

24 February 2010

Mr Paul Gray  
Interim Group Director - Children and Young People  
Gloucestershire County Council  
Shire Hall  
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Dear Mr Gray

## **Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Gloucestershire County Council'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 Gloucestershire County 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 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:

- Assessments seen appropriately include parents' views. In addition there are some good examples of children's views being used to inform case planning.



- All child protection cases are allocated to suitably qualified social workers ensuring that an appropriate level of expertise is available to children and families.
- Child protection enquiries are timely and are carried out by suitably experienced social workers.
- Case notes were generally up to date and of an acceptable standard.
- The recent move to four locality referral and assessment teams has led to improved working arrangements with key partner agencies and knowledge of local provision; this enables the service to respond more effectively to local need.
- There has been a recent independent audit of the referral and assessment service and initial improvements are beginning to be made in some areas. For example, the audit identified that the correct recording process for child protection enquiries was not being followed and appropriate action has been taken to rectify this.
- A review of the training available to social workers is underway to identify how it can better meet their needs. Specific training for referral and assessment workers is planned.

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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The common assessment framework is well developed and demonstrates some good partnership working.</li> <li>▪ The council has a good awareness of the strengths and areas for development within the referral and assessment teams. Elected members and senior managers have given a high priority to this area, which has led to the restructuring of the service and securing funding for additional social work posts.</li> </ul>
<b>Areas for development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The information passed to the referral and assessment teams by customer services often lacks sufficient detail and leads to further work being undertaken by social workers before initial decisions can be made. This has led in some cases to decisions about contacts not being made within required timescales.</li> <li>▪ Thresholds for access to children's social care are not consistently applied</li> </ul>

between teams. The assessment of risk on some initial contacts is insufficient to justify decisions to take no further action. However, the council has recognised the inconsistent response to domestic abuse referrals and is piloting a multi-agency group to assess and screen these contacts; the impact of this has yet to be evaluated.

- Social work capacity varies across the teams. Some caseloads are too high resulting in some significant delays in children, young people and their families being seen and in initial assessments not being completed within required timescales.
- Some initial assessments are concluded prematurely and without the child being seen.
- Too many assessments are of poor quality and lack analysis. Some assessments focus only on current issues and do not take into account historical information or undertake checks with all relevant agencies.
- The quality and frequency of supervision vary between teams; management oversight of some cases is inadequate and fails to identify shortfalls in practice. However, some social workers were very positive about the support and supervision that they received.
- The electronic recording system does not provide sufficient accurate up to date management information and therefore does not enable effective monitoring of practice. The combination of a number of factors including the inputting of data and correct recording processes not being followed results in data not always accurately reflecting the activity taking place. In some cases key information such as a child's ethnicity is not recorded.
- The quality of chronologies on case files is poor and makes it difficult to ascertain quickly the family history.
- In the majority of children in need cases, service recommendations and plans are not sufficiently clear or measurable.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action.

**Area(s) for priority action**

- Some assessments of risk are of poor quality resulting in children and young people being left vulnerable to significant harm. Some contacts and cases are closed without consideration of all relevant risk and protective factors including historical information.

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

Yours sincerely

**Paul d'Inverno**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Peter Bungard, Chief Executive, Gloucestershire County Council  
Margaret Styles, Independent Chair of Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board  
Paul McLain, Lead Member for Children's Services, Gloucestershire County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families