

5 February 2010

Mr Nick Jarman
Interim Director of Children's Services
Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
Floor 2, The Council House
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Dear Mr Jarman

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Doncaster 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 Doncaster Council which was conducted on 12 and 13 January 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 one area for priority action and a number of 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:

- A key area in the council's improvement plan to tackle the backlog of unallocated cases has now been addressed effectively. Where action was required to protect children this has been taken.
- Improvements have been made in the quality of initial and core assessments. In most cases seen, assessments are clear and analytical,



risk factors are identified appropriately, and assessments are translated into effective plans.

- When it is identified that there is a need for a child protection enquiry (Section 47), appropriate action is undertaken by qualified social workers. Responses are thorough and prompt to ensure children's safety.
- Children who are subject of an assessment are routinely seen on their own and their views are recorded and taken into account to meet their needs. For example, the specific needs of children from minority ethnic groups are acted on sensitively.
- Progress is being made on the implementation of the common assessment framework and the quality of assessments seen is good.
- Staff from the Children with Disability Team, utilise specialist, communication skills and support services to manage and undertake all referrals, assessments and child protection enquiries for children with disabilities to ensure the views of these children and young people are known and understood.
- New arrangements are in place to support joint work with the police and this has resulted in more widespread use of domestic violence services.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Councillors and senior managers have demonstrated effective leadership in identifying the shortfalls of the service and a strong commitment to drive forward improvements over the last eight months. This is beginning to have an impact on service delivery. ▪ The new arrangements for handling contacts, referrals and assessments have had a positive impact on social workers' caseloads, which are now generally more manageable. ▪ There is a good level of appropriate training to support practice. Staff speak very positively about the range and quality of training available. Training is usefully informed by lessons learned from serious case reviews.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Although there is evidence of improvement, for example with child protection procedures and referral pathways, these are not yet fully embedded at a practice level.

- The council's electronic recording system is under-developed and does not provide a secure management information system for decision making. For example, the system does not provide a clear audit trail of case decisions to ensure that managers have effective oversight, particularly for contacts and referrals.
- The strategic development of multi-agency planning is not yet underpinned by a Children's Trust Board.
- Senior managers have implemented quality assurance processes to drive up the quality of case work and decision making, but this is yet to be integrated into the work of the Local Safeguarding Children Board.
- Not all staff receive regular formal supervision with the result that poor performance is not being consistently identified and challenged and some staff are not receiving the level of support they need.
- Performance indicators for initial and core assessments are beginning to show improvement from a low baseline. However, performance remains below that of similar authorities and national comparators. As a result there are delays in identifying and meeting the needs of children and families.
- Historically the service has not been adequately resourced. This has been recognised and social worker capacity has been improved. However, there continues to be a high turnover of social workers and an over reliance on agency staff. This inevitably has an impact on the quality and consistency of services for children and families.
- Although cases requiring initial and core assessments are allocated to named workers, not all of these are to appropriately qualified social workers.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action.

Area for priority action

- There has been improvement to ensure that prompt decision making takes place with regard to safeguarding children who are at risk of significant harm. However, practice is not consistent and there are examples of cases where there have been delays and a lack of robust decision making, resulting in the potential for children to be left at risk.

The area for priority action 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: Tim Leader, Chief Executive, Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
Roger Thompson, Chair of Doncaster Safeguarding Children Board
Andrea Milner, Lead Member for Children's Services, Doncaster
Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families