

Ofsted
Children's Services Assessment Development Team
Floor 7
Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE.

29th September 2011

Response of Family Rights Group to Ofsted's consultation on arrangements for the inspection of children's services

Family Rights Group advises and supports parents and wider family members in England and Wales who are involved with, or require, local authority children's services, about the needs, care and protection of their children. The Charity was founded in 1974. We promote the involvement and support of parents and wider family members in making safe plans for their children which will enhance their welfare. We campaign to challenge injustice, to improve access to effective services, and to increase the voice children and families have over decisions affecting their lives. Our free telephone and email advice service advises 6,500 parents and relatives per year about their legal rights and the options open to them. Their experiences of contact with children's services inform this response.

Universal inspections

All children in care deserve to know whether they and their families are receiving the best quality help and support. Parents and other family members often have concerns about the care their children are receiving from local authorities. In addition relatives and friends who take on the care of children who cannot remain safely at home with their parents/carers often express concerns about the assessment process and their access to appropriate support. Ofsted inspections should listen to their concerns and provide an assurance of quality.

Therefore, we are concerned that the current proposals introduce the possibility that some local authorities may not have an inspection of their children in care services. Ofsted needs to seriously consider the full implications of this proposal. They will mean that many children and young people could experience a deteriorating service which is not inspected at any point during their time in care. Although there is a duty to consult parents and significant others about decisions concerning looked after children (s.22(4)&(5) Children Act 1989), parents and wider families are relatively powerless to challenge practice once a care order has been made because children's services can override their wishes (s.33(1) Children Act 1989). Inspections of children's services are therefore key to the accountability and scrutiny of the service looked after children receive.

www.frg.org.uk

T: 020 7923 2628 F: 020 7923 2683 E: office@frg.org.uk

The Print House 18 Ashwin Street London E8 3DL

Chief Executive: Cathy Ashley

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Consultation

Family Rights Group firmly believes that in addition to being more child centred, inspections should also involve consultation with parents and wider family members. We would therefore support the consultation document's reference to seeking children and families' direct experiences. We would encourage Ofsted to reflect further on the best ways of ensuring that inspections really do meaningfully involve parents, wider family members as well as children.

We would also recommend that in relation to children in care inspections, Ofsted also seek the views of IROs, since they are in an key position to provide incite.

Kinship Care

We are concerned that no reference is made in the consultation document to kinship care. We would suggest that as well as being an important part of authority inspections, it should also be the focus of a thematic review.

Judgements

It is officially recognised that:

- the best place for children to be raised is within their family network, provided it is safe (see for example s.22C Children Act 1989). This is consistent with their right to respect fro family life (Article 8 ECHR); and
- an effective working partnership between the family and the local authority is key to keeping vulnerable children safe (DoH 1995). This makes sense since 92% of children subject to child protection plans live at home (DfE, 2010), therefore it is parents and other family members who are responsible for their day to day care. If they do not engage with the child protection plan, the child may not be safe.

However, although such partnership is critical, it is often difficult to achieve during the course of child protection enquiries because many parents:

- are frightened, angry and confused which prevents them from hearing what is being said by the local authority, and they often don't know where to turn for advice.
- don't understand the processes and are overwhelmed by continuous assessments and meetings in which they are under the spot light of a large numbers of professionals.
- fear that the child may be removed by the local authority makes it hard for them to trust and to work openly with social workers, to reach agreement about how their child should be kept safe.

Research has found that:

- independent advice and advocacy for parents can substantially assist in improving this partnership working (Lindley 2001) and
- the use of Family group Conferences can result in extended family members stepping in to support struggling parents and when necessary to take on the care of the child if s/he cannot remain with their parents; fathers and paternal relatives being engaged; improved outcomes for

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Advice line 10am–3.30pm 0808 801 0366

children at risk; and a cost effective means of preventing children being unnecessarily subject to care proceedings or removed into care (Family Rights Group, 2011) ¹

We therefore believe that judgements for child protection inspections should specifically include what has been done by children's services to support the family to work in partnership to make a safe plan for their child. Such supports would include:

- Signposting to sources of independent advice and advocacy for parents of children involved in child protection enquiries; and
- Referral for a family group conference.

We would welcome further information on how Ofsted intend to develop the current proposals and would be pleased to work collaboratively to support improvements to the inspections framework including about family engagement.

Yours sincerely,

i) ¹ For example, a survey by Family Rights Group of nine projects reported that they have prevented 229 children becoming looked after in the last year, including avoidance of proceedings for 116 children, and that FGCs had led to 58 children returning to their family from local authority care. The combined savings from this amounted to an estimated £11,005,167. The combined FGC project budgets amounted to £1,467,700 in 2009/10 and whilst costs to public agencies of supporting the family plan must also be taken into account, nevertheless the savings are clear

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