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Ms Bronwen Lacey
Director of Children's Services
Plymouth City Council
Windsor House
Tavistock Road
Plymouth
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Dear Ms Lacey

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Plymouth City 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 Plymouth City Council which was conducted on 6 and 7 October 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 four areas for priority action and a number of 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:

- All cases are allocated to suitably qualified social workers.
- Communication and inter-agency working between the police and the advice and assessment service are effective.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

- The out of hours service is good and coordinated well with the advice and assessment service.
- There is recent evidence that auditing processes are having a positive impact on the quality of work in some individual cases.
- The Advice and Assessment Service is well resourced. The council is committing further investment to improve the electronic recording system.
- The Advice and Assessment Service demonstrates a commitment to gaining feedback from service users on service quality. For example, senior managers have contacted some service users by phone to gain feedback about their experience of the service. However, this work is yet to have an impact on the quality of the service being delivered.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The rapid response team offers timely and effective support to children and their families who have assessed needs. ▪ Frontline staff in the advice and assessment service demonstrate commitment to both providing and improving services for children and their families.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child protection processes and procedures are not consistently applied. In some of the cases sampled, there was insufficient identification of risk and protective factors, potentially leaving children at risk of significant harm. However, there were also examples of good practice. ▪ Case recording is not up to date and in too many cases the quality is poor. This results in a lack of clarity about actions that need to be undertaken. ▪ The combination of no single record for children and families, inconsistent filing and the lack of chronologies in some cases leads to ineffective use of background information; the full family history is not always taken into consideration. As a result the assessment and decision making processes do not consistently identify the risk of harm to children referred to the service. ▪ The quality of core and initial assessments is inconsistent. While some are good, others lack sufficient analysis and do not have clear service recommendations or specific and measurable action plans.

- The identity, ethnicity, religion and cultural needs of children and their families are not always appropriately considered in assessments and planning.
- The frequency of supervision is inconsistent and the quality is variable. Managers do not always sign off completed work in a timely manner, resulting in significant delays in decision making or case closures.
- A range of systems for quality assurance and performance monitoring enables the council to have a good awareness of its strengths and weaknesses. However, information is not used consistently to ensure that appropriate action is taken where weaknesses have been identified.

This visit has identified the following areas for priority action.

Areas for priority action

- Inter-agency thresholds for children in need are not agreed, which leads to an inconsistent response to children and their families by the advice and assessment service. This contributes to caseloads being unacceptably high which has a detrimental impact on the quality of the work and results in some unsafe practice. For example, some concerns about risks to children are not recorded, are not communicated effectively with relevant partners or investigated in a timely manner.
- Management overview of individual casework is inconsistent, resulting in drift in referral, assessment and planning processes, inconsistent practice and cases not being transferred in accordance with the transfer protocol. Some incomplete initial assessments are signed off prematurely by managers in order to meet timescales. In addition, some initial assessments are signed off without the child being seen.
- Plymouth City Council has not ensured criminal record bureau checks are in place for staff working in the contact centre and who process initial child and family contacts.

The areas for priority action identified above will be specifically considered in any future inspection of services to safeguard children within your area.

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Barry Keel, Chief Executive, Plymouth City Council
Jim Gould, Independent Chair of Plymouth Safeguarding Children Board
Grant Monahan, Lead Member for Children's Services, Plymouth City Council
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