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Mrs Lorraine Butcher
Head of Service for Children and Families
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Westfields
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Dear Mrs Butcher

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Cheshire East 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 Cheshire East 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 practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The council has acted swiftly to modernise services following its creation in 2009 as part of the local government reorganisation. Despite improvements there remain issues about the variability of practice and effective management oversight. The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in July 2010 have been addressed by the council through an action plan. There have been some improvements in most of the identified areas however in others arrangements are too recent to have sufficient impact.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

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

- Following the last inspection the council has identified the need to co-locate teams undertaking contact, referral and assessment functions. Although this realignment of services is too recent to have much impact the unified management structure combined with increased capacity provides a strong platform to deliver improvements.
- Partnership working with the police is good. As a result there has been a significant improvement in the appropriateness and quality of referrals from the police ensuring both agencies focus their resources on the most vulnerable children.
- Thresholds regarding child protection are well understood by partner agencies. This ensures that concerns are referred and acted upon promptly.
- Improved management of child protection investigations ensures that initial child protection conferences are held promptly. This ensures good multi-agency involvement in planning to meet children's needs in a timely manner.
- The emergency out of hours team is effective in investigating child protection concerns. Referrals to daytime services are timely and contain the relevant information.
- There are clear arrangements to co-work child protection cases with the children's disability team where appropriate. This ensures that vulnerable children are protected.
- The recording of equality and diversity in assessments is consistent and examples of good consideration of cultural needs were seen.
- There are clear arrangements in place for the transfer of work to longer term teams supported by weekly meetings. This minimises disruption and delays for children and families.
- The Cheshire East Safeguarding Children Board has a good focus on performance in the updated business plan which holds agencies to account in achieving improvements to services for children.
- Training programmes reflect the priorities identified at the last inspection and include supervision and quality assurance for managers and the 'back to basics' course for social workers. There is good dissemination of findings from serious case reviews.
- Progress to reduce social work caseloads is good and these are now generally

manageable.

- Supervision practice and recording are adequate and social workers report they are well supported by approachable managers. Social workers are positive about the recent reorganisation of services and increased management support.
- The resourcing of administrative support in the teams is good. This enables social workers to spend more time on direct work with families.

Areas for development

- The common assessment framework is yet to be embedded with a lack of consistent understanding of thresholds and purpose. The local authority is aware of this and is working with partner agencies to develop its use.
- The effectiveness of the contact and referral service is compromised by delays in processing of initial contacts and a lack of clarity on the requirements to gather information. This is recognised as an area for improvement by the local authority who have recently introduced increased management monitoring and oversight.
- All core assessments seen considered risk and protective factors and there were examples of good analysis. However the recent increase in management capacity to improve oversight has yet to ensure that all assessments are of a sufficiently good quality. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Measures to monitor and manage initial and core assessments are now in place, but have only recently been introduced and are yet to have an impact. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- The quality of recording of strategy discussions and child protection enquiries remains variable. The local authority has recognised this and has put in place improved auditing and training but this has yet to have an impact. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- The council has introduced a structured programme to systematically audit the quality of assessments, planning and recording although this has yet to have an impact. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Improvements to the council's electronic system have been introduced and further upgrades are scheduled. However there are still weaknesses in the system and it does not provide managers with easily accessible performance management information. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Ralph Trevelyan-Butler
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Erica Wenzel, Chief Executive, Cheshire East Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education