

28 October 2009

Mr John Harris
Director of Children, Schools and Families
Hertfordshire County Council
County Hall
Pegs Lane
Hertford
SG13 8DQ

Dear Mr Harris

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Hertfordshire County 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 Hertfordshire County Council which was conducted on 6 and 7 October 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 areas for priority action and a number of 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 child protection concerns are identified, agencies work well together to safeguard children. In most cases, strategy meetings are chaired by managers, are well attended by agencies and are timely.
- Most assessments seen by inspectors are child focused and lead to effective plans to support children and young people.



- There is evidence of some focused partnership working, for example the multi-agency initiative led by the Local Safeguarding Children Board tackling the overload of assessment work in one area.
- Learning from serious case reviews is disseminated effectively to staff and there is evidence of improved systems and processes as a result.
- A range of relevant training opportunities is provided, although staff report they do not always have time to attend due to work pressure.
- Participation of children and families is supported by good access to interpreters and to the Language Line service.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cases seen in the children with disabilities service have timely, needs-led assessments with multi-agency input and active participation by the families. ▪ The integrated children's system has been implemented effectively. Staff find it useful as a casework support, including for example the production of clear printed copies of assessments which are routinely shared with families. ▪ Good arrangements are in place for auditing case files and this provides an effective process to review the quality of practice. Independent reviewing officers routinely give feedback to social workers about their contribution to child protection conferences. ▪ Communication between assessment teams and the staff in the emergency duty team (EDT) is timely and effective. EDT staff benefit from easy access to management support from children's service managers. ▪ An innovative approach to supporting newly qualified social workers through an 'academy' has already contributed to improvements in recruitment.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The high numbers of referrals and shortages of skilled staff are resulting in delays to assessments and individual workloads which are too onerous. Some workload reduction has been achieved through recent strengthening of the management in the client service team. The local authority is planning to reduce these pressures by restructuring the service in November 2009.

- The common assessment framework (CAF) is underdeveloped. The Children's Trust has worked hard to promote take up but the impact of this work so far has not been sufficient to reduce the high level of referrals to children's services..
- High numbers of domestic violence incidents are reported by the police. Many reports lack sufficient detail to enable a priority judgement about individual cases to be made, placing heavy demands on resources in the assessment teams. The local authority and the police are piloting a scheme for joint evaluation of all such reports in order to target intervention more effectively. It is too early to measure the impact of the pilot.
- Thresholds for core assessments are variable across the county and some complex assessments are undertaken by unqualified staff. The local authority recognises this and is taking action to standardise thresholds.
- There is a shortage of qualified social workers; the current vacancy rate is 25%. The local authority is taking action to address this, including recruiting staff from overseas and the creation of the academy.
- The reliance on agency staff and agency managers to cover vacant posts and the resulting rapid turnover risk undermining continuity for families and social workers.
- Whilst there are examples of staff receiving effective challenge and support from their managers, with regular supervision and stable management arrangements, this is not consistent across the local authority.

This visit has identified the following areas for priority action.

Areas for priority action

- Management of risk assessments in the contact centre is not sufficiently robust; some contacts are closed by professional assistants rather than managers. Two cases were seen by inspectors where child protection concerns had not been properly evaluated. These were brought to the attention of the local authority who took immediate and appropriate action to ensure the children were safe.
- Some cases awaiting assessment are long overdue with examples dating back to March 2009. The local authority is aware of these cases, which result from severe staffing shortages earlier this year, and reports that they have been screened for risk and are kept under review. While the assessments remain uncompleted, there is the potential that children and young people will not be safeguarded effectively or will not receive

services they need.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Heather Brown HMI
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Caroline Tapster, Chief Executive, Hertfordshire County Council and
Chair of Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Board
Jane Pitman, Lead Member for Children's Services, Hertfordshire County
Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families