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30 December 2011

Ms Sue Imbriano
Strategic Director for Children and Young People
Buckinghamshire County Council
County Hall
Walton Street
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Dear Ms Imbriano

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Buckinghamshire 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 Buckinghamshire County Council which was conducted on 28 and 29 November 2011. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to next year's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating. 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 for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in June 2009, in relation to consistently implementing service priorities and performance management, have been addressed, as have transfer arrangements between social work teams. However insufficient progress has been made in relation to improving the timeliness of assessments to ensure that children receive the services at the time they require it.



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

- Robust partnership working enables effective support to meet the needs of children through early intervention services and the appropriate use of the common assessment framework.
- Thresholds for access to children’s social care services are clear across the partnership and are suitably implemented. Contacts are dealt with in a timely way and clear decisions are made by managers on the actions required.
- Most assessments, seen by inspectors, were of a satisfactory standard and some were good. Children are routinely seen, alone where appropriate and their views are taken into account.
- Child protection investigations are preceded by robust strategy discussion and are carried out promptly and thoroughly by suitably experienced and qualified social workers.
- Safeguarding concerns in relation to children with disabilities are suitably prioritised and assessed by specialist social workers within the children with disabilities teams.
- Managers are readily accessible to staff and they provide regular advice and case direction, which staff highly value.
- Staff have ready access to a wide range of training and personal development opportunities. In particular, newly qualified social workers and staff supported through the graduate trainee scheme to become qualified social workers receive effective additional support.
- Transfer processes between the referral team and longer term teams are clear and are applied consistently, resulting in the timely transfer of cases to support vulnerable families in need.
- Detailed performance management information is routinely monitored and analysed by managers to improve service delivery.
- Communication and information sharing between the referral and assessment services and the out-of-hours social work service is effective.

Areas for development

- Prompt action to tackle performance management and capability issues within the referral and assessment services has resulted in a recent, well structured, reconfiguration of the service. However, this has still to be fully embedded to

demonstrate impact on the consistency of work.

- The reconfiguration of referral and assessment services, together with insufficient capacity within the assessment teams has resulted in very high numbers of unallocated assessments. In some cases core assessments have not been started for a considerable length of time. Whilst these cases are regularly reviewed and reprioritised by managers, the delay in assessment results in some children not promptly receiving services they require and in other cases concerns have escalated. The council have agreed to review these unallocated assessments as a matter of priority. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Identification and communication of concerns by partner agencies in relation to domestic violence affecting children within families is prompt. However, some notifications by the Police lack sufficient detail and do not clearly identify the implications for individual children.
- Some targeted audits of casework are undertaken by managers, and the findings are effectively used to enable services to be improved. A system for managers to routinely audit cases has been developed. However the impact of this work is limited because managers do not routinely undertake these audits due to lack of capacity.
- Whilst the ethnic background of children and their families is routinely recorded, the diverse needs of children and their families are not consistently considered or recorded in assessments.
- In most cases seen by inspectors case recording and chronologies were not sufficiently up to date to enable a full picture of significant events to be readily understood.

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: Chris Williams, Chief Executive, Buckinghamshire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education