Improvement Through Inspection?

A personal critique of Ofsted methodology and the implementation of the Single Inspection Framework for Local Authority Children’s Services in Stockport.

1. What is the point of Ofsted?

Ofsted sets out to improve children’s lives through inspection. Amanda Spielman, Ofsted’s Chief Inspector, was recently reported to have said:

“My ambition is for Ofsted to be a real force for improvement, both in education and children’s social care. This implies using our inspection and regulatory powers in an intelligent, focused and responsible way. And, of course, it means being an effective, credible and independent arbiter of standards.”

….and who would argue with that ambition? However, to deliver this ambition requires, at the very least, tools that can measure progress over time and differentiate between effective and ineffective practice. Most importantly, an “effective, credible and independent arbiter” requires tools that are demonstrably reliable and valid, and lead to judgements in which the level of “certainty” claimed is supported by an appropriately robust evidence base. Unfortunately none of these properties can be found in the tools in Ofsted’s toolbox, and the only way that their trademark four-point judgement scale can be used with the certainty with which it is published is if Ofsted inspectors are infallible.

2. What does the Single Inspection Framework measure, and how well does it do it?

The Single Inspection Framework (SIF) was introduced in the autumn of 2013, replacing the Safeguarding and Looked After Children (SLAC) regime, and was described at the time as having been designed to “raise the bar” of expectation about the quality and impact of children’s services. The SIF’s successor (the ILAC) is already being trialled. The methodology of these three major inspection regimes is sufficiently different to render meaningless any attempt at comparing the performance of a single Local Authority or local safeguarding system over time. The approaches measure different things, in different ways. So, rather than “raising the bar”, what Ofsted has actually done is “move the goalposts”. Furthermore, the methodology of the SIF has never been externally evaluated so it is not possible to say with any certainty whether it has validity (i.e. it actually measures what it sets out to measure), or is reliable (i.e. permits valid comparisons of judgements between inspections). The only checks to which the SIF is ever subjected are through internal moderation: in short, despite the impact and importance attached to this inspection process, Ofsted simply marks its own work so any judgements it makes about what it has found should be treated with caution.

What can be said with certainty is that the SIF provides the Local Authority with feedback from a team of professional peers, based on their reading of case files, document reviews and interviews with staff. This inspection methodology could have great value, or none, depending on the dynamics
of its implementation and the local ecology into which it is introduced. But it neither evaluates actual social work practice, nor does it provide a rigorous assessment of system impact: it simply compares a random selection of events and processes with an idealised (but not evaluated) description of what practice “should” look like. Most practitioners and system leaders would value this approach if it culminated in a robust debate about the strengths and weaknesses of local practice, and the development of an agreed action plan covering aspects of the local system that need to be better understood (an evaluation programme), and that which patently could be improved (a development plan). But it doesn’t, it culminates in the inspection team going into a secretive huddle, comparing and standardising notes (in the tradition of most systemic miscarriages of justice), and the publication of a judgement using language that gives it weight and certainty that are not justified by the methods used to determine it.

At the time of writing this critique, the SIF had been carried out 138 times: some Councils having been inspected twice, not all Councils having had their first inspection. Despite the absence of supporting evidence for the validity of the SIF, Ofsted has developed a narrative about the quality of services which has been swallowed hook, line and sinker, by Parliament, the media and most worryingly, by the Children’s Social Care Sector. The acceptance and adoption of a simplistic approach to “what good looks like” (as an alternative to setting evidence-informed, outcomes-based standards), coupled with the inescapable power of an Ofsted judgement, has shaped social work practice and local interagency procedures. But ironically, if Ofsted’s frameworks did have credibility, and inspection can improve outcomes, the social care programme appears to have led to a deterioration in standards in Local Authority services. Both SLAC and SIF programmes use a four point judgement scale with which to rate the services inspected, and under the SIF regime, significantly more LAs have been judged to be in the lower categories (and described as causing grave concern) than under the SLAC regime.

3. The impact of the SIF and evidence behind the judgement.

The concept of “readiness”.

All Local Authorities have been on notice since 2013 that they will have an unannounced inspection as part of the SIF programme. Ofsted’s expectation that local areas are perpetually “inspection-ready” has been made repeatedly in briefings to the sector over the years, confirming that complying with Ofsted expectations has to be a priority for local systems. The centrality of the SIF, as opposed to alternative measures of quality and impact, to thinking about local performance has been reinforced through the development of the “getting to good” seminar programme initiated by Ofsted and now, tragically, adopted by the sector.

Being prepared to be inspected requires the maintenance of documents, audit trails, improvement plans and local systems in a format that complies with Ofsted’s published Inspection Framework. Partners also have to be kept informed of the likelihood and nature of the inspection, and staff turnover creates the need for some elements of preparation to become a rolling programme. As the SIF programme has been delivered it has become increasingly evident that simply maintaining the types of records in a format that is of use to support local practice is insufficient: being seen to be “inspection unready” on Day 1 of a SIF is to be avoided at all costs.

Similarly, on arrival, the SIF team creates a demand for local systems that is unprecedented: casefiles need to be audited at short notice; additional document requests are generated on a daily basis; “leadership grip” is tested in as many ways as the team can come up with. The SIF team is large, its
members very busy (almost frenetic) throughout their visit, and the SIF methodology brings aspects of the Local Authority’s work to a standstill (some continuously, some sporadically) over a period of a month.

**What did the inspectors actually do?**

Public perception of Ofsted inspection activity is largely based on what goes on in schools and other educational and early years settings, as this is by far the largest sector in Ofsted’s remit. Inspections of education and early years settings include an element of direct observation of practice, but in the social care sector this is virtually non-existent (to the extent that a children’s home inspection in Stockport was once completed without a single child having been seen). As can been seen from the following activity breakdown, the SIF is essentially an audit and review of records. It involves triangulation through a variety of means, including staff interviews, but has an overwhelming focus on processes and procedures (and compliance with them). But at its core, the SIF fieldwork is based almost entirely on how well social workers and their manager tell a story. It is their narrative, whether from the case file or an interview, that is evaluated, not their actual practice. Furthermore, Ofsted has no reliable standards or measures against which to judge system performance. For example: there is no “optimum” rate, based on research evidence, to indicate that the balance between prevention and statutory intervention is about right; there are no universally accepted practice standards against which to judge social work responses to families in crisis. As a consequence inspectors spend much of their time comparing what they see in case files with an image of “what good looks like”, and with the Local Authority’s past history and with other places they have been. They then ask middle and senior leaders to explain the inevitable differences between actual and ideal that they think have discovered, but without sharing their judgement as to the quality of what they have found.

A core team of seven inspectors (at least three other Ofsted staff spent varying amounts of time in Stockport) took part in the inspection. We have no information about the amount of time they spent preparing for this process, or the way they allocated their time outside the face to face sessions they asked us to arrange. The following provides a reasonably accurate picture of the SIF inspection activity from the perspective of the inspected. We have not wasted resources developing an accurate time-use tool, simply worked off the activity schedule, inspectors’ access to the Council’s electronic client record system and inspection timetable as it happened.

It would appear that inspectors tracked or explored in detail 31 child and family cases – and this included in-depth discussions with social workers and their managers. The team held 31 sessions with social workers, spending on average 1 hour and 15 minutes on each session; and they sampled a further 188 cases spending, on average, about 10 minutes on each case. 11 sessions were held with 1st line managers (most involved more than one manager): the average time per session being 1 hour 35 minutes. 14 sessions were conducted with middle managers (most involved more than one manager): the average time per session being 1 hour 25 minutes. 13 staff focus groups were arranged (involving approximately 40 Council staff, 10 Head Teachers and a few NHS colleagues), with an average length of session being 1 hour 10 minutes. They also held one-hour meetings with 2 Councillors, and the independent chair of the Adoption and Fostering Panel.

The Council supplied 91 documents as required by Annex A of the inspection framework and subsequently provided the team with 194 additional documents in response to requests during the four week process.
Contact with people receiving a service.

As far as we can tell, the inspectors involved in the Stockport SIF met no children or young people on their own, and neither met nor telephoned any parents on their own; their one attempt to have a telephone conversation with a young person in custody failed. The inspection framework requires that families whose casefiles have been tracked and audited should be contacted by the Local Authority and consent sought from them for inspectors to speak to them. This was done, and a full list of details supplied but it would appear that none of the families were contacted. The inspection team observed no individual social work interventions or other practice sessions.

The inspectors held one focus group with 5 young people from the Children in Care Council, another with 13 care leavers. They met a group of 10 adopters, a group of 8 foster carers and a group of 4 parents at a Children’s Centre.

4. What did Stockport staff make of the process?

We created a simple, anonymous, staff survey to provide those that had been inspected (a highly professional, highly committed workforce) to share their experiences of the process and to evaluate the extent to which it appeared capable of achieving what it set out to achieve. There were 58 respondents (all the results below represented as percentages have been rounded).

Three quarters of the respondents attended either one or two face-to-face sessions with inspectors, but in addition, 21% of them spent between 1 and 2 hours preparing for their sessions, 26% spent between 2 hours and 3. In 25% of the sessions the inspector spent between 15 minutes and 30 minutes discussing cases, but in 41% the conversation was around an hour.

The point of the focus groups was made clear to participants, and participants either tended to agree or agreed strongly with the statement that inspectors enabled people to participate and their views appeared to be both noted and accepted.

Respondents were asked to use a four-point rating scale to share their professional judgement, based on their actual experience, of the extent to which the inspection methodology would achieve what was set out in the Ofsted handbook (with additional “focus” from the Lead Inspector in the set-up meeting): nobody thought it had no merit; 22% judged it to have limited ability to achieve its goals; 53% judged it would achieve them moderately well and 24% very well.

Finally, respondents were asked to rate the performance of the inspectors: 5% judged them to be outstanding; 81% to be good; and 14% to require improvement.

Of more interest, and I hope of more use to Ofsted, is the range of narrative judgements received, a small selection of which follows:

Two of the inspectors really knew the area that they were interviewing about and it made a difference. There was some challenge and some helpful “critical friend” discussion in the meetings.

One inspector clearly interviewed us on an area that I didn’t feel she was an expert in and it showed.

The inspectors were keen to understand and obtain a clear picture of Stockport
I felt that the meeting was well conducted and fair—sharp questions, challenge but good interpersonal skills. I felt she listened carefully and responded appropriately.

I was disappointed that we didn’t receive any written feedback about the case audit, as the interview felt quite negative and I know the inspector had a question for my manager regarding a decision that had been made on the case.

The process felt scripted and when inspectors were asking for evidence of innovation they stopped writing when positive things were presented or if they didn’t fit the questions on their scripts.

The inspector provided opportunities to give strengths and areas for development; the second interview affirmed that the inspector had listened, followed up and confirmed what was said.

With one inspector I did get into a discussion on threshold. There was difference of opinion as I am more focused on the interventions in the child’s life, are we making a difference, how are we engaging with the family rather than are we debating is this above or below a threshold. Agreed to disagree in the end.

I had the same inspector for all 3 of the meetings in which I was involved. She was discerning, warm, authoritative and realistic.

I felt that in the interviews that I attended that the Inspectors were fair and measured in their approach and questions. They took time to listen and asked appropriate questions, with a significant focus on ‘impact’ and ‘evidence-base’. They seemed well-prepared and demonstrated understanding of the subject area. To my knowledge they did not ask to speak to any children, young people or the families of the service areas that I have responsibility for and I felt that this was a gap that could have provided a more holistic view of service delivery and impact.

There was also a significant focus on ‘social work’ delivery, which is entirely understandable given the remit, however as we move more and more towards integrated services it is worth noting the value of all practitioners within Stockport Family, or similar models in other authorities, for inspection purposes and the contribution they make to the safeguarding and protection of children and families.

The inspectors were very positive towards myself and the staff from the team, and were clearly interested in how our support was impacting on our young people. However the general consensus in the team was of disappointment that they did not spend more time with us, did not come out on visits and did not meet our young people.

The responses to our survey were mostly provided by front-line staff and their direct managers and reflect their experience of discussing practice. However, the SIF methodology and the widely-shared experience of other authorities of the consequences of inspectors developing hypotheses about failing services create a hidden pressure on middle managers and senior leaders which is not reflected in the survey. Auditing and re-auditing casefiles, responding to queries about data, and providing additional, quality assured examples of good practice led to a small number of key individuals regularly working well into the night and over weekends. And whilst contacts with the inspection team were invariably well managed and polite, the frustration experienced by outstanding, experienced professionals when their analysis and explanation was simply met with a
cryptic comment (or none) simply added to the pernicious, debilitating impact of the four-week process.

5. What did it cost to be inspected?

In 2014 Stockport children’s services carried out a brief review of the single and multi-agency activity it had undertaken to respond to its earlier SLAC inspection and to prepare for a SIF inspection. We identified the activity that was “inspection specific” (that is, went beyond our routine performance and quality assurance processes and was linked directly to the expectations in the SIF handbook), and costed the staff time involved in preparing and maintaining a state of inspection readiness. We estimated this to be in the region of £32,000, and on reflection this is probably a conservative estimate. However, most of this preparation activity has to be repeated regularly, and information sets updated, so we have assumed this is a recurrent annual cost driven by the unannounced nature of the SIF programme. Therefore the cost to the Council of preparing for inspection between the announcement of the SIF programme in Sept 2013 to inspection notification in June 2017 is estimated to be £136,000.

The inspection process is voracious. The long term cost to services being judged to be inadequate is immeasurable. The experience and approach to inspection of authorities that have been judged to be performing well have been highlighted by Ofsted and shared widely within the social care sector so I believe that the approach taken by Stockport leaders and staff is normal, accepted activity during a SIF inspection. Apart from the meetings held directly with staff to discuss cases, Ofsted require file audits to be carried out at short notice, data to be provided and checked, and arrangements for visits and office accommodation to be in place. Middle and senior leaders’ lives are taken over by aspects of the inspection for a month: people worked late into the night and came into their offices over weekends; yet despite this, much routine activity (i.e. what we are actually here for) had to be deferred. We have not estimated the cost of recovering from having been inspected: the following paragraph simply sets out, using standard cost-recovery approaches in respect of both lost productive time and additional actual expenditure, the size of the bill to Stockport council tax payers that the SIF generated.

In total, 2775 staff hours were committed to the SIF. This is the equivalent of 75 working weeks. However, when this is broken down by the actual staff and costed at the mid-point of salary bands the picture becomes even more shocking. We have calculated that the cost of middle and senior leadership time lost (including the administration time involved in the process) to be in the region of £74,000. Practitioner time devoted to various individual and group meetings with inspectors cost in the region of £7000. Data preparation, document management, IT support and general administration cost in the region of £9000. So, a total cost over the four week period of £90,000.


On the final day of the inspection the SIF team locks itself away for three hours in what the timetable describes as a “Judgement Meeting”. Only Ofsted staff are invited and permitted to attend. I have no idea what was discussed in Stockport, how any dissenting views were managed, or how complex thoughts were translated into simple judgements. All I know is that there was an output consisting of a series of draft judgments and some agreed narrative to accompany them which were read out to a small audience with no opportunity to debate or discuss the findings.
Sadly, there is no straightforward recourse open to the Local Authority should they wish to challenge the opinions of the team, and no forum in which a considered, professionally led discussion about the implications of the findings might be held: the judgement is the judgement.

If the purpose of an inspection is to improve practice, then surely this session should engage the Local Authority. If handled differently, the judgement meeting could, arguably, become the most important element of the SIF process. If Ofsted had the courage of its convictions (to be an effective, credible arbiter of standards...to improve outcomes), then surely the engagement of the inspection team and the local leadership team in the co-production of an agreed improvement plan would be the means by which maximum value would be squeezed out of an inspection. Frankly, for the Local Authority and key partners to be excluded from this process is not only a serious missed opportunity, it is also a gross insult to the professionalism and integrity of the local leadership team and may actually reduce the likelihood of any subsequent improvement plan being focused on the actions that will have the greatest sustainable impact.

7. Conclusion.

Ofsted and the services it inspects largely share the same overarching goal: to improve outcomes for children. Ofsted’s workforce is, by and large, recruited from the services it inspects, so inspectors and inspected are generally professional peers. The SIF process has been designed, and is delivered, in a way that fails to build on the potential power of this alignment.

The members of the Ofsted team involved in the Stockport SIF were judged, generally, to be good at their jobs, but they also showed a tendency to retreat behind their processes when challenged. Their knowledge base was generally judged to be good, but not in all cases: they were far from infallible. The aspect of the SIF that staff at all levels found most frustrating was the lack of an opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion with inspectors about the complexity of the social work task in the current climate, and how best to balance options: the inspectors’ default was to revert to judgement mode.

The fact that it has cost Stockport Council in the region of £225,000 in preparing for and hosting this inspection is shocking. Stockport preparation costs are likely to be higher than most Local Authorities as our inspection came at the end of the programme, but the hosting cost is likely to be common to all. And for this cost, 31 child and family cases were reviewed in detail; no direct practice was observed. A couple of hundred other cases were sampled in some way, but as a registered social worker I would say that this was carried out at such a superficial level that it cannot provide meaningful insight into the families being supported, and is certainly not capable of evaluating actual practice. As a social scientist I would say that the sampling approach carries significant risk of confirming any pre-formulated bias the reader has – in fact I struggle to come up with a design more likely to confirm a hypothesis than rapidly flicking through a file looking for evidence.

The outcome of the Stockport SIF is a published report which includes five judgements and eight recommendations. Objectively, much of the body of the report is simply a version of the narrative we provided to Ofsted being played back to us with the endorsement that we understand our population and the quality of local services. The Local Authority has 70 days in which to construct and submit (to the Secretary of State and Chief Inspector) an action plan and I hope by then to have reconciled the apparent need to increase the resources available to the services to respond to four of the recommendations with the reality of having had to reduce the overall budget by 35% over the past four years as a direct consequence of Government policy.
On the positive side, the SIF process has made a limited contribution to our understanding, locally, of how best to discharge our statutory duties to vulnerable children and families that struggle. However, this positive contribution pales into insignificance alongside the enormous waste of public funds involved in the inspection itself, and the impact of SIF on the social care sector by creating a climate of fear of failure and in constraining innovation.

Andrew Webb. Corporate Director, Services for People, Stockport Council.
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Postscript: LSCB.

Ofsted has made six recommendations to the LSCB, all of which will require action and which will presumably feature in a future inspection. The previous Government commissioned a review of LSCBs from Alan Wood, a highly respected former DCS. The Wood review recommended a radical overhaul to the LSCB system, as it had concluded that the evidence of impact did not justify their continued existence in their current form. The Government accepted much of the review report and included an intent to abolish LSCBs in the Children and Social Work Bill. The Bill received Royal Assent earlier this year. However, Ofsted has continued, throughout the two years that LSCBs have been acknowledged to have no future, to review local performance against a model of “what good looks like” and made judgements and recommendations to local areas as a result. Is it just me, or is this utterly perverse?

Two of the recommendations for Stockport LSCB are particularly ill thought out: firstly that partners should review their contribution to the board to ensure that the SSCB is appropriately resourced; secondly, to ensure multi agency audits are focused on improving practice (the body of the report suggesting that more multi agency audits should be carried out). The audit of historic cases can provide useful lessons, but if the system objective is to improve outcomes for children, it is a very poor substitute for “getting it right first time”. As an improvement tool the auditing of past actions is the equivalent of trying to drive more safely by spending more time looking in the rear view mirror.

In order to respond to these recommendations (in order to comply with a model which is defunct), partners would either have to find new resources to move into children’s services, or more realistically, divert resources from another operational area. In the current financial climate, following years of cuts to local funding, this would be an irrational decision for partners to make.