

14 July 2011

Ms Jennie Stephens
Strategic Director People
Devon County Council
County Hall
Topsham Rd
Exeter
EX2 4QD

Dear Ms Stephens

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Devon 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 Devon County Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 June 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.

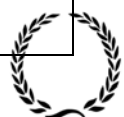
The inspection identified areas of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

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

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

Strengths

- The Advanced Professional Tier 2 team provides a good preventative service for cases that do not meet the threshold for ongoing social care intervention. This is leading to positive outcomes for children and their families and reducing the level of repeat referrals. Team representatives also attend



common assessment framework (CAF) meetings and provide good oversight and support on selected cases.

- The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub continues to provide a high quality and comprehensive referral service for use by the local authority assessment teams.

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

- Decisions about contact and referrals are made in accordance with statutory timescales.
- Thresholds for multi-agency prevention and early intervention services are well established and consistently applied. Partnership working between children's services and the voluntary and community sector is enabling support and service provision for children and young people.
- The council has been successful in reducing caseloads to more manageable levels. A reorganisation of teams has strengthened the arrangements for the prompt transfer of cases.
- Most children are seen alone and their wishes and feelings form an integral part of individual assessments and planning.
- The high volume of domestic abuse referrals is managed effectively. Past referral history is appropriately taken into account to inform assessment decisions.
- Child protection enquiries are appropriately prioritised and always carried out by a qualified social worker.
- Social workers are well supported by their managers and are positive about training opportunities that are made available to them. Newly qualified social workers have protected caseloads and are appropriately supported.
- The council has a comprehensive audit programme from which data is derived to help inform service planning. Management peer reviews have also been introduced leading to improvements in service provision, for example, increased preventative services.
- Links between the emergency duty team and locality teams are well established and information is shared promptly and effectively.
- The use of CAF is embedded with a significant increase in its use in recent months.
- There is a good consideration of identity, ethnicity and cultural issues in

assessment and care planning post referral.

Areas for development

- Initial and core assessments are of too variable quality. Some lack sufficient analysis and are not consistently clear in highlighting risk and protective factors. In a few cases seen by inspectors assessments are over-optimistic and there is too much reliance on the capacity of parents to adequately protect their children from harm.
- Some cases are closed prematurely and before all the necessary work has been completed. This has the potential to leave children and young people at risk.
- Core assessments are started in the assessment team but are transferred before the full assessment is completed which increases the potential for unnecessary replication of work and delay in the provision of services to children and young people.
- Some case recording is not always up to date making it difficult for managers to ascertain whether children have been seen and if appropriate safeguarding action, including investigation, has been taken.
- Referral documentation does not routinely collect information about the child's religion or first language.
- Although supervision of staff is carried out regularly and in accordance with the council's supervision policy the records do not consistently indicate that supervision is sufficiently challenging or reflective.

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

Yours sincerely

Emmy Tomsett
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Phil Norrey, Chief Executive, Devon County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education