

**Joint inspection of services to protect children and young
people in the North Ayrshire Council area**

9 September 2010

The inspection of services to protect children¹ in the North Ayrshire Council area was carried out in April and May 2010. We looked at the services provided by health, the police, the council and the Children's Reporter. We also looked at the services provided by voluntary and independent organisations. Our report describes how good they are at protecting children and keeping them safe. To find this out we read a sample of children's files which were held by these services. We talked to a number of children and their parents and carers to listen to their views about the services they had received. We also spoke to staff in these services who worked with children, parents and carers and to senior managers who were responsible for these staff and the services they provided.

What we found and tell you about in this report is based on a sample of children and families. We cannot promise that this will be the same for every child in the area who might need help.

A team of inspectors gathered all the information and helped to write this report. These inspectors have experience of working across the range of services involved in protecting children. Inspection teams include professional staff who work in council areas elsewhere in Scotland.

¹ When we refer to children in this report we mean children and young people under the age of 18 years.

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1. The area

North Ayrshire Council area is situated in the west of Scotland. It covers an area of 885 square kilometres. There are diverse communities located mainly in urban areas and small towns. The area has an extensive coastline and includes the islands of Arran and Cumbrae. North Ayrshire has a population of 135,920, with 21% under the age of 18 years compared to the Scottish average of 20.5%.

The number of children referred to the council for child protection enquiries increased between 2006 and 2009. The level of referrals is higher than that for Scotland as a whole. The proportion of children on the Child Protection Register (CPR) in North Ayrshire council is 2.3 per 1000 which is lower than the national average of 2.9.

2. Particular strengths that made a difference to children and families

- Help and support provided by services at an early stage.
- Staff responding quickly and effectively to children who need help.
- Good communication and trusting relationships with staff.
- Strong leadership and teamwork to improve outcomes for children and families.

3. Examples of good practice

- Staff evaluating the outcomes of domestic abuse referrals and making improvements to meet children's needs better.
- Housing services playing an important part in identifying vulnerable children.
- Improving home security arrangements for adult and child victims of domestic abuse.

4. How well are the needs of children and families met?

A wide range of programmes in schools strongly promotes children's safety and wellbeing. A theatre company has performed the educational play *Cyberspyder* in all secondary schools effectively raising awareness of the children's personal safety, including their use of the internet. Some vulnerable children benefit from staff working with them individually to help them keep safe from domestic abuse,

parental substance misuse or bullying. Children are supported effectively by staff from a variety of services such as Women's Aid, the Young Person's Substance Support Team, youth services and schools. Parents and carers are helped by a wide range of very effective, flexible support which is put in place at an early stage to help them care for their children. Services provide practical help as well as emotional support and this is given at times when families most need it. They often receive intensive support in the evenings and at weekends. Staff identify vulnerable pregnant women at a sufficiently early stage to be able to help them better care for their babies. Support continues for most children and families for as long as they need it. For a few families, help is not provided early enough or it is removed too quickly.

Staff, across services, recognise children who are at risk of abuse or harm. They respond very quickly and share information well. In almost all cases police officers and social workers, including out of hours staff, take prompt and appropriate action following concerns about a child's safety. Staff carefully explain to children and families the actions they are taking and the reasons for these. Children are protected by the effective action of police officers at incidents of domestic abuse. Some decisions about risks to children are made without involving relevant health staff.

Staff consider the use of legal measures very carefully and use these well to protect children. When it is not safe for children to remain at home, they are placed with relatives or foster carers. Staff carry out checks to make sure that these placements are suitable. Improved communication across services is helping staff work together better to keep children safe.

Overall, staff are working well to meet the needs of most children who have experienced abuse and neglect. However they do not always identify all children's needs well, particularly their health needs. Children affected by substance misuse are, in most cases, benefiting from improvements in services. *Family Connexions, Children 1st 4Ward Steps* and addictions services provide essential help and

support to meet children's needs effectively. Children who are not able to remain at home are looked after well by foster carers, friends and relatives or residential care staff. Plans to meet the needs of children who are looked after away from home and those who need a permanent place to live have improved. Children who need extra support to overcome difficulties in their lives as a result of abuse or trauma receive effective specialist help. A few wait too long for this and are not able to get alternative help while they are waiting.

There are reliable systems in place to trace children who go missing from school. Education staff ensure parents are informed quickly when children are absent from school. There is clear guidance to help staff across services to respond to children who run away from home. The Child Protection Committee (CPC) has recently developed comprehensive guidance to identify and respond to children who may have been moved around the country illegally. Staff are becoming increasingly aware of the support needs of young people in relation to their sexual identity.

Children and families are benefiting from very trusting and positive relationships with staff. Staff know them very well, listen attentively and take full account of their views. Staff pay special attention to very young children and those who are not able to talk about their worries. They carefully observe any changes in their behaviour. Staff work very effectively to build relationships and through this they are able to help families make positive changes to their lives. Children and families are assisted to express their views and feelings individually and in meetings. They are helped to understand what is happening and why. The Children 1st Advocacy Service gives very helpful independent support for all older children whose names are on the CPR.

5. How good is the management and delivery of services?

Staff gather information from a range of services when they are assessing risks and needs. Important information about children's

health is now included more routinely. Overall, staff make helpful assessments but the quality of these is still too variable. They are working hard to make further improvements so that all of children's short and long-term needs are met. A shared assessment process and a shared plan have been introduced to help staff work better together to assess risks and meet children's needs. Managers have put in place an effective system to ensure that staff have enough information to give children affected by domestic abuse the support they need. This system involves staff in health and education services well. Chief Officers have agreed how to improve the contribution of health staff to planning child protection investigations. More work needs to be done to ensure all staff know about this and use it consistently so that children's health needs are never overlooked.

Staff in adult and children's services share information well to keep children safe from sex offenders who may pose a risk to them. When investigating concerns about children, medical examinations are carried out effectively. Suitably trained doctors are available at all times and see children in appropriate settings.

Chief Officers and senior managers are committed to reviewing work to improve services and outcomes for vulnerable children. They have considered their own performance to improve their leadership and ensure they are giving clear direction to support staff. They are encouraging staff to think more about their work and to check how it is improving children's lives. Increasingly, staff from different services are reviewing their work jointly, which is helping them work together better. Particularly helpful activities have included a joint examination of case records and a detailed review of the new system to support children affected by domestic abuse. However, not all reviewing activity is joined up well. Managers need to continue to develop reviewing the impact of services for vulnerable children. They should seek to involve children and families and the staff who work directly with them in that work.

6. How good is leadership and direction?

Chief Officers and senior managers across services have developed a clear joint vision to protect children and have shared it successfully with staff and the public. This helps everyone appreciate the need to keep children safe. Staff clearly understand their leaders' expectations of them and their own roles and responsibilities. Effective leadership and clear direction are helping staff work better together. Chief Officers and managers keep in touch with the findings of local and national enquiries about child protection and make sure they apply any lessons locally, communicating them to staff effectively. They are working well with partners in other parts of Ayrshire to promote consistently high quality services. They ensure the CPC has enough resources to take forward their work to protect children. Partnership working and joint planning are continuing to improve. As a result, children are benefitting from better coordinated services which meet their needs.

7. How are services improving?

The Integrated Children's Services Plan, *A Better Childhood* has clear aims about what services want to achieve. Senior managers ensure that staff use this when identifying, planning and improving outcomes for children and families. *The Child Protection Management Information Framework* has been revised and helpful links are made to national and local priorities for services.

Services review their performance regularly and a range of plans to improve service to children and families have been drawn up. These are regularly monitored by Chief Officers and the CPC and as a result some positive improvements have been made. Services have improved greatly the quality of provision to support children and families with a range of difficulties. Children and families are benefitting from better services as a result of staff working more closely together. Improvements have also been made to services for children living away from home which have made their lives better.

Children are benefitting from clearer planning to meet their needs. Services have adopted new methods to support young children, parents and children unable to live at home leading to improvements in the lives of those involved. Although the full impact of all the revised approaches have yet to be felt, services are well placed to take these further forward effectively.

8. What happens next?

We are confident that the services will be able to make the necessary improvements in light of the inspection findings. As a result, we will make no more visits in connection with this inspection. Our link inspector will maintain contact with services to support improvement.

We have agreed the following areas for improvement with services in the North Ayrshire Council area.

- Continue to improve the assessment of risk and needs, focusing more on improving outcomes for children and families.
- Strengthen approaches to reviewing the quality of services and more fully involve staff, children and families in this work.

Quality indicators help services and inspectors to judge what is good and what needs to be improved in the work to protect children and meet their needs. You can find these quality indicators in the HMIE publication *How well do we protect children and meet their needs?* Following the inspection of each local authority area, the Scottish Government gathers evaluations of four important quality indicators to keep track of how well services across Scotland are doing to protect children and meet their needs.

Here are the evaluations of these for the North Ayrshire Council area.

Children are listened to and respected	very good
Children are helped to keep safe	very good
Response to immediate concerns	very good
Meeting needs and reducing long term harm	good

We also evaluated the following aspects of the work within the local authority area.

Self-evaluation	good
Improvements in performance	very good

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This report uses the following word scale to make clear judgements made by inspectors.

excellent	outstanding, sector leading
very good	major strengths
good	important strengths with some areas for improvement
satisfactory	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses