

6 May 2011

Mrs Edwina Grant
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 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 Central Bedfordshire Council which was conducted on 16 and 17 March 2011. 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 one area 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 in May 2010 have been met. The council has worked diligently to address the issues that were identified and can demonstrate significant improvement in these areas.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Arrangements for the transfer of cases between teams are undertaken



efficiently and without delay. The transfer is underpinned by a two-stage process that ensures that all tasks are completed and that plans and ensuing actions are fully understood and promptly implemented in order to safeguard children.

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

- Most assessments are comprehensive, clear and offer sound analysis on which further plans are based. There is a good understanding of risk and protective factors. Research is widely used and referred to within assessments and informs conclusions and decision making.
- Children and family members are routinely involved in assessments and in planning. Views and opinions are demonstrably taken into account and clearly recorded. Management oversight of cases is well embedded and underpins effective casework and decision-making. This ensures that work is appropriately undertaken and that staff are well supported.
- Case supervision is regularly provided and is in accordance with the council's procedures. It is reflective and case-specific and is valued by staff through supporting their decision-making and professional development.
- The understanding and use of the common assessment framework (CAF) by partner agencies has improved and is leading to an increased number of children being supported through early intervention services. The council is continuing its work to ensure the use of CAF is fully integrated into the practice of partner agencies.
- Section 47 child protection enquiries are carried out by suitably qualified and experienced workers and are effective in supporting the safeguarding of children. Decision making is appropriate and timely and leads to suitable intervention where this is required.
- The recently introduced independent audit process provides objective critical scrutiny of work undertaken including the quality of case recording. This process provides managers and staff with clear information on social workers' practice.
- Staff workloads have reduced over the past year and as a result are more manageable. This supports staff in responding to children's needs in a timely way and has greatly increased social workers' capacity to undertake direct work with children and families.
- The diverse needs of children are taken into account when assessing their needs and clearly recorded within case files. Safeguarding plans demonstrate a good level of respect for ethnicity, age, culture and religious needs of children and their families.

Areas for development

- The electronic record-keeping system does not provide effective support to staff and managers. Record-keeping, data retrieval and analysis and the efficient use of social worker time are all compromised by the inadequacies of the current system.
- Performance management systems do not provide an overview of the work of the intake and referral team. The council is not easily able to provide information on the amount or nature of duty work being undertaken at any given time.
- Unqualified staff undertake both initial and core assessments as part of supervised staff development. This is contrary to the guidance in *'Working Together'*. Whilst there is no evidence that outcomes for children have so far been affected by work being carried out by unqualified staff, risks are increased by this arrangement.
- Work undertaken at the point of contact does not always meet the guidance in *'Working Together'*. In some cases seen by inspectors decisions had been made to close contacts before full information had been gathered.
- Referrals from the police are variable in timeliness and the detail of information provided. This can impact on the council's ability to provide appropriate responses to safeguarding concerns.

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

Yours sincerely

Jeff Banham
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Richard Carr, Chief Executive, Central Bedfordshire Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education