

20 July 2011

Ms Jo Davidson  
Interim Director of Children's Services  
Herefordshire Council  
Brockington  
35 Hafod Road  
Hereford  
Herefordshire  
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Dear Ms Davidson

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Herefordshire 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 Herefordshire Council which was conducted on 21 and 22 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 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.

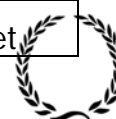
The inspection identified an area of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The area for priority action from the previous inspection has been addressed; there is now closer strategic oversight of the service and improved arrangements for assessment of risk. The majority of the areas for development from this previous inspection have also been addressed.

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

**Strengths**

- Highly effective arrangements are in place to enable cases that do not meet



thresholds or no longer require services from the Family Assessment and Safeguarding Team (FAST) to be offered appropriate support through the common assessment framework. The use of a multi-agency group, chaired by a Head of Service, enables close monitoring and review of these individual cases and a priority referral system ensures a timely response where referral back to statutory services is required.

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

- Strategic management and oversight of the FAST team has been strengthened. Case file audits are regularly undertaken and senior managers scrutinise qualitative and quantitative performance data through a multi-agency improvement group and direct reporting to the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board.
- Safeguarding policies and procedures have recently been revised and comply with statutory guidance.
- Contacts and referrals are responded to promptly and are effectively assessed by a dedicated assistant team manager.
- Children are seen by social workers during assessment, and where necessary are seen alone. The team manager monitors this area of practice closely and prevents any unacceptable delay. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Staff who undertake assessments, including Section 47 investigations, are suitably qualified and experienced. These enquiries are timely and prompt action is taken to keep children safe.
- Case supervision is regular and is in accordance with council procedures. Effective management oversight of casework is clearly evidenced on most files seen by inspectors. Social workers report that there is a good range of training available, which they can access as required. Lessons from serious case reviews are effectively disseminated, and support practice improvements.
- The quality of social work assessments has improved since the last inspection. The majority of assessments seen by inspectors included analysis of historical information and identified risk and protective factors well. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Children and family members are involved in assessment and case planning, their views and feelings are recorded and these are taken into account in planning.
- Case transfer arrangements between teams are clear and effective. Suitable child protection or child in need plans are in place prior to transfer, this supports continuity of planning and helps to ensure efficiency within the FAST

team. This was an area for development at the last inspection.

- Appropriate arrangements are in place which ensure prompt sharing of information between the Emergency Duty Team and the FAST team.

#### **Areas for development**

- While inter-agency thresholds have been reviewed and agreed, these are not consistently applied by all partner agencies. High numbers of referrals by some agencies which do not meet these thresholds result in unnecessary demands on the service.
- The timeliness of both initial and core assessments is inconsistent. They both fall short of targets set by the council and are below the national average and comparator councils. Action to tackle this variation in performance remains limited.
- Although operational managers monitor all assessments that are out of timescale, oversight and movement on cases which have been open for a significant period is not always effective resulting in delay in identifying need and providing services for some families. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Delays in preparing reports for child protection conferences and issuing minutes of strategy discussion undermines the ability of agencies to provide effective responses to child protection concerns.
- The quality of recording and analysis within assessments of identity, ethnicity and cultural needs of children and their families is inconsistent. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Not all cases have chronologies which makes it difficult for social workers and managers to understand the family history from reading a file. This was an area for development at the last inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

**Martin Davis**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Chris Bull, Chief Executive, Herefordshire Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education