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Mr David Lund
Executive Director of Education and Children's Services
Education and Children's Services Department
Blackpool Borough Council
Progress House
Clifton Road
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Dear Mr Lund

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Blackpool Borough 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 Blackpool Borough Council which was conducted on 16 and 17 June 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 a significant number of 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 referral, assessment and contact services were satisfactorily carrying out their responsibilities in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- Decision-making regarding contacts and referrals is timely and children and young people identified as at risk are responded to appropriately.

- Initial assessments and core assessments seen by inspectors are of satisfactory quality overall. Unqualified staff receive additional support and oversight when contributing to assessments.
- The recording of Section 47 strategy discussions and investigations meet the requirements set out in *'Working Together to Safeguard Children'* and support joint agency working.
- Information is consistently shared between the emergency duty team and day time services to ensure service continuity for children and families.
- Management information relating to contacts, referrals and assessments is readily available to team managers to assist them in checking the progress of their teams' work.
- Accountability for decision-making and risk management is set out in practice guidance and is clearly understood by operational staff.
- All staff are regularly supervised with examples of good practice seen in some teams, where staff feel well supported.
- Good multi-agency partnership working is evident. For example, agencies routinely contribute to assessments, and are involved in regular inter-agency locality meetings to share information and develop local practice.
- The local safeguarding children board has recently improved its quality assurance role by increasing its scrutiny of case work in order to better understand the effectiveness of joint working by agencies at the operational level. It is too early to detect measurable improvement in joint working.

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

| Strengths |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff training needs are identified systematically and relevant good quality training is commissioned. The majority of staff report that their training needs are met effectively. ▪ All children and young people, including children with disabilities, are routinely involved in their assessments. |
| Areas for development |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ While high numbers of initial and core assessments are conducted in Blackpool, the proportion completed within timescales is low in comparison to similar councils. The rate of completion within timescales varies markedly between teams. |

- Comparative data on performance is not used effectively to assist managers and staff in improving practice. For example, local performance reports on indicators, such as timescales for initial assessments, are interpreted by staff and managers as positive, even though performance remains below average when compared with other similar councils.
- Some teams do not have sufficient qualified and experienced staff and caseloads are high. As a result, there is evidence of delays, for example in completing assessments and recording routine visits.
- While support and induction programmes for newly qualified staff are available, workload pressures mean that not all such staff can derive the full benefit.
- Blackpool's guidance on the common assessment framework (CAF) is not used consistently in practice by agencies. There is a lack of clarity at an operational level about the linkages between the CAF and referrals of children in need.
- The number of domestic violence incidents in Blackpool is high and the police process 'non-urgent' referrals in batches. This makes swift identification of specific concerns difficult and reduces the capacity of staff to respond in a timely way.
- Blackpool's computer system is compatible with the requirements for recording the integrated children's system. However, staff report the system is difficult to use and printed forms are not user-friendly for staff or service users.
- Consistent arrangements for monitoring and auditing case files by senior managers are not sufficiently established. The impact is that senior managers do not have a robust overview of the quality of practice across all teams.
- The use of unqualified staff to conduct initial assessments does not comply with the guidance in '*Working Together to Safeguard Children*' (5.39).

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Steve Weaver, Chief Executive, Blackpool Borough Council
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