



The Fostering Network's response to improving the way Ofsted inspects children's social care consultation

Our response is based on three focus groups we held with Ofsted - one with 29 representatives from local authority fostering services, one with our IFP steering group attended by six regional IFP chairs and another with 22 foster carer representatives of the National FCA Forum, plus our organisational research and expertise.

Proposal 1: The content of inspection frameworks

Our ambitions for children's social care inspection

Question 1 (ILACS)

What do you think about our proposed statement of ambition for children's social care inspections in relation to ILACS?

Local authority fostering service members were broadly supportive of the proposed statement of ambition for ILACS. Members welcomed the increased focus on sufficiency, commissioning, and wider system factors affecting placement availability, as well as the recognition that fostering should be considered within the broader Families First agenda and the shift to early support to keep families together.

Foster carers who foster with local authority fostering services were supportive of the ambition for ILACS inspections to focus more clearly on what matters to children, but felt strongly that this must include the people who know children's day-to-day experiences best, including foster carers. They stated that children's outcomes are directly affected by foster carer recruitment, retention, respect and support. Inspections should therefore test not only whether systems and processes are in place, but whether foster carers and children experience them as meaningful, safe, timely and effective.

They also welcomed the ambition to ensure carers voices are at the heart of inspections and the commitment to improving how Ofsted engages with those with lived experience of children's social care in inspections.

The Fostering Network welcomes the focus on delivering the best outcomes for children and the aim to better meet their needs, particularly those with complex lives. The care system has been in crisis for too long and we urgently need to improve many areas within it, in particular the retention of foster carers who provide care for 67% of children in the care system. There is a huge need to improve sufficiency of foster placements so children can be placed in the right homes closer to their networks so we also welcome the ambition to look more closely at how local authorities are meeting their sufficiency duty and how providers and local authorities are working together to understand and meet the needs of children,

both locally and regionally. We are also pleased to see the focus on putting children's and foster carer's voices at the centre of the framework and the emphasis on enduring relationships - foster carers provide loving, stable relationships that help many children to thrive.

We particularly welcome the ambition to create a more integrated approach to the inspection of children's social care. Historically, fostering has often been viewed as a distinct service rather than as a core component of the wider children's social care system and local authorities' corporate parenting responsibilities. While fostering has formed part of ILACS inspections, this has not always fully reflected the extent to which children's experiences in care are shaped by the relationships and partnership working between children's social workers, fostering social workers, foster carers, commissioning teams and senior leaders.

As foster care remains the primary care arrangement for the majority of children in care, we welcome the opportunity for the revised framework to place greater emphasis on how the whole system works together to support children. This should include consideration of how fostering services are valued and understood by senior leaders, how fostering expertise informs strategic decision-making, and how foster carers are recognised and engaged as key partners in delivering effective corporate parenting.

We hope this new framework will drive improved practice that children deserve.

Question 2 (SCCIF)

What do you think about our proposed statement of ambition for children's social care inspections in relation to SCCIF?

Our IFA members were generally supportive of the proposed statement of ambition for SCCIF. In particular, members welcomed the stronger focus on relationships, recognising that fostering is fundamentally relationship-based practice. They also supported the increased emphasis on foster carer experiences and the greater focus on understanding the reality of children's everyday lives and experiences.

However, the IFAs stressed that the success of these proposals will depend on how they are implemented and measured in practice. Clear expectations and consistent approaches to assessment will be essential to ensure these ambitions lead to meaningful improvements for children and foster carers.

The Fostering Network strongly welcomes the proposed ambition to place children's enduring relationships at the centre of inspection. For children in foster care, these relationships are often among the most significant and protective factors in their lives and can have a lasting impact on their wellbeing, sense of belonging and future outcomes.

Independent fostering agencies are generally committed to supporting children to develop and maintain enduring relationships with their foster families. However, achieving this can be challenging where key decisions about a child's care planning, placement arrangements and future transitions are made by the local authority as the corporate parent. At times, decisions that are driven by wider sufficiency pressures, financial considerations or a desire to move children closer to their home area may unintentionally disrupt important relationships that have been established over time.

We therefore welcome Ofsted's focus on enduring relationships but believe the framework should recognise the shared responsibility for supporting these relationships. Inspections

should consider how effectively local authorities and providers work together to identify, preserve and promote children's important relationships, including when significant placement decisions are being made. Providers should be evaluated on the quality of their efforts to support enduring relationships, even when ultimate decision-making authority rests elsewhere.

Question 3 (ILACS)

How can ILACS inspections support local authorities to meet the needs of children who have the most complex lives?

Local authority fostering service participants felt that ILACS inspections could better support local authorities to meet the needs of children with the most complex lives by placing greater emphasis on commissioning decisions and the quality of children's placement matching. These members highlighted that effective matching is fundamental to children's placement stability and positive outcomes for children. They suggested that greater scrutiny of matching decisions would strengthen accountability where fostering arrangements break down and encourage local authorities to ensure children are placed with foster carers who have the skills, experience, and capacity to meet their individual needs effectively.

However, there were concerns that sometimes unsustainable matches are made due to external factors that are not in the local authorities' control that they do not believe they should be penalised against.

In addition, LA members stressed that inspection frameworks should remain responsive to major system reforms, including the introduction of Regional Care Cooperatives, to ensure they continue to reflect and assess local authority performance effectively.

The Fostering Network would support a greater focus on matching in inspections. Good matching is key to ensuring children are looked after by foster carers who can meet their needs, stay close to home and with their siblings where appropriate. This helps avoid unplanned moves and increases stability for children. However, services often lack the information they need to make good matches.

Our State of the Nations (SoTN) foster care survey in 2024 found that just over half (56%) of fostering services said they always or usually receive all the information required from children's social workers to inform the matching process. Only two in five (40%) said the service always or usually seeks the child's previous foster carers' views to feed into the matching process, or requests these if the carer is with another service. This lack of information-sharing carries over to foster carers, with only half of those we surveyed in 2024 saying they were given all the information they needed to care for the child they were most recently matched with. Only three in five foster carers (58%) felt they had time to plan before the child they were most recently matched with moved in, down from 83% in 2021.¹

The Fostering Network believes inspections should also consider the availability of specialist fostering provision, therapeutic support and multidisciplinary working arrangements that enable foster carers to care successfully for children with complex needs. Inspectors should examine not only where children are placed, but whether carers receive the support, training and professional respect required to provide children with the stability of enduring relationships. Given that many children with the most complex lives will be cared for by foster

¹ Ellis, S and Williams N. *State of the Nations' Foster Care* (2024) The Fostering Network

families, inspections should consider how effectively children's social workers, fostering social workers, health partners and other professionals work together around the child and foster family. This should include assessing whether barriers to integrated working are identified and addressed, and whether services are providing the coordinated support needed to help children's placements remain stable and meet their needs over time.

The Fostering Network believes inspections should also consider how children's voices are incorporated into matching decisions. Effective matching is not simply about finding an available foster home but understanding what matters to the child, their relationships, identity, wishes and experiences. Best practice includes supporting children to contribute to profiles about themselves, express their views on what would help them feel safe and settled, and shape decisions about where they live.

Inspectors should also consider how the views of others within fostering households are taken into account during matching. This may include the perspectives of children and young people already living with foster carers, including birth children, previously adopted children, children subject to Special Guardianship Orders and other fostered children. Meaningful involvement of children in matching decisions can help strengthen a child's sense of belonging and increase the likelihood of stable, enduring relationships developing within the foster family.

"Our placement service sits externally to our fostering service and our children's service, but so they're never really spoken to around about how they match and how they find the best matches for children" – LA Fostering service

Question 4 (SCCIF)

How can SCCIF inspections support providers to care for the children who have the most complex lives?

IFA members felt that SCCIF inspections could better support providers caring for children with the most complex lives by recognising the complexity of situations where providers are reliant on local authority decision-making.

There was support for a more flexible approach to inspection that recognises a range of effective practices, rather than a single model of good practice.

The Fostering Network believes SCCIF inspections should recognise the increasingly complex needs of children entering care and assess whether agencies have sufficient specialist support, training, therapeutic provision and workforce capacity to meet those needs. Inspection should acknowledge where providers have taken appropriate action but decision-making responsibilities ultimately rest elsewhere within the care system.

In practice, providers are sometimes required to make difficult decisions about whether they can safely and successfully meet a child's needs. Agencies may be concerned that the support required from the wider team around the child, including children's social care, education, health and therapeutic services, will not be available or sustained over time. In some circumstances, additional services may be required to support a placement, creating resource implications which are not always reflected within commissioning arrangements.

Providers must also consider the needs, safety and wellbeing of other children living within the fostering household, including other fostered children, birth children, adopted children and children subject to Special Guardianship Orders. There are occasions where concerns about the impact on existing relationships or household dynamics mean that a match cannot be supported. These decisions should not automatically be viewed as evidence of poor practice. Rather, inspections should consider whether decisions have been made thoughtfully, based on the available information and with children's welfare at the centre.

Members also highlighted the challenges that arise when referral information is incomplete or when agencies are not provided with robust assessments of need and risk. Effective matching relies not only on understanding the risks and challenges a child may present, but also on receiving clear information about the strategies, strengths and support arrangements that can mitigate those risks and help the child succeed within a foster family.

The Fostering Network believes inspections should take an enquiry-based approach to these situations, exploring how decisions have been reached collaboratively across the system rather than focusing solely on outcomes. Inspectors should recognise that declining a child's referral can, at times, be the most child-centred decision if an agency does not have confidence that the necessary information, support or resources are in place to meet a child's needs safely and sustainably. Similarly, where fostering arrangements do end, inspection should consider whether professionals worked together appropriately, responded to emerging concerns and sought to maintain children's stability before making judgements about provider effectiveness.

"We're not the corporate parent and there are times... there's a fine line for us about decisions we have to make in the best interests of children, but also in the best interests of our carers." – IFA Fostering service

Question 5 (ILACS)

How can ILACS inspections encourage providers and local authorities to make sure that children are able to receive the right type of care and support in the right place?

Fostering service members thought that the increased focus on sufficiency, greater scrutiny of commissioning arrangements, and stronger consideration of placement matching within the proposed ILACS inspections would help to make sure that children are able to receive the right type of care and support in the right place. Members felt that a whole-system approach is needed to understand how local authorities secure appropriate children's placements and ensure children receive the right care and support in the right place.

However, they noted that wider system barriers can affect local authorities' ability to achieve sufficiency. In particular, concerns were raised about delays in Ofsted registration processes for new children's homes, which can restrict children's placement availability and limit options for children requiring specialist support. These delays lead to children not being able to access the support they require at the time they need it and can result in children losing the opportunity to live in a fostering family later in their childhood.

Foster carer members thought that inspections should test whether children are receiving the right care and support by hearing from children, foster carers, foster carer associations and care leavers, rather than relying too heavily on provider-selected evidence. Foster carers raised concerns that local authorities may "cherry pick" who inspectors speak to. Inspectors should therefore use independent and transparent selection methods, including

randomised sampling and direct engagement with local foster carer associations, to gain a fuller picture of children's lived experience.

The Fostering Network welcomes the increased focus on sufficiency, commissioning and children's placement availability within ILACS. We believe that ensuring children receive the right care and support in the right place should be a key consideration within the Impact of Leaders judgement, as this is ultimately a reflection of local authorities' effectiveness as corporate parents. Leaders play a critical role in shaping local sufficiency strategies, commissioning arrangements, relationships with providers and the culture within which children's placement decisions are made.

Inspection should therefore consider not only whether appropriate placements are available, but whether leaders have a clear understanding of local need, are investing in foster carer recruitment and retention, are working effectively with providers, regional partners and foster carers, and are taking proactive steps to prevent children being placed far from their families, communities and support networks wherever this can be safely avoided.

The Fostering Network also believes inspectors should consider how well local authorities create the conditions for successful and sustainable children's placements. This includes the quality of partnership working across children's social care, fostering services, health, education and other agencies, as well as the extent to which foster carers are recognised, listened to and supported as key members of the team around the child. Strong leadership should be reflected not only in placement availability, but in children's experiences of stability, belonging and enduring relationships.

Question 6 (SCCIF)

How can SCCIF inspections encourage providers to make sure that children are able to receive the right type of care and support in the right place?

IFA members felt SCCIF inspections should consider the quality of matching processes, the support available to foster carers following a child joining them and the extent to which agencies work collaboratively with local authorities to identify the most suitable homes for children. Members stressed that providers should be assessed on the quality of their practice and decision-making rather than solely on children's placement outcomes that may be influenced by wider system pressures.

Members recognised the importance of children remaining close to their families, schools, communities and support networks wherever possible. However, they cautioned against geographical proximity becoming the overriding consideration in matching decisions. There will be occasions where the foster carer best placed to meet a child's needs is not the nearest available home for a child.

Members felt providers should be encouraged to put forward fostering households that they believe can offer the best match for a child, even where they may not fully meet geographical preferences. In these circumstances, providers and local authorities should work collaboratively to consider the child's best interests holistically, balancing the potential benefits of the match alongside the impact on family relationships, education, community connections and other important support networks.

Members highlighted that the success of these arrangements often depends on effective partnership working between providers, local authorities and the wider team around the child. Inspections should recognise situations where agencies and authorities work together to maintain children's important relationships through practical arrangements such as supporting family time, transport to education settings and continued participation in community activities.

The Fostering Network agrees that effective matching remains one of the strongest predictors of stable fostering arrangements. Inspection should therefore explore how agencies contribute to matching decisions, prepare foster carers and support children and foster carers when difficulties arise. We believe inspectors should adopt an enquiry-based approach, examining how providers and local authorities have worked together with foster carers to identify and support the most appropriate home for a child, rather than focusing solely on placement outcomes or geographical proximity.

Question 7 (ILACS)

What further changes can be made to ensure ILACS inspections focus on what matters for children?

Foster carer members from the National Foster Carer Association Forum thought that ILACS should make it explicit that engaging with foster carers and local foster carer associations is an expected element of inspection activity. Foster carers reported feeling unheard and, in some cases, worried about speaking openly. Associations can help inspectors understand wider patterns, reduce the risk of individual experiences being over-weighted, and ensure the voices of carers who may be reluctant to speak directly are still represented.

Children and young people should also be seen as active contributors to inspections rather than solely as sources of evidence. Many children value opportunities to influence services and can develop confidence, skills and experience through meaningful participation activities. Inspectors should consider how local authorities engage children and young people through participation groups, children's councils, consultation activities and other mechanisms that enable them to influence service development.

Inspection should focus not only on whether children are asked for their views, but on how those views shape both individual and organisational practice. This should include consideration of how children's wishes and feelings influence care planning and decision-making, as well as how services gather, analyse and respond to feedback from children at a strategic level. Evidence that services are making changes as a result of children's feedback should form an important part of inspection activity.

Question 8 (SCCIF)

What further changes can be made to ensure SCCIF inspections focus on what matters for children?

Members felt SCCIF inspections should place greater emphasis on how providers gather, understand and respond to the views of children and young people. Many fostering services

have well-established participation activities, including children's forums, children's councils, participation groups and dedicated participation workers who help children express their views and influence service development.

Inspection should explore not only whether children have opportunities to contribute, but whether their views lead to meaningful change. This should include understanding how children influence decisions about their own care and support, as well as how agencies use feedback from children collectively to improve policies, practice and service delivery. Providers should be able to demonstrate how they have listened to children and the changes they have made as a result.

Members also highlighted the importance of evaluating how agencies engage with foster carers and foster carer forums. Foster carers have unique insight into children's day-to-day experiences and are often well placed to identify both strengths and areas for improvement within services. Many agencies have established foster carer forums, consultation groups and other mechanisms through which foster carers contribute to service development and quality assurance. Inspection should consider how providers seek and respond to foster carer feedback and whether foster carers can clearly identify changes that have occurred as a result of their involvement.

The Fostering Network believes that both children's and foster carers' voices should be considered at an individual and organisational level. Effective services create opportunities for children to shape their own care planning while also influencing the wider development of services. Equally, foster carers should be viewed as important partners in service improvement. Inspection should therefore place equal emphasis on listening to children and foster carers and understanding how services have acted on what they have said.

ILACS evaluation areas

Question 9 (ILACS)

What do you think about the proposed changes to ILACS evaluation areas?

The Fostering Network welcomes the decision to separate evaluation areas into experiences of children in care and experiences of care leavers. This approach recognises that each group has distinct needs, challenges, and experiences, and will ensure that both receive the focused attention they deserve.

We also welcome the opportunity for the revised evaluation areas to better reflect fostering as a core component of effective corporate parenting, recognising the interdependence between children's social care teams, fostering services and foster carers in improving children's experiences and outcomes.

Local authority fostering services were broadly positive about the proposed changes to the ILACS evaluation areas. Members welcomed the clearer focus on sufficiency, the proposed grading framework and "secure fit" approach, the inclusion of children receiving Family Help and the greater transparency around expected standards.

They were also supportive of the focus on enduring relationships but sought greater clarity on how these would be evidenced and assessed in practice, particularly where this relies on engagement with foster carers, children and young people. Questions were also raised about how kinship care and Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) would be reflected and inspected within the framework if all or most local authorities will be operating 'end to end' recruitment and retention hubs. Overall, members supported the direction of travel but felt further detail on implementation would be beneficial.

The Fostering Network welcomes the proposed evaluation area on engagement with family networks. Supporting children to maintain safe and positive relationships with family members is an important aspect of many fostering arrangements and aligns closely with the ambition to strengthen enduring relationships. It will be important, however, that this evaluation area recognises the practical role foster carers often play in facilitating and supporting these relationships.

Foster carers welcomed the intention to focus evaluation areas on what matters most, but the framework must clearly capture fostering-specific issues that affect children's experiences: sufficiency, stability, professional respect and retention of foster carers, social work support, Staying Put and transitions from care. Evaluation should consider whether local authorities have meaningful mechanisms for hearing from foster carers and whether feedback from those mechanisms leads to improvement.

<i>"That baseline minimum, the sort of expectation that it's a secure fit standard seems quite a positive approach really." – LA Fostering service</i>

Evaluating sufficiency and the use of unregistered provision in the ILACS framework

Proposals to strengthen our approach to the use of unregistered provision and sufficiency

Question 10 (ILACS)

What do you think about our proposal that inspection activity on sufficiency and use of unregistered provision should sit within the 'impact of leaders' judgement in ILACS?

Local authority fostering services generally supported the proposal to include sufficiency and the use of unregistered provision within the 'impact of leaders' judgement. Members welcomed the stronger focus on sufficiency and commissioning arrangements but stressed that inspections should take account of wider system factors that affect placement availability, such as delays in registering new children's homes. Members were concerned that local authorities could otherwise be held accountable for challenges that are not wholly within their control.

Foster carers welcomed the approach, stating that sufficiency and unregistered provision are leadership issues and should be considered within the 'impact of leaders' judgement. However, inspection activity must avoid shifting attention away from the child's lived experience. Foster carers were concerned that a strong focus on unregistered provision could overlook whether children are safe, settled and thriving, or whether children in registered provision may still be experiencing poor care. Leadership scrutiny should

therefore include both strategic sufficiency and the quality of individual children's experiences.

The Fostering Network welcomes this proposal as the harmful consequences of unregistered provision on children are sadly well documented and this should be inspected at the highest level of the local authority and would echo our members call for registration to be expediated. As we have stated above, we support the focus on sufficiency and would recommend that there is a greater focus on fostering provision, specifically retention as part of this.

The Fostering Network supports stronger accountability regarding the use of unregistered provision. However, inspectors should consider the context, including local sufficiency challenges and the actions taken by leaders to secure appropriate alternatives. Inspection should focus on whether children are safe, whether their needs are being met and whether there is a clear plan to move them into suitable registered provision.

<i>"When it's going to be a limiting judgment and places are waiting nine months for registration, then it's got to be a meet in the middle" – LA Fostering service</i>

Question 11 (ILACS)

What do you think about our proposal to make the use of unregistered provision a limiting criterion on ILACS inspections?

Foster carers in our focus groups felt that the use of unregistered provision is serious and should receive strong scrutiny, but a limiting criterion should be applied carefully and proportionately. The paramount consideration must remain the child's welfare and experience. Inspections should distinguish between the existence of unregistered provision, the reasons it has been used, the safeguards in place, the local authority's plan to resolve it, and whether children's needs are actually being met.

The Fostering Network supports stronger accountability regarding the use of unregistered provision and agrees that it should receive the highest level of scrutiny. However, any limiting judgement should be applied following careful consideration of the circumstances that led to the decision, the efforts made to secure suitable registered provision and the actions taken to safeguard and support the child.

There may be occasions where local authorities are faced with extremely limited placement options and must make decisions in response to immediate safeguarding concerns, such as a child being at significant risk of harm, exploitation or going missing. In these circumstances, inspectors should consider whether leaders have undertaken robust forward planning, explored all available alternatives, worked effectively with partners and put appropriate safeguards in place to protect the child whilst a suitable registered placement is secured.

Inspection should focus not only on the fact that unregistered provision has been used, but also on the quality of decision-making surrounding its use. This should include consideration of the team around the child, the additional support and monitoring arrangements in place, the extent to which the child's wishes and feelings have been sought and considered, and whether there is a clear and achievable plan to move the child into appropriate registered provision as quickly as possible.

The limiting criterion should therefore distinguish between situations arising from poor planning or ineffective leadership and those where leaders have acted responsibly and proportionately in exceptionally challenging circumstances despite having exhausted all reasonable alternatives.

Question 12 (ILACS)

What do you think about our proposal to change how inspectors look at sufficiency as part of an ILACS inspection?

Fostering services welcomed the proposed focus on commissioning, noting that this is an area that is not always given sufficient scrutiny. They highlighted the importance of examining how commissioning arrangements, fostering services, and children's services work together to identify and secure the best possible matches for children. Members felt that greater attention to these areas would help strengthen children's placement stability and ensure children are placed with foster carers who can effectively meet their needs.

Foster carers were supportive of a stronger focus on sufficiency, provided it includes foster carer retention as well as recruitment and placement availability. The National Foster Care Association suggested that asking why foster carers leave is central to understanding sufficiency. Inspection should consider the quality of support, relationships with children's social workers and supervising social workers, respect for foster carers, financial pressures, Staying Put arrangements and whether local authorities learn from foster carer feedback.

The Fostering Network welcomes Ofsted's proposal to strengthen the focus on sufficiency within ILACS inspections. We agree that understanding how local authorities fulfil their sufficiency duty requires greater scrutiny of commissioning arrangements, market management, placement matching and strategic planning. However, sufficiency should not be judged solely on the availability of placements. Inspection should consider whether children are able to access the right type of care at the right time, in the right place, and with the support necessary to promote stability and positive outcomes.

We believe there should be a stronger focus on foster carer retention as a key indicator of sufficiency. Recruitment is important, but local authorities cannot achieve sustainable sufficiency if experienced foster carers continue to leave the sector. Inspection should therefore consider how local authorities understand and respond to the reasons foster carers leave, how they support and value foster carers, and whether foster carers are treated as respected partners within the team around the child.

Inspection should also consider the quality of placement decision-making and matching arrangements. A local authority may appear to have sufficient placements available, but if children are not being matched appropriately to foster families, their stability and outcomes can be compromised. Inspectors should therefore explore how information is shared, how children's wishes and feelings are considered in matching processes, and how the views of foster carers and fostering services contribute to children's placement decisions.

The Fostering Network believes that sufficiency should ultimately be measured through children's experiences. This includes whether children experience stable and enduring relationships, are able to remain connected to people who are important to them, can stay close to their communities where appropriate, and are cared for by foster carers who have the support, training and resources needed to meet their needs. A stronger focus on these

outcomes would help ensure sufficiency is considered not simply as a question of capacity, but as a measure of whether the system is effectively meeting children's needs.

SCCIF evaluation areas

Proposals to change SCCIF evaluation areas

Question 13 (SCCIF)

What do you think of our proposal to add an evaluation area on enduring relationships into the SCCIF?

The Fostering Network strongly welcomes the proposed focus on enduring relationships within the SCCIF. For many children, relationships with their foster families become some of the most significant, stable and protective relationships in their lives. Supporting children to develop and maintain these relationships should be seen as a core element of good fostering practice and positive outcomes.

However, inspections should recognise that sustaining enduring relationships is often a shared responsibility across the wider system. Independent fostering agencies may work hard to support and preserve important relationships, but decisions about care planning, reunification, placement moves, commissioning arrangements and long-term permanence frequently sit with the local authority as the corporate parent. Inspection should therefore consider how effectively providers work with local authorities and other partners to identify, preserve and promote children's important relationships, rather than assessing providers solely on outcomes that may sit outside their control.

We would also encourage Ofsted to recognise that enduring relationships are not limited to the foster carer-child relationship. Children may develop and maintain important relationships with foster siblings, birth children within fostering households, extended foster family networks, peers, former foster carers, family members and other significant adults. Inspection should consider how services support children to identify and maintain the relationships that matter most to them.

Children's voices should be central to this evaluation area. Inspectors should explore how children are involved in decisions about maintaining relationships and whether children's wishes and feelings are actively considered when significant decisions are made about placement moves, family time and permanence arrangements.

We continue to have concerns about how enduring relationships will be evidenced and measured consistently during a relatively short inspection activity. Inspectors should therefore focus on the quality of practice, decision-making and relationship-based planning rather than relying solely on quantitative measures. Evidence should include how services have responded when children's important relationships are at risk of being disrupted and what steps have been taken to preserve them.

Staying Put arrangements are one important mechanism for maintaining enduring relationships, but not the only one. Inspection should also consider how fostering services support children and young people to remain connected to former foster families beyond placement endings and into adulthood where this reflects their wishes. Alongside changes to the inspection framework, there will need to be a broader culture shift across the sector to ensure these lifelong relationships are recognised, valued and actively supported.

“How are you going to measure that? Because I think measuring relationships, unless you’re just seeing it and talking to people is really hard.” – IFP Fostering service

“The perception sometimes of the professionals, the foster carers and young peoples on the relationships is all different, potentially.” – IFP Fostering service

“There is a lot of effort to maintain relationships, but it’s not always recorded as such in an easy way that you can identify it.” – IFP Fostering service

“How might Staying Close and Staying Put link with focus on enduring relationships?” – IFP Fostering service

Question 14 (SCCIF)

What do you think about our proposal to add ‘the quality of foster carer recruitment, assessment and support’ as an additional evaluation area for independent fostering agencies?

IFA members broadly welcomed the proposed evaluation area, recognising the importance of foster carers and the critical role that recruitment, assessment and support play in securing positive outcomes for children.

However, members raised concerns about the timing of the proposal given the ongoing development of Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) and fostering hubs. Members also questioned whether agencies could be negatively affected by outcomes that are beyond their control and sought clarification on how this would be reflected in inspection judgments.

Members also queried why a dedicated evaluation area is being proposed for independent fostering agencies when the equivalent activity within local authority fostering services is already subsumed within wider ILACS inspection activity. While we recognise that recruitment, assessment, training and support are currently considered as part of ILACS inspections, we believe the proposals highlight the need for greater prominence to be given to fostering within the local authority framework.

Foster carers are central to local authorities' ability to fulfil their corporate parenting responsibilities and achieve sufficiency, stability and positive outcomes for children. The quality of recruitment, assessment, support and retention of foster carers has a direct impact on children's experiences and outcomes. We would therefore welcome greater visibility within ILACS of how effectively local authorities deliver these functions and how they support foster carers throughout their fostering journey.

The Fostering Network believes there should be greater parity between the prominence given to fostering within SCCIF and ILACS. While the inspection frameworks necessarily have different purposes, fostering should be recognised as a core component of effective corporate parenting rather than a specialist area considered separately from the wider children's social care system.

The Fostering Network strongly welcomes the inclusion of a dedicated evaluation area focused on foster carer recruitment, assessment and support. Foster carers are central to children's experiences of care and it is right that inspection gives greater prominence to the quality of work undertaken with them.

We are particularly pleased to see recognition of the importance of ongoing support, as the quality of support provided after approval has a direct impact on children's placement stability, foster carer retention and children's outcomes.

We would encourage Ofsted to ensure that this evaluation area considers the full foster carer journey, rather than focusing primarily on recruitment and assessment. Inspection should examine the quality of supervision, training, therapeutic support, out-of-hours support, peer support, support during allegations and investigations, and the extent to which foster carers feel respected, listened to and included as valued members of the team around the child.

We also believe there should be a stronger emphasis on foster carer retention within this evaluation area. Recruitment remains important, but in the context of ongoing sufficiency challenges, retaining skilled and experienced foster carers is equally critical. Inspection should therefore consider how agencies understand and respond to the factors that influence foster carers to continue fostering or leave the role, and how they use feedback from foster carers to improve services.

The quality of support provided to foster carers should be considered not only through service processes and policies, but through the experiences of foster carers themselves and the impact that support has on children. Effective support helps foster carers to care for children with increasingly complex needs, promotes children's stability and enables children to develop the secure and enduring relationships that this consultation seeks to prioritise.

Proposal 2: How we grade

Removing the 'overall experiences and progress' judgement in SCCIF

Question 15 (SCCIF)

What do you think about our proposal to remove the 'overall experiences and progress' judgement in SCCIF?

We welcome the proposal to remove the overall experiences and progress judgement in SCIFF. Currently the overall judgement oversimplifies the in depth inspection outcome. This change may help reduce the risk of one area disproportionately influencing the overall inspection outcome enabling inspection reports to provide a clearer picture of where services are performing well and where improvements are needed. This could support a more constructive approach to continuous improvement.

The Fostering Network welcomes the greater nuance that this proposal may bring and agrees that individual evaluation areas should be clearly visible rather than being subsumed within a single overall judgement. However, we would encourage Ofsted to consider how inspection outcomes are used by local authorities and commissioning teams when making placement decisions. There is a risk that, despite the introduction of a more nuanced reporting approach, commissioners may continue to seek simplified indicators of quality or place disproportionate weight on individual evaluation areas. This could unintentionally reduce placement choice for children. We would therefore encourage Ofsted to ensure that report cards and accompanying guidance support a balanced interpretation of inspection

findings and promote child-centred commissioning decisions based on the full inspection outcome.

The 5-point grade scale

Question 16 (ILACS)

What do you think about our proposal to introduce the 'secure fit' grading methodology for ILACS inspections?

Fostering services were strongly supportive of the proposed "secure fit" approach. They felt it could provide a clearer and more consistent baseline standard for assessing local authority performance.

Foster carer members were supportive of a secure fit approach as it could be helpful to support a balanced, evidence-led judgement and avoids disproportionate emphasis on a single issue. However, they raised concerns about inspections feeling pre-judged or overly dependent on selected evidence. Secure fit should therefore be underpinned by transparent evidence gathering, strong inspector training in fostering, and meaningful challenge where providers, carers or children believe the evidence base is incomplete.

The Fostering Network welcomes the proposed "secure fit" methodology and agrees that it has the potential to bring greater consistency, transparency and clarity to ILACS inspections. A clearer articulation of the standards expected at each level should support improvement activity and help local authorities better understand how judgements are reached.

However, the secure fit approach should continue to allow inspectors to exercise professional judgement and consider the context in which decisions have been made. Children's social care is complex and local authorities are often required to make difficult decisions in response to competing risks, sufficiency challenges and factors outside their direct control. Inspection should therefore consider the quality of leadership, decision-making, partnership working and risk management, rather than focusing solely on outcomes.

We would also encourage Ofsted to ensure that the secure fit approach remains firmly focused on children's lived experiences. Strong performance should be evidenced not only through compliance with standards, but through children's experiences of stability, belonging, enduring relationships, effective support and meaningful involvement in decisions affecting their lives. Similarly, judgements should take account of how local authorities engage with and support foster carers, recognising their central role in achieving positive outcomes for children.

Question 17 (SCCIF)

What do you think about our proposal to introduce the 'secure fit' grading methodology for SCCIF inspections?

Although relatively supportive of the secure fit, IFA members questioned how secure fit judgments would account for circumstances where providers are not responsible for all decisions affecting children's experiences and outcomes.

The Fostering Network broadly supports the proposed secure fit methodology for SCCIF inspections. A clearer and more transparent framework has the potential to improve

consistency of inspection judgements and help providers better understand the standards expected of them.

However, it is essential that the secure fit approach continues to recognise the distinct role of fostering providers within the wider children's social care system. Independent fostering agencies make an important contribution to children's experiences and outcomes but do not hold all decision-making responsibilities relating to children in their care. Decisions about care planning, permanence, commissioning, placement moves and the provision of wider support services frequently sit with the local authority as the corporate parent.

We would therefore encourage Ofsted to ensure that the secure fit approach places appropriate emphasis on the quality of provider practice, decision-making, partnership working and advocacy for children, rather than focusing solely on outcomes. Inspectors should be able to distinguish between situations where a provider has taken reasonable and appropriate action to support a child and those where shortcomings in provider practice have contributed to poor outcomes.

The Fostering Network believes that inspection should recognise the increasingly collaborative nature of children's social care. Strong practice is often demonstrated through effective joint working between providers, local authorities, foster carers and the wider team around the child. The secure fit methodology should therefore allow inspectors to consider how providers have contributed to achieving positive outcomes for children, including maintaining stability, promoting enduring relationships and securing support, even where final decisions rest elsewhere.

Question 18 (ILACS)

What do you think about our proposal to introduce the 5-point grade scale for ILACS inspections?

Fostering service members were in strong support of the 5-point grade scale and felt the proposed approach would create greater clarity and transparency around expectations and inspection outcomes.

<i>"I really like that grade scale, the five point grade scale. To me that makes sense." – LA Fostering service</i>
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Foster carer members thought that a 5-point scale may help provide more nuance than the current grading approach, particularly if it distinguishes between services that are broadly meeting expectations and those requiring urgent improvement. However, the descriptors must be clear, consistently applied and supported by data and qualitative evidence. They felt that the scale should not obscure the lived experience of children and carers, and should make clear how fostering sufficiency, foster carer respect and engagement influence judgements.

The Fostering Network welcomes the introduction of a 5-point grading scale for ILACS inspections. We believe it has the potential to provide a more nuanced and balanced assessment of children's services than the current approach, better recognising the complexity of children's social care. The proposed scale may also support a stronger culture of continuous improvement by helping local authorities understand more clearly where practice is strong and where further development is required.

However, it will be important that the descriptors are sufficiently clear and consistently applied, particularly in relation to areas such as fostering sufficiency, foster carer support and retention, placement stability, and children's enduring relationships. The grading scale should help stakeholders understand not only whether services are meeting expected standards, but how effectively they are improving children's lived experiences and outcomes.

We would also encourage Ofsted to ensure that the grading framework reflects the importance of effective corporate parenting, including how well local authorities value, support and engage foster carers as key partners in achieving positive outcomes for children.

Question 19 (SCCIF)

What do you think about our proposal to introduce the 5-point grade scale for SCCIF inspections?

Foster carer members felt that the 5-point grade scale are concise and easy to understand. They should ensure that everyone knows what is required and expected.

The Fostering Network welcomes the introduction of a 5-point grading scale for SCCIF inspections. We believe the proposed approach has the potential to provide greater nuance and a more balanced reflection of provider performance, recognising that fostering services may demonstrate differing levels of effectiveness across various aspects of their work. This should support a clearer understanding of both strengths and areas for development.

However, the effectiveness of the grading scale will depend on clear descriptors, consistent application and a shared understanding of the responsibilities that sit within a provider's control. The framework should recognise the complexity of fostering practice and the collaborative nature of children's social care, ensuring that inspection judgements appropriately reflect the quality of practice, support provided to foster carers, and children's experiences and outcomes.

We would also encourage Ofsted to monitor how the new grading structure is interpreted and used within commissioning arrangements to ensure that the intended benefits of greater nuance are realised and that children continue to have access to a broad range of high-quality fostering provision.

Question 20 (ILACS)

For each of the following proposed ILACS grades, what do you think about the description we have proposed?

- Exceptional
- Strong standard
- Expected standard
- Needs attention
- Urgent improvement

Foster carer FCA members said that the grade descriptions should explicitly recognise the quality of relationships and support around children, including the extent to which foster carers are treated as professional partners. “Exceptional” and “Strong standard” should require evidence that children, foster carers and care leavers are routinely heard and that their feedback leads to improvement. “Needs attention” and “Urgent improvement” should capture weak engagement, poor responsiveness to foster carer concerns, high foster carer turnover, insufficient placements, and ineffective support for staying put or transitions to adulthood.

The Fostering Network supports the proposed descriptors and welcomes the greater differentiation between levels of performance. We believe the highest grades should reflect not only strong systems and processes, but clear evidence that children and foster carers are listened to and that their views lead to meaningful change. Exceptional and Strong Standard services should demonstrate high-quality matching, support for enduring relationships, effective foster carer retention and a culture where foster carers are recognised as valued partners in delivering care and support to children.

Equally, descriptors for Needs Attention and Urgent Improvement should reflect circumstances where unfortunately children experience instability, important relationships are disrupted, foster carers do not feel adequately supported or engaged, and services are unable to demonstrate how they have responded to feedback from children and carers.

Question 21 (SCCIF)

For each of the following proposed SCCIF grades, what do you think about the description we have proposed?

- Exceptional
- Strong standard
- Expected standard
- Needs attention
- Urgent improvement

The Fostering Network supports the proposed grade descriptors and welcomes the greater differentiation between levels of performance. The highest grades should recognise providers that consistently deliver high-quality support to foster carers, promote stable and enduring relationships for children, involve children and carers in service development and demonstrate effective partnership working with local authorities and the wider team around the child.

We believe the descriptors should recognise the quality of provider decision-making, support and relationship-based practice, particularly where some outcomes sit outside providers' direct control. Descriptors for Needs Attention and Urgent Improvement should reflect poor matching, insufficient support to foster carers, ineffective engagement with children and carers, high levels of placement instability and a failure to respond appropriately to feedback.

Proposal 3: How we report

Report cards for ILACS and SCCIF

Question 22 (ILACS)

What do you think about our proposal to introduce report cards for ILACS inspections?

Foster carer members thought report cards could make ILACS findings more accessible if they are clear, balanced and meaningful to children, foster carers, families and local authorities. They highlighted that Ofsted should engage with foster carers to directly shape the design, language and content of the report cards.

The Fostering Network supports the introduction of report cards and welcomes efforts to make inspection findings more accessible to children, families, carers, practitioners and leaders. A clear and concise summary of inspection outcomes should help improve transparency and understanding of children's services.

However, it will be important that report cards complement rather than replace the richness and nuance of full inspection findings. Children's social care is complex and inspection outcomes often require explanation and context. We would encourage Ofsted to ensure report cards act as a gateway to fuller inspection evidence and do not inadvertently encourage an over-simplified interpretation of local authority performance. This is particularly important where commissioning, sufficiency and placement decisions may be influenced by inspection outcomes.

Question 23 (SCCIF)

What do you think about our proposal to introduce report cards for SCCIF inspections?

Members welcomed the proposal to introduce SCCIF report cards, recognising the potential to improve accessibility and transparency. Report cards should provide concise information about children's experiences and agency performance while remaining balanced and evidence based.

The Fostering Network supports the proposal but would encourage Ofsted to consider how report cards may be interpreted and used by commissioning authorities. While summary information can be helpful, there is a risk that commissioners rely heavily on headline findings rather than considering the full inspection narrative and context. The success of this proposal will therefore depend on report cards capturing sufficient nuance to support informed, child-centred commissioning decisions and ensuring that children's placement options are not unintentionally restricted through over-simplified interpretation of inspection outcomes.

We would particularly welcome report cards that include information about children's experiences, placement stability, foster carer support, retention and enduring relationships alongside inspection judgements, helping readers understand the factors that underpin effective fostering practice.

Introducing data on children's social care report cards

Question 24 (ILACS)

What are your views on including data and information in ILACS report cards?

Foster carer members support including data and information in report cards, provided it is used to illuminate children's and carers' experiences rather than replace them. Data-driven

analysis can reduce reliance on anecdote or provider-selected examples, but it must be accompanied by qualitative evidence from children, foster carers, foster carer associations and care leavers. Report cards should also clarify what evidence was gathered and who was spoken to.

The Fostering Network supports the move to include data and information in report cards in response to children's views that current reports did not reflect their lived experience and that data will complement, not drive, inspection judgements. We welcome that the data will be based on the Children's Social Care National Framework as this will reflect the best-established outcomes for children. We would also support including data on sufficiency as part of the broader changes above.

Question 25 (ILACS)

Which data and information would be most meaningful to include on an ILACS report card?

Foster carer members believe that meaningful data would include foster carer recruitment and retention statistics, reasons for foster carers leaving, placement stability, use of unregistered provision, sufficiency by placement type, staying put availability and take-up, timeliness and quality of support, children's social worker continuity, survey response rates, how foster carers and children were selected for engagement, and what action was taken in response to feedback. Report cards should also show whether the local foster carer association was engaged during inspection. The Fostering Network would agree with this.

The Fostering Network would also encourage Ofsted to include data that helps describe children's experiences of stability, belonging and relationships. This could include placement stability measures, the proportion of children placed with siblings where appropriate, distance from home and community, continuity of social workers, availability and uptake of therapeutic support, and information about children maintaining relationships with former foster carers and other significant adults. Data should help illustrate whether local authorities are creating the conditions for children to develop and maintain safe, stable and enduring relationships.

Question 26 (SCCIF)

What are your views on including data and information in SCCIF report cards?

IFA members broadly welcomed the inclusion of data and information in SCCIF report cards to provide greater context about services. However, they wanted clarity on what data would be included, whether contextual information would influence judgments, and how fostering-specific measures would be reflected. Members also highlighted the need to avoid unintended consequences and ensure data is interpreted within the appropriate local context.

The Fostering Network supports the inclusion of data and information within SCCIF report cards. Used appropriately, data can help provide context, support transparency and improve understanding of children's experiences. However, data should complement rather than replace inspection evidence and should be accompanied by sufficient narrative and contextual information to avoid simplistic comparisons between providers.

"The additional data... is quite welcome in terms of the environment that the services operate in." – IFP Fostering Service

Question 27 (SCCIF)

Which data and information would be most meaningful to include on a SCCIF report card?

The Fostering Network believes that the most meaningful data for SCCIF report cards should focus on the factors that have the greatest impact on children's experiences and outcomes. This could include foster carer recruitment and retention, reasons foster carers leave, children's placement stability, unplanned endings, Staying Put availability and uptake, workforce stability, supervising social worker caseloads and feedback from children and foster carers.

We would also welcome information that reflects the quality of relationships and children's sense of belonging. This could include data relating to children maintaining relationships with former foster carers, sibling placements, support for family relationships and evidence of children's participation in service development.

However, data should always be accompanied by appropriate context. Inspection findings should recognise that fostering services often operate within wider local authority systems and that some outcomes may be influenced by factors beyond a provider's direct control. Report cards should therefore use data to support a balanced understanding of practice rather than encourage simplistic comparisons between providers.

Proposal 4: Engagement during inspections

Engaging with children, young people, parents, carers and families on inspection

Question 28 (ILACS)

How can we better engage with children and young people during ILACS inspections?

Foster carer members suggested that Ofsted should continue to strengthen direct engagement with children and young people using methods that are accessible, safe and suited to children's circumstances. Engagement should not depend solely on local authority routes. Inspectors should also hear from the adults children trust and live with, including foster carers, because they can help inspectors understand children's day-to-day experiences, communication needs and whether support is making a difference.

The Fostering Network believes that children and young people should be viewed as active contributors to inspections rather than solely as sources of evidence. Many children enjoy participating in consultation and inspection activities and can gain confidence, skills and experience through meaningful involvement. Inspectors should therefore consider the range of opportunities available for children and young people to influence services, including participation groups, children in care councils, consultation activities and other forums designed to gather children's views.

Inspection should focus not only on whether children have been asked for their views, but on how those views have influenced decision-making and service development. This should

include both the child's individual experience, including how their wishes and feelings are reflected in care planning, and how children's collective feedback has informed strategic improvements across children's services.

Ofsted should also continue to promote a range of engagement methods that enable children to participate in ways that feel safe, accessible and meaningful to them. Direct conversations with inspectors should form one part of a broader approach that recognises the diverse communication preferences, experiences and needs of children and young people.

Question 29 (SCCIF)

How can we better engage with children and young people during SCCIF inspections?

Members supported efforts to ensure children and young people's voices are heard during SCCIF inspections. However, they highlighted that many children may not wish to engage directly with inspectors and that participation should always be voluntary. Members therefore supported flexible approaches to gathering children's views, using a range of methods that enable children and young people to share their experiences in ways that feel comfortable and appropriate to them.

Members felt that engagement with children and young people should extend beyond inspection activity itself and include consideration of how fostering agencies seek, respond to and act upon children's views throughout the year. Many agencies have established participation groups, children's councils and participation workers who support children to influence service development and shape organisational decisions.

Inspection should therefore consider not only whether children have opportunities to contribute, but whether services can demonstrate the impact of their participation. Providers should be able to show how children's views influence their own care and support, as well as wider organisational policies, training, recruitment and service development activities.

While direct engagement with inspectors should be encouraged where children want to participate, members reiterated that participation should always be voluntary. Ofsted should continue to utilise a range of methods to gather children's views, recognising that some children may prefer to contribute through existing participation structures, creative approaches, surveys or trusted adults who can help facilitate their voices being heard.

The Fostering Network believes inspection should place equal emphasis on hearing children's views and understanding how providers have acted upon them. Meaningful participation is demonstrated not by the number of opportunities children have to speak, but by the extent to which their views lead to positive change.

"Most of our children don't want to speak to Ofsted inspectors." – IFP Fostering service
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Question 30 (ILACS)

How can we better engage with parents, carers and families during ILACS inspections?

Foster carer members suggested that Ofsted should make engagement with foster carers and foster carer associations a routine and expected part of ILACS inspections. Inspectors

should not rely solely on surveys or local authority nominations. Foster carers reported that some are unaware of surveys, some never receive feedback after completing them, and some fear speaking openly. Independent selection, direct contact with FCAs, visible feedback loops and reassurance about confidentiality would improve both participation and trust.

The Fostering Network believes that effective engagement with parents, carers and families requires a culture across children's social care that values and actively seeks their views. Inspection should therefore consider not only how Ofsted engages with these groups during inspection, but also how local authorities create opportunities for their voices to influence practice, decision-making and service development throughout the year.

For foster carers in particular, meaningful engagement relies on the wider children's workforce recognising their role as key partners in caring for children. Children's social workers, fostering social workers, senior leaders and other professionals should actively support foster carers to share their views and contribute to discussions about both individual children and wider service improvement. Inspection should therefore explore whether foster carers feel listened to, respected and included as part of the team around the child.

The Fostering Network would also encourage Ofsted to consider how local authorities engage with a wider range of parents, carers and family members, including kinship carers, special guardians and birth families where appropriate. Effective engagement is not simply about gathering feedback but demonstrating how that feedback has influenced services and improved experiences for children and families.

Question 31 (SCCIF)

How can we better engage with parents, carers and families during SCCIF inspections?

Members highlighted that engagement with parents, carers and families within fostering arrangements is often a shared responsibility between providers and local authorities. While foster carers may develop positive relationships with children's parents and wider family members, the nature and extent of this involvement can vary significantly depending on the child's circumstances and care plan. In many cases, independent fostering agencies will not have direct relationships with parents or wider family networks.

Members noted that effective engagement with parents and families therefore relies on strong partnership working between providers, local authorities and the wider team around the child. Where inspectors wish to understand the views and experiences of parents or family members, this may require liaison with the child's responsible local authority to ensure the appropriate people are identified and engagement takes place in a safe and appropriate way.

The Fostering Network believes SCCIF inspections should recognise the collaborative nature of this work and consider how effectively providers support arrangements that help children maintain safe and positive family relationships. Inspection should explore how agencies work with local authorities, foster carers and other professionals to support family time, maintain important relationships and share information appropriately in the child's best interests.

We would also encourage Ofsted to consider how providers engage with foster carers and foster carer forums as part of inspection activity. Foster carers often have valuable insights

into children's day-to-day experiences, family relationships and the effectiveness of support arrangements. Inspection should therefore consider both how providers gather these views and how they use feedback from foster carers to improve services and outcomes for children.

Proposal 5: ILACS inspection scheduling

Question 32 (ILACS)

What do you think about our proposals for ILACS scheduling?

We recognise the significant pressures currently facing local authorities, including local government reorganisation, children's social care reform activity and wider workforce challenges. Our members report that these changes are having a considerable impact on capacity across services, particularly at senior leadership level.

While we understand the rationale for moving from a standard inspection cycle of at least every three years to every four years, it will be important to ensure that inspection arrangements remain sufficiently responsive during periods of major organisational change. In circumstances where local government reorganisation results in the creation of new authorities or significant changes to service structures, there may be merit in undertaking an earlier standard inspection than the proposed four-year cycle.

Allowing a reasonable period for new arrangements to embed would be important, both to generate sufficient evidence of practice and to avoid creating additional disruption during implementation. However, inspection should take place early enough to provide assurance that children are safe, that leadership arrangements are effective and that any emerging concerns are identified before they become embedded. We would therefore encourage Ofsted to consider whether there should be flexibility within the inspection schedule for newly established authorities or those undergoing significant structural change.

We welcome the continued use of focused visits, monitoring activity and annual engagement arrangements between standard inspections. These mechanisms will be particularly important in ensuring that the impact of major reforms, sufficiency challenges and organisational change on children and families continues to receive appropriate scrutiny.

Question 33 (ILACS)

What do you think about the idea to explore assurance visits, which would take place between full inspections, and would review one evaluation area graded 'needs attention'?

Foster carer members highlighted that assurance visits could be useful if they provide timely scrutiny of areas graded "needs attention" and check whether improvement is being experienced in practice.

The Fostering Network agrees with the idea to explore assurance visits and continuing to hold annual engagement meetings with each local authority. We support the proposal to explore how these conversations can play a stronger role in shaping decisions about visits and inspections and a vital opportunity to bring together the full breadth of data, intelligence and professional insight that inspectors and local leaders hold, and to use that understanding to improve decision-making. We support strengthening these meetings to help target activity where it will have the greatest impact for children and families. We hope this will strengthen Ofsted's ability to recognise improvement, intervene earlier where necessary, and maintain a consistent level of inspection across a period of significant reform.

Additional questions

Question 34 (ILACS)

What effect do you think the proposed ILACS changes will have on leaders', practitioners' and inspectors' workload and wellbeing?

Foster carer members were concerned that the proposed changes could increase workload if local authorities, practitioners, foster carers and inspectors are asked to provide more evidence without clearer processes. However, better-targeted engagement and more meaningful use of data could reduce duplication and improve the quality of evidence. Foster carers' wellbeing should also be considered: being asked for views without feedback can feel disempowering, while being properly heard and seeing change can increase confidence in the system.

As mentioned above, the pace of significant change and impact this will have on the whole local authority from leaders to practitioners and inspectors needs to be considered as this will have an impact on support for fostering families and therefore impact on children.

Question 35 (SCCIF)

What effect do you think the proposed SCCIF changes will have on leaders', practitioners' and inspectors' workload and wellbeing?

IFA members felt that the proposed SCCIF changes may initially increase workload for leaders, practitioners and inspectors as services adapt to new evaluation areas, reporting requirements and approaches to evidence gathering. In particular, agencies may need to strengthen mechanisms for evidencing children's participation, enduring relationships and the impact of support provided to foster carers.

However, members also felt that the proposals have the potential to create a clearer and more transparent inspection framework over time. A dedicated focus on foster carer recruitment, assessment and support may help agencies better understand expectations and ensure inspection activity reflects the aspects of practice that have the greatest impact on children's experiences and outcomes.

Members highlighted that meaningful engagement with children and foster carers requires time and resource to do well. Services should not be encouraged to create additional consultation processes solely for inspection purposes. Instead, inspections should recognise and draw upon existing participation structures, foster carer forums and quality assurance mechanisms wherever possible.

The Fostering Network believes that the cumulative impact of wider sector reforms should also be considered when implementing these changes. Providers are already responding to significant developments across children's social care, including sufficiency challenges, workforce pressures and ongoing reform activity. Care should be taken to ensure that additional inspection requirements do not create unnecessary administrative burden that detracts from direct support to children and foster families.

We also believe that effective implementation will depend on consistent inspector training and support. As inspections place greater emphasis on areas such as enduring relationships, participation and foster carer support, inspectors will require the knowledge and confidence to make balanced and consistent judgements. If implemented well, the proposed changes have the potential to improve confidence in the inspection process and better reflect the realities of fostering practice.

Question 36 (ILACS)

What steps could we take to reduce or manage any unintended consequences of our proposals?

Foster carer members believe that Ofsted could reduce unintended consequences by setting clear expectations for how inspectors select people to speak to, requiring engagement with FCAs where they exist, publishing clearer information about how survey feedback is used, and ensuring inspectors are trained in fostering practice. Test-and-learn activity should include foster carers in participating services, and those carers should be made aware when their service is involved so they can contribute.

The Fostering Network believes that clear communication and implementation guidance will be critical in reducing unintended consequences arising from the proposed reforms. In particular, Ofsted should provide clarity on how inspection outcomes, report cards and individual evaluation areas are intended to be interpreted and used. This will help reduce the risk of local authorities, commissioners and other stakeholders relying on simplified measures of performance rather than considering the full inspection findings and context.

We would also encourage Ofsted to monitor the impact of the changes on placement commissioning and sufficiency. The introduction of new grading arrangements and report cards should not inadvertently reduce placement choice for children or discourage providers and local authorities from making complex, child-centred decisions where these are in a child's best interests.

Given the scale of wider children's social care reforms, including local government reorganisation and regional developments, Ofsted should also ensure that inspection scheduling and expectations remain sufficiently flexible to reflect significant organisational change. Newly established authorities and services may require time to embed new structures before their effectiveness can be fully assessed, whilst still maintaining appropriate oversight to identify and respond to safeguarding concerns.

Finally, we would encourage Ofsted to continue testing proposed changes with local authorities, providers, foster carers, children and young people before full implementation. This will help ensure that the revised framework delivers its intended benefits without creating unnecessary burden or unintended barriers to children receiving the right care and support.

Question 37 (SCCIF)

What steps could we take to reduce or manage any unintended consequences of our proposals?

IFA members felt that one of the biggest risks arising from the proposals would be the potential for providers to become more risk averse if inspection judgements are perceived as being driven primarily by outcomes rather than the quality of practice and decision-making. Providers must sometimes make complex decisions about whether they can safely meet a child's needs, taking account of the support available from the wider team around the child, the needs of other children within fostering households and the information available at the time.

The Fostering Network believes Ofsted can reduce this risk by ensuring that inspections take an enquiry-based approach and place appropriate emphasis on the quality of provider decision-making, partnership working and advocacy for children. Providers should be assessed on their actions, judgement and support arrangements rather than solely on outcomes that may be influenced by factors outside their direct control.

We would also encourage Ofsted to monitor how the new grading structure and report cards are interpreted and used by commissioning authorities. Greater transparency and accessibility are positive developments, but there is a risk that nuanced inspection findings could be reduced to simplified commissioning decisions. Ofsted should ensure that report cards encourage a balanced understanding of provider performance and support child-centred placement decision-making.

There is also a risk that providers create additional consultation, recording or quality assurance processes purely to satisfy inspection requirements. Inspection should recognise existing mechanisms through which agencies gather and respond to the views of children and foster carers, rather than encouraging unnecessary duplication or administrative burden.

Finally, effective implementation will depend on clear guidance and consistent inspector training, particularly in relation to enduring relationships, foster carer support, participation and partnership working. A shared understanding of these concepts will help ensure inspections remain fair, proportionate and focused on improving children's experiences and outcomes.

Question 38 (ILACS)

Please tell us how you think our proposed changes to ILACS may or may not impact Ofsted's public sector equality duty.

Foster carer members suggested that the changes could support Ofsted's public sector equality duty if inspections more consistently hear from a broad range of children, young people, foster carers, parents, carers and families, including those who may be less confident or less able to engage through standard survey routes. Ofsted should ensure engagement methods do not privilege only the most visible or confident voices and should pay particular attention to children and carers whose experiences may otherwise be underrepresented.

The Fostering Network believes the proposed changes have the potential to positively support Ofsted's public sector equality duty through the increased emphasis on children's voices, enduring relationships and engagement with those who have lived experience of

children's social care. However, this will require inspection activity to actively seek out and understand the experiences of children, families and carers from a diverse range of backgrounds and circumstances.

Inspection should consider whether local authorities are listening to and acting upon the views of children and carers whose experiences may not always be heard through traditional engagement methods, including children with disabilities, children with communication needs, children placed at a distance from their home authority, care-experienced young people, foster carers from diverse backgrounds and children from minoritised communities.

Local authorities also have an important role in ensuring children are supported to develop and maintain their identity, including their culture, ethnicity, language, religion, disability, sexuality and family relationships. Inspection should therefore explore how effectively corporate parenting arrangements respond to the diverse needs of children and ensure they have equitable access to opportunities, services and support.

We would also encourage Ofsted to consider how local authorities support a diverse fostering workforce. This includes understanding whether foster carers from different backgrounds have equitable access to training, support, participation opportunities and involvement in service development, and whether there are appropriate mechanisms in place to identify and respond to any additional support needs.

Finally, inspection should focus not only on whether opportunities for participation exist, but whether children and carers from all backgrounds can meaningfully influence decisions about their own lives and contribute to the development of services. Equality, diversity and inclusion should therefore be considered through children's lived experiences and outcomes, rather than solely through policies and procedures.

Question 39 (SCCIF)

Please tell us how you think our proposed changes to SCCIF may or may not impact Ofsted's public sector equality duty.

Members felt that the proposed changes could have a positive impact on Ofsted's public sector equality duty if they encourage providers to better understand and respond to the diverse needs of children, young people and foster carers. The increased focus on children's voices, enduring relationships and foster carer recruitment, assessment and support provides an opportunity to strengthen consideration of equality, diversity and inclusion throughout fostering services.

The Fostering Network believes the proposed changes could support equality of opportunity by encouraging fostering services to recruit, assess and support a diverse range of foster carers capable of meeting the varied needs of children in care. Inspection should consider not only recruitment activity but also whether foster carers from different backgrounds and with different protected characteristics receive equitable access to training, support, progression opportunities and involvement in service development.

Inspection should also consider how effectively providers support children to maintain and develop their identity, including their culture, ethnicity, language, religion, disability, sexuality and family relationships. Children should be supported to develop a strong sense of belonging and connection to the people and communities that are important to them.

The Fostering Network would encourage Ofsted to ensure that engagement activities actively seek views from children and foster carers whose experiences may otherwise be underrepresented. As with the wider proposals, inspection should not only consider whether opportunities for participation exist, but whether diverse groups can meaningfully influence decisions and service development.

Finally, we believe the proposed evaluation area on foster carer recruitment, assessment and support provides an opportunity to better understand how fostering services meet the individual needs of foster carers throughout their fostering journey. This includes recognising where foster carers may require additional support, adjustments or tailored approaches in order to participate fully and effectively in fostering. Inspection should recognise and promote inclusive practice that enables both children and foster carers to thrive.

Question 40 (ILACS)

Do you have any other comments about our proposed changes to ILACS?

As mentioned above, member shad questions around how the framework will operate alongside RCCs. Fostering hubs and other system reforms and requested clarity around assessing enduring relationships and kinship care issues.

The strongest message from foster carers in the National Foster Carer Association forum was that foster carer recruitment and retention are central to children's welfare. If there are not enough supported, respected foster carers, children will experience instability and reduced choice. ILACS inspections should therefore treat foster carer voice, respect, support and retention as core evidence about the effectiveness of local authority children's services, not as peripheral issues.

The Fostering Network welcomes the overall direction of travel within the proposed ILACS framework, particularly the increased focus on sufficiency, enduring relationships, children's voices and the lived experience of those involved in children's social care.

Ofsted should provide early clarity on how inspection accountability will operate for local authorities whose recruitment, retention and placement functions are delivered through Regional Care Cooperatives or fostering hubs (particularly if this would involve RCCs being inspected under SCCIFs). This would ensure responsibilities remain transparent and children continue to receive effective corporate parenting.

Ultimately, children's experiences are shaped not by individual services working in isolation, but by how effectively the whole system works together around them. We hope the revised ILACS framework will support and promote this more integrated approach to corporate parenting.

Question 41 (SCCIF)

Do you have any other comments about our proposed changes to SCCIF?

Members emphasised that the success of the proposed SCCIF reforms will depend on effective inspector training, consistent interpretation of the framework, and a willingness to recognise different models of good practice. They stressed the importance of reducing reliance on individual inspector preferences to ensure inspections are fair, proportionate, and consistent across providers.

"There will have to be a cultural shift within the inspectors themselves." – IFP Fostering service

The Fostering Network welcomes the increased prominence given to foster carers within the proposed framework, particularly through the introduction of dedicated evaluation areas focused on foster carer recruitment, assessment, support and enduring relationships. Foster carers are central to children's experiences in care and these proposals provide an opportunity for inspection to better recognise their contribution to children's stability, wellbeing and long-term outcomes.

However, we would encourage Ofsted to ensure that SCCIF inspections continue to recognise the shared responsibilities that exist across the children's social care system. Providers play a crucial role in supporting children and foster carers but do not control all aspects of care planning, commissioning and decision-making. Inspection should therefore place appropriate emphasis on the quality of provider practice, decision-making, partnership working and advocacy for children, rather than focusing solely on outcomes.

We would also encourage continued engagement with providers, foster carers, children and young people during the implementation phase to ensure that the final framework reflects the realities of fostering practice and achieves its ambition of improving children's experiences and outcomes.

Ultimately, we hope the revised SCCIF framework will strengthen the sector's focus on relationship-based practice, meaningful participation, high-quality support for foster carers and the development of stable, enduring relationships that enable children to thrive.