

Social care inspections

Introduction

190 On 1 April 2007, Ofsted began the regulation and inspection of children's social care provision. This work builds on information and professional expertise from the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), from which many inspectors have joined the new Ofsted.

191 This section gives an overview of social care inspection findings published during the period up to March 2007, and Ofsted's findings since then. The final data for inspection findings for the period up to March 2007 will be available in the CSCI report *The state of social care in England 2006–07*, which is due for publication in January 2008.

192 In March 2007, CSCI looked back over its three years as a regulatory body and inspectorate for children's social care, and reported on the themes revealed through inspection and other regulatory activity.²³ This report acknowledged that, historically, looked after children had often been subject to poor quality services.

193 Good services made a positive difference in children's lives, so it is vital that strengths are identified and promoted. CSCI noted improvements in the protection of children from harm and greater stability in placements. CSCI also found that local authorities with strong provision of services to children shared important general characteristics. These include: clarity of vision; good service planning; good systems to involve children and young people in developing a range of care placements and in making improvements to services; high quality 'first contact' with children and families in need; good quality care plans; and systems of performance management that enable the outcomes for children to be tracked.

194 However, a considerable number of areas gave CSCI cause for concern. Children and families were not always getting access to the help they needed at an early enough stage. Once in a placement, children were not receiving continuing support to help them stay there. Vulnerable children and young people with mental health problems found that their problems were compounded by shortfalls in child and adolescent mental health services provision. Overall, the process of selecting residential and foster care placements for children and young people showed weaknesses, particularly in analysing and predicting long term needs.

195 It is clear from CSCI's work, and from the first Ofsted social care inspections, that children and young people want to be recognised as individuals, to have their views taken seriously and to be given an opportunity to contribute to the decisions which affect them. They would like the services they receive to be ones that meet their specific needs, rather than simply being whatever is available at the time. Children and young people value the relationships they already have before they come to the attention of social services. They may want to remain with their families, and they appreciate early interventions which enable them to do so. They like to know what is happening to them so that their future feels secure. Children and young people want to be able to enjoy continuity at school, to maintain their friendships and, if looked after, to have a stable placement.

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196 The CSCI report states that services for children in care are slowly getting better and addressing the issues that children and young people prioritise as important. Between 2004 and 2007 there was a very slight fall in the number of children subjected to three or more placement moves in a year. Most looked after children are in foster care or adoptive placements rather than residential care. Foster placements tend to be more local to the child's home and family. Reviews generally take place on time and with the appropriate involvement of the children concerned. In 2005/06, one in three children's homes met more than 90% of the national minimum standards, compared with only one in 10 in 2003. Similar improvements were shown in relation to fostering services. The overall proportions of local authorities judged to be good or excellent by CSCI, in relation to the contribution they make to improving social care services for children and young people, also increased. Assessments and care planning are more systematic, and safeguarding arrangements are generally more secure. Significant improvements have been made to adoption services. Children are commenting more positively on their experiences.

197 Nevertheless, CSCI also reported that a third of children's homes do not meet standards relating to health, safety and security or to the adequacy of staff. The rate of teenage pregnancy is not going down quickly enough. The most recently available government data, published in 2007, show that conception rates have dropped from 43.7 per 1,000 girls under the age of 18 in 2000 to 41.1 in 2005. Too many children do not have a named, qualified social worker and the educational achievements of children in care still fall far short of the achievement levels of all children.²⁴ The need to safeguard the welfare of children with complex needs is often overlooked by those responsible for their care. These children include those in secure settings as a result of mental health conditions, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and children who have committed offences. This is of particular concern in relation to those children and young people with challenging behaviour, who may be exposed to inappropriate forms of restraint.

198 CSCI's evaluation of the quality of children's services suggested that the majority did not meet all of the national minimum standards. There is still considerable room for improvement. In the case of inadequate providers, Ofsted sets appropriate actions to be taken within a limited period of time. Failure to carry out such actions may result in Ofsted's taking enforcement action such as issuing a compliance notice, cancelling registration, or prosecution if the provider continues to fall short of the requirement.



²⁴ *The state of social care in England 2005-06*, Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2006.

Social care inspections continued

Inspections from April to June 2007

199 Since April 2007, there have been over 800 children's social care inspections, including over 750 of children's homes, 25 of fostering agencies and 15 of residential special schools.

200 Each children's home is inspected twice yearly. One inspection, known as a full inspection, evaluates the provision in relation to all five of the Every Child Matters outcomes. The second inspection, known as an interim inspection, takes a more focused approach, concentrating on a smaller range of outcomes.

201 Between 1 April and 30 June 2007, there have been 347 full inspections of children's homes, and 416 interim inspections. Over half (54%) of the children's homes receiving a full inspection during this period are providing a service that is good or outstanding; one in three (30%) is satisfactory and one in seven (16%) is inadequate. In the 55 inadequate settings, inspectors issued notices of actions to improve in 53 cases, and put enforcement actions in place in the remaining two.

202 Where inspectors made judgements against individual outcomes during full inspections of children's homes, 60% of the provision to enable children to be healthy is good or outstanding. In relation to the staying safe outcome, children's homes are good or outstanding in 52% of cases. For enjoying and achieving, provision is good or outstanding in 76% of inspections.

203 Inspectors set actions that must be completed to meet regulations and make recommendations for ways in which settings can improve further. The numbers of actions set are generally highest in inadequate settings, with each having at least four. Most satisfactory settings have fewer than four actions. Actions are rarely set in good settings.

A wide range of actions has been set relating to matters such as the maintenance of premises, having proper risk assessments in place, record-keeping and staff training.

204 Recommendations are made in settings of all levels of effectiveness. In outstanding settings, recommendations generally focus on improving already good practice. As with actions, recommendations are varied and frequently relate to ensuring that good practices are consistently applied. They are often detailed, focusing on a particular element of the minimum standards or regulations.

