

28 July 2010

Mr David Sanders
Director of Children's Services
Herefordshire Council
Brockington
35 Hafod Road
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Dear Mr Sanders

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Herefordshire 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 Herefordshire Council which was conducted on 29 and 30 June 2010. 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 one area for priority action alongside areas of strength, satisfactory practice and areas for development.

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

Strengths

- Morale is high and social workers have access to a range of training and development opportunities which are valued. This supports good workforce stability in the face of increasing demand.
- Senior managers have taken decisive action in tackling current deficiencies with children's services, while this is in the early stages of implementation the service is improving from a low base in some areas.



Satisfactory practice

- Processes and systems for responding to contacts and referrals are well managed.
- Information sharing arrangements with the police are comprehensive and support timely decision making.
- All child protection cases are allocated to suitably qualified social workers.
- Lessons learnt from serious cases reviews have been disseminated to all staff and are widely understood. This is beginning to support practice development and improvement.
- The use and quality of the common assessment framework (CAF) is significantly improving although it is not fully embedded across all partner agencies.
- A dedicated CAF implementation officer who is based in the referral and assessment team provides effective support for lead professionals and ensures that outcomes are monitored and evaluated.
- Newly qualified social workers report that they are well supported. There are good learning opportunities and effective mentoring systems for these members of staff.
- The development and implementation of a strategic audit programme that includes peer review has started to identify some areas of practice where change is required within the referral and assessment team. This includes inter-agency working and staff performance issues.

Areas for development

- Management oversight and decision making is inconsistent and does not support clear and effective case planning or appropriately monitor practice. In some cases decisions are made before important historical information has been accessed or taken into account.
- Inspectors found evidence of delay and significant weaknesses within assessment practice in many cases. For example, initial assessments are finalised without the child being seen and assessments are being signed off as complete before the findings have been shared with the family.
- Key performance data including the completion of initial and core assessments is inaccurate and prevents managers from monitoring performance effectively. In many cases initial assessments are closed prematurely and before the threshold for a core assessment has been established, despite this a core assessment is then used to complete the initial assessment of risk. This leads to significant delay in the assessment of risk and protective factors.
- Not all cases have chronologies which makes it difficult for social workers and

managers to understand the family history from reading a file.

- Analysis within some assessments is limited. Protective and risk factors are not made sufficiently explicit and children's views are not consistently evidenced.
- There is inconsistent recording and consideration of the identity, ethnicity and cultural needs of children and their families in some assessments.
- Planning in children in need cases is insufficiently specific and in some cases lacks measureable outcomes. In child protection cases plans do not always include contingency arrangements.
- Delays in the throughput of work and the inappropriate use of core assessments have contributed to social workers having high caseloads.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action:

Area for priority action

- Assessment and child protection processes are not always timely and management oversight and decision making is inconsistent and does not always identify risk factors. Consequently some children are left at risk of harm or experience delays in the provision of services. The council accepted these findings and took immediate action to begin to address the issues identified and review relevant cases.

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

In addition, it is considered by Ofsted that the findings of this inspection and the identified area for priority action are likely to become a limiting judgement of the annual children's services assessment when considered with other evidence. This means the annual assessment is likely to be limited to 'performs poorly'.

Yours sincerely

Martin Davis
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Mr Chris Bull, Chief Executive, Herefordshire Council
Ms Maggie Blythe, Chair of Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr Jenny Hyde, Lead Member for Children's Services, Herefordshire Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education