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Mr David Lund  
Director of Children, Adults and Families  
Blackpool Borough Council  
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Dear Mr Lund

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Blackpool 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 Blackpool Borough Council which was conducted on 19 and 20 January 2011. 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 June 2009 have been considered during this inspection. Improvement has been made in six of the nine areas. Some social workers report that they have high caseloads and this is impacting on their work, timescales for completion of core assessments remain a concern and staff continue to report problems with the IT system. These remain as areas for development.



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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The council and partner agencies are highly committed to ensuring appropriate intervention and support to families affected by domestic abuse. Strong partnership working by police and children’s services in the Catalyst team provides a timely and highly effective response to domestic abuse incidents. All serious incident reports are assessed promptly and high risk cases are given urgent priority. Health visitors and schools are routinely informed of domestic abuse incidents. The speed of response to domestic abuse incidents was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection.</li> </ul>
<b>The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use of the common assessment framework (CAF) has increased since the last unannounced inspection with high numbers now completed, providing coordinated preventative support to children. Written protocols for CAF are agreed and advice and support is available to partner agencies. In some cases duty officers offer advice to referrers, resulting in agreement that a CAF will be undertaken. The use of the CAF was an area for development in the previous inspection.</li> <li>▪ The number of referrals received by the social care service is high compared with similar councils and is increasing. Most referrals are appropriate and decision making by managers is generally timely and appropriate so that children and families who may need services receive an assessment.</li> <li>▪ A high number of initial assessments are completed and these are generally of good quality. Timescales for the completion of initial assessments have improved since the last inspection and are now comparable with those in other councils. This was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection.</li> <li>▪ Action needed to ensure children’s safety is identified and implemented promptly. Section 47 enquiries are conducted in a thorough and timely manner with clear decisions recorded at the strategy meeting and at the conclusion of enquiries.</li> <li>▪ The diverse needs of children with disability are appropriately considered in assessments undertaken by this service. Assessments by the Catalyst team give full attention to the specific needs of children and young people in family circumstances involving domestic abuse.</li> <li>▪ Record keeping is generally up-to-date and demonstrates sound decision making. In some cases decisions by managers are supplemented by clear explanatory notes.</li> </ul>

- Effective partnership working is established across the borough. For example, regular multi-agency meetings are held at some local schools to share information and develop best practice in safeguarding. Agencies routinely contribute to assessments enabling a holistic assessment of needs.
- Out-of-hours duty arrangements are clear with prompt and effective exchange of information between the emergency duty team and the daytime services using electronic systems.
- A range of quality assurance methods are in place and findings are regularly reported to senior officers and to the Local Safeguarding Children Board. This is contributing to improvements in practice. The effectiveness of quality assurance systems was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection.
- Performance data now includes comparisons with other councils and the national average, strengthening the analysis of performance. The use of comparative data on performance was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection.
- Social workers report good levels of support from their managers who are readily available. Staff receive regular formal supervision including thorough discussion of cases, and can access a suitable range of training opportunities including briefings on lessons learned from serious case reviews, which contribute to improving practice.
- Staff undertaking referral and assessment work are suitably qualified and experienced. The council is now successful in recruiting and retaining permanent social workers and creating a stable workforce. This was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection.

#### **Areas for development**

- Agencies are not routinely notified of the outcome of referrals in accordance with guidance outlined in *'Working Together to Safeguard Children'* 2010.
- The quality of core assessments is too variable. A high number of core assessments are completed compared with similar councils and, while some core assessments are of a good quality, this is not consistent across the service. Children's views are not routinely recorded or taken into account and in some cases the quality of analysis is poor. The number of core assessments completed within timescales was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection. The council has taken action resulting in some improvement from a low base, but timescales for core assessments remain poor compared with other councils.
- Although caseloads have reduced as a result of improvements in the level of staffing, some social workers report they still have too many cases and that this impacts on the timely completion and recording of work. This was an area

for development in the last unannounced inspection. The council has plans at an advanced stage to create a dedicated duty and assessment service which will encourage more efficient working practices in this area.

- Blackpool Borough Council's computer system is compatible with the requirements for recording the integrated children's system. However, staff report that the system is difficult to use and printed forms are not user-friendly for staff or service users. This was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

**Robert Hackeson**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Steve Weaver, Chief Executive, Blackpool Borough Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education