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Ms Margaret Goldie
Corporate Director for Children and Young People
Civic Offices
West Berkshire Council
West Street House
West Street
Newbury
RG14 1BZ

Dear Ms Goldie

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within West Berkshire 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 West Berkshire Council which was conducted on 16 and 17 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 12 and 13 January 2010 have been addressed with one exception that relates to casework allocations to family support workers.

The area of priority action identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in January 2010 has been addressed.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prompt and responsive strengthening of resources within the referral and assessment service, due to a significant increase in demand, has assisted the improved timeliness of assessments and manageable workloads. ▪ The out-of-hours service has developed very strong inter-agency relationships and access to resources. This enables children and young people who are in need, including those in need of protection, to consistently receive timely, effective and well co-ordinated services out-of-hours. ▪ Early intervention services are very well established across West Berkshire. A comprehensive common assessment framework register and monthly multi-agency panels enable services to deliver effective interventions to children with identified additional needs.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child protection policy and procedures are in place and provide a clear framework for agencies to meet their responsibilities. ▪ Consistent and effective management oversight of high risk cases is clearly and comprehensively recorded. ▪ Where children are clearly identified as suffering from significant harm, child protection arrangements work well. ▪ Completed assessments appropriately identify risk and protective factors that impact upon children’s safety and welfare. ▪ Assessments include an appreciation of the issues for young people arriving unaccompanied to the United Kingdom and for minority ethnic families and ensures the provision of culturally suitable services. ▪ Case file and thematic audits are used well to inform the management and development of the referral and assessment service and to improve the quality of individual casework. ▪ In most cases records, including case chronologies, are up-to-date, clear and support effective case planning. ▪ In most cases children are seen promptly and their views are consistently sought and taken into account in case work assessment and planning. ▪ Arrangements for the transfer of cases between referral and assessment and other teams are robust and enable the prompt delivery of preventative services.

Areas for development

- Most cases held within the referral and assessment service are allocated to suitably qualified staff. However, the implementation of a new policy regarding the use of family support workers is not yet fully effective and in some instances they hold inappropriately complex work.
- Social work caseloads are manageable and balanced, although the more skilled, qualified staff experience significant additional pressures due to the frequency that they are required to undertake child protection enquiries.
- Assessments which exceed statutory timescales are not consistently or robustly monitored. In some cases this leads to delays in assessments being concluded.
- Social workers generally receive good support and management oversight. However inexperienced staff do not consistently receive the level of formal supervision that is required given the complexity of work allocated to them.
- The inaccurate classification of some contacts as referrals has contributed to a high rate of re-referrals during this year. Although appropriate action has been taken to address this, the rate of re-referrals remains high.

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

Yours sincerely

Richard Nash
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Nick Carter, Chief Executive, West Berkshire Council
Stephen Barber, Chair of West Berkshire Safeguarding Children Board
Gordon Lundie, Lead Member for Children's Services, West Berkshire Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education