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17 September 2009

Ms Anna Wright
Director of Education and Children's Services
Reading Borough Council
Education and Children's Services
Level 10 Civic Centre
Reading
Berkshire
RG1 7AE

Dear Ms Wright

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Reading Borough 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 Reading Borough Council which was conducted on 25 and 26 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:

- The referral and assessment service has sufficient resources to meet the demand for service for the children referred to it.
- Established inter-agency working by the referral and assessment service leads to appropriate support for vulnerable children.



- Children and family members are effectively involved in the assessment and planning process and their views are appropriately taken into account and recorded on files.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board is monitoring the implementation of the action plan arising from the serious case review effectively.
- From case work sampled, there is evidence that practice is sensitive to the racial, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of children and their families.
- Managers oversee the safe processes and procedures within the referral and assessment teams effectively and ensure that children known to the service are seen when needed and provided with a timely service.
- Appropriate decisions are made within 24 hours on incoming referrals and a written response is provided to referring agencies detailing what decisions have been made about the case.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The speed and effectiveness of the remedial change implemented by managers since the Joint Area Review have led to greatly improved front line services for children and families. This change is based on an accurate self assessment and an effective action plan. ▪ Good quality assurance systems, which include feedback from children and families, are helping to ensure that referral and assessment services are effective and to increase consistency in the quality of service provided to children and their families. ▪ Children's views are taken into account well when new services are designed. For example, the specification for the new contact centre was modified following consultation with the local youth parliament. ▪ Front line social work staff have manageable caseloads and are supervised and supported well by competent managers.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Core and initial assessments are not always completed on time; too many lack adequate analysis and service plans for children and young people are insufficiently detailed and outcome focused. ▪ While social work assistants receive regular and effective supervision and do not carry cases that meet the thresholds for child protection, some of the cases they are carrying are too complex to ensure confident service provision.

- Protocols with the police with regard to domestic abuse notifications are insufficiently developed. High risk cases are prioritised appropriately, however lower risk cases are not, leading to some delays in providing a service to children and families whose wellbeing may be affected by domestic abuse.
- A lack of clarity in the initial referral and assessment teams on thresholds for service underpinning the work of multi-agency children's action teams results in some delays in the transfer of cases. As a result, some children and families have to wait for services.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Mr Michael Coughlin, Chief Executive Reading Borough Council
Mr Stephen Barber, Chair of Reading Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor John Ennis, Lead Member for Children's Services, Reading
Mr Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families