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Mr Matt Dunkley
Director of Children's Services
East Sussex County Council
County Hall
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Dear Mr Dunkley

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within East Sussex County 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 East Sussex County Council which was conducted on 11 and 12 October 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 areas of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The area of priority action identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in July 2009 has been addressed. Two of the three areas for development have also been addressed. However, the timeliness of completing written assessments remains as an area for development.

The relevant areas for improvement identified in the safeguarding and looked after inspection of 29 November-14 December 2010 have been addressed.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Effective and sustained action has been taken to improve recruitment and retention of staff including access to high quality training and good support to newly qualified social workers. Improved recruitment has led to capacity being significantly increased, resulting in lower caseloads. Staff report very good morale and value the support and accessibility of managers. This was an area of priority action at the last unannounced inspection. ▪ Senior managers employ regular and systematic auditing combined with effective performance monitoring and use of management information to improve service effectiveness and oversee areas of development. This has, for example, enabled the service to improve the timeliness of completion of assessments during a period of sustained unprecedented demand.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is good communication and joint working between the police and children's social care which leads to an effective initial response to concerns about the protection of children. This includes prompt initial strategy discussions. ▪ The duty and assessment team has access to specific named health visitors which enables timely and effective information sharing. ▪ There is good management oversight of contacts and referrals, which leads to appropriate and timely decision making and consistent application of thresholds. ▪ The transfer of cases from the duty and assessment teams to the longer term teams are clear, effective and timely. ▪ Clear links between the out of hours service and the duty and assessment teams enable information between the services to be shared promptly and effectively. ▪ All social work staff, including those newly qualified, receive regular and critically reflective supervision which is well regarded. ▪ Learning is disseminated effectively through good quality and valued training opportunities along with reflective practice learning sessions and formal supervision, all of which contribute to improvements in practice. ▪ All children subject to child protection enquiries are allocated to suitably experienced and qualified social workers.

- Children's ethnic, religious and cultural identities are appropriately considered in assessments and decision making.
- Families are appropriately involved in the assessment process with evidence of the increasing and effective use of parental written agreements in working with families.
- In the majority of cases children were routinely seen by social workers in a timely manner.

Areas for development

- No child was found to be at risk of significant harm during the inspection. In some cases child protection processes are not consistently robust and timely. The timeliness of the initial response to child protection enquiries has improved, and in the vast majority of cases is prompt. However a lack of clarity and timeliness in decision making has led to drift in the conclusion of some enquiries. Clear plans including contingency plans are not always put in place and as a consequence families do not always understand what they have to achieve and by when.
- There is a high volume of police notifications, which includes a high proportion that lead to no further action which impacts significantly on the capacity of the service. Agencies are considering options to address this.
- The common assessment framework is not yet sufficiently embedded across partner agencies which results in some inappropriate referrals to the duty and assessment teams.
- The quality of written assessments is variable. In a few assessments risk and protective factors are not made sufficiently explicit. Historical information and chronologies are not consistently in place, the views of children are not always evident and neither is whether children are seen alone where this is appropriate. There are also delays in parents being informed of the outcome of assessments and in some cases accessing appropriate services.
- The quality of case recording is inconsistent and there are significant delays in recording strategy discussion and information sharing with other agencies and delays in recording section 47 enquires.
- The council has recognised that the timeliness of initial assessments needs further improvement. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Although, the quality of front line management oversight has significantly improved, it is still variable, particularly between the two duty and assessment teams which leads to differences in the quality of service provided. This is exacerbated by a key management vacancy in one of the teams. Appropriate

management action is being taken to address this.

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

Yours sincerely

Bill Wallace
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Becky Shaw, Chief Executive, East Sussex County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education