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18 August 2010

Mrs Lorraine Butcher
Head of Service for Children and Families
Cheshire East Council
Westfields
Middlewich Road
Sandbach
CW11 1HZ

Dear Mrs Butcher

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Cheshire East 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 Cheshire East Council which was conducted on 20 and 21 July 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. During the inspection 56 children's files and 18 staff supervision files were seen.

The inspection identified areas of satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

Satisfactory practice

- All child protection enquiries are undertaken by experienced and qualified social workers and in the cases seen by inspectors appropriate actions were identified to ensure that children are protected.
- Management oversight ensures that timely decision-making and prompt action occur to allocate work, to undertake initial assessments or to divert or close



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referrals appropriately.

- Managers monitor the timeliness of initial assessments effectively and ensure that risks to children are considered where there are delays.
- The quality of initial assessments is adequate and includes attention to risk and protective factors; where children require further assessment this is recognised.
- Safeguarding and child protection thresholds are set at an appropriate and consistent level. Referrals seen from partner agencies are appropriate and contain relevant and sufficient detail.
- The recent establishment of the duty and initial assessment team has resulted in a reduction in social workers' caseloads in the children in need/child protection teams, which are now at a manageable level.
- Clear guidance for staff supports effective case transfers between the initial assessment team and the children in need and child protection teams.
- Child protection strategy meetings are held in a timely way and in the majority of cases relevant agencies attend in line with statutory requirements.
- Children and young people are interviewed alone where appropriate and are routinely involved in their assessments. Children and their families are consistently informed about the outcome of their assessment.
- Children's identity and their cultural and linguistic needs are assessed satisfactorily and there is effective use of translation and interpreter services.
- Social workers receive regular supervision and inspectors saw some examples of challenging and reflective discussions.
- There is a good range of training and development opportunities and staff expressed positive views about their access to, and the quality of, recent training.

Areas for development

- Timeliness in completing initial and core assessments varies and in some cases results in delays in meeting children's needs.
- The management oversight of core assessments is inconsistent and so does not always ensure their timeliness or that risks to children are sufficiently monitored when there are delays.
- The quality of core assessments is not consistent. Although some are satisfactory, others are too brief and lack analysis of risk or protective factors. Inadequate assessments are being seen and signed off without challenge by

first line managers, which is unsatisfactory.

- Although no children were found to be at risk, the quality of child protection enquiries is variable and some were inadequate. Inspectors found cases where not all of the factors which had led to the referral had been sufficiently addressed and potential risks to children had not been adequately assessed. The quality of the recording of these enquiries also varied.
- The quality of child protection strategy meeting minutes is inconsistent. In some cases, inspectors saw brief and superficial records which lacked sufficiently detailed or clear plans about how the child protection enquiries would be carried out. Similarly, they lacked necessary information about how criminal investigations would proceed.
- The council's electronic system does not deliver sufficient management information or support managers at all levels in the effective management of performance. The impact of this is recognised by the council and funds have been secured to purchase a new system.
- Although policies to quality assure and audit social work practice have been developed recently, the inspection did not find evidence of effective implementation or impact. Consequently, strengths and areas for development are not systematically identified and analysed by managers, or reported to Cheshire East Safeguarding Children Board to drive improvement.

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

Yours sincerely

Judith Nelson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Erica Wenzel, Chief Executive, Cheshire East Council
 David Mellor, Chair of Cheshire East Safeguarding Children Board
 Hilda Gaddum, Lead Member for Children's Services, Cheshire East Council
 Andrew Spencer, Department for Education