

12 November 2009

Mr Malcolm Newsam
Executive Director for Schools, Children, and Families
Essex County Council
PO Box 11
County Hall
Chelmsford
CM1 1LX

Dear Mr Newsam

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Essex 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 Essex County Council which was conducted on 14 and 15 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:

- Identification of risks of immediate harm to children in new referrals is prompt. Strategy discussions are usually held in a timely manner.
- Arrangements for initial contact from members of the public and professionals, screening of information, and referral for a children's social care or related service are effective.



- A responsive out of hours emergency duty team provides an appropriate service.
- Inter-agency co-operation in responding to child protection cases is effective.
- Case file and workload monitoring measures and audits are used appropriately to inform managers of strengths and weaknesses of service delivery.
- Carers and children were involved in the assessment and case planning process in the cases seen by inspectors.
- Thresholds for assessment have been agreed and published by the council. They are being phased in by children's social care and assist in prioritising work. The council is phasing in an Initial Response Team, using these thresholds, to provide a county-wide framework to improve the consistency, timeliness and quality of the response to contact and referrals.
- The implementation of the new information technology system to record and monitor assessments is being prudently managed. In the sites where it has been introduced, management oversight of service delivery has been strengthened.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good staff briefing and instructions following serious case reviews have been introduced, in accordance with the recommendation in the Joint Area Review to ensure that lessons are learned in a timely way. ▪ Managers and staff are strongly committed to delivering a child-centred service in difficult circumstances. ▪ Social workers report that they receive supportive, regular supervision and that easy access to management advice is available when they need it, helping to manage the significant workload pressures.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The quality of initial assessments is inconsistent, although inspectors saw some examples of good practice. ▪ Children and families are not receiving a consistent and timely service across the county. The results of assessments are not shared with them in all cases.

- Action following assessments is not always authorised by managers, including both child protection and children in need cases. This is not consistent with statutory guidance.
- The high volume of domestic violence referrals results in undue pressure on assessment resources and delayed response in some cases. The agreed protocols between children's services and police to prioritise risks in these referrals are not yet implemented, adding to pressures on the assessment system.
- The Common Assessment Framework is underdeveloped and not routinely used by partner agencies. The Framework is not reducing referrals to children's social care or enabling consistent access to early intervention for children.
- Measures taken by senior managers to address capacity shortfalls in the assessment service are evident but are yet to have sufficient impact across the county. Although there is gradual reduction in social work caseloads, some caseloads remain too high, which affects the timeliness of effective assessment.
- Recording of the religion, ethnicity and culture of service users is not consistent, although examples of sensitive practice in handling diversity were seen by inspectors.
- In some cases seen by inspectors, it was not clear that children had always been seen alone when social workers visit.

This visit has identified the following areas for priority action.

Areas for priority action

- The capacity of the assessment service is significantly stretched by high rates of referrals and high staff turnover, vacancies and sickness. This results in allocation and completion of initial assessments being significantly delayed, core assessments not being completed on time and child protection planning failing to progress in a timely way. In some parts of the county, there are significant delays in allocating initial assessments; some cases seen by inspectors had waited up to six months before the initial assessment commenced. Children's needs are not properly identified and met. As a result problems that they and their families face are not resolved in a timely manner and risks are not minimised.
- There are high levels of unallocated work with children in need in some parts of the county and some child protection cases are not allocated to a named social worker. The cases are monitored and action is undertaken

by a duty worker, but this does not provide a consistent service to families in crisis.

- In those local offices where capacity is insufficient, case recording is inadequate, including some child protection cases, with the result that it is difficult to ascertain progress in delivering protection plans.

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 stroke extending to the right.

Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Joanna Killian, Chief Executive, Essex County Council
Paul Fallon, Chair of Essex Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Peter Martin, Lead Member for Children's Services, Essex County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families