

6 January 2010

Mr Ian Curryer
Corporate Director Children's Services
Nottingham City Council
The Sandfield Centre
Sandfield Road
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Dear Mr Curryer

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Nottingham City 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 Nottingham City Council which was conducted on 1 and 2 December 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.

The inspection identified no 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:

- In most cases relevant partners are effectively involved at the time of response to referrals and informed of intervention with children and families.



- Children are routinely seen by social workers during initial assessments and are seen alone. The views of children and their families are taken into account and their well-being is properly assessed; written assessments were seen to have been shared with families in the majority of case files read by inspectors.
- Interpreter services are accessible to support assessments and communication in a large variety of languages spoken by local children and families.
- The Common Assessment Framework is increasingly used by all agencies working with children to identify appropriate services to support children and families and inform assessment by the council's children's services.
- The emergency duty team delivers effective out of hours intervention, providing relevant information to be followed up in normal office hours.
- Casework supervision is recorded regularly on files and enables social workers to review actions and recommendations and increase their learning.
- Regular performance reporting identifies some strengths and weaknesses of the service and is being developed to improve management information about compliance with initial assessment timescales.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A strong sense of team work among staff in duty teams and good formal and informal support from managers result in conscientious, hard working and enthusiastic duty teams, committed to providing a good service and further improvement. ▪ First line managers in duty teams regularly provide reflective and challenging supervision that is valued by social workers. ▪ Newly qualified workers and those undertaking training are given 'protected caseloads' and are effectively mentored by managers and experienced colleagues. ▪ The new senior management team has taken action to develop the workforce, for example by significantly reducing vacancy levels and successfully recruiting permanent social workers. ▪ Co-working between specialist staff in the children with disabilities team is effective, resulting in holistic assessments which identify good child-focused

plans.

Areas for development

- In a number of cases seen by inspectors, it was not evident from the case records that action had been taken to safeguard children from risk of harm after referral, or when initial assessments had identified chronic situations or risk of emotional abuse. The issues were addressed and clarified promptly by managers.
- The application of definitions and criteria varies between different teams in relation to what constitutes a contact and referral, and when to undertake an initial assessment, resulting in inconsistent responses by the different teams.
- The quality and potential effectiveness of initial assessments vary between the duty teams. Risk and protective factors are well analysed in some cases but poorly evaluated in others. Full background checks and previous history are not always taken into account.
- Duty teams in different locations do not consistently record the religion, ethnic origin and cultural needs of service users. Cultural needs are not consistently taken into account in initial assessments.
- Managerial decisions and the reasons for a course of action are not consistently recorded on case records.
- Initiating child protection (Section 47) strategy discussions in some cases is inhibited by perceived limitations in police resources. In these cases, such a discussion did not take place or the council proceeds as a single agency when decisions about risk should more appropriately be shared.
- Information referred by some partner agencies about incidents of domestic abuse is of poor quality providing insufficient information to evaluate risk to children.
- With the exception of the children with disabilities team, service user feedback is not taken into account in helping to shape the contact referral and assessment service.
- One duty team, which receives numerous visitors, is located in a building that has no access for disabled persons.
- Two separate electronic systems are used for all case recording, requiring continual cross-referencing. This wastes time and hinders a clear audit trail of actions on cases.

Yours sincerely



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Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Jane Todd, Chief Executive, Nottingham City Council
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