

18 November 2010

Mr Paul Burnett  
Director for Children and Young People  
Northamptonshire County Council  
County Hall  
George Row  
Northampton  
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Dear Mr Burnett

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Northamptonshire 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 Northamptonshire County Council which was conducted on 20 and 21 October 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 practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

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

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

- Procedures have been reviewed and updated to comply with statutory requirements and are available and accessible to staff.
- Child protection work is given high priority. In almost all cases seen by inspectors there was a timely response to those children identified as in need



of protection.

- Strategy discussions are usually held where appropriate. They involve the key agencies and clearly identify the action to be taken. Section 47 enquiries are promptly undertaken in conjunction with the police where necessary.
- Agencies work effectively in partnership to protect children through their contribution to assessments or by referring their concerns about children in a timely way.
- Most initial and core assessments seen are at least adequate, and some are good. They contain key information including previous history, appropriate analysis and summary and lead to provision of services to meet the identified needs of the child.
- Children are seen and their views are sought to inform their assessments.
- Out-of-hours provision operates effectively with the referral and assessment teams in managing risk of harm to children.
- Where case records are up-to-date they are of satisfactory quality.
- Managers have access to a good range of helpful performance management information to support them in their work.
- Social workers and managers demonstrate some awareness of the lessons learned from local serious case reviews, for example in relation to the management of hospital social workers and the undertaking of repeated initial assessments.
- A number of staff members are being supported to complete social work qualifications and post qualifying awards.
- Senior managers are aware of the areas for development and are taking action to address them. A programme for the re-alignment of resources in social care teams has been developed and was being implemented at the time of the inspection. Clear timescales are in place for future developments such as the establishment of a contact centre.
- Referral and assessment team social workers and staff spoken to by inspectors are dedicated and committed to achieving good outcomes for children and young people.

#### **Areas for development**

- Some case files examined by inspectors demonstrate ineffective management oversight of children in need cases at the point of referral, with a lack of

effective risk assessment or prompt follow up action.

- Management and supervision arrangements during the transition period to new teams have not been consistently robust, resulting in delays in work being progressed in a number of cases.
- There have been delays in addressing vacancies in staff teams, with significant capacity issues in one team visited by inspectors. This, together with increasing referral rates, has resulted in considerable workload pressures with delays in starting assessments and in progressing and recording work undertaken. In one case examined by inspectors there were unacceptable delays in assessing risk of potential harm to children and in ensuring that appropriate follow up action was taken. This was acknowledged by the council who took immediate action to address the situation.
- Workload pressures are impacting on the opportunities for staff to take up training and on the ability of newly qualified social workers to benefit from support arrangements such as protected or reduced caseloads.
- While basic information about children and their families is usually recorded there is limited evidence of attention to equality and diversity in the assessments and case records seen by inspectors.
- Additional resources have recently been allocated to improve the effectiveness of the common assessment framework (CAF) in assessing and addressing children's needs at an earlier stage. While increasing numbers of CAFs are being completed, the impact of this is not yet evident.
- Systems for senior management oversight of referral and assessment work, including audit of cases, do not demonstrate impact on improvements to practice.

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

Yours sincerely

**Joan Dennis**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Paul Blantern, Chief Executive, Northamptonshire County Council  
Janet Galley, Chair of Northamptonshire Safeguarding Children Board  
Andrew Grant, Lead Member for Children's Services, Northamptonshire County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education