

11 August 2010

Ms Sally Rees
Executive Director of Children's Services
Staffordshire County Council
Wedgewood Building
Tipping Street
Stafford
ST16 2DH

Dear Ms Rees

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Staffordshire 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 Staffordshire County 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

- Social workers have excellent access to training and staff development opportunities.
- The use of the common assessment framework is good in comparison with similar areas with significant numbers of children and families benefiting from well coordinated services.



Satisfactory practice

- Contact, referral and duty arrangements are effective. There is widespread awareness of safeguarding needs leading to appropriate contacts and referrals by all agencies.
- The 'First Response' service, which deals with all incoming work, processes and transfers contacts and referrals promptly.
- Team managers are making sound decisions in response to contacts and referrals and appropriately prioritising work in accordance with need and risk.
- Work is appropriately allocated to social workers according to their skill and experience and managers provide effective oversight and direction.
- Staff in contact, referral and assessment teams receive regular supervision and state they have good access to their managers for advice and guidance. Formal supervision is regular and recorded.
- Initial and core assessments are generally timely and ensure that need and risk are suitably evaluated.
- Child protection investigations, core group and strategy meetings are timely and lead to effective planning for the safeguarding of children and young people.
- Emergency duty arrangements are well embedded and ensure that there is appropriate information sharing between the emergency duty service, 'First Response' and contact, referral and assessment teams.
- Social worker visiting frequency is regular and children and young people are routinely seen alone as part of assessments and subsequent planning.
- Joint work to facilitate early intervention and continuous family support is contributing to a comparatively low rate of re-referrals.

Areas for development

- Case records reflect that children and young people have been seen during assessments and visits and that account has been taken of ethnicity, culture, religion, disability and linguistic needs. However, records do not consistently show how this information is used in case planning or that user views have been fully considered.
- The electronic recording system, which is undergoing substantial development, is hindering the smooth operation of assessment and case planning. Staff and

managers are exhibiting frustration with the system and have found it necessary to develop a variety of back-up systems to secure their work. Excessive time is being taken to operate this system which is detracting from face to face contact with children, young people and their families.

- Joint working at initial phases of assessments and case planning is extensive but the engagement of agencies, other than social care, is less consistent in longer-term planning arrangements.
- The breadth of work in safeguarding teams is extensive and sometimes leads to staff feeling under excessive pressure to meet deadlines for initial and core assessments as well as court proceedings.

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.

Yours sincerely

Martin Ayres
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Mr N Bell, Chief Executive, Staffordshire County Council
Mr K Black, Chair of Staffordshire Safeguarding Children Board
Mr I Parry, Lead Member for Children's Services, Staffordshire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education