

Freshford House
Redcliffe Way
Bristol BS1 6NL

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 9456448
Direct F 0117 9456554
lac.safeguarding@ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Andy Roberts
Strategic Director for Families
Surrey County Council
County Hall, Room 116
Penrhyn Road
Kingston-upon-Thames
Surrey
KT1 2DJ

Dear Mr Roberts

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Surrey County Council children's services.

This letter contains the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Surrey County Council which was conducted on 19 and 20 August 2009. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but some areas for development, which are detailed below.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of 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. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

From the evidence gathered, the inspection identified a number of areas where the contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- Since the Joint Area Review 2008 when safeguarding services were judged to be inadequate, the remedial changes implemented by the council have impacted quickly and positively in raising standards of practice within children's front line services.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

- There is clear evidence that the restructuring of the referral and assessment teams and the overall improvements to the quality and timeliness of practice has resulted in effective action being taken to protect children at risk of harm.
- All contacts are seen by a manager within 24 hours. Cases sampled demonstrated that appropriate decisions on incoming work are made in accordance with statutory timescales.
- Child protection enquiries, seen by inspectors, are thorough, timely, carried out by a qualified social worker and supported by joint agency working.
- All assessments seen by inspectors are at least satisfactory and the majority are good. Most files sampled demonstrated clear identification of need and a good analysis of risk.
- In most cases record keeping is up to date. Case files demonstrate managerial overview of the service provided, with clear evidence of management decision making.
- Overall, the arrangements for the transfer and allocation of cases between social work teams are satisfactory. At the time of inspection there were no unallocated child protection or looked after children cases.
- Revised quality assurance systems and case audits by new senior managers have been recently implemented and are beginning to address systems and practice within, and across, teams.
- Staff, including newly qualified social workers, are regularly supervised. They reported that they are supported well and have appropriate training opportunities. Vacancy levels are reducing and retention rates are improving.

From the evidence gathered, the following strengths and areas for development were also identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff demonstrate a professional approach to practice and development. They are child focused and committed to safeguarding children and young people. ▪ In cases sampled, children, young people and their carers are actively involved in assessment and care planning processes. There is clear evidence of their wishes being taken into account, resulting in appropriate child in need or child protection plans. ▪ Most case files seen reflect well how the cultural needs of families and children, in particular those from minority ethnic groups and those with disabilities, are taken into account in assessments and decision-making.

- Management information relating to contact, referral and assessment services is readily available to team managers and used well to check the progress of their team's work and to ensure timely provision and review of services.
- Staff involved in providing front-line referral and assessment services report significantly improved senior management support since the Joint Area Review. For example, staff morale overall was observed to be good and positive comments were received, such as staff now feel 'listened to'.

Areas for development

- Referral and assessment arrangements in one area office are not sufficiently robust. This is due to high staff turnover and a history of insufficient and inconsistent management intervention. While senior managers are taking appropriate and effective remedial action to ensure children and young people are safeguarded, planned interventions for sustainable improvement have yet to be fully implemented.
- Arrangements for access to services have been revised very recently and are yet to become consistently well known and applied by partner agencies. Although reducing in number, inappropriate referrals continue to be made to children's social care services by partner agencies. For example, in some instances the Common Assessment Framework is incorrectly used as a referral form.
- Some children in need cases are closed prematurely without appropriate services in place, or without ensuring that all agencies involved with the child are fully consulted or involved in the closure processes.

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Mr David McNulty, Chief Executive, Surrey County Council
Ms Kamini Rambellas, Chair of Surrey Safeguarding Children Board
Mr Peter Martin, Lead Member for Children's Services, Surrey County Council
Mr Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families