

15 December 2010

Mr Pete Dwyer
Director of Learning, Culture & Children's Services
City of York Council
Mill House
North Street
York
YO1 6JD

Dear Mr Dwyer

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within the City of York children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in the City of York Council which was conducted on 16 and 17 November 2010. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to the annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later next year. I would like to thank all of the staff we met for their assistance in undertaking this inspection.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising any child abuse and neglect. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including: electronic case records; supervision files and notes; observation of social workers and senior practitioners undertaking referral and assessment duties; and other information provided by staff and managers. Inspectors also spoke to a range of staff including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

The inspection identified areas of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in April 2010 are being addressed through the council's comprehensive action plan. The plan identified areas of policy and practice that will take time to become embedded.

From the evidence gathered, the following features of the service were identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">There are robust early intervention strategies and services in place. This has resulted in a significant reduction, so far this year, in the number of referrals



to children's services and a more effective and responsive use of services.

- A suitably experienced social worker in the children with disabilities team processes new referrals and undertakes assessments. This ensures that the specific disability needs of children are given due weight and consideration. The service has additional and specific thresholds to support families and works closely with partner agencies to provide effective early intervention services such as short breaks.

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- The council has an appropriate action plan to address the findings from the last unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements undertaken in April 2010. This has involved restructuring of services and further development of quality assurance processes.
- Thresholds for referrals are comprehensive and have been agreed on a multi-agency basis. Expected outcomes are clearly defined and these are used effectively by professionals in partner agencies to ensure appropriate services are provided to children and young people.
- There has been a significant increase in the use of common assessment framework (CAF) in the last 12 months and this is now an effective part of the council's early intervention strategy.
- Staff in the referral and assessment team are appropriately qualified and experienced.
- Senior managers have taken steps to improve the quality of supervision, with a particular focus on practice, professional challenge and caseload oversight.
- Initial assessments are detailed, clear and analytical identifying risk and protective factors. In the majority of cases the views and feelings of children and young people are taken into account and appropriately reflected in the assessments.
- The experiences and views of children and parents on services provided are routinely collated and analysed. This has directly influenced practice. Some parents had previously stated to the council that they did not think that initial assessments fully reflected personal family circumstances. As a result the council now routinely sends out a letter with assessments informing parents of the status of the initial assessment and what can be expected to be included.
- Senior managers have developed and implemented a range of quality assurance and monitoring activities which have led to improvements in practice.

- The council has been proactive in learning from serious case review findings. A multi-agency thematic review and training programme has been commissioned, to develop and inform multi-agency practice. There is also a good range of training opportunities for staff both in-house and from the City of York Safeguarding Children Board.
- The emergency duty team provides effective duty arrangements with links to daytime services.

Areas for development

- Management of the referral and assessment service is not consistent in ensuring the quality of assessment. For example, not all decisions are signed off by a manager and the duplication of information across sibling groups needs more careful monitoring.
- Staff caseloads including those of senior practitioners with management responsibilities are variable, and some are too high. This effects the timely completion of assessments.

Any areas for development identified above will be specifically considered in any future inspection of services to safeguard children within your area.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Millns
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Kersten England, Chief Executive, City of York Council
Roger Thompson, Chair of City of York Safeguarding Children Board
Carol Runciman, Lead Member for Children's Services, City of York Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education