

14 January 2011

Mrs Isobel Cattermole
Acting Corporate Director for Children's Services
The London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Mulberry Court
5 Clove Crescent
London
E14 2BG

Dear Mrs Cattermole

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within the London Borough of Tower Hamlets 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 Tower Hamlets Council which was conducted on 8 and 9 December 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 January 2010 have been addressed and satisfactory progress has been made in relation to all five areas for development.



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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The views, wishes and feelings of children are given significant priority in assessments and interventions within the advice and assessment and children with disabilities services. Substantial efforts are made to ensure that all children are fully engaged in assessment processes at all stages of intervention, leading to child focused plans. ▪ Agreed multi-agency thresholds are increasingly being supported and implemented by key partner agencies through the use of the common assessment framework and extensive briefing, support and engagement with the integrated pathways and support team. Co-located practitioners contribute significantly to signposting, advice, guidance for referrers and assessment of contacts thereby enabling families to access services proportionate to their needs.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Procedures and practice to protect children and manage risks are appropriately established and implemented. Additional targeted approaches specific to the local area receive considerable attention; for example in engaging a wide range of faith and belief groups and in responding to other local circumstances. ▪ Front line managers appropriately oversee and direct child protection enquiries and other child in need assessments. Child protection enquiries are consistently allocated and completed in a timely manner. ▪ The majority of assessments contain extensive contextual information and adequate analysis evaluating risks, strengths and needs; some assessments, notably in child protection, are of good quality. Plans and recommendations for further action also focus well on addressing identified needs. ▪ Constructive and robust inter-agency relationships between social care and key partner agencies result in appropriate information sharing and effective contributions to assessments and plans. In particular there are good operational relationships with the police child abuse investigation team and the local housing advice and support agency. ▪ Senior managers have extensive and regular data and performance reporting mechanisms, as well as an established quality audit framework, using risk based as well as thematic approaches. Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Children Board has also recently undertaken an audit of agency compliance with safeguarding duties and learning following a number of serious case reviews. Both have

contributed to improved performance in safeguarding indicators.

- Out-of-hours arrangements for receiving referrals are clear with effective communication with daytime services. The social care database and key documentation are accessible to the out-of-hours duty service, enabling sufficient communication and coordinated activity.
- Workforce capacity, notably the number of qualified social workers, is sufficient to address current demand in the advice and assessment teams. The integrated pathways and support team is also well resourced by partner agencies leading to prompt, effective responses to contacts.
- Morale is high within the workforce, with most staff relating this to accessibility and the responsiveness of operational managers for consultation, as well as strong and supportive team relationships. A support and training scheme for permanent newly qualified social work staff is also in place.
- Performance indicators show recent continuous improvement in relation to neighbouring authorities, particularly in the timeliness of assessments. This is against a background of a sustained increase in service demand.

Areas for development

- High proportions of referrals do not lead to assessments, and many initial and core assessments are completed or discontinued without service plans being made. While many children are appropriately signposted to community services, performance data indicates that some children who do not meet the threshold for intervention are being subject to assessment.
- Some child protection enquiries are conducted by qualified social workers with insufficient experience. Decision-making about child protection investigations are also inappropriately undertaken by independent child protection coordinators rather than operational managers.
- There is little evidence of supervision for some staff, including workers with limited post qualifying experience. Supervision of staff is neither consistently timely, nor sufficiently focused on reflective casework practice.
- While there are examples of good work in the identification of ethnicity, culture and religion, some assessments do not sufficiently evidence the implications of these factors or consequent service plans.
- Arrangements for case transfers are insufficiently robust to ensure that they are transferred in line with the council's workflow protocol, creating some uncertainties in the implementation of plans for children and hindering the development of long term professional relationships with children.

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

Yours sincerely

Brendan Parkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Kevan Collins, Chief Executive, London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Brian Parrott, Chair of Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr Oliur Rahman, Lead Member for Children's Services, London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education