

10 December 2009

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 contains 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 11 and 12 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 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:

- Where children are identified as at immediate risk of harm, the process is well managed. Child protection (Section 47) enquiries are thorough and timely and always carried out by a qualified and suitably experienced social worker. Action needed to ensure children's safety is identified and implemented promptly.



- Children and family members are appropriately involved in the assessment process. Children are seen and their views are taken effectively into account.
- Samples of case files are regularly audited by team managers and the head of service, leading to improvements in the quality of work. In addition, more systematic file auditing by the separate quality assurance team has recently been introduced although it is too early to demonstrate impact.
- Senior managers take appropriate measures to assure themselves that referral and assessment processes are effective at identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm, and take suitable remedial action when areas for improvement are identified.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board provides regular challenge and scrutiny based on the performance reports it receives, such as information on referral and assessment activity. This role is continuing to develop as the Board introduces a new structure and governance arrangements.
- Actions taken arising from recommendations from a recent serious case review have strengthened the service and the lessons learned have been appropriately disseminated to staff.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Robust processes and systems are in place to manage the service ensuring an effective and prompt response to referrals; a high proportion of initial and core assessments are completed within the required timescales. ▪ All posts in the Referral and Assessment Team are filled and staff have manageable workloads. Maintaining the team at full strength is a priority for the service. ▪ Joint working arrangements with the police in investigating child protection concerns are good. Strategy meetings are well attended by agencies and are capably chaired by managers resulting in clear plans for intervention. ▪ The council's training programme is comprehensive and responsive to the training needs of social care staff; training is highly regarded by staff. ▪ Staff report that they have good access to advice and support from their managers and colleagues. ▪ The Family Advice and Support Team provides evening and weekend cover which enables high risk cases to be effectively supported out of normal

working hours. Staff are available to monitor the safety of children in their families throughout the assessment process.

- The Family Advice and Support Team has used feedback from families who have received the service to improve and develop it further.

Areas for development

- Thresholds for access to social care are not fully understood by other agencies resulting in high levels of referrals to the service.
- There is no agreed protocol with the police service regarding referrals of domestic violence incidents. High numbers of domestic violence referrals, many of which lack clarity, result in increased work for the Assessment Team in seeking the basic information required.
- Although there are examples of good inter-agency co-operation during assessments, the Common Assessment Framework is under-developed, which contributes to the high level of referrals received by the Referral and Assessment Team. The Children's Trust now has an action plan to address this deficit.
- While most initial and core assessments seen are of satisfactory quality, some assessments including those of children from minority ethnic groups lack sufficient analysis, potentially resulting in needs not being identified. Senior managers recognise this and have commissioned suitable training.
- Some staff do not benefit from sufficiently frequent formal supervision. Personal development plans are not in use and appraisals are not all up-to-date. As a result individual staff development needs are not easily identified. Case discussions during supervision are recorded on case files but outcomes and decisions are not always clear and specific.

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: David Hill, Chief Executive, Milton Keynes Council
Elaine Coleridge Smith, Chair of Milton Keynes Safeguarding Children Board
Sandra Clark, Lead Member for Children's Services, Milton Keynes Council
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