Ofsted Inspections of Local Authority and Voluntary Adoption Agencies

**Practice areas affected:**
Adoption

**Status:**
Ofsted report: ‘Inspections of Local Authority and Voluntary Adoption Agencies’
(published March 2012)

**Useful Links:**
The Ofsted website http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/inspection-of-local-authority-and-voluntary-adoption-agencies-0

**Timescales:**
The Ofsted framework for inspection set out in the report will have effect from April 2012.

**Introduction**

This briefing outlines the Ofsted Framework for inspections of local authority and voluntary adoption agencies, in place from April 2012. It is a summary of *Inspections of Local Authority and Voluntary Adoption Agencies* (Ofsted, 2012) which is available on the Ofsted website with the accompanying *Inspections of Adoption Agencies: Evaluation Schedule and Grade Descriptors*. For the purpose of this policy briefing, the term adoption agency covers both local authority and voluntary agencies.

Ofsted intends that inspections not only test compliance, but also raise standards and focus improvement in the sector. There is a particular emphasis on improving outcomes for children and young people; services will be required to show how they are contributing to delivering such outcomes.

Ofsted notes that age is the most significant indicator of a successful adoption; the younger a child is when placed, the better the outcomes. It states that delays in placements can have a severe impact on children and young people’s health, development and ability to make new meaningful attachments, and can damage their chances of enjoying a successful adult life. The report says, therefore, that the inspection will evaluate how the adoption agency ensures that, when adoption is in the best interests of the child, they are placed appropriately, as young as possible, and without avoidable delay.
There has been significant publicity surrounding local authority adoption agencies achieving an overall Ofsted judgement of outstanding. To clarify this, the National Minimum Standards for Adoption provide that all children with an adoption plan should wait no longer than 12 months for an adoptive placement from the time the agency decided to place them for adoption. Local authority adoption agencies will only achieve an overall evaluation of ‘outstanding’ if they can show that they are meeting this standard. (The timescale is not that children should have an adoptive placement within 12 months of being received into care, as has been reported by some media.) For further information see the section on the Evaluation Schedule below.

Frequency of inspection

All adoption agencies must have at least one inspection in each three year inspection cycle. The timing of an inspection is influenced by:

- the outcomes of previous inspections;
- any current complaints or enforcement action;
- notifications received from a voluntary adoption agency;
- other relevant information received by Ofsted.

Where Ofsted judges an adoption agency as inadequate, they will usually re-inspect within 12 months. See the full Ofsted report for the approach taken following a judgement of inadequate.

Types and notice of inspection

The following types of inspection of adoption agencies are carried out by Ofsted:

- An inspection carried out at least once in each three year cycle, conducted against the evaluation schedule and results in a set of graded judgements;
- A monitoring inspection if there is an incident, complaint or concern regarding a registered agency
- A survey inspection to gather evidence on a particular theme, issue or aspect of best practice that Ofsted is examining with the intention of publishing a report on the findings.

A maximum of nine inspector days is allocated to each local authority adoption agency inspection, and six inspector days to each voluntary adoption agency inspection. This includes preparation, fieldwork and report writing.

Inspections will be conducted with 10 working days’ notice.
Evaluation schedule

The evaluation schedule (see full Ofsted document) outlines the judgements that inspectors make during inspection and the grade descriptors that they use to arrive at their judgements, which are: overall effectiveness; outcomes for children and young people; the quality of service provision; safeguarding children and young people; leadership and management.

Simply achieving the national minimum standards will not necessarily mean that an adoption agency is good or outstanding. They are, by definition, the minimum standard expected. Failure to meet all the legal requirements in full however, does not necessarily result in a judgement of inadequate. The seriousness of the failure and its potential impact on outcomes for children and young people is considered carefully to determine how it should impact on the overall judgement.

Inspectors must evaluate the evidence in a particular area and consider how it best fits against the descriptors for outstanding, good, adequate or inadequate, before making a judgement. Examples of practice may be used to support more than one judgement. Judgements are made on carefully balanced consideration of the impact on children and young people, and not on a formulaic approach. Local authorities are responsible for the placement of children and young people for adoption; voluntary adoption agencies rarely are. Therefore, roles and responsibilities differ and this is taken into account during inspection.

Local authority adoption agencies should monitor and report on their performance in relation to: the timescales for making the decision that adoption is in the best interests of the child; the time it takes to place children and young people with adoptive families; and the length of time before an adoption order is granted. In relation to timescales for placing children for adoption, the National Minimum Standards for Adoption provide that all children with an adoption plan should wait no longer than 12 months for an adoptive placement from the time the agency decided to place them for adoption. Local authority adoption agencies will only achieve an overall evaluation of 'outstanding' if they can show that they are meeting this standard.

Inspection activity

Inspectors focus their inspection activities on evaluating the progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people, and the quality and impact of services in helping to improve outcomes.

Therefore, inspections of local authority adoption services will focus on the performance of the local authority as a whole in relation to the adoption of children and young people. This includes the effectiveness of early permanency planning and its outcome in ensuring that all those children and young people for whom adoption is, or may be, the appropriate plan is identified in a timely way, and that those plans are pursued without avoidable delay. Where agencies work directly with children and young people, this includes the initiation and implementation of adoption plans in accordance with the care planning regulations and adoption legislation.
Voluntary adoption agencies (and receiving local authorities who have approved the adopters) are not directly responsible for the placement of a child. They should however, be contributing to meeting the needs of, and promoting good outcomes for, children and young people through their recruitment, assessment, preparation and training of adopters, and through effective support of adoptive families following a child’s placement. How well voluntary adoption agencies and local authorities work in partnership is crucial therefore, and will be considered during inspection.

Inspection activities, where possible, include:

- gathering views from children and young people, where appropriate; birth relatives; partners and stakeholders, such as placing social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and other organisations working with the agency, for example adoption support agencies
- discussion with adult adoptees; adopters and prospective adopters; staff and managers; chair of the adoption panel or other members of the panel; foster carers who provide pre-adoption placements;
- case file reading and case tracking
- examination of records.

The identification of children and young people to participate in the inspection must be at the discretion of the adopters and social workers. It may not be possible for inspectors to talk directly to children and young people.

Preparation for Inspection

In preparation for inspection, inspectors consider the information that Ofsted has about the service. This includes:

- the annual online questionnaires completed by children, young people, adult adoptees, people who enquire about or apply to adopt, prospective adopters, adopters, birth relatives, staff and partner organisations;
- previous inspection reports, including, for local authorities, any inspection of the authority’s services for looked after children;
- the statement of purpose and, where appropriate, the children’s guide;
- concerns and complaints received;
- notifications of significant events received;
- any changes to registration, including change of manager;
- any current or recent enforcement activity;
- any self-assessment and dataset submitted;
- adoption data, including the percentage of children and young people adopted from care, the characteristics of children and young people identified for adoption, the timescales for their placement with adoptive families and the timescales for the approval of adoptive applicants and their characteristics;
- panel minutes.

Ofsted will consider other material, if the service has explicitly stated the relevance of the material to the framework and the evaluation schedule.
Reporting findings at inspections

Each inspection is followed by a report that sets out the inspection findings using text and grades. The draft report is sent to the provider for a factual accuracy check within 10 working days of the end of the inspection; they should reply to related comments within five working days. The final report will be published on the Ofsted website within 20 working days of the end of the inspection.

Further Information

For further information please see Inspection of Local Authority and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (Ofsted, 2012) and Inspections of Adoption Agencies: Evaluation Schedule and Grade Descriptors (Ofsted, 2012). These are available at: http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/inspection-of-local-authority-and-voluntary-adoption-agencies-0

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