

31 December 2010

Ms Helen Denton
Executive Director for Children and Young People
Lancashire County Council
County Hall
Preston
Lancashire
PR1 8RJ

Dear Ms Denton

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Lancashire 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 Lancashire County Council which was conducted on 30 November and 1 December 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 next 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 areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements on 3 and 4 November 2009 have been addressed with the exception of the completion of timely initial assessments.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Following the previous inspection the council took decisive and extensive action to address the findings including the commissioning of specific research



to evaluate the effectiveness of the service. The council have acted on the findings and made significant structural changes to the service which means that children and families receive a localised service and a reduction in the number of professionals involved in their care.

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

- The central contact, assessment and referral team (CART) ensures a consistent response to all contacts with appropriate and detailed referrals sent to the district offices, enabling swifter allocation of work.
- The information systems developed by CART provide the council with good quality data about the referrals which has shaped further work with partners.
- Children suffering or at risk of harm receive a prompt and appropriate response. Strategy discussions are held at appropriate times involving a range of agencies and in two of the three offices visited these are detailed and clear.
- Section 47 enquiries are undertaken by qualified social workers who are supported by experienced managers.
- The majority of assessments are of good quality with clear analysis and conclusions which flow logically from the assessments and are translated into effective plans.
- The cultural, religious and other important information about the needs of children are identified and reflected in most assessments. Good arrangements were observed in ensuring appropriate use of interpreters and the pursuit of investigations into possible sexual exploitation.
- The views of children and family members are recorded and taken into account in assessments and planning.
- The Integrated Children's System is an efficient tool and enables staff to record information in a logical manner. The council takes appropriate steps to continually improve the system. Record keeping generally is up-to-date.
- There are good working relationships with the out-of-hours service and arrangements are in place for joint visits and welfare checks.
- Most staff benefit from regular and reflective supervision. A range of training opportunities are available for staff, including lessons learned from serious case reviews.
- Senior managers are visible and provide good support and staff are satisfied with their working arrangements.

Areas for development

- There is an uneven distribution of experienced and newly qualified social workers within the social work teams which means that some newly qualified social workers do not have appropriate arrangements in place for mentoring, protected case loads, co-working of difficult cases and regular supervision. The council have recognised this and have plans to change the balance of the teams.
- There are significant challenges at one office including staff vacancies, team deployment issues, use of agency staff and high staff case loads, leading to deficits in the timeliness and quality of assessments, transfer of cases and quality of supervision. However appropriate management arrangements and a robust action plan is in place to address the immediate deficiencies
- The rationale for actions taken by managers is not routinely recorded in all cases.
- The timely completion of initial assessments varies across the council. This was identified as an area for development at the last inspection.
- The protocol of transfer of cases between teams is not consistently applied which means that social workers in some initial assessment teams are carrying long term work undermining their ability to complete assessments promptly.
- The use of the common assessment framework continues to be under-developed across the partnership; the council are aware of this and have plans in place to re-launch the arrangements to improve the level of uptake and quality and service to families.

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

Yours sincerely

Helen Humphreys
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Ged Fitzgerald, Chief Executive, Lancashire County Council
Nigel Burke, Chair of Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board
Susie Charles, Lead Member for Children's Services, Lancashire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education