

28 July 2010

Mr P Moffat
Corporate Director for Children's Services
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
NE61 2EF

Dear Mr Moffat

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Northumberland 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 Northumberland County Council which was conducted on 29 and 30 June 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 in the 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 satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

Strengths

- A comprehensive performance management framework is in place and is being effectively utilised by local managers to drive continuous improvement in safeguarding practice and processes.
- Multi-agency working is embedded in the county including across the national border between England and Scotland with strong evidence of good



information exchange, protocol sharing and agreed thresholds for intervention.

- County-wide consistency is being maintained in key elements of service including thresholds and procedural compliance in parallel with appropriate scope for local responses to the needs of children and young people.
- Managers of local contact, referral and assessment teams work well together to deliver reliable safeguarding services, they are open to learning from each other and provide an appropriate level of challenge in order to ensure a clear focus is maintained on the needs of children and young people.

Satisfactory practice

- Contact, referral and duty arrangements are effective. Joint accountabilities are clear and based on widespread awareness of safeguarding priorities.
- All work is suitably allocated according to skill and experience with prompt action to respond to the needs of vulnerable children and young people. Managers provide effective oversight and direction.
- The social care workforce in contact, referral and assessment teams, and emergency duty is stable, experienced and well supported by managers. Staff receive regular supervision and have good access to training and personal development opportunities.
- Initial assessments are timely and produced to a consistent standard.
- The quality and timeliness of core assessments has markedly improved following concerted management action to raise the county-wide performance level.
- Child protection investigations are timely, well considered and lead to effective planning for the safeguarding of children and young people.
- Emergency duty arrangements are firmly in place and ensure that urgent action is taken outside normal working hours to safeguard children and young people. There is appropriate information sharing between emergency duty team members and staff in the contact, referral and assessment teams.
- Social worker visiting frequency is regular and children and young people are routinely seen alone as part of assessments and subsequent planning.
- Clear and well established processes are in place to ensure that learning from serious case reviews is widely disseminated and used to promote good safeguarding practice.
- Administrative support to duty functions is highly professional and ensures that

case records are consistently well organised and maintained.

Areas for development

- Case records do not sufficiently reflect work that is being undertaken by social workers to ensure that issues of diversity, equality and identity are fully addressed. Similarly, case records do not provide enough information on the wishes and feelings of the children and young people who are regularly seen in the course of assessments.
- Working agreements with parents following social care interventions are not always written in a way that facilitates a partnership and not always adapted to ensure they can fully comprehend what is required of them as part of a plan.

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

Yours sincerely

Martin Ayres
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Mr S Stewart, Chief Executive, Northumberland County Council
Mrs A Walton, Chair of Northumberland Safeguarding Children Board
Lesley Rickerby, Lead Member for Children's Services, Northumberland County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education