

23 December 2010

Mr John Collings
Executive Director of Children's Services
Newcastle upon Tyne City Council
Civic Centre
Newcastle upon Tyne
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Dear Mr Collings

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Newcastle upon Tyne City 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 Newcastle upon Tyne City Council which was conducted on 24 and 25 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 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 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 January 2010 have been considered during this inspection. The local authority developed an action plan and significant progress has been made in two of the three areas identified. The third area for development relating to the consistent quality of assessments continues to be addressed in the action plan, but the measures taken are yet to have sufficient impact.



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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is strong multi-agency working to protect children identified to be at risk of harm. Participation in strategy discussions is given a high priority and excellent attendance across a range of agencies is very effective in enhancing the quality of investigations and the recording of strategy meetings is of a high standard. ▪ Inter-agency working is enhanced through other professionals shadowing the duty service and the regular on site availability of professionals from a range of agencies. This is supported through robust and regular audits by the Newcastle Safeguarding Children Board and as a result thresholds for children's social care are increasingly well understood and appropriately applied.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The initial response duty team provides prompt access to a qualified social worker for the public and professionals. The effective screening of referrals has significantly reduced the pressure on teams undertaking assessments. ▪ There is a positive commitment at all levels of management to improve the quality of work with children and families through routine case file auditing and the findings are collated and reported on a quarterly basis. This has yet to have a consistent impact to improve all areas of practice. ▪ Managers have access to good quality and timely management information. The on-site service manager for the initial response teams makes good use of the management information to monitor the quality and throughput of work and drive improvement of the service across teams. ▪ The majority of assessments are undertaken in a timely manner. There has been a further improvement in the timeliness of initial assessments which remains significantly above the national average, and a marked improvement in the completion timescales of core assessments to take them above the average. ▪ Joint working with the police enables multi-agency screening of concerns about children in families experiencing domestic violence. The daily meetings between the police and children's services ensure that all incidents are risk assessed and that, where appropriate, referrals are made promptly to children's services. ▪ Managers are accessible and staff feel well supported in their work. Social

workers, have good access to training.

- Staff receive regular supervision although records are not always signed and do not evidence reflective supervision.
- All child protection enquiries are undertaken by suitably experienced and qualified social workers including those involving children with disabilities. Where child protection concerns are identified timely and thorough Section 47 investigations are carried out jointly with the police.
- Most social workers report they have manageable caseloads, which enables work to be allocated in a timely manner leaving no cases unallocated.
- There is effective liaison with the emergency duty team, which acts appropriately to safeguard children outside of normal working hours.
- The council has invested in additional training and resources to support holistic assessments of the needs of children in asylum-seeking families and to ensure they receive appropriate funding. Effective management oversight has ensured this area for development at the last inspection has been acted upon.
- Record keeping is generally clear and up-to-date, and good quality recording was seen in some cases.
- Ethnicity, religion and culture are consistently identified and in some cases are used well to inform assessments. Social workers have good access to interpreters.

Areas for development

- In some cases there is insufficient evidence of management oversight in the closure of assessments, some of which are authorised as completed without the child or young person being seen by a social worker. The council has recognised that the needs of these children and young people had not been properly assessed and took prompt action to do so.
- While inspectors have seen good quality initial and core assessments, overall the quality is variable with chronologies not started on all new cases and information on previous involvement not consistently taken into account. This was an area for development from the last inspection and the council has recognised the need for further improvement.
- Assessments seen do not routinely reflect the views and wishes of children and it is not always evident from the recording if children are seen alone. Individual initial and core assessments are not always completed for each child in a family in cases where this would be appropriate.
- While there has been good progress in supporting professionals to use the common assessment framework (CAF) where the duty team decides a referral

does not reach the threshold for children's social care the council recognises that the uptake and quality of CAFs generally remains inconsistent and is investing in new arrangements to monitor and support agency involvement.

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

Yours sincerely

Ralph Trevelyan-Butler
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Barry Rowland, Chief Executive, Newcastle upon Tyne City Council
Edwina Harrison, Chair of Newcastle Safeguarding Children Board
Nick Cott, Lead Member for Children's Services, Newcastle upon Tyne City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education