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Ms Therese Gillespie
Corporate Director for Children and Young People
South Gloucestershire Council Offices
Badminton Road
Yate
South Gloucestershire
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Dear Ms Gillespie

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within South Gloucestershire Council 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 South Gloucestershire Council which was conducted on 18 and 19 May 2011. 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 practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

Two of the areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in June 2010 have been addressed fully, but two areas for development from the last inspection have yet to be fully embedded.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- Senior managers have a good understanding of the challenges they face in order to modernise services. The local authority and key partner agencies have a programme of development which includes the implementation of locality 'hubs' and the restructure to locality teams, planned to be completed in autumn 2011.
- Contact, referral and assessment practice, seen by inspectors, is compliant with statutory guidance, ensuring that the risk of harm to children is effectively assessed and addressed in a consistent and timely way. Contacts and referrals are promptly and effectively screened by suitably qualified staff and experienced managers.
- Agreed inter-agency thresholds for access to social care services are well understood by partner agencies, enabling a timely and effective response to the range of children's needs.
- Most initial and core assessments are completed within national timescales. This was an area for development in the previous inspection.
- Children are seen by social workers as part of assessments, but it is not always recorded whether they were seen alone. The views of children and their families are reflected in most cases.
- In the children with disability team, inspectors saw good examples of effective communication which influenced the services provided for them.
- Child protection matters are responded to appropriately and investigations undertaken by suitably qualified social workers. Strategy meetings are comprehensive, include contributions from relevant key partners and are recorded within locally agreed timescales by managers.
- There are good working relationships with the police particularly in the conduct of child protection enquiries ensuring children are appropriately safeguarded.
- All cases are allocated to appropriately qualified and experienced workers. Most social workers reported to inspectors, that their caseloads were manageable.
- Most case recording is of a high quality and up to date. However, this is not consistent across all of the teams.
- There have been improvements in the information technology system which is now accessible to all teams within the service. This was an area for development in the previous inspection.

- The out of hours services provides timely and effective intervention. Improvements in the information technology system, now allow this service access to relevant service user information and this has resulted in more focused support to those in immediate need.
- Staff supervision is regular, appropriate to levels of qualification and experience and is well received by staff. Staff report feeling well supported by managers.
- Learning from serious case reviews, is provided by the local safeguarding children board. This enhances practitioners' understanding of relevant casework issues.
- Performance management systems are in place. Managers at all levels utilise data, resulting in prompt response to trends across the service.
- There are some positive examples of the local authority seeking service user feedback on the quality of service provided. This is particularly well embedded in the Our Voice Matters service for parents of disabled children. Service user feedback is not yet systematic across the whole children and families' service in a way that shapes future service developments.
- Relevant training, which is readily accessible to staff, is highly valued. However not all supervision files show a routine identification of training needs or staff performance review.

Areas for development

- The recording of the individual needs of children in sibling groups is inconsistent. The practice of writing one assessment on all children within a family and then duplicating across all files has resulted in insufficient attention being given to the needs of individual children.
- Many of the cases seen by inspectors did not identify the ethnic, cultural and religious needs of children. Although managers have recently ensured the prioritisation of recording of these issues, this has not yet resulted in sufficient improvement in practice. This was an area for development in the previous inspection.
- There are improvements in the use of common assessment framework (CAF) including the recent development of arrangements when cases close to children's social care. However the use of the CAF is still not embedded in some agencies within the partnership. This was an area for development in the previous inspection.
- Inspectors saw some examples of high quality assessments with thoughtful evaluation. However, this was variable, and some assessments lacked effective analysis of risk and protective factors.

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

Yours sincerely

Debbie Barazetti-Scott
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Amanda Deeks, Chief Executive, South Gloucestershire Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education