

21 May 2010

Mr Pete Dwyer
Director of Learning, Culture & Children's Services
City of York Council
Mill House
North Street
York
YO1 6JD

Dear Mr Dwyer

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within City of York 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 City of York Council which was conducted on 20 and 21 April 2010. 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.

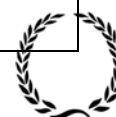
The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising any child abuse and neglect. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including: electronic case records; supervision files and notes; observation of social workers and 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 no areas for priority action alongside areas of satisfactory practice and areas for development.

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

Satisfactory practice

- Action is taken by senior managers to continually improve services for children and families. There is now one point of contact for all referrals to children's social care strengthened by the addition of two customer contact workers and a senior practitioner. Further improvements are well advanced including the co-location of services and improved office accommodation.



- There is an established and committed referral and assessment team including customer contact workers and business support staff who are suitably qualified and/or experienced.
- Partner agencies refer concerns about children and families to social care in a timely way. Where referrals are unclear or do not include sufficient information, this is followed up promptly by the relevant worker.
- Cases identified by the referral and assessment team that require an immediate response due to a clear risk of significant harm, receive a prompt and thorough response in line with statute and guidance.
- The majority of initial and core assessments seen by inspectors are of a satisfactory standard overall and some are of good quality. There is appropriate liaison with other agencies; children are usually seen where appropriate, and completed assessments are signed off by managers.
- Assessments are routinely shared with children and families and there is good practice in the sending of satisfaction questionnaires to children and families on the completion of work.
- There are clear out of hours duty arrangements with satisfactory links to daytime services.
- Most staff report satisfactory access to a range of training. This includes support to achieve social work qualifications, post-qualifying awards and a range of practice development training.
- The common assessment framework (CAF) is being increasingly used by a range of agencies to provide earlier assessment and intervention to children and families. Support and training are being provided for lead practitioners with a CAF practitioner co-located in the referral and assessment team. There are clear and innovative arrangements in place ('Step Down') to monitor and review cases referred to CAF particularly those cases which are on the threshold for intervention by social care.

Areas for development

- Some weaknesses in recording practice make it difficult to identify what action has been taken or what decisions have been made. These weaknesses include the inconsistent recording of contacts, incomplete individual case records and a lack of recorded evidence of how casework decisions are reached.
- The focus and direction of the work undertaken in a number of children in need cases are unclear. There are delays in progressing enquiries, in starting and completing assessments and in closing cases.
- While the majority of completed assessments seen were satisfactory overall,

the quality of practice is inconsistent. Management oversight and quality assurance of work being undertaken are insufficiently proactive. In a number of cases apparently judged to be of lower priority, decisions or actions taken are not clearly based on sound analysis of risk. Inspectors sought clarification from senior management on a number of these cases. While none of the children concerned were judged as being at risk of immediate harm, the weaknesses in practice have been acknowledged by the council with prompt and appropriate action taken.

- Staff report that managers are accessible and they receive regular informal and formal supervision. However, formal supervision is predominantly concerned with case management and is insufficiently focused on support and development issues. The council acknowledges that the quality of supervision is an area for development and is already taking action to address this.
- Although basic information regarding ethnicity is usually recorded, there is otherwise limited evidence of attention to issues of equality and diversity in the assessments and case records seen by inspectors.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Dennis
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Kirsten England, Chief Executive, City of York Council
Roger Thompson, Chair of City of York Safeguarding Children Board
Carol Runciman, Lead Member for Children's Services, City of York Council
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