

15 January 2010

Mr Colin Green
New Council Offices
Earl Street
Coventry
West Midlands
CV1 5RR

Dear Mr Green

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Coventry City 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 Coventry City Council which was conducted on 8 and 9 December 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.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but some 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:

- Effective action is taken to ensure that children at risk of immediate harm are safeguarded.
- Clear thresholds for services are in place and are understood and agreed by partner agencies. Most children and young people are referred to social care services appropriately.



- Social workers and managers understand and have easy access to policy and procedures which underpin and support interventions.
- Duty assessment and referral systems are staffed by skilled, experienced and qualified social workers. As a result, complex case work is managed well and children and young people receive appropriate support.
- Assessments are routinely shared with parents, carers and young people, enabling families to engage effectively with the resulting plans, including child protection plans.
- The emergency duty team provides an effective out of hours response. Inspectors saw examples of good communication with the referral and assessment teams which ensured that children and young people were safeguarded.
- Local analysis of needs has led to investment in multi-agency working across partner agencies and more provision of preventative services underpinned by the use of the Common Assessment Framework. This ensures that children and young people receive an appropriate level of support and are not referred to children's social care services unnecessarily.
- Staff in the referral and assessment teams report that they receive good advice and support from their line managers and regular supervision with a clear focus on case work management. Senior and front line managers are effective in overseeing casework decisions and make a positive impact on the quality and timeliness of service delivery.
- Well-established arrangements are in place to support partnership working and information sharing between the police and social care to safeguard children from domestic abuse.
- Core assessments seen by inspectors were at least satisfactory in quality with some good examples where risk factors were identified and analysed well and there were clear plans for service delivery. Case files seen by inspectors contained thorough chronologies and background history which informed decision making well.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board ensures that lessons from serious case reviews and research to improve the quality of front line practice are communicated to all staff.
- Children and families from a wide range of ethnic and minority groups receive appropriate support which meets their individual needs; ethnicity and religion are consistently recorded and considered within assessments.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Senior managers have a good understanding of the current strengths and areas for development within the referral and assessment services and have promoted a culture of continuous improvement. Major changes have been implemented and have led to improvement in the quality of services and performance. ▪ Front line staff demonstrate a strong commitment to providing good quality services to children and young people and promote a strong team working ethos. This contributes to all identified risks to children being assessed promptly. ▪ Children in need of protection benefit from good multi-agency child protection strategy discussions which use a locally developed model to consider risks comprehensively. These discussions are recorded well and lead to effective multi-agency planning and interventions. ▪ The views, wishes and feelings of children and young people are understood and inform assessments and plans. Social workers use a good range of innovative methods which enable children to share their views more effectively. ▪ Children with disabilities who are in need of protection, or whose siblings are in need of protection, have their needs holistically assessed; this results in good plans which meet both their safeguarding and welfare needs well.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social workers' caseloads are too high in the referral and assessment teams. While all child protection work is managed safely, there are delays in responding to and recording some child in need cases. ▪ A complex system for recording and storing information within two electronic recording systems and paper files places considerable demands on front line workers and some duplicated effort to ensure information is fully recorded and retrieved. ▪ Some current templates for recording information do not assist social workers to collate all relevant information efficiently. For example, although recorded separately in the electronic recording system, the contact template does not include the child and family's ethnicity or first language. ▪ Some children and young people who are referred to the referral and

assessment service and assessed as not meeting the threshold for children's social care services would benefit from additional support from preventative and universal services. However, not all are redirected to the relevant agencies or helped to access more appropriate and less intensive support.

- The quality of initial assessments is variable. Some are of high quality. However, some child in need assessments contain insufficient information to make effective decisions or plans.
- Senior managers have identified that neighbourhood teams do not have enough social workers and this adversely impacts on the referral and assessment services' ability to manage and transfer work in a timely manner.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Martin Reeves, Chief Executive, Coventry City Council
Colin Green, Chair of Coventry Safeguarding Children Board
John Blundell, Lead Member for Children's Services, Coventry City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families