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Mr Paul Burnett  
Director for Children and Young People  
Northamptonshire County Council  
County Hall  
George Row  
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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 contains 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 18 and 19 August 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, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but some areas for development, which are detailed below.

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:

- Action needed to ensure the safety of children referred to the service is identified and implemented promptly.



- Practice and procedures in relation to child protection comply with statutory requirements.
- Initial assessments are allocated in a timely way; there was no unallocated work within the duty and assessment service at the time of the inspection.
- Work requiring a child protection response is allocated appropriately to qualified, and mostly experienced, social workers.
- Communication and liaison with partner agencies on individual cases contribute effectively to the assessment of safeguarding of children and young people.
- The cultural and religious needs of children and families from minority ethnic backgrounds are appropriately identified and considered within assessments.
- From the work seen by inspectors, the out-of-hours service takes appropriate action to safeguard children and communicates effectively with daytime services.

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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Child-centred work with a clear focus on the protection of children is carried out well. Children are appropriately involved in their assessments and their wishes and feelings are identified and recorded.</li> <li>▪ Child protection enquiries are thorough with a sustained focus on the needs of the child across the range of Every Child Matters outcomes.</li> <li>▪ Initial assessments are consistently of satisfactory quality or better and completed in a timely manner.</li> <li>▪ Workers reported that they have good support, guidance and direction from their managers. Regular supervision takes place, the records of which are clear, detailed and purposeful.</li> <li>▪ Continuous professional development is prioritised with good access to training, with a large number of staff being trained in Achieving Best Evidence.</li> <li>▪ Inspectors saw good learning from a serious case review through the development and use of a working tool to support assessment and monitoring of cases where neglect is a key feature.</li> <li>▪ Operational and senior managers focus effectively on performance management, and particularly the quality of the service. For example, a recently developed audit programme measures the quality of assessments and interventions as well as compliance with indicators and targets.</li> </ul>

### Areas for development

- Core assessments and reports to child protection conferences lack the necessary rigour and consistency in analysis of strengths and areas for change.
- While workforce capacity is sufficient overall to meet demand, the distribution of social work resources is inconsistent between referral teams. This results in variations in workload and morale across teams.
- The Common Assessment Framework and Team Around the Child approach are insufficiently owned by partner agencies. Limited progress in developing arrangements for early support and intervention results in some children and families being inappropriately referred to the social care service. This compounds the capacity difficulties mentioned above.
- Formal recording of management guidance and direction on individual case records is inconsistent.
- Whilst inspectors saw much work being undertaken with individual children in families, not all children in need have an individual, unique electronic case file record. The practice of identifying a 'nominal' child for recording the needs and services for all children in the family is not appropriate.

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown  
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Ms Katharine Kerswell, Chief Executive, Northamptonshire County Council  
Mr Chris Few, Chair of Northamptonshire Safeguarding Children Board  
Cllr Andrew Grant, Lead Member for Children's Services, Northamptonshire County Council  
Mr Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families