

**Joint Interim Follow-through inspection of services
to protect children and young people in the
Aberdeen City Council area**

June 2009

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Introduction

The *Joint Inspection of Children's Services and Inspection of Social Work Services (Scotland) Act 2006*, together with the associated regulations and Code of Practice, provide the legislative framework for the conduct of joint inspections of the provision of services to children. Inspections are conducted within a published framework of quality indicators, '*How well are children and young people protected and their needs met?*'.¹

Inspection teams include Associate Assessors who are members of staff from services and agencies providing services to children and young people in other Scottish local authority areas.

¹ '*How well are children and young people protected and their needs met?*'. Self-evaluation using quality indicators, HM Inspectorate of Education 2005.

1. The inspection

HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) published a report on the joint inspection of services to protect children and young people in the Aberdeen City Council area in November 2008. Working together, services in the Aberdeen City Council area prepared an action plan indicating how they would address the main points for action identified in the original HMIE inspection report.

In 2008 Audit Scotland published a report on the Audit of Best Value and Community Planning undertaken at Aberdeen City Council. In the same year the Social Work Inspection Agency (SWIA) published a performance inspection report of Aberdeen City Council's social work service. These reports required follow-up inspection by the respective scrutiny bodies. It was agreed that HMIE, SWIA and Audit Scotland would coordinate their follow-up inspections to minimise the impact on services and staff, particularly in Aberdeen City Council. Staff in HMIE, SWIA and Audit Scotland worked together to plan and coordinate inspection activities, which were carried out around the same time. Information and findings were shared at key points in the process. A number of interviews were carried out jointly.

Inspectors revisited the Aberdeen City Council area in April 2009 to assess the extent to which services were continuing to improve the quality of their work to protect children and young people, and report on progress made in responding to the main points for action in the initial report.

2. Continuous improvement

A collective approach had been taken by Chief Officers and senior managers across services to improving child protection services.

There had been a number of significant changes to staffing in Aberdeen City Council. A new Chief Executive had been appointed. An external consultant had been recruited as interim Director of Social Work Services. Interim management arrangements for the social work service had been put in place. The responsibilities of the Chief Social Work Officer had been reallocated. A major restructuring of Council services had just been approved. A comprehensive plan for a re-designed children and families social work service had been agreed and was in the process of being implemented. This provided for the appointment of a Director of Social Care and Wellbeing. The recruitment process for that post had been concluded and an appointment made. Senior managers in the social work service had developed a clear and compelling vision for the long-term improvement of outcomes for children in Aberdeen through investment in early years and family support services.

A multi-agency review of the structures and effectiveness of the North East of Scotland Child Protection Committee (NESPC) had been completed. A report of the findings of that review was being considered by the Chief Constable of Grampian Police, the Chief Executive of NHS Grampian and the Chief Executives of Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray Councils. An Aberdeen City Chief Officer's Group made up of senior managers from across services had been established. They were overseeing the development and implementation of a joint action plan to address

areas for improvement in child protection services. Services were at an early stage of developing working practices which support a '*Getting it Right for Every Child*' (GIRFEC) approach to providing help to children when they need it.

3. Progress towards meeting the main points for action

The initial inspection report published in November 2008 identified seven main points for action.

3.1 Ensure safe alternative care arrangements are provided for all children identified as living in situations which are unsafe, using appropriate legal measures when necessary.

An encouraging start had been made to ensuring safe alternative care arrangements were provided for all children identified as living in situations which are unsafe. Practice in using appropriate legal measures to protect children was improving.

Social work managers and staff had successfully increased the number of local foster carers and freed up others by moving children appropriately to adoptive families. There were plans to recruit dedicated emergency foster carers to meet children's needs outwith office hours, during the night and at weekends. Increased demand for foster placements meant that more children had to be placed with foster carers further away from Aberdeen. It was still difficult for social work staff to maintain regular contact with these children and to support contact between the children and their families. The recently established Achieving Reintegration Team (ART) was identifying opportunities to return children, over the age of 12 years, who were in residential care outwith the city to their home or to alternative care arrangements in Aberdeen. Social work staff were carrying out suitability checks and initial assessments more frequently before placing children with relatives. This was helping to prevent children being placed inappropriately. Some children still experienced a delay in being provided with suitable alternative care arrangements. The local authority was developing a kinship care service to help address this.

Social work staff were supported better by senior managers to take the necessary action to protect children. A procedure had been put in place to enable them to raise any concerns they had about insufficient action to protect children with senior managers. Their managers were starting to challenge poor practice. The Council's legal services department had begun to provide training for social workers. There had been an increase in the appropriate use of child protection orders. Referrals to the Children's Reporter by social work staff were beginning to be made earlier rather than in response to a crisis. Social work staff were more aware of the need for compulsory measures of supervision when the apparent cooperation by parents was not leading to a reduction in the risks to their children. Joint monitoring by the Chief Social Work Officer and the Authority Reporter was beginning to improve the appropriate and timely use of compulsory measures of supervision. Meetings between the Children's Reporters and social workers and between children's panel members and social work managers provided opportunities to develop a shared understanding of the effective use of legal measures to improve outcomes for vulnerable children. Managers and staff recognised that the level of risk for

determining when children should be looked after away from home was still too variable. New structures and clearer lines of accountability had been introduced to improve this.

3.2 Improve information sharing and recording

Very positive first steps had been taken by services to improve information sharing and recording.

Information sharing and recording procedures had been reviewed. The Pan-Grampian Information-Sharing Protocol was beginning to be used to guide the development of local agreements and policies. The participation by most services in multi-agency meetings was improving. More regular core group meetings were contributing to better information sharing. The increased involvement of police in multi-agency meetings had improved the quality of information sharing at these meetings. The Council's housing services were beginning to share information on child protection.

Services had begun to improve record keeping and file management. In social work, recording of significant events and case work were now more detailed. Staff in schools had been issued with new guidance on record keeping on child protection. In health, training was being provided on report writing and child protection case conferences. A revised format for recording case management had been introduced.

Grampian police had developed a public protection unit and a vulnerable persons' database to improve access to, and sharing of, information. Communication between the police and the Children's Reporter on referrals had improved. Joint working between the Children's Reporter and social work managers and staff was improving. A social work liaison manager had been appointed to the Children's Reporter's office to support effective communication, information-sharing and joint working on individual cases. Children and families social work staff were now participating regularly in meetings to jointly risk assess sex offenders where child protection was a consideration.

Although greater emphasis was being given to the importance of information sharing and recording across services, there were still some important gaps and inconsistencies. Information was not always shared by mental health services and substance misuse services. Managers had recognised that further development, support and monitoring was required to ensure that improvements in practice were made and sustained.

3.3 Improve assessment of risks and needs

Some early progress had been made in improving assessment of risks and needs.

Social work staff had screened a large number of children's cases using a risk assessment tool. The quality of risk assessment, particularly for children on the Child Protection Register (CPR), was still variable. Staff training had commenced on the newly developed NESPC multi-agency assessment framework which provided

a soundly based structured approach. This had great potential to support improvements in practice.

Following an audit of a small number of children's case records, the Chief Social Work Officer identified areas for development in assessment processes. Action plans and monitoring arrangements were yet to be put in place to ensure this led to improvement. A greater emphasis was being placed on the responsibility of social work managers for quality assuring assessment reports. They were working together in monthly meetings to improve key processes and practices.

Health staff, drugs workers and social workers were starting to complete assessments of substance misusing pregnant women in good time for pre-birth child protection case conferences. A joint assessment approach had yet to be developed. Health visitors and school nurses were starting to be trained in risk assessment, report writing and their role in child protection case conferences. Management supervision of some health visitors and school nurses about the cases they held was being tried out before being extended to other staff. Some joint assessments were being carried by substance misuse workers and social workers to assess the impact of parental substance misuse on children's safety and wellbeing. Joint assessments of parenting capacity were not carried out routinely for all children where there were concerns about parental alcohol and drug misuse, mental health or learning disability.

There had been some progress in improving the quality and timeliness of assessment reports submitted to the Children's Reporter by social workers. The appointment of a social work liaison manager to the Children's Reporter's office was intended to improve further the consistency of these reports and submission within required timescales. Children's Reporters had received training in risk assessment and decision-making.

Social work and police staff jointly assessed police referrals of child welfare concerns. Plans were being developed to involve health and education services in this joint assessment process. Improved attendance of police staff at Child Protection Case Conferences (CPCCs) was helping to improve the quality of joint risk assessment and decision-making. Education staff attended CPCCs, but were not yet consistently producing written assessment reports. The Council's housing services were developing plans to train staff to become fully involved in assessments when the accommodation needs of children and families was a relevant factor.

3.4 Improve joint planning to meet children's needs, ensuring that child protection plans are implemented, regularly monitored and reviewed.

Encouraging progress had been made in joint planning to meet children's needs.

Almost all children on the CPR now had an allocated social worker. Managers had made it clear that they expected social workers to see these children more regularly. There were early indications that this increased contact was beginning to benefit children.

Effective plans were in place to reduce the risk to newborn babies by substance misusing mothers. However, for a few babies the initial CPCC was not held quickly enough to put plans in place before they were born. Although staff attendance at CPCCs and core groups had improved, attendance by staff in health and education services was still inconsistent. The contribution by police to joint planning had improved significantly as a result of their improved attendance at review CPCCs. Parents were now being involved more fully in these meetings.

The quality of child care and child protection plans was still variable. Training and guidance was being developed to help staff improve this. The chairs of CPCCs and review meetings for looked after children were beginning to monitor the quality of social work reports and plans. The chairs of these meetings were now being supported by managers to challenge staff where insufficient progress was being made against the plans. Staff across services were involved more effectively in making important decisions about children at these meetings. Managers were developing a process for dealing with any disagreements between staff about the decisions made at CPCCs.

There had been improvements in the planning and coordination of child protection core group meetings. The NESPC guidelines on core group meetings had recently been revised. The effectiveness of child protection plans was now monitored through more regular core group meetings. Progress of plans made for children was being noted in the records of meetings. Some staff were not yet aware of these changes. The development of detailed local guidance to staff on core group meetings and child protection plans was at an advanced stage. Review meetings for looked after children did not always take place as regularly as they should. However, positive steps had been taken to coordinate more effectively planning meetings for looked after children who were also on the CPR.

3.5 Develop a systematic approach to gathering the views of children and families about services and use these to make improvements.

The development of a systematic approach to gathering the views of children and families about services and using these to make improvements was at an early stage.

Services were gathering the views of children and families in different ways and beginning to use that information to improve services. The Council's culture and learning services had consulted with young people about what they wanted from services. The parental involvement strategy aimed to ensure the involvement of school children and their parents in a broad range of issues, including child protection. The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) was undertaking a national survey of children's views to help identify how best to involve them.

Social work staff regularly gathered the views of children involved in CPCCs and other meetings. Information received had been used effectively to develop practice. The views of carers of children with disabilities had been gathered to improve the support provided to them. The social work complaints system was being reviewed to ensure that information gathered would be used to improve services. Positive

work was being carried out by gathering the views of children looked after away from home. These were being used as a part of a DVD to raise the awareness of Councillors of their corporate parenting responsibilities.

NHS Grampian was planning to re-design their website to encourage children and adults to provide feedback about their services. The health service was also reviewing their complaints system. The police were working with an external company to make better use of feedback from service users.

The Council's culture and learning services was leading a collective approach to collating information about all surveys and consultations taking place across integrated children's services. However, they had yet to develop, a systematic approach to using that information effectively to make improvements.

3.6 Ensure sufficient levels of staff within the children and families social work service.

Some constructive initial action had been taken to ensure the children and families social work service had sufficient staff.

Senior managers communicated effectively with staff and had developed a clear understanding of the needs of the service. A clear plan for a re-designed children and families social work service had recently been agreed. There had been wide consultation with staff about this. The plan had gained widespread support. Senior managers were overseeing a very complex change process. It was not yet clear how provision for sufficient staff resource would be made in order to implement the plan.

New social work posts had been created at Aberdeen Maternity Hospital and in some specialist teams. As a result, services for a few children and families had improved. Additional funding had been secured to support children affected by parental substance misuse. Managers were in the early stages of considering how to use this effectively. There had been a significant rise in child protection referrals and the number of children looked after. The workload of staff, particularly in fieldwork teams, had increased as a result of this and new practices being introduced. Staffing of the children and families social work service was still at a level which did not currently meet the demand for services. A lack of administrative support continued to hinder prompt submission of reports and the efficient administration of child protection case conferences. A review was being undertaken to address this. Resources in the out-of-hours Service were still insufficient to respond effectively to the needs of children requiring care and protection during evenings, weekends and holidays.

Although recruiting and retaining staff with the necessary skills, knowledge and experience remained challenging, there had been a positive response to the recent recruitment of social workers. A helpful workforce planning strategy was being developed in the social work service. However, human resource processes in the Council were not always flexible and responsive enough to support managers in recruiting staff. These processes were being reviewed.

3.7 Ensure that Chief Officers monitor the effectiveness of the NESPC and key child protection processes to better protect children and meet their needs.

Chief Officers had taken positive steps to monitor the effectiveness of the NESPC and key child protection processes.

An Aberdeen City Chief Officer's Group had been established to oversee the development and implementation of a joint child protection action plan by a multi-disciplinary project team which met regularly and frequently. This was helping to clarify responsibilities and provide clearer direction for improving child protection services in Aberdeen. The project team had successfully involved a wide range of partners from across services, including the voluntary sector. Procedures were being put in place to monitor the progress of the joint child protection action plan. Systems for ensuring a more robust approach to quality assurance through line management were being established in the social work service. This included case file audits and improved staff supervision.

A report outlining a proposal to improve performance reporting and monitoring of social work services had recently been approved by the Council's continuous improvement committee. A range of performance measures had been developed. Reports on these were going to be provided to senior managers, Councillors and partners at regular intervals to allow them to monitor key child protection processes. A group had been established to involve Councillors more fully in scrutinising performance. Additional management information about child protection had recently begun to be provided to the NESPC. This was at a very early stage of development.

4. Conclusion

Chief Officers had responded positively to the main points for action outlined in the original inspection report. Very encouragingly, there had been an acceptance of a shared responsibility across services for improving child protection services. Decisions based on the review of the structures and effectiveness of the NESPC were still to be made. These decisions were needed to provide clarification of management responsibilities for child protection. As an interim measure, the Aberdeen City Chief Officers Group, supported by a multi-disciplinary project team, was helping to develop and implement the joint child protection action plan drawn up in response to the initial inspection report.

Aberdeen City Council had embarked on a major restructuring of services, including the social work and education services, to provide the foundations on which to build and make sustainable improvements. It was too early to evaluate the impact of these changes on practice and outcomes for vulnerable children. Nevertheless, there had been significant improvements in the leadership and direction in Aberdeen City Council, in particular by the new Chief Executive of the Council and the interim Director of Social Work Services. This had been very helpful in establishing child protection as a corporate responsibility of the Council and improving communication and the involvement and support of staff. Management and staff responsibilities had

been clarified. Social work staff were generally positive and encouraged by these developments and their professional confidence was increasing through working in a more open and supportive environment. Joint working within and across services had improved. The police, health service and Children's Reporter had made a significant contribution to these improvements.

Managers and staff across services, but particularly in the social work service, have been successful in laying effective foundations for improvement. They all recognised that more had to be done to improve the effectiveness of child protection services and to meet the needs of vulnerable children and families.

5. What happens next?

Inspectors will revisit the Aberdeen City Council area in the next cycle of joint inspection of services to protect children and, at that time, assess further progress made in meeting the main points for action in the original inspection report.

Kevin Mitchell
Inspector
June 2009

How can you contact us?

If you would like an additional copy of this report

Copies of this report have been sent to the Chief Executives of the local authority and Health Board, Chief Constable, Authority and Principal Reporter, Members of the Scottish Parliament, and other relevant individuals and agencies. Subject to availability, further copies may be obtained free of charge from HM Inspectorate of Education, First Floor, Denholm House, Almondvale Business Park, Almondvale Way, Livingston EH54 6GA or by telephoning 01506 600262. Copies are also available on our website www.hmie.gov.uk.

If you wish to comment about this inspection

Should you wish to comment on any aspect of this inspection you should write in the first instance to Neil McKechnie, HM Chief Inspector at HM Inspectorate of Education, Denholm House, Almondvale Business Park, Almondvale Way, Livingston EH54 6GA.

Our complaints procedure

If you wish to comment about any of our inspections, contact us at HMIE enquiries@hmie.gsi.gov.uk or alternatively you should write to BMCT, HM Inspectorate of Education, Denholm House, Almondvale Business Park, Almondvale Way, Livingston, EH54 6GA.

If you are not satisfied with the action we have taken at the end of our complaints procedure, you can raise your complaint with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). The SPSO is fully independent and has powers to investigate complaints about Government departments and agencies. You should write to the SPSO, Freepost EH641, Edinburgh, EH3 0BR. You can also telephone 0800 377 7330, fax 0800 377 7331 or e-mail: ask@spso.org.uk. More information about the Ombudsman's office can be obtained from the website: www.spso.org.uk.

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