

16 March 2011

Ms Gail Tolley
Director of Children and Young People's Services
Milton Keynes Council
Saxon Court
Avebury Boulevard
Central Milton Keynes
MK9 3HS

Dear Ms Tolley

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Milton Keynes Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Milton Keynes Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 February 2011. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to the annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year. 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 contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising any 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.

The inspection identified areas of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

Three of the areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in November 2009 have been addressed. Two have been addressed but have not yet achieved their desired outcomes and remain areas for development.

From the evidence gathered, the following features of the service were identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Newly qualified social workers are enabled to develop knowledge and practice skills in a supportive learning environment, providing children they work with the benefit of more confident social work intervention. The comprehensive



induction programme enables them to explore and understand a wider range of practice issues than is customarily the case. In addition to highly effective arrangements for their supervision, they also have an opportunity to attend regular practice workshops, to exchange experience and expertise and to network on practice issues.

- There is a good out-of-hours service which is effectively linked to daytime services and has the additional capacity of bringing in family support workers who offer evening and weekend cover, which enables high risk cases to be effectively supported out of normal working hours.

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- Assessments are clear, sufficiently analytical and appropriately identify risk. Ethnicity, gender and any disability needs are effectively considered. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Social workers benefit from frequent formal supervision and appraisals are up-to-date. As a result individual staff development needs are identified and appropriate training provided. Case discussions during supervision are suitably recorded, outcomes and decisions are clear and specific. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- The use of the common assessment framework continues to improve, with a significant increase in the number of children being supported through early intervention arrangements. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- The service's response to child protection concerns meets statutory requirements and appropriate action is taken to ensure children are safe and appropriately protected.
- Multi-agency strategy meetings are held promptly and result in robust plans of action.
- All referrers receive written notification of the decision regarding their referral. This ensures multi-agency awareness of the outcome of decisions and actions taken by children's social care and also promotes confidence in their decision making.
- Children and parents' views are routinely recorded and they are customarily seen as part of the assessment process.
- The quality of initial and core assessments are generally satisfactory with appropriate management oversight recorded in case files.
- Senior managers undertake a systematic audit of the effectiveness of referral and assessment arrangements, which is reported quarterly with areas for

improvement appropriately identified.

Areas for development

- There is an agreed protocol with Thames Valley Police regarding notifications of domestic abuse and this was an area for development at the previous inspection. However, notifications identified by the police as low risk are assessed and closed by unqualified staff without social care management oversight. Inspectors did not identify any children left at risk as a result, but did see a number of cases where there were repeat notifications following further incidents of violence between the parents.
- Thresholds for access to social care are not fully understood by other agencies resulting in high levels of referrals and re-referral to the service. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Work on contacts is undertaken by unqualified staff and can be closed without management oversight. This is contrary to national guidance.
- There are delays in the allocation of work requiring social work assessment, other than child protection enquiries, which impacts upon timescales and the ability to meet children's needs promptly.

Areas for development identified above will be specifically considered in any future inspection of services to safeguard children within your area.

Yours sincerely

Ian G Young
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: David Hill, Chief Executive, Milton Keynes Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education