

21 May 2010

Mr John Stephens  
Director of Children and Young People's Services  
Cheshire West and Chester Council  
County Hall  
Chester  
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Dear Mr Stephens

### **Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Cheshire West and Chester Council children's services**

This letter contains the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Cheshire West and Chester Council which was conducted on 17 and 18 March 2010. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but some areas for development, which are detailed below.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of 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. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

From the evidence gathered, the inspection identified a number of areas where the contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- Contacts and referrals receive prompt attention. There is evidence of timely and appropriate management decision making in respect of closing referrals or proceeding to an assessment.



- Where child protection concerns are identified, strategy discussions are held appropriately with other agencies and most Section 47 enquiries are conducted in a timely manner.
- There is sufficient capacity to ensure the caseloads of social workers are manageable, and duty and assessment workers report that managers are readily available for advice.
- Recent action has been taken to strengthen the management of the emergency duty service leading to more consistent practice and improvement in communications between the service and daytime services.
- Learning from serious case reviews disseminated to staff in children's services has led to improved practice, for example in the way pre-birth assessments are conducted.

From the evidence gathered, the following strengths and areas for development were also identified:

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There is good partnership working with the children's centres and the Catch 22 family support service, providing well-coordinated early intervention with families by multi-agency services.</li> <li>▪ Senior managers have a good understanding of the performance of referral and assessment services across the borough and have taken robust action to tackle identified areas for development. The recent restructure of fieldwork services and the creation of additional management posts have improved the management of referral and assessment arrangements.</li> </ul>
<b>Areas for development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There is no written multi-agency agreement on thresholds for access to services and the common assessment framework (CAF) is underused. While CAF training has been delivered to a large number of professionals from relevant agencies, the numbers of CAF completed remain comparatively low.</li> <li>▪ A significant proportion of contacts received are domestic abuse incidents reported by police. Many reports lack sufficient detail to make a judgement of risk or priority without further enquiries, placing additional demands on resources in the assessment teams.</li> <li>▪ The integrated children's system does not provide management information reports which support the business processes and managers are using inefficient manual systems to monitor the progress of work in their teams.</li> </ul>

- The proportion of both initial and core assessments completed within statutory timescales is low. Record keeping is not consistently up-to-date and this contributes to delays in completion of assessments and plans.
- The quality of initial and core assessments varies widely. While the majority of assessments seen were adequate overall, too many were missing important details. Examples of weaknesses in the poorer quality assessments include: a lack of detail of the child's views, no record of consideration of diversity issues, no clarity about which agencies contributed to the assessment, and inadequate risk analysis. Plans arising from the assessment are not always clear, and referrers do not routinely receive a response about the outcome of their referral.
- The local safeguarding children board (LSCB) does not have a clear overview of performance regarding contact, referral and assessment activity. While some data are reported, these data do not include comparison with performance in similar councils, and there is no information on quality. A new quality assurance framework which includes regular reporting to the LSCB is to be introduced in April 2010.
- The quality of supervision of social workers is variable. In particular, the frequency of formal supervision sessions is not always within the monthly timescale set out in the council's policy, although there has been some recent improvement now that team managers manage fewer staff. Staff personal development plans and appraisal systems are underdeveloped. As a result individual staff development needs cannot readily be identified.

Yours sincerely

**Robert Hackeson**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Steve Robinson, Chief Executive, Cheshire West and Chester Council  
Nancy Palmer, Chair of Cheshire West and Chester Safeguarding Children Board  
Arthur Harada, Lead Member for Children's Services, Cheshire West and Chester Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families