

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 020-7421-6666
Direct F 020-7421-6746
sue.leaver@ofsted.gov.uk



29 July 2009

Ms Cynthia Welbourn
Corporate Director Children and Young People's Service
North Yorkshire County Council
County Hall
Northallerton
North Yorkshire DL7 8AE

Dear Ms Welbourn

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within North Yorkshire County Council children's services

This letter contains the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in North Yorkshire County Council which was conducted on 30 June and 1 July 2009. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified areas for priority action and a number of areas for development.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of 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. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

From the evidence gathered, the inspection identified a number of areas where the contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- All new contacts requesting support and advice are dealt with by the council's Customer Services Centre. Referrals that require a social care response are appropriately forwarded onto the children's social care teams in a timely manner.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

- The quality and recording of work undertaken in the children’s social care teams, including initial assessments, core assessments and Section 47 enquiries are, in most cases, satisfactory and in some cases good.
- The out-of-hours service works effectively, responds in a timely manner and cases are appropriately passed on to the social work teams or the Customer Services Centre.
- The contribution of service users is well-documented. Children are always seen as part of assessments, their views are recorded and account is taken of their age. Copies of the assessments are routinely sent to the parents and, where appropriate, to the child.
- It was evident from all of the assessments looked at, and staff interviewed, that the children’s social care staff have access to good procedures published by North Yorkshire Local Safeguarding Children Board procedures and a locally developed vulnerability checklist supports them to carry out their work.

From the evidence gathered, the following strengths and areas for development were also identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The approach to the delivery of the common assessment framework is impressive with good quality family-focused assessments. Thresholds, based on cases sampled, are clear and communicated to other agencies and service users. There is evidence of learning, development and improvements in the work being carried out across the range of agencies. ▪ In the three social care teams visited, there was committed, knowledgeable and skilled staff who reported good access to support and quality training that met their needs. ▪ Management of staff is effective, with regular supervision and good recording on case files. Staff reported that they felt well supported. ▪ Multi-agency information sharing and partnership working is good and was well evidenced in all of the assessments seen. ▪ Front-line managers are visible, available and supportive to staff which is valued. This assists in appropriate advice and timely decision-making. ▪ Strategy meetings are well used to inform planning, focusing on outcomes for the child. They are well attended and have good contributions from other agencies, in addition to children’s social care and the police. ▪ Auditing of files by managers is good and clear. Practice-based issues are identified and used to further improve services.

- The North Yorkshire Safeguarding Children Board effectively disseminates learning and research from serious case reviews including holding multi-agency training events which are reported to be well attended.
- Additional resources, including front-line staff, managers and administrative support, have been provided to reduce the impact on the quality of services created by the difficulties arising from technical problems with current IT and information systems.

Areas for development

- There is inconsistent performance of the completion of initial and core assessments within national timescales across the county. There were delays evident in the completion of assessments within all of the social work teams visited. North Yorkshire performance is poorer than similar authorities and the national average. Delays were also seen in the completion of some Section 47 enquiries. This could potentially result in some children and young people not receiving services or not being safeguarded effectively in a timely manner.
- There is a low percentage of core assessments completed compared to the national picture. The council was unable to provide an explanation and further work needs to be undertaken by the council in order for them to understand why this is occurring and to assure themselves that all children and young people are being appropriately assessed and receiving services. The council is aware of the issue and has prioritised it for improvement in its Children and Young People's Plan and Local Area Agreement targets.
- The council has identified significant problems of compatibility of the ICS system and the Children's Social Care electronic database already in place. In addition, during the inspection, there was an IT system failure and this had a significant impact on the work of front-line staff and managers in one of the teams visited, with a lack of access to the telephone system and computer records in at least two locations. These combined difficulties were having an impact on the morale of front-line staff and managers, on access to information on individual cases and on the ability of managers to benchmark performance, including access to management information.
- Within the Customer Services Team, there were gaps in the recording of information for contacts, which either did not proceed to referrals or were signposted to the common assessment framework. This included the lack of a tracking and audit trail and no monitoring of the ethnicity of under 18 year olds in the LAGAN system used by the Contact Centre (though ethnicity is recorded in the ICS system). North Yorkshire responded immediately when these matters were brought to their attention during the inspection and report that they have introduced systems which will record ethnicity in LAGAN.

This visit has identified the following areas for priority action:

Areas for priority action

- Two cases were brought to the attention of the authority where child protection issues were identified by the inspectors. In both cases, children had been subject, or claimed to have been subject, to an assault by an adult in their household. The response to the cases had not followed local child protection procedures, potentially leaving the children at risk of harm. Once made aware, the authority immediately took appropriate action.
- In one of the teams visited there were 50 unallocated referrals, some dating back to March/April 2009, which were awaiting allocation for an initial assessment. All of these cases had been risk assessed and were subject to regular review by managers. There were also 25 cases which had been allocated for workers to carry out initial assessments which had not been completed. Some of these cases had been with the team for some months and, although allocated to a named worker, had not been worked on. In another team, there were 15 cases with initial assessments completed, which were now unallocated due to staffing issues within that team. As a result there is the potential for some children and young people not to receive appropriate services or being safeguarded effectively in a timely manner.

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

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: John Marsden, Chief Executive, North Yorkshire County Council
Cynthia Welbourn, Chair of North Yorkshire Local Safeguarding Children Board
Caroline Patmore, Lead member for Children's Services, North Yorkshire County Council
John Browning, Department for Children, Schools and Families