

23 February 2011

Mrs Rose Collinson
Director of Children's Services
Medway Council
Gun Wharf
Dock Road
Chatham
ME4 4TR

Dear Mrs Collinson

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Medway 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 Medway Council which was conducted on 25 and 26 January 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 an area of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas of development.

Most areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in January 2010 have been addressed. Those which remain an area of development are:

- The assessment and provision of services to meet the cultural, religious and ethnic needs of children and families are not consistently evident in case files.
- The quality and timeliness of assessments.



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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social workers are well supported by accessible managers. As a result there is high staff morale and a strong professional commitment to improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families. Furthermore caseloads have become more manageable due to an increase in the number of front line staff.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social work skills are developed through regular, good quality supervision and appraisal with access to a wide range of training opportunities which are valued highly by staff. ▪ Clear protocols and written guidelines are in place to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are met. ▪ All child protection cases are allocated to suitably qualified and experienced social workers and where children are assessed as being at risk of harm appropriate and prompt action is taken. ▪ Children are routinely seen when their needs are being assessed and in most cases their wishes and feelings are recorded. ▪ The council has implemented a number of changes to develop social work capacity and responsiveness but as yet consistent improvements in service delivery are not evident. ▪ Information provided to the contact, referral and assessment service by the commissioned out-of-hours duty team is accurate and links well with daytime service processes. The council regularly reviews these arrangements. ▪ Staff workloads are manageable and social workers benefit from recent increased capacity in front line supervisory arrangements. ▪ Thresholds for access to children's services are well established, understood and applied between partner agencies. ▪ The common assessment framework is well embedded across a wide range of partner agencies which has led to positive outcomes for some children and their families. ▪ Section 47 enquires are thorough and carried out in a timely manner with risks clearly identified and appropriate action taken. ▪ Senior managers scrutinise performance monitoring and audit data. However the impact of this in ensuring timely and good quality assessment remains inconsistent.

Areas for development

- The assessment and provision of services to meet the cultural, religious and ethnic needs of children and families are not consistently evident in case files. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- The timeliness of core assessments is below the target set by the council. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- The quality and timeliness of assessment is variable with some being too descriptive and lacking sufficient analysis of need.
- The council has identified deficiencies in its electronic social care records which have limited functionality and paper files are also kept to capture critical elements such as management decisions.

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

Yours sincerely

Bill Wallace
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Neil Davies, Chief Executive, Medway Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education