

17 June 2010

Mr John Nash
Director of Children's Services
County Hall
Colliton Park
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Dear Mr Nash

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Dorset 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 Dorset County Council which was conducted on 18 and 19 May 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 areas of strength and satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

Strengths

- Lessons learnt from serious cases reviews have been disseminated across all social work teams and have led to practice developments and improvements.
- The Specialist Prevention Service provides timely and effective intervention to children on the edge of care and leads to improved outcomes for children and their families.
- Staff are well supported, morale is high and turnover is low. This provides good



stability and consistency of service provision for children and their families.

Satisfactory practice

- Assessments seen by inspectors identify both risk and protective factors, and include sufficient analysis of the information gathered. The wishes and feelings of children and carers are taken into account. Specific and measurable action plans are in place and progress against these are monitored effectively ensuring children are provided with appropriate services.
- All staff undertaking Section 47 investigations are suitably qualified and experienced. The investigations they undertake are thorough and initial child protection conferences are held within timescale.
- Staff have access to relevant training; they are well informed about up to date practice and they use this knowledge when providing services to children and their families.
- Once a decision has been made to offer a service, record keeping is up to date, includes sufficient detail and demonstrates how decisions have been made and how risk is managed.
- Successful communication and information sharing between agencies contribute well to the safeguarding of children.
- Out of hours duty arrangements are clear and link well to the referral and assessment teams. This service has access to up to date case information of sufficient quality to enable them to make appropriate decisions in relation to safeguarding children.
- Supervision is regular and provides good support to staff. It helps inform case work planning and ensures appropriate management oversight is maintained.

Areas for development

- Overall the timeliness of initial and core assessments has improved. However this improvement varies considerably between teams and in some cases is considerably below the target set by the council and the national average. This leads to a delay in service provision for some children.
- Although there is currently no unallocated work, during the past six months significant numbers of initial assessments have been unallocated for short periods. Senior managers have monitored the situation closely but have yet to develop effective action plans to ensure similar delays do not re-occur. During this period high risk work has not always been effectively prioritised.
- The ethnicity of service users is not always recorded or taken into account in assessments or management information and so service design will not reflect

the diverse needs of the community.

- A structure to support the use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is in place but use of the CAF is not fully embedded across all partner agencies and so its impact has yet to be fully realised.
- Practice for responding to initial contacts is not consistent across teams. In some cases contacts are not passed to a manager for decision on how to respond for a number of days while further information is being sought. Management oversight of decision making about contacts and evidence to confirm that all relevant background factors have been taken into account are not always evidenced on file.
- Not all cases are transferred from the Assessment Teams to the Child Care Teams within timescales set by the authority. This has a significant impact upon capacity within referral and assessment teams.
- A survey of the views of children and their carers using the contact, referral and assessment service has not taken place since 2008. As a result their collated views are not used systematically to review and help inform practice developments.
- The analysis and impact of management information and monitoring are variable. There are significant areas of practice which are currently not monitored on a regular basis. As a result there is a lack of robust and clear management action plans to drive service improvements.

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.

Yours sincerely

Martin Davis
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: David Jenkins, Chief Executive, Dorset County Council
Richard Stowe, Chair of Dorset Safeguarding Children Board
Toni Coombs, Lead Member for Children's Services, Dorset County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education