

28 July 2010

Ms Anne Whiteley
Executive Director of Children and Young Persons' Services
Devon County Council
Room 126, County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
EX2 4QD

Dear Ms Whiteley

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Devon's 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 Devon County 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 practice managers 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

- Staff are well motivated, have access to good training and value the professional advice and support provided by managers, who are readily accessible for formal and informal consultation.
- Links between the out-of-hours service and the contact and referral service are effective to enable appropriate information to be shared promptly and the out-of-hours staff undertake some non-emergency visits during evenings and



weekends to ensure that children are safe.

- The Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub, a pathfinder service, which brings together statutory and voluntary agencies into a central contact point for referrals, while in early stages of development, enables improved intelligence gathering and information sharing across partner agencies.

Satisfactory practice

- Clear procedures and practices are in place to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are met.
- Communication and liaison with partner agencies are effective and contribute towards prompt referral and exchange of information.
- Contacts and referrals, including child protection referrals, receive a prompt response and are subject to robust initial decision making.
- All cases held within referral and assessment services are allocated to and assessed by suitably qualified and experienced staff.
- Children are routinely seen and interviewed, where appropriate, during assessments.
- Diversity issues are appropriately considered in case work practice.
- Most assessments are of a satisfactory quality and some are good.
- The outcome of referrals is routinely notified to families and to referring agencies.
- Regular supervision is provided to staff and management decisions are routinely recorded on case files.
- Managers at all levels routinely monitor management information and audit cases.
- Early intervention and increased use of the common assessment framework results in more positive outcomes for increased numbers of children in need.

Areas for development

- Protocols for transfer of cases from the referral and assessment teams to long-term teams are in place. However, significant capacity issues within the long-term teams result in cases being held too long within the referral and assessment teams. This increases pressures on staff within the referral and assessment teams and reduces the time available to them to ensure recording is up-to-date and to maintain a good standard of practice.

- Despite improvements to the electronic records systems, poor system operating performance results in staff experiencing significant delays in accessing or inputting onto case files and records.
- Contacts, received through referral co-ordinators, do not always contain accurate or sufficient information. Not all staff are sufficiently skilled in sensitive information gathering.

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

Yours sincerely

Pietro Battista
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Phil Norrey, Chief Executive, Devon County Council
Alan Wooderson, Independent Chair of the Devon Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr Andrea Davis, Lead Member for Children's Services, Devon County Council
Cllr Christine Channon, Lead Member for Children's Services, Devon County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education