

25 August 2010

Mr R Clark
Interim Director of Children's Services
Somerset County Council
County Hall
Taunton
Somerset
TA1 4DY

Dear Mr Clark

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Somerset 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 Somerset County Council which was conducted on 27 and 28 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

- The staffing structure of assessment teams and their defined areas of responsibility (known as pods) very effectively facilitate the smooth transfer of work, enhance team support and communication and enable the effective escalation and de-escalation of interventions. Administrative support within the pods is highly regarded and contributes significantly to the smooth delivery of safeguarding services.



- Social workers and their managers greatly benefit from regular access to legal surgeries through which clear advice is provided on cases where statutory interventions are indicated and agreed legal processes are closely monitored.
- Somerset Direct provides a highly effective county-wide service dealing with all initial contacts and referrals. The deployment of experienced social workers alongside other well-trained staff ensures appropriate and prompt decisions are taken on all contacts and referrals. Timely feedback is provided to referrers on agreed decisions and actions.
- Managers at all levels in the organisation demonstrate strong corporate commitment to contact, referral and assessment processes. They are very much in touch with individual cases and set clear work priorities and objectives. Explicit protocols are in place to ensure the volume and quality of work across the county is closely monitored and decisive action is taken to deal with any peaks in activity.
- All newly-qualified social workers undergo specific training and a competency test before they can assume lead professional responsibilities for child protection tasks.

Satisfactory practice

- Contact, referral and duty arrangements are robust. Work is well supported by the effective use of the electronic information and recording system. Accountabilities are clear and based on wide-spread awareness of policies, procedures and safeguarding priorities. Joint working arrangements with the police and health partners are particularly effective.
- All work is allocated to suitably qualified social workers in accordance with their respective skill and experience. The social care workforce in the pods and emergency duty team is stable, experienced and well supported by accessible managers. Staff within the pods receive regular supervision and are positive about the level and quality of support they receive.
- Initial and core assessments are timely and include clear analyses and decisions. Child protection investigations are well-considered, prompt and lead to effective actions to safeguard the most vulnerable children and young people.
- Emergency duty arrangements are well embedded and ensure that urgent action is taken outside normal working hours to safeguard children and young people. Information is appropriately shared between the emergency duty team and the local pods.
- Careful consideration is given to ascertaining the views of parents, children and young people. Services are responsive to the diverse needs of the community with appropriate use of interpreters and effective joint work between the pods and disability service.
- Social worker visiting frequency, including unannounced visits, accords with national guidance. Children and young people are routinely seen alone as part

of assessments and subsequent planning and arrangements are in place to ensure visits are undertaken in any period when the allocated social worker is absent.

- Performance management systems are established, comprehensive and used well by managers to oversee safeguarding practice and processes. Audits including themed audits are undertaken regularly, the outcomes of which are routinely reported to the Local Safeguarding Children Board.
- The use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is well considered and these assessments are being appropriately targeted. The CAF is supporting earlier forms of intervention and ensuring the work carried out within the pods is focused on cases that meet the appropriate threshold for social care interventions.

Areas for development

- The pods are working at full capacity to meet the increasing demands for safeguarding services. Although caseloads are generally manageable, pod staff feel they are sometimes stretched at times of peak activity. When this occurs social workers have difficulty in finding the time to record all their work. In some instances it is necessary for managers to shift priorities and call on resources from other pods to meet increasing work pressures.
- Although initial assessments are completed and have good management oversight the electronic recording system does not require their management sign-off in accordance with national guidance (*Working Together (2010)* paragraph 5.3.9).
- Staff supervision records are not maintained in a consistent format and do not fully reflect the quality and extent of the supervision that is taking place. The format does not readily provide a clear link to appraisal and staff development systems.

Any areas for development 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: Ms S Wheeler, Chief Executive, Somerset County Council
Mr J Snell, Chair of Somerset Safeguarding Children Board
Mr J Osman, Lead Member for Children's Services, Somerset County Council
Mr Andrew Spencer, Department for Education