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11 August 2010

Mr Clive Webster
Executive Director of Children's Services and Learning
Southampton City Council
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Southampton
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Dear Mr Webster

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Southampton's 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 Southampton City Council which was conducted on 13 and 14 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 areas of strength and satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

Strengths

- Strong performance management, analysis and oversight by members and senior management across the council and partners has resulted in a clear, well phased, strategy for development of referral and assessment services and has secured additional funding to improve service provision.



- Managers have effectively implemented systematic changes to referral and assessment services which have resulted in significant improvements in the service, such as in the reduction in social work caseloads and in the timeliness of assessments. Staff respond well to the changes being introduced and are committed to improving the quality of services provided.
- Workforce development and recruitment strategies are effective in securing appropriately qualified social work staff, enabling staff to gain qualifications and facilitating newly qualified staff to gain experience.

Satisfactory practice

- Clear procedures and practices are in place to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are met.
- Communication and liaison with partner agencies are well established and result in prompt referral and exchange of information.
- Contacts and referrals, including child protection referrals, receive a prompt response and are subject to effective initial screening.
- All cases held within referral and assessment services are allocated to and assessed by suitably qualified staff. Many staff are newly qualified and have protected caseloads so they are enabled to progressively gain experience.
- Children are routinely seen and interviewed, where appropriate, during assessments.
- Diversity issues are sufficiently considered in case work practice.
- Partnership arrangements for the assessment and support for children with disabilities are well established.
- Staff have prompt access to managers for casework discussions which are routinely recorded on case files.
- The outcome of referrals is consistently notified to families and to referring agencies.
- Managers at all levels routinely monitor management information and have recently begun to regularly audit cases.

Areas for development

- The views of children are not sufficiently or consistently recorded in assessments and it is not always evident that their views contribute to case planning.

- Most assessments are of a satisfactory quality. However, many lack detailed analysis and some assessments over-emphasise the needs of parents above those of the child.
- Staff report receiving regular supervision. However, the recording of supervision varies too much in its structure, frequency, detail and quality. In some cases it is not possible to confirm that supervision has occurred in accordance with council policy.
- Management decisions are routinely recorded on case files. However, the quality of the decisions recorded and actions required in case plans are inconsistent. This is of concern in a service which has a high proportion of newly qualified staff.
- Arrangements for transfer of cases following assessment vary between the three children in need teams. The current transfer protocol is ineffective and a new one is currently being developed across the service.

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

Yours sincerely

Pietro Battista
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Brad Roynon, Chief Executive, Southampton City Council
Donald McPail, Independent Chair of the Southampton Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr Paul Holmes, Lead Member for Children's Services, Southampton City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education