

9 September 2010

Ms Rosalind Turner  
Managing Director, Children, Families and Education Directorate  
Kent County Council  
Sessions House  
County Hall  
Maidstone  
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Dear Ms Turner

### **Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Kent 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 Kent County Council which was conducted on 10 and 11 August 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**

- Kent and Medway out-of-hours service undertakes effective work to ensure that children identified as at risk of significant harm are appropriately safeguarded.
- Operational relationships between social care and Kent police Child Abuse Investigation Unit (CAIU) are consistently timely and constructive in responding



to the immediate protection needs of identified children.

- Changes in procedure and practice have taken place as a direct consequence of learning from serious case reviews. Additionally, there are quarterly events at district level for all social care staff aimed at ensuring serious case review and other safeguarding learning takes place.

### **Satisfactory practice**

- Up-to-date child protection policy and procedures are in place, providing a clear framework for agencies in implementing responsibilities for, and contributing to, meeting children's safeguarding needs.
- Referrals and contacts are communicated by the contact and assessment service in a timely way, ensuring equality of access initially to children's social care.
- Thresholds and arrangements for access to children's social care and collaborative working are clearly defined. However, some partner agencies consider thresholds for intervention are set too high.
- Child protection enquiries, when conducted, are always carried out by a qualified social worker and meet satisfactory standards.
- Case note recording is consistently timely and other related records are mainly up-to-date, providing a clear picture of the current circumstances on cases.
- Good communication between professionals involved with children in need was noted with their views and relevant information appropriately incorporated into initial and core assessments.
- Senior managers take steps to seek assurance of the quality of services provided through themed and externally commissioned audits and have arrangements in place for the provision of key performance indicators data.
- Staff report that they feel well supported by their manager and are encouraged to undertake appropriate training. An extensive recruitment and retention strategy has resulted in the council employing a significant number of newly qualified social workers who are supported in establishing their practice through a Newly Qualified Social Worker scheme.

### **Areas for development**

- Arrangements for prevention and early intervention through the common assessment framework are inconsistently applied by agencies in the county. Some referrals for social care intervention, seen by inspectors, could have been dealt with through coordinated work by universal services.

- The record of agreed actions from strategy meetings between children's social care and the CAIU in child protection matters is not always shared in a timely way between the agencies and delays of several weeks can take place before the formal record is shared.
- The reliability of performance management information is undermined by a variable and inaccurate application of the statutory guidance on the commencement and completion of some initial assessments by managers.
- The quality of analysis in assessments is variable with some lacking sufficient focus on key risk factors.
- Children's wishes and feelings are insufficiently evidenced in assessments or impact on plans. In many cases recording is unclear whether children are seen alone or that their home environment and sleeping arrangements have been considered.
- Attention to identifying and responding to the diverse needs of some children and their parents and carers is inconsistent, although there are individual examples of good work.
- Management oversight and decision making are inconsistently applied and there is a lack of locally generated performance management information at team level. There are examples of inappropriate decision making by managers.
- Team managers and principal social workers have responsibility for a number of children's cases; some are held on the basis that there are insufficient qualified and experienced social workers to whom these can be allocated. This leads to delays in undertaking assessments and delivering services.
- The frequency and quality of staff supervision are insufficiently evidenced in key areas such as identifying development needs, enabling critically reflective practice, ensuring the implementation of plans, and progressing the timely throughput of work.
- Children's records are stored in three different forms that are not linked or integrated within a single information and data platform. This leads to potential gaps in practitioners having a full understanding of children's assessments and plans.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action:

**Area for priority action**

- Some children in need of protection do not receive an adequate and timely assessment of risks and needs, leaving them at risk of harm. A significant shortfall in the capacity of qualified, experienced social workers and

weaknesses in the quality of team manager oversight on child protection cases in some duty and assessment teams contribute to these serious concerns.

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 area 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

**Brendan Parkinson**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Katherine Kerswell, Chief Executive, Kent County Council  
David Worlock, Chair of Kent Safeguarding Children Board  
Sarah Hohler, Lead Member for Children's Services, Kent County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education