

22 December 2010

Ms Meera Spillett
Director of Children, Young People and Families
Oxfordshire County Council
County Hall
New Road
Oxford
Oxfordshire
OX1 1NA

Dear Ms Spillett

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Oxfordshire 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 Oxfordshire County Council which was conducted on 23 and 24 November 2010. 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 areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in November 2009 have been addressed, in full or in part. Substantial improvements have been made in all the identified areas of development. However, parents are still not routinely provided with copies of assessments in a timely way. The significant work pressures in the family support teams previously identified remain, although these no longer impact on duty and assessment responsibilities and there are no longer delays in the transfer of work.

The area for priority action identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in November 2009 has been fully addressed.



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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engagement and direct work with children is highly effective and many examples were seen of excellent, determined work in seeing children on their own, establishing their views and incorporating these within assessments. ▪ Links between the range of interventions, including common assessment framework, team around the child and child in need, are clear and effectively coordinated. Inspectors saw examples of seamless, effective transfers between the responses to changing need. A particular strength is the 'step down' arrangement from child in need to a less intensive level of intervention. ▪ Inter-agency relationships are very effective, in particular between social care and the police in the prompt identification and planning of child protection enquiries. Housing specialists, many schools and numerous other agency practitioners are also robustly engaged in the delivery of coordinated plans and services across the 13 localities.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appropriate, agreed multi-agency thresholds are effectively implemented by key partner agencies. ▪ Front line managers oversee and direct Section 47 assessments and planning in a timely, purposeful way demonstrating appropriate and clearly evidenced decision making. ▪ The majority of assessments contain substantial contextual information and adequate analysis which evaluates risks, strengths and needs. Recommendations and plans focus appropriately on addressing identified needs. ▪ Manageable workloads are in place for almost all staff, enabling them to produce timely assessments and interventions with children and families. ▪ Workforce capacity is sufficient to address demand, notably in relation to qualified social workers. This makes possible the timely allocation and completion of child protection enquiries by suitably experienced staff. ▪ Staff value the training they receive and this learning is consistently shared in team settings. The area has implemented a newly qualified social work support scheme. Lessons from serious case reviews have been widely shared through briefings and training events. ▪ Senior managers have recently introduced quality assurance systems to complement key performance indicators, and themed audits are now conducted in conjunction with the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board.

Areas for development

- While staff feel well supported and managed on a day-to-day basis, formal supervision, including support for personal and professional development, has not been sufficiently maintained recently in one of the three area teams. This is acknowledged by managers and remedial plans are in place.
- A number of examples were found where the out-of-hours service did not ensure a timely response in addressing concerns for children. However, in these cases shortcomings were immediately addressed by the daytime services
- Assessments and plans to protect children do not always sufficiently take into account background circumstances where there is substantial evidence of previously over-optimistic assessments of parents' ability to deliver safe parenting. Recording tools such as chronologies and genograms are not always effectively deployed.
- Parents are still not routinely provided with copies of assessments in a timely way, which was an area for development in the previous inspection. There is also limited evidence of other important communication including written confirmation of agreements with parents or changed status of cases with partner agencies; and, an absence of written consents to share information.
- While ethnicity, culture and religion are mostly identified, the implications of these factors for children and their families are not always evidenced in assessments and plans. Although there are some examples of good and outstanding work in this area, particularly with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, in many other cases these factors are not sufficiently taken into account.

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

Yours sincerely

Brendan Parkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Joanna Simons, Chief Executive, Oxfordshire County Council
Andrea Hickman, Chair of Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board
Louise Chapman, Lead Member for Children's Services, Oxfordshire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education