information
Thursday and Friday	Full team off-site evaluation of evidence Telephone conference team meeting (including an Ofsted analytical officer)

Week 2: fieldwork

Usual day of the week	Activities
Monday	Lead inspector on site in the afternoon to meet DCS and set up the inspection Full team on site pm
Tuesday to Thursday	Full team on site gathering evidence

Friday Full team off-site evaluation of evidence

Week 3: fieldwork

Usual day of the week **Activities**

Monday Full team on site from lunchtime gathering evidence

Tuesday to Thursday Full team on site gathering evidence

Friday Feeding back inspection findings
Team off site by early afternoon

Short inspection arrangements

57. On a short inspection, inspectors will gather evidence across the ILACS scope.

58. We usually give 5 working days' notice of the inspection.

59. The inspection team for a short inspection will usually be 4 social care inspectors, but for some smaller local authorities, we may send fewer inspectors. In addition, a social care regulatory inspector and an education inspector (usually a schools HMI) will carry out 2 days of fieldwork. If we are making a judgement on 'the experiences and progress of care leavers' for the first time, the inspection team will usually include an additional social care HMI for 2 days during fieldwork.

60. Inspection teams may include an additional inspector who will be shadowing the work of their colleagues. Any activity they carry out will be for their training and development or to evaluate the inspection framework and methodology. They will not carry out any inspection work independently or gather evidence that will inform the inspection judgements.

Week 1: notice period – off site

Usual day of **Activities**
the week

Monday	Lead inspector phone call to DCS to announce the inspection Afternoon 'set-up' discussion between lead inspector and DCS (by telephone or in person)
Tuesday	Local authority shares child-level data and information about audits
Wednesday	Local authority shares performance and management information
Thursday and Friday	Full team off-site evaluation of evidence Telephone conference team meeting (including an Ofsted analytical officer)

Week 2: fieldwork

Usual day of the week	Activities
Monday	Lead inspector on site in the afternoon to meet DCS and set up the inspection Full team on site pm gathering evidence
Tuesday to Thursday	Full team on site gathering evidence
Friday	Feeding back inspection findings Team off site by early afternoon

61. A short inspection covers the ILACS scope, which is the same as a standard inspection. Judgements are made against the same evaluation criteria. However, it is not a 2-week inspection delivered in 1 week. Inspectors preparing for a short inspection will start with a mindset that 'this is a good local authority'. This assumption is based on:

- the previous inspection judgement
- a focused visit or JTAI that has reinforced earlier findings
- the quality of self-evaluation over the preceding years, which will have been explored during the annual engagement meetings

- information held on the LAIS that supports a view of continuing strong performance

In a short inspection, inspectors will seek to answer 3 questions:

1. Has the quality and impact of practice been maintained?
2. Are there any areas where the quality and impact of practice have improved?
3. Are there any areas where the quality and impact of practice have deteriorated?

62. This approach enables the lead inspector to prioritise gathering primary evidence on the areas that need the greatest focus. It also enables the team to test the validity of the most recent self-evaluation by testing samples of casework. This will help inspectors to quickly close down lines of enquiry. If inspectors are making a judgement on ‘the experiences and progress of care leavers’ for the first time at a short inspection, they will prioritise gathering evidence about this group of young people. To ensure that their judgement of this area is valid, inspectors are likely to look wider than the 3 questions set out above.

63. Evaluating individual children’s records that have already been audited by the local authority is another effective way to answer the 3 questions set out above. If the local authority’s evaluation of practice is in line with our evaluation, this will usually reduce the need for further primary evidence in that part of the inspection.

Further guidance on short and standard inspections

Inspecting against the scope and making judgements based on the evaluation criteria

64. Inspectors inspect across the areas included in the scope of the inspection and record their evidence under the 23 headings in the evaluation criteria. Each heading has several criteria that describe the features of a good service or good experiences and progress for children. Inspectors do not have to gather evidence against each individual criterion. The evaluation criteria help the inspection team make the correct judgement on the 4-point grading scheme.

The order of evidence-gathering in standard and short inspections

65. In previous inspection programmes, inspections have followed ‘the journey of the child’ – starting with the ‘front door’, then help and protection, children in care and, finally, leaving care. For standard and short inspections, this may not always be

the best approach.

66. The factors that influence where the evidence-gathering will start are:

- the geography of the local authority – for example, we may not always start in the main centre of population
- previous known strengths and weaknesses (including the findings from a focused visit or the most recent annual engagement meeting); the lead may wish to inspect the stronger areas first to swiftly close down areas of enquiry, so that the inspection can focus on whether performance has improved in a previously weaker area
- structure of services – where teams are located and across how many offices
- logistical issues – where inspectors need to go at the start of fieldwork to sort practical issues (for example, to pick up security passes or gain access to IT systems)

67. An inspection might therefore start, for example, in the children in care service. In these circumstances, inspectors may gain helpful insights into the help and protection services through evaluating the experiences of those children who have recently become looked after.

68. In all cases, it will be for the lead inspector, with the quality assurance manager, to determine the approach. The lead inspector will provide the rationale to the DCS.

Off-site evaluation

69. Off-site evaluation and planning are important parts of all inspections. All inspectors will have access to LAIS. For standard and short inspections, the Ofsted analytical officer will coordinate the data, provide a pre-inspection analysis (PIA) and discuss priorities for the inspection with the inspection team. The analytical officer will ensure that the PIA contains the information the lead inspector and team will need to inform the inspection planning and on-site activity. This will summarise:

- a contextual overview of the local authority
- findings from relevant inspections (including previous focused visits) and regulatory activity, including some inspections carried out by other inspectorates
- regional intelligence about the effectiveness and impact of the virtual school on the educational progress of children in care
- findings from rapid reviews, child safeguarding practice reviews or management reviews

- analysis of published statistics and national comparisons
- evidence from whistleblowing or complaints to Ofsted
- regional intelligence, including events of public concern, such as high-profile court cases or media issues
- search and review of recently published documentation, such as the independent reviewing officer annual report

70. The PIA will include the regional SHMI's analysis of the most recent self-evaluation and annual engagement meeting with the local authority.

71. [Annex A](#) lists the information that we request from the local authority at the start of the inspection.

72. The lead inspector will have time allocated, before fieldwork begins, to review the PIA, information on LAIS, the information from Annex A and the views of children, young people, parents and staff expressed through the social care annual point-in-time surveys run by Ofsted. The lead inspector will use this information to:

- ensure that the fieldwork is properly focused and used to the best effect in collecting first-hand evidence
- decide which site(s) within the local authority to visit during inspection
- identify initial lines of enquiry for the inspection
- allocate information to the inspection team for them to analyse

73. Only initial lines of enquiry will be generated at this point. These will be few in number and themed around priority areas. The lead inspector will share verbally the lines of enquiry with the local authority at the beginning of the inspection. The lead inspector will explain to the local authority how these lines will be pursued and what, if any, specific information is required from them as a result.

74. We do not expect the local authority to produce documents and data in response to these initial lines of enquiry unless specifically requested by the lead inspector. During the inspection, additional requests for further documentation will be kept to an absolute minimum and agreed by the lead inspector.

75. All inspectors have time allocated to prepare for the inspection. All team inspectors must read the PIA and familiarise themselves with the relevant material and profile of the local authority area before arriving on site. The lead inspector is likely to identify other documents for inspectors to read before the on-site activity.

76. Inspectors must review the information in [Annex A](#) provided by the local

authority. The lead inspector may decide that some documents must be read by all team members; others will be read by only one inspector and then summarised for the team. Some documents may be used as reference material and read only when required. The lead inspector will ensure that key points of analysis are collated and disseminated to the inspection team to inform the inspection.

Notifying the local authority and requesting information

77. The lead inspector will ensure that the local authority (usually the DCS) is notified by telephone of the inspection by 9.30am 5 working days before the fieldwork starts. If notification is due on a bank holiday, we will move it to the previous working day.

78. As part of this telephone call, the lead inspector will also arrange to meet with the DCS or the most senior manager available at the earliest opportunity when they arrive on site.

79. Immediately following the telephone call to the local authority, the lead inspector will email the DCS to confirm the start of the inspection and ask them to share the information set out in [Annex A](#). Annex A lists information we think the local authority will already maintain to inform its oversight and management of its service. On this basis, we do not consider that the information we request is unreasonable. The lead inspector will offer the DCS an opportunity for a conversation later the same day to give the DCS time to bring together the relevant staff. This conversation will usually be by phone, but the lead inspector may meet with the DCS in person if it is practical to do so. This conversation will help the lead inspector and local senior leaders to establish a constructive and professional relationship and give them a shared understanding of the starting point of the inspection.

80. If the DCS is not available, the lead inspector will speak with or email the most senior manager available and ask them to notify the DCS or, if the DCS is not available, the chief executive. The non-availability of the DCS or a senior manager will not delay the start of the inspection.

81. The lead inspector will ask the DCS to identify a link support person for the inspection. It is important that the link person has ready access to the DCS and senior leaders and sufficient authority to be able to respond to the lead inspector's requests.

82. In the week before inspectors are on site, the lead inspector will work with the link person and/or DCS to prepare for the on-site activity. The lead inspector will:

- answer questions about the scope of the inspection

- outline the format and methodology of the inspection, which will focus almost exclusively on practice with children and families. Meetings will be kept to a minimum, will only look into matters arising from case evaluations and will only take place at the lead inspector's request.
- discuss how inspectors will directly consider the experiences of children, young people and families as an integral part of the inspection. When opportunities arise during the fieldwork to speak with or observe contact with children, young people and families, the local social work staff will be asked to obtain their agreement to observe any meetings and speak to inspectors
- agree practical arrangements, such as work space, access to files and information technology systems, and any staff support required to access these files and systems
- agree arrangements to meet with the DCS and his/her senior leadership team for regular keep-in-touch (KIT) meetings and the feedback meeting
- provide contact details for the lead inspector, inspection team members and the allocated SHMI responsible for quality assurance
- provide information for affected/relevant staff, such as copies of the summary of the framework explaining the purpose of the inspection
- gain an understanding of how the local area services are structured, as well as any issues specific to the site(s) being inspected
- provide an opportunity for the local authority representatives to explain the local authority's local context, key strengths and challenges
- clarify whether there are any serious incidents that are awaiting notification or have been notified to Ofsted recently; this should include significant and current investigations (including police investigations), national or local learning reviews and local issues of high media interest
- ask whether any steps need to be taken to ensure the well-being of local authority staff, including senior leaders, during the inspection. The lead inspector will ask who to contact if the inspection team need to pass on any concerns about someone's well-being
- provide the local authority with an opportunity to raise any issues or concerns about the inspection and explain how the local authority can raise any matters during the inspection

83. After the local authority shares the information listed in [Annex A](#), an Ofsted analytical officer may contact a local authority analyst to clarify any issues with the composition or content of the local authority's data.

84. The lead inspector may also ask for a phone conversation with the lead

member for children's services and/or the local authority chief executive.

Fieldwork

85. The lead inspector and 3 inspectors will arrive on site on Monday afternoon. All inspectors will show their inspector identity badges. They do not need to carry copies of their Disclosure and Barring Service checks.

86. When the lead inspector arrives on site, they will meet with the DCS and/or the most senior manager available. At this meeting, the lead inspector will review the matters and arrangements discussed in the previous week. The lead inspector will answer any remaining questions and ask local leaders to confirm that the practical arrangements inspectors requested are in place.

87. When planning the on-site aspect of inspection, the lead inspector should ensure that:

- support is provided to facilitate communication with children, young people, care experienced young people, carers and parents who require additional support
- the plan allows realistic travel time for inspectors between activities
- the plan allows sufficient time and flexibility for inspectors to pursue lines of enquiry
- staff are given the opportunity to provide their evidence separately to those who manage them
- if the need for any meeting arises as a result of evaluating children's experiences, the lead inspector asks for this as soon as the need becomes apparent; these meetings may be held by telephone as well as in person
- inspectors have time to reflect on, record and analyse evidence, individually and as a team

88. The schedule for the inspection will develop throughout the inspection in response to issues emerging from evaluating children and young people's experiences. The lead inspector has overall responsibility for the schedule. On-site inspection activity will not normally continue after 6pm on any fieldwork day.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the recruitment, assessment, training and support for foster and adoptive carers

89. During a standard or short inspection, the social care regulatory inspector will carry out two days of fieldwork. For a standard inspection, these days will usually be in the second week of fieldwork. Their focus will be on evaluating the effectiveness of the recruitment, assessment, training and support for foster and adoptive carers.

They will evaluate the experiences of:

- up to 4 foster carer households (including a recent carer assessment)
- up to 4 adopter households (including a recent carer assessment)

90. The lead inspector will ask the local authority to provide lists of foster carers and adopters at the start of the inspection (see [Annex A](#)). They will use these lists to select the households mentioned above and ask the local authority to share their most recent assessments of these foster carers and adopters. In addition, the social care regulatory inspector will speak to:

- foster carers and adopters
- staff and managers who support foster and adoptive carers
- the foster and adoption panel chairs

91. Conversations with carers and staff will usually be by telephone. The lead inspector will ask the local authority to help arrange these calls.

92. Social care regulatory inspectors will evaluate the effectiveness of the recruitment, assessment and training of prospective foster and adoptive carers against the criteria in this framework that cover arrangements to secure timely permanence for all children.

93. Local authorities may be part of a regional adoption agency (RAA), where groups of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) work together to improve their adoption services. In these circumstances, it remains the responsibility of each local authority to demonstrate how the arrangements comply with their statutory responsibilities and meet the needs of local children.

94. If a local authority manages its own recruitment, assessment, training and support for adopters, inspectors will evaluate the effectiveness of these arrangements. If these are managed by an RAA, inspectors will look at the local authority's arrangements to assure itself that the RAA meets the needs of local children. See '[guidance for inspecting local authorities that are part of a regional adoption agency](#)' for more information.

Evaluating the educational progress of children in care and care leavers

95. Each standard and short inspection will include a schools HMI. The schools HMI will carry out two days of fieldwork. For a standard inspection, these days will usually be in the second week of fieldwork.

96. Working off site, they will evaluate data and information to provide analysis and lines of enquiry. They may contact the virtual school headteacher for a conversation by phone.

97. During fieldwork, they will usually be on site and will interview the virtual school headteacher and, if appropriate, the local authority data personnel. They will evaluate some case studies of specific children's and care leavers' progress. They may contact specific schools by phone for further information.

98. The schools HMI will analyse data and information about:

- the educational progress of children in care and care leavers
- elective home-educated children
- children missing education

Making judgements at standard or short inspections

99. Inspectors will make the following graded judgements:

- overall effectiveness
- the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection
- the experiences and progress of children in care
- the experiences and progress of care leavers
- the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families

100. Inspectors will make their graded judgements on a 4-point scale:

- outstanding
- good
- requires improvement to be good
- inadequate

101. Inspectors will evaluate the experiences of children, young people and families and the services they receive using the evaluation criteria as a benchmark.

Inspectors will use professional judgement to determine the weight and significance of their findings. A judgement of good will be made if the inspection team concludes that the evidence overall sits most appropriately with a finding of good. This is what we describe as 'best fit'.

102. The overall effectiveness judgement is derived from findings in each of the 4 other judgement areas. Inspectors will use both evidence and their professional

judgement to award the overall effectiveness grade.

103. If inspectors find widespread or serious failure resulting in harm, continued risk of harm or failure to safeguard the welfare of children and young people, including care leavers, in either the arrangements to protect or care for them, they will always give an overall effectiveness judgement of inadequate.

104. It is possible for the impact of leaders to be judged good or requires improvement to be good even if any of the other judgements given is inadequate. Inspectors will make this judgement if leaders and managers show sufficient understanding of the widespread or serious failure and have taken effective action to prioritise, challenge and make sustained improvement to services. Inspectors will acknowledge this in the report. The overall judgement will be inadequate because children's experiences have the most weight in determining this judgement.

105. If, at the end of fieldwork, the local authority's children's services are judged inadequate, inspectors will follow the section in this guidance on [monitoring inadequate local authorities](#).

Focused visits

106. Focused visits evaluate an aspect of service, a theme or the experiences of a cohort of children. HMI carry out these visits under section 136(2) of the EIA. HMCI has the power to carry out ILACS functions as listed in section 135 of the EIA.

Focused visit arrangements

107. We carry out focused visits between standard and short inspections. We usually give 5 working days' notice of the visit. The arrangements for notifying the local authority of a focused visit are the same as those for inspections. However, the lead inspector will adjust the arrangements so that they are proportionate to the scope of the visit. [See notifying the local authority and requesting information](#).

108. Usually, 2 inspectors will carry out 2 days of fieldwork contained within one week. Focused visits will include some or all of the same inspection activity as a standard or short inspection.

109. The table below shows an example timeline for a focused visit that takes place on a Tuesday and Wednesday. If a focused visit takes place on other days of the week, we will move the other activities accordingly. The lead inspector will provide the DCS with a specific timeline when they notify them of the visit.

Week 1: notice period – off site

Example day of the week	Activities
Monday	Lead inspector off-site evaluation of evidence
Tuesday	Lead inspector phone call to DCS to announce the focused visit Afternoon 'set-up' telephone conference – lead inspector and DCS
Wednesday	Local authority shares child-level data, information about audits and performance and management information
Thursday and Friday	Full team off-site evaluation of evidence Telephone conference team meeting

Week 2: fieldwork

Example day of the week	Activities
Monday	Off-site evaluation of evidence
Tuesday	Full team on site gathering evidence
Wednesday	Full team on site gathering evidence and providing feedback

Focused visit topics

110. A focused visit will look at one or more aspects of the service, themes or

cohorts of children. Inspections will use evaluation criteria from this framework or from our JTAs.

111. We will make the final decision about the focused visit topic to be covered. The decision will be based on one or more of the following:

- if a specific area of service has been identified in a local authority as an example of good or outstanding practice
- if a specific area of service has been identified as one that needs to improve or an area where themes, trends and issues are identified
- if an agreement between us and the local authority has been made that a specific focus will support that local authority's improvement journey
- if we decide to carry out a short programme in a particular area of service, which will then lead to a thematic overview

112. Each focused visit will cover part of the scope of standard and short inspections.

113. The scope for individual focused visits will usually be narrowed within each topic. Leadership is a feature of all focused visits, principally through the lens of the impact of leaders on practice with children and families.

A list of topics and what they may include is set out below.

Topic: the front door

The front door is the service that receives contacts and referrals (single- or multi-agency), where decisions are made about:

- child protection enquiries – such as strategy discussions or section 47 enquiries
- emergency action – liaison with police to use powers of protection or applications for an emergency protection order
- child in need assessments
- decisions to accommodate
- step-up from and step-down to early help
- no further action/signposting

Topic: children in need or subject to a protection plan

This may cover:

- thresholds

- step-up/step-down between children in need and child protection
- children on the edge of care
- children subject to a letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings interventions
- children in need at risk of family breakdown
- the quality of decisions about entering care
- protection of disabled children

Topic: protection of vulnerable children from extra-familial risk

This may cover:

- child sexual/criminal exploitation
- missing from home, care or education
- risks associated with gangs
- risks associated with radicalisation
- trafficking and modern slavery

Topic: children in care

This may cover:

- quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care
- the experiences and progress of disabled children in care
- the experiences and progress of children living in supported accommodation or an unregistered children's home

Topic: planning and achieving permanence

This may cover:

- return to birth family
- connected and kinship (family and friends) care
- adoption
- long-term foster or residential care
- special guardianship

Topic: care leavers

These visits may focus on all care leavers or specific age groups (for example,

those aged 16 and 17 or aged 18 to 25). These visits will cover some but not all the following aspects:

- quality and suitability of accommodation
- employment, education and training
- support into adulthood
- staying close and in touch
- care leavers with specific needs (for example, unaccompanied asylum seekers, young parents or those who have had contact with the criminal justice system)
- disabled care leavers and those with specific physical or mental health needs, including those who misuse alcohol or drugs
- care leavers at risk of specific types of harm, such criminal or sexual exploitation and domestic abuse

Topic: placement decision making for older children

This may cover:

- children, including children who meet the [definition of 'eligible']^[footnote 1], living in or with a plan for living in supported accommodation ^[footnote 2]
- children aged 16- or 17-years old living in unregistered children's homes (including on an emergency basis)
- children under 16 years old living in unregistered children's homes (including on an emergency basis)
- placement sufficiency, including fostering matching practice
- children placed in unregistered children's homes when subject to an order under the court's inherent jurisdiction to deprive them of their liberty
- children placed in, or waiting for, a secure children's home on welfare grounds (s25)
- arrangements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children
- how local authorities are working in partnership with others to meet their sufficiency duty to older children

Findings at focused visits

In each of these focused visits, inspectors will evaluate the effectiveness of:

- performance management
- management oversight
- supervision
- quality assurance
- continuous professional development of the workforce

114. Inspectors will not make graded judgements at the outcome of a focused visit. Nor will they indicate what the grade may have been if the visit had been a short or standard inspection. The outcome will be findings about strengths and areas for improvement, reported in a published letter.

115. If inspectors find serious weaknesses, they will identify areas for priority action. An area for priority action is either:

* an area of serious weakness that is placing children at risk of inadequate protection and significant harm

- an unnecessary delay in identifying permanent solutions for children in care that results in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted
- a failure to keep in touch with care leavers, or provide them with support and services, that results in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted

116. Priority actions may result from particular or localised failings to protect or care for children or care leavers as well as from systemic failures or deficits. Some examples of areas for priority action are:

- unrecognised or unallocated children's cases and/or significant delays in addressing child protection concerns or safeguarding the welfare of a child in care
- systemic failure or significant weakness in practice that expose children or care leavers to significant risk of harm or fail to safeguard and promote their welfare
- a significant shortfall in capacity (frontline staffing numbers, qualifications and expertise) or deficit in management oversight and supervision that impacts adversely on delivery of help, protection or care to children or care leavers
- significant delays in the allocation or assessment of a large number of children in need cases that expose those children to potential and unquantified risk of harm

117. Inspectors will use findings from focused visits when planning their next short or standard inspection. The evidence from a focused visit will not be used as primary evidence but may enable inspectors to target their evidence-gathering more effectively.

Monitoring inadequate local authorities

Notifying the local authority of monitoring activity

118. If local authority children's services are judged inadequate, we will carry out monitoring activity that includes an action planning visit, monitoring visits and a re-inspection. The lead inspector will inform the DCS of this at the feedback meeting for the inspection where the inadequate judgement is given.

119. If a local authority is not prepared to agree the programme of monitoring visits, the Secretary of State for Education is likely to intervene and direct us to carry out these visits. Section 118(2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 enables the Secretary of State for Education to direct the Chief Inspector to carry out an inspection of a local authority's children's services.

120. These activities may also take place if inspectors identify areas for priority action at a JTAI that suggest that children are at risk of significant harm.

121. Monitoring visits will focus on where improvement is needed the most. Inspectors will monitor and report on the local authority's progress since the inspection. Inspectors will also check that performance in other areas has not declined since the inspection. If new concerns emerge, inspectors are likely to look at these on the monitoring visits.

The table below sets out an illustrative timetable for activities after an inadequate judgement. Each step is set out in more detail after the table.

Activity	When the activity happens
Action planning visit between Ofsted and the local authority	30 working days after we publish the inspection report
Local authority shares action plan	70 working days after we publish the inspection report
First monitoring visit	6 months after we publish the inspection report
Second and subsequent	Timetable to be agreed between Ofsted and the local

Action planning visit following an inadequate judgement

122. At the inspection feedback meeting, the lead inspector will ask the DCS to arrange an action planning visit. The visit should take place about 30 working days after the local authority has received its inspection report.

The purpose of the visit is to:

- clarify the roles, responsibilities and activities of Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE)
- help the local authority and its partners understand the inspection findings so that they can develop an action plan
- set out the implications for statutory partners, including those included in the local strategic safeguarding arrangements
- discuss the draft action plan (if available)
- confirm the calendar month of the first monitoring visit and establish the pattern of future monitoring activity
- agree the focus of the first monitoring visit and (if possible) any subsequent monitoring visits

123. Once the local authority has received its inspection report, the regional director will write to the DCS confirming the action planning visit. They will copy this letter to the DfE inspections and interventions team.

124. A member of the inspection team, usually the lead inspector, and a SHMI based in the local authority's region will attend the visit. The role of the inspector and SHMI is to help the local authority understand the findings from the inspection.

125. The DCS will decide who else attends the action planning visit. The DCS may wish to discuss this with the lead inspector to ensure that attendees are appropriate to the findings in the report. The attendees will usually include senior managers of the local authority children's services and other key partners. The visit is concerned with the operational work of children's services professionals, so elected councillors will not normally attend.

126. The SHMI and lead inspector will discuss the agenda for the action planning visit with the DCS before the event. The lead inspector will circulate the final agenda 5 working days before the visit.

127. If the local authority has a draft of its action plan, the DCS should share this with the lead inspector before the action planning visit. Early drafts of action plans are accepted as a 'work in progress' and will not be formally reviewed by the inspector.

128. The lead inspector will record the outcome of the discussions. The SHMI will send this to the DCS, regional director and the national director, social care.

Reviewing the local authority action plan

129. The lead inspector will review the action plan as soon as possible after receiving it. We are not responsible for 'signing off' or endorsing the action plan – this is the responsibility of the DCS. Our role is to advise the DCS about whether the action plan reflects the findings in the inspection report. Our regional director will write to the DCS confirming whether the action plan reflects the inspection findings.

130. If the regional director thinks that the action plan does not respond to the findings set out in the inspection report, the lead inspector and/or SHMI will discuss this with the DCS. If we and the local authority disagree on this matter, the regional director will write to the DCS setting out the area(s) of difference and the reasons.

131. The lead inspector will share the letter they send to the DCS with the DfE inspections and interventions unit. If we and the local authority differ in our view of the action plan, we will ask the Secretary of State for Education to consider what action (if any) they want the DfE to take.

132. With the agreement of the DCS, the inspector and/or SHMI may attend the local authority's improvement board or other related meetings, for example with DfE officials. Our inspectors will attend as observers.

Arrangements for monitoring visits

133. At the action planning visit, the SHMI, lead inspector and DCS will agree arrangements for monitoring visits. The following guidelines will usually apply.

- The first monitoring visit will be within 3 months of the submission deadline for the local authority's action plan (which is about 6 months after publication of the inspection report).
- We will carry out 3 or 4 monitoring visits a year.
- We will carry out between 4 and 6 monitoring visits before a re-inspection.
- The monitoring visits may not be equally spaced throughout the year.
- The lead inspector will confirm the calendar month that a visit will take place in advance.

After we have completed these monitoring visits, we will either:

- adopt the ILACS process for self-evaluation and annual engagement before carrying out a re-inspection
- consider whether further monitoring would continue to add value in light of further plans for improvement

134. Usually, 2 inspectors will carry out each visit. Each visit will usually last for 2 days. Whenever possible, the same inspector will lead all the monitoring visits in the same local authority.

135. The table below shows an example timeline for a monitoring visit that takes place on a Tuesday and Wednesday. If a monitoring visit takes place on other days of the week, we will move the other activities accordingly. The lead inspector will provide the DCS with a specific timeline when they notify them of the visit.

Timescale: before the visit

Timescale	Example day of the week	Activities
10 days before the visit	Tuesday	Lead inspector requests child-level data
9 days before the visit	Wednesday	Local authority provides data, indicating which cases they have audited
8 days	Thursday	Lead inspector notifies local authority of specific

before the visit audited cases that the local authority should share

The week before the visit Wednesday Local authority shares audited cases
Local authority shares the information it uses to manage services for children and young people

The week before the visit Thursday and Friday Full team off-site evaluation of evidence
Telephone conference team meeting

Timescale: fieldwork

Example day of the week	Activities
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Monday	Off-site evaluation of evidence
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Tuesday	Full team on site gathering evidence
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Wednesday	Full team on site gathering evidence and providing feedback
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Before a monitoring visit

136. Two weeks before the visit, the lead inspector will ask the local authority to provide up-to-date child-level data. When providing the data, the local authority should indicate any cases that it has audited since the last monitoring visit.

137. The inspector may ask the local authority to audit cases. Usually, the inspector will request information about up to 6 cases that have already been audited by the local authority. The local authority should share the completed audits at least 3 working days before the monitoring visit.

138. We will only request information that is necessary to inform that monitoring visit. Requests will be based on the information in [Annex A](#).

139. Inspectors will provide details for accessing a secure online site that the local

authority can use to share this information.

Fieldwork for monitoring visits

140. The lead inspector and DCS will agree a timetable for the on-site activity. On-site activity will usually consist of evaluating the experience of up to 6 children and young people. Inspectors will evaluate the cases audited by the local authority to see how effective the local authority's auditing systems are.

141. To triangulate their findings, inspectors will look at a sample of other cases. Any sampling activity will be proportionate to the practice that inspectors are evaluating. Inspectors will usually only sample cases from the previous 3 months.

142. If the inspector identifies a cause for concern about the help, protection or care given to a child or children, they must bring it to the DCS's attention.

143. Inspectors will record the evidence collected and their conclusions during each monitoring visit. Inspectors must record the case numbers of tracked and sampled cases so that these can be cross-referenced in future visits.

144. At the end of each visit, the lead inspector will feed back a summary of the inspection findings to the local authority. It is for the local authority to decide who will attend this meeting. If the Secretary of State for Education has appointed a children's services commissioner, the local authority may invite the commissioner to attend the feedback as an observer. The Ofsted regional director and/or quality assurance manager may be present for the feedback. If the authority and inspectors disagree about the findings, this must be recorded.

145. The lead inspector and the local authority will discuss the areas to consider at the next monitoring visit. If the calendar month of the next monitoring visit is known, the lead inspector will confirm this and whether the local authority will need to audit any cases.

Roles and expectations of inspectors

The things inspectors should do when working as part of an inspection team.

146. In all inspections, all inspectors work collaboratively on all aspects of the scope to ensure that evidence is analysed as a group activity. In short and standard inspections, all inspectors usually gather evidence and evaluate the same cohort of children's experiences and progress at the same time. This is central to the effectiveness of a small team.

The lead inspector will:

- coordinate the inspection between the team and with the local authority area leaders
- challenge, support and give advice to the team and quality assure the team's work
- develop lines of enquiry alongside the team
- prioritise inspection activity according to lines of enquiry
- consider any health and safety risks for individual inspectors

The team inspector will:

- work across judgement areas to provide challenge and scrutiny to the work of other inspectors throughout the inspection and in the final judgement meeting
- present succinct analysis of the main findings based on reliable evidence
- quality assure their own and other inspectors' work during inspections

Inspection team meetings

147. Team meetings are important to ensure that the team covers the scope of the inspection. Inspectors should come together at the beginning, middle and end of each fieldwork day to:

- share and triangulate their evidence and analysis
- agree and record shared findings in their joint evidence record
- develop and close down lines of enquiry as a team
- build up an evidence-based view of the quality and impact of practice and leadership within the local authority area
- keep the lead inspector fully aware of any key developments
- enable the lead inspector to coordinate the inspection effectively

148. The team will meet for an extended period on the penultimate day on site to discuss findings, agree provisional judgements and identify areas for improvement.

Inspection methodology

The things that inspectors will do to gather and evaluate evidence and report their findings.

Inspection activity and gathering evidence

149. Almost all inspection evidence will be gathered by looking at individual children and young people's experiences. This will be largely through meeting with practitioners to understand the nature and impact of their work with children and families, including scrutinising electronic records. Inspectors will work with leaders and staff constructively and will act with professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect.

150. We take into account individual children's 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. We also recognise that for some children, 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.

151. Evaluating individual children's records that have already been audited by the local authority is an effective way for inspectors to understand the local authority and target their evidence-gathering. If the local authority's evaluation of practice is in line with our evaluation, this will usually reduce the need for further primary evidence in that part of the inspection.

152. When evaluating the experiences and progress of individual children, inspectors will consider the extent to which the local authority complies with the relevant legal duties as set out in the [Equality Act 2010](#), including, when relevant, the Public Sector Equality Duty and the [Human Rights Act 1998](#).

153. When evaluating individual children's experiences, inspectors will not grade individual pieces of work.

154. If statutory functions have been delegated, the inspectors will evaluate the experiences of children and young people in the same way as they do in areas where functions have not been delegated. For further information on delegated functions, see the section on [alternative delivery models](#).

155. When inspectors select the children and young people whose experiences they will evaluate, they will take into account the factors set out below:

- age, gender, disability and ethnicity
- children at risk of harm from physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect. Inspectors will also want to identify those children and young people who the local authority is concerned may be vulnerable to sexual and other forms of exploitation and those children and young people who have been missing from care, home and education. These children must be part of the cohort of children whose experiences inspectors evaluate
- educational achievement and ability
- type of placement, including out-of-area placements, kinship care or 'connected person' arrangements and children placed at home and subject to a care order (Regulation 24(3) Care Planning, Placement and Care Review (England) Regulations 2010)
- at least one child from a large sibling group
- children and young people supported by a third-party provider operating with social services functions delegated to it by the local authority (if the local authority has delegated functions to a provider of social work services; for further information on delegated functions, see the section on [alternative delivery models](#)).

156. The lead inspector will take into account any lines of enquiry identified before arriving on site or particular children and young people who are identified through the sample information, such as children who appear to have experienced significant delay.

157. It is important that inspectors examine good practice as part of the inspection. We encourage local authorities to provide examples of cases that demonstrate good practice that it has identified through local case audit activity.

158. In evaluating children and young people's experiences, inspectors will test the following thresholds:

- early help – including early help assessments
- referral and assessment
- children in need
- child protection (for investigation and for a plan)
- continuing help and support for families
- the decision to accommodate

- the decision to remove
- permanence planning
- matching and placement decisions, including work to support return home
- leaving care

159. Inspectors will base their judgements on contemporary practice. This will usually be practice in the 6 months before the inspection. They may need to evaluate practice from before this to understand a child's journey.

160. Judgements will generally be based on practice that has an impact on the child's or young person's current situation, although inspectors will read some historical information to understand the child's journey, their progress and how this relates to the plans for their future.

161. If case files are wholly or partly electronic, the local authority should arrange for each inspector to have individual access to all relevant electronic systems. Inspectors must return any paper case files when they are needed by the staff working with the child and/or family.

162. Inspectors will review a sample of supervision records and carers' records (when appropriate), including those related to the sample of children and young people.

Protecting personal data

163. During inspections and visits, inspectors will gather personal information that is necessary to help them evaluate local services. Our [privacy notices](#) set out what data we collect, what we do with it, how long we keep it for and people's rights under the Data Protection Act 2018.

Hearing the views of children and young people and their families

164. There are various opportunities to hear the views of children, young people and their families. Inspectors will use these whenever possible. These include:

- direct testimony – for example, speaking to those whose cases we are looking at

closely

- views of representative groups – for example, from the Children in Care Council
- views expressed by others advocating for children in care and care experienced young people, including foster carers and residential staff
- views directly recorded in case files and meeting minutes
- views expressed by practitioners
- views expressed by others advocating for children, young people and their families
- analysis of the annual questionnaires, including those from children in care, carers, social workers and stakeholders
- reviewing complaints made by children

165. Inspectors will talk to children and young people whenever possible during the inspection, although these discussions will not always be face to face. When talking to or about children or young people, inspectors are interested in hearing how the children and young people's rights are being considered, how their entitlements are realised and about their experiences of the local pledges or charters in practice. Inspectors may speak with children and their families during the notification period or outside of usual working hours during fieldwork. This will happen only when children and families indicate that this is their preferred time to speak with inspectors. The lead inspector will make sure that the DCS is aware of these arrangements. Any information gathered in these discussions will be part of the evidence base for the inspection or visit.

166. It is the responsibility of the local authority to inform inspectors of anything they need to know to carry out discussions with a child sensitively. Inspectors may read records about the child before a discussion with or about them. This is to help the inspector understand the context of the child's views, any communication needs they have or sensitive matters that may arise during the discussion. Inspectors will be proportionate and read only records that are necessary to ensure the discussion is child-centred. Inspectors will not pre-judge anything about a child's experience or progress as a result of accessing case records. Inspectors will inform the local authority if any information from the records causes inspectors to be concerned about the safety or wellbeing of a child.

167. Inspectors will provide the local authority with guidance to help prepare children, young people, carers and families to be involved in the inspection. Inspectors must make sure that children and young people and their families understand what their involvement in the inspection means before speaking with them about their experiences. We have published 2 documents with this [framework](#)

to help local authorities and inspectors explain to children and their families what their involvement in inspections and visits means.

168. Inspectors will discuss any risks or ethical issues concerned with meeting children and birth family members with the child's social worker or lead practitioner.

169. Inspectors will work with agencies to ensure that any child or young person with communication difficulties has access to the necessary support to facilitate her/his full involvement in the inspection.

170. We will also want to see and hear the impact of local consultation with all children and young people. This includes children in care, care experienced young people, carers and birth families. We will want to see how their feedback has been asked for, both individually and collectively, and taken into account to improve practice and services.

171. During a standard or short inspection, an inspector may meet with a group of foster carers, either an established group or a group identified through an open invitation to meet the inspection team.

Documentation

172. The inspection team will review the documentation requested in [Annex A](#). If the local authority wants to share any information additional to what is listed in Annex A, it must discuss this with the lead inspector first. The local authority must be clear why it believes the information is relevant to the inspection. The lead inspector will make the final decision about whether to accept the information as part of the inspection evidence.

When inspectors request further information

173. We sometimes have to ask for further information. This may be about a service or strategy or about an individual child's experiences.

174. Requests for further information about an individual child's experiences should not be seen as a negative. Sometimes it is because inspectors have insufficient information to know that a child is safe and it may appear that the child is at risk of harm. For example, the inspectors may be unable to find the information or it may not have been recorded by the local authority. After the local authority senior leadership team has responded to the request, inspectors are able to make a more

informed judgement about the quality and impact of the practice they have seen. In some cases, requests for further information enable inspectors to explore good practice.

175. At the start of the inspection, the lead inspector will set up a record of requests for further information and share this with the DCS. The lead inspector will ask the DCS to enter responses to a request for information on the record. When inspectors request information about a child, they will be specific about the issue they are asking the local authority to respond to.

Engaging with leaders and staff

Interviews with practitioners, managers and stakeholders

176. Inspectors will triangulate evidence by talking to practitioners and/or managers, either by telephone or in person. They will follow our code of conduct, acting with professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect. If children and young people are supported by a third-party provider as the result of statutory functions being delegated, inspectors will talk to the practitioners and managers of that provider in the same way as they would to local authority staff. Lead inspectors will only request that groups of people are brought together for discussions or meetings if this is the only way to triangulate evidence and is needed to explore lines of enquiry arising from case evaluations.

177. When talking to social workers about practice, inspectors are likely to ask questions about a range of issues, for example:

- the quality and impact of supervision and management oversight
- the ways in which they are helped to strengthen families and minimise risk
- workloads and workload management
- the availability, quality and impact of training and development opportunities
- the impact on practice of multi-agency training and the dissemination of learning from national or local learning reviews

178. In most instances, inspectors will want to have confidential conversations with practitioners and managers and will usually ask to speak alone with social workers. A social worker may ask to have a colleague present at this discussion to support them. This should not usually be their direct manager, unless the inspector agrees this is appropriate. It is the responsibility of both local authority staff and Ofsted

inspectors to ensure that discussions are not overheard or influenced by others. If the individuals that inspectors want to speak to are not available, they may talk to those who are deputising for them. If a member of staff becomes upset or distressed, inspectors will take a break from the discussion. The inspector will inform those responsible for that person's welfare, the lead inspector and the QA manager. The discussion will resume after the necessary steps have been taken to ensure the person's well-being. If appropriate, inspectors will change the arrangements for the staff member to enable the discussion to continue.

179. If local authorities are in a process of reform or implementing an improvement plan, the lead inspector will ensure that the impact of these changes is evaluated throughout the inspection and discussed with the senior managers. This is likely to be reflected in the report, particularly the impact of leaders on frontline social work practice judgement.

180. If, as part of the assessment of the impact of leadership on social work practice with children and families, inspectors identify an issue arising from the arrangements for discharging the functions of the DCS and lead member for children's services, they will look at the quality and effectiveness of the local authority's assurance and compliance process.

181. Statutory guidance states that the DCS and lead member should provide a clear line of political and professional accountability for children's well-being. The DCS should report to the chief executive and the lead member should report to the council leader or mayor, as the individuals with ultimate responsibility for the political and corporate leadership of the council.

182. It is legal for the DCS and lead member roles to be combined with other operational and political functions. However, given the breadth and importance of children's services functions that they cover, local authorities should give due consideration to protecting the discrete roles and responsibilities of the DCS and lead member before allocating any additional functions to individuals performing these roles.

183. If issues arise during inspection, inspectors will ask to see the local test of assurance. Inspectors will evaluate whether the focus on outcomes for children and young people has been weakened or diluted as a result of adding other responsibilities to the DCS and/or lead member roles. They will also seek to understand how the local authority has considered all aspects of any combined posts, for example the impact on both children and adult services if there is a joint DCS and director of adult social services post.

Engaging the DCS during an inspection/visit

184. The lead inspector will inform the DCS or another member of the senior staff of emerging findings throughout the inspection/visit. This is likely to be on a daily basis through a brief face-to-face meeting, which may involve other inspectors from the team and other leaders in the local authority. This gives the local authority the opportunity to challenge and understand emerging findings. In a large local authority, where the inspection team is working at different locations on different days, the lead inspector may ask the DCS to travel to that location for the daily meeting or be in touch by telephone or video conference.

185. These meetings will be short and focus on the main findings arising from the inspection. They will not be a description of all the inspection activity. The lead inspector should check that the DCS is clear about the relationship between the evidence and the emerging and/or substantiated findings.

186. Although the lead inspector will always offer the DCS opportunities for engagement, the DCS may choose whether or not to accept. For example, they may not be available to meet with the lead inspector due to other commitments. The extent to which the DCS engages with the inspection team will not, in itself, influence inspection judgements.

Local family justice system

187. In evaluating services for children subject to care, supervision and adoption proceedings, it is important to understand local authority performance in the context of the local family justice system and to gather a wide range of valuable evidence, particularly in reviewing the child's journey on coming into care and plans for permanence. Inspectors may contact the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) to hear its experience of local authority performance and get its perspective on the local family justice system.

188. Inspectors may, in some circumstances, decide to speak with the local judiciary (likely to be the local designated family judge and/or the chair of the family proceedings court bench) and/or court administration (court manager, family court listing officer or clerk to the family justices). Interviews will usually be by telephone.

189. We will not make judgements about family justice partner organisations or the judiciary in the report, but may report system-wide strengths and weaknesses.

190. The range of information gathered will vary according to the lines of enquiry in each area and will be proportionate.

191. Contact with the local Cafcass service area will add to the evidence base. Cafcass may have information about:

- response to referrals and requests for information
- the appropriateness of thresholds for care applications and timeliness of applications
- level and appropriateness of applications for section 25 secure orders and emergency protection orders
- the quality of the local authority's pre-proceeding work within the Public Law Outline (PLO)
- timeliness and quality of assessments and reports to court, including quality assurance processes
- the effectiveness of independent reviewing officers
- the local authority's engagement with the Local Family Justice Board
- the involvement of Cafcass in the local safeguarding arrangements and their effectiveness
- the quality of the local authority's legal advice and representation
- the appropriate allocation of requests for section 7 reports to Cafcass or the local authority

192. A note on the last point above: when a court is considering any question with respect to a child under the Children Act 1989, it can 'ask' a Cafcass officer or a local authority to report to the court. These often relate to questions like where a child should live or with whom they should have contact in circumstances when parents are divorcing or separating. A national protocol between Cafcass and ADCS states that if the child is in an open case to a local authority or a closed case of less than a month, the report should be prepared by the local authority. The protocol, called 'Determining whether Cafcass or a LA should prepare a s7', is available under [Cafcass/ADCS good practice guidance](#).

Recording evidence

193. Throughout an inspection or visit, inspectors will maintain a record of the evidence they gather. The record will include their individual and team analysis of the evidence. Inspectors may use an electronic recording system for this.

194. Each inspector will maintain records of the evidence they gather throughout the inspection. Inspectors must record the source, date and time of the evidence they

gather. If the local authority provides any evidence on paper that is essential to the inspection, the inspector will ask it to add electronic copies to the online portal.

195. The lead inspector must allocate time for team inspectors to analyse their record and add individual evaluative summaries to the team's shared evidence record.

196. Inspectors should meet at least once a day to discuss their individual findings and record shared evaluative summaries. These shared summaries will usually draw on findings from multiple sources of evidence gathered by more than one inspector – they are essential for underpinning feedback at keep-in-touch (KIT) meetings, judgements and the inspection report.

197. Evaluative summaries must set out the inspector's or team's view about the quality, effectiveness and extent of practice. They should not simply describe the practice that is in place. A 3-part structure can help to achieve summaries that are clear, concise and inform judgements and reporting effectively:

- start with an overall evaluative statement about the aspect of practice being considered
- briefly summarise the evidence underpinning this statement
- end with a comment on the difference this makes for children and young people

198. Inspectors should always consider and record what the evidence about practice with children and families tells them about the impact of local authority leaders.

199. When considered as a whole, the team's shared evaluative summaries must cover the scope of the inspection or visit and be clearly linked to the relevant headings in the evaluation criteria. They must reflect strengths and areas for improvement found across the scope. However, the number of summaries is less important than their quality.

200. All inspectors are responsible for reviewing the evidence record to identify gaps and make sure that the record is of good quality. The lead inspector will decide when sufficient evidence has been recorded about an issue so that it can be closed.

201. Inspectors should record individual summaries in the evidence record if they have serious concerns about the safety and welfare of a child that the local authority does not appear to be aware of and/or is not responding to appropriately. This may lead to a request for additional information, which inspectors should record.

202. Inspectors should also record summaries of examples of outstanding practice.

203. Inspectors should not use the names of individual children, young people or family members in their evidence records. They should use case reference numbers and/or initials. Inspectors should use job titles or roles for individual staff or practitioners.

204. The quality assurance manager will review the evidence record and challenge the team's findings to make sure that the 2 align. They will add their analysis to the evidence record, which may include recommending areas for further investigation by the inspection team.

Finalising evidence

205. Towards the end of the inspection or focused visit, the inspection team will complete its inspection activities and inspectors will meet to agree their findings and judgements. This meeting should be informed by clear and aligned evaluation of the evidence.

206. Inspectors will weigh the evidence against the evaluation criteria. At a standard or short inspection, inspectors will make a judgement of good if the characteristics set out in the framework are widespread and common practice and are demonstrably leading to improved outcomes. Inspectors will use their professional judgement to determine the weight and significance of their findings. They will make a judgement of good if the inspection team concludes that the evidence overall sits most appropriately with a finding of good. This is what we describe as 'best fit'.

207. At the end of a focused visit, the team will agree the main strengths and areas for improvement and whether there are any priority actions.

208. Before formal feedback at the end of a standard or short inspection, the lead inspector and quality assurance manager will usually inform the DCS of the provisional judgements from the inspection.

Feedback at the end of the inspection/visit

209. On the final day on site, the lead inspector will invite the DCS and senior leaders to meet with the inspection team to hear the provisional findings and/or judgements and, most importantly, the evidence that supports them. The meeting should encourage dialogue between the inspection team and the local authority

about this evidence. Because the strengths and areas for development should have been discussed in the daily meetings, there should be no surprises on the final day. In short and standard inspections, the lead inspector will inform the DCS of the provisional judgements before the meeting. Attendance at the feedback meeting is voluntary and any attendee may leave at any time.

210. Senior leaders are invited to engage in this final discussion about the evidence supporting the provisional findings and/or judgements to:

- understand the evidence that the team used to reach findings and/or judgements to support improvement (for local authorities judged to be good, this includes understanding the factors that kept them from being judged outstanding)
- participate in a dialogue about the areas for development that are likely to follow the inspection and to ensure that senior leaders fully understand the issues that have been identified
- understand what will make the most difference for the individual local authority and the children, young people and families that it serves
- support understanding of the evidence so that the findings and/or judgements of the inspection can be disseminated accurately and inform internal discussions about improvement

211. To make findings and/or judgements clear and to inform the discussion with the local authority, inspectors should share their analysed, prioritised and themed summary evidence. They will highlight strengths and areas for development across the scope of the inspection/visit. This is an opportunity for dialogue with senior leaders to help them understand the findings and not just a scripted presentation by inspectors. The meeting will usually last no longer than 60 minutes. Inspectors will not have produced a written report or letter at this stage of the inspection.

212. The lead inspector will outline the team's final findings and/or judgements. Members of the inspection team will then describe to the local authority the key evidence that supports their findings and/or judgements and the areas they have debated. They will invite discussion about what this means. The discussion should relate to the scope of the inspection/visit and be focused on the experience of children and young people through evidenced examples.

213. At the feedback meeting, the lead inspector will set out the procedures for raising any concerns or issues after fieldwork, sharing the draft report/letter for the local authority to review, publishing the report/letter and making a formal complaint. Local authority leaders can share inspection findings, in confidence, with others who were not involved in the inspection. This may include their colleagues, family

members, medical advisers and/or their wider support group. Leaders should not make the findings public.

Engaging children's services commissioners appointed by the Secretary of State for Education

214. At the time of an inspection or visit, a commissioner appointed by the Secretary of State for Education may be reviewing action taken by the local authority to secure improvement to children's services. This is usually in a local authority that is having a monitoring visit or re-inspection because it was judged to be inadequate at its previous inspection. The commissioner is an important stakeholder.

215. Ofsted will contact the DCS to announce the inspection or visit. The local authority should inform the commissioner and any other relevant partners. Ofsted will also inform the DfE that an inspection or visit has started. The DfE would also inform the commissioner.

216. The lead inspector should contact the commissioner for their view of the action taken by the local authority to improve. This will usually be in the week before fieldwork. The lead inspector will use the commissioner's information to refine their lines of enquiry, not as primary evidence.

217. It is for the local authority to decide whether the commissioner should attend the feedback meeting. If a commissioner does attend, this will be as an observer.

218. In some circumstances, the commissioner may be providing or facilitating direct improvement support to the local authority in addition to their role reviewing services for the Secretary of State for Education. For example, if the commissioner is employed by a local authority or organisation delivering children's services, they may offer peer support and challenge through members of their own children's services team. If this is the case, the guidance above still applies. It remains the responsibility of the local authority to carry out its statutory functions and demonstrate what it is doing to improve children's experiences and progress, even when it is delivering this with support or in partnership with others.

Inspection reports and letters

219. The following table sets out the kind of report we write after each type of inspection or visit:

Type of inspection	Type of report
Standard inspection	Inspection report with judgements on the Ofsted 4-point scale Plus, a standalone summary written for children and young people
Short inspection	Inspection report with judgements on the Ofsted 4-point scale Plus, a standalone summary written for children and young people
Focused inspection	Letter setting out narrative findings about strengths and areas to improve
Monitoring visit	Letter setting out narrative findings about strengths and areas to improve We do not usually publish a letter after the first monitoring visit, unless this is the second set of monitoring visits for a local authority.

220. The lead inspector will write the inspection report/letter. The lead inspector is responsible for collating all the information into a final report following fieldwork and is accountable for its quality and integrity.

221. Reports/letters should:

- be concise, evaluative documents, written in clear, straightforward language and be free of jargon
- be a fair and accurate reflection of the local area being inspected, with text, balance and tone that reflect the quality of children's experiences
- be written so that they highlight good and outstanding practice and identify clear areas of strength and improvement for the local authority
- strike a balance between being accessible to a wider audience and being of value to the local authority
- be sufficiently clear, precise and detailed about areas that need to improve so the local authority has a basis for subsequent action to lead to improvement

Sections in the report/letter

222. The first page of the report for a standard or short inspection will include the graded judgements and a brief summary that answers these questions:

1. What do we know about the overall experiences of children living in this local authority?
2. To what extent do leaders know about the quality of frontline practice?
3. How well do they support practice to help it stay or become good?
4. What has changed for children since the last inspection?

223. The report will then identify areas where improvement is needed most. The rest of the report will include a section on each of the judgement areas.

224. Letters following focused visits will set out the findings from the visit. The letter may identify a small number of areas where improvement is needed most in relation to the practice inspectors looked at. If inspectors find serious weaknesses, they will include a section that identifies areas for priority action. If inspectors identify an area for priority action, the letter will be subject to additional moderation. If this will affect the pre-publication checks and milestones, we will write to the DCS to confirm this.

225. After a monitoring visit, the inspector will write a brief report about their findings and, in particular, their evaluation of the local authority's progress.

Summary for children and young people

226. After each standard and short inspection, we will provide a summary of the inspection findings for children and young people. This document will be separate from the main report.

227. We will not publish this summary. We will send it to the local authority at the same time that we send the pre-publication version of the main report. It will be for the local authority to decide how best to share this summary with the children and young people it helps, protects and cares for.

Writing the report/letter

228. When identifying the things that need to improve most, inspectors must ensure that these are proportionate to the overall grade in inspection reports and to the

findings in letters. This section of the report/letter must help the local authority to fully understand the areas of the service where improvement is needed most to ensure that children receive or continue to receive a good or better service. We will set out the area of service or practice that needs to improve but will not make a recommendation as to how the local authority should remedy this issue.

229. In the rest of the report/letter, inspectors will only report the main strengths and areas that need to improve. Standard and short inspection reports do not need to report on every aspect of what has been inspected. If a particular issue is not mentioned, this will be because it was neither a strength nor an area in need of improvement.

230. Inspectors must make clear the extent of all the issues reported and the experience that children and young people have and the progress they make. The report must outline the local authority's knowledge about these children and the effectiveness of its response. If any specific group of children is particularly affected – such as those from a specific age, community or ethnic group, disabled children or those with a specific placement type, for example fostered children – inspectors should include this in the report.

231. Reports following a standard or short inspection should be no more than 10 pages.

232. If children and young people are supported by a third-party provider operating under delegated functions, strengths and areas for improvement must include the extent to which the local authority assures itself of the effectiveness of help, protection and care given to children, young people, families and carers. This includes the effectiveness of the contract management and quality assurance arrangements, as defined by [The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 \(Relevant Care Functions\) \(England\) Regulations 2014](#).

Arrangements for publishing inspection reports and letters

233. The quality assurance manager allocated to the inspection will review the report/letter and support the lead inspector throughout the report writing process. Our regional director and/or national director, social care, will review all reports.

234. After we send the draft report/letter to the local authority, it will have 5 working days to comment on the report/letter, inspection process and findings. We will

respond to the local authority's comments when we send the final report/letter. If the local authority wishes to submit a formal complaint, it will have 5 working days after we send the final version of the report/letter to do so.

235. We will usually publish the report/letter on our [reports site](#) 8 working days after we send the final version to the local authority. If the local authority submits a complaint within the deadline set out above, we will not publish the report/letter while we consider the complaint.

Publication stage	Standard and short inspections	Focused visits and monitoring visits
Draft report sent to local authority for comments	10 working days after inspectors complete fieldwork	5 working days after inspectors complete fieldwork
Local authority has 5 working days to return any comments about the findings and the inspection process	11 to 15 working days after fieldwork	6 to 10 working days after fieldwork
Final report sent to the local authority (pre-publication, under embargo)	22 working days after inspectors complete fieldwork	16 working days after inspectors complete fieldwork
Local authority may submit a formal complaint within 5 working days of receiving the final report	23 to 27 working days after fieldwork	17 to 21 working days after fieldwork
Report/letter published on Ofsted's reports site	30 working days after inspectors complete fieldwork	24 working days after inspectors complete fieldwork

Quality assurance

236. The principles of quality assurance for all inspections, focused visits and monitoring visits are based on the assumption that the lead inspector owns the inspection and is responsible for the quality of the report/letter.

237. Quality assurance arrangements will be flexible and proportionate depending on the type of inspection activity carried out. The level of quality assurance will be influenced by:

- whether it is an inspection resulting in a judgement or a visit resulting in a letter
- the experience of the team
- the influencing factors of the local authority, including size and location
- local intelligence held by us.

Incomplete inspections

238. We will apply our policy on incomplete inspections, [Gathering additional evidence to secure an incomplete inspection – Ofsted protocol](#), where appropriate.

Sharing information with other inspectorates

239. We share the final version of our local authority reports with our partner inspectorates under embargo until the report is published. Our partner inspectorates are the CQC, HMICFRS, HMIP, HMI Prisons and HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate.

240. If there is evidence of significant concerns relating to the practice of other agencies, we will write to the relevant inspectorate setting out the concerns in the report and our advice that they may wish to investigate under their powers. There may be occasions when, due to the serious nature of the concern, we will share information with other inspectorates during the inspection.

241. It is the responsibility of the lead inspector to draft and submit letters to partner chief inspectors at the same time that the draft inspection report is submitted for quality assurance.

242. If inspection evidence suggests that there are weaknesses in practice in other providers or agencies that we regulate or inspect, inspectors will record this to inform future inspections of those providers/agencies.

Conduct during inspections

243. Ofsted's [code of conduct](#) sets out the expectations for both inspectors and providers. At the set-up discussion, the lead inspector will explain these expectations and will ask providers to read the code. Inspectors will work with leaders and staff constructively and will act with professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect.

Concerns and complaints about an inspection

Concerns

244. Most of our work is carried out smoothly and without incident. If concerns arise during an inspection, these should be raised with the lead inspector or quality assurance manager as soon as possible during the inspection/visit. This provides an opportunity to resolve the matter before the inspection/visit is completed. If an issue remains unresolved, the local authority can contact the quality assurance manager – a senior HMI who is independent of the inspection team – on the working day after the end of fieldwork. This is an opportunity for the local authority to raise concerns about the inspection process or outcomes informally to try to resolve these concerns at the earliest opportunity.

245. The local authority will have an opportunity to raise concerns about the draft inspection report, inspection process and findings when it receives the draft report.

Complaints

246. If it is not possible to resolve concerns during the inspection, shortly after the inspection or through submitting comments about the draft report, the local authority may wish to make a formal complaint when it receives the final report/letter, before the report/letter is published. It can do this by following our [complaints procedure](#).

247. If the local authority wishes to submit a formal complaint, it will have 5 working days after receiving the final report to do so.

Inspection feedback survey

248. After a standard inspection, short inspection or focused visit, we will ask the local authority for feedback through an online survey. We will send the local authority a link to this survey at the same time that we send the final inspection report/letter.

249. We do not send a feedback survey after each monitoring visit to an inadequate local authority. We will ask for feedback about monitoring visits in the survey that we send to the local authority after its re-inspection. We will use feedback from local authorities to improve our inspections.

Action plan after an inspection or visit

250. After a standard or short inspection, the local authority should write an action plan that responds to the findings in the report. It must submit its action plan to us at ProtectionOfChildren@ofsted.gov.uk within 70 working days of receiving the final inspection report. The requirement for this is set out in the [Education and Inspections Act 2006 \(Inspection of Local Authorities\) Regulations 2007](#). We will acknowledge receipt of the action plan. For local authorities judged inadequate or requires improvement to be good, inspectors will offer constructive criticism of the plan. Inspectors will offer to have a conversation with the DCS (or their nominee) to discuss the action plan in the spirit of 'critical friend'. Ultimately, it is for the local authority to satisfy itself that the action plan is fit for purpose.

251. Following a focused visit, updating the existing action plan from the previous inspection will be deemed sufficient for Ofsted and the DfE's purposes. The local authority should send the updated action plan to us when it shares its self-evaluation in preparation for the next annual engagement meeting.

252. If a focused visit results in an area for priority action, the local authority should submit an action plan that responds to the priority action within 70 working days of receiving the final focused visit letter. We will also ask that the local authority share a draft of its action plan within 20 working days of receiving the focused visit letter. This is so we can be assured that the local authority is taking action with an urgency commensurate with the seriousness of the findings.

253. The local authority does not need to submit an action plan to us after a monitoring visit.

Alternative delivery models and delegation of local authority functions

Information about how we inspect and report when a local authority delivers services through a third-party organisation, for example a trust.

254. This section provides information about inspections when a local authority has delegated statutory functions to a third-party provider – an alternative delivery model.

255. In these circumstances (with the exception of arrangements under section 497A(4AA) of the Education Act 2006), the inspection is still an inspection of the local authority. This is because the third party is acting as the local authority's agent.

Local authority functions

256. Under Part 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, local authorities may make arrangements with a body corporate for the discharge of some or all of the local authority's statutory care functions.

257. Relevant care functions are those functions set out in section 1(2) of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and regulation 3 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 (Relevant Care Functions) (England) Regulations 2014. Relevant care functions do not include those functions set out in section 2 of the Children and Young Persons Act. A body corporate that is carried on for profit may not be party to an arrangement for the discharge of a function set out in regulation 3 of the 2014 Regulations.

Direction by the Secretary of State for Education

258. Under section 497A(4) of the Education Act 1996, the Secretary of State for Education may direct a local authority to contract out its social services functions relating to children or transfer those functions to a nominee. At the time of writing, the delegation of functions by local authorities has either been on a voluntary basis (with no direction from the Secretary of State for Education) or under a section 497(4) direction. In both cases, the body operating under the delegation is acting as the agent of the local authority. Any inspection judgement is therefore of the local authority.

259. If the Secretary of State for Education has given a direction under section 497A(4A), then by virtue of section 497A(4AA), any reference to a local authority is to be read as a reference to the body corporate or person who is exercising the function. If a direction is made under section 497(4A) or (4AA), the inspection is of the nominee or the Secretary of State for Education's exercise of the relevant functions and therefore the judgement will be of that person/body and not the local authority. At the time of writing, no such directions have been made.

Judgements about leadership when there are alternative delivery models

260. If a local authority makes arrangements with a third-party provider to discharge functions, that provider is acting as the agent of the local authority. Therefore, inspectors will evaluate their effectiveness using the same evaluation criteria.

261. When applying the criteria, inspectors will consider whether:

- effective contract monitoring arrangements by the local authority are in place to ensure that children receive services that meet their needs
- the local authority reviews these arrangements regularly to ensure that they remain effective
- the local authority has proportionate scrutiny arrangements in place to ensure that it fulfils its role as the corporate parent
- in cases where the third-party provider is responsible for managing local authority partnerships, the provider is engaged with partner organisations to ensure that their responsibilities are carried out to a high standard
- in cases where a local authority has delegated all of its functions to a third-party

provider, the chief executive or equivalent and the board of that provider discharge the individual and collective responsibilities of local authority leaders (as outlined)

- in cases where only some functions have been delegated, the arrangements for how the local authority holds the provider to account are proportionate to the nature and extent of delegation

262. All references in the evaluation criteria to a 'local authority' also refer to all arrangements for alternative delivery models.

Action plans when there are alternative delivery models

263. We and the DfE have agreed that the local authority and alternative delivery model (ADM)/trust are responsible for different aspects of any action plans. Our expectations are that:

- arrangements reflect what has already been agreed as part of existing service contract
- the local authority will draft the overarching strategic elements (information taken from any existing services contract) that would include any wider issues that are not the responsibility of the ADM/trust (for example governance, relationship with trust, scrutiny function and support services)
- the ADM/trust should draft the operational content describing how outcomes will be achieved to address our findings
- the local authority is responsible for submitting the plan (copied to the ADM/trust)

264. It must be made clear whether the plan has been agreed and, if there is any disagreement, these areas must be set out.

265. If the ADM/trust has been created at the direction of the Secretary of State for Education, the plan should be copied to the Secretary of State to enable these issues to be addressed through the appropriate route.

Evaluation criteria

266. This section sets out our description of what a good experience for children and young people looks like. Inspectors use this to make their judgements.

Overall effectiveness

267. Inspectors will determine the overall effectiveness graded judgement by taking account of the grading of the other judgements that have been agreed and by looking at:

- the extent of good practice across the service
- the extent and impact of any areas for improvement
- whether areas for improvement have been identified and the extent to which leaders and managers have a 'grip' on the issue

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection

268. A local authority is likely to be judged good if the following apply:

Evaluation criteria	Description
Early help	Children, young people and families are offered help when needs and/or concerns are first identified. The early help improves the child's situation and supports sustainable progress. The interface between early help and statutory work is clearly and effectively differentiated.
Identifying and responding to children's needs and appropriate thresholds	Professionals identify children and young people in need of help and protection, including young carers. They make appropriate referrals to children's social care and are able to access social work expertise and advice. There is a timely and effective response to referrals, including out of normal office hours and referrals to the designated officer. Professionals understand thresholds. This leads to children and families receiving effective, proportionate and timely interventions, which improve their situation.

Making good decisions and providing effective help

Children and families experience child protection enquiries that are thorough and lead to timely action, which reduces the risk of harm to children.

Allegations of abuse, mistreatment or poor practice by professionals and carers are taken seriously. Steps are taken to protect children and young people and the management of allegations against staff is robust and effective.

Assessments and plans are dynamic and change in the light of emerging issues and risks. Assessments (including early help assessments) are timely and proportionate to risk. They are informed by research and by the historical context and significant events for each child. They result in direct help for families, including young carers if needed and are focused on achieving sustainable progress for children. Help given to families is proportionate to the level of need. Information-sharing between agencies and professionals is timely, specific, effective and lawful.

Children in need of help and/or protection have a plan setting out how they will be helped, how their needs are going to be met and how risk will be reduced within the timescales appropriate for the child. If families refuse to engage, clear contingency plans are in place. These are based on the assessment of need and risks to the child. Action is taken to avoid drift and delay. Plans and decisions are reviewed. Alternative decisive action is taken if children's circumstances do not change and the help provided does not meet their needs, or the risk of harm or actual harm remains or intensifies.

Children and young people are protected through effective multi-agency arrangements. Key participants attend multi-agency meetings (for example, case conferences, strategy meetings, core groups and multi-agency risk assessment conferences). These meetings are effective forums for timely information-sharing, planning, decision-making and monitoring. Actions happen within agreed timescales and the help and protection provided reduce risk and meet need.

Management oversight of

Decisions are made by suitably qualified and experienced social workers and managers. Actions are clearly recorded. Systematic

frontline practice and high-quality management oversight of frontline practice drives child-centred plans and actions within the timescales appropriate for the child. Effective and timely planning, support and decision-making takes place during pre-proceedings work.

Participation and direct work with children and families Children, young people and families benefit from stable and meaningful relationships with social workers. They are consistently seen and seen alone by social workers if it is in the best interests of the child. Practice is based on understanding each child's day-to-day lived experience. Children are safer as a result of the help they receive.

Children and young people are listened to. Practice focuses on their needs and experiences and is influenced by their wishes and feelings. Children, young people and families have timely access to, and use the services of, an advocate. Feedback from children and their families about the effectiveness of the help, care or support they receive informs practice and service development.

Identifying and responding to all types of abuse recognising the vulnerability of specific groups of children. Neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse and emotional abuse are effectively identified and responded to. Children and young people who live in households where at least one parent or carer misuses substances or suffers from mental ill-health, or where there is domestic violence, are helped and protected.

Social workers recognise the factors that can make children more vulnerable and tailor their interventions appropriately. This includes, but is not limited to, disabled children, children who are privately fostered, children not attending school, vulnerable adolescents and children at risk of radicalisation or exploitation or becoming involved in gangs.

Children and young people who are missing from home, care or full-time school education (including those who are excluded from school) and those at risk of exploitation and trafficking receive well-coordinated responses that reduce the harm or risk of harm to them. The local authority has arrangements in place to identify the number of children not in full-time school education and to respond if there are concerns about their welfare. For those who are missing or often missing, there is a clear plan of urgent action in place to protect them and to reduce the risk of harm or further harm.

Outstanding	‘The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection’ is likely to be judged outstanding if the response to children and families is consistently good or better and results in sustained improvement to the lives of children, young people and their families.
Requires improvement to be good	‘The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection’ is likely to be judged requires improvement if there are no widespread or serious failures that create or leave children being harmed or at risk of harm. However, the local authority is not yet consistently delivering good help and protection for children, young people and families.
Inadequate	‘The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection’ is likely to be judged inadequate if there are widespread or serious failures, which leave children being harmed or at risk of harm.

The experiences and progress of children in care

269. This area is likely to be judged good if the following apply:

Evaluation criteria	Description
Making good decisions for children	<p>Children and young people become looked after in a timely manner and in their best interests. Decisions that children should be in care are based on clear, effective, comprehensive and risk-based assessments, involving, if appropriate, other professionals working with the family.</p> <p>If it is not possible for children to return home, suitable and timely plans for permanence are made for them to live away from the family home.</p> <p>If the plan for a child is to return home, there is purposeful work carried out with the family so that it is safe for the child to return.</p>

Further care episodes are avoided unless they are provided as a part of an appropriate plan of support.

The wishes and feelings of children, and those of their parents, are clearly set out in timely and authoritative assessments and applications to court. Assessments of family members as potential kinship carers are carried out promptly to a good standard.

Children's care plans comprehensively address their needs and experiences, including the need for timely permanence. Children's plans are thoroughly and independently reviewed with the involvement, as appropriate, of parents, carers, residential staff and other adults who know them. Plans for their futures continue to be appropriate and ambitious and consider how they will be supported and prepared for the experience of leaving care.

Participation and direct work with children in care

Children are seen regularly and seen alone by their social worker and children understand what is happening to them. Children have positive and stable relationships with professionals and carers who are committed to protecting them and promoting their welfare.

Children in care are helped to understand their rights, entitlements and responsibilities. They know how to give feedback or complain and understand what has happened as a result of their complaint. Their complaints are treated seriously and are responded to clearly. Urgent action is taken and services improve when necessary. Children and young people have access to an advocate and independent visitor when needed.

The local authority celebrates the achievements of children in care. It shows it is ambitious for their futures.

Children in care and care leavers are well represented by a Children in Care Council or similar body, which is regularly consulted on how to improve the support for these children and young people.

Helping and protecting

Children in care are protected or helped to keep themselves safe from bullying, homophobic behaviour and other forms of discrimination.

Any risks associated with children in care offending, misusing drugs or alcohol, going missing or being sexually exploited or exploited in any other way are known well by the adults who care for them. Children receive help to reduce the risk of harm or actual harm. Children are safe and feel safe. They are helped to understand how they can keep themselves safe.

Health

Children in care are in good physical and mental health, or are being helped to improve their health. Their health needs are identified and met.

Learning and enjoyment

Children and young people make good educational progress at school or other provision since being in care. They receive the same support from their carers as they would from a good parent.

Children and young people who do not attend school have prompt access to suitable good-quality registered alternative provision. There is regular review of their progress. Urgent action is taken if children are missing from education or if their attendance reduces.

Children and young people enjoy what they do and have access to a range of social, educational and recreational opportunities. Adult carers have suitable delegated authority to make prompt decisions about children's day-to-day lives.

Stability and permanence

Children and young people are safe and settled where they live. They move only in line with care plans, when they are at risk of harm or are being harmed. They do not live anywhere that fails to meet their needs. They are able to live with their brothers and sisters when this is in their best interests, including when they are adopted. Children and young people have appropriate, carefully assessed and supported contact with family, friends and other people who are important to them.

Children who live away from their 'home' local authority have access to education and health services that meet their needs as soon as they move outside of their 'home' area. Placing local authorities notify the 'receiving' local authority that a child is moving to their area promptly and ensure that services are in place to meet the child's needs before the child moves.

There is a sufficiently wide range and choice of placements available to meet the needs of children in care.

Effective recruitment, assessment, training and support of carers (including, as appropriate, foster carers, adopters, special guardians and residential staff) ensure that children and young people receive high-quality, safe and stable care that meets their diverse needs.

All agencies and professionals work together effectively to reduce any unnecessary delay in receiving support and achieving permanence for children.

Children are effectively prepared for, and carefully matched with, a permanent placement. Their wishes and feelings influence the decisions about where they live. Children are helped to develop secure, primary attachments with the adults caring for them. They are helped to understand their life histories, experiences and identities.

The accessibility, style and clarity of case records enhance the understanding that children in care have about their histories and experiences.

Adoption and kinship care are considered carefully and promptly for all children who are unable to return home or to their birth families and who need a permanent alternative home. This includes good use of concurrent and parallel planning, the Adoption Register and Fostering for Adoption.

Fostering and adoption panels, and the respective decision-makers, ensure that children are effectively matched with families. Local authorities have arrangements in place to ensure consistently good practice and receive regular feedback on the effectiveness of the work of panels.

Children who are adopted, their adoptive families, their birth relatives and adopted adults are informed, and are aware of, their entitlement to receive an assessment of their adoption support needs. When support is needed, it is provided quickly, effectively and leads to improved circumstances for the children, young

people, families and carers involved.

Outstanding	'The experiences and progress of children in care' is likely to be judged outstanding if the response to children in care is consistently good or better and results in sustained improvement to the lives of children in care.
Requires improvement to be good	'The experiences and progress of children in care' is likely to be judged requires improvement if there are no widespread or serious failures or unnecessary delays that result in the welfare of children in care not being safeguarded and promoted. However, the local authority is not yet consistently delivering good help and care for children in care.
Inadequate	'The experiences and progress of children in care' is likely to be judged inadequate if there are widespread or serious failures, including unnecessary delay in achieving permanence, which result in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.

The experiences and progress of care leavers

Evaluation criteria	Description
Relationships and participation	<p>Care leavers have positive, trusting and stable relationships with personal advisers, carers and other professionals. Professionals are committed to protecting them, promoting their emotional health and well-being, acting in their best interests and helping them to understand what is happening in their lives. They are ambitious for young people's futures and celebrate their achievements.</p> <p>Care leavers are supported to maintain relationships with people who are important to them (for example, family, friends, carers, former carers and professionals). They have strong social networks that they can rely on when they need support, and that keep them from experiencing loneliness and isolation. These relationships and social networks endure into adulthood.</p>

Care leavers have access to a range of social and recreational opportunities that help them to create and maintain supportive and positive relationships with people that are important to them and to feel a part of their community.

Professionals create a culture where young people want to keep in touch. Social workers and/or personal advisers are proactive in creating opportunities to engage with care leavers, including those who are not currently in regular contact with the local authority. The level of engagement with individual young people reflects their known needs and preferences.

Care leavers are helped to understand their rights, entitlements and responsibilities, including their right to independent advocacy that meets their needs. They know how to give feedback or complain and understand what has happened as a result. Their complaints are treated seriously and are responded to clearly. Urgent action is taken and services improve when necessary.

The local authority consults widely with care leavers and involves them in designing services. Young people are well represented by a Children in Care Council (or similar body), which is regularly and routinely consulted about services for them and has direct access to the corporate parenting board. Young people's views lead to improvements in services.

Health and emotional well-being

Care leavers are in good physical and mental health or are being helped to improve their health through access to services that meet their needs. Practitioners understand young people's emotional well-being and mental health needs, including the potential impact of trauma and adverse life experiences. The local authority works effectively with their partners in the health sector to ensure that care leavers can access good physical and mental health services, including adult mental health services, when these are needed.

Care leavers have access to and understand their full health history.

Local offer for care

Care leavers are aware of and understand the local offer. The local authority's offer is ambitious, clear and accessible. It takes account

leavers

of the corporate parenting principles, sets out how the local authority is delivering on young people's statutory entitlements and is clear about what further discretionary support the local authority offers. The local offer is clear about the help provided to young people with specific needs, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, young parents and young people who have had contact with the criminal justice system.

The local authority consults care leavers effectively on the local offer. It monitors how effective the local offer is at providing good experiences for young people and helping them to make progress. The local authority reviews and updates the offer regularly to ensure that it continues to meet young people's needs.

Children's services work closely with other local authority departments and local partners to develop a multi-agency offer for care leavers that supports their overall well-being. The corporate parenting board takes ownership of the offer and monitors its effectiveness.

Making good decisions for care leavers

The wishes and feelings of care leavers are set out clearly in timely and authoritative assessments. Planning for leaving care starts sufficiently early to meet young people's needs and builds on existing care and personal education plans. Young people are actively involved in creating plans for their future and their views are central to decisions about their lives.

Decisions about care leavers consider any needs related to their specific circumstances, including whether they are an unaccompanied asylum seeker, a young parent or have had contact with the criminal justice system.

Helping and protecting

Care leavers are protected and helped to keep themselves safe from all forms of bullying, discrimination and harassment, such as homophobic behaviour, racism and stigma that they may encounter because they are care experienced.

Care leavers feel safe. The local authority works effectively with its partners to respond to risks associated with young people offending, misusing drugs or alcohol, going missing or being sexually or criminally exploited. Young people receive help to

reduce the risk of harm or actual harm and are helped to understand how they can keep themselves safe.

Employment, education and training

The local authority supports care leavers to be ambitious and aspirational about their education and employment choices. Young people know what assistance is available to help them find education and employment, and they receive good careers advice that helps them to make decisions about their future. Young people are encouraged and supported to continue their education and training, or to return to education and training at a time that is right for them.

Care leavers make progress in employment, education or training that they enjoy, which meets their needs and interests and helps them achieve their potential.

The local authority works closely with its partners, education providers, the virtual school and local businesses to secure a range of employment, education and training opportunities for care leavers, including work experience, apprenticeships and further and higher education

Support into adulthood

Care leavers have effective pathway plans. These plans are created sufficiently early, address young people's needs, are aspirational and set out clearly how young people will be supported to achieve their goals. Plans are dynamic and reviewed regularly, reflecting that young people's needs and wishes may change and that they may need multiple opportunities to make the choices that are right for them. Plans and reviews involve all key people, including the young person, their social worker and their personal adviser. Young people understand their pathway plans and are fully involved in developing them.

Care leavers have enough time to develop a trusting relationship with their personal adviser before they leave care. Personal advisers know young people well. They are well informed about young people's plans for the future, their progress and their well-being. Personal advisers help young people to access services that meet their needs.

Care leavers know they are entitled to see their records. They can

access their case records quickly and easily and are supported to do this. Their records are clear and provide a comprehensive record of important life events. The local authority helps young people to understand their histories and experiences, including why they were in care, and to have a clear sense of who they are.

Care leavers have somewhere secure and stable to live that best meets their needs, where they feel safe and where they can develop their independence skills. Risks of tenancy breakdown or homelessness are identified and addressed early; alternative plans and support are put in place promptly when necessary and reasonable efforts are made to avoid young people being deemed intentionally homeless. Houses in multiple occupation are only used when it is a young person's choice and it is in their best interests. When young people live in supported accommodation, the local authority ensures that their accommodation is suitable and that risks to their safety or welfare are assessed and managed well.

Care leavers are provided with all the key documents they need to give them control over their lives as young adults, such as national insurance numbers, birth certificates and passports. They have the resources and financial support they need to engage with education, employment and training and to connect with people who are important to them. For example, they have devices to get online, reliable and affordable internet access and affordable transportation.

Care leavers who live away from their 'home' local authority have access to education and health services that meet their needs as soon as they move outside of their 'home' area. Placing local authorities notify the 'receiving' local authority that a young person is moving to their area promptly and ensure that services are in place to meet the young person's needs before they move. Arrangements for young people to stay connected to their 'home' local authority address any relevant safeguarding risks.

Care leavers develop the skills and confidence they need to become independent and successful adults, for example being able to manage their finances and parenting skills. They receive the practical, emotional and financial support they need until they

are at least 21 and, when necessary, until they are 25.

Care leavers leave care and move towards independence at a time and pace that is right for them. Young people are encouraged to remain in care until their 18th birthday, when this is in their best interests. After their 18th birthday, they are supported to live with or close to the people who are important to them, such as previous carers or their immediate or extended family. Positive and loving relationships and social networks established while they were in care endure into adulthood.

Outstanding	'The experiences and progress of care leavers' is likely to be judged outstanding if the response to young people is consistently good or better and results in sustained improvement to their lives.
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Requires improvement to be good	'The experiences and progress of care leavers' is likely to be judged requires improvement if there are no widespread or serious failures or unnecessary delays that result in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted. However, the local authority is not yet consistently delivering good help and support to care leavers.
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Inadequate	'The experiences and progress of care leavers' is likely to be judged inadequate if there are widespread or serious failures, including a failure of the local authority to keep in touch with them, which result in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.
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The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families

270. When reporting, it should be clear which tier of management the strengths and areas for improvement relate to.

271. This judgement is likely to be judged good if the following apply:

Evaluation criteria	Description
Strategic	The leadership of the council, including the chief executive, lead

leadership

member (and other members) and the DCS recognise and prioritise the needs of children and this is reflected in corporate decision-making, action and active attendance at key committees and boards.

The chief executive and lead member are well informed and hold the DCS and their leadership team to account for the quality of practice and the challenges in the local area. This is exemplified through accurate assessments of practice that drive improvement.

Strategic leaders ensure that relationships with key partners, including the health community, the police, schools, Cafcass and the family courts, provide a helpful and effective context for social workers and practitioners to work effectively with children and families.

The local authority is an active, strong and committed corporate parent – in line with the corporate parenting principles ([see Section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017](#)). There is a corporate sense of responsibility for children in care and care leavers and the chief executive leads a local authority that recognises and prioritises the needs of children in all aspects, such as housing, career opportunities, education and learning.

Learning culture

The local authority has a track record of responding appropriately, effectively and quickly to areas for development, service deficiencies or new demands, and shows resilience to new challenges. The local authority's self-evaluation of practice is accurate.

The local authority has detailed and relevant knowledge of its local communities, including children in care and care leavers and uses this knowledge effectively to meet their needs. Leaders identify the vulnerable groups in their local areas and their needs and ensure that there is an effective response for these groups of children. Commissioned and in-house services have sufficient capacity and meet the needs of local children, young people and families in need of help, care and protection.

The local authority can demonstrate evidence of practice that is informed and sustainably improved by feedback, research and

intelligence about the quality of services. The experiences of children, young people and families who use them are important, including learning from their complaints and from successful or disrupted placements or adoption breakdown.

Performance management The local authority, through performance management and monitoring, has an accurate and systematically updated understanding of its effectiveness and uses this to drive improvement.

Management oversight of practice, including practice scrutiny by senior managers, is established, systematic and used clearly to improve the quality of decisions and the provision of help to children and young people.

Workforce Careful monitoring of workloads and oversight of the impact of wider systems on working conditions for practitioners ensure that practitioners have the capacity and ability to develop meaningful relationships with children, families and care leavers. The impact of any systems change is well managed, with a sustained focus on the experience of children and families.

The local authority social care workforce is sufficient, suitably qualified and accredited to deliver high-quality services to children and their families. (For more information about accreditation, see the [national assessment and accreditation system \(NAAS\)](#)). Managers and practitioners are experienced, effectively trained and supervised and the quality of their practice improves the lives of vulnerable children, young people and families. There is effective organisational support for the training and professional development of social workers, personal advisers and managers. Leaders and managers have created an environment where good social work can flourish and this is evident in the overall quality and impact of social work.

Outstanding 'The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families' is likely to be outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a 'good' judgement, there is evidence that leaders (both professional and political) and managers are confident, ambitious and influential in changing the lives of local children, young people and families, including children in care and those who

have left or who are leaving care. They inspire others to change the lives of these children and young people and their families. They innovate and generate creative ideas to sustain the highest-quality services, including early help services, for all children and young people. They know their strengths and weaknesses well and both respond to and are resilient to new challenges. Professional relationships between the local authority and partner organisations are mature and well developed. Accountabilities are embedded and result in confident, regular evaluation and improvement of the quality of help, care and protection that is provided.

Requires improvement to be good

‘The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families’ will be judged as requires improvement when any widespread or serious failures have been identified by the local authority and are being effectively addressed, but the characteristics of good leadership are not consistently in place.

Inadequate

‘The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families’ is likely to be inadequate if any of the practice judgements is inadequate and leaders and managers have not been able to demonstrate sufficient understanding of the failure. They have been ineffective in prioritising, challenging and making improvements.

Regional adoption agencies and ILACS inspections

Introduction

272. We want to determine whether children in need of adoption are well served. At each inspection, we are interested in the children that the local authority is responsible for. This includes when a local authority is part of an RAA.

273. Whatever the local arrangements, we will ask whether there is a sufficient and appropriate supply of adopters for the local authority’s children.

274. If there are failings for children, we will ask what the local authority has done to challenge or remedy this.

275. When writing our report, we will state the name of the RAA. Although we will report on any strengths or weaknesses for children in the local authority, we will not imply or make any judgement on the RAA.

276. The evaluation of the quality of children's experiences, local authority oversight and leadership are HMI tasks. If there is an RAA, a social care regulatory inspector will usually look at the adoptive carer cases as identified by the lead inspector.

Role of RAAs

277. An RAA is a larger organisation made up of local authorities, trusts and, in some cases, VAAs. An RAA is likely to be either:

- a group of local authorities collaborating to provide a central service, with one local authority as host
- a separate company registered as a VAA

278. The RAA generally takes on responsibility for recruiting, assessing, approving and supporting adopters. It provides a central pool of adopters for the local authorities in question.

279. We are not inspecting the effectiveness of the RAA, but we do take into account the interface between the individual local authority and the RAA. We focus on how the local authority discharges its functions through the RAA and how it ensures that the RAA meets the local authority's needs. We always look at this through the lens of the local authority.

On inspection

280. The DCS should notify the management team at the RAA that an inspection has started.

281. A local authority that is part of an RAA must be able to demonstrate how the arrangements comply with its statutory responsibilities and meet the needs of local children.

282. To understand how the local authority works with the RAA to meet the needs of local children, inspectors will speak to the local authority's link officer for the RAA and the independent chair of the adoption panel. We may wish to arrange a joint meeting with the local authority's link officer and the relevant manager in the RAA.

283. We have the right to access records relevant to the performance of a local authority, wherever they may be held. HMI will arrange this access with the local authority. Inspectors will visit the premises of the RAA if that is the best way to access the records they need to see as part of the inspection of the local authority. Many RAAs are co-located with local authorities.

284. When a local authority is part of an RAA, inspectors will still look at the planning, decision-making and matching for the children in that local authority. Each local authority will need to have an agency decision-maker. In some local authorities, the agency decision-maker is supported by the RAA at different stages in the case management process. We would want to be assured of the effectiveness of the agency decision-maker role. This is usually an HMI task.

285. We want to understand how the local authority ensures that there are sufficient suitable adopters available and what action it has taken if this is not the case. This is usually an HMI task.

286. If any of the local authority's children are placed for adoption, a social care regulatory inspector will look at the quality and impact of the recruitment and assessment of those specific carers in up to 4 cases.

287. To allow the inspector to access case records relating to recruitment and assessment, the children selected for sampling by the HMI should be those placed with adoptive families approved by the RAA (or by the local authority if assessment and approval are within the timeframe of the inspection, that is 6 months before the inspection).

288. The social care regulatory inspector will usually speak to:

- the local authority's responsible person for adoption
- the lead for recruitment in the RAA
- the adoptive carers
- the assessing social workers in the RAA
- the chair of the adoption panel

289. We will consider information relating to children with a plan for adoption. This is usually an HMI task.

290. If the RAA arrangements hinder children achieving permanence and/or other issues emerge, inspectors will follow this as a line of enquiry and seek assurances from the local authority about the steps it is taking.

291. If the local authority being inspected is the host local authority for the RAA, we only focus on the children of that local authority and equally on the availability and suitability of adopters for the children.

292. Some RAAs carry out other adoption tasks in addition to the recruitment and assessment of adopters. This may include, for example, life story work, family finding activities or adoption support. In these cases, we will look at the local authority's arrangements to assure itself that the needs of local children are being met.

Evaluating practice and writing the report

293. We are not judging the performance of the RAA.

294. If a local authority is involved in an RAA, we will state the name of the RAA. However, we only evaluate what the local authority is doing for its children and this will be the focus of our overall evaluation and final report.

295. The report should not make or imply any broader evaluation of the performance of the RAA.

296. We will only comment on the RAA's performance for the local authority when this represents a strength or area for improvement in meeting local need. The use of any judgement language relating to the RAA is likely to be misleading. This is because the impact of the RAA may differ between local authority partners.

297. We do not share any findings with the RAA directly. Our inspection relationship is with the local authority. However, inspection evidence may inform our inspections of other providers or agencies that we regulate or inspect, including other RAA partners.

Frequently asked questions

Q: Should the RAA register with Ofsted?

The majority of RAAs are several local authority services collaborating under a host local authority arrangement to deliver services. In these cases, the RAA will not need to register and therefore not be subject to inspection as a single entity.

However, there are some RAAs that are formed of other types of bodies (such as local authority trading companies or not-for-profit entities) or are hosted by trusts. These types of RAAs will be required to register as VAAs and/or independent fostering agencies (IFAs). If you are in any doubt about the legitimacy of the arrangements, you should seek legal advice.

Q: Some RAAs are comprised of a group of local authorities operating as a trading company. Are these RAAs required to register with Ofsted?

Yes. As a trading company, the RAA is a separate legal entity from the local authority and is required to register as a VAA and/or IFA (as appropriate).

Q: If the local authority children's services are delivered through a trust, which is part of an RAA, and an RAA takes on adoption functions, is the trust required to register as a VAA?

Yes. As the trust will be a separate legal entity and continue to perform adoption functions, it must be registered as a VAA.

Q: Under which framework do we inspect those local authority children's services that are also a trust, registered as a VAA/IFA and are part of a RAA?

We inspect VAAs and IFAs under the [social care common inspection framework \(SCCIF\)](#) and local authority children services under ILACS. If the local authority adoption provision is delivered through a trust and registered as VAA and IFA, both frameworks will apply. The timing of inspections in these circumstances will be determined by the relevant Ofsted regional team.

Q: Can the local authority children's services delegate the role of the responsible officer to the RAA?

For local-authority-hosted RAAs, each local authority must appoint one of its officers as the responsible officer of the adoption service (under regulation 5 in [The Local Authority Adoption Service \(England\) Regulations 2003](#)). The officer can sit in the RAA if that is what the local authority and the RAA agree, but the person must be one of that local authority's officers and not an officer from another local authority.

In those RAAs that have chosen to set up as a local authority trading company

model, they must register as a VAA (see question above). For that reason, [The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Regulations 2003](#) apply to the VAA. The local authority would still need a responsible officer for adoption services.

Q: Should local authorities that are participating in RAA arrangements continue to notify Ofsted of the named officer responsible for each local authority children adoption service?

Yes. Individual local authorities should use [form SC3](#) to notify us of a change of officer for the adoption service. The regulations continue to require all notifications of a change to the named local authority officer responsible for the adoption service to be sent to us by the individual local authority. This includes all participating local authorities in regional adoption arrangements.

Annex A: Information we request from the local authority

298. This annex sets out the information inspectors will ask the local authority to share to support the inspection/visit. The milestones for sharing the information are set out in the table below.

299. The lead inspector will provide details for accessing an online system that the local authority can use to share information. Ofsted configures and manages this system in line with guidance from the [National Cyber Security Centre](#). The lead inspector will provide details when they notify the local authority that the inspection/visit will take place. [Guidance on how to share information with us](#) is published with this framework.

Information	Standard and short inspections	Focused visits	Monitoring visits
Information requested	All the information in Annex A	Only information relevant to the focus of the visit (The lead inspector will discuss this with the	Only information relevant to the focus of the visit (The lead inspector will discuss this with the DCS at

		DCS at the start of the inspection.)	the start of the inspection.)
Notification/request for Annex A	5 days before fieldwork (usually Monday)	5 days before fieldwork (usually Tuesday)	10 days before fieldwork (usually Tuesday)
Child-level data lists	One day after notification (by 5pm on Tuesday)	One day after notification (usually by midday Wednesday)	One day after notification (usually Wednesday)
Information about audits the local authority has completed in the 6 months before the inspection	One day after notification (by 5pm on Tuesday)	One day after notification (usually by midday Wednesday)	One day after notification (usually Wednesday)
Information used by the local authority to manage services for children and young people	2 days after notification (by 5pm on Wednesday)	One day after notification (usually by 5pm on Wednesday)	7 days after notification (usually the Wednesday before inspectors are on site)
Information about specific children's cases	3 days after notification (by 5pm on Thursday)	2 days after notification (usually by 5pm on Thursday)	7 days after notification (usually the Wednesday before inspectors are on site)

300. The lead inspector will make the final decision about whether to request or accept additional information based on whether:

- it is necessary for an accurate understanding of children's experiences and social work practice
- there is already sufficient information on the issue available through other sources

in Annex A or primary evidence-gathering

301. The lead inspector will maintain a record of [requests for further information](#).

Child-level data

302. When the lead inspector contacts the local authority, she/he will ask for lists containing child-level data. The local authority should provide the child-level data lists as soon as they are able. The table at the start of [Annex A](#) sets out expected deadlines for submission. The child-level data lists should be as up to date as possible. However, the local authority may provide lists that it has prepared in advance that show data up to the Wednesday before notification. Please provide these lists in Excel.

303. Below is an outline of the broad contents of each list. [Detailed guidance about the fields for each list is available in a spreadsheet](#). Included in the spreadsheet is an optional template for each child-level list.

304. To reduce the burden on local authorities, we have aligned the information within the child-level lists with DfE guidance on [children looked after](#) and [children in need](#).

305. The spreadsheet template includes an overview of the ideal codes to use and how these link to the more detailed descriptions in the DfE guidance.

306. The child-level data lists should cover a period of 6 months before the date of notification. When the local authority shares the lists, they should indicate the specific date range that each list covers.

The information we request

List number	Description
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List 1	All contacts received in the 6 months before the date of inspection.
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List 2	All early help assessments in the 6 months before the date of inspection. Also, current early help interventions that are being coordinated through the local authority.
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-
- List 3** All referrals received in the 6 months before the inspection.
-
- List 4** All statutory assessment in accordance with section 17 or section 47 of the Children Act 1989 in the 6 months before the inspection.
-
- List 5** All section 47 enquiries in the 6 months before the inspection.
-
- List 6** All those in receipt of services as a child in need at the point of inspection or in the 6 months before the inspection (see template for more detail on the cohort to include).
-
- List 7** All those who are the subject of a child protection plan at the point of inspection. Include those who ceased to be the subject of a child protection plan in the 6 months before the inspection.
-
- List 8** All children in care at the point of inspection. Include all those children who ceased to be looked after in the 6 months before the inspection.
-
- List 9** All those who are receiving leaving care services at the point of inspection.
-
- List 10** All those children who, in the 12 months before the inspection, have:
- (a) been adopted
 - (b) had the decision that they should be placed for adoption but they have not yet been adopted
 - (c) had an adoption decision reversed during the 12 months
-
- List 11** All those individuals who in the 12 months before the inspection have had contact with the local authority adoption agency for any of the following reasons:
- (a) prospective adopters at any stage of the adoption process (only include information about prospective adopters who have made an application; you do not need to include people who have only made enquiries)
 - (b) prospective adopters who have made an application, even if they are being matched to children from another authority

(c) prospective adopters who are no longer going through the process (for example, those who have chosen to withdraw from the process or have been refused)

307. It is likely that children will appear on more than one list. The consistent use of the child ID across lists will enable the lead inspector to recognise when this occurs.

308. For lists 6 to 10, please provide only one row for each unique child ID. Information should relate to the most recent event (for example, list 6 should show the most recent episode of need).

309. Some of the requested data – particularly in relation to list 1 ‘contacts’ and list 2 ‘early help assessments’ – may not be recorded on the local authority’s main ICS system. In these circumstances, the local authority is free to use the solution that suits it best and enables them to provide the data in the timeframe requested. Whatever the format, the data should be clearly identifiable.

310. If certain data is unavailable, we will ask the local authority to demonstrate how it has sufficient management oversight of the specific issue.

311. After the local authority shares the information listed in Annex A, an Ofsted analytical officer may contact a local authority analyst to clarify any issues with the composition or content of the local authority’s data.

312. Queries about the child-level data should be sent to SocialCareSAO@ofsted.gov.uk. However, if you have any queries after you have been notified that an inspection is to take place, please contact the lead inspector.

Local authority audits

313. The local authority should share a list of the audits that they have carried out in the 6 months before the inspection/visit. The list should identify the child unique ID for those children whose experiences were evaluated, the audit theme and when the audit was completed. If the local authority has an overview report, learning or action plan from the audits, it should share this too.

Case file documents

314. The lead inspector will not ask the local authority to carry out audits specifically for the inspection. Before fieldwork, the lead inspector will select children's cases the local authority has already audited. They will usually select up to 6 cases for a focused visit and up to 12 cases for a standard or short inspection. They will ask the local authority to share the documents set out in the table below for each child's case.

Description	Document
From the time of the audit	Audit document Child's assessment Child in need, child protection, care or pathway plan Chronology Supervision record
The most recent copy of	Child in need, child protection, care or pathway plan Supervision record

315. Inspectors will use these documents to evaluate the effectiveness of the local authority's auditing practice and the impact of learning from the audits. Inspectors will evaluate the effectiveness of the social work practice in these cases during fieldwork. The lead inspector may ask the local authority to speak to the children, young people, parents and carers to see if they are happy to speak to an inspector. The lead inspector will usually only ask for this when it is necessary to pursue a specific line of enquiry for the inspection.

Information the local authority uses to manage its services

316. The lead inspector will ask the local authority to share information it uses to understand and manage its social work practice. The local authority should share its best and most recent information. The local authority must clearly direct the lead inspector to the relevant documents or sections within them. If the reasons for sharing a particular piece of information are unclear or the lead inspector decides the information is not relevant to the scope of the inspection/visit, inspectors will not read it.

317. The local authority should provide the information below as soon as it is able to

and by the deadlines set out at the beginning of Annex A.

318. Each of the topics is numbered. When the local authority shares the information with inspectors, it should include the number in the document name as a prefix. This will enable inspectors to easily identify and retrieve information and support the local authority to link its evidence to the topic.

Impact of leadership on social work practice with children and families

Item number	Description
1.01	Organisational structure showing lines of reporting and accountability (when relevant, this should include information about structures for alternative delivery models).
1.02	The local authority's scheme of delegation, case transfer policy (including step-up/down from or to early help) and any workflow documents/flowcharts that will help inspectors understand how children's social care work is structured.
1.03	Management information reports that the local authority uses to monitor and improve performance. This should include the most recent monthly/quarterly report(s) and the last annual overview document.
1.04	The local authority's arrangements to gather feedback from children, care leavers and their families, complaints and serious case reviews and what the local authority has done in response to improve practice.
1.05	The most recent self-evaluation of social work practice and any peer review or similar external evaluation of practice, carried out in the last 12 months.
1.06	A sample of local authority and multi-agency practice audits of work with children in need, those at risk of significant harm and those who are looked after or care leavers carried out in the 6 months before inspection and any associated improvement/action plans.
1.07	The workforce profile for social care staff working with children in need, children subject to child protection plans, children in care and care leavers (including: the number of qualified social workers and their post-

qualifying experience; the number of vacancies for permanent staff; the number of locum/agency staff; the extent of staff turnover/stability and sickness levels; and average caseloads of staff by team). This should include information the local authority uses to understand its workforce profile within particular localities, offices or teams.

1.08 The workforce development strategy, including the core training and development offer for social workers and their managers and any evaluation of the impact of this carried out in the last 12 months.

1.09 The social work supervision policy and a list of all case-holding social workers and personal advisers, including the number of cases held on the date of notification. This should include a list of all workers' allocated cases, the number of open cases they held on the day of notification and their job title. Include the number of open cases unallocated on this date. If possible, please provide this information on an Excel spreadsheet. This list should be as up to date as possible. However, the local authority may provide a pre-prepared version showing the position up to the Wednesday before notification.

1.10 The thresholds/criteria for the provision of services to children at different levels of need.

1.11 The annual report by the local safeguarding partners.

1.12 The safeguarding arrangements agreed by the local safeguarding partners.

1.13 Minutes from the last 12 months of meetings of the local safeguarding partners.

1.14 Rapid reviews carried out following child safeguarding incident notifications in the 12 months before the inspection. You can find guidance on rapid reviews in chapter four 4 of ['Working together to safeguard children'](#).

Children in need of help and protection, including early help

Item number	Description
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2.01 The early help strategy, any associated action plan and relevant management information on the quality, timeliness and impact of the early help provided to children and their families. This should include, as a minimum, the number of early help assessments or similar (for example, the common assessment framework), completed in the last 12 months and the number currently receiving a service through a team around the family.

2.02 Information about children missing from home or care and children at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation, and the services these children receive. This should include:

- a list of children who have been missing or at risk of exploitation within the last 12 months, including the child unique ID for each child (in line with the ID used in the child-level lists). This should indicate the current status of each child (care leaver, looked after child, child protection, child in need or not receiving a statutory service) and highlight those that are missing, at risk of sexual exploitation and/or at risk of criminal exploitation.

- any child exploitation or missing strategies and associated action plans.

- any workflow documents/flowcharts that will assist inspectors in understanding work done to reduce the risks to children from exploitation and going missing and how this work is structured and delivered.

- the most recent performance management and quality assurance information used to monitor and develop practice in these areas of work.

2.03 A report on those children known to the local authority who are currently being privately fostered. This report should include, for each child:

- child unique ID and the date of birth.

- date private fostering arrangement commenced.

2.04 The information the local authority uses to monitor the welfare of electively home educated children, in particular those children who are electively home educated and are either on a child protection plan, education, health and care (EHC) plan or are a child in need. If available, please provide the policy on elective home education.

- 2.05** A report on children for whom the local authority is responsible who are of school age and who are not in receipt of full-time school education at the time of inspection. This report should include for each child the:
- child unique ID or unique pupil number (UPN) and the date of birth.
 - type of educational provision that they are receiving, including home tuition.
 - number of hours of provision per week (in particular, whether they are receiving more or less than 25 hours per week).
 - type of exclusion (if the child has been excluded).
 - date when alternative provision commenced.
-
- 2.06** A list of children aged 16- or 17-years-old who have presented as homeless in the three months before the inspection.
-
- 2.07** A list of children supported under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 who are identified as being young carers.
-

Children in care and care leavers

Item number	Description
3.01	The strategic plan for children in care, the corporate parenting strategy/plan and the last 3 sets of minutes from the meetings of the corporate parenting board.
3.02	The latest sufficiency strategy and any associated action or commissioning plans.
3.03	The arrangements for permanence planning and any associated strategy, action plan and management information used to monitor performance.
3.04	The most recent adoption and fostering panel reports to the local authority.
3.05	The local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) strategy

(including any strategy relating to the mental health support offer for care leavers), any associated action plan and recent, relevant management information, including length of waiting time, average length of help offered and any outcome information routinely collected

- 3.06** The management report of the independent reviewing officer service.
-
- 3.07** The annual report of the headteacher of the virtual school and any other relevant plans.
-
- 3.08** The data the headteacher of the virtual school and the local authority use to monitor the attainment, progress, attendance, exclusion, employment and training of children in care and care leavers.
-
- 3.09** Evidence of an appropriate focus on maintaining and improving the health of children looked after and care leavers, including data on health (physical, psychological and emotional) assessments and dental checks.
-
- 3.10** The number of young people currently placed under secure accommodation welfare orders (section 25 of the Children Act 1989).
-
- 3.11** The strategy for care leavers, associated action plan and relevant recent management information used to monitor and develop practice (to include 'in-touch' figures and information about the completion of pathway plans).
-
- 3.12** Information the local authority uses to track and manage cases in the PLO.
-
- 3.13** The local authority's offer for care leavers.
-
- 3.14** A list of care leavers known to be living in houses in multiple occupation. This list may be up to one month before the date of notification.
-
- 3.15** Information about the recruitment, assessment, training and support of foster carers. This should include:
- the local authority's register of foster carers
 - the 3 most recent fostering panel minutes (if the local authority is part of a partnership arrangement to deliver its fostering services, this should be the most recent minutes that relate to children that the local authority is responsible for)

- overview of training for foster carers and data about take-up/completion
 - recruitment strategy for foster carers.
 - statement of purpose for the fostering service
 - list of support groups run for foster carers
 - support provided to foster carers to enable young people to 'stay put'.
-

3.16 Information about the recruitment, assessment, training and support of adoptive carers:

The local authority's list of adopters.

The 3 most recent adoption panel minutes (if the local authority is part of an RAA, this should be the most recent minutes that relate to children that the local authority is responsible for)

- overview of training for adopters and data about take-up/completion
 - recruitment strategy for adopters
 - statement of purpose for the adoption service
 - list of support groups run for adopters
-

3.17 The information the local authority uses to monitor which of its children are living in supported accommodation and unregistered children's homes. This should be a list of each child who has been living in these types of accommodation in the 6 months before the inspection. The list should include their unique ID, age, the date this provision started and finished and details of the provision.

3.18 A list of all children subject to a deprivation of liberty order made by the high court under its inherent jurisdiction.

[Children Act 1989.](#) ↵

2. [Children Act 1989, section 22C](#)

[Children Act 1989, section 23B.](#) ↵

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