

21 May 2010

Ms Romi Bowen
Director of Children's Services
London Borough of Southwark
Mabel Goldwin House
49 Grange Walk
London
SE1 3DY

Dear Ms Bowen

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Southwark 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 Southwark Council which was conducted on 20 and 21 April 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 satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

Strengths

- Staff are well motivated and value the professional advice and support provided by managers, who are readily accessible for formal and informal consultation.
- Equality and diversity issues are thoroughly addressed in casework assessment and planning.



- Senior managers have commissioned good audits of the service, which have been appropriately used to focus service development and to take action to address the development issues identified.

Satisfactory practice

- Clear procedures and practices are in place to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are met.
- Systems for receiving referrals are effective. Administrative processes function well to support work within the teams.
- Contacts and referrals, including child protection referrals, receive a prompt response and are subject to effective initial decision making.
- All cases, including child protection referrals, held within referral and assessment services are allocated to and assessed by suitably qualified and experienced staff.
- Children are routinely seen and interviewed where appropriate during assessments.
- Communication and liaison with partner agencies are effective and contribute towards prompt referral and exchange of information.
- Most assessments are of a satisfactory quality. Although some are good, others lack sufficiently clear analysis or succinct detail.
- Managers at all levels routinely audit cases.
- Links between the out of hours service and the contact and referral service work are effective. Appropriate information is shared promptly.
- Recruitment and retention strategies are contributing to workforce stability and a reduction in high staff turnover within the service.

Areas for development

- Unsatisfactory casework practice and managerial oversight within one of the assessment teams have been identified by managers and remedial action taken. Although this action is beginning to show improvement in the quality of work and management oversight within the team, it has yet to become embedded.
- Managerial oversight and case planning, including the recording of management decisions on case files, are insufficiently robust or consistent. In some cases significant delay occurs in transferring the record of management casework decisions from handwritten notes to electronic case files. Managerial

capacity has recently been increased. However, it is too early to assess its impact.

- Slow development and use of the common assessment framework have led to a lack of clarity among partner agencies about the thresholds to access the referral and assessment services.
- High numbers of inappropriate referrals are made by agencies to the referral and assessment services, which result in no further action. This has led to deterioration in the timeliness of initial assessments over the last year. Inconsistent application of thresholds by managers across the referral and assessment teams also has impact on the timeliness of assessments and on reducing unnecessary re-referrals.

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

Yours sincerely

Pietro Battista
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Annie Shepperd, Chief Executive, London Borough of Southwark
Chris Davies CBE, Independent Chair of the Southwark Safeguarding
Children Board
Cllr Lisa Rajan, Lead Member for Children's Services, London Borough of
Southwark
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families