

5 October 2011

Mr David Taylor
Corporate Director - People
Shropshire Council
Shirehall
Abbey Foregate
Shrewsbury
Shropshire
SY2 6ND

Dear Mr Taylor

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Shropshire 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 Shropshire Council which was conducted on 6 and 7 September 2011. 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 an area of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in May 2010 have been appropriately addressed. The areas for improvement in relation to safeguarding from the safeguarding and looked after children inspection in February 2011 have been appropriately addressed.



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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Highly effective measures have been taken to recruit and retain staff which have led to most posts being filled by permanent staff. This has resulted in significant improvements in the timeliness of assessments, the manageability of social work caseloads and staff morale.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Systems for receiving contacts and referrals within the initial assessment team are effective and contacts and referrals receive a prompt response. ▪ Thresholds for access to children’s services are clear and have been recently reviewed effectively, in partnership with other agencies. ▪ No cases are unallocated at the time of this inspection. All cases are promptly allocated to suitably experienced and qualified social workers. ▪ Child protection inquiries are promptly and appropriately undertaken, in partnership with other agencies. ▪ Most assessments are of at least a satisfactory standard, and some are of a good standard. ▪ The views of children and their carers are evident within assessments and taken into consideration in case planning. ▪ The diverse needs of children and their families are appropriately considered in assessments. ▪ Children are routinely seen during assessments and contacts are clearly recorded. ▪ Cases are routinely reviewed by managers and their decisions and directions are satisfactorily recorded. ▪ Staff receive regular supervision, which is appropriately recorded. Staff have ready access to managers, including senior managers, which is highly valued. ▪ Relevant training and development opportunities are available to staff. Newly qualified social workers are effectively supported and enabled to develop their skills and experience. ▪ Communication and links between the out of hours service and the contact, referral and assessment service are robust.

Areas for development

- Referrals to the children with disability services, other than those for children at risk of significant harm, are assessed within the common assessment framework with insufficiently clear prioritisation, risk assessment and management oversight.
- The service operates a combined electronic and hard copy case file system which is inefficient. This has been acknowledged by the council and plans have been developed to address this.
- Robust systems for case audits have been developed by managers within the service and by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. However routine case audits by service managers have not been undertaken since April 2011, as a result of the service reorganisation. This negatively impacts on managers' ability to monitor the quality of service provision. The council plans to re-introduce these audits in the near future.

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

Yours sincerely

Pietro Battista
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Kim Ryley, Chief Executive, Shropshire Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education