



Supplementary advice on the Ofsted single inspection framework for children's services

From this November Ofsted will commence a three-year universal deployment of what is rather lengthily entitled The framework for the inspection of service for children in need of help and protection, looked after children and care leavers – more easily remembered as “the single inspection”. In launching the framework at the end of September, Ofsted re-stated what SOLACE, the LGA and the ADCS have long espoused, namely that only good is good enough, and that this should be the minimum standard for all services for children and young people. So, something that we have in common at least.

Much has been written over recent months about this emergent unified framework since the decision was taken in the Spring to halt work on two separate approaches (for safeguarding and looked after children) and, instead, focus on a single inspectorate, local authority focused inspection culminating in a single headline judgement – itself governed by the application of limiting judgements scattered throughout the framework. I will comment no further on the arguments for and against the framework we have ended up with – other than to say that at least it is not as bad as I feared, but nor is it as good as it could be. Rather than rehearse old arguments, perversely pleasurable though that might be, I want to look ahead at what councils might do to ensure that they get a fair hearing when being subject to the “harder test” that Ofsted intends this inspection to be.

Firstly, do not be passive recipients of inspection. Be prepared and pro-active at all times – ensure your local quality assurance is tip top and the message from scrutiny are understood; always have Annex A up to date; produce your own succinct but honest self-assessment and even consider having this in the form of a draft inspection report so that you can show inspectors how you think they should be writing about you. And use your peers to check that you have told your story authentically.

Secondly, when Ofsted comes on site constantly check that inspectors are drawing on all the evidence available. Take nothing for-granted and use all discussion time you have with them (the so-called Keeping In Touch meetings) to ask what their emergent thoughts are, what they are based on and whether they are truly using appreciative enquiry to understand what is happening and why. Challenge them to think that there might be more than one explanation for what they are seeing and check that they can accommodate ambiguity and uncertainty in their thinking, analysis and judgements.

Thirdly, always challenge the inspectors to demonstrate that they are open to proving positive outcomes and not defaulting to what many of us have experienced in the past – ie a deeply rooted deficit model of chasing failure. This is all the more important with a framework wherein the achievement of “good” requires a “perfect 10” against all the grade criteria. It is essential to be mindful that this inspection seems inherently predisposed to proving failure (it is called a “harder test” for a reason).

Fourthly, keep asking them about whether or not they understand the symptoms affecting the system's effectiveness or the tendency will be to focus superficially on causes. Challenge the team to explain not just what it is that's been seen (with sufficient compelling supporting evidence), but why the inspectors think it is performing the way it is. This is crucial if we are to get meaningful recommendations at the end of a very long month.

Fifthly, insist that the strategic leaders in your place are seen and seen early in the inspection schedule. The chief executive, lead member, director and LSCB chair all need to be seen at the beginning to give their account of the context of local children's services and explain how well (or not) they think the local services perform. Whilst this inspection is rightly about the child's experiences of the helping system, you are entitled to meet and influence inspectors the formative stage of the process, and not near the middle, let alone the end, when hypotheses have become conclusions and your influence will count for little.

So, a call to action to the sector in an effort to offset an otherwise perceived pre-deterministic approach to inspection that Ofsted's own leadership is on record as saying will judge 80% of councils a less than good or excellent by the end of the cycle.

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