

16 February 2012

Mr Chris Pratt
Director of Children's Services
Doncaster Council
The Council House
College Road
Doncaster
DN1 3AJ

Dear Mr Pratt

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Doncaster 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 Doncaster Council which was conducted on 18 and 19 January 2012. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to next year's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating. 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 area of priority action identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in January 2010 has been addressed. All but one of the areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in January 2010 have been addressed.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Child protection enquires are supported by highly effective multi-agency strategy meetings which are well facilitated and attended by the co-location of



police, specialist health staff and social care staff, and by staff from other agencies where relevant. Good information-sharing supports robust decision making. Effective chairing and recording of daily meetings clearly specifies plans for enquiries and ensures that these are kept under close review and are timely. Information is shared well between the child welfare and criminal justice inquiries at each stage, reducing delay and maximising the quality of both inquiry strands.

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

- Practice is supported by easily accessible and comprehensive child protection policies and procedures. Work is underway to further strengthen information about thresholds for referral to children's social care.
- Management oversight of contacts and referrals is mostly timely and effective. Staff and managers respond promptly to child protection concerns about children.
- Child protection enquiries are always carried out by qualified social workers and are of a good standard. Detailed multi-agency risk assessments enable effective safeguarding inquiries. Joint investigations with the police are conducted where this is identified by the strategy meeting as appropriate.
- Partner agencies appropriately understand the thresholds for children's social care services and provide increasingly good quality information in referrals which enhances further decision making.
- Early intervention through the common assessment framework (CAF) is satisfactory and numbers of plans are increasing. Regular monitoring and evaluation of CAF activity undertaken by the local authority confirms that children and families value the support services they have received and that outcomes have improved.
- Most initial and core assessments demonstrate good analysis of information gathered including risk and protective factors.
- Children, young people and their parents/carers are routinely consulted during assessments and this is appropriately recorded on children's case files. Good attention is paid to children's individual needs including their age, gender, ethnicity and disabilities, and this effectively influences the provision of services to them.
- Most children's case files are up to date with appropriate evidence of management oversight and decision making which contributes to effective safeguarding of children.
- Transfer arrangements of cases between teams are clear and timely, and well monitored by senior managers. This ensures that social workers are able to

respond swiftly to new referrals and children who require ongoing support are promptly allocated to other teams.

- The Emergency Social Services Team provides an adequate service and there are generally timely links and transfer of information to the day service.
- All managers robustly implement a detailed performance management framework including regular case file auditing, ensuring a shared understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of social work practice. Effective feedback of findings to staff results in improved provision of services to children and staff report this contributes to significantly improving their practice.
- Front line managers effectively support staff and provide considered oversight of social workers' and social work assistants' casework. Staff have regular supervision which includes personal and professional development issues as well as critically reflective casework discussion. This has a positive impact on the quality of case assessment and planning.
- Staff, including agency staff, are suitably qualified and experienced in safeguarding. They have good access to targeted training which ensures they are able to respond to the range of children's needs. Staff have manageable caseloads and confirmed to inspectors that they have sufficient time to undertake direct work with children.
- Lessons from recent court judgements in relation to children's legal proceedings and serious case reviews are appropriately disseminated including at twice yearly multi-agency development days for all staff and team meetings with social work staff. This contributes to improving practice.

Areas for development

- Core assessments are not always initiated when child protection enquiries commence, resulting in the potential for historical information to be overlooked when evaluating risk and protective factors.
- Some children's records, particularly regarding siblings, contain information relating to a different child, resulting in an inaccurate record of the child's life and needs. This could result in breaches of confidentiality and poor planning and assessment of individual needs.
- Children, young people and their parents/carers are not always informed in writing of the outcome of child protection enquiries and assessments. Similarly, referrers are not routinely informed of the action taken by children's social care services. This means that families and other agencies may not be clear about the actions that will or will not be taken by children's social care, and what will be expected of them.
- Although social work capacity has been improved, there continues to be a high

reliance on agency social work staff. The council is aware of this and has plans to reduce the need for agency staff but this has yet to have the full planned impact. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.

- Service delivery is not yet influenced by the experiences of service users. This is understood by the council and plans are being developed to address this.

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

Yours sincerely

Sheena Doyle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Jo Miller, Chief Executive, Doncaster Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education