

John Goldup
Ofsted
By email to: john.goldup@ofsted.gov.uk

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Dear John

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Ofsted's proposals for this year's surveys of social workers and the third sector. It will not surprise you to hear that our objections to these surveys are very similar to those expressed when the surveys were introduced. Members of the Association still have a number of concerns about the purpose of the surveys and how the results will be interpreted. These concerns are laid out below and should be read in the context of a trend towards reducing the burden of inspection, to which these surveys contribute.

Validity

Last year, we expressed concern that the timing of the surveys will dramatically alter the responses received – due to the proximity of budget setting or end of year savings for example. Clearly this year, as local authorities attempt to make frontloaded cuts to their budgets of upto 20% it is difficult to see how surveys of frontline workers and the third sector will produce anything other than negative results, as the respondents are faced with job and contract losses. Questions about commissioning, at a time when local authority budgets are still unclear, and when many voluntary organisations are threatened by their reliance on the Area Based Grant, seems similarly unlikely to elicit fair, considered responses. A question should be added to ascertain whether the team / organisation being consulted has had recent LA budget cuts.

There is always a risk that those with a grudge respond to surveys while those without do not – this seems even more likely in the current financial context. This will not offer any constructive insight into the views of those surveyed into the running of the organisation.

The social worker survey would need to be delivered nationally and held at the same time of year each time to be most useful.

Presentation

It is customary for survey respondents to be given clear instructions as to the purpose of the survey, how the results are to be used and clearly informed that the response is voluntary and these surveys should be no exception. There is clearly a need to remove references to CAA and the contribution of the surveys to that, now defunct, process. Similarly there will need to be consideration of the need to re-phrase questions about Children's Trusts and Children and Young People Plans, given the regulatory changes to this area.

Phrasing will need to take into account areas where Children's Trusts arrangements continue to exist and partners produce a plan, and areas where other arrangements are in place.

There is no opportunity for participants to express how well they do their job, or the effect that they believe they have on outcomes for children and young people – this would give some balance to questions about caseloads and staffing levels.

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Wording and questions

A number for the questions and sections are vaguely worded and it is hard to see how they will elicit responses that are helpful to local authorities in improving or Ofsted in forming hypotheses, for example questions about “effective systems”, particularly IT systems, appear to be too broad to elicit useful answers that will help local authorities to respond to staff concerns, and it would be difficult to answer negatively to whether children are “one of” the main beneficiary groups.

We have some concerns about the “leading” nature of some of the questions, including the use of words like “sufficient” and “effective” suggest that there is a correct level of caseloads or numbers of staff, rather than those appropriate to the demand and resources available (Questions 6a, 7 & 8). These questions appear to us to be more likely to elicit responses related to fairness or to the personal circumstances and experiences of the respondent – if this is the answer expected, the wording of the questions should reflect this unambiguously.

The use of the word “risk” in Part 4 is ambiguous in the context – does this refer to risks to the worker, or the risks inherent in child protection, or both?

The social worker questionnaire should seek views about other partner agencies’ responsiveness rather than just the LA; the most effective safeguarding is dependent upon good partnership timeliness of input.

We are also concerned at the wording of question one in the survey of the third sector – how would any one organisation know whether there is an effective partnership across the whole third sector in the local area? In the Partnership working section, only a small number of organisations are in the position of third sector network representative on Strategic Boards, but they can have a role in representing others and cascading information; current questions seem to assume this is entirely a LA responsibility. It may be better to send the questionnaire to a lead third Sector organisation to canvas views as appropriate and complete.

The third sector survey appears to focus mainly on safeguarding but this is not clear in the wording of the questions – it may add clarity for respondents to make this explicit.

I hope that you find these comments helpful. I would be willing, as always, to discuss these concerns with you in more detail should that be required.

Yours sincerely

Eleanor Schooling
Chair of ADCS Standards, Performance & Inspection Policy Committee

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