

Ofsted consultation: Future of social care inspection

Cafcass (the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Ministry of Justice. The role of Cafcass within the family court is to: safeguard and promote the welfare of children; provide advice to the court; make provision for children to be represented; and provide information and support to children and families.

While Cafcass is not inspected under the same framework as local authorities, we employ the greatest number of children's social workers of any organisation in the UK, and our social workers carry out frontline work in many thousands of private law cases each year. We share concerns with local authorities that any inspection programme must be proportionate to the standard of practice and issues present in each inspected organisation, and that it should continue to support the drive to raise the standards of social work practice throughout England.

Part one – the principles of social care inspection

We agree with the three proposed principles for inspection. We would support an agreed understanding of what the first principle - *that inspection should focus on the things that matter most to children's lives* - will mean within each inspection setting and in the context of the role of each agency. This is explored further, below, with reference to the key areas of judgement. We see this section as an opportunity to express more about the expected outcomes of interventions for children and their families, to avoid undue concentration on process.

Part two – local authority inspections

Proportionate inspections, taking account of the earlier performance of each local authority, and short modular inspections

We support the overall principles of proportionality and a varied inspection programme, in place of a resource intensive four-week single inspection. Monitoring authorities via modular inspections in the intervening period will help to achieve this but the range of different inspection types seems to us to be unduly complex and it is difficult for us to assess, at this stage, whether the proposals offer the more targeted and focussed inspections being sought.

It is important that good and outstanding authorities are monitored, proportionately, to ensure that quality is maintained, to identify further areas for improvement, and to share good practice across the sector. More clarity about what constitutes the very best 'outstanding' practice would be welcome.

Local authority self-evaluation of practice

Self-evaluation and sector-led improvement is critical to drive improvements across the system. We think more could be made of this within the inspection methodology. Cafcass has recently strengthened our area quality review (AQR) model and quality assurance and impact framework for casework auditing. Within a three-year programme, each of our 17 service areas is peer reviewed, alongside a programme of commissioned thematic audits to review our work. This rolling programme enables us to identify and share best practice, and address any learning points. We continually reflect on our AQRs to ensure that we are getting the most

out of the process, with regular discussions taking place within our operational management team.

We believe that local authorities should be able to produce assessments at a time that best fits with their work programme, rather than doing so at a particular point within the year. We would support local authorities being asked when an update is required.

New judgement inspection

We agree that it can be challenging for local authorities to facilitate unannounced inspections and can see this becoming more of a concern with increased demand for services and reducing resources. In our response to Ofsted's consultation on joint targeted area reviews, we were in favour of a notice period of one month, to provide authorities with adequate time to prepare. In fact, quarterly advanced notice would in our view be unlikely to skew the outcome of the inspection and it may reduce the constant anxiety experienced by organisations expecting an inspection. We also recognise the importance of proportionate preparation, and we would like to see clear guidelines to local authorities about the information required by Ofsted for fieldwork.

Part three – the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF)

It is proposed that the principles of the framework will apply to Cafcass, though the framework itself will not. We support the proposed 'two part' inspection handbook, containing agency-specific criteria, and will participate in further consultation on the extent to which the principles of the SCCIF will apply to our work. We would caution against encouraging comparability of children's experiences and progress where agencies are working with families at very different stages in their lives, and for very different purposes. This could pose risks in public perception of the services provided within the sector.

The focus of inspections

The areas of judgement to be considered within the SCCIF are sufficiently broad as to apply within a range of social care settings, supported by the two-part inspection handbook. Regarding the overall experience and progress of children, we note the complexity inherent in 'outcome' measures for children's social work, particularly in private law where we have no mandate to obtain data about children or families after our court-ordered involvement with them has ended.

We mostly agree with the seven key areas, though question the extent to which agencies should be judged on the progress children make in relation to their health, education, and emotional, social and psychological wellbeing. This is a complex measure, determined by a range of contributing factors for which causation cannot be confidently ascribed. This also applies – to an extent – to the quality of children's experiences on a day-to-day basis. Under this heading, we would like to see a more explicit judgement measure about the voice of the child, how well this has been heard, and what has been done to support the child in voicing their wishes and feelings. This is different to the current key area of how well children's views are understood and taken into account.

For the key judgement of how well children are helped and protected, we feel it is important that the focus on radicalisation and extremism, while timely, does not divert the attention of

local authorities, or Ofsted, from core safeguarding responsibilities towards all children. Our small-scale research in this area highlighted the importance of core safeguarding skills in protecting children from risks related to radicalisation and extremism.

We agree with the areas of judgement for the effectiveness of leaders and managers. Again, not all elements apply to all agencies. For example, Cafcass could not be assessed on the expectations for what children can achieve, or on the progress made by children, when we are undertaking specific court-ordered work within family proceedings. We would recommend a key area to reflect the finding from Ofsted's commentary on social care, about connections to the frontline. Our experience at Cafcass is that this connection improves staff confidence and supports high quality practice. Improved technology has been critical to maintain this connection within Cafcass, enabling senior leaders to foster strong working relationships within teams that are often geographically disparate. We think more could be said about specific component elements of a strong infrastructure in the criteria for leadership and governance across the sector.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anthony Douglas". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Anthony Douglas CBE
Chief Executive of Cafcass

September 2016