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5 February 2010

Ms Margaret Goldie
Corporate Director for Children and Young People
Civic Offices, West Berkshire Council
West Street House,
West Street, Newbury
RG14 1BZ

Dear Ms Goldie

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within West Berkshire 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 the West Berkshire Council which was conducted on 12 and 13 January 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 one area for priority action and 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:

- Clear procedures and policies are in place to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are met.
- Administrative processes within the referral and assessment team are well structured and efficiently support work within the service.



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- Thresholds for access to children’s services and protocols for collaborative working are clear and are agreed by partner agencies.
- In most cases children and their families are informed of the outcome of their assessment.
- Most assessments of children in need are satisfactory and some are of good quality.
- Equality and diversity issues are appropriately addressed in casework assessment and planning.
- Arrangements for transfer of cases to locality teams are clear, flexible and effectively implemented.
- Managers routinely analyse detailed performance information to help plan service development.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff have good access to regular supervision and value the professional advice and support provided by managers, who are readily accessible for formal and informal consultation. ▪ Robust partnership work is well embedded, facilitating prompt communication and effective collaboration between agencies. ▪ Screening of contacts and referrals is well managed through a call centre and directly within the referral and assessment team. ▪ Auditing of files and services is well established. Issues are identified and actions recommended which are appropriately reported to and monitored by managers and by the West Berkshire Safeguarding Children Board.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Performance in the timeliness of assessments is below targets set by the council and is lower than the national average. ▪ Performance issues in relation to some social work staff within the referral and assessment team have been identified by managers and appropriate action has been taken. However, this action has created difficulties in allocating more complex work and contributes to the delay in completing assessments. ▪ Most cases held within the referral and assessment service are allocated to

suitably qualified staff. However, there is insufficient clarity regarding the appropriate allocation of cases to Family Support Workers and some of these cases require allocation to a qualified social worker.

- Some unqualified staff working with families where there is domestic abuse between adults, do not always fully understand or apply the appropriate risk thresholds.
- The quality of case recording is too variable. In many cases recording is not up to date due to time pressures on staff. In some cases assessments and case planning have not been recorded in any accessible format.
- Children are routinely seen during assessments. However in many cases their views are not recorded and it is not evident that their views are taken into account when making plans for their future.
- Recording of managerial oversight and case planning is not sufficiently robust or consistent.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action.

Area for priority action

- Some assessments to ascertain whether children are at risk of significant harm lack sufficiently rigorous risk analysis. In some cases, where the analysis is clear that the child is not in need of protection but in need of family support, delay in completing the assessment, and, insufficient managerial oversight result in avoidable delay in the provision of services.

Yours sincerely

Pietro Battista
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Nick Carter, Chief Executive, West Berkshire Council
Stephen Barber, Chair of West Berkshire Safeguarding Children Board
Barbara Alexander, Portfolio Member for Children's Services, West Berkshire Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families