At the hearing on the 8th November a number of points were raised in relation to GIRFEC and the significant impact this was having on practice.

Our findings from inspection would clearly support this view in terms of the direction of travel and informing how services operated. However we have also found issues that need to be addressed in relation to assessment and care planning processes. These need to be right if targeted and purposeful intervention is made to improve the outcomes for these young people. As part of that overall assessment and plan, sufficient attention needs to be paid to a child’s education and learning.

We thought that it was important to submit additional evidence to the committee to aid understanding of some of the issues in practice in implementing GIRFEC. It is not possible to improve a young person’s educational attainment in isolation from the rest of their lives and you are much more likely to be able to achieve this with a good, rounded understanding of that child’s needs and a clear plan to direct any work. As outlined below, there is room for improvements in all these processes, and this includes sufficient attention to educational attainment.

In the performance inspections of social work services undertaken between 2005 and 2009 we found that two thirds of assessments were of a good or better quality but there was room for improvement in the remainder. It was not always apparent that those making the assessments had gathered and analysed all available and relevant information to establish the child’s needs and risks. Just less than one in ten failed to meet even a basic acceptable standard. Overall, assessments of the needs of looked after children were of better quality than those of young people leaving care or children with disabilities. We found that practice was better where services had rigorous quality assurance measures in place.

Informed by good assessments, rigorous care planning is essential. Although our findings did not necessarily focus directly on educational attainment we read these files within the context of trying to understand how services were working together to improve the young person’s life chances:

- Most files we read contained a care plan for the young person, but one in five did not.

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1 We read over 1200 children and families files
• Three quarters of plans mostly addressed the child’s assessed needs and risks but one in four only partially addressed them or failed to do so at all
• Almost all care plans for children looked after away from home were regularly reviewed (92%)
• Almost 60% of care plans were not clear enough about the timescales for planned actions
• Few care plans took a long term view of the needs of the child and it was rare to find a plan that linked actions to anticipated outcomes.

Weaknesses in assessment and in joint planning to meet the needs of individual children were also identified as areas requiring development nationally in the review of the findings of the first programme of joint inspections of services to protect children [How well do we protect Scotland’s children? 2005-2009]. The assessment of risks and needs of vulnerable children and families was evaluated as weak or unsatisfactory in almost half of the 30 areas inspected. No areas were evaluated as higher than good. The effectiveness of planning to meet the needs of vulnerable children was evaluated as good or better in less than one half of the areas and weak or unsatisfactory in nearly a third.

More than two thirds of the way through the second programme of joint inspections of services to protect children, we are finding some improvement in both assessment and planning for vulnerable children but there is still considerable work to be done to improve the quality of assessment and plans and the effectiveness of planning. This is also being echoed in the findings of more recent inspections of social work services.

Our work found that councils and their partners were at different stages of implementing the integrated assessment framework which is central to the GIRFEC approach. Some had made insufficient progress. Data sharing was still problematic in some areas.

In some areas, there has been very helpful attention to raising the awareness of staff at all levels across services about their responsibilities in respect of vulnerable children, including looked after children and the contribution they can make to developing and implementing high quality care plans to meet children’s needs. In some areas, a sound understanding of how GIRFEC principles should be applied in their day to day work is helping staff change the way they work to be more effective in planning jointly for children. In some areas, new paperwork has become the predominant focus and has prevented the necessary culture change taking place. In some areas, new processes have been introduced without sufficient training and support for staff to ensure staff understand and can use them well. An example is the introduction of a format for chronologies across all services without providing guidance, training and support in when and how to use them and without effective quality assurance systems and robust self-evaluation to ensure their use is improving assessment and planning.
Streamlining the various planning systems for looked after children who may also be subject to child protection processes and require co-ordinated support plans is proving challenging for services in a number of areas. Each system may involve different staff with a contribution to make, there are different expectations and requirements for each planning mechanism, including legal requirements and there may be different timescales involved. Translating a list of agreed actions which may be needed to keep a child safe in the immediate term into an outcome-focussed plan to meet the longer-term needs of individual children is a complex and time-consuming task involving a level of skill and competence which staff need support to develop. Both inspection of social work services and joint inspections of services to protect children have identified the critical importance of chairs of meetings being highly effective and having sufficient authority to ensure plans are actions are carried out timeously, necessary resources are made available and staff across services are held accountable for progressing agreed plans to secure improvement in children’s lives.

The Care Inspectorate clearly has a role as part of a whole system approach to ensuring effective monitoring and quality assurance of these important processes.

Improvements in these core processes would impact on better outcomes for children and young people across the spectrum of their needs, including improving educational attainments.

Care Inspectorate
18 November 2011