

27 July 2011

Mr Paul Moffat  
Corporate Director for Children's Services  
Northumberland County Council  
County Hall  
Morpeth  
NE61 2EF

Dear Mr Moffat

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Northumberland 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 Northumberland County Council which was conducted on 28 and 29 June 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.

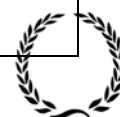
The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising any child abuse and neglect. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including: electronic case records; supervision files and notes; observation of social workers and 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.

Of the two areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in July 2010 one has been addressed satisfactorily and work is progressing well on the other area to ensure that written agreements with parents are effective.

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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>There has been a significant reduction in the number and frequency of children going missing through highly effective partnership arrangements between the local authority, Northumbria Police and Barnardos. Local</li></ul>



intelligence about the risks posed to young people who go missing and are at risk has been gathered and is being used to inform further work with these vulnerable young people.

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

- There is a prompt response to all referrals as a result of the establishment of an initial response team which provides a central point of initial contact for half of the local authority area. Early indications are that this is beginning to have a positive impact in dealing more consistently with contacts and referrals, is valued by partner agencies, and is leading to a reduction in the number of re-referrals. The council intends to roll out these arrangements in the rest of the county following the evaluation of its effectiveness.
- There are clear and effective procedures provided to staff which ensures that risk of harm is managed and children and families receive a prompt service.
- Referrals are responded to promptly and practice complies with statutory requirements and associated guidance. There is evidence in the majority of cases of good managerial oversight and decision making.
- The quality of most assessments is good. They are well written and set out clearly the risks and protective factors. Conclusions are clear and appropriately set out the plans for further intervention.
- Child protection strategy meetings are convened promptly and often held with a range of multi-agency partners. Subsequent child protection enquiries are carried out swiftly and always carried out by qualified and suitably experienced social workers. These are detailed and include clear action plans.
- There is good multi-agency contribution to initial and core assessments from voluntary and statutory sector partners.
- Agencies comment positively on the timeliness of feedback of outcomes following their referrals.
- The council has effectively implemented the use of 'Signs of Safety' tools, in conjunction with partner agencies, to use when working with children and young people to ascertain their views during assessments. They are accurately recorded and used to influence outcomes.
- The religious, cultural and any disability needs of children and young people are routinely recorded and taken into account in assessments and other records. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- The views of children and family members are routinely gathered and appropriately taken into account by social workers, when undertaking

assessments and other enquiries.

- The children with disabilities team provides effective specialist support to area teams to ensure the safeguarding needs of disabled children and young people are effectively addressed and their views and wishes are identified.
- The common assessment framework is embedded across the work of partner agencies across the county, ensuring that families have access to a good range of support services.
- There is a comprehensive case audit framework in place conducted by a range of senior managers including the Director of Children's Services with evidence that this has improved practice particularly in relation to the quality of assessments.
- Staff receive regular case work supervision and good support from accessible and experienced managers. Case work supervision is well recorded on the Integrated Children's Services system but other elements such as professional development is not consistently recorded to a good standard or sufficiently detailed.
- Staff have good access to training which is targeted to meet organisational and individual need.
- The council has in place a secondment programme which is contributing to maintaining a stable workforce by encouraging staff already employed by the council to undertake social work training and remain working within Northumberland.
- The majority of staff are suitably qualified and experienced and newly qualified social workers receive a good level of support from the council, including protected caseloads.

#### **Areas for development**

- Referrals from the Northumbria Police often contain insufficient detail, resulting in significant social work time being used to clarify information. This has resulted, in some cases, to delays in decision making and the formulation of effective plans to assess if children are in need of protection.
- Record keeping on many cases is insufficiently up to date, particularly in recording significant changes in circumstance which has implications for managers and workers needing to access records in order to respond to situations occurring out of office hours.
- The size of caseloads is variable and for some workers too high which is affecting the timely completion of some assessments and other case work. Senior managers are aware of this and taking active steps to reduce workloads.

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

Yours sincerely

**Helen Humphreys**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Steve Stewart, Chief Executive, Northumberland County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education