

18 August 2010

Mr Gareth Williams  
Director of Children's Services  
Leicestershire County Council  
County Hall  
Glenfield  
Leicestershire  
LE3 8RA

Dear Mr Williams

### **Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Leicestershire 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 Leicestershire County Council which was conducted on 20 and 21 July 2010. 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 strength and satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

#### **Strengths**

- The council has recognised the need for a thorough and wide ranging review of children's services, including how contact, referral and assessment services are provided. A detailed analysis of current provision has been completed and following an extensive consultation with staff an ambitious plan for change is about to be implemented.
- The council has made significant changes to practice and procedures for pre-



birth assessments following a thorough internal audit which highlighted significant areas for development. A subsequent audit has confirmed that improvements are being successfully implemented.

- New and recently qualified staff have well protected caseloads. Their development needs are comprehensively and effectively met through an established training and support scheme which includes good access to external mentoring.

### **Satisfactory practice**

- Consistent and effective management oversight of high risk cases results in decisions being clearly and comprehensively recorded.
- Where children are clearly seen to be suffering from significant harm, child protection arrangements work well.
- Case file and thematic audits have been used well to inform the recent planning of improvements to contact, referral and assessment services.
- The council's commitment to providing high quality placement opportunities for social work students has contributed to its workforce development strategy.
- In most cases, where appropriate, children are seen during assessments.
- There is a good working relationship between Children's Access Teams and the Children with Disability Team which has resulted in improvements in the effectiveness of responses to requests for services for disabled children and their families.
- Multi-agency working within assessments is effective and contributes to thorough assessment of need and well considered interventions, for instance in relation to the police and domestic violence referrals.
- Assessments include an appreciation of the issues for young people arriving unaccompanied in the United Kingdom and for minority ethnic families and this ensures the provision of culturally suitable services.
- Appropriate use is made of learning from serious case reviews, and lessons learnt are being effectively used to drive improvements to practice.
- Experienced and well informed administrative staff within Children's Access Teams provide valuable support to operational colleagues.

### **Areas for development**

- Thresholds for instigating Section 47 child protection enquiries are too high, leading to some assessments being inappropriately conducted through children

in need procedures. While inspectors found no evidence that this had left children at risk of serious harm, it means that some children may not benefit from prompt multi-agency assessment or monitoring of their needs.

- Staff and managers are not clear about the supervision policy operating within children's services. There is inconsistency in the frequency of formal supervision sessions, and this impacts on performance management of staff who require more intensive support. Performance development reviews are not routinely undertaken and this affects the identification and provision of training for more experienced staff.
- Recording of practice, and in particular the issue of children being seen, does not accurately reflect the quality of work being undertaken.
- The quality of assessments is too variable, and of those seen a number were largely descriptive and lacking in detailed analysis and assessment of risk.
- The timeliness of initial and core assessment in reported data is good. However, in some teams there is evidence of significant delays in the completion of some assessments.
- Too many contacts are taking too long to progress to referral. This means that there is potentially a delay in services being provided to families. The council is aware of this and is taking steps to address this concern.
- Workloads are too variable in size and not all case files are appropriately reviewed and closed in a timely manner.
- The common assessment framework is not routinely used by partner agencies prior to making referrals to children's services. This means that the level of referrals is higher than it needs to be, and that opportunities for partner agencies to provide early intervention services for families may be missed.

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

Yours sincerely

**David Asher**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: John Sinnott, Chief Executive, Leicestershire County Council  
Mary Robertson, Chair of Leicestershire and Rutland Safeguarding Children Board  
Councillor Ivan Ould, Lead Member for Children's Services, Leicestershire County Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education