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An analysis of Ofsted inspection reports for children's social care services in England.

Abstract

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) is responsible for inspecting services that care for children and young people in England and Wales. This paper presents findings from an independent study of Ofsted inspections into children's social care in England, covering reports under three inspection frameworks during the period 2009 to 2016. The research aimed to identify the main themes of recommendations made in Ofsted reports, and to explore similarities and differences between frameworks and between local authorities. The methodological approach was document analysis. A stratified sample of 60 reports was prepared on the basis of inspection framework and local authority characteristics such as local deprivation, Ofsted rating and urban/rural category. A thematic analysis was conducted of the recommendations in each report, with emerging themes subjected to an iterative process of coding and categorisation. The findings identified nine categories of themes, the most common of which were performance management, casework, oversight of practice, and multi-agency working. Overall, the recommendations were strongly oriented towards process issues and compliance with standards. Recommendations were found to differ somewhat between inspection frameworks but remained largely consistent between local authorities with different characteristics. The paper concludes by examining the implications of findings for the current regulatory framework in children's social care.

Keywords

Ofsted, child protection, children's social care, inspection, performance management, regulation

Introduction

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) is a non-ministerial government department that inspects services providing care for children and young people, and education and training for learners of all ages. Ofsted's remit covers services in England, while a similar role is performed by different bodies in other parts of the UK. Originally established by the 1992 Education Act in order to inspect schools, Ofsted was expanded in 2007 when it took on responsibility for monitoring local authority children's services departments. This amalgamated the functions of three existing organisations in relation to children's social care: the Commission for Social Care Inspection, the inspection role of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), and the Adult Learning Inspectorate. Ofsted's remit for children's social care includes local authority services, adoption and fostering agencies, residential homes, and other children's social care services. Ofsted's main function is to carry out inspections, which tend to run in cycles of three or four years; the current cycle began in January 2018 and is based on a framework called the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) (Ofsted, 2017b). Generally the services for children in every local authority are inspected at least once under each framework, with more targeted inspections occurring for particular types of provision in particular areas as required. Individual Ofsted reports are published online as well as being reported directly to Parliament. The agency also produces annual summary reports based on its inspections (e.g. Ofsted, 2016) as well as the findings from research and consultation (e.g. Ofsted, 2008).

Ofsted's contribution to standards in children's social care has been the subject of some debate, as proved the case in its original remit of schools and education (Rosenthal, 2004; Shaw *et al.*, 2003). Questions have been raised about political interference in the wake of child abuse scandals (Jones, 2014), excessive focus on process compliance rather than on outcomes for children (ADCS, 2015), and the link between local authority ratings and levels of deprivation and expenditure (Bywaters *et al.*, 2017). The inspection process has also been criticised for causing organisational and professional upheaval, particularly in the wake of an 'inadequate' rating (Jones, 2015), while institutional anxiety about Ofsted judgements has been linked to rising use of child protection interventions over recent years (Hood *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, in this politically sensitive sector, the inspectorate is not immune to accountability pressures. While Ofsted has attracted criticism for excessively punitive judgements in its last cycle of inspections, in which the majority of local authorities were found to be either inadequate or requiring improvement (Ofsted, 2015), it has also been lambasted for not picking up problems in local authorities that received positive inspection reports shortly before

scandals erupted about child sexual exploitation (Craven and Tooley, 2016) and deaths from child abuse (Elliott, 2009).

Ofsted describes its role in the sector as that of 'inspection and regulation' (Ofsted, 2009), and although inspection and regulation is not the same thing, generally speaking the former tends to be analysed through the prism of regulatory theory (Ayres and Braithwaite, 1992; Black, 2005; Gunningham *et al.*, 1998). Indeed, inspections are one of the principal methods used by regulators to enforce standards and reduce risks to public health and welfare. However, this broader aspect of Ofsted's role is arguably *shared* with local authorities and other agencies, which also carry out regulatory duties, most notably by providing statutory services to protect children from neglect and abuse. This complicates the regulatory tasks of detection, assessment and enforcement. For example, a well-known model of regulation is the 'responsive' framework advocated by Ayre and Braithwaite (1992), who argue that regulators should adopt compliance-based approaches to start with but escalate to more punitive enforcement methods if agencies continue to be non-compliant. Elements of this 'tit-for-tat' strategy (Baldwin and Black, 2008) can be seen in Ofsted's approach; for example, children's services that are repeatedly found to be 'inadequate' are subject to a number of sanctions, including in some cases their removal from local authority control. At the same time, children's services themselves operate a similar tiered or 'pyramidal' model, in which an increase in assessed need or risk to children is met by an escalation in support and intervention (Hood, 2015). Ofsted's inspection of such services therefore has an element of regulating the regulator, and is shaped inevitably by the fallout from child abuse scandals and institutional anxiety about risk (Elliott, 2009). In its most recent inspection framework (Ofsted, 2017b), Ofsted shifted explicitly to a risk-based approach to inspection, setting out three different pathways according to various types of 'intelligence', including previous inspection outcomes.

This paper's main contribution is to examine the qualitative content of reports, which up to now has only been addressed in Ofsted's own annual summaries. Before describing the study and its methodology, some contextual information is provided about the Ofsted inspection process and the frameworks within which judgements are made.

Ofsted inspection frameworks

Prior to 2009, inspections of local authority children's services were carried out as part of Joint Area Reviews (JARs). JARs were conducted by multi-disciplinary teams led by Ofsted and the Commission

for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), and were an extension of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of local authorities carried out by the Audit Commission. The framework for inspections changed in April 2009, when the government introduced a new corporate assessment regime for local authorities, the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). Joint Area Reviews were replaced by a new programme of inspections of outcomes and services for safeguarding and looked after children (Ofsted, 2009a), and unannounced inspections of contact, referral and assessment services (Ofsted, 2009b). From 2012-2013, a series of unannounced inspections were carried out under a separate framework covering local authority arrangements for the protection of children (Ofsted, 2012), although not all areas were inspected during this period. In September 2013, a multi-inspectorate framework for children's social care was introduced, generally known as the Single Inspection Framework (SIF) (Ofsted, 2017a). In February 2016 the government also launched Joint Targeted Area Inspections of services for vulnerable children and young people (JTAI), carried out by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. These inspections comprised an in-depth evaluation of children and young people's experiences, focusing on particular themes. Finally, in January 2018, the SIF was replaced by a new framework, the Inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) (Ofsted, 2017b), although the SIF was retained for some re-inspections of inadequate children's services.

Insert Table 1 here

It is perhaps worth highlighting two features within this shifting landscape of inspection. The first is an attempt by successive frameworks to encompass a complex multi-agency domain (statutory services for children) at the same time as targeting standards and accountability within particular parts of the system, e.g. child protection and looked after children. This dual concern is reflected in the combination of joint inspection regimes with more targeted inspections of safeguarding services. There was a shift to targeted and unannounced inspections of safeguarding in 2009, during a period of systemic crisis precipitated by the 'Baby P' scandal in the previous year (Jones, 2014). Another feature of inspection frameworks following this crisis was the increasingly robust view of standards in the sector, which became particularly apparent in the range of Ofsted judgements emerging from the SIF cycle. Indeed, the wording of judgements themselves reflected this change, with the 'adequate' rating (3) being replaced in the SIF by a 'requires improvement' rating (also 3). A comparative summary of the three inspection frameworks considered in this study is provided in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

Method

The aim of the research was to identify and compare the main issues for improvement identified in Ofsted inspection reports from 2009-16. There were two main objectives; first to analyse recommendations in a set of inspection reports from three different inspection frameworks, and second to examine whether and how these recommendations differed according to the framework employed, the overall judgement (inadequate or not inadequate) and local authority characteristics such as deprivation and urban/rural classification. The research team consisted of two social work academics, with practice backgrounds in child protection and looked after children, as well as a specialist researcher with a background in social care and education. A literature review was first carried out in order to identify contextual elements of the Ofsted inspection process, the results of which have been summarised above. Given that the empirical data consisted of published reports already available in the public domain, ethical approval was not required for this study.

The study's aim and objectives suggested a methodology based on document analysis (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004; Bowen, 2009). Bowen (2009) describes document analysis as 'a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents' (2009: 27). Documents contain texts (and images) that have been recorded without the researcher's intervention, include both printed and electronic material, and are 'produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways' (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004: 79). Document analysis approaches its subject matter as texts, whose form and function serves to construct a version of reality rather than being a direct representation of it. In turn, the production of texts relies on explicit and implicit conventions, e.g. about structure, tone and content, and is part of a broader socio-political (and cultural) context. Analysing documents as texts can therefore entail a form of discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough, 2003) as well as the thematic analysis of content, although the focus in this study was on the latter.

The first stage of document analysis was to collect a sample of twenty Ofsted reports from each of the three inspection frameworks outlined in Table 2 (total n=60). Sixty reports was the maximum that could be considered within the constraints of time and resources available. Within the overall sample, an effort was made to obtain a reasonable spread of ratings as well as local authority characteristics, i.e. deprivation and rural urban classification. Deprivation was defined as the local authority's average score in the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation, with 152 English LAs grouped

into three categories: (1) third most deprived (2) middle third, and (3) third least deprived. Rural urban classification was defined according to the 2001 Census, with English LAs grouped also into three categories: (1) urban with major conurbation, (2) urban with significant rural or city and town or minor conurbation, and (3) 'mainly or largely rural'. The characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 3, and a full list of all the reports considered in this study can be found as an Appendix to the online version of this article.

Insert Table 3 here

Each report in the sample was downloaded from the Ofsted website and imported into qualitative analysis software (NVivo 10). In the first stage of analysis, one member of the research team (RHa) read all the reports and carried out initial coding of the 'recommendations' section, which was common to all of them. Coding focused on the thematic content of reports; for example, a recommendation for the Local Child Safeguarding Board to disseminate information about thresholds for access to early help and children's social care (Slough, Framework 3) was coded within the theme of 'thresholds'. In the second stage of analysis, other members of the research team (DN and RHo) independently reviewed the codes both in terms of applicability and consistency across all of the reviewed documents. Any discrepancies were discussed in regular research meetings in order to reach a degree of inter-rater agreement on the coding of recommendations. Once this had been done, the third stage of analysis was to categorise the detailed codes into broader thematic categories. For example, textual elements coded with the theme 'thresholds' were included within a broader theme of 'consistency of policy application' and then into a higher order category of 'leadership and governance'. Again, this was done independently by two members of the research team (DN and RHo), with regular meetings to agree on inclusion and definitions. The final stage of analysis was to use code matrices in order to explore whether broad patterns of recommendations seemed to differ between Ofsted frameworks or between groupings of local authorities according to deprivation, urban/rural classification or Ofsted rating. For example, it was found that recommendations about children going missing seemed to be more evident in reports for highly urban local authorities and those with an inadequate rating in Framework 2. It should be noted that these comparisons constitute qualitative findings rather than statistical evidence, and there will inevitably be some overlap in the thematic categories used to compare reports.

Findings

Overall nine thematic categories emerged from the analysis of recommendations. The most common category in terms of coded items was performance management, followed by casework/direct practice and multi-agency working. In what follows, the main themes under each category will be described and illustrated with examples from individual reports. Differences between recommendations under the three inspection frameworks are noted, and between recommendations when local authorities were grouped by their levels of deprivation or urban/rural classification, or by whether they received an inadequate rating. Individual reports are referenced by local authority, year of report publication, overall rating and the inspection framework (F1, F2 and F3, see Table 2).

Casework and direct practice

This category comprised a number of themes in relation to casework, mainly to do with ‘timeliness’, ‘consistency’ and a ‘focus on outcomes’. Other themes included chronologies, equality and diversity, seeing children alone, and support for complex needs.

Recommendations on timeliness mainly concerned assessments, referrals and care plans:

‘Ensure that appropriate and timely action is taken in respect of child protection concerns referred to children’s social care in line with statutory requirements.’
Doncaster, 2012 (F2, Inadequate)

Recommendations on consistency concerned the quality of social work practice and the standard of reports and assessments:

‘Ensure that the consistency of recording, frequency of visits and quality of social work practice within the disabled children’s team are of a high standard.’
Lambeth, 2015 (F3, Inadequate)

A focus on outcomes was often mentioned in relation to care plans and services, with a particular emphasis on SMART terminology:

‘Ensure that all child protection plans are SMART (specific, measureable, achievable, realistic and timely) and contain appropriate contingencies’.
South Gloucestershire, 2012 (F1, Adequate)

Similar themes came up across the three Frameworks, i.e. focus on outcomes, consistency and timeliness. Framework 2 had more emphasis on ‘SMART’ outcomes and ‘equality and diversity’, and in Framework 3 a concern with LAC education was apparent. Few differences were noted between

LAs with different deprivation levels, although in the most deprived LAs recommendations to focus on the child were slightly more apparent. Similar themes were observed across LAs with varying levels of urbanisation; in 'mostly rural' areas, timeliness seemed more to do with the review and updating of care plans rather than with assessment completion. In local authorities receiving an inadequate rating, there was less of a focus on outcomes and more emphasis on timeliness, whereas the reverse was true in not-inadequate local authorities. Common recommendations for 'inadequate' local authorities also included 'seeing children alone' in Framework 2 and 'LAC education' in Framework 3.

Leadership and governance

This category comprised a number of themes, notably 'access to services and support', 'challenging service management', and 'consistency within application of policy'. Other themes included corporate parenting, learning from SCRs and training for managers and senior managers.

Recommendations in relation to 'access to services and support' addressed perceived gaps in provision, e.g. advocacy, substance misuse, or children's mental health, as well as support following transitions or step-down, e.g. leaving care, post-adoption, and access to early help:

'Ensure that children and young people are made aware of and supported to use advocacy services in child protection processes'
Gateshead, 2013 (F2, Good)

'Develop and implement working arrangements with local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service providers to enable better access to treatment for looked after children.'
Herefordshire, 2014 (F3, Requires Improvement)

Recommendations in relation to 'challenging service management' concerned two interconnected issues, firstly the need to strengthen management oversight in relation to shortcomings in quality assurance; and secondly management oversight of concerns identified in practice by IROs and conference chairs:

Wiltshire Council to ensure that the serious shortcomings in quality assurance arrangements are addressed by strengthening management oversight and challenge in case work and through improved effectiveness of the child protection chairs
Wiltshire, 2012 (F1, Inadequate)

Recommendations in relation to ‘consistency of policy application’ mainly concerned thresholds for services, such as early help and children’s social care, as well as other issues such as supervision, training and even ‘child sleep-overs’ for LAC.

Ensure that the thresholds for access to early help and children’s social care services is disseminated effectively by the Local Safeguarding Children Board and is consistently applied and understood across the partnership.
Slough, 2013 (F3, Inadequate)

When it came to differences between Frameworks, corporate parenting emerged as a significant concern in Framework 3, whereas it did not feature at all in recommendations from the earlier reports sampled here. There were no major differences in recommendations in this category according to deprivation, urban/rural classification or whether an inadequate rating was given.

Multi-agency working/integrated working

This category comprised themes about joint working and collaboration, information sharing, early help/intervention, and health. Other themes included multi-agency training and communication.

Recommendations in relation to joint work and collaboration were often to do with multi-agency processes such as core groups, strategy meetings, and case conference, service areas such as early help and support, and collaboration with other professional services such as the police, primary health, and mental health. Some service user groups were highlighted such as missing and exploited children. Most recommendations were concerned with procedures to ensure effective joint working.

‘Ensure that the Medway Safeguarding Children Board (MSCB) robustly holds other agencies to account for their participation in child protection conferences and within the common assessment framework (CAF) process and timely and appropriate information sharing and multi-agency decision making.’
Medway, 2012 (F2, Inadequate)

Recommendations on information sharing mainly concerned reports and assessments, but also notifications of risk, e.g. domestic abuse incidents and admissions to care. Children’s social care services were recommended to share information with other agencies, or vice versa, usually on a casework level, although some recommendations were more on a strategic level, e.g. information-sharing between the local child safeguarding board (LSCB) and an ‘improvement board’.

Recommendations in relation to early help and early intervention referred to the provision of support designed to reduce demand for statutory services. Most of these recommendations

concerned processes to ensure early help were in place, as well as the measurement of outcomes and effectiveness.

The Local Authority and partners need to ensure that early help is coordinated and effectively targeted through the implementation of the early help strategy, so that families receive support when need is first identified, and the number of referrals to children's social care is reduced.

Waltham Forest, 2013 (F2, Adequate)

Recommendations in relation to health were numerous – this seemed to be the central collaborative relationship identified in Ofsted reports about joint working, particularly in relation to primary care (GPs), Accident and Emergency (AandE), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and health services for Looked After Children (LAC) and care leavers. Early help emerged as a key recommendation in Frameworks 2 and 3, and was particularly a feature of recommendations for local authorities rated inadequate. Recommendations to do with the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) were quite frequent in Framework 1 but had disappeared by Framework 3. Overall in Framework 2 there were fewer recommendations in relation to multi-agency working than in 1 and 3. Deprivation and urban classification seemed to make little difference to recommendations in this category.

Oversight of social work practice

This category comprised themes about supervision, management and oversight, and challenging practitioners. Other themes included recording management decisions and management skills and experience.

Recommendations on supervision focused on processes to ensure that supervision was timely, regular, reflective and challenged practitioners. Occasionally there was more specific guidance on what supervision should entail:

Social workers must be supported by managers in supervision to 'think the unthinkable' at all times so that the experiences and views of both children and parents are equally understood and considered in decisions about risks and next steps.

Hartlepool, 2013 (F3, Good)

Recommendations on management and oversight referred mainly to quality assurance and the oversight of social work practice, as well as systems for recording decisions and actions. Some recommendations were linked to specific objectives, such as reducing delay in assessments.

Ensure robust management oversight of the single assessment process at both first tier and senior management level, so that children and families are seen and risks evaluated within timescales that meet the child's need.

Darlington, 2015 (F3, Inadequate)

Recommendations on challenging practitioners concerned the supervision of social workers, as well as the review function in care planning, e.g. Independent Reviewing Officers and case conference chairs. Overall, challenging practitioners was particularly emphasised in Framework 3. Grouping local authorities according to Ofsted rating, deprivation and urban/rural classification seemed to make little difference to the type of recommendations in this category.

Partnership working (with service users)

This category comprised themes in relation to advocacy support, service users' involvement in their own plans, and the voice of the child. User involvement in service planning was also a common theme.

Recommendations in relation to advocacy support concerned both access to and use of advocacy services, mainly for children and care leavers but also for parents. Often the advocacy was linked to agency objectives such as contributing to assessments or attending meetings, although access to complaints service was also mentioned in several reports.

'Ensure work is progressed to enable children and young people to access advocacy services which supports them to attend child protection conferences.'

Greenwich, 2012 (F2, Good)

Recommendations on service user involvement primarily concerned their contribution to assessment and care planning. The requirement to take account of children's wishes and feelings, and record their views, was a common theme, as was the use of advocates and involvement in decision-making.

'Improve the extent to which children's views in relation to their circumstances, wishes and feelings are secured and influence plans.'

Redbridge, 2010 (F1, Adequate)

Recommendations in relation to the voice of the child usually concerned the degree to which their views were recorded in plans and assessments, as well as evidence that they were being seen and spoken to regularly by their social workers.

'Ensure that children and young people who are subject to child protection plans are seen and seen alone where appropriate and their views are recorded and considered in response to their needs.'
Cumbria, 2013 (F2, Inadequate)

Between Framework 1 and Framework 3 there seemed to be more of an emphasis on direct user involvement (particular children) in decisions relating to them, as opposed to advocacy and contributing to planning of services. Grouping local authorities according to Ofsted rating, deprivation or urban/rural classification, seemed to make little difference to the type of recommendations in this category.

Performance management/quality assurance

This category comprised the theme of performance management along with related themes such as timescales, auditing, following guidelines, and quality assurance. Performance management was directly mentioned in just over half of all the reports considered here, mainly in connection with child protection and looked after children services, multi-agency services, the performance of social workers and managers, and the reporting of performance information.

'Ensure all social workers and managers have a clear, appropriate and evaluated individual development plan linking casework and management skills and performance to development activity'
Harrow, 2012 (F1, Adequate)

'Improve the performance management and audit programme so that it is sharply focused on the risks posed to children. Take action to effectively evaluate practice and efforts to reduce risk, including reporting on the quality of work and whether outcomes for children have improved.'
Slough, 2013 (F3, Inadequate)

Other recommendations in this category concerned timeliness for responding to referrals, completing and sharing reports and assessments, seeking legal advice, and complying with timescales for care proceedings. Some recommendations concerned particular practice areas, such as responding in a timely fashion to domestic abuse concerns. Others concerned the ability of health services, including CAMHS, to respond to requests for assessment and treatment.

'Ensure that appropriate and timely action is taken in respect of child protection concerns referred to children's social care in line with statutory requirements.'
Doncaster, 2012 (F2, Inadequate)

Following guidelines was another important theme under this category. Usually this referred to statutory guidance and LAs duties under the legislation, often linked to timescales and procedures.

'Ensure that plans for permanency are made and clearly recorded at children's second looked after review in line with national guidance.'
Herefordshire, 2014 (F3, Requires Improvement)

Recommendations around following guidelines seemed to have more prominence in Framework 1 than in the other two Frameworks, while timescales and performance management were mentioned increasingly in Frameworks 2 and 3. Quality assurance and following guidelines were particularly a feature of recommendations for inadequate LAs. Grouping local authorities according to deprivation or urban/rural classification, seemed to make little difference to the type of recommendations in this category.

Risk assessment/risk and decision-making

This category linked the theme of risk assessment with other themes relating to decision-making such as thresholds, consistency and appropriateness of plans and referrals. Recommendations on risk assessment were mainly concerned to ensure that risk assessments were comprehensive and sufficiently analytical, i.e. that all potential risks were investigated and that a suitable analysis was undertaken. Often the recommendations identified specific areas where this was not happening, e.g. in early years, or with respect to unallocated cases.

'Ensure that assessments focus on the experience of the child and are sufficiently analytical, so that they clearly identify and analyse risk, needs and protective factors.'
Harrow, 2012 (F1, Adequate)

'Introduce a formal risk assessment process to improve management oversight of child protection work and ensure that decisions are based on robust written evaluations of risk, including those relating to decisions to close or transfer cases.'
Sandwell, 2013 (F2, Inadequate)

Thresholds were an important theme in this category, generally in relation to child protection interventions and access to services. Recommendations were made to review how thresholds operated and ensure greater consistency in their application. Overall, the theme of consistency of

decision-making was more evident in Frameworks 2 and 3, and in groupings of the least deprived and 'moderately urban' local authorities.

'Develop robust partnership arrangements to review the thresholds for access to services so that children and families receive coordinated support appropriate to their level of need.'

Cumbria, 2012 (F1, Inadequate)

'Review the thresholds applied to child protection enquiries and strategy discussions and ensure that there is appropriate multi-agency information sharing to inform decision making, so that children and families are not unnecessarily subject to child protection investigations.'

St Helens, 2015 (F3, Requires Improvement)

Specific service user groups

The themes under this category related to specific service user groups targeted by the recommendations, principally care leavers, missing children, child sexual exploitation and adoption practice. In relation to care leaver planning, recommendations focused on issues such as access to health services, outcomes in relation to education and employment, transition to adulthood (pathway planning), and access to accommodation.

Ensure that pathway plans for care leavers set out clear objectives for their futures, including education, training, employment, housing and provision of support to meet their emotional and social needs.

Sheffield, 2014 (F3, Requires Improvement)

In relation to missing children, recommendations were focused mainly on procedures, guidelines and reporting requirements:

'Improve the timeliness in conducting return interviews when children and young people return from a missing episode.'

Cumbria, 2015 (F3, Inadequate).

In relation to child sexual exploitation, recommendations tended to focus on the coordination of services and the training of professionals:

'In partnership with the Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board develop a comprehensive strategy to protect children and young people at risk of, or being, sexually exploited and ensure that it is fully implemented.'

Waltham Forest, 2013 (F2, Adequate).

In this category, it was clear to see different priorities in each Framework, for example with child sexual exploitation becoming particularly prominent in Framework 3. It was perhaps surprising to find more recommendations about CSE and missing children in groupings of the least and moderately deprived local authorities, whereas in the most deprived LAs there was more focus on care leavers, permanence and adoption. Recommendations about children going missing were more evident in highly urban local authorities and those with an inadequate rating under Framework 2. Recommendations for inadequate local authorities under Frameworks 1 and 3 had more emphasis on services for looked after children and care leavers.

Workforce/resources/training and development

The themes under this category concerned capacity, caseloads, the allocation of social workers, staffing levels and training of SWs. Recommendations about 'capacity' referred to the capacity of statutory services, including health, social care and other agencies, to meet demand with 'a timely and appropriate response' (Manchester, 2014, F3).

'Tackle capacity issues within other social care teams in order to ensure that timely, high quality interventions are delivered to children and their families.'
Redbridge, 2010 (F1, Adequate)

Recommendations about staffing levels were concerned with maintaining the stability of the workforce, with a view to promoting consistency and continuity of care.

'Ensure effective arrangements are in place to recruit a more permanent and stable workforce of qualified social workers.'
Kingston, 2013 (F2, Inadequate)

In Framework 1, recommendations about the allocation of social workers were concerned with ensuring that children were allocated to professionals with the requisite skills and qualifications. In Frameworks 2 and 3, the focus was more on consistency and reducing the number of changes of social work experienced by children.

'Implement the workforce strategy as swiftly as possible to improve workforce stability and ensure that children have consistent social workers, who see them on their own and with whom they can develop meaningful relationships.'

West Berkshire, 2015 (F3, Inadequate).

There seemed to be a growing number of recommendations about staffing levels and allocation of social workers in Frameworks 2 and 3, while recommendations about caseloads were more evident in the grouping of most deprived local authorities. There were no major differences between recommendations in groupings according to urban/rural classification. Staffing levels, along with the allocation of social workers, were more often mentioned in recommendations for inadequate local authorities.

Summary of findings

- Overall nine thematic categories emerged from the analysis of recommendations. The most common category in terms of coded items was performance management, followed by casework/direct practice and multi-agency working.
- There were some differences in themes identified across the three frameworks. For example, in F1 recommendations emphasised multi-agency working and following guidelines, whereas in F2 there was more of a focus on outcomes, early help and timescales. In F3 there was a concern with child sexual exploitation, corporate parenting, and staffing levels.
- Recommendations for local authorities with an inadequate rating were more concerned across all three frameworks with timeliness, following guidelines, and seeing children alone. For LAs rated inadequate under F2 there was an emphasis on missing children and under F3 on education for looked after children.
- Overall there was a degree of uniformity in recommendations across local authorities in different categories of deprivation and rural urban classification. Recommendations in the most deprived local authorities had more emphasis on care leavers, adoption and permanency. Recommendations in highly urban areas were more concerned with missing children than in rural areas.

Discussion

The analysis of recommendations gives a picture of thematic content over time and across different frameworks, pointing overall to a focus on performance management, quality assurance and compliance. The majority of recommendations were geared towards improving the effectiveness and consistency of processes. Sometimes there was a direct link to standards, e.g. statutory requirements around assessment timescales, but recommendations generally stopped short of

setting targets and rarely referred to specific performance measures. However, these could often be inferred from the wording; for example, a recommendation to ensure access to advocacy services for children and young people would suggest that take-up of such services was currently low and should be higher by the time of the next inspection visit – even if this was not directly stated (e.g. Gateshead, 2013). Recommendations also assumed causal links, e.g. that advocacy helps children to participate in the CP process and influence decisions made about their lives, which in turn should reduce risks and result in better services. While the evidence to justify these assumptions might well exist (e.g. La Valle, 2015), the link between inspection recommendations, process measures and outcome measures was not discussed in the reports themselves. In performance management terms, the overall emphasis was therefore on ‘quality of effort’ rather than ‘quality of effect’ (Friedman, 2001), which is a tendency in the sector as a whole (Hood et al., 2016).

The findings suggested a degree of uniformity in the thematic content of recommendations, although some differences were evident particularly under the different frameworks. To some extent, this was attributable to differences in scope and emphasis, but also reflected shifts in policy priorities. For example, the focus on multi-agency working and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in F1 reflects the Every Child Matters agenda of the government at the time, whereas the concern with child sexual exploitation in F3 could be seen as a response to the exposure of CSE as a major institutional failing (Jay, 2014). In one sense, Ofsted inspections form part of the ‘scandal-reform’ cycle that has long shaped policy and practice in child protection (Elliot, 2009). However, the regulatory failure around CSE also points to the drawbacks of risk-based approaches, which tend to focus on known, familiar risks and therefore can fail to pick up developing risks or issues that lie outside the established analytic framework (Black and Baldwin, 2007). What are sometimes called ‘problem-centred’ approaches (e.g. Sparrow, 2000) stress the need for regulators to serve their purpose by identifying specific problems, or concentrations of risk, and then designing interventions to solve them. Sparrow points out such projects are often labelled ‘innovation’ when in fact they should constitute business as usual for regulators, who should ‘place effective risk control at the heart of routine operations’ (2000: 10).

In this context, it is interesting to note that the thematic content of Ofsted recommendations was not found to differ greatly between local authorities with different characteristics. This was somewhat unexpected, since deprivation has been shown to be a key driver of performance across services (Hood et al., 2016), while large, sparsely populated rural areas might be presumed to have different problems to small, densely populated urban areas. Some differences were suggestive of

context; for example, a greater number of recommendations about looked after children in the most deprived local authorities might reflect the larger numbers of children in care in those areas. In general, however, the lack of thematic variation suggests that Ofsted's emphasis on procedural compliance and performance management makes its recommendations less sensitive to the contextual differences between local authorities than one might expect. Given the focus on accountability, inspection frameworks end up targeting a similar cross-section of issues across a range of local authorities in order to ensure a consistent basis for ratings.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a study of recommendations from Ofsted inspections of children's social care under three inspection frameworks during the period 2009 to 2016. The findings suggested that recommendations tended to fall within nine themes, of which the most common was performance management. Their principal focus was on process issues and while there was often an implicit link between these and performance measures, and an assumed causal link to outcomes for children, such connections were not explicitly stated. Differences in emphasis between inspection frameworks were attributable to shifts in scope and remit, or to shifts in the wider policy context, and in some cases suggested a reactive response to institutional failings exposed in public inquiries and reviews. Contextual differences between local authorities did not seem to make much difference to the thematic content of recommendations, suggesting that analytical frameworks were an important driver of report findings. In theoretical terms, Ofsted's current approach reflects a risk-based approach to regulation, which has been the preferred approach in the UK for over decade (Black, 2005). This means, however, that Ofsted may be inhibited in its capacity to go beyond existing performance frameworks to consider regulatory risks that are not currently being detected by agencies.

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