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Mr J Crook
Director for Children, Young People and Families
Oxfordshire County Council
Macclesfield House
New Road, Oxford
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Dear Mr Crook

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Oxfordshire 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 Oxfordshire council which was conducted on 24 and 25 November 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 one area for priority action and 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:

- Clear procedures and practices are in place to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are being met.
- All cases held within contact, referral and assessment services are allocated to suitably experienced staff.



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- Systems for receiving referrals are well structured. Administrative processes, which are operated by competent staff, effectively support work within the service.
- Thresholds for child protection inquiries are clear, agreed by partner agencies, and are appropriately implemented within the service.
- Links between the contact, referral and assessment service and other local services are well established and effective use is made of the Common Assessment Framework and the Team Around the Child provision.
- Child protection referrals are responded to promptly and are assessed by suitably experienced social workers.
- Case records in most cases are of a satisfactory standard, and are up-to-date. However, in some cases where assessment has been finalised, delay in completing case recording results in cases not being promptly closed, which distorts workload and performance management.
- Supervision provided to staff is mostly regular, well documented and of a good quality.
- Equality and diversity issues are well addressed in casework assessment and planning, with ready access to interpreters and specialist advisers where required.
- Young people and service users are routinely involved in their assessment and case planning. Their views are regularly sought and are used to influence some service developments.
- Management and performance information is routinely collated and interrogated by managers to identify trends and issues impacting on the effectiveness of services.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff seen by inspectors are committed, motivated and enthusiastic. They indicate that they are well supported by managers who are readily accessible for formal and informal consultation. ▪ Newly qualified workers are provided with good quality induction, manageable caseloads, and regular support and supervision to gradually develop experience, knowledge and competence. ▪ Audit and quality assurance procedures and practice at all levels are in place,

with good evidence of casework audit by front line and senior managers. Senior managers take appropriate measures to assure themselves that referral and assessment processes are effective.

- Partnership working is effectively established, with good professional relationships. In most cases, this results in prompt communication and information-sharing, in particular with housing and police services.
- There is good senior management oversight of complex cases, which are well documented. The Care Proceedings, Advice and Decisions panel provides effective oversight of complex cases where legal issues are being considered.

Areas for development

- Contacts which are held on duty, pending further information to determine whether to carry out initial assessments, are not sufficiently managed and monitored across the teams. Processes for tracking actions to be taken are not consistently robust and the management review of some of these cases is not always up-to-date. This results in drift in some cases and delay in assessment or support being provided to some children and their families.
- Not all child protection inquiries are completed within appropriate timescales across all teams. Some child protection inquiries do not have managerial oversight recorded following assessment or where there has been a change of plan from the original actions which had been authorised.
- Performance against national indicators relating to the timeliness of assessments and the proportion of re-referrals is poor. Some re-referrals occur because of the inadequate quality of analysis in previous assessments where needs had not been promptly identified.
- The quality of assessments is variable. Some are of good quality, but some lack sufficient detail or analysis.
- Young people and their families are not routinely provided with copies of their assessment.
- Arrangements for transfer of cases to long term teams are clear. However, implementation is variable as a result of difficulties in promptly allocating cases within family support teams.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action.

Area for priority action
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Staff turnover within one of the contact, referral and assessment teams has had a recent but marked adverse impact on its performance, particularly on the timeliness and quality of assessments and management oversight of contacts held on duty. Senior managers have taken some action to address the issues. However, this action has not yet had significant impact.

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Joanna Simons, Chief Executive, Oxfordshire County Council
Andrea Hickman, Chair of Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board
Louise Chapman, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Oxfordshire County Council
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