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16 June 2011

Mr John Harris
Director of Children, Schools and Families
Hertfordshire County Council
County Hall
Pegs Lane
Hertford
SG13 8DQ

Dear Mr Harris

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Hertfordshire County 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 Hertfordshire County Council which was conducted on 17 and 18 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 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 areas of strength and 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 October 2009 have been fully met. In particular the staffing situation has improved considerably. This enables staff to hold manageable caseloads and to provide effective and timely responses to identified safeguarding needs. There is a clearer understanding amongst partner agencies of thresholds for referrals. Staff receive regular supervision that provides them with challenge and support in their work.

PROTECT: INSPECTION



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Highly effective arrangements are now in place to provide a consistent and coherent response to children and young people who may be at risk. The customer service model is robust and ensures that information is comprehensively collated and supports good quality decision making and subsequent actions to safeguard children. ▪ Strong partnership working around children affected by domestic violence has led to two dedicated police officers with direct access to the police database now being involved in joint assessments at the stage of initial contacts. This facilitates early and effective prioritisation and timely responses to referrals involving domestic violence to children. ▪ The creation of the Targeted Advice Service (TAS) is having significant impact and has led to rapid progress on improving the response to initial enquiries. The TAS enables quick assessment of identified need leading to early interventions for the whole range of safeguarding needs to ensure effective support for children and families.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Most assessments, including initial and core assessments, are timely although there are some delays in recording at times of peak activity. Where delays occur managers actively oversee work and manage work pressures. ▪ All initial and core assessments seen by inspectors were of a satisfactory standard and some were good. The identification of risks and protective factors leads to sound plans to meet needs and safeguard children. ▪ Staff undertaking referral and assessment work and Section 47 child protection enquiries are suitably qualified and experienced. The council has taken effective steps to develop a stable workforce through its recruitment and retention strategy. ▪ Clear procedures and policies are in place to inform practice and ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are in place. Decisions for agreed actions are made within timescales set out in statutory guidance. ▪ Out of hours duty arrangements are clear. The duty team is well linked to the day service and provides effective responses to safeguarding referrals. ▪ Management oversight of cases is well embedded and promotes effective casework and decision making. This ensures work is appropriately undertaken and staff are well supported. ▪ Children and family members are routinely seen as part of the assessment process and their views inform subsequent plans to meet children's needs.

Social workers are visiting children and young people at least in line with statutory requirements.

- Staff have good access to training and development opportunities to update their knowledge and promote their development.
- Use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is integrated within a clear thresholds framework. The CAF is well established across partner agencies to promote a range of preventative services.
- The diverse needs of children are taken into account when assessing their needs and are clearly recorded within case files. Safeguarding plans demonstrate how identified needs are taken into account.
- Senior managers are actively involved in ensuring that referral and assessment procedures are effective in identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm.

Areas for development

- The use of chronologies is inconsistent and not fully supported by the electronic recording system. Although chronologies are written for cases at the point of transfer they are not always in place when social workers are involved in the earlier stages of assessment. This affects social workers' ability to make full use of the historical information of cases and to fully inform decision making and planning.
- There is a case audit system in place and managers routinely examine cases. However the information derived is not systematically collated to identify trends in practice and provide a framework for improvement.
- The experiences and views of children and parents are not routinely recorded in a way that is best used to influence service delivery and development.
- The council has recently re-commissioned the service provided by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). However the contribution of CAMHS at the point of initial contact and referral remains inconsistent and this affects the capacity of the council to provide effective and timely support to some children and families.

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

Yours sincerely

Jeff Banham
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Caroline Tapster, Chief Executive, Hertfordshire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education