

2 December 2009

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 contains 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 3 and 4 November 2009. 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, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but 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:

- Contact information is gathered efficiently and effectively. Staff at the customer service contact centre are well briefed to carry out their role, with a good level of training and support provided by on-site dedicated qualified social workers.



- Good communication between customer service contact centre staff and the Emergency Duty Team enables contacts and referrals to be received, processed and responded to effectively over a 24-hour period.
- Good progress is being made on the integration of teams and co-location of workers from different agencies which is improving the quality of communication, investigations and assessments and leading to better co-ordinated service responses to children and young people and their families.
- Initial and core assessments and child protection investigations are undertaken appropriately by qualified social workers and in two out of the three offices visited, these are analytical and focus clearly on the safety and welfare of children and young people.
- In two out of the three offices inspected, the outcomes of assessments and decisions from meetings are routinely shared with children and families. Inspectors saw examples of good engagement of service users.
- Senior managers know the strengths and weaknesses of the service and are implementing effective action to tackle identified areas for improvement. For example, senior practitioners have been appointed to increase support and guidance for front line social work staff undertaking complex casework.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Senior managers have taken prompt action following the joint area review to establish and implement new guidance and a protocol for the management of referrals of domestic abuse. This has already had some impact resulting in better joint working between children’s services and the police, with good management and prioritisation of joint investigation and protection of children and young people. ▪ A strong culture of performance management supported by a robust management information system enables senior managers to analyse front line practice at locality and team levels and is leading to improved service delivery. ▪ Implementation of the Common Assessment Framework is progressing well with good multi-agency involvement and high numbers of children and families receiving earlier intervention and the support they need. ▪ The Local Children Safeguarding Board has been proactive in driving forward the lessons learned from serious case reviews with several examples of initiatives leading to improved practice. For example, increased

use of the NHS child protection lead officers is improving the quality of referrals from health workers.

- Monitoring of the implementation of the corporate equality and diversity plan which includes core competencies against which all staff performance is measured, through individual personal development appraisals, is effective. For example, staff articulate and demonstrate a strong sensitivity to meeting the diverse needs of the communities in which they work.
- Good creative multi-agency practice is having a positive impact on outcomes for specific vulnerable groups including: young women involved in forced marriages, missing children, and those who are subject to sexual exploitation.

Areas for development

- Not all integrated children's service teams provide timely assessments. At one office inspected, there was a high rate of re-referrals of approximately one third of all cases in the last 12 months, which could mean children in need are not receiving support at the most appropriate time.
- Capacity at social worker level in one of the three offices visited is not sufficient to meet the demand of the service. This results in social workers having inappropriately high caseloads, examples of initial assessments not being recorded in a timely manner, and the audit trail of case decisions not always being clear. Although assessments of risk are carried out effectively these are not always appropriately recorded on the integrated children's system (ICS).
- Information regarding initial contacts and referrals is appropriately prioritised by the duty manager to ensure prompt decision-making to safeguard children. However, the underpinning processes are having a detrimental impact on the capacity of front line managers to respond to all their work demands effectively.
- The location of office accommodation used by one integrated assessment team is in the view of the inspectors unsuitable for its purpose. This seriously impacts on the ability of social workers and other professionals to conduct their day to day business, for example, time lost and interruptions at meetings and conferences when staff have to repeatedly move their cars.
- In one office, not all social work staff and newly-qualified social workers receive regular and appropriate supervision.

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

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
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