

4 June 2010

Ms Lisa Christensen  
Director of Children's services  
County Hall  
Martineau Lane  
Norwich  
Norfolk  
NR1 2DH

Dear Ms Christensen

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Norfolk 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 Norfolk County Council which was conducted on 5 and 6 May 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 areas of strength and satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

**Strengths**

- Children in need of protection are consistently responded to in an assured and timely way. This includes active joint working between social care and the police child abuse investigation unit which includes a shared ownership of planning and decision making.
- There is extensive local inter-agency working, with a particularly good example being the joint assessment of all children in need under five years old by social



care and community health services.

- Supervision of staff is good and systematically assured. It consistently takes into account individual experience, workload size, case complexity and developmental need.
- Training opportunities are particularly valued by staff, being directly linked to individual need. The embedding of learning from serious case reviews, regular briefings provided by partner agencies, and the newly-qualified social worker development programme all contribute to supporting knowledge development and the overall high level of staff morale.

### **Satisfactory practice**

- Policy and up-to-date procedures are in place, understood by staff and managers and followed consistently. New referrals are screened and prioritised thoroughly and where necessary timely inter-agency checks are completed.
- Thresholds for child protection are clear and appropriate. Child protection investigations and enquiries are undertaken by experienced and qualified social workers. Immediate risks are identified appropriately.
- Casework decisions are appropriately recorded by workers and managers.
- Developments in inter-agency relationships are supported by the local council and the Norfolk Safeguarding Children Board. Inter-agency communication is adequate and its timeliness is improving.
- The out of hours emergency social work service is effective in addressing immediate child protection needs, followed up by clear communication with daytime services.
- The views of most children and parents are recorded, and integrated within assessments. Children and parents attending child protection and other meetings are appropriately consulted and enabled to contribute.
- Senior managers have performance management information systems in place, including programmes of practice audits across the county. This information has assisted organisational restructuring and the alignment of resources with need, including a greater equity of workloads.

### **Areas for development**

- The area has 55 unallocated children in need cases. These cases have been risk assessed and children are not left unprotected. The cases are directly overseen and reviewed by an operational manager, supported by monitoring of cases by partner agencies.

- The use of the common assessment framework is unequally developed across the area and does not align with profiles of need. Implementation has been delayed by capacity difficulties for some health services and schools.
- The quality of analysis in both initial and core assessments is too variable. While some assessments are clear and focused, others are descriptive and lack analysis. Child in need plans are also insufficiently comprehensive, resulting in limited identification of specific outcomes.
- Although there are some examples of good practice there is insufficient focus on identifying and meeting the cultural and identity needs of children and their families in assessments and consequent service provision.
- Recording is insufficiently timely, with a significant number of cases awaiting completion for closure, including initial assessments. The integrated children's recording system remains a difficult and time-consuming operational tool for practitioners to use. It contributes to delays in recording and the production of inaccurate data reports.
- Inaccurate data within performance reporting lead to managers having insufficient detail about how well teams are functioning. Not all team managers are effective in using management and performance information to drive their team's improvement.
- There is inconsistent progress in improving a number of key performance indicators. Particular challenges are in the timely completion of initial assessments, and reducing the high rates of re-referrals as well as for children subject to child protection plans for a second or subsequent time.

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

Yours sincerely

**Brendan Parkinson**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: David White, Chief Executive, Norfolk County Council  
Dr Caroline Ball, Chair of Norfolk Safeguarding Children Board  
Alison Thomas, Lead Member for Children's Services, Norfolk County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education