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Mr Darren Shaw
Operational Director Cafcass North
Cafcass
38 Saddler Street
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Dear Mr Shaw

Inspection of Cafcass in N1 – North and South of Tyne

This letter summarises the findings of the recent inspection of Cafcass in North and South of Tyne which was conducted on 17 and 18 November 2010. The inspection was carried out under sections 143–145 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. 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 progress that is being made against the Cafcass Transformation Plan through aspects of the existing published framework for the inspection of Cafcass, focusing on aspects of:

- ambition and prioritisation
- performance management
- safeguarding
- service responsiveness.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including: case records; observation of family court advisers undertaking duty arrangements; and other information provided by stakeholders, staff and managers. Inspectors also spoke to a range of staff including managers, family court advisers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

Overall progress
Judgement: Good progress

The quality and effectiveness of local implementation and business planning

- The Head of Service and the newly appointed management team have an accurate understanding of the strengths and challenges of the service area. The area business plan appropriately prioritises the key areas for effective delivery and improvement of services to children and families. The plan is monitored and reviewed on regular basis through service improvement meetings, chaired by the Operational Director (North). This ensures accountability at a senior level and effective links to national priorities.
- Managers use performance information well to monitor and improve the effectiveness of service delivery. The regular audits undertaken by the quality improvement team demonstrate a positive impact on improving practice. In addition, a recently commissioned management information report, regarding cases which had not met court filing dates, showed that a high number of cases missed the date by a few days. As a result, improved systems have been implemented to ensure that deadlines are more consistently met.
- During the two months prior to the inspection, the service area had implemented significant changes in practice to eradicate a long-standing backlog of work and to ensure that new work was allocated swiftly. While these aims had been achieved, the combination of a large amount of residual work at the same time as needing to embrace a new system has resulted in some staff reporting that they feel unable to manage the increase in their workloads.
- Some quality assurance processes, such as supervision and management oversight of reports are not sufficiently rigorous. As a result, the quality of reports presented to court is too variable.
- Where the need to improve practice has been identified, effective processes are in place to monitor and support staff to achieve required levels of performance.

Reducing delays and unallocated cases

- The local judiciary confirms that relationships between the courts and the service are improving from a low base. Effective joint working arrangements, groups such as the Public Law Steering Group and regular meetings with the judiciary are improving multi-agency working to tackle avoidable delay in service provision to children and families.
- The longstanding backlog of work has been eradicated in the service area. All cases are quickly allocated to a suitably qualified practitioner and the key performance indicators for allocating cases are met.
- New arrangements are in place to deal more effectively with demand and tackle delay. These new arrangements ensure early intervention in cases, including the timely provision of safeguarding information for the court and improved working practices to meet the requirements of the Public Law Outline. Where more detailed assessment is required, cases transfer efficiently to a family court advisor in the long-term team at specified points in the court process. The system is currently supported through the use of additional temporary staff who will leave Cafcass in January 2011. Plans are in place to ensure the sustainability of the system when this resource ends.
- For the period up until the end of October 2010 the progress towards meeting the KPI target in filing times of reports set by courts has been below that of comparator areas. However, the data about throughput of work are artificially high because the data include many cases that had been on a waiting list for a significant period of time. More recent unpublished data provided by Cafcass show a significant improvement in the time taken to prepare reports. For example, the average filing time for private law reports is currently 13 weeks compared to a high of 28 weeks in April 2010.

Compliance with statutory requirements in the management of safeguarding practice and the assessment of risk

- The impact of relationships with local authorities is too variable. In some cases, referrals for services are not made within agreed local thresholds or do not offer sufficient information to progress the case. As a result, in some cases unnecessary referrals are made. In others, delays occur when further clarification is needed by the local authority before action

can be taken.

- Historical problems in obtaining a full range of information from the police have resulted in the service being unable to offer a comprehensive safeguarding assessment to the court within agreed timescales. A new protocol has been agreed with the police to tackle this problem but it has yet to be implemented.
- In almost all cases seen by inspectors, the needs of the child or young person were the prime focus for the practice.
- Although the majority of safeguarding practice seen by inspectors was satisfactory or better and no child was left at risk, significant variation in the quality of assessments was evident between the two sites which results in a differential service to children.
- Effective systems are in place for screening new cases for domestic abuse. However, the responsibility of Cafcass to safeguard children in private law cases where domestic abuse is an issue is not fully understood by all practitioners.
- 'Wishes and Feeling' reports produced by family support workers are good and effectively allow children to voice their concerns and influence plans for their future. These reports are appreciated by the courts in helping them make considered decisions.

Any areas of inadequate performance will be specifically considered in any future inspection of Cafcass services in your area.

Yours sincerely



Karen McKeown

Her Majesty's Inspector