

25 August 2010

Mr Chris Kiernan
Director of Children's Services
London Borough of Waltham Forest
2nd Floor, Uplands Business Park
Silver Birch House
Blackhorse Lane
Walthamstow
London
E17 5SD

Dear Mr Kiernan

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within the London Borough of Waltham Forest 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 the London Borough of Waltham Forest Council which was conducted on 27 and 28 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.

The inspection identified areas of strength, satisfactory practice, and areas for development. From the evidence gathered, the following features of the service were identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">There is very good involvement from a wide range of professionals in strategy meetings, these meetings are well recorded and actions are very clear.



Satisfactory practice

- The overview and management of new contacts and referrals is effective and ensures timely decision making and allocation.
- Child protection concerns are responded to promptly, strategy discussions and investigations are thorough and timely interventions ensure children and young people's safety.
- In most cases examined there is evidence of appropriate management oversight which is well recorded on case files with actions and timescales.
- When new cases are allocated managers provide clear direction and cases are discussed regularly in supervision.
- The quality of initial and core assessments is satisfactory overall. In most cases analyses provide a balanced view of risk and protective factors and good multi-agency involvement occurs in most but not all assessments.
- In most assessments attention is paid to children and young people's ethnicity, religion and culture.
- The needs of young people at risk of homelessness are appropriately assessed and responded to.
- The views of parents and carers are consistently taken into account, staff engage sensitively with them and make use of interpreters where appropriate.
- Staff receive regular supervision at a frequency reflecting their experience and skills and signed supervision agreements are in place. The primary focus in supervision is on case discussion and there is also evidence of discussion about training, and professional development. However, the practice of reflective supervision is not always evident.
- Social work capacity is adequate and social workers' caseloads are generally manageable. Additional temporary staff have been appointed in response to the increased volume of referrals. There is also an increased reliance on agency staff, particularly in some teams. In addition specific case work is carried out by independent social workers. This has the potential to affect consistency of case work and longer term capacity.
- Thematic audits of various aspects of practice are undertaken and reported to the Local Safeguarding Children Board, these include audits of core assessments, Section 47 child protection investigations and supervision practice.
- Staff have access to a wide range of training, including external courses and are well supported to attend by their managers.

- The emergency duty team operates effectively and there is clear communication with day time staff. Swift and appropriate action is taken by out-of-hours social workers and the police to ensure children and young people's safety.

Areas for development

- While there is good evidence of historical information being used to inform assessments, particularly core assessments, this is inconsistent and chronologies are not in place on all case files.
- The reasons for management decisions to take no further action on contacts and referrals are not always clearly summarised in case records. Management decisions regarding future actions in most cases are appropriate although in two cases examined had been closed too early without an initial assessment.
- Ethnic origin is not recorded on all open cases and therefore it is not possible to determine if the service is responding to the needs of the whole community.
- Children and young people are seen when concerns about their well-being are assessed. However, their views, wishes and feelings are recorded inconsistently and in assessments the impact of their views is too variable. Both these issues particularly affect disabled children.
- Case file audits are undertaken by group and team managers although not all team managers have the capacity to complete audits at the agreed frequency. Auditing appropriately identifies practice issues on individual cases and findings are shared with front line staff. However, overall findings are not systematically analysed and reported to the Local Safeguarding Children Board, consequently their impact in improving practice is not monitored.
- The progress of assessments is well monitored and recent data shows considerable improvement in the timeliness of completion of both initial and core assessments. However, there continues to be delays in completing assessments of disabled children and young people.
- Referrals relating to disabled children often lack sufficient detail and further information has to be gathered from referrers before a decision can be made leading to delays in services being put in place.
- Safeguarding concerns for disabled children are not always sufficiently well recognised by agencies leading to delays in these being referred to children's services.
- In some cases there are delays in the prison service informing children's services about the release date of prisoners who are deemed to be a risk to children and young people. This leaves very little time for thorough checks to

be done to ensure children and young people are safeguarded.

- In most cases examined recording is up-to-date but in some long delays in writing up assessments and case records is evident.
- The use of the common assessment framework (CAF) to support children, young people and their families is not well embedded across all agencies and professionals. While the number of completed CAF assessments has risen year on year, they remain low overall. Most referrals to children's services by other agencies are not supported by a CAF.
- The practice of using a statement of special educational needs in place of a CAF does not enable a holistic assessment of a child's needs.

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: Martin Esom, Acting Chief Executive, Waltham Forest
Mark Benbow, Chair of Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board
Saima Mahmud, Lead Member for Children's Services, Waltham Forest
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education