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Dr Janette Karklins
Director for Children, Young People and Learning
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Dear Dr Karklins

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Bracknell Forest Borough 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 Bracknell Forest Borough Council which was conducted on 3 and 4 August 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 satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

Strengths

Contact, referral and assessment arrangements are very well managed. Management oversight is evident on all cases and is very clearly recorded, demonstrating thoughtful and well considered decisions based on very good analyses. Referrals are responded to appropriately in a very timely way and cases are allocated without delay for assessment.



The morale of staff is high and they report that experienced and accessible managers provide them with very good support.

Assessments are thorough and detailed. Information from other agencies is gathered appropriately and good consideration is given to historical information. Parents' views are appropriately sought. The quality of analysis in assessments is good. Strengths and risk factors are very well evaluated and this leads to appropriate actions and services to support children and young people.

High quality annual appraisals are undertaken for all staff. They are comprehensive and reflective covering performance and professional development with clear action plans monitored through ongoing supervision.

There is evidence of good use of research in social workers' reports to initial child protection case conferences to inform assessment and planning for children and young people in need of protection.

Satisfactory practice

Child protection concerns are responded to promptly. Joint working with the police is effective. Strategy discussions and meetings are undertaken appropriately, sometimes involving a number of agencies. Investigations are thorough and timely interventions ensure children and young people's safety.

Thresholds for children's social care services are appropriate, clearly set out and consistently applied. They are generally well understood by other agencies, and referrals are made appropriately by members of the public and a wide range of professionals.

The emergency duty team takes appropriate steps to ensure children and young people are safeguarded out-of-hours and communicate clearly with day time staff.

Policies and procedures are readily available and good use is made of these by staff to inform and guide their practice.

Managers develop and maintain links with a wide range of agencies to ensure effective joint working.

The needs of young people presenting as homeless are appropriately identified, assessed and responded to through well established joint working arrangements between children's services and the housing department.

Case loads are manageable and work is progressed in a timely way. Case recording is generally up-to-date. Case transfers to longer term teams are made within acceptable and agreed timescales.

Social workers have access to a wide range of training which they find useful in

their day-to-day work.

All staff have regular supervision; allocated cases are discussed and actions clearly recorded. There is some evidence of reflective practice recorded but this is not consistent. Personal and professional development is appropriately considered. Staff care is good, sickness absence is actively managed and staff are encouraged and supported to have a positive work/life balance.

Performance and capability issues are clearly identified by managers and actions are taken promptly to resolve them.

Good efforts are made to obtain feedback from families following initial assessments. The number of completed questionnaires is low but is increasing. Feedback is given to individual staff, contributing to their professional development and identified practice issues are discussed appropriately in team meetings.

The work of the contact, referral and assessment service is quality assured through regular audits by senior managers and independent consultants. Findings from audits of individual cases are discussed with staff and managers, and key findings are summarised and reported to senior managers though not to the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). Themed audits and multi-agency audits are reported to the LSCB.

There is evidence of clear understanding of the importance of equalities and diversity, for example work has been done with the Nepalese community to improve understanding of safeguarding issues.

A wide range of services are available to support children, young people and their families in their community.

Areas for development

Children and young people are seen when assessments are undertaken but it is not always made clear if they are seen alone. Their views are generally well recorded and taken into account, however, this is not consistent in all cases.

In a small number of cases initial assessments are undertaken by family support workers and there is some evidence that needs are not always properly identified.

The use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is not consistent or fully established. Inspectors saw detailed and thorough CAFs with good multi-agency involvement and clear and appropriate plans. However, in some cases CAFs are only completed at the point of a referral being made to children's social care services without children and young people having the benefit of co-ordinated early intervention services and support.

There is a lack of clarity between the recording of contacts and referrals. Some cases are inaccurately recorded as contacts instead of referrals while information is gathered to inform decisions and actions.

It is part of the role of assistant team managers to hold cases. This has the potential to blur boundaries between the social worker and the managerial role.

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

Yours sincerely

Pat O'Brien
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Timothy Wheadon, Chief Executive, Bracknell Forest Borough Council
Elaine Coleridge Smith, Chair of Bracknell Forest Safeguarding Children Board
Dr Gareth Barnard, Executive Member for Children's Services, Bracknell Forest Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education