

Unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment

Framework for inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection and guidance for local authorities and partners

The new inspections of contact, assessment and referral arrangements for children in need and children who may be in need of protection take effect from 1 April 2009.

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Contents

Introduction	4
Ofsted inspects	5
Frequency of inspection	5
Notice period	5
Inspection team	6
Scope of inspection	6
Documentation before inspection	7
Documentation during inspection	8
Views of users, staff and stakeholders	8
Random sampling of cases	9
Meetings	9
Communication and feedback	10
Reporting inspection findings	10
Confidentiality	11
Quality assurance	11
Conduct during the inspection	12
Expectations of providers	12
Complaints	13
Further information	14
Annex A	15
Guidance on effective practice (unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children and young people in need and children and young people)	15

Introduction

1. This paper sets out the framework and guidance for the new unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children and young people in need and children and young people who may be in need of protection.
2. The unannounced inspections are not a full inspection of safeguarding. They are an inspection of front-line practice in relation to contact, referral and assessment processes for children in need and children who may be in need of protection and an assessment of how well practice helps to manage risk of harm to children and young people and minimise the incidence of child abuse and neglect.
3. These short inspections will focus on the local authority as the lead agency for child protection. However, the contribution of partners to achieving good or better outcomes for children through effective multi-agency working will be evaluated also as an integral part of the inspections.
4. The inspections will commence from April 2009 and will be carried out by two suitably experienced Her Majesty's Inspectors from Ofsted.
5. The inspections will be carried out under Section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. They will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of each local authority's children's services functions and will be taken into account in Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's statutory annual performance rating of the authority and in the wider Comprehensive Area Assessment.¹ They do not preclude other inspections of safeguarding and services for looked after children arising out of joint inspectorate Comprehensive Area Assessments, as set out in the Comprehensive Area Assessments joint inspection framework.
6. Effective contact, referral and assessment arrangements are important in ensuring that the needs of children, young people and their parents and carers are accurately identified and that services are appropriately provided so that good or better safeguarding outcomes are achieved and sustained.
7. Ofsted recognises that the quality of assessments, and the services that are commissioned as a result of good or better assessments, are key in helping to protect children. Inspectors will use the scrutiny of case files with staff to assess the quality of assessment practice and the impact of multi-agency prevention and support for safeguarding those children and young people who are or may be in need.

¹ For further information, see: <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/NATIONAL-REPORT.asp?CategoryID=&ProdID=63FF7DFA-D1DB-46D0-B72E-39DA12AEF9E1>.

8. Pilot inspections in March 2009 helped to shape the final framework and guidance for these inspections. The framework and guidance have also been reviewed in light of the recently published report on the protection of children in England.²
9. This framework and guidance should be read alongside the accompanying framework and guidance for the joint inspection of safeguarding and looked after children.³ The findings of unannounced inspections will help determine the timing of the wider inspections of safeguarding and looked after children.
10. This framework and guidance are subject to periodic review.

Ofsted inspects

11. Ofsted has published an overarching framework for inspection, which informs all of Ofsted's inspection and regulatory activity, including the new inspections of safeguarding and looked after children.⁴
12. This overarching framework guides the general scope and methods of inspection, but it does not determine the targeted inspection activity necessary for the unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements that is set out in this framework and guidance.

Frequency of inspection

13. All local authority areas will have an unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in any one 12-month period. The scheduling of these inspections will draw on evidence from other inspection and regulatory work such as evaluations of the quality of serious case reviews and evidence from annual questionnaires of users and stakeholders and the new Ofsted whistleblower hotline. Where the inspection has raised serious concerns, the lead inspector may recommend that a follow-up inspection is carried out, including a full safeguarding inspection either undertaken separately or combined with an inspection of services for looked after children.

Notice period

14. No period of notice will be given for the annual unannounced inspection of contact, assessment and referral arrangements for children and young people in need and children and young people who may be in need of protection. In

² *The protection of children in England: a progress report*, The Lord Laming, March 2009.

³ *Inspections of safeguarding and looked after children services: framework for inspection and guidance for local authorities and partners*, Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090027.

⁴ *Ofsted inspects: a framework for all Ofsted inspection and regulation* (080121), Ofsted, 2009; <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Forms-and-guidance/Browse-all-by/Other/General/Ofsted-inspects>.

these inspections, the council will be notified immediately before the inspection (on the same day) that inspectors will carry out the inspection at one or more of their offices. Ofsted will maintain a list of the number and location of office addresses where arrangements for dealing with contacts, referrals and assessments are undertaken in order to plan inspections. Ofsted will write to local authorities setting out the arrangements for this.

15. Inspections will not normally be deferred because of staff absence or staff shortages in the local authority.

Inspection team

16. Two suitably experienced Her Majesty's Inspectors from Ofsted will carry out the annual unannounced inspection and they will normally be on site for up to two days.

Scope of inspection

17. These inspections will look at practice in relation to contact, assessment and referral processes for children in need and children who may be in need of protection and consider how well practice supports the effective management of risk and minimises the incidence of child abuse and neglect.
18. Inspectors will focus their activity on analysing and discussing case files so as to assess the quality of practice and actions taken to ensure good or better outcomes for children and their families. Inspectors will consider any evidence as to how well initial assessment informs case planning.
19. Although the main focus of the inspection will be on the local authority services, any findings about partners' contributions and the quality of multi-agency prevention and support for safeguarding children and young people, including the impact of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and Children's Trust Board, will be reported on also.
20. Inspections will usually include an evaluation of:
 - the quality and timeliness of referrals and assessments, including:
 - the extent and quality of partner agency involvement
 - the involvement of children and their families
 - how this impacts on the services offered to children and their families
 - the quality of management oversight and decision-making, including:
 - senior management audit of how well workers manage risk of harm through effective referral and assessment
 - case allocation and caseload management
 - the quality of direct supervision and support

- the quality of case-file recording and arrangements for informing and involving senior managers in decision-making
 - the application of thresholds, their clarity and consistency and how these impact on outcomes for children
 - the impact of strategy discussions and enquiries in protecting children and young people
 - the effectiveness of communication, liaison and joint working between agencies
 - the effectiveness of out-of-hours provision, including accident and emergency health services, in managing risk of harm through effective information sharing, referral and assessment
 - the effectiveness of the service in meeting the needs of children from particular groups
 - how well services act on users' views
 - the role and responsibilities of support staff, level of training and support received and how this impacts on the quality of service delivery
 - the effectiveness of social workers and unqualified staff, including family support and social work assistants, in identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm for children and their families.
21. Guidance on identified features of effective practice in relation to contact, assessment and referral arrangements is set out at the end of this document.

Documentation before inspection

22. No documents need to be provided in advance for the annual unannounced inspection of contact, assessment and referral arrangements.
23. Inspectors will have access to information already held by Ofsted before the inspection such as:
- the new Ofsted performance profile, which will include findings from other relevant Ofsted inspections and regulatory activity
 - relevant performance indicators from the National Indicator Set
 - a summary of judgements made in serious case review evaluations
 - Ofsted's fostering and adoption datasets

- views of users, staff and third sector organisations gathered through three new sets of questionnaires,⁵ and evidence from a new Ofsted whistleblower hotline
- a summary of substantiated complaints about the council and its partners made to Ofsted that relate to safeguarding and looked after children
- the local area agreement and other related published documentation.

Documentation during inspection

24. During the inspection, inspectors will require access to the performance information that managers routinely use to inform themselves of the activity and effectiveness of the work of the teams, including any available self-evaluation. Inspectors will need to know the number of referrals awaiting action and/or the number of individual cases awaiting transfer to other teams.
25. Inspectors will focus on a random sample of case files for examination and for their discussions with available social workers and other key staff.

Views of users, staff and stakeholders

26. In this context, users are the children, young people and their families or carers who are supported or who make use of these important services.
27. Inspectors will take into account any available evidence that demonstrates how the views of children, young people and families or carers have been taken into account to secure improved services and outcomes.
28. Inspectors will speak to staff to gather evidence about the overall quality of services and the support they receive, including that provided by managers.
29. Where it is possible, inspectors will always seek to speak to children, young people and their families or carers.
30. Inspectors will also take account of Ofsted annual surveys of the views of looked after children and care leavers⁶, a new annual survey of the views of social workers and other safeguarding professionals and a new annual survey of the third sector.

⁵ These new questionnaires are to be used in these inspections from September 2009. See paragraph 31 also.

⁶ Ofsted is considering extending these surveys to include children who have a child in need or child protection plan.

Random sampling of cases

31. Inspectors will examine a sample of case files, wherever possible with social workers or other key workers who are available at the time of the inspection. The samples will be selected at random from both current cases and cases that have been closed in the previous six months.
32. Cases will be sampled from among the following:

Common Assessment Framework	That proceeded/did not proceed to referral
Contacts	That proceeded/did not proceed to referral
Referrals	That proceeded/did not proceed to initial assessment
Re-referrals	That proceeded/did not proceed to initial assessment
Initial assessments	That proceeded/did not proceed to further service or to core assessment
Core assessments	That proceeded/did not proceed to further service
Section 47 enquiries	That proceeded/did not proceed to an initial child protection conference

Meetings

33. Inspectors will meet with the manager on arrival at the contact, referral and assessment site and make arrangements to meet with individual workers to read their case files and discuss their caseload. On arrival, inspectors will explain that the inspection will be carried out in a way that will seek to minimise disruption to the service.
34. Inspectors will usually discuss with the relevant manager:
 - outcomes achieved for children and young people
 - information about the team composition, including staffing establishment, the number of qualified social workers and their relevant experience, the number of vacancies for permanent staff, the number of locum/agency staff and sickness levels and individual caseloads of staff
 - analysis of Common Assessment Framework activity over the last 12 months
 - analysis of the numbers of referrals

- analysis of referrals by referrer, the number of initial assessments, core assessments, Section 47 enquiries,⁷ and number of open cases
 - number of referrals awaiting action and/or allocation to a social worker, and number of cases waiting for transfer
 - arrangements for transfer of cases between different teams
 - arrangements for the quality assurance and monitoring of contact, referral and assessment procedures
 - self-evaluation of the effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements
 - the latest audits and action plans relating to contact, referral and assessment arrangements
 - any available evaluation of users' views of the service.
35. Inspectors will not expect the manager to produce additional information specifically for the inspection. Inspectors will use the information that managers use routinely to inform themselves of the activity and effectiveness of the work of the team.
36. Should any unresolved issues of significant risk of harm to a child be identified during the inspection, inspectors will immediately inform the relevant senior manager and confirm this in writing at the earliest opportunity.

Communication and feedback

37. Inspectors will ensure managers have opportunities to provide any relevant information that informs judgements, especially where there are emerging concerns. Oral feedback about draft findings, including an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses in practice, will normally be given to the Director of Children's Services and/or the Head of Service before the inspectors leave at the end of the inspection. Where available, the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board will attend. In their absence, feedback will be provided to the most senior manager who is available.

Reporting inspection findings

38. Following the site visit, inspectors will report on findings by letter, indicating the strengths of the service and any areas for development in observed practice. The letter will always identify any serious concerns identified during the inspection. These inspections will not receive a grade using the Ofsted four-point scale.

⁷ Section 47 of the Children Act 1989.

39. However, the letter will make clear where the inspection raises concerns. In such instances, the lead inspector may recommend that a follow-up inspection is carried out, including a full inspection of safeguarding.
40. The draft letter will be sent to the Director of Children's Services within five working days of the end of the inspection for a factual accuracy check.
41. The Director of Children's Services or representatives must return the draft letter with any comments on factual accuracy within five days (within 10 working days of the end of the inspection).
42. Following this, the final letter setting out the inspection findings will be sent to the Director of Children's Services within five days (within 15 working days of the end of the inspection) copied to the Lead Member for Children's Services, the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the chief executive of the local authority.
43. The final letter will be published on the Ofsted website within 20 days of the end of the inspection.

Confidentiality

44. Ofsted will take all appropriate steps to ensure that information provided to inspectors remains confidential, as required by statute. However, evidence gathered during inspections may be subject to disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, although individuals will not be identified by name.

Quality assurance

45. Quality assurance is the action taken to provide confidence that an inspection is of the quality needed and expected by users and providers and, indeed, Ofsted itself. As part of this, Ofsted will ensure inspections are conducted by inspectors who are suitably experienced in the areas they are inspecting.
46. During inspection, the lead inspector has responsibility for testing and evaluating the quality of the evidence-gathering process and the way in which judgements are formed.
47. To ensure national consistency, some inspections will be visited by an inspector from Ofsted. During these visits, this inspector will speak to the lead and team inspector, managers and other staff, and if possible users and other stakeholders. They will also attend any inspection team meetings taking place during their visit. This inspector will always seek views from the council and/or partners on the conduct of the inspection and sample the way evidence is being gathered and used.
48. Ofsted will also ask the council to complete a short evaluation form following each inspection, which will be used to improve the quality of inspections.

49. All inspection reports will be subject to Ofsted's internal quality assurance procedures.

Conduct during the inspection⁸

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

Expectations of providers

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

⁸ See *Ofsted inspects*, 2009.

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

Complaints

52. We anticipate that the great majority of our work will be carried out smoothly and without incident. If concerns do arise during an inspection, they should be raised with the lead inspector immediately so that they can be resolved while the inspection is taking place. A complaint about any aspect of the inspection can be made at any stage during or after the inspection and up to 30 calendar days from the date of publication of any report or letter. Lodging a complaint will not normally delay publication of the letter.
53. All complaints will be initially assessed by a designated Ofsted representative and contact will be made with the complainant in order to seek resolution at the earliest stage. Where this is not possible, complaints will be investigated in accordance with Ofsted's complaints procedure. The complaints procedure, which sets out how providers or users can complain about their inspection and what will happen to their complaint, is available at:
www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070080.
54. Complaints should be made in writing (including by email to enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk) to:

David Williams
Ofsted National Business Unit
Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

Further information

55. We hope that you find this document useful in helping you understand the nature of this inspection.
56. If you have any queries about the unannounced inspections of contact, assessment and referral arrangements for children in need or who may be in need of protection, please contact Sue Leaver on 020 7421 6666 or sue.leaver@ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Guidance on effective practice (unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children and young people in need and children and young people)

- Practice and procedures manage risk of harm and ensure best possible outcomes for children and young people.
- Practice and procedures comply with statutory requirements and associated guidance. They are implemented efficiently and effectively and ensure that referrals are responded to promptly.
- Decisions are made in accordance with statutory timescales. Children suffering or at significant risk of harm are identified and receive a prompt and appropriate response.
- Agreed inter-agency thresholds (or arrangements for access to services), and responsibilities for safeguarding children are applied and regularly reviewed.
- Assessments are clear and analytical. Risk and protective factors that impact on children's safety and welfare are identified. Conclusions flow logically from analysis and include judgements about standards of care, allowing assessments to be translated into effective plans.
- Section 47 enquiries are thorough and timely and always carried out by a qualified and suitable experienced social worker. Findings in relation to significant harm are clear. Action needed to ensure children's safety is identified and implemented promptly.
- Record keeping is up to date and demonstrates effective management of risk of harm, sound decision-making and effective planning.
- There is evidence of focused multi-agency and partnership working, led by the Children's Trust Board and Local Safeguarding Children Board.
- Communication and liaison with relevant agencies is established and effective.
- There is evidence that the Local Safeguarding Children Board has a robust approach to quality assurance and audit.
- Monitoring and evaluation are helping to ensure that practice across all partner agencies is improving or sustained at a high level and meeting the needs of particular groups of vulnerable children.
- Senior managers take appropriate measures to assure themselves that referral and assessment processes in their area are effective at identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm.
- There is evidence that senior managers effectively challenge casework and decision-making.

- The experiences and views of children and parents are gathered and used to influence service delivery and development.
- Children and family members are involved in assessment or planning to meet the child's needs, and the views and feelings of children and the views of family members are taken into account.
- Critically reflective supervision, management audit and oversight are provided to all staff, and are resulting in improving practice. Suitable training for staff is available and is improving practice.
- The service is resourced sufficiently to meet identified needs.
- Performance indicators reflect good and sustained and/or improving practice.