

18 August 2010

Mr Simon White
Director for Children and Young People's Services
Suffolk County Council
Endeavour House
8 Russell Road
Ipswich
Suffolk
IP1 2BX

Dear Mr White

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Suffolk 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 Suffolk County Council which was conducted on 20 and 21 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 one area for priority action alongside areas of strength, satisfactory practice and areas for development.

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

Strengths

- The work of the integrated teams in the south of the county using the common assessment framework and team around the child models is very effective and there is evidence of this improving outcomes for individual children.



Satisfactory practice

- The customer first service and the access team operate effectively ensuring that referrals are appropriately responded to in a timely way. The access team, which currently operates across the south of the county, performs a valuable role in screening referrals to ensure they meet the threshold for children's services involvement and in gathering information to inform future assessments.
- Duty co-ordinators provide valuable support to team managers helping to ensure that new referrals to assessment and family support teams are progressed in a timely way.
- Social workers report that they have good access to training.
- The quality of completed initial and core assessments is adequate overall. In most of the cases examined partner agencies contributed appropriately to assessments. There are some examples of good quality assessments in which analysis is well focused on the risk factors, although this is not consistent.
- Regular audits of referral and assessment work clearly identify key practice issues which are the subject of feedback to front line staff and are reported to the Local Safeguarding Children Board.
- The findings from serious case reviews are disseminated to and discussed with operational staff. There is evidence of action taken following serious case reviews resulting in improved practice, for example the improved process for early identification and assessment of risk to unborn babies.
- Where children and young people are clearly identified as in need of protection, timely and appropriate Section 47 child protection enquiries are undertaken. Strategy discussions are held appropriately between the police and children's services and there is evidence of a positive working relationship between the two agencies.
- Managers at all levels are accessible and staff feel well supported in their day-to-day work.
- Good efforts are made to gain the views of families about the service received through the use of customer questionnaires when initial assessments are completed. However, the number of completed questionnaires is low.

Areas for development

- The views of children and young people are not always well recorded and in many cases it is not clear how their views have informed the assessments.
- The quality and consistency of formal supervision of social workers are too

variable. While some social workers are well supported, some, including newly qualified members of staff, do not receive sufficient regular formal supervision. This is due in part to the high number of staff supervised by some team managers. Social workers do not all have up-to-date personal development plans or supervision agreements in place.

- Caseloads for many social workers and family support practitioners are too high. This makes effective progression of cases difficult and as a result there are delays in closing cases in a timely way. This issue has been recognised and steps have already been taken to resolve this through increasing the numbers of social worker posts. This is beginning to have a positive impact in some teams.
- The quality of managerial oversight and decision making is too variable. In some teams there is clear evidence of regular, well recorded and well considered management decisions but this is not consistent in all teams across the county.
- Thresholds for children in need services are not being applied consistently. In some cases services are provided to children within the assessment and family support service without an initial assessment being undertaken.
- Most initial assessments are undertaken in the assessment and family support teams and include visits to the families. However, a small number of initial assessments have been recorded as being undertaken by the access team. This team is office based and families are not visited to inform these assessments. This work is inaccurately recorded and authorised by managers as completed assessments and should have been recorded as referrals.
- Timescales for initial and core assessments are not always recorded accurately in line with 'Working Together' guidance. As a result reported performance data on assessment timescales are not reliable.
- Ethnic origin is not recorded in all cases and insufficient attention is paid to the impact of ethnicity, culture and diversity in assessments. As a result, plans are not always appropriate to meet children's needs.

This visit has identified the following areas for priority action:

Areas for priority action

- In one team 35 active cases are allocated to the team manager. Of these, eight are children with child protection plans. All the day-to-day work on these eight cases is carried out by unqualified staff or staff who are not yet registered as social workers. This practice falls well below expected standards and may place children at risk of inadequate protection. Of the cases examined in this team, there were significant delays in undertaking core assessments of children in two families. In these cases there are serious safeguarding concerns which have left

these children at potential risk. In one of these families, this risk is compounded by a lack of evidence of any social work activity or management oversight over a number of months,

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

In addition, it is considered by Ofsted that the findings of this inspection and the identified areas for priority action are likely to become a limiting judgement of the annual children's services assessment when considered with other evidence. This means the annual assessment is likely to be limited to 'performs poorly'.

Yours sincerely

Pat O'Brien
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Andrea Hill, Chief Executive, Suffolk County Council
Peter Worobec, Chair of Suffolk Safeguarding Children Board
Graham Newman, Lead Member for Children's Schools and Young People's Services, Suffolk County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education