

17 June 2011

Mr Chris Hilliard
Executive Director, Children's Services, Schools and Families
Bedford Borough Council
Borough Hall
Cauldwell Street
Bedford
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Dear Mr Hilliard

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Bedford 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 Bedford Borough Council which was conducted on 18 and 19 May 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 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 one area of strength and a number of areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in August 2010 have been substantially addressed.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Inter-agency working arrangements, particularly with the police, are well established. Children in need receive a good multi-agency response to their needs. All strategy discussions are held on a face-to-face basis by managers with good attendance from partner agencies leading to clear and effective



planning. In addition the intake and assessment team has a co-located educational psychologist and formal links with a homelessness officer. These arrangements are consistent with the authority's intention to further progress the multi-agency nature of the service.

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

- Thresholds for access to children's social care are applied consistently and are agreed and well understood by partner agencies.
- Child protection enquiries are appropriately allocated to qualified and experienced social workers who undertake this work in a timely manner.
- The recent restructuring of the intake and assessment team is showing positive impact in addressing previous service challenges arising from high volumes of work. This approach is supported by staff and managers.
- Decision making in the intake and assessment team is prompt and in accordance with statutory timescales. All contacts are seen by a manager and in most cases a decision is made within 24 hours. For a small number of contacts there is delay while further information is sought to inform decision making.
- The overall quality of assessments is adequate in identifying risk and protective factors and in some cases such assessments are of a high quality and are informed by research.
- All cases are allocated promptly in the intake and assessment team. Caseloads are generally manageable, but for some workers are high. Managers are aware of this and have recently reconfigured service provision to respond to the changes in demand for services.
- Children and young people with a disability receive an effective service from the specialist disabled children team, who undertake contact, referral and assessment responsibilities.
- Case records and assessments generally consider the impact of culture, ethnicity or beliefs when assessing the needs of children and young people.
- Staff report that they value the support, advice and guidance that they receive from experienced and accessible managers.
- Staff report good access to a range of relevant training opportunities.
- Senior managers have a good understanding of the strengths and challenges within the service and a range of quality audit, case monitoring and performance tools have been developed to report on service effectiveness and workforce capacity. As a result improvements in practice can be seen including

sustained timeliness in the completion of initial and core assessments.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unqualified social work staff routinely undertake initial and core assessments. Although there is appropriate oversight from qualified managers, some of these assessments should be undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced social workers to reflect the complexity of the work. ▪ Difficulties with the electronic case management system result in duplicate electronic and case files being kept, which is inefficient. This is recognised by senior management who have resourced and agreed measures to improve the system. Such measures are being implemented incrementally but it is too early to assess the impact of these developments. ▪ The frequency and quality of supervision arrangements for front line practitioners is not in accordance with the authority's own requirements. Supervision files were found to be overly casework specific and there was little evidence of reflective practice or consideration of staff training and development needs. ▪ Although progress has been made in developing inter-agency processes and training to support effective implementation, the common assessment framework remains insufficiently embedded as a working tool across agencies. ▪ Out of hours duty arrangements enable effective responses and timely referral to the duty and assessment team. However, the service has difficulty in consistently accessing contemporaneous electronic records to inform appropriate interventions.

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

Yours sincerely

Sean Tarpey
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Phillip Simpkins, Chief Executive, Bedford Borough Council
 Andrew Spencer, Department for Education