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6 August 2009

Mr Matt Dunkley
Director of Children's Services
East Sussex County Council
County Hall
St Ann's Crescent
Lewes
East Sussex BN7 1SG

Dear Mr Dunkley

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within East Sussex 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 East Sussex County Council which was conducted on 7 and 8 July 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 one area for priority action and a 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: 45 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:

- Decisions are made in accordance with statutory timescales. All contacts are seen by a manager within 24-hours and appropriate decisions about incoming work are being made.



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- Agreed inter-agency thresholds and the use of the common assessment framework are established and applied consistently.
- Senior managers support staff who are managing complex family situations through a well-established care planning forum, which ensures appropriate senior management engagement with decision-making.
- Regular and well-established random audits of files take place which enables senior management to oversee and improve the quality of the referral and assessment service.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All social workers in the referral and assessment teams receive regular, high quality supervision and are able to access appropriate training. This ensures that staff are able to offer a good service to the most vulnerable children. ▪ Children and family members are routinely and sensitively involved in assessment and planning which includes appropriate consideration of their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious needs. Assessments lead to plans which take account of the child’s total situation, are based on robust analysis and which are agreed by family members and partners. ▪ Well-established and successful front-line communication and integrated information sharing between agencies contributes effectively to the safeguarding of children.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Due to limited social worker capacity, assessments are not always written promptly. This leaves some files with inadequate written information on which to make safe decisions. ▪ Caseloads are generally high and in some instances excessive. ▪ The current method for determining the finish date for initial assessments is not consistent with the definition of the associated national indicator.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action:

Areas for priority action
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The shortage of qualified social workers in the duty and assessment service means that, in a few cases, child protection investigations are not completed and appropriately recorded in a timely way. All cases are risk assessed and no examples of children being left at risk were seen but this has the potential to delay the start of services which may be needed by a child and family.

The area for priority action identified above will be specifically considered in any future inspection of services to safeguard children within your area.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a horizontal line underneath.

Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Cheryl Miller, Chief Executive, East Sussex County Council
Matt Dunkley, Chair of East Sussex Safeguarding Children Board
Meg Stroude, Lead Member for Children's Services, East Sussex County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families