

21 October 2010

Mr John Stephens
Director of Children and Young People's Services
Cheshire West and Chester Council
County Hall
Chester
CH1 1SF

Dear Mr Stephens

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Cheshire West and Chester 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 Cheshire West and Chester Council which was conducted on 22 and 23 September 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 an area for priority action alongside areas of strength, areas of practice that met requirements and areas for development.

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

Strengths

- There is a strong commitment from partner agencies at a strategic level to align themselves with the new local authority and respond to the service improvement plan. This has enabled senior managers to deliver improvement in key areas such as the redesign of the front line service arrangements, which ensures social work staff receive good quality referral information.



The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- Swift multi-agency action has been taken to agree and implement a multi-agency guide on thresholds for access to services, that provides a sound basis for the delivery of services.
- Agencies' use of the common assessment framework (CAF) has increased significantly but the number of common assessments completed remains relatively low. The commissioning arrangements for the delivery of the CAF are well established and the quality of assessments seen by inspectors is good.
- Local performance data analysis systems have been strengthened to provide information to assist managers' oversight of key areas of service operation, such as the timely completion of initial and core assessments. This is underpinned by new auditing arrangements that sample the quality of work completed.
- There are examples of good quality initial and core assessments leading to interventions which safely reduce risk for children. Social work practice is child centred and multi-agency work to support assessments is good.
- Children are seen and their views considered as part of the assessment process. Systems are in place to evidence that assessments and plans are routinely shared with families.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) has reviewed and strengthened its own procedure and practice for the management of serious case reviews (SCR). A SCR sub-group has been established to lead this area of work.
- The LSCB has introduced a new multi-agency case file audit tool. This is being used to challenge poor practice and identify and disseminate strengths.
- Training programmes reflect the priorities set out in the improvement plan. The recently provided training in supervision and 'back to basics' training for social work staff, has been well received and is contributing to improvements in practice.
- The emergency out-of-hours arrangements have been strengthened, and there is good contact between the out-of-hours service and the contact and referral teams to ensure continuity of service.
- Social work practice is sensitive to the diverse cultural and ethnic needs of children and their families.

Areas for development

- The quality of supervision is variable. Although some staff report there have been improvements in the frequency of supervision, arrangements are not compliant with the council's own supervision policy. There are inconsistencies in the quality of recording, and the content is not critically reflective of social work practice. Staff have access to a good range of training but this is not yet underpinned by personal development plans and appraisal.
- Work to develop a joint protocol between the police and children's social care is being progressed and remains a priority for the LSCB. There has been some recent improvement in the timeliness and quality of domestic abuse referrals received from the police but practice is not consistent.
- Plans to develop unborn baby risk assessment guidance for staff is at an early stage of development and remains a priority for the LSCB.
- It is recognised by senior managers that the electronic integrated children's system (ICS) inherited from the previous council is not fit for purpose. The council has taken swift action to agree and implement an action plan to replace this. Staff and managers are working hard to find short term solutions to ensure services are delivered as efficiently as possible. The current arrangements are disproportionately time consuming and do not adequately support managers or the LSCB in monitoring performance.
- There has been an improvement in the completion rate of initial and core assessments. However, not all assessments are entered on the ICS within statutory timescales. The rate of completion of assessments in the children with disability team is low.
- The implementation of the new contact and referral team has improved the quality and speed at which information is made available for managers and social workers to assess risk and prioritise work. Not all contacts are being recorded by front line administrative staff.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action:

Area for priority action

- In one area social work team where there has been a high turnover of practitioners and managers, there are serious weaknesses in child protection investigations and a poor level of management oversight. Inspectors identified some cases where there had been a failure to adequately manage known risk and provide effective protection, leaving some children at risk of significant harm.

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.

In addition, the findings of this inspection and the identified area for priority action may have a significant impact on the annual children's service assessment. If the concerns raised by the identified area for priority action are not resolved by the findings of a subsequent inspection, the overall rating of the local authority's children's services is unlikely to be better than 'performing poorly'.

The identification of an area for priority action is likely to lead, at an appropriate time, to further inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements, a full safeguarding inspection, or a full safeguarding and looked after children inspection. If such an inspection takes place before the decision on the annual assessment, the findings and judgement of that inspection will supersede the findings of the unannounced inspection.

Yours sincerely

Gary Lamb
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Steve Robinson, Chief Executive, Cheshire West and Chester Council
Nancy Palmer, Chair of Cheshire West and Chester Safeguarding Children Board
Arthur Harada, Lead Member for Children's Services, Cheshire West and Chester Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education