

21 May 2010

Mrs Edwina Grant
Director of Children's Services
Central Bedfordshire Council
Priory House
Monks Walk
Chicksands
Shefford
Central Bedfordshire
SG17 5TQ

Dear Mrs Grant

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Central Bedfordshire 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 Central Bedfordshire Council which was conducted on 9 and 10 March 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 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 contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- Children and young people are consistently seen during the course of assessments and their wishes and feelings are taken into account.



- Families are appropriately involved in assessment and care planning with satisfactory consideration given to their ethnic, cultural and disability needs.
- There are effective systems to process all incoming work and there are no unallocated cases.
- Completed assessments and cases to be transferred to other teams are audited and signed off by managers.
- Social workers have good formal and informal access to their managers at all times.
- A substantial and appropriate range of performance management information is collected to support operational management of the duty and assessment service.
- Child protection cases are promptly identified and allocated to qualified social workers.
- Joint work with the police child abuse investigation team results in timely and planned action to protect children and young people.
- Case file audit processes are well established and contribute to service development.
- The interface between the out of hours social work team and day time services is clear, well integrated and leads to case management continuity.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The improved recruitment of permanent social work managers and staff has led to good stability and has reduced pressures on front line staff. ▪ Staff morale is high and is accompanied by a strong commitment at all levels to continually improve the duty and assessment service. ▪ The local authority and Local Safeguarding Children Board actively promote a range of effective training and development opportunities, which include lessons from serious case reviews. ▪ Assessment and child protection processes for disabled children are robust with good management oversight.

Areas for development

- Delays in case closure mean that some social workers' caseloads are too high.
- There is insufficient use of case chronologies by the duty and assessment team.
- Completed assessments in the duty and assessment team are not consistently signed off in a timely way.
- Case file recording too often fails to reflect the actions required by assessments and care plans to improve outcomes for children and young people.
- The quality of supervision is variable and in some cases fails to identify key casework issues.
- Recording of information relating to the timeliness of initial assessments is insufficiently robust to ensure its accuracy.
- The use of the common assessment framework is insufficiently developed to promote better outcomes for children in need.
- The quality of referrals from other agencies is inconsistent. Some insufficiently define need or risk for the child and place further demands on the duty and assessment service.

Yours sincerely

Derek Churchman
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Richard Carr, Chief Executive, Central Bedfordshire Council
Maggie Blyth, Independent Chair of Central Bedfordshire Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Anita Lewis, Lead Member for Children's Services, Central Bedfordshire
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families