

24 February 2010

Mrs Barbara Hughes
Interim Director of Children and Family Services
The Municipal Offices
Town Hall Square
Grimsby
North East Lincolnshire
DN31 1HU

Dear Mrs Hughes

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within North East Lincolnshire 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 North East Lincolnshire Council which was conducted on 26 and 27 January 2010. 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 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:

- Concerns about risk of significant harm to children and young people are dealt with immediately and jointly with other agencies as necessary. Children and young people are appropriately seen in these situations to ensure that they are safe.



- Qualified and experienced staff receive initial contacts about children, young people and families. This ensures informed decisions are made about the range of services that may be appropriate, and continuity is provided in dealing with particular enquiries.
- Contacts that are identified as requiring further enquiries as referrals are transferred promptly for assessment. Once an assessment is completed and if a further service is required, the transfer of cases to longer term teams are clearly managed, ensuring continuity of service to children, young people and their families.
- All children and young people who have a child protection plan are allocated to qualified and experienced social workers, ensuring an appropriate level of expertise. In the cases seen by inspectors, child protection plans were satisfactory in ensuring risks were appropriately managed.
- Children and young people are spoken with as part of their assessments unless they are very young, and are seen alone by social workers when this is appropriate.
- The out of hours team makes effective contact with safeguarding services to ensure that out of hours work is followed up efficiently.
- Supervision and case discussion notes record decisions and provide appropriate direction to case workers.
- The service is actively considering ways in which ethnic and minority groups which may need support can be encouraged to take up services. Low take up of service by minority groups is identified through consistent recording and monitoring of referral records and comparisons with local population information.
- Service user feedback is collected each month through questionnaires asking a range of questions about the quality of the service provided. Response rates are low but are discussed in monthly team meetings.
- Performance is monitored in various ways, accompanied by random case auditing by senior managers, to promote an increasing emphasis on improving the quality of intervention with children and families, as well as ensuring satisfactory performance.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The council has recently assessed the strengths and weaknesses of its contact, referral and assessment service. Changes have been made to improve quality

and consistency, with further changes including improvements to data systems, planned. Substantial funding has been agreed to provide additional social work and supervisory posts, and legal support.

- There is very high commitment from staff in the duty, referral and assessment teams to improve and provide a good quality service to children and families. Staff development and training opportunities are good, with readily available professional support from a range of supervisors and managers. Local leadership enables a shared sense of purpose and a positive culture of improvement.
- Essential relationships with other agencies which work together to safeguard and protect children are very strong and responsive, with a flexible approach to sharing responsibility. Good examples of inter-agency work in child protection, particularly with the police, were seen by inspectors.

Areas for development

- Decisions about the action required regarding some initial contacts are delayed. Some are identified as requiring 'no further action' without sufficient evaluation of the range of possible risks and issues that might affect all the children and young people in a household.
- Endorsement by managers of assessment recommendations and the rationale for decisions made about contacts and referrals is inconsistently recorded and absent in some cases.
- Historical information and chronologies are not used consistently to inform current assessments.
- The quality of assessments is too variable. Although some good examples of assessment in complex cases were seen by inspectors, other assessments were insufficiently analytical.
- The case recording system does not document effectively family members and affiliations, making it difficult to understand the relationships in some assessment and linked materials. Use of first names only in records is common practice and does not adequately identify the person concerned.

Yours sincerely

Steve Briggs
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Tony Hunter, Chief Executive
Martin Wright, Chair of North East Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Tony McCabe, Lead Member for Children's Services, North East Lincolnshire
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families