

21 May 2010

Mr Kim Ryley
Chief Executive
Shropshire Council
Shirehall
Abbey Foregate
Shrewsbury
Shropshire
SY2 6ND

Dear Mr Ryley

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Shropshire Children's Services

This letter contains the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Shropshire Council which was conducted on 7 and 8 April 2010. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but a significant number of areas for development, which are detailed below.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of 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. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

From the evidence gathered, the inspection identified a number of areas where the contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- An effective system is in place to ensure that referrals are progressed in a timely manner and receive an appropriate response. There are clearly written inter-agency thresholds which have been agreed by all statutory and voluntary partners.



- All cases are allocated promptly. Child protection investigations are undertaken in a timely manner.
- Some core assessments are detailed with effective use of historical information about children and young people and their families. Risk and protective factors are appropriately identified.
- The views of children, young people and their parents are taken into account as part of assessment processes.
- Access to interpreters and advocacy services is satisfactory, ensuring that all children and young people and their parents can communicate their views effectively.
- Regular individual supervision is undertaken with social workers, providing appropriate support and effective monitoring of practice. Newly qualified social workers are well supported with good induction, additional supervision and reduced caseloads.
- Front line managers are readily accessible to social workers who feel supported in making appropriate casework decisions on a day-to-day basis.

From the evidence gathered, the following strengths and areas for development were also identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Partnership working is strong. 'Team around the Child' interventions illustrate good multi-agency working to ensure that children and young people are appropriately supported. Good working relationships have also been established with local midwifery services resulting in the early identification and assessment of vulnerable pregnant women.▪ Effective involvement by the 'Stay Safe' service in the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference processes ensure appropriate responses to children and young people at risk of harm due to domestic abuse.▪ Actions arising from serious case reviews have been followed up effectively and have resulted in an improved quality of service to vulnerable young people at risk of suicide.▪ Good written working agreements with parents, signed by all those involved with the case, are used well. These ensure that roles and expectations of both agencies and parents are clearly understood by all parties.

Areas for development

- While there is evidence of management oversight and decision-making on the individual supervision files of social workers, this is not routinely transferred on to case files.
- The quality and timeliness of initial assessments are variable with some offering insufficient detail and analysis. Similarly, assessments undertaken as part of the common assessment framework lack enough analysis and conclusions to support effective planning.
- Child protection plans are insufficiently outcome-focused and do not always fully explain how the planned activities will reduce risk. Children remain subject to a child protection plan for longer than is necessary.
- Caseloads for some social workers are too high, resulting in considerable delays in record-keeping and in closing cases.
- Ethnic origin is not recorded in all cases which does not allow the service to assess if the needs of the wider community are being met.
- Processes for monitoring timescales for completion of all assessments are not sufficiently robust to ensure accurate reporting of performance.
- Record-keeping in case files is not timely with some still in handwritten note form. Senior management has taken steps to address this but this has yet to have an impact on the case files seen.

Yours sincerely

Karen McKeown
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Kathryn Edwards, Acting Chair of Shropshire Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Cecilia Motley, Lead Member for Children's Services, Shropshire Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families