

3 June 2011

Mrs L Goll  
Director of Children Services  
Somerset County Council  
County Hall  
Taunton  
Somerset  
TA1 4DY

Dear Mrs Goll

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Somerset County 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 Somerset County Council which was conducted on 4 and 5 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 strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in July 2010 have substantially been addressed. One area for further development remains.

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

**Strengths**

- The countywide organisation for contact, referral and assessment services is effective. 'Somerset Direct' provides a central point for all contacts and referrals and is an outstanding model. Managers within 'Somerset Direct' are



knowledgeable and supportive and set high work standards. The presence of qualified social workers and managers within this service is appropriate in determining appropriate thresholds for intervention. Administrative support within 'Somerset Direct' and in area teams is good.

- Managers at all levels are active in fully supporting contact, referral and assessments processes. Social work and administrative staff state that managers are accessible, helpful and provide the necessary leadership. Cooperation between area teams is very good and provides flexibility in meeting changing work demands and staffing needs.
- Social workers are well trained in contact, referral and assessment processes and there is a systematic assessment of capability before staff are permitted to undertake this work.

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

- Processes for contact, referral and assessment are clearly defined and effective. Practice is in line with statutory requirements and supported by a good information and recording system. Thresholds are clearly stated and understood.
- Incoming contacts and referrals are appropriately recorded, prioritised and allocated to well trained staff. Management support and guidance is readily available to customer advisers and social workers at all stages.
- Most assessments, including initial and core, are timely although there are some delays in recording in a minority of cases at times of peak activity. Where delays occur managers take an active role in overseeing work and tracking work pressures.
- Child protection investigations are well planned and implemented and include joint action with the police and other agencies where needed. Inter-agency cooperation in referral, assessment and planning accords with national requirements.
- Social worker visits to children and young people are at least in line with national requirements and children and young people are appropriately involved as part of the assessment of need and risk.
- Emergency duty arrangements are robust and ensure that children and young people who may be at risk outside normal working hours are appropriately assessed and assisted. There is good communication between Somerset Direct and the emergency duty team.
- Managers have good access to real-time performance information to enable them to plan the delivery of services and to respond promptly with any fluctuations in work pressures. Themed audits are routinely undertaken with

clear reporting arrangements to the senior management team and the local safeguarding children board.

- Staff supervision follows a countywide format and is consistent with regard to individual cases. Management direction on individual cases is recorded and management sign-off is evidenced in most cases.
- The commitment to review the provision of early intervention services, opportunities for inter-agency integration and the use of the common assessment framework is timely and appropriate.

#### **Areas for development**

- Further work is needed to ensure that decisions on cases, including case closure, are fully documented and the narrative includes clear analyses, outcomes and contingency plans.
- The format for staff supervision on individual cases does not extend to the inclusion of staff performance information for purposes of agreeing personal training and development plans or the routine appraisal of individual staff performance.
- Work pressures remain within 'Somerset Direct' and across the areas. Although managers provide an effective overview and deal with fluctuations in service demand elected members need to ensure resource levels are kept under constant review.

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

Yours sincerely

**Martin Ayres**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Sheila Wheeler, Chief Executive, Somerset County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education