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Dear Anthony

**Post inspection monitoring
Ofsted inspection of Cafcass service area Staffordshire and the Marches
(C4) 2009**

This letter contains the findings of the recent post inspection monitoring carried out by Ofsted on 20 and 21 April 2010 at the Cafcass office in Worcester. The monitoring visit assessed progress made by Cafcass in implementing recommendations arising from the inspection of Cafcass Staffordshire and the Marches service area in October 2010. I would like to thank you and your staff for the assistance you provided to inspectors in carrying out this visit.

As a part of the post inspection monitoring process, inspectors assessed:

- the post-inspection monitoring self-assessment prepared by the service area
- a range of documents provided by the service area
- a sample of recently completed reports for courts from across C4
- a sample of recently closed case files from each office
- a sample of files for complaints made since June 2009
- a sample of supervision files
- a sample of appraisal files
- a sample of action plans to improve staff performance
- the work to first hearing team in the Worcester office

Inspectors met with

- the Head of Service C4



- the Quality Improvement Service Manager for Staffordshire and the Marches service area together with a service manager from C4
- five Family Court Advisors from the four local offices

Outcome of the inspection

The inspection report of Cafcass Staffordshire and the Marches service area was published in October 2009 and identified nine areas for improvement.

The action plan for improvement submitted by the service area following the inspection was judged to be satisfactory.

Findings of the post inspection monitoring visit:

- **Area for improvement 1:** Take action immediately to ensure that safeguarding practice complies fully with statutory guidance and Cafcass requirements in all cases

The inspection in October 2009 reported that in a small minority of cases children were left at potential risk of significant harm. The inspection found that staff did not have a shared understanding of safeguarding in private law cases and risks were not always assessed adequately.

Satisfactory progress has been made by Cafcass on this area for improvement. The Head of Service has taken effective action to ensure that staff understand and follow the Cafcass requirements to safeguard children. Steps taken include briefings and workshops to all staff, improved monitoring of the quality of work, two audits of safeguarding practice and the implementation of action plans where necessary to improve the safeguarding practice of some staff. In addition the Head of Service has implemented effectively the national policies of improved recording and work to first hearing teams across C4. These changes demonstrate improved attention to safeguarding across the service area and staff are enthusiastic about the changes made to working practices. Overall, the Schedule 2 letters, which are prepared for courts at first directions hearings, demonstrate satisfactory safeguarding practice. Safeguarding issues are identified well in complaints and appropriate action is taken. The key performance indicator for safeguarding, which is reported monthly, shows evidence of consistent monitoring of staff performance and improving practice.

Although the steps taken are beginning to show positive impact, further action is needed to ensure that improved safeguarding practice is sustained. Internal audits conducted by Cafcass in January and February 2010 found evidence of some poor practice. The quality of the risk assessments was too variable; some were good, some inadequate and, in a few cases, a risk assessment was not completed. However, overall service area is to be commended for the resolute attention to improved safeguarding following the inspection in October 2009.



- **Area for improvement 2:** Take action immediately to ensure the consistent application of allocation and duty processes to safeguard children and young people, including taking account of children's ages and time awaiting service.

The inspection in October 2009 reported that in cases where children were on waiting lists some risk assessments undertaken were insufficiently rigorous.

Good progress has been made by Cafcass on this area for improvement. New working practices have been introduced through the work to first hearing teams across the service area. These teams ensure that effective and timely safeguarding information is provided to courts at first directions. Cafcass has worked in collaboration with courts to tackle delay and all cases on waiting lists were allocated in January 2010. At the time of the post inspection visit there was no evidence of avoidable delay and no children were waiting for a service from Cafcass.

- **Area for improvement 3:** Take action immediately to ensure that performance improvement tools are used consistently to achieve better outcomes for children and young people across the service area.

The inspection in October 2009 reported that performance management processes were not used consistently and the data provided by the performance management system were not sufficiently reliable. Consequently the data provided a more favourable view of some practice than was warranted, including about safeguarding.

Satisfactory progress has been made by Cafcass on this area for improvement. While the quality of some work remains variable and little progress has been made to improve data, managers use performance improvement tools such as Quality 4 Children (Q4C), supervision and appraisal more effectively and their judgements about practice are now more consistent. The number of service objective assessments completed has improved from a low twenty-five at the time of the inspection to one hundred and sixty by March 2010. An audit by the Head of Service of the quality of supervision identified appropriate areas for improvement by managers. The improvement in audit and performance management is linked effectively with action planning to improve practice. While some practitioners and managers have achieved the improvements set out in their action plan, others still have to reach the required standard.

Although progress has been made, further action is needed to increase the use of Q4C and the service area should pay closer attention to the quality assurance of all reports to court. Inspectors saw some examples where the quality of reports to court was inadequate, including poor assessment and weak recommendations.



- **Area for improvement 4:** Within three months ensure that case plans and recommendations to court are shared with children and families appropriately and in a timely manner.

The inspection in October 2009 reported that case plans and recommendations to courts were not shared consistently with Cafcass service users.

Satisfactory progress has been made by Cafcass on this area for improvement. In December 2009 Cafcass introduced an improved national casework system which includes the requirement to share case plans with children and families. The service area implemented these changes effectively. Internal audits conducted by C4 in March 2010 of fifty-seven different files, case plans and reports found that in all cases Cafcass service users had been informed and involved appropriately in plans, assessments and recommendations about their cases.

- **Area for improvement 5:** Ensure that strategic partnership working is effective across all courts, local authorities, commissioned services and relevant community groups.

The inspection in October 2009 reported that while partnership work at an operational level was good it was less well developed at a strategic level.

Satisfactory progress has been made by Cafcass on this area for improvement. The service area reports good relationships with courts across Staffordshire and the Marches. This is demonstrated through the effective implementation of the President's Interim Guidelines in courts across the service area and the provision of early safeguarding information to courts through work to first hearing teams. Strategic links have been established with some local authorities including arrangements for joint training and agreed protocols on the discharge of care orders and the preparation of reports in private law proceedings. A meeting has been held with Families Need Fathers. Although some improvements have been made from a low base and further plans are in place, action is needed to ensure that C4 makes best use of commissioned services and existing community provision across Staffordshire and the Marches.

- **Area for improvement 6:** Within three months ensure that complaints are managed and responded to consistently and comply with the Cafcass complaints policy

The inspection in October reported that the responses to complaints did not meet timescales and some complaints handling showed lack of rigour, appearing cursory and unhelpful to the service user. No mechanism existed to ensure that lessons were learned from complaints.



Inadequate progress has been made by Cafcass on this area for improvement. While there has been some improvement in reducing the time taken to acknowledge receipt of a complaint, the service area is not meeting the national performance indicator for dealing with complaints. The most recent data show that only 46% of complaints are dealt with by the service area in 20 working days. The target is 65%. Although this response time is poor, the average performance across Cafcass Central (41%) and the national average (34%) are lower. Where complaints interviews are cancelled or rearranged, sometimes repeatedly, this demonstrates inadequate priority attention to the concerns of service users. There is too much variation in the quality of the response by Cafcass C4 to complaints. While some complaints addressed all aspects of the complaint in a clear and conciliatory manner, others focused on procedural issues and were more dismissive in tone. Although safeguarding issues are identified appropriately in complaints, further action is needed to improve timeliness and to disseminate any learning from complaints.

- **Area for improvement 7:** Within six months ensure that the impact of family disruption on all aspects of the Every Child Matters outcomes for children is considered fully when planning assessments and informs reports and recommendations to court.

The inspection in October 2009 reported that the Every Child Matters outcomes were not incorporated consistently into the assessments of children and young people.

Satisfactory progress has been made by Cafcass on this area for improvement. Reports to court have a much greater focus on the effects of family disruption on the safety and emotional health of children and young people. Although some case files demonstrated good attention to the effect of family disruption on children's safety and emotional health, assessment of the effect on achievement and consideration of economic well-being were largely absent. The improved national casework system provides a model of case planning and assessment that incorporates attention to all aspects of the Every Child Matters outcomes; an audit of attention to ECM outcomes is planned.

- **Area for improvement 8:** Within six months ensure secure meaningful participation by children, young people and families in improving services.

The inspection in October 2009 reported that the service area did not have a regular process for participation by children and young people and they made little use of the national 'HearNow' system for providing feedback.

Satisfactory progress has been made by Cafcass on this area for improvement. In February 2010 the service area held a very effective consultation meeting with ten



young people. The consultation was conducted by a Family Support Worker from the service area with the National Cafcass Children's Rights Director and the Children's Rights Consultant Hear4U/CafcassYoung Inspectors. Key messages from the children and young people included a request to know what was written in Cafcass reports to court. They also wanted a better understanding of the meaning of confidentiality in the context of family proceedings and how it was used by Cafcass. The children and young people also asked Cafcass practitioners to keep in touch with them during the course of proceedings. As this is the first consultation by Cafcass in C4 it represents a significant step forward in improving services to children and families. The service area reports an enthusiastic response by staff to the feedback from the young people with an increased understanding of the need to consult regularly. The key messages from the consultation will be incorporated into the service area business plan to ensure that effective action is taken. Although the figures remain low, the use of 'HearNow' is improving with 160 responses from adults and 115 responses from children and young people over the last twelve months. Children and young people are also encouraged to use the 'MyCafcass' logon to a secure website. Although the national target for logons is 80%, 51% of children and young people in public law proceedings and 60% of children and young people in private law cases use this service. The trend of use in this excellent national provision is increasing in the service area.

Area for improvement 9: Within six months ensure that the service area's equality impact assessments are implemented effectively.

The inspection in October 2009 reported that while the service area had completed Equality Impact Assessments they had not been implemented.

Inadequate progress has been made by Cafcass on this area for improvement. Although staff attention is now drawn better to Equality and Diversity issues in a broad sense and service managers have attended relevant training, the Equality Impact Assessments are not yet implemented. The service area should reconsider this area of improvement.

Having considered the range of evidence presented, Ofsted judges that satisfactory progress has been made in six of the nine areas for improvement and good progress in one. Taken together, this represents **satisfactory** progress overall.

Yours sincerely

Steve Hunt HM Inspector



cc:

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