

Report summary

Protecting disabled children: thematic inspection

This thematic inspection was commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness of work to protect disabled children and young people at all stages from early support to the identification of and response to child protection concerns. It examined the actions taken to ensure the protection of disabled children and young people, identifying the key factors which promoted effective protection and the barriers to achieving this. It considered how well local authorities and Local Safeguarding Children Boards evaluate the impact of the work done across agencies and by professionals to ensure the effective protection of disabled children and young people.

Key findings

- Most disabled children were recorded to be living with parents or carers who were well motivated to provide good care for them. In almost all cases they recognised or accepted that they and their children needed additional support and were keen to take up available services. Parents found the support provided helpful. Effective multi-agency support was provided at an early stage in the cases examined by inspectors. When early concerns for children's welfare or emerging risks arose, in most cases these were tackled well, ensuring that their well-being did not suffer and that their safety was not compromised.
- A wide range of professionals and staff made timely referrals when they had concerns about disabled children. However contacts with, and referrals to, children's social care were not routinely analysed to consider if the proportion of referrals relating to disabled children reflected the proportion of disabled children within the local area.
- Children in need work was not always well coordinated; many plans were not detailed or focused on outcomes. In a small number of cases children had no plans or reviews were not held. In other cases reviews did not always include other professionals working with the children. This lack of rigour in the management of child in need work increased the likelihood of child protection concerns not being identified early enough.

- When child protection concerns were clear they were investigated promptly and steps were taken to ensure that children at immediate risk were safe. However when concerns were less clear-cut, and particularly when the concerns related to neglect, there were delays in identifying when thresholds for child protection were reached. Assessments did not consistently identify and analyse key risk factors, including previous concerns. This led to delays in some disabled children getting the right level of support and intervention needed to protect them.
- When these children did become subject to child protection plans there was a marked improvement in their outcomes. Effective action was taken to reduce the risks to them and in the majority of cases they made good progress. Parents understood why their children were subject to plans and most accepted the reasons for the concerns.
- Many child protection plans were not sufficiently focused on outcomes, making it difficult to hold agencies and parents to account and to measure progress. In a very small number of very complex child protection cases examined by inspectors there was no robust and timely action to respond to increasing or ongoing risks.
- Child protection enquiries were usually carried out by suitably trained, experienced social workers with good experience of working with disabled children. Although the majority of staff working with disabled children had attended specialist training in safeguarding disabled children, this still left a significant minority without such training. Specialist training is not available in all local authorities.
- A small number of children supported as children in need had previously been the subject of child protection plans. These cases were managed effectively. Social workers showed good understanding of the risks and the need for constant vigilance in the light of the previous, often very substantial, child protection concerns.
- The extent to which the views, wishes and feelings of disabled children were captured and recorded varied. In many cases professionals knew children well and were skilled in communicating with them and in using observation of behaviour to assess how they were feeling. However, children were not always spoken to directly about the concerns for their welfare even when they could communicate well. Advocacy was usually not considered and was rarely used.
- Most LSCBs and local authorities were not in a position to assess the quality of work to protect disabled children. Systems were not well established to evaluate and report on the quality and impact of work to ensure that child protection concerns for disabled children were recognised and responded to effectively.

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