

20 July 2011

Ms Bronwen Lacey
Director of Children's Services
Plymouth City Council
Windsor House
Tavistock Road
Plymouth
PL6 5UF

Dear Ms Lacey

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Plymouth City 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 Plymouth City Council which was conducted on 21 and 22 June 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 three areas of priority action and the areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements were followed up during the full safeguarding and looked after children inspection in May 2010 and have been satisfactorily addressed. Continued improvements have been sustained.

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

Strengths

- The staff group is suitably qualified and experienced with an effective mix of experience and skill. Staff retention is good. Most staff are permanent and have manageable caseloads. They are well motivated, provide good support to peers and demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm. Social workers have easy access to managers through formal and informal supervision, and morale



is good. Staff are appreciative of the training opportunities available to them.

- Clear arrangements are in place for the transfer of cases to long term teams through a weekly transfer meeting between the Head of Service and all team managers. Transfers are well planned and effectively implemented which means that children and young people do not experience delay to the continuity of the services they receive. All cases are audited prior to transfer and case requirements discussed.
- Timely and high quality family group conferences are readily available to the advice and assessment teams. These result in highly effective plans to safeguard children and young people with clear evidence of positive outcomes in a majority of cases.

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- Child protection policies and procedures are used appropriately and provide a clear framework for agencies to meet their responsibilities. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- In a majority of cases seen by inspectors effective communication and collaboration between referral and assessment services and partner agencies contribute to timely and appropriate action to safeguard children.
- The establishment of a thresholds manager within the advice and assessment service ensures the thresholds for access to children's services are applied consistently. Protocols for joint working are agreed with and well understood by partner agencies.
- The use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is well established across partner agencies and provides a wide range of preventative services. The co-location of a CAF worker within the duty team and close working with the thresholds manager is effective in ensuring children and families, where appropriate, have access to early preventative interventions without the need for a formal referral to children's services.
- Significant improvements have been made since the last unannounced and full safeguarding inspections with regard to improving the quality and timeliness of initial and core assessments. Learning from inspection findings and serious case reviews is evidenced through the improved quality of assessments which now clearly and routinely identify risk and protective factors.
- Most cases that require Section 47 enquiries are identified effectively. Assessments are undertaken by social workers who are suitably qualified and experienced. In most cases action is implemented in a timely way to ensure that children and young people are appropriately safeguarded.
- Effective and robust out of hours arrangements are in place which link well to

daytime services. Where a child protection or child in need plan requires unannounced welfare checks to be made out of daytime hours the team has the capacity to fulfil this function to ensure specific children are safeguarded.

- Significantly improved performance management and monitoring systems, including systematic auditing of case files, are consistently applied to effectively support and improve the work of the advice and assessment teams.

Areas for development

- In a small number of cases inspected not all decisions on initial contacts had been completed within 24 hours in accordance with statutory guidance.
- Although most records, including case chronologies, are up to date family case history is not consistently taken into account to inform case planning.
- While management oversight is evident in most cases, including the signing off of assessments, in a small number of cases inspected it was not used proactively to identify risk. This has the potential to expose children and young people to the risk of harm. Senior managers have taken immediate remedial action to address this issue.
- Equality and diversity issues are addressed and explored appropriately in casework assessment and planning. However, although social workers were able to articulate the equality and diversity needs of families they were working with this was not well evidenced in case recording.
- The views of children and young people are not always well recorded and in some cases it is not clear how their views have informed either children's social care assessments or CAFs.

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

Yours sincerely

Lynne Staines
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Barry Keel, Chief Executive, Plymouth City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education