

14 July 2010

Ms Marion Davis
Director of Children, Young People and Families Directorate
Saltisford Office Park
Ansell Way
Warwick
CV32 4UL

Dear Ms Davis

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Warwickshire 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 Warwickshire County Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 June 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

- Children and young people and their families are given very good opportunities to contribute to their assessments leading to more effective plans.
- The quality of core assessments prepared for child protection conferences is good. Examples were seen of complex situations being insightfully considered with balanced and appropriate decisions reached.



- Staff are well managed and value the level and quality of the support and supervision they receive from accessible local managers. This has a discernible positive impact on their professional confidence in dealing with challenging casework.

Satisfactory practice

- Children at immediate risk of harm are safeguarded by timely and appropriate action.
- The deployment of a social worker to the police has improved communication, two-way understanding of pressures and thresholds, and is helping to focus referrals more effectively.
- Prompt and effective decisions and actions at the point of initial contact protect children who may be at immediate or significant risk.
- Initial assessments are routinely shared with parents.
- All child protection investigations and child protection cases are allocated to qualified and suitably experienced social workers.
- Clear systems are in place to safeguard children with disabilities. Child protection investigations are undertaken by duty teams supported as necessary by specialist staff from the integrated disability service.
- A range of agencies contribute effectively to strategy meetings which are well chaired and result in clear plans.
- Good examples of direct work with children and families are evident.
- Newly qualified social workers receive good support and training packages.
- Administrators and social workers operate together effectively and supportively with roles and responsibilities well defined.
- Close operational oversight by front line managers ensures prompt and effective decision-making. As a consequence workers are clear about the direction and focus of their cases.
- Comprehensive management information is regularly reviewed by senior managers and used to improve provision.
- Senior and operational managers undertake a regular programme of case audits and these are fed back to individual staff to improve their practice.

Areas for development

- Significant variation in practice and consistency between teams makes it more difficult for agencies working across districts to collaborate in the most effective way and some opportunities for disseminating good practice are missed.
- Agencies vary across districts in their understanding and application of the threshold for referrals.
- Significant vacancy levels in the long-term team in one district have led to very high caseloads in the duty team and a backlog of incomplete assessments and delays. However this is well monitored which ensures no children are at immediate risk.
- The focus on equality and diversity in assessments and work with families is variable and there is no comprehensive programme to ensure staff receive training.
- The quality of initial assessments varies. While some are of a good standard and contain a clear analysis of risks, a small number are too brief and do not take account of available information.
- A small number of initial assessments are signed off by managers before all the necessary work is undertaken or completed.
- Modifications to the electronic recording system have led to improvements. However it is still not a fully effective working tool. The duplication of electronic and paper files results in some inefficiency.
- The physical condition of one of the public reception areas and the standard of confidentiality offered to service users is poor.

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

Yours sincerely

Tony Dewhurst
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Jim Graham, Chief Executive, Warwickshire County Council
Chris Hallett, Chair of Warwickshire Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Heather Timms, Lead Member for Children's Services, Warwickshire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education