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Mr John Coughlan CBE
Director of Children's Services
Children's Services Department
Hampshire County Council
Elizabeth 2 Court East
The Castle
Winchester
Hampshire
SO23 8UG

Dear Mr Coughlan

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Hampshire 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 Hampshire County Council which was conducted on 18 and 19 August 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 one area 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:

- Children and families are involved in assessments and their views are appropriately recorded on files.
- Child protection enquiries seen by inspectors are conducted in a thorough and timely manner.



- Child protection thresholds are well understood and appropriately applied.
- The training co-ordinated by the Local Safeguarding Children Board is valued by social work staff.
- Practice is sensitive to the racial, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of children and their families.
- Revised arrangements for case file auditing have recently been adopted. Senior managers have plans for a systematic evaluation of the impact of this process on the quality of services to children and families.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The emergency duty team provides a well resourced, robust and effective service for children and their families. ▪ The Local Safeguarding Children Board has taken a thematic approach to the dissemination of lessons learnt from all recent serious case reviews. This has been delivered as a training package to social workers who have reported positively on the learning experience. ▪ Senior managers have responded promptly to weaknesses identified in the referral and assessment service by restructuring the service in the north east of the county, thereby reducing caseloads in this service and by significantly remodelling the 'Hantsdirect' service.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There are, at present, no agreed written inter-agency thresholds for services for children in need, contributing to an inconsistency of service provision across the county. ▪ The current arrangements for screening referrals are not robust and have resulted in inappropriate referrals being transferred to the referral and assessment teams. New arrangements aimed at improving the quality of initial screening are planned to be implemented in September 2009. ▪ Written receipts of referrals are not routinely sent to referring agencies, resulting in some evidence of poor communication between agencies. ▪ The quality of initial and core assessments is too variable across the county and some assessments lack sufficient analysis. ▪ Record keeping is inconsistent across the county. Not all file records are up to date and a chronology was not available on the files of children in need cases seen by inspectors.

- Managers' decision making and reflective supervision of staff are not always clearly recorded on children's files; when this is recorded on the electronic file, it is hard for staff to find. This results in a lack of easily identifiable evidence of management guidance and direction for front line staff.

This visit has identified the following area(s) for priority action:

Area(s) for priority action

- Social work staff in the children in need team in one office were found to be carrying unacceptably high caseloads, resulting in serious delays in recording, poor quality assessments and the potential for delays in the delivery of services for some children and families.

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



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Mr Andrew Smith OBE, Chief Executive, Hampshire County Council.
Mr David Kirk, Lead Member for Children's Services, Hampshire County Council
Mr Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families