

2 March 2011

Mr Anthony May
Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services
County Hall
Nottinghamshire County Council
West Bridgford
Nottingham
NG2 7QP

Dear Mr May

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Nottinghamshire County Council 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 Nottinghamshire County Council which was conducted on 8 and 9 February 2011. 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 priority action identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in October 2009 and the areas for improvement relevant to this front line service, identified in the report of the safeguarding and looked after children inspection published in May 2010, have been addressed.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The strategic and political leadership of the council has taken swift action since the safeguarding and looked after children inspection to tackle the priority areas for action and areas for development. Following a rigorous review of

performance and service provision, considerable additional resources have been committed to front line services. Priorities have been tackled through the implementation of a robust improvement plan. Staff at all levels are actively implementing the service improvement plan which is being effectively overseen by an independently chaired multi-agency board. Progress has been rapid and child protection services have been strengthened.

- The arrangements for auditing the quality of the front line service responses by senior and operational managers are rigorous and strategic oversight now provides effective challenge. Robust data analysis and reporting is being used effectively at all levels of the service to measure performance and to drive improvement.

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- The council's strategy and initiatives for the recruitment and retention of staff have resulted in a suitably qualified and experienced workforce.
- Child protection investigations are undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced social workers. Action needed to ensure the safety of children and young people is identified and implemented promptly.
- The recently introduced 'Pathway to Provision' document clearly sets out the threshold for access to the child protection service. This has been disseminated across the partnership and provides a sound basis for the delivery of services.
- The quality of referral information provided by agencies has improved and the reorganisation of the service has ensured that referrers have the opportunity to discuss their concerns with a qualified social worker.
- The use of the common assessment framework by partner agencies has increased significantly since the safeguarding and looked after children inspection, appropriately identifying need and providing a sound basis for access to a range of early intervention provision.
- The timeliness of initial assessments has improved significantly and is now in line with comparators. There are examples of good quality assessments that result in interventions which safely reduce the risk for children. Case decisions are clearly recorded by managers and further actions required are identified and recorded.
- Children are routinely seen and seen alone. Their views and those of their family members are sought, considered and recorded as part of the assessment. Assessments examined by inspectors are sensitive to the diverse needs of individual children and their families.
- Lessons learned from serious case reviews have improved the delivery of services for children with disability. The service has been reorganised so that

referrers have access to dedicated specialist duty social workers, who are well trained to respond to risk.

- The emergency duty arrangements ensure continuity of provision between the out-of-hours service and the contact and referral teams.
- The council demonstrates a strong commitment to newly qualified and trainee social workers, who report that they receive good support from their managers and guidance from experienced social workers.
- Social workers, who spoke with inspectors, report ready access to good quality training that is relevant to their professional development needs.

Areas for development

- Good progress has been made on the previous area for priority action to improve the timeliness of core assessments, from a low base, but performance remains below that of comparator authorities. The quality of core assessments, whilst improving, is not consistently robust. Risk and protective factors are not always explicit and the records do not always reflect the reasons why decisions were made.
- Mental health services are not consistently engaged in the completion of core assessments where there are adult mental health issues.
- The arrangements for the supervision of social workers have improved. Most social workers report that they receive good support from their manager. Managers are increasingly challenging poor practice but this is not yet consistent. Some staff report that the reorganisation of the service has impacted negatively on the regularity of supervision and that when their manager is absent, the cover arrangements are not being effectively used.
- The backlog of unallocated work has been tackled and, although some social worker caseloads remain high, this situation is being monitored rigorously and has improved over time. Team managers have line management responsibility for too many staff. This is acknowledged by senior managers and is being tackled through the service improvement plan.
- Agencies do not always respond promptly to social workers requests for information. This negatively impacts on the quality and timeliness of assessments.
- Assessments completed by partner agencies as part of the common assessment framework process are not being used consistently to inform contact, referral and assessment decisions.

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

Yours sincerely

Gary Lamb
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Mick Burrows, Chief Executive, Nottinghamshire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families