

Building C
Cumberland Place
Nottingham
NG1 6HJ

Telephone: 0300 123 1231
Fax: 0300 123 3159
Minicom: 0161 618 8524
Email: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
Web: www.ofsted.gov.uk



02 March 2011

Anthony Douglas
Chief Executive
Cafcass
6th Floor
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London, SW1P 3BT

Dear Mr Douglas

Inspection of Cafcass in S4 – Kent service area

This letter summarises the findings of the recent inspection of Cafcass in the Kent service area, which was conducted on 9 and 10 February 2011. The inspection was carried out under sections 143–145 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. 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 progress that is being made against the Cafcass Transformation Plan through aspects of the existing published framework for the inspection of Cafcass, focusing on aspects of:

- ambition and prioritisation
- performance management
- safeguarding
- service responsiveness.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including: information about Cafcass provided by the local judiciary and local authority children's services departments; observation of the work of a family court adviser; court reports; case records and a range of data and policy documents. Inspectors met with senior and first line managers, family court advisers and a family support worker.

Overall progress

Judgement: Inadequate progress

Although progress has been made by senior managers in some key areas of service provision, the overall quality of the safeguarding service provided to children and families is inadequate.

The quality and effectiveness of local implementation and business planning

- Cafcass policies and procedures comply with statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people. However these are not applied consistently by staff in the Kent service area. Although systems are in place to monitor compliance with policy requirements, these are not used effectively to ensure that staff are accountable for their work. This leads to poor safeguarding practice in some cases.
- Although the area business plan identifies accurately many key actions needed to improve service delivery, it fails to prioritise sufficiently the supervision of staff and the quality assurance of their work.
- The quality assurance by managers of the work undertaken by practitioners is weak. Inspectors found little evidence of the impact of audits to improve front line practice. The quality of supervision is poor. Although supervision does provide some support to staff, it offers little challenge and results in insufficient oversight of the work undertaken. Inspectors found some examples in case files where inaccurate risk assessments had been authorised by middle managers without being scrutinised sufficiently.
- Local authority children's services departments report effective communication at senior management level. This leads to improvements in strategic development between the organisations and greater involvement by Cafcass in Local Safeguarding Children Boards. Communication between Cafcass and local authority practitioners is less well developed and the local authorities consider the quality of work undertaken by Cafcass is too variable.
- Local judiciary confirm that relationships are much improved and liaison is good, resulting in efficient communication between Cafcass and courts.
- The performance by Kent service area as measured by compliance with national key indicators is good. Some performance indicators are better than national averages. Financial management is strong. Kent is one of the three top performing service areas nationally in the reduction of unit costs.

Reducing delays and unallocated cases

- Good progress has been achieved by Kent service area in tackling delay through the implementation of an Early Intervention Team for private law cases and a duty system for public law work. The Early Intervention Team provides timely, risk assessed, safeguarding information about children and families to courts when cases are at an early stage in family proceedings. The duty system in public law ensures that new cases receive early allocation.
- Key performance data demonstrate that there is no delay in allocation, intervention or reporting on any case in Kent service area. This improvement in performance is commendable in the context of previous long delays and a significant increase in demand for public law work over the last twelve months.

Compliance with statutory requirements in the management of safeguarding practice and the assessment of risk

- Inspectors assess safeguarding practice is inadequate overall, although work by some practitioners is strong. As the service area has not conducted an internal audit of safeguarding work, managers only became aware of the wide range in the quality of safeguarding practice during the inspection.
- In too many cases examined by inspectors the assessment of risk is inaccurate. In some cases practitioners are too cautious and over emphasise the potential of risk to children and young people. In some others the risk is underestimated or missed altogether. One case sampled was referred to the local authority at the request of inspectors because safeguarding concerns had not been identified by Cafcass. As a result of the inspection, two other closed cases were identified by Cafcass as requiring referral to the local authority to safeguard the children. Consequently, managers took immediate action during the inspection to begin a full audit of safeguarding work throughout the service area.
- Some Schedule 2 reports are inadequate. Schedule 2 reports provide safeguarding information to courts at first directions hearings. Some of the Schedule 2 reports seen by inspectors did not follow Cafcass guidance on reporting information about the relevance of previous convictions to the court. This requires immediate attention by Kent service area.

Any areas of inadequate performance will be specifically considered in any future inspection of Cafcass services in your area.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve Hunt', followed by a stylized flourish.

Steve Hunt HMI
Her Majesty's Inspector