

Inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children

North Yorkshire County Council

Inspection dates: 1 -10 October 2012
Lead inspector Lynn Radley HMI

Age group: All

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Inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children

The inspection judgements and what they mean

1. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding	a service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good	a service that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate	a service that meets minimum requirements
Inadequate	a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

2. The overall effectiveness of the arrangements to protect children in North Yorkshire County Council is judged to be **adequate**.

Areas for improvement

3. In order to improve the quality of help and protection given to children and young people in North Yorkshire the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

Immediately:

- ensure that from now on children's views are explicitly detailed in children's social care case files in addition to the record that they have been seen and spoken to.

Within three months:

- ensure that up to date chronologies are in place for all children subject to child protection and child in need plans
- ensure that front line managers receive consolidated training in relation to the application of thresholds for commencing section 47 enquiries
- ensure all children in need who receive social work services have individual, outcome focused plans in place and that they are regularly reviewed to monitor and drive progress
- ensure that the North Yorkshire Safeguarding Children Board (NYSCB) has a robust understanding of the quality of multi-agency child protection practice and that this information is effectively used to challenge and drive ongoing improvements.

Within six months:

- ensure all children and young people in receipt of children's social care services have information about, and good access to, appropriate advocacy services
- ensure staff supervision is recorded consistently and in detail across the county
- ensure that all data collected is evaluated to inform understanding of the impact services have on improving outcomes for children and young people
- the NYSCB and the council should develop and implement effective mechanisms for collecting and evaluating feedback from children, young people and their families and ensure that this is used to influence service development
- ensure that elected members routinely scrutinise the effectiveness of child protection and preventative work.

About this inspection

4. This inspection was unannounced.
5. This inspection considered key aspects of a child's journey through the child protection system, focusing on the experiences of the child or young person, and the effectiveness of the help and protection that they are offered. Inspectors have scrutinised case files, observed practice and discussed the help and protection given to these children and young people with social workers, managers and other professionals including members of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Wherever possible, they have talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have analysed performance data, reports and management information that the local authority holds to inform its work with children and young people.
6. This inspection focused on the effectiveness of multi-agency arrangements for identifying children who are suffering, or likely to suffer, harm from abuse or neglect; and for the provision of early help where it is needed. It also considered the effectiveness of the local authority and its partners in protecting these children if the risk remains or intensifies.
7. The inspection team consisted of six of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI).
8. This inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Service information

9. North Yorkshire County Council has approximately 138,000 children and young people under the age of 19 years. This is 23% of the total population. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 2.7% of the total population, compared with 24.3% in the country as a whole. The largest minority ethnic groups resident in the county are Asian or Asian/White children each at 0.4%. An additional and specific group are the children of Commonwealth forces families and 20% of this group do not have English as their first language.
10. Contacts from the public and agencies are dealt with by a central contact centre who forward referrals to children's social care services which are delivered via four geographical localities. In total there are six Assessment and Impact teams, five long term teams working with children subject to plans and family support teams working alongside them. Out of hours services are shared with a neighbouring authority. At the time of the inspection 450 children were subject to a child protection plan.
11. Early help services are organised in four geographical areas. They include family intervention teams (FIT), the co-ordination of common assessment

framework (CAF) and team around the child (TAC) activity by early intervention managers, parent support advisors and a range of other agencies. In addition there are 37 children's centres offering a range of activities and services.

Overall effectiveness

12. The overall effectiveness of the arrangements to protect children in North Yorkshire County Council is judged to be adequate. Effective leadership with clear strategic vision is evidenced by the recently implemented transformation strategy. Significant investment in adopting a well-researched model to assess risk is beginning to show positive impact and is well placed to improve further. Increased management and social work capacity in some assessment and impact teams has led to improved timeliness of assessments and responses from children's social care. Senior managers have a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses in the services and are aware that further work is required to progress children in need work to a consistently high standard across the county. Senior officers have the support of elected members who also provide regular scrutiny. However, elected members have not sufficiently focused their activities to scrutinise the effectiveness of child protection and preventative work.
13. Thresholds are clear, understood by the full range of agencies, and the North Yorkshire 'Vulnerability Checklist', an accessible guide to thresholds application, supports this and is widely used. The early help offer is appropriate, localised and accessible for children and young people 0-18 years. A satisfactory range of services are in place to enable early identification of children and young people who require targeted, additional support. Partner agencies work well together including within the team around the child (TAC) arrangements, and these are effectively overseen by early intervention managers. Agencies have a shared understanding of the early intervention agenda and what is required to prevent the need for escalation to statutory services. The North Yorkshire customer contact centre provides a prompt and appropriate response to contacts from the public and partner agencies in the vast majority of cases. Effective arrangements are in place within children's social care to protect children from immediate risk of harm. However, in a very small number of cases it is not always clear why the decision has been taken to undertake an initial assessment and not a section 47 enquiry. Although some good assessments were seen, their overall quality is adequate and the voice, along with the wishes and feelings, of individual children is not routinely evident.
14. When children are subject to child protection plan good multi-agency action to reduce risk continues through regular core groups and reviews. However, outline plans are not routinely developed in sufficient detail by core groups to sufficiently measure progress and ensure that outcomes are improving and risk is decreasing. While children and young people involved in child protection processes are seen regularly by their social worker they are rarely offered the services of an advocate or supported to attend case conferences and core groups. Children in need who receive services from children's social care do not always have a regularly

reviewed plan to monitor progress. As a result their cases can drift and the desired outcomes are not sufficiently clear. Service development is not yet influenced sufficiently by children and families.

15. North Yorkshire Safeguarding Children Board is appropriately constituted and has effective governance arrangements. However, multi-agency case auditing is neither systematic nor fully developed. As a consequence the Board cannot demonstrate effective challenge to the council and its partners in relation to risk management or child protection practice. Further, the Board does not have an embedded system for sufficiently focused scrutiny of performance data that directly relates to its main strategic priorities.

The effectiveness of the help and protection provided to children, young people, families and carers

Adequate

16. The effectiveness of the help and protection provided to children, young people, their families and carers is adequate. Overall, managers have established sound foundations for an effective county wide early help offer for all children and young people aged 0-18.
17. Locally based services are responsive to the changing, individual needs of children and families. However, work by some children's centres has not yet been successful in engaging harder to reach fathers although they are routinely engaged in TAC processes. A family group conferencing service is in place although availability and use of this service across the county is inconsistent. Help given is generally proportionate to risk and families are not subjected to unnecessary child protection enquiries.
18. The use of the CAF is embedded across agencies and in most cases signposting to the appropriate level of service is appropriate. Reviews of TAC activity are routinely undertaken at key stages to ensure that outcomes are improving and that needs are appropriately addressed. Evaluation of the impact of CAF is limited despite large amounts of data being collected. This at times leads to managers not having a clear understanding of how effective interventions are and what the key areas for further development should be. 'Outcomes' meetings, recently developed to decide whether individual cases need to be escalated for specialist intervention or de-escalated to targeted services, vary in their effectiveness and their impact has yet to be evaluated.
19. Where a child is clearly at risk of significant harm the response from social care is timely and managed well. In most cases, the help and protection that children receive is well coordinated and proportionate to their needs. Most children are referred appropriately to the services that best meet their needs. Partner agencies are consistently positive about the timeliness and quality of advice they receive from children's social care. Multi-agency

protocols for children and young people missing from home and school are in place, are clear and work well.

20. Early intervention services and FIT routinely collate feedback on their work. This demonstrates that parents are positive about the early help they receive, reporting increased confidence in raising their children and keeping them safe from harm. Parents feel involved and understand the goals of action taken, whether relating to common assessment or child protection plans. Children's records demonstrate some effective outcome focused work in relation to team around the child and child protection plans. One young person, for example, commented that because of the help received, home felt 'like a proper family again'.
21. Children known to social care are visited regularly and social workers have a good understanding of the children they work with. In most cases this results in the management and minimisation of risk which enables children to remain safely at home with their parents. Services are sensitive to the diverse needs of families and understand what factors might discourage them from seeking help. Particularly good practice is demonstrated in work with the county's Polish community to understand the intent of social work intervention. Appropriate support is provided for families of children with disabilities, for example through specific groups provided at children's centres. Recently commissioned services to provide signers, translators and additional translation resources are responsive to individual needs within the community. The minority ethnic advice service (MEA) works effectively with partner agencies to support members of the Traveller community. However, despite good work in several areas, children and young people's case records do not always identify their ethnicity and cultural backgrounds.
22. Multi-agency working and strong professional networks are facilitating effective work to support children and families. Evidence of this is seen in work between targeted youth support services and the police which has contributed to a reduction in anti-social and risky behaviours among young people in the Scarborough area. Well established, close collaboration between agencies, such as schools and the Army Welfare Service, ensures continuity of support for families, even when they move between postings in this country and abroad. County wide services to support young people who misuse drugs and alcohol have recently been jointly commissioned by health and the council but it is too early to assess their impact. However, not all of the work commissioned at a local level is being consistently monitored for impact and quality.

The quality of practice

Adequate

23. The quality of practice is adequate. Senior managers have implemented processes for monitoring the quality of practice and assessment of risk but

it is too early to demonstrate their full impact. However a sound base is now in place for continued improvement.

24. Children and young people who are the subject of assessments and interventions are seen promptly by qualified social workers. Social workers appropriately use observations of very young or pre-verbal children to help understand their feelings. Evidence was seen in a very small number of cases where too much focus was placed on the needs of the adults in the household.
25. Universal services refer children and young people to children's social care appropriately. Thresholds are generally understood and applied consistently with good use of the 'Vulnerability Checklist'. Partners are able to easily access valued social work advice when considering whether to make a referral to children's social care. The vast majority of contacts from partner agencies and members of the public are dealt with promptly by specialist children's customer care advisors. Timely decisions to refer cases to children's social care are made by an appropriately qualified social worker. In a very small number of cases evidence was seen where earlier and more comprehensive consideration of the full history of a child would have led to their needs being addressed sooner. Emergency duty team (EDT) arrangements which are shared with a neighbouring authority have been effectively strengthened following an inspection recommendation made in respect of that authority. Satisfactory arrangements between EDT and day time services ensure information is shared promptly. However, a small number of cases seen demonstrated an insufficiently robust response by EDT leading to a delay in fully addressing children's needs. Managers review all work undertaken by EDT social workers which contributes to improvements in practice.
26. Most referrals to children's social care teams are responded to promptly. The 'Signs of Safety' approach is used well to assist the assessment process in most teams. Analysis utilising this method explicitly considers risk and protective factors well. However where this approach is not embedded, analysis, decision making and recording of significant harm are less rigorously detailed. Information sharing between agencies is good and evident in section 47 enquiries which are always undertaken by suitably experienced social workers. Findings are generally recorded promptly and in sufficient detail. In a very small number of cases containing concerns of a child protection nature, decisions were made to undertake an initial assessment and the reasons why this course of action was taken was not clear. However, no evidence was seen of children being left at risk of significant harm.
27. Assessments are of adequate quality overall. While some assessments demonstrate good analysis of children and families' circumstances and needs, core assessments sometimes contain insufficient detail and some seen were incomplete. Common assessments are undertaken by a range

of professionals and those subject to oversight by early intervention managers are improving in quality and are responsive to a family's changing needs. Children and young people receive appropriate services promptly without having to wait for assessments to be finalised before receiving them.

28. Strategy meetings are timely and attended by a wide range of relevant partner agencies who thoroughly consider historical information alongside the incident(s) which have prompted the meeting. Evidence from case records demonstrated delay in arranging strategy meetings in a small minority of cases with no recording of the reasons for the delay. Routine practice of recording meetings contemporaneously enables all attendees to have an immediate record of the issues discussed including who has responsibility for undertaking the next steps, ensuring effective multi-agency work to protect children.
29. Most child protection plans set out what needs to happen to protect a child and are clearly focused on improving outcomes. However, these outline plans developed at case conferences are not always sufficiently updated by core groups to enable progress against outcomes to be measured clearly. This means that while review child protection conferences and core groups monitor compliance with plans, they are not always able to be as explicit as they should be about the extent to which risk has reduced. Social work reports for conference are shared with families in advance of the conference in the majority of cases. Core groups meet regularly and are well attended by the appropriate professionals and family members. The quality and use of child in need plans are too variable and several cases were seen where no plan was in place. There is also too much variability in how frequently and robustly these plans are reviewed and actions progressed. Council managers are aware of the variance in practice and are working to address this. Children and young people are not sufficiently supported to access advocacy services to ensure their full participation in relevant meetings and this is a weakness.
30. Overall case recording is of a satisfactory standard. Most children's case records include decisions made in respect of them, but the underpinning reasons for these are sometimes too brief or absent. In the majority of cases recording is timely and up to date reflecting the work undertaken. However, chronologies are absent on many cases and electronically generated chronologies are inappropriately imported into reports such as those for child protection conferences. This means that families receive reports which do not reflect key events in their history.
31. In most cases management oversight is effective, prioritising and detailing risks and protective factors for children and young people. However, in a few cases this focus was lacking, evidencing delays in tasks being completed by workers and shortfalls not addressed. The quality of supervision is satisfactory overall. Most staff receive regular supervision

that covers an appropriate range of issues. However, supervision files reviewed were of variable quality and although staff reported critical analysis taking place it was not recorded. The practice of group supervision that takes place in front line teams benefits and is valued by social workers and increases individual understanding of complex cases.

Leadership and governance

Adequate

32. Leadership and governance are adequate. The council and its partners effectively prioritise early help and child protection services. Priorities are clearly defined within the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) and are shared by key strategic leaders. An appropriate range of services are commissioned from independent and voluntary providers. For example, the 'Making Safe' scheme in which perpetrators of domestic abuse are provided with alternative accommodation and support to change their behaviour. Strategic managers have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of provision and ensure that statutory requirements are met. Previous inspection findings and recommendations have been carefully considered and used to improve practice. The integrated children's system (ICS) is now an effective tool for managing performance and the recording of casework. Since March 2012 the children's social care transformation strategy has successfully redirected staffing to areas of greatest pressure and increased administrative support. Resources for front line staff working in child protection have been maintained in the face of increased financial stringency.
33. The respective responsibilities and accountabilities of the Children's Trust Board (CTB) and the NYSCB are clearly detailed and understood by all partners. Work is well underway to finalise strategic governance arrangements with the shadow Health and Well-Being Board. A committed Lead Member is well informed about performance through regular meetings with senior council officers and is a participating observer on the NYSCB. The young people's overview and scrutiny committee demonstrates a realistic understanding of the key issues affecting vulnerable children and young people. However, there is scope to extend their focus on child protection and to more actively consider the views of children and young people.
34. An independent chair who offers suitable challenge to the Board leads the NYSCB. Key partners offer good level of support and the Board appropriately discharges its statutory duties. Governance arrangements are robust and links with the Army Welfare Service are strongly embedded. However, communication with and monitoring of the impact of the Board's locality forums is at a less developed stage. Although the Board receives performance information against key performance indicators effective scrutiny of this is not embedded and work has begun

to streamline the quantity of data considered by the Board. Multi-agency case auditing is not systematic and is underdeveloped. The annual report and business plan do not reflect the Board's priorities in relation to the quality of multi-agency practice. As a consequence of these factors the Board cannot fully demonstrate its effectiveness in challenging and improving child protection practice. These gaps are recognised, but required improvements are not yet in place. The Board is also aware that further work is required to identify and take into account feedback from children, young people and their families. Learning from completed serious case reviews have been widely disseminated across the children's workforce and are also incorporated into training. Impact of learning is demonstrated in the current priority being given to the better management of risk in relation to young people who have multiple vulnerabilities.

35. The Director of Children's Services provides stable and consistent leadership and has ensured that the senior leadership team has the skills and necessary drive to oversee change and improvement. The recent ambitious 'transformation strategy' which has realigned resources to geographical areas of greatest need effectively demonstrates this. However, it is too early for the full-intended impact of the strategy to be evident. Senior managers are visible and routinely involve themselves in observing front line work and in auditing practice. Child protection and early help priorities are accurately reflected in service and team business plans.
36. Performance reporting and monitoring within the council is routine and involves managers at all levels. Positive action is strengthening the range of local performance information available to front line managers. Effective action has resulted in repeat referrals to children's social care beginning to decrease as well as improved timeliness of assessments. Monitoring the quality of practice through case audit has been recently improved and is used to identify strengths and areas for development but it is too early to demonstrate any clear impact.
37. Workforce planning, development and recruitment are good. Action to tackle a high number of vacant posts has been effective and social work vacancies and the use of agency staff are minimal. Good action enables significant numbers of staff to gain further qualifications and progress their careers. Effective work has led to an increasing number of men working within targeted early help provision. Staff at all levels and across partner agencies benefit from access to well-planned learning and development opportunities, including those organised by the NYSCB. A positive development is a coaching scheme that provides trained mentors to support staff in developing their practice. Although feedback from staff in relation to their experience of training is routinely gathered, the council is aware that systems for assessing the impact of learning on practice are under developed.

38. Parents report positively on the intentions and impact of the help they have received. However, although some early intervention services and the FIT routinely collect feedback, managers recognise that insufficient use is made of feedback from children, young people and their families.

Record of main findings

Local authority arrangements for the protection of children	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate
The effectiveness of the help and protection provided to children, young people, families and carers	Adequate
The quality of practice	Adequate
Leadership and governance	Adequate