

18 February 2010

Ms Pauline Pilkington
Executive Director for Children's Services
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Room 39, The Council House
Lichfield Street
Walsall
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Dear Ms Pilkington

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter contains the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 20 and 21 January 2010. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but some areas for development, which are detailed below.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of 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 and other practitioners. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

From the evidence gathered, the inspection identified a number of areas where the contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- Initial decision making in respect of contacts and referrals is thorough. Children at immediate risk of harm are promptly recognised and timely protective action is taken.



- Multi-agency screening and initial risk assessment in the domestic abuse response team ensure that focused action is taken to further assess risks to children.
- Local agencies recognise children's needs for further assessment and make well-founded and usually timely referrals.
- Child protection enquiries and investigations are satisfactorily completed by qualified and experienced staff. This means that risks to children are identified and addressed.
- The work of the initial response team continues to be robustly audited by managers at all levels. The latest action plan appropriately addresses identified weaknesses.
- Staff receive regular and effective supervision from experienced managers. Decisions reached in supervision are routinely transferred to electronic records.
- The high proportion of newly-qualified social workers are suitably supported by additional supervision, protected caseloads and a programme of learning and development.
- The racial, cultural and religious needs of children are generally recognised and taken into account within assessments.
- Communication and information exchange between the day time services and the Emergency Response Service are well-established and are facilitated by a shared electronic recording system.
- Policy, operational procedures and protocols provide sound guidance for staff in carrying out assessments.

From the evidence gathered, the following strengths and areas for development were also identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The electronic recording system effectively supports staff in undertaking their duties. It is easy to use, efficient and reliable. Staff receive good support and training to assist them making best use of the system. Improvements have been made as a result of feedback. ▪ Good quality professional interpretation services are readily available and routinely used for a wide range of families for whom English is not their first language to ensure that information is comprehensively gathered.

Areas for development

- Not all initial assessment work is correctly categorised which means that the volume of such work is not accurately recognised and recorded.
- There are delays in completing a high proportion of initial assessments. Monitoring and prioritisation of this incomplete work are inconsistent and insufficiently rigorous. Senior managers took immediate steps to review all outstanding assessments and to strengthen monitoring arrangements.
- The quality of written assessments is variable, with poor writing and limited analysis in some assessments. The contribution of other agencies is difficult to discern. Assessments do not consistently demonstrate that children's wishes and feelings are taken into account.
- Although effective action is taken to protect children, the records of strategy discussions do not consistently demonstrate the contribution of other agencies or that appropriate joint planning for child protection investigations is taking place.
- In two instances childminders were used inappropriately to provide overnight care for children. The council identified that these were isolated cases and gave an immediate undertaking that they would not be repeated.
- The council's policy to maximise the use of the common assessment framework to make referrals to children's social care is yet to be fully embedded.

Yours sincerely

Mary Varley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Paul Sheehan, Chief Executive, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Jane Evans, Chair of Walsall Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Rachel Walker, Lead Member for Children's Services, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families