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Ms Janet Donaldson
Group Director of Children and Young People's Services
Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council
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Dear Ms Donaldson

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council 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 Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 18 and 19 January 2011. 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 and paper case records; supervision files and notes; observation of social workers and practice supervisors 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 several areas of practice that met requirements, along with several areas for development.

Both areas of priority action along with the large majority of the areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements on 7 and 8 July 2009 have been addressed. This includes the increase in number and quality of assessments and the improved consideration of children's views. Insufficient progress has been made in respect of a small number of areas for development such as the sufficiency of referral information from partner agencies and delays in recording work. A new electronic recording system is in the process of being introduced. However, the difficulties identified in the previous inspection in respect of the electronic recording of information have not been fully resolved.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Many areas for development identified in the safeguarding and looked after children inspection of 18-29 January 2010 have been addressed. However, a weakness in relation to the inconsistent application of thresholds for access to children's social care still remains.

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

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

- The common assessment framework is increasingly and appropriately used to make referrals to children's social care where children's needs have escalated and require further exploration.
- In those cases where risk of harm has already been identified, child protection enquiries are promptly undertaken by qualified social workers. Children are seen and appropriate action is taken to ensure their safety.
- The number of initial and core assessments has steadily increased during 2010-11 according to the council's latest data, so that a higher number of children are now benefiting from an assessment of their needs. This was an area for development at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment.
- The quality of initial and core assessments examined during the inspection is satisfactory. Other agencies are appropriately consulted during assessments. Risks and actions to improve outcomes for children are identified. Some assessments seen demonstrated diligent practice and good analysis. This was an area for development at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment.
- Children are routinely seen during assessments and their views are generally recorded. Children's concerns are effectively reflected in some assessments and this is improved practice since the last inspection.
- There is appropriate access to and use of local interpretation services to ensure that communication with families is effective.
- Staff in the First Response service are qualified and experienced. Unqualified staff are suitably deployed to assist in initial information gathering.
- Performance within the service is appropriately monitored by senior managers and regularly reported to the Improvement Board. Performance against national indicators is scrutinised and corrective action taken where necessary. A detailed improvement action plan for the service is in place.
- A good range of training opportunities is available to staff.

Areas for development

- The absence of written operational procedures to guide the work of staff undertaking duty work contributes to a lack of clarity about responsibilities and tasks and to variations in practice.
- The quality of referrals from partner agencies, including domestic abuse notifications from the police, is variable. Although a minority of referrals are of good quality, most do not contain sufficient detail and clarity about the reasons for referral. This was an area for development at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment.
- Many aspects of the management of incoming work and initial information gathering in the First Response service are weak. The daily change of duty officers leads to a lack of continuity and duplication of effort. The use of brief handwritten notes as a substitute for the routine entry of information on the electronic system increases the possibility that important information will be lost. Families and referrers may have to repeat information already provided and in some instances there is delay in undertaking further assessment.
- A small number of contacts seen by inspectors contained information to suggest that children were at potential risk of harm. These were poorly recorded. The records did not provide evidence that referral information had been properly explored or that the cases had been subject to management scrutiny and oversight. It was subsequently established that appropriate actions had been taken in most instances. However, managers were unable to quickly ascertain whether these children had been appropriately safeguarded. The inconsistency of recording was an area for development at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment.
- Management decisions, including those reached in supervision, are not routinely entered into the electronic recording system. Children's records are stored in three different formats. Two electronic systems are currently in use as well as paper files. This contributes to difficulties in the efficient monitoring of work which was an area for development at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment.
- Although all work is allocated, not all initial assessments are commenced promptly. The practice of allocating several assessments at any one time to individual social workers contributes to this delay. As a consequence, the full range of children's needs and risks remain unknown and the timely provision of services is delayed for some children. Regular monitoring of workloads is undertaken but action to reduce pressures on individuals is yet to demonstrate sufficient impact.
- Strategy discussions about children at risk of harm are routinely undertaken by social workers but there is little evidence of management involvement or oversight. Agencies other than the police are infrequently involved. Records

seen during the inspection did not contain a plan for how the child protection enquiry would be carried out. Some summary records of these enquiries do not include detail in respect of the key findings. Action points of discussions are not circulated to those taking part.

- A significant backlog in the recording of assessments and in the timely closure of completed work is reported by staff as due to high workloads and competing demands on their time. There is a lack of clarity as to when an initial assessment is deemed as complete. The management tracking and oversight of incomplete assessments is insufficiently rigorous and this was an area for development at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment.
- The frequency of staff supervision, including that of newly qualified social workers does not fully comply with the council's required standard. Some supervision records demonstrate good analysis of practice and attention to staff support while others are too brief to provide evidence of either activity.

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

Yours sincerely

Mary Varley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Owen Williams, Chief Executive, Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education