

6 May 2011

Mr Dave Hill
Executive Director
Children, Families and Schools
Essex County Council
County Hall
Chelmsford
Essex
CM1 1QH

Dear Mr Hill

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Essex 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 Essex County Council which was conducted on 16 and 17 March 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 areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in October 2009 have been addressed.

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

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| The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">Agreed thresholds of need and intervention are applied effectively by a majority of partner agencies resulting in most referrals to social care being |



appropriate.

- The council has undertaken a detailed self-evaluation and this has led to a good appreciation of its progress and areas for improvement that were identified in the safeguarding and looked after inspection. Quality audits and a safeguarding improvement project have assisted staff to raise standards from a low base and have resulted in improvements in the quality of services delivered to children and families.
- The establishment of the initial referral team is effective in providing timely and appropriate responses to contacts and referrals and in ensuring that all cases are allocated.
- Referral and assessment practice and procedures effectively manage risk of harm.
- Children at risk of immediate harm are protected by Section 47 enquiries which are timely, undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced social workers and supported by effective management decisions.
- Assessments demonstrate that social workers take suitable account of a wide range of children's and families' diverse cultural and individual needs so as to ensure the delivery of suitable services.
- Record keeping is up-to-date and reflects purposeful intervention, timely and sound decision making and effective planning.
- Out-of-hours arrangements for receiving and responding to referrals are effective and suitable links to daytime services are in place resulting in effective communication.
- Social work staff report that they are well supported by managers and value the council's appraisal scheme and management supervision which enable them to improve their practice.
- Social workers report that caseloads are manageable resulting in families receiving a timely and appropriate level of service.

Areas for development

- While multi-agency allocation groups have been recently established, use of the common assessment framework is not fully embedded. Early intervention services are at an early stage of development and have yet to show impact.
- Too many assessments lack sufficient analysis and this results in recommendations that are not suitably based on clear evidence.
- The impact of children's views on the analysis of core assessments is not always evident, and parents and carers are not consistently provided with a

copy of the assessment.

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

Yours sincerely

Geoff Corre
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Joanna Killian, Chief Executive, Essex County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education