

25 November 2009

Mr Bruce Buckley  
Deputy Chief Executive and Strategic Director for Children & Younger Adults  
Derbyshire County Council  
County Hall  
Matlock  
DE4 3AG

Dear Mr Buckley

## **Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Derbyshire 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 Derbyshire County Council which was conducted on 27 and 28 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 no areas for priority action but 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:

- The council's call centre, Call Derbyshire, provides effective records of contacts to the assessment and referral teams.
- The views of children and family members are comprehensively incorporated into the assessment process, and assessments include sufficient focus on children.



- Information obtained from partner agencies is appropriately used to inform assessments.
- Cases are allocated to qualified staff who have manageable caseloads.

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 Children’s Rapid Response Team provides a good out of hours service.</li> <li>▪ Staff value the good training opportunities and mentoring arrangements provided for newly qualified social workers. Training courses, such as ‘Analysis and Critical Thinking on Assessments’ have been commissioned in response to identified areas of staff need.</li> <li>▪ Staff report that they receive good management support, advice and supervision whilst on duty.</li> </ul>
<b>Areas for development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Although thresholds for services are in place, re-referral rates are the highest in the statistical neighbour group, and the reasons for this have yet to be fully addressed.</li> <li>▪ In some cases, risk assessment is insufficiently robust at the point of referrals of child protection concerns, leading to them being responded to as initial assessments rather than as immediate child protection (Section 47) enquiries. This leads to delays in investigation and a low level of joint investigations with partner agencies, and the potential for children to remain at risk.</li> <li>▪ Variation in the timeliness in completion of core and initial assessments timescales specified in national guidelines is too wide. For example, some core assessments have taken as long as 461 days to complete whilst others have been completed within two days. This results in delays in the provision of appropriate services to some children in need.</li> <li>▪ Core and initial assessments are too variable in quality, with some including good quality analysis and others being too descriptive. Too many fail to make effective use of chronologies and lack rigorous analysis to inform effective recommendations for service provision and care planning.</li> <li>▪ The current method for determining the completion date for initial assessments, at the point at which the child or young person is seen, is not consistent with national guidance.</li> <li>▪ Whilst satisfactory performance information and management systems are in place, they are not used consistently to improve areas of practice that require development.</li> </ul>

- Issues concerning children and families' cultural and diversity needs are not consistently addressed in assessments.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a long, sweeping underline.

Heather Brown HMI  
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Nick Hodgson, Chief Executive, Derbyshire County Council  
Bruce Buckley, Chair of Derbyshire Safeguarding Children Board  
Tracy Critchlow, Lead Member for Children's Services, Derbyshire County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families