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Mr Trevor Doughty  
Corporate Director of Children's Services  
Cornwall Council  
New County Hall  
Treyew Road  
Truro  
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Dear Mr Doughty

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Cornwall 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 Cornwall Council which was conducted on 7 and 8 December 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 and other practitioners.

The inspection identified areas of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The area of priority action identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in July 2009 along with the areas for improvement identified within the two safeguarding and looked after children inspections carried out in September 2009 and January 2011 have been addressed to varying degrees with positive progress being made in most aspects.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Robust, energetic and accessible leadership combined with determination and high expectations is delivering improved safeguarding service responses and working practices from a very low base. As a result of the leadership focus and the inclusion of staff in the improvement agenda, professional expectations and clear levels of accountability have been firmly established leading to staff across the service feeling supported and safe in their work.</li> </ul>
<b>The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Decision making in both the single referral unit and the assessment teams is appropriate and timely. In most cases seen by inspectors, the rationale for decisions which includes taking into account past history is clearly set out.</li> <li>▪ Responses to contacts made to the single referral unit are progressed promptly and in most cases lead to timely decisions being made supported by a rigorous quality assurance process prior to transfer of cases to other teams.</li> <li>▪ Section 47 child protection enquiries are undertaken appropriately and within timescales by qualified social workers.</li> <li>▪ Social work staff are suitably qualified to undertake referral and assessment work. However, contact workers in the single referral unit are not all trained in level 1 child protection. This is an identified need and is work in progress.</li> <li>▪ Good progress has been made in improving the timeliness for completion of initial and core assessments with performance at least in line with statistical neighbours. Safeguarding arrangements are reinforced through the routine completion of risk assessment and management plans attached to initial and core assessments.</li> <li>▪ Case recording is up to date and children are seen routinely and alone when appropriate. Their views are reflected in assessments and are taken into account in care planning.</li> <li>▪ Robust management and oversight of police referrals is in place through the location of a designated police officer within the single referral unit. Effective daily monitoring of activity is in place with each incident being risk assessed. Safeguarding is strengthened by daily reports being sent out to partner agencies.</li> <li>▪ The use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is evident. The need to drive forward the CAF agenda in order to maximise its potential to support children and families earlier and to develop sustainable step down support is recognised by the council as an essential focus for development to reduce the</li> </ul>

currently high re-referral rate to children's social care services.

- Out of hours arrangements are clear. Workers have remote access to the electronic case records system to help inform decision making and actions. The crisis service provides an essential element to the out of hours service and is able to prevent, where appropriate, children being accommodated during the night or at weekends. Good working relationships are reported with the police.
- A rigorous system of quality assurance and performance is in place which includes practice standards and random case audits. As a result, this is contributing to recent improvements in practice and compliance with '*Working Together to Safeguard Children*' requirements.
- Supervision is regular. In some assessment teams, good use is being made of a supervision pilot which includes fortnightly supervision and a specific focus on reflective practice and the child's experience.
- Newly qualified social workers are well supported through the Newly Qualified Social Worker and Early Professional Development programmes. Consequently, newly qualified social workers receive appropriate support, training and protected caseloads.
- Social workers have an increased range of training opportunities available to them. Effective learning from research and serious case reviews is achieved through team meetings.
- The council is reducing its reliance on agency staff and through a well thought out workforce development strategy, demonstrates its commitment to recruitment and retention in order to ensure sufficient capacity and experience within the service.
- The children with disabilities team does not yet undertake the lead role in child protection. However, good preparation has been successfully provided to ensure staff are competent in taking on this role in the new year.
- Most staff report caseloads to be manageable with some staff reporting a significant reduction in caseloads. At the time of the inspection, there were no unallocated cases within the single referral unit and assessment teams visited by inspectors.

#### **Areas for development**

- The primary focus of the council and the Improvement Board has been to change systems, practice and culture to address the issues arising from previous inspections. Whilst inspectors saw clear evidence of positive progress, the quality of assessment work, case recording, supervision and application of chronologies remains variable.

- In some cases, where the outcome is clear, decision making on contacts is delayed whilst further enquiries are made.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board has recently re-launched the threshold criteria. However, the high number of contacts which do not progress onto referral suggest there is more work to be done in establishing a common understanding across the partnership.
- In some assessment teams there is a challenge in transferring cases onto other teams and services. This impacts adversely on the capacity of staff and the teams to effectively manage incoming work. The council recognises this and plans are in place to establish children in need teams. This was an area for development in the unannounced inspection of 2009 which is now being actively progressed.
- Not all strategy discussions are held in a timely manner. Where some strategy discussions should have been held, work has been undertaken prior to the discussion rather than under the strategy discussion framework.
- The consideration to equality and diversity is variable. Where evidence was seen, this was cursory with the impact not being fully explored.

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

Yours sincerely

**Chris Sands**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Kevin Lavery, Chief Executive, Cornwall Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education