

Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should have a flexible framework that allows inspections of a group of centres, as well as individual centres?

- **Agree**

We agree that where appropriate a group of centres could be inspected together as this could reduce duplication, require fewer resources and place less pressure on staff. We can see group inspections working well where centres are working as a whole programme, sharing staff and management arrangements. Where centres are working as a cluster it makes sense for them to be inspected as such.

However, the consultation proposes that in cases of shared leadership and management, one report would be created with recommendations for the whole area. We have concerns that an individual centre's local needs and performance could get lost in a group inspection. Even where centres are working in a cluster, sharing management etc, each centre still faces a local variation of needs, parental involvement and target groups. Individual centre ratings should be made clear within a group inspection of centres, even in cases where the cluster share management structures.

We are also concerned about an overall rating for a group of centres where centres within a group were found to be performing at different levels. For example, if only one centre in the cluster/group was found to be inadequate and all the other centres were good or outstanding. More clarity is needed on what would happen in this situation.

Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should carry out inspections simultaneously across a geographical area wherever possible?

- **Agree**

We agree that simultaneous inspections would give a good indication of how well centres are working across an area. Where centres are engaging with similar local partners it makes sense to inspect them simultaneously across one geographical area.

However, we have concerns about the size of the geographical areas that will be covered. Centres based across a large geographical area, particularly in rural areas, may share management but they often engage with different local partners. For example, The Children's Society runs a number of children's centres across the East Devon area which are linked through management where each centre has particular local community needs and engages with different partners.

Consideration should be given to the size of the geographical area covered by an inspection and whether similar local partners are used by the centres, when making the decision to do simultaneous inspections across a geographical area.

Q3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should reduce the number of inspection judgements we make from 20 to three, with another judgement for overall effectiveness?

- **Agree**

We support a reduction in the number of inspection judgements as we think this would make inspections simpler and more focused. However, we are concerned that some of inspection judgements previously included in the 20 criteria are important and should not be removed, for example:

- The extent to which parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.
- The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties.

The focus on parents in the first judgement above is unique and not replicated in the new three judgements (or new inspection criteria). We believe this is important as children's centres can play a key role in promoting access to training and employment for parents and this should be recognised by Ofsted. We also believe that it is vital that Ofsted continue to inspect the extent to which equality and diversity are promoted and discrimination is tackled in children's centres.

Q4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the inspection criteria identified in paragraph 16 cover the right areas?

- **Agree**

We agree that the inspection criteria are comprehensive and cover the right areas. The focus on outcomes measures and the importance of meeting the needs of the community will support centres to focus resources and services more effectively.

We welcome the focus on families most in need. We would also like to see an inspection criteria focused on how centres improve the outcomes of young children in families most in need. This is an important element of how children's centres can narrow the achievement gap in the early years between those children from disadvantaged families and those from more affluent families.

Q5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the four grades (outstanding; good; requires improvement and inadequate) are the right ones?

- **Disagree**

We understand that the four grades bring children's centres in line with schools in terms of inspections. Nonetheless, we have concerns that the 'requires improvement' grade is more

negative than the 'satisfactory' grade currently used. 'Requires improvement' could be received negatively by families in a centre's reach area and could lead to lack of engagement with, or withdrawal from, the centre. This could be counter productive, and in some cases lead to centres dropping toward the inadequate grading.

We would prefer a grading of 'satisfactory in need of improvement' or 'requires development' as these are less negative. This would suggest that a centre has some adequate service provision but still has a way to go to be a 'good' setting.

There is also a lack of clarity about what intervention there will be for centres that are graded as 'requires improvement'. Currently when a centre is graded 'inadequate' there is a clear action plan to improve performance. A similar intervention or plan is also necessary for a 'requires improvement' grading.

At the consultation event for this consultation, a draft copy of the evaluation schedule for the inspection of Sure Start Children's Centres was provided. Page 6/7 outlined proposed grade descriptors. The 'requires improvement' grade descriptor only has one indicator and this was purely negative - based on not meeting the requirements for 'good'. In contrast the 'good' grade descriptor was made up of six detailed bullet points. We believe there should be a more comprehensive description for 'requires improvement' in order for centres who are graded in this category to have a better understanding of what level they are at and how they can improve.

We are also concerned that the proportions (in Annex B in the draft evaluation schedule) outlined in the grade descriptors for 'good', are set at a particularly challenging level. For example, some of our centres based in highly disadvantaged areas would find it very difficult to get 80-96% take up of the free entitlement for early education required to achieve a 'good' grading. Our children's centre practitioners raised concerns that the proportions place unrealistic expectations on centres that will make it very difficult for centres, particularly in deprived communities to achieve a grading above 'requires improvement'.

Q6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should re-inspect centres judged to 'require improvement' in the local authorities that have the highest proportion of centres with this grade and to focus those inspections on the effectiveness of the action plan that local authorities must produce following an inspection?

- **Agree**

We agree that re-inspections are necessary in local authorities where many centres 'require improvement'. These re-inspections should place greater emphasis on assessing the support provided by local authorities, as in some cases centres may not be getting adequate support to help improve their performance.

Q7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should produce one report for a group of centres that shares management?

- **Neither agree nor disagree**

One report for a group of centres that shares management could be effective in the right circumstances, allowing the inspection to focus on the effectiveness of the management of the cluster as a whole. However, (as noted in the answer to question 1) we believe it is essential that the distinctions between individual centre are made very clear within a group inspection. The particular strengths and weakness of individual centres should also be clearly set out.

Comparisons between centres may not be fair where the make-up of the communities being served differs greatly across the cluster . Similarly to the issues raised in our answer to question 1, there is the issue of what would happen when one centre in the group is graded as 'outstanding' or 'good' and another centre is considered 'inadequate'.

Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should continue to make a self-evaluation form available?

- **Agree**

We agree that a self evaluation form should continue to be made available to centres.

Whilst we agree that the self evaluation forms should match the new evaluation schedule being introduced, we believe that this is another reason to ensure that the evaluation schedule provides room for assessment of the variations in performance of centres within the cluster, in order to help centres and clusters focus on self-evaluation of the different needs of different centres.

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