Your Ofsted inspection: a practical guide for early years providers
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a practical guide for early years providers

Introduction

Early years providers are committed to delivering the best quality learning and care experiences for children and their families.

Inspections are a hugely important way to highlight the quality of your service, demonstrate your plans for continuous improvement, and share your achievements while ensuring that you remain competitive.

We believe that your inspection should be a mutually beneficial partnership between you, the inspector and the inspection process. A shared aim to improve outcomes for families through the delivery of quality learning and care for children in the early years brings you together.

We believe that the inspection process should be fair, consistent and transparent to ensure this happens. The outcome of your inspection should accurately reflect the quality of your service.

Support for you

This practical guide helps all early years practitioners, whether in group settings or home-based services such as childminders, to understand, to feel supported and to understand and engage with their Ofsted inspection to ensure a positive experience and outcome.

It focuses on the process of inspection including advice on the best way to prepare, what should be in place in advance of your inspection visit, how it is carried out on the
day, what you should expect and how you can respond if you are concerned about the accuracy or quality of your inspection at the time.

**Important considerations**

As a childcare professional, you continuously review and evaluate your service. You should therefore not need to make any special preparations for an inspection. However, it is important to take some time to consider how you and your team would demonstrate the following:

- self-evaluation processes and tools which impact positively on the children’s care, learning and development
- your understanding and implementation of the principles and requirements of the EYFS
- how your provision works closely and in partnership with parents, partners and other professionals and providers
- effective performance management systems to develop, coach and mentor students and trainees

**Your expectations on the day**

- it should be a positive and empowering experience with opportunities to demonstrate how well the children in your care are progressing toward their early learning goals.
- it should be an impartial, external evaluation of the effectiveness of the quality and standards of care, learning and development of children accessing your service.
- the inspector should be trained to inspect childcare and early years provision and should show their identification on arrival.
- all inspectors must adhere to a code of conduct to ensure that inspections are of the highest possible standard.
the inspector, you and the team should act courteously and professionally and treat each other with respect.

your team should be observed demonstrating how their personal qualities, skills and qualifications impact positively on the children’s learning experience.

**What is Ofsted’s role?**

Ofsted inspects all registered early years providers as part of its regulatory function determined by Parliament (or 'the government')¹. The purpose of regulation, as outlined by Ofsted in the *Framework for the regulation of provision on the Early Years Register 2013*, is to give parents an expert and independent assessment to show how well the provider is performing so they can make informed choices about childcare for their children.

New providers are normally inspected fairly soon after their registration and all settings are inspected within a four year cycle.

**Childcare provider inspection priorities**

- if you received an inadequate rating at your last inspection
- after two previous requires improvement inspections, where you cannot show evidence of improvement
- if Ofsted receives a complaint or information which suggests that you are not meeting requirements of the EYFS
- if Ofsted receives a complaint or information about significant changes to your service such as a new manager, high turnover of staff or a change of premises
When do you find out about a planned inspection?

Ofsted do not give group providers notice of a planned inspection as ‘no notice’ inspections are meant to allow the inspector to see the provision ‘as it really is’. It is also meant to reduce levels of anxiety or stress amongst staff that used to occur when weeks of notice were given.

For childminders and temporary provision like holiday play schemes, the inspector usually telephones to check the childminder's availability in a given week or thereabouts. This ensures that children will be present or that the service is open.

As a guide for the day, inspections can take around two to three hours for childminders while group provision may take up to six hours or more.
Before your inspection happens

Ofsted say you should not make any special arrangements for inspection. However, as with most things, you should always be well prepared. An Ofsted inspection can be stressful and like any important assessment, you would like to perform well and achieve a successful outcome.

Your success depends on two things; how well established your preparations are and how well you perform on the day. As such you should aim to ensure that you and the team are ‘inspection ready’ at any time. You should have a copy of Are you ready for your inspection? (Ofsted 2012), which outlines how they undertake inspections including what areas they will be focusing on and how they intend to measure your practice against certain criteria. The guidance also covers how they will make a judgment between a good or outstanding rating.

As mentioned, you should continually reflect on your practice and focus on the following three key judgement areas:

- how well your early years provision meets the needs of the range of children in your care
- the contribution that your early years provision makes to the well-being of children
- the effectiveness of your leadership and the management of the service

Involve everyone

Everyone involved with your provision; management committee or owner, staff team, students, trainees, assistants and volunteers should have a solid understanding of the Early Years Foundation Stage. This is essential as it enables you to demonstrate how the learning goals underpin your everyday practice.
For group settings, the key person is central to ensuring that every child develops at a pace which suits their individual needs. For childminders too, the ability to demonstrate skills in the key person role is vital to their inspection outcome.

“The key person must help ensure that every child’s learning and care is tailored to meet their individual needs. The key person must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child’s development at home. They should also help families engage with more specialist support if appropriate.” (EYFS 1.11)

**Be reflective**

You should continually reflect and demonstrate how the observations you make of children inform your planning of activities to ensure that they meet each individual child's needs. Inspectors often report that planning is done at a whole group level and does not differentiate between the range of ages and abilities of children. This can be a particular challenge for groups which may be located in a single room and for childminders.

You should consider how an activity which involves all the children can be amended slightly for each child to sustain their interest, reinforce the skills they already have and provide for the characteristics of effective learning. Similarly, the EYFS requires you to provide teaching and learning for children (EYFS 1.9) to ensure an effective balance of adult-led and child-led activities. This needs to be thought through carefully as how each child's session looks is influenced by many things such as their age and particular interests. For those providers delivering wrap-around care, including childminders, you should also consider whether a child has already had a tiring day at a nursery or school reception class and plan accordingly.
Gather evidence

As a childcare professional, you should be confident that you consistently meet the EYFS requirements on a daily basis, so the main consideration in relation to your inspection is how best you can demonstrate this to the inspector. It is useful to produce and provide evidence which shows how well-planned, led and differentiated the children’s learning is. While the early years Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) is not compulsory, it provides an effective way to present information to your inspector about how you reflect on and continuously improve your practice before the inspection. A regularly up-dated SEF provides an opportunity to show the inspector a valuable insight into your practice or approach before they even arrive to observe your provision.

Similarly, well presented, up to date and engaging Learning Journeys for each child can offer an important summary of the benefit each child gains from your provision. Each Learning Journey should include evidence of how the child’s starting points were assessed when they joined you and how they have progressed against the seven areas of learning and development outlined in the EYFS.

The evidence found in a child’s Learning Journey further supplements the inspector’s evidence of the progress children make in your care. You should ensure all Learning Journeys are available and accessible; if you allow parents to take them home do ensure that they bring them back. Some inspection reports indicate the quality of Learning Journeys or other child progress records are not consistent across every key person or for children of different ages.

Be presentable

You should check that all your paperwork is ready, up-to-date and easily found. Presenting documents of variable quality to the inspector is almost as poor as not having them at all. Your role as a manager or childminder requires you to ensure that all progress evidence is maintained, consistent and high quality.
You should not underestimate the importance of the environment in showing how effective your service is. Your home, reception areas, outdoor spaces, activity areas, offices and training rooms all provide information to the inspector about the provision and the experience that children, parents and other visitors to the premises receive. Non-verbal communication is not limited to people; cluttered, 'noisy' notice boards with posters for open evenings that happened six months ago 'say' to the inspector that engaging with parents regularly and effective communication are not really priorities for you.

Similarly for childminders working in their own homes, you should think about how to merge the care and learning environment with your home environment. It is relatively easy to make adjustments that utilise the every-day facilities in the home to create an enabling environment for learning to take place. For example, an extra easel that doubles as a notice board for parents or the space below the dining room table with cushions and drapes hidden there becomes a snug or den. It demonstrates to the inspector that you are planning the learning environment with innovation and flexibility.

The 'language' of inspection also requires you and your team to ‘talk the talk’ with the inspector. You may not like the terms, 'school readiness', 'tracking progress' or 'teaching' however be prepared to use these terms confidently in discussions. It demonstrates that you understand the importance of early years in preparing each child for formal learning in school. You should ensure that your planning documents use key phrases such as 'active learning', 'creativity' and 'critical thinking' to show that activities are underpinned by an understanding of the characteristics of effective learning.

It is important to get the basics right and make sure that the terminology you do use is correct. For example, many settings refer to key worker, where this is not in fact the term used in the EYFS - the correct term is key person. A key worker is something else entirely and is more likely to be used in a social care environment. It may seem a minor issue, but it gives the wrong impression about your knowledge, attention to detail and may undermine your professional credibility in front of the inspector.
Childminders have an advantage here as they are not likely to be responsible for other childcare professionals on the premises. However, you should be equally confident in your use of terminology.

The challenge for a group is to ensure that all colleagues are equally confident in their specific roles, as manager, deputy, room leader and practitioner and also as members of the whole team. Inspectors are free to communicate with any member of the team so make sure that you are all comfortable and confident about the inspection process and what it involves. The inspector will expect that the messages received from the manager about individual children and the provision as a whole are reinforced or consistent with communication held with other team members and, more crucially, parents.

**Engage with parents**

Evidence of your positive engagement with parents is an essential element to achieving a good or better inspection outcome. You should be prepared to demonstrate how well you work with parents to support their child’s learning and development needs and engage with other providers and professionals to further their progress. These aspects are key elements of the EYFS. An inspector will gather evidence for this from discussions with parents on the day and through records you keep such as Learning Journeys or other records showing a child’s progress. Records should be kept of any knowledge or advice shared with other agencies such as health services or other provisions which the child may attend.

Every team member should understand how your service actively engages with parents because, remember, there is no guarantee that the manager will definitely be present on the day of inspection. A manager’s illness or annual leave are no grounds for the postponement of an inspection. Evidence should be available to demonstrate effective, consistent practice is embedded throughout the provision through an effective management system.
Group teams and childminders who work with assistants should have records of regular supervision and appraisal, plans for professional development and processes to mentor and support staff as well as strategies for tackling under-achievement.

**On the day**

It may be pushing it to say that you should look forward to an inspection, but you should at least see the event as an opportunity to show off your provision and demonstrate the effective outcomes you achieve for the children in your care. At any time the team should know who the main point of contact is for the inspector, if the manager is not available.

On arrival, the inspector should introduce themselves and show their identification. If you are worried about the identity of the inspector, you should check this by ringing Ofsted’s helpline on 0300 123 1231.

The inspector should reassure you that they are largely here to observe so you should carry out your normal routine and activities. This ensures that disruption is kept to a minimum. One element of this routine is recognising how answering the door may affect the staff to child ratio in a particular room or across the setting as a whole. If it risks putting your provision out of ratio, you should be comfortable about saying this to the inspector. This applies to any point during the day. If the inspector wishes to communicate with a specific team member, please consider wider implications for the team and discuss with the inspector how this can be addressed.

The inspector will wish to communicate with parents so this may be one of the first activities they undertake. You should let parents know that this may happen in advance and display a notice to let parents know that they are welcome to share their views with the inspector on the day.
When reviewing your child registration list the inspector is likely to select one or two children or specific groups to focus on during the day. Understandably inspectors often select children with specific needs, such as a two year old funded child or one with identified additional needs. The principle is that if the provision is good for this child then it demonstrates how well you identify and respond to children’s individual needs.

**Inspector’s code of conduct**

Every inspector works to guidance outlined in *Conducting early years inspections* (Ofsted 2013). This requires them to carry out inspections in a way that aims to secure your full cooperation and confidence and is used in conjunction with the *Evaluation schedule for inspections of registered early years provision* (Ofsted 2013).

Your inspector should be thoroughly prepared with a good understanding of your provision gained from previous inspection reports and the completed SEF. The inspection should be a positive experience for everyone. The inspector should be allowed to carry out their visit in an open and honest way and should evaluate your provision objectively. The inspector may suspend an inspection if they are subject to implied or actual harassment, abuse or intimidation, with Ofsted asserting its right to take appropriate action in support of its inspector. Similarly, if you believe the inspector is behaving inappropriately, for example by failing to follow Ofsted guidelines or making inaccurate observations or statements about your practice, you should raise your concerns with the inspector at the time. If you are still unhappy, you should contact Ofsted’s helpline immediately to find out what steps you should then take to resolve concerns. Details are shown towards the end of this document.

**What will they do?**

The inspector spends most of the visit observing the way adults work with children, evaluating how the children learn and how well they are helped to be physically, mentally and emotionally healthy.
A new element introduced into inspection visits in *Evaluation schedule for inspections of early years provision* (Ofsted 2013) is joint observation. The inspector is likely to invite a senior member of a group setting or a childminder (if they employ an assistant) to observe activities in the environment with them.

You do not have to do this and will not be penalised if you choose not to do this. However this is an opportunity to demonstrate how well you know your team and your ability to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the provision you offer. The joint observation should allow you to reach a shared understanding of your provision with the inspector. You should be honest in your evaluation of any observations. There is little point in trying to overlook any examples of poor provision you may see. You can guarantee the inspector will not have missed them so not referring to them may indicate that you are not very observant or reflective. A good manager would always identify any problems or difficulties with a team member’s practice to support their continuous development and improvement in their role.

The inspector should keep you informed during the visit about how the inspection is progressing and share any findings which they will be making a note of. If you feel the inspector is drawing the wrong conclusion from a document or observation you should produce evidence to counter the view before it becomes a negative conclusion.

At the end of the visit the inspector should meet with you and any other people you wish to be present in order to feedback their findings; having a colleague with you is important as it allows you to take in verbal information while notes are being taken. These notes can act as prompts for questions and help to process information once the inspector has left. The inspector should also share their judgement. The inspector will decide on the grades to award by referring to the grade descriptors explained in *Are you ready for your inspection?* (Ofsted 2012). They should explain how the judgement conclusion was made, supported by their gathered evidence. At this...
stage, your grade is provisional. The inspector’s findings will be moderated through the quality assurance procedure.

If you have a concern about the inspection process, how the inspection is being conducted or the judgements made you should raise these with the inspector as soon as possible during the visit. You should try to resolve any concerns before the inspection is completed. However, if you feel unable to raise your concern directly with the inspector, you should contact Ofsted’s national helpline on 0300 123 1231 and speak with the inspection coordinator.
After the inspection

Shortly after the inspection you should receive your report to check for factual accuracy.

If you find any factual inaccuracies you should contact Ofsted immediately via the helpline on 0300 123 1231. The report is written by your inspector and should include the grades for your setting. The report at this stage should have been through the moderation and quality assurance process. It is your final grade. Some grades in the final report may differ from the provisional grade given at the feedback meeting. You may wish to challenge this position through the formal complaints procedure.

How to complain

The Alliance has produced an accessible, free resource, *A Guide to the Ofsted complaints process for early years providers*, which is available on the Alliance’s website.

In summary, an Ofsted inspection is not something that is done to you. You and your team should feel confident about your practice, skills and the benefits to families supported by your service. By understanding the process, you can become more empowered to actively participate in and influence the outcome of your inspection. You should be confident about facing any challenges or concerns about the process and find the experience positive in other ways by being ready, willing and able to make any improvements required.
Further reading and resources

Framework for the regulation of provision on the Early Years Register (Ofsted 2013)

Are you ready for your inspection? A guide to the inspection of provision on Ofsted's Childcare and Early Years Registers (Ofsted 2012)

Getting it right first time: achieving and maintaining high-quality early years provision (Ofsted 2013)

A Guide to the Ofsted complaints process for early years providers (Pre-school Learning Alliance 2013)

Complaints procedure: raising concerns and making complaints about Ofsted (Ofsted 2013)

Getting to Grips with the EYFS (Pre-school Learning Alliance 2012)

Developing Effective Teamwork (Pre-school Learning Alliance 2010)

Observation, Assessment & Planning in the Early Years (Pre-school Learning Alliance December 2013)

The first six months of the new Ofsted early years inspection regime (Pre-school Learning Alliance webinar) Broadcast June 2013, available at https://www.pre-school.org.uk/whats-new/1244)

Managing your Ofsted inspection.(Pre-school Learning Alliance 3 or 6 hour training session) For more information contact the Alliance’s Training Centre on 01732 363070.

Creating a Learning Environment in the Home (Pre-school Learning Alliance Nov 2013)
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