

10 May 2011

Mr John Nash
Director for Children's Services
Dorset County Council
County Hall
Colliton Park
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Dear Mr Nash

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Dorset 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 Dorset County Council which was conducted on 5 and 6 April 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.

A comprehensive action plan was put into place to respond to the areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in May 2010. This has led to demonstrable improvements in practice. Good improvements have been made to the timeliness of initial and core assessments, and almost all case files identify the ethnicity of the child or young person. Performance management information is being used more effectively to analyse trends and variations across teams. The children's social care service was restructured as from 4 April 2011, removing the distinction between assessment and longer term teams. Teams are now aligned with localities and cases remain within teams, removing the potential for transfer backlogs.



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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Highly effective communication and collaboration between referral and assessment services and partner agencies contribute to timely and appropriate action to safeguard children. ▪ Staff turnover and vacancy levels continue to be low, enabling consistency of service provision to children and young people. Staff are well motivated and demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm. Social workers have easy access to managers through formal and informal supervision, and morale is good.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inter-agency threshold criteria for access to referral and assessment services are agreed and applied, and have been updated recently. ▪ Early intervention through the use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is increasing. A thorough analysis of the effectiveness of the CAF has been undertaken and an appropriate action plan is in progress. ▪ Processes for responding to contacts and referrals are robust, enabling relevant information to be obtained to facilitate prompt decision making. ▪ In almost all cases seen, timely decisions are made in response to referrals for children in need and for children in need of protection. ▪ Most assessments seen are clear and analytical and are of a satisfactory standard. Risk and protective factors are identified, leading to appropriate plans. ▪ In most cases the views of children and young people are reported and taken into account within assessments, and children and young people are seen alone where appropriate. ▪ Staff who undertake assessments, including Section 47 investigations, are suitably qualified and experienced. ▪ Section 47 investigations are timely and almost all initial child protection conferences take place within 15 working days, ensuring prompt planning for children and young people at risk of significant harm. ▪ Appropriate action is taken to ensure that interpreters are available for families that speak English as an additional language, and that information is translated if required. ▪ In most cases record keeping is up to date and informative.

- Effective arrangements are in place for prompt communication and information sharing between the out of hours service and the childcare teams.
- Robust performance management information is readily available and accessed by managers. The findings from recent themed audits, for example of core assessments and of multi-agency working, are beginning to impact on practice.
- Good personal development and training opportunities are routinely available to staff.
- Senior managers are actively involved in ensuring that referral and assessment procedures are increasingly effective at identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm.

Areas for development

- The very recent reorganisation has resulted in a uniform structure across the childcare teams. However consistent operational practices across the county have yet to be established, for example regarding the application of the threshold for referral by first line managers who are new to the task.
- Action on a small number of cases is being undertaken by duty workers pending allocation, denoted on the electronic recording system as 'assigned to team'. A sample of these cases examined by inspectors demonstrated that arrangements for the assessment and review of risk factors are not sufficiently robust.
- On some files seen by inspectors, management direction is either not recorded or is very brief, which results in a lack of clarity in case planning.
- Most staff receive regular supervision. However in some cases there are gaps in the regularity of recorded supervision, which are outside of the council's expected standards. Supervision records do not routinely evidence that actions agreed within supervision are subsequently reviewed.

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

Yours sincerely

Carolyn Adcock
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: David Jenkins, Chief Executive, Dorset County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education