

24 February 2010

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's 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 the Medway Council which was conducted on 26 and 27 January 2010. 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.

The inspection identified no areas 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 policies are in place to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are met.
- Processes for receiving contacts and referrals through the council's customer first adult and children team are efficient and well embedded.
- Administrative processes for the referral and assessment service are well structured and provide effective support for the service.



- Thresholds for access to children’s services are clear in most cases. These are being further developed in consultation with partner agencies.
- Decisions about referrals and the actions required are timely and are appropriately recorded and reviewed.
- Assessments about the safety of children are undertaken by suitably experienced, qualified social workers, and are routinely overseen by managers.
- Most assessments of children in need are satisfactory and some are of good quality.
- Children and their families are routinely informed of the outcome of their assessment.
- Case recording is up to date and in most cases is of satisfactory quality; some recording is good.
- Communication and collaborative working with partners across agencies are well developed.
- Arrangements for transfer of cases to long term teams are clear, flexible and effectively implemented. This is well facilitated by co-location and shared line management of the teams.
- Managers routinely analyse detailed performance information and case audits to effectively plan and improve services.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Managers and staff have responded positively to the findings of inspection and audit to effect significant improvement in service delivery. ▪ Staff are committed, enthusiastic; morale is high. A generally stable staff complement enables social workers to develop a sound knowledge of families and local issues. ▪ Staff have good access to regular supervision and value the professional advice and support provided by managers, who are readily accessible for formal and informal consultation.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The timeliness of core assessments is below the targets set by the council.

- Information provided to the contact, referral and assessment service by the commissioned out of hours duty team is not always consistently accurate.
- While children are routinely seen during assessments, in some cases their views are not recorded. It is not evident that their views are always taken into account when making plans for their future.
- While the ethnicity of children and families is appropriately recorded, 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.
- Staff shortages, the high proportion of agency staff and pressures on front line management within one of the referral and assessment teams result in greater variability in practice. The council has taken steps to stabilise the team, secure competent permanent staff and to tackle imbalances in referrals across the teams, this has yet to show impact.

This visit has not identified any areas for priority action.

Yours sincerely

Pietro Battista
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Neil Davies, Chief Executive, Medway Council
David Worlock, Chair of Medway Safeguarding Children Board
Les Wicks, Lead Member for Children's Services, Medway Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families