

Overview of inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS)

Introduction

From January 2018 onwards, a new universal inspection framework will be introduced. The ILACS focuses on the local authority (LA) functions regarding the help, care and protection of children and young people. Where all or part of an LA's functions have been delegated to a third-party provider, the inspection is still of the LA. Where some or all of the LA's functions are delegated, under the direction of the Secretary of State, LA references should be read as the person or body by whom the function is exercised e.g. a trust.

A 'whole system' approach

Driving up improvement and catching LAs before they topple over are the underpinning principles of the new framework, which has been described as a system rather than a programme of inspection. ILACS attempts to take a proportionate, whole system approach that is less intensive than the single inspection framework (SIF), this inevitably involves more contact. In addition to onsite inspection activity, this new way of working is both supported and informed by:

- The submission of an annual self-evaluation by the LA
- An annual conversation between the DCS and the relevant regional director, ideally based on the LA's self-assessment
- Up to two focused visits between the three-yearly judgement inspection, one of which may be a joint targeted area inspection (JTAI)
- Ofsted's local authority intelligence system.

Ofsted does not plan to publish advance notification dates, however, the new inspections and focused visits come with five days' notice. Additionally, the ILACS handbook clearly states inspections will not usually commence in August or over the Christmas/ new year period.



Local authority contact with Ofsted

Inadequate local authority	Requires improvement to be good local authority	Good or outstanding local authority
Quarterly monitoring visits	Standard inspection (once in a three year period)	Short inspection (once in a three year period)
SIF or post-monitoring SIF	Up to two focused visits in between inspections	Up to two focused visits in between inspections
Annual conversation	Possible JTAI (would replace a focused visit)	Possible JTAI (would replace a focused visit)
Shared self-evaluation	Annual conversation	Annual conversation
	Shared self-evaluation	Shared self-evaluation

Proportionate pathways

Local authorities will be inspected differently based upon all known intelligence and their most recent inspection judgement. Fieldwork will last between five days and four weeks depending on the type of inspection (focused visits are two days in length). Inspection teams are typically made up of a lead inspector and three other inspectors who work collectively to arrive at shared decisions. Two

additional inspectors will briefly be involved in standard and short inspections - an education expert looking at the impact and effectiveness of the virtual school and a regulatory inspector looking at recruitment processes for foster carers and adoptive families. Whether the LA has created an environment where social work can flourish is the hypotheses tested throughout the inspection. Pilot LAs reported that approx. 80% of inspector's time is spent with frontline social workers and team managers reviewing case files, which is a significant departure from the SIF.

The handbook suggests every effort will be made to ensure there is a gap of at least six months between each episode of inspection e.g. a focused visit or a JTAI.

Pathway one - LAs previously found to be good or outstanding – one week notification, one week of field work, four inspectors

LAs previously found to be good or outstanding will be subject to a short inspection approx. every three years. Inspectors will arrive on site with the assumption that services are still good and will be cross referencing this with the picture presented in LA's self-evaluation. In the intervening years the LA will usually be subject to up to two focused visits (one of which may be a JTAI). By exception LAs previously rated as 'good' may also receive a standard inspection, instead of a short one, if concerns arise.

Pathway two - LAs previously judged as requires improvement to be good – one week notification, two weeks of field work, four inspectors

LAs previously found to require improvement to be good will be subject to a standard inspection approx. every three years. In the intervening years the LA will be subject to up to two focused visits (one of which may be a JTAI).

Pathway three - LAs previously judged as inadequate – one day notification, four weeks of field work, seven inspectors for the full SIF OR two days notification, two weeks of field work, four inspectors for the post-monitoring SIF

LAs previously found to be inadequate will be subject to quarterly monitoring visits. These visits will be followed by a re-inspection under the framework that their inadequate judgement was made. The duration of the fieldwork and the size of the team will be informed by the progress evidenced in these visits - the full SIF is four weeks as before and the post-monitoring SIF is two weeks in length. This truncated version will be deployed in LAs that have made significant progress during monitoring. ADCS understands Ofsted will inform inadequate LAs if they no longer plan to undertake monitoring visits meaning a re-inspection should take place within six months. If the outcome of the subsequent re-inspection is better than inadequate, that authority will then begin to follow pathway one or two, see above.

Focused visits – one week notification, two days of field work, two inspectors

Focused visits concentrate on an area of anticipated good practice or possible concern. The self-evaluation and the annual conversation both feed into the process of identifying areas of focus. Each visit, led by two inspectors, will cover a service area or cohort of children e.g. the front door or the protection of vulnerable adolescents, whilst taking in the impact of leadership and management. Pilot LAs reported this process, including the level of activity experienced in the set-up period, was intensive but resulted in a rich picture of practice. Findings from these visits will be set out in a narrative letter to the DCS, however, any serious concerns evidenced during the visit will be identified as areas for priority action, this may in turn inform the nature and timing of future inspection activity.

Judgements

Standard and short inspections will result in an overall judgement on the usual four-point scale (inadequate; requires improvement to be good; good; and, outstanding) plus a narrative judgement for the three additional key judgements, which largely echo the areas of focus under the SIF, see below.



Inspection judgements

Overall judgement		
<p>Key judgement: The impact of leadership on social work practice with children and families</p>	<p>Key judgement: The experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection</p>	<p>Key judgement: The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers</p>
<p>Narrative: How good leaders are at creating an environment where social work can flourish</p>	<p>Narrative Early help Children in need Children on a child protection plan</p>	<p>Narrative How well permanence is achieved (including adoption) Care leavers Making good decisions</p>

The self-evaluation

The self-evaluation is a new feature of the ILACS. The LA's submission will be discussed in detail during the annual conversation and then triangulated during the inspection process. Ofsted does not plan to issue a standard template, but asks that local evaluations succinctly answer the following questions: What do you know about the quality and impact of social work practice with children and families in your authority; how do you know it; and, how do you plan to maintain or improve practice? Pilot LAs have underlined the importance of giving a frank and honest assessment and avoiding the temptation to swamp inspectors in detail. This process should largely draw on existing documents e.g. audit and assurance activity. The LA's leadership and management judgement is built on the views of frontline staff, pilot areas noted it is good practice to incorporate their feedback here.

The annual conversation

The LA's self-evaluation forms the basis of the annual conversation between the relevant regional director and DCS although it was noted at the ILACS launch events that in 2018, as the new framework beds in, the sequencing might not quite work as planned. In such cases it was suggested alternative arrangements should be agreed locally e.g. a follow up conversation. Other available intelligence will also be drawn into this process e.g. serious incident notifications, SCRs etc. This exercise will inform focused visits and the timing / key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) of a full inspection. The DCS will receive a letter following the meeting, there will be no published outcome or grade resulting from this activity.

Experiences of, and top tips from, pilot LAs

- The notification period involves a lot of activity. During this time the LA will be required to provide 'Annex A' evidence and audit lists from the last six months, from this and the LA's self-evaluation the KLOEs are identified
- KLOEs are strictly adhered to and closed down as the inspection progresses

- The pace of the ILACS is swift and the inspection timetable is both flexible and reviewed daily based on emerging findings. Pilot LAs underlined the need for a feedback system for staff, one LA used a Whatsapp group chat, for example
- Pilot LAs emphasised the importance of an honest self-evaluation and a strong presentation from the DCS at the start of the onsite inspection activity
- In larger, rural areas inspectors recognised it was logistically impossible to visit everywhere so cases were sampled from locality teams they were unable to visit
- All forms of permanency were described as an 'obsession' during the inspection as is the inspectorate's focus on care leavers
- One LA recommended having a data analyst onsite with the inspection team at all times to respond quickly to information requests as they arise
- An LA piloting the standard inspection reported upwards of 270 cases were sampled over two weeks, given the focus on the frontline it is important to prepare staff for this level of contact and to help them talk with confidence about the children and families they work with and the plans they have put in place
- The majority of pilots reported that there was little contact with children and families. Instead Ofsted look at how children and young people's voices are heard and acted upon by the LA
- The ILACS does not have the same focus on multiagency arrangements as the SIF, partners are largely drawn in via their involvement in individual case files. The JTAI will be the barometer of multiagency working going forwards.

Useful links

The ILACS handbook can be found [here](#), the latest version of the SIF handbook can be found [here](#).

Slides from Ofsted's session at the NCAS Conference, which included feedback from pilot LAs, can be found [here](#). An ILACS blog from Eleanor Schooling can be found [here](#).

Slides from Nottingham City Council, which were presented at the ADCS annual conference, can be found [here](#) and a blog from Alison Michalska, ADCS President and the DCS in Nottingham, about local experiences of piloting the ILACS can be found [here](#).

Slides from the ILACS launch events can be found [here](#).

Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAI)

JTAIs will supplement focused visits in LAs previously rated as requires improvement or better. The next round of JTAIs, beginning February 2018, will revisit two earlier themes, four will take in an updated CSE remit (now includes gangs) and two will have a DA focus. From September onwards, the focus of these inspections will be on familial abuse.

ADCS briefing on the CSE JTAI can be found [here](#).

The report on the aggregated findings of the CSE JTAI can be viewed [here](#) and the findings from the DA JTAI can be viewed [here](#).

This note is based on a recent meeting of the ADCS Standards, Performance & Inspection Policy Committee (attended by five pilot LAs), plus presentations delivered at the most recent NCAS Conference and a recent ILACS launch event.