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New for Cafcass

The new Ofsted now inspects services provided by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), which provides a social work service to children and families who are involved in family proceedings

Funded by government through the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Cafcass was established in 2001 to advise courts about any applications made to them in proceedings involving the welfare of children.

Cafcass safeguards and promotes children's welfare by ensuring they are properly represented in court and by providing information, advice and support for the children and their families. It is the largest single employer of social workers in the country.

What is changing?

No immediate changes to the way Cafcass is inspected are planned, but important on-going developments will be carried forward. For example, inspections will better reflect how Cafcass contributes to the Every Child Matters agenda.

Cafcass's performance will increasingly be graded in ways similar to those used for joint area reviews (JARs) and annual performance assessments (APAs). The views of children and parents about their experiences will be given a higher profile.

The process will include single inspections of Cafcass and joint inspections managed between the new Ofsted and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA) to bring in the perspective of the administration of family courts.

The work of Cafcass impacts about 100,000 children and their families each year. Family proceedings often come at a critical moment in the lives of children, and courts have to take far-reaching decisions about children's lives. Examples of such decisions include:

making a care order -care orders usually place a child away from the family, perhaps with minimal contact. A care order may be made without a view to eventual rehabilitation; instead, it may support the local authority's plan for long-term alternative care or even a transfer of parental responsibility to new parents via adoption

making an order to decide where a child should live or with whom the child should have contact after the separation or divorce of parents

deciding on even more specialist and complex cases such as international abduction and medical/ethical cases concerning children with life-threatening conditions.

The focus of inspection is on the vulnerability of children dealt with by Cafcass. This focus is aimed to improve delivery of Cafcass frontline services and to help improve outcomes for children.

Current inspections of Cafcass

A review of family assistance orders has just been completed and the report will be available soon. Other current inspections are front-line practice in public law care proceedings, reporting in July 2007, and an inspection of the East Midlands Region of Cafcass with a report due in the autumn.

Inspection and overview reports of Cafcass 2002 to 2006 are available on the new Ofsted website.