

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

Introduction

In January 2018, a new universal inspection framework came into force. 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 or ADM.

A 'whole system' approach

Driving up improvement and catching LAs before they fall over are the underpinning principles of the new framework, which is 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 greater contact. In addition to on-site inspection activity, this new way of working is supported and informed by an annual self-evaluation, the annual conversation and Ofsted's LA intelligence system.

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

Advanced notification dates are not being made available by Ofsted, however, short and standard inspections plus focused visits come with five days notice. The ILACS handbook also states inspection activity will not usually commence in August or over the Christmas/ new year period.

Proportionate pathways

Under the ILACS LAs will be inspected differently based upon all known intelligence and their most recent inspection judgement. The length of fieldwork depends on the type of inspection activity (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 are also 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 and those involved in the first wave of inspections reported that the bulk of HMI's time is spent with frontline social workers and team managers reviewing case files.

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. JTAIs will supplement focused visits in LAs previously rated as requires improvement or better (from September 2018 the focus of the JTAI will be child sexual abuse in the family environment).

1. Short inspection for LAs previously found to be good or outstanding – one week off site, one week on-site, four inspectors

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

2. Standard inspection for LAs previously judged as requires improvement to be good or inadequate – one-week off site, two weeks on-site, four inspectors

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

3. Focused visit – one-week off site, two days on-site, 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 whilst also looking at the impact of leadership and management. LAs have reported that this process, including the level of activity experienced in the set-up period, is intensive but has resulted in a rich picture of practice. As of September 2018, any serious concerns evidenced during a visit will require an action plan to be produced. This may inform the nature and timing of future inspection activity.

Judgements

Standard and short inspections will result in an overall judgement and three sub-judgements on the usual four-point scale, see below. Focused visits result in a narrative letter to the DCS.

Inspection judgements



Overall judgement		
<p>Key judgement: The impact of leadership on social work practice with children and families</p> <p>Narrative: How good leaders are at creating an environment where social work can flourish</p>	<p>Key judgement: The experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection</p> <p>Narrative: Early help Children in need Children on a child protection plan</p>	<p>Key judgement: The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers</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 submissions are discussed in detail during the annual conversation and then triangulated during the inspection process. Ofsted has not produced 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?
- How do you plan to maintain or improve practice?

The importance of giving a frank and honest assessment and avoiding the temptation to swamp inspectors in detail has been underlined by LAs that have been through the ILACS already. This process should largely draw on existing audit and assurance activity. The LA's leadership judgement is built on the views of frontline staff, it is therefore good practice to incorporate their feedback as well.

The annual conversation

The LA's self-evaluation forms the basis of the annual conversation between the relevant regional director. Other available intelligence will also be drawn into this process e.g. serious incident notifications, SCRs, whistleblowing reports, press coverage, published minutes of meetings etc. This exercise informs focused visits and the timing / key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) of a full inspection. The DCS will receive a letter following the meeting, there is no published outcome.

Experiences of, and top tips from, LAs

- All LAs inspected so far have underlined the volume and intensity of activity during the notification period when 'Annex A' and recent audit lists are requested. This and the LA's self-evaluation informs identification of KLOEs. This applies to focused visits too
- The senior leadership team is heavily involved in week one (which has been likened to week two of the SIF) in terms of intense activity via phone and additional information requests as the KLOEs are identified
- The LA's data lead will also be involved early in week one as inspectors seek to understand how well LAs know themselves and their services
- LAs emphasised the importance of an honest self-evaluation and a strong presentation from the DCS at the start of the onsite inspection to set out the local context
- Be upfront about challenges or areas for improvement and by the same token be confident and proud of your successes and strengths, evidence this with feedback from partners etc.
- KLOEs are strictly adhered to and once enough evidence is received and a finding arrived at then the team quickly moves on to the next area at speed
- The pace of the ILACS is swift and the inspection timetable is reviewed daily based on emerging findings. LAs have underlined the need for a feedback system for staff to keep on top of apparent lines of enquiry and interest e.g. a Whatsapp group or shared inbox
- Know your progress since the last inspection, write it down (but keep it a sensible length), share it with the SHMI during the inspection and/or focused visit and refer to it as required
- In larger, rural areas inspectors recognise it is logistically impossible to visit everywhere so may look to sample cases from locality teams they were unable to visit
- All forms of permanence are described as an 'obsession' during the inspection as is the inspectorate's focus on care leavers. Exclusion seems to be an emerging focus too

- One LA recommended having a data analyst onsite with the inspection team to respond quickly to information requests as they arise
- It is important to prepare frontline staff for the level of contact they will have with inspectors, to help them talk with confidence about the children they work with and the plans put in place
- There is little contact with children and families, what little there is happens largely via phone. Instead Ofsted say their focus is on how children and young people's voices are heard/ acted upon
- The ILACS does not have the same focus on partners as the SIF, they are largely drawn in via involvement in individual cases. Those who have been inspected to date highlighted this as a weakness, given our increasingly multiagency approaches to early help and safeguarding
- The ILACS is no less intensive than the SIF, it did feel more sophisticated and authentic though – there's nowhere to hide.

Useful links

Slides from Ofsted's session at the NCAS Conference 2017, which included feedback from pilot LAs, can be found [here](#). Slides from the ILACS launch events in January 2018 can be found [here](#).

An ILACS blog from Eleanor Schooling can be found [here](#).

Slides from the 'Lessons from the inspected' workshop at the ADCS annual conference, July 2018, can be found [here](#).

A blog from Alison Michalska, ADCS President and the DCS in Nottingham, about local experiences of piloting the ILACS can be found [here](#).

A blog by the DCS in Oxfordshire about their local ILACS experience can be found [here](#).

Please check the Ofsted website for the latest version of the ILACS handbook (updated September 2018).

This note is based on feedback from pilot LAs and those visited in the first half of 2018 as well as ADCS policy committee meetings, conference presentations and the national ILACS launch events.