

Select Committee on Children's Services – 16 September 2010

Report of the Director of Children's Services

Unannounced Ofsted inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements

Purpose of Report

1. To advise Select Committee of the outcome of the unannounced OFSTED inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements this took place on the 15 and 16 June 2010.

Background

2. The purpose of the annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authorities is to assess the effectiveness of front line practice in managing potential risks to children and young people and minimising the incidence of abuse and neglect.
3. The focus is primarily on the local authority as the lead agency for child protection but integral to this is the contribution of partner agencies and the effectiveness of multi agency working.
4. The inspection informs future inspections and in particular the full inspection of safeguarding and looked after children. The announced inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After children is undertaken on a 3 year cycle. Dudley's announced inspection can be expected at any time between now and April 2012.
5. The inspection was carried out by two HMI's (Her Majesty's Inspectors) with a social work background and experience of child protection and safeguarding services.
6. The inspection lasted for two days during which the inspectors carried out the following activities:
 - A meeting with the Assistant Director, Children and Families and Divisional Manager responsible for the referral and assessment arrangements within Children's Services
 - Interviews with social workers, support and administrative staff

- Observation of a duty room practice and procedures, a discussion with the Divisional Manager and Team Manager for Children with Disabilities Services and an interview with the Divisional Manager and representative from the out of hours services
 - Examination of a sample of case files in consultation with the responsible social worker and a meeting with the Team Manager and Duty Manager.
7. Although Dudley has three public access points, the inspectors only visited the central Dudley office and the Children with Disability Team based in central Dudley.
8. The overall inspection included the evaluation of:
- The quality and timeliness of referrals and assessment
 - The quality of management oversight and decision making
 - The application of thresholds
 - The impact of strategy discussions and enquiries in protecting children and young people
 - The effectiveness of communication, liaison and joint working between agencies
 - The effectiveness of out of hours provision
 - The effectiveness of the service in meeting the needs of children from particular groups (in Dudley there was a particular focus on children with disabilities)
 - How well services act on user views
 - The roles and responsibilities of support staff
 - The effectiveness of social workers and unqualified staff, including family support and social work assistants in identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm for children and their families.
9. Following the inspection, the authority received a verbal summary of the main findings and a letter detailing these within five days of the inspection for comment. The agreed letter was then published on the OfSTED website on the 14 July and is attached to Appendix 1 of this report.

Outcomes

10. The findings of the OfSTED inspection are reported under the following categories:
- Strengths
 - Areas of good practice
 - Areas for development
 - Areas of priority action

The inspection is not given an overall rating but the findings inform any future inspections and clearly if there are any areas of concern these will be noted and actions taken by the local authority to address those areas will be scrutinised in any future inspections. It is also possible that the outcomes of

this inspection may trigger an early announced inspection of safeguarding and looked after children or a specific safeguarding inspection.

11. Of particular note in the findings of the inspection is the identified area of strength in relation to the identification and protection of children from significant harm.
12. In summary there are a number of areas highlighted in relation to good practice and particularly the management oversight and support that is given to front line workers.
13. With regard to areas for development these can be summarised around issues relating to the audit of case files, performance management and the use of electronic recording systems.
14. The most challenging areas for development are:
 - (a) The service's ability to allocate work and undertake initial assessments in a timely way. The service has been under extreme pressure and has seen a significant rise in contact, referrals and request for assessment over the last 12 – 18 months. Steps have been taken to increase capacity and manage referral systems to improve performance in this area.
 - b) The need to further imbed the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) across all agencies to promote earlier intervention.
15. An action plan to respond to the findings of the inspection is attached at Appendix 2.

Finance

16. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Any potential costs relating to the developmental work required in respect of the inspection outlined in paragraph 14 will be subject to a separate report in due course.

Law

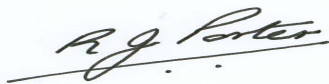
17. The law relating to the contents of the report is contained in the Children Act 1989 and is governed by guidance in 'Working Together' to safeguard children.

Equality Impact

18. The delivery of a public access for contact, referral and assessment service allows the authority to discharge its duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in the borough. Three public access points are provided to enable timely access to services to meet additional needs and signpost to other services to support and prevent family breakdown and help children achieve better outcomes

Recommendation

19. Select Committee to receive and note the findings of the OFTSTED inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Children's Services.
20. Select Committee to receive and note the action plan in response to the findings.
21. Select Committee receives further report in the progress against the action plan in March 2011.



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