

9 November 2011

Mr Malcolm Newsam  
Interim Corporate Director of Families and Social Care  
Kent County Council  
Sessions House  
County Hall  
Maidstone  
Kent  
ME14 1XQ

Dear Mr Newsam

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Kent 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 Kent County Council which was conducted on 11 and 12 October 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.

All areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in August 2010 have been tackled and most have improved to a satisfactory standard, although many are yet to be consolidated. Some areas require further development, in particular: sustaining improved timeliness of assessments; ensuring that assessments are of an appropriate quality; and management oversight of casework.

The area for priority action identified at the inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in August 2010 has been addressed. The recommendations from the safeguarding and looked after children inspection in



November 2010 which related to contact, referral and assessment services have also been addressed.

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

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

- Children in need of protection receive a timely assessment of risks and needs. Assessments are conducted by suitably qualified and experienced social workers. This was an area for priority action at the last inspection.
- Thresholds for access to children's social care services are clear. Satisfactory action has been taken to ensure that partner agencies are familiar with these thresholds. This enables referrals to be appropriate and clear and makes better use of early intervention through the common assessment framework.
- The recent introduction of a central referral team for the county has improved responsiveness and has resulted in a reduction in referrals to social care services which could be dealt with more suitably by universal or community based services.
- All child protection cases are allocated. Significant progress has been made to reduce the level of unallocated cases. As a result there are a small number of unallocated children in need cases at the time of this inspection, and these are suitably overseen by managers.
- Children are routinely seen within assessments and their views are recorded and taken into account in case planning. The diverse needs of children are satisfactorily identified and addressed in assessments.
- Children's records are appropriately stored and records seen were sufficiently detailed and up to date. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Appropriate action has been taken by managers, since the last inspection, to ensure that cases which do not require ongoing social work assessment or intervention are promptly closed, and those that do are actively case managed.
- Significant progress has been made in workforce planning and in the recruitment and retention of staff. As a result caseloads have been reduced to manageable levels.
- Staff have access to relevant training opportunities. They receive regular supervision from managers and have ready access to them for advice and direction in case planning.
- Effective arrangements are in place to ensure prompt transfer within social care services of cases requiring support following assessment.

- Effective arrangements for communication between the emergency duty service and the referral and assessment service are well established.
- Robust management information systems have been developed since the previous inspection and are appropriately used by managers to identify and respond to casework and service development issues.

#### **Areas for development**

- Significant progress has been made to improve the timeliness of assessments since the last inspection, through temporary additional staffing assigned to reduce the extensive backlog. As a result the timeliness in recent months has improved to be in line with or better than those of comparator authorities and national levels. However, this improvement has yet to be sustained and when aggregated over the year the timeliness of core assessments remains low. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Positive action has been taken to improve the quality of assessments. Most assessments seen in this inspection were of a satisfactory quality. However the quality of analysis in assessments is still too variable, with some lacking sufficient focus on key risk factors. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Whilst management oversight is clearly evident in decision making and case planning, the recording of the reasons for management decisions and directions in case planning is not sufficiently explicit in some cases. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Changes made to the information and recording systems since the last inspection have improved management information and case recording. However the current system remains inefficient. The council recognises this and is commissioning a new system to address the issues.
- The recently introduced audit framework requires managers to routinely audit cases. However this activity is not yet sufficiently embedded to enable the learning from these to systematically shape service delivery.

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

Yours sincerely

**Pietro Battista**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Katherine Kerswell, Chief Executive, Kent County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education