

4 August 2010

Ms Gail Quinton
Director of Children's Services
Worcestershire County Council
Spetchley Road
Worcester
WR5 2NP

Dear Ms Quinton

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Worcestershire 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 Worcestershire County Council which was conducted on 6 and 7 July 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 an area for priority action alongside areas of strength, satisfactory practice and areas for development.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Effective arrangements are in place to ensure that the needs of children with disabilities are identified and are met through appropriate multi-agency assessment.▪ The use of the common assessment framework is well established and demonstrates good partnership working within this area of early intervention.



Satisfactory practice

- A dedicated access centre ensures that contacts and referrals to children's social care are dealt with appropriately through a single referral point.
- Multi-agency procedures to safeguard children are in place and are understood by staff.
- The out-of-hours service takes appropriate action to safeguard children and communicates well with daytime services. Staff working out-of-hours have full access to all social care records and work within agreed protocols with other agencies.
- Systems are in place to ensure that referrers receive both written and oral feedback about the outcome of their contact with the service.

Areas for development

- Cases are not always allocated to staff with the appropriate skills and experience to effectively undertake the work required. Some complex child protection cases are jointly allocated to social work assistants and qualified social workers. However, in most of these cases assessments and casework are undertaken by the social work assistants with limited oversight or involvement by the social worker.
- Processes for expediting enquiries regarding children and young people who are at immediate risk of harm are not robust. In some cases child protection strategy meetings are not held until a considerable time after the initial referral resulting in children remaining at potential risk.
- Many social workers carry caseloads that are too high and include too many cases involving high risk and complexity. This contributes to delays in progressing assessments and completing planned work. The authority is aware of this problem and is seeking to resolve it through a structural re-organisation which will begin in September 2010.
- The quality of initial and core assessments is too variable. In a number of cases insufficient consideration is given by social work staff and managers to both the analysis of risks and effective plans to address them. The authority is already aware of these shortcomings and mandatory training to address these issues has recently been introduced. However, this has yet to have an impact.
- Recording is not undertaken in a timely manner. In some cases key documents such as child protection plans and records of strategy meetings are missing. Similarly managerial oversight, including records of decision-making, is frequently not recorded on case files.
- The frequency and quality of staff supervision are variable across the authority. In one team some staff have not received formal supervision for several months.

- Although information-sharing protocols have been agreed through Worcestershire Local Safeguarding Children Board these have not been fully translated into all levels of practice. Consequently there is some confusion between agencies regarding the appropriateness of sharing relevant information to protect children and young people.
- Working relationships and communication, at an operational level, between the police and children's social care are inconsistent across the county.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action:

Area for priority action

- Following the Joint Area Review in 2008, a recommendation was made for immediate action to 'increase social care staff capacity and ensure the quality and consistency of management systems and practice in the contact, referral and assessment services'. However, since then there has been only limited progress and management action to improve the services in order that all children are properly safeguarded. During the course of the inspection several cases of immediate concern were referred to the local authority for action to ensure the well-being of the child involved.

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

In addition, it is considered by Ofsted that the findings of this inspection and the identified area for priority action are likely to become a limiting judgement of the annual children's services assessment when considered with other evidence. This means the annual assessment is likely to be limited to 'performs poorly'.

Yours sincerely

Karen McKeown
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Trish Haines, Chief Executive, Worcestershire County Council
Hilary Thompson, Chair of Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr Marcus Hart, Lead Member for Children's Services, Worcestershire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education