

20 August 2009

Mr Dean Ashton
Corporate Director, Children, Schools and Families
Cornwall County Council
County Hall
Treyew Road
Truro TR1 3AY

Dear Mr Ashton

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Cornwall 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 Cornwall County Council which was conducted on 22 and 23 July 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 some areas where the contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- All children subject to child protection plans are appropriately allocated to qualified social workers and in cases seen are receiving an appropriate response.



- The recent implementation of case audits by new senior managers. Issues arising from these relating to systems and practice within the teams are beginning to be addressed.
- Supervision of staff is carried out regularly and in accordance with the council's supervision policy.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff met during the inspection demonstrated a commitment to improving safeguarding services to meet the needs of children, young people and families.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child protection processes and procedures are in place but are not consistently implemented in operational practice. In some cases, delays in convening strategy discussions during child protection enquiries and in holding initial child protection conferences mean that timely and appropriate action is not taken to reduce suspected harm to some children. ▪ Referrals to the access and assessment teams are not always promptly responded to, including some concerned with child protection, and there are significant delays for some children and families in receiving a timely and appropriate service response. For example, delay in receiving police notifications of domestic violence incidents is reducing the council's ability to safeguard children and young people. ▪ A number of cases seen had experienced three or more repeat referrals before being accepted as a case for ongoing intervention, suggesting ineffective initial assessment processes. ▪ Thresholds for risk and assessment are not well understood and are inconsistently applied. ▪ Some direct referrals could more appropriately be assessed through the common assessment framework, thereby decreasing the capacity pressures on the access and assessment teams. ▪ Many initial and core assessments show significant delay in recording the outcome of assessments and in recording management decisions. In addition, case note recording by social work staff is not consistently up-to-date and in some cases the delay is significant. Case files inspected did not have chronologies and social workers confirm that these are not being completed as standard practice.

- The quality of assessments and subsequent care planning is inconsistent and lacks a clear focus on outcomes for children and young people. In cases seen, assessments often lacked sufficient detail and analysis and practice was not informed by up-to-date knowledge and research. This in turn impacts adversely on the quality of the care plans arising out of the assessments.
- There is significant delay in the transfer of cases between children's services teams. A significant number of children in need cases are being held within the access and assessment teams for well over four months. This limits the capacity to provide an appropriate front-line service.
- Action plans on cases, including those subject to child protection plans, are not specific, measurable or clear in terms of lead responsibility. There is little evidence that first line managers are addressing this issue.
- Many social workers are currently carrying excessive caseloads. A significant number of cases are awaiting completion of assessments, recording of information or management decision to enable their closure.
- Case files seen did not adequately reflect how the cultural needs of families and children, in particular those from minority ethnic groups, are taken into account in assessments and decision-making.
- Children's views and needs are not consistently reflected in the assessment process. In a number of cases seen no reference was made to the direct involvement of the child or young person in the assessment process. Some initial assessments were closed without the child having been seen.

This visit has identified the following areas for priority action:

Areas for priority action

- Assessment and risk management practices within the access and assessment service have significant weaknesses, identified under areas for development listed above.
- A comprehensive restructuring of children's services is scheduled for 1 September 2009. While the number of qualified social work posts allocated to the access and assessment teams remains the same, the creation, within this cohort of staff, of the new senior social work posts carrying mentoring and supervision responsibilities, has the potential to reduce capacity for direct work with children and families. This, coupled with the high volume of work referred to children's social care and the current difficulties in transferring cases to long-term teams, raises concern about capacity in the council's future safeguarding services.

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

Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Kevin Lavery, Chief Executive, Cornwall County Council
David Ellis, Chair of Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Safeguarding Children Board
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