Briefing on the First Five Ofsted Inspections of Services for Children in Need of Help and Protection, Children Looked After and Care Leavers

On 19th November 2013 Ofsted started the first inspections under their new three year programme. Every local authority in England will have an inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers over the next three years. From April 2015 there will be inspections with partner inspectorates (Care Quality Commission, Her Majesty’s Inspector of Prisons, Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Courts and Her Majesty’s Inspector of Police) using a framework that additionally evaluates the contribution of core statutory partners to the care and protection of children.

The new framework leads to an overall judgment with other judgments on:

- Children who need help and protection;
- Children looked after and achieving permanence with related sub-judgments on:
  - Adoption performance;
  - Experience and progress of care leavers.
- Leadership, management and governance.

There is a separate further judgment on the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

The judgments are Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement and Inadequate. As with schools, Ofsted’s expectation is that ‘Good’ should be the standard. For each judgment, Ofsted has clearly defined the characteristics of Good. These are used to consider the evidence from the inspection and what is the best fit judgment. The overall judgment is cumulative derived from the three key judgments above. Widespread or serious failure resulting in harm or continued risk of harm to children and young people, in either the arrangements to protect or look after them, will always result in an overall effectiveness judgment of Inadequate. It is also likely that, if either the effectiveness of child protection or the effectiveness of provision for looked after children is Inadequate, the leadership judgment is likely to be judged Inadequate.

The link to the Ofsted documents is:

This inspection framework is significantly different from its predecessors. Ofsted’s setting the bar at ‘Good’ has raised the standard. The inspection has other important features such as:

- Its focus on the child’s journey, in particular the arrangements for and the impact of early help services;
- The attention to adoption and leaving care services within the inspection of services for looked after children;
- The increase in the number of children whose cases are scrutinised in depth either through detailed tracking of their experience or sampling of their experience and the quality of practice. The minimum number that will be sampled is eighty with more in larger authorities;
- The focus on the authority’s ability to audit and make accurate evaluations of the quality of their own practice and their overall self-awareness of the effectiveness and quality of their services;
- The separate evaluation of the work of the LSCB with its own judgment on the four point scale described above.

The reports from the first five inspections were published between the 11th and 21st February. The overall judgments were:

- Derbyshire  Good
- Hartlepool  Good
- Sheffield  Requires Improvement
- Hillingdon  Requires Improvement
- Slough  Inadequate

The full reports can be found at:

http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report

Selecting the name of the local authority and the provider type as local authority brings up all the inspection reports related to that authority.

A summary of the overall and key judgments is given at the end of this briefing.

The reports start with the overall judgment and then lists the three key judgments for the local authority and the two sub-judgments for looked after children and the judgment of the effectiveness of the LSCB. There is then a summary of key findings divided between a section on why the authority is not yet Good or why it is Good, strengths if the overall judgment is Inadequate or Requires Improvement and then areas for priority action, if the judgment is Inadequate, or areas for improvement.

What can we conclude about Ofsted’s view of what is a Good children’s service from these first five reports?
**Children Who Need Help and Protection**

Hartlepool, Derbyshire and Sheffield were judged Good for their services to children who need help and protection. Central to that judgment was that all these authorities have effective early help offers and these were seen to be making a difference to children’s lives. For example Hartlepool’s report says ‘Children, young people and their families can easily access good early help in their local community when difficulties begin to emerge. This helps children and young people’s circumstances improve’. All these authorities have strategies in place for early help with partners that were seen to be working. Thresholds were understood across the partnerships and, when children needed a social work service as children in need or were thought to be at risk of harm, there was ready access to that service with good assessments undertaken. Decision-making was effective including where children needed protection including through care proceedings and where return of children to parents from being looked after was being planned.

In all these authorities, Ofsted found good evidence of children being seen alone and of their voices being heard in assessments and care plans.

For these ‘Good’ authorities there was still work to be done to improve, especially in quality of recording, multi-agency engagement in strategy meetings and challenge from child protection conference chairs to the quality of child protection plans.

For the authorities Requiring Improvement or Inadequate, an important factor in the judgment was either that these characteristics were not securely in place (Hillingdon), or not in place (Slough).

All the reports have comments focusing on the response to children who are missing, at risk of sexual exploitation, who are privately fostered and experiencing domestic violence.

**Children Looked After**

The two authorities judged Good for children looked after and achieving permanence, Derbyshire and Hartlepool, were able to demonstrate that they matched children well with carers, they had a good range of accommodation options for care leavers, delays in finding permanent homes where children need this were kept to a minimum, they could provide sufficient local adopters and there was continuity in social workers. The authorities judged Good were effective in meeting the educational needs of looked after children and they were making good progress in school. The judgment for Sheffield of Requires Improvement seems to have been particularly influenced by the ‘requires improvement’ sub-judgment for Adoption given the other strengths of the service.

For all the authorities, the reports identify weaknesses in the work of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO). It is evident that Ofsted expects IROs to have significantly smaller caseloads than they do in many authorities and work to the guidance on their role issued in 2010. This should be evident in the challenge they make to the quality of assessments, care plans and pathway plans and to how effectively social workers are progressing these.

All the inspections focus on children out of area and the quality of social work interaction with children. Frequent changes of social worker and lack of social work time with children are criticised. These were significant factors in the Inadequate judgment for Slough in this area.

**Leadership, Management and Governance**

Hartlepool, Derbyshire and Sheffield were all judged Good for leadership, management and governance. Hillingdon Requires Improvement and Slough Inadequate. For the authorities judged Good, crucial factors were the presence of a clear vision and commitment to children’s needs in the authority and agreed with partners. This was shared across officers and political leadership.
All these authorities had effective inter-agency strategies, especially for early help. There was evidence of effective relationships between key senior managers across the partnership including between the LSCB chair and the chief executive and DCS.

The ability to lead and manage purposeful change based on good self-assessment was also important. In all the authorities judged Good, the maintenance of investment in services for vulnerable children was commented on.

These authorities had all been effective in delivering a workforce strategy that helped them recruit and retain social workers. Oversight of practice is strong with good self-knowledge and strong management grip of practice at all levels. Ofsted comments positively in some of the reports on senior managers’ knowledge of individual cases and engagement in the more difficult practice decisions.

In Hillingdon, the report identifies that senior leaders do not yet have an effective improvement plan in place and do not have the information they need on what they are doing well and what they need to do better. They also identify that more needs to be done to recruit and retain sufficient social workers.

In Slough, where leadership, management and governance were judged Inadequate, the report highlights the lack of progress since the safeguarding arrangements were judged Inadequate and the looked after children service adequate in May 2011. The absence of an effective workforce strategy is also key to the Inadequate judgment. The report highlights the absence of effective strategic partnerships driving improvement and change including in developing early help services.

**Effectiveness of the LSCB**

Only Sheffield’s LSCB was judged ‘Good’. Hillingdon, Derbyshire and Hartlepool were judged Requires Improvement and Slough Inadequate.

The Sheffield board was able to demonstrate that it was well established with good governance arrangements and strong relationships with key partners including Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Health and Wellbeing Board. The board could also demonstrate effective challenge and its leadership of key areas for development and improvement such as tackling sexual exploitation.

In contrast, the LSCBs judged Requiring Improvement, whilst meeting the core statutory requirements and with the right arrangements in place, were less able to demonstrate the impact of the challenge they brought to safeguarding children, their performance management of the system and their use of information from audit and review work to improve practice.

For Slough the report identifies weaknesses in the engagement of all partners in the work of the board to take full responsibility for their roles as set out in Working Together.

**What was the Inspection Like?**

There is no doubt that the inspection process is very demanding. It requires an intense focus from the senior children’s team in the local authority and their corporate colleagues throughout the four week inspection period.

Feedback from the process highlights the following key points:

- Pre-inspection preparation is critical e.g. having the annex A data readily available and integrated into your existing performance management cycle;
• Prepare a self-evaluation with grades and evidence identified to support the grades. There is debate about whether this is the best course and there are risks that Ofsted will use this to evidence weaknesses. However it does help the authority construct and put forward their own narrative about performance and how performance has developed since the last inspections. It helps demonstrate you know your own performance in depth and can accurately evaluate it;

• Develop the relationship with the lead inspector – a key role for the DCS and ensure that the inspection team are well supported and have their ICT and other needs such as administrative support well met;

• Critical to proactively and quickly respond to emerging key lines of enquiry and shut down the critical ones if possible e.g. one LA after Ofsted asked for all the contacts for a period, 692, went through all of these to ensure they had their own evidence about whether the decisions were appropriate or not;

• Ensure that the inspection team understand how the early help offer is organised. They will want to see this in action;

• Ensure your self-audit of the cases Ofsted select is robust by using a strong and ideally multi-disciplinary team. One LA used a dragons den type approach to this work;

• Ensure staff are prepared with daily communication on what is happening in the inspection. This is their chance to shine and feedback should be gathered from all interviews so that the DCS is prepared for any issues that arise in the daily keep in touch meetings;

• Be ready to debate practice and argue about outcomes not process. Ofsted expect a level of challenge but this needs to be on the right issues and points;

• Ofsted inspectors seemed well informed and knowledgeable about practice and keen to look at the child’s journey and experience. Voice of the child is very important;

• Ofsted inspectors were looking at the right things;

• Finally do not panic and prepare everyone for it being a rollercoaster. Issues will come up and be prepared to deal with them and stand your ground if that is the right thing to do.

See below for Appendix 1: Inspection Outcomes
## APPENDIX 1

### Inspection Outcomes

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<th>Local Authority</th>
<th>Overall Judgment</th>
<th>Children who need help &amp; protection</th>
<th>Children looked after &amp; achieving permanence</th>
<th>Adoption</th>
<th>Experiences and Progress of care leavers</th>
<th>Leadership, Management &amp; governance</th>
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