

16 March 2011

Ms Julia Morrison  
Corporate Director of Children's Services  
Cumbria County Council  
5 Portland Place  
Carlisle  
Cumbria  
CA1 1PU

Dear Ms Morrison

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Cumbria 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 Cumbria County Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 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 an area of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The two areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in May 2010 have been addressed and neither was identified as an area for development in this inspection.

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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The front line advice and access service has a strong track record of being highly effective. Workforce planning has ensured the service is well resourced with skilled and highly experienced staff. This ensures that all referrals get an</li></ul>



appropriate and consistent response and that children quickly receive the services they need based on a good quality initial assessment.

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

- Out-of-hours duty arrangements meet statutory requirements, urgent needs are responded to promptly and there are clear communication processes with the police, health and daytime social work services. Plans to develop a more integrated approach with daytime children's services are being progressed. This was an area for development from the last inspection.
- Improvements have been made in recording the views of children and young people within the electronic recording system and these are now more prominent in assessments and planning. This was an area for development from the last inspection.
- Children suffering, or at risk of, harm receive a prompt and appropriate response. Section 47 enquiries are planned through timely strategy discussions with good multi-agency involvement.
- All cases are allocated promptly to ensure that initial and core assessments and investigations are undertaken in a timely manner by suitably qualified social workers. The achievement of timescales for assessments is well above the national average. Initial assessments examined by inspectors were of a consistently good quality, with children seen alone when appropriate. They clearly identify the needs of each child and are used to produce plans which have clear, measurable objectives for improving children's welfare.
- Assessments pay due attention to the diverse needs of children including taking account of disability, ethnicity, religion and equalities issues.
- Staff in advice and access teams work well within a multi-agency framework providing good quality advice to external agencies and professionals and signposting children and families appropriately to a range of early intervention services.
- Feedback following contact is routinely provided to referrers on actions to be taken and the outcome of assessments and investigations.
- Case file recording is up-to-date and workers and managers use the electronic system very effectively. Good use is made of chronologies and case histories to inform assessment and care planning. Management oversight is evident providing sound decision making and case direction.
- Staff are well supported by their line managers and receive regular supervision. They have access to good quality training and development opportunities.

- Staff workloads are manageable which enables work to be completed in a timely way.
- There is an established culture of case auditing which has been used to drive service improvement. Action plans arising from audits are closely monitored within localities and countywide. The Local Safeguarding Children Board also has a well-established, multi-agency, thematic audit programme. The authority is implementing plans to further strengthen its audit process.
- Senior managers provide strong strategic leadership and have a record of achieving and sustaining service improvement. They are responding positively and creatively to service challenges through, for example, promoting needs-led and outcome-focused assessment and planning.

#### **Areas for development**

- The quality of core assessments is variable with some not including all relevant information and others duplicating existing assessments. This is inefficient and results in not all longer term work with children being informed by a robust assessment.
- There are delays in convening most Initial Child Protection Conferences due to the lack of availability of conference chairs. The authority is aware of this and taking action to address this shortfall but it is too early to demonstrate consistent improvement in this area. This means that currently there can be delays in formulating multi-agency plans to protect children.
- Although use of the common assessment framework has increased this is not yet sufficiently embedded across the authority or with all partners. This leads to assessments not always being undertaken when required and inconsistencies in the quality of assessments that are completed. As a result early, multi-agency preventative work with children is not always supported by a clear assessment.

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

Yours sincerely

**Nicholas McMullen**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Jill Stannard, Chief Executive, Cumbria County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education