

16 September 2010

Mr Michael O'Connor
Director of Children's Services
Westminster City Council
Westminster City Hall
64 Victoria Street
London
SW1E 6QP

Dear Mr O'Connor

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Westminster City 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 Westminster City Council which was conducted on 17 and 18 August 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 morale in the duty and assessment team is high and staff turnover is low. Almost all staff are permanent and have manageable caseloads. Staff feel very well supported by their managers who are approachable and easily accessible.



Satisfactory practice

- New contacts and referrals are effectively managed with timely and appropriate decision making. Thresholds for intervention are clear and are generally well understood by other agencies.
- Child protection concerns are identified by a wide range of agencies and appropriately referred to children's services. Section 47 enquiries including strategy discussions are thorough and timely with effective joint working with the police ensuring that children and young people are safeguarded.
- Case records show evidence of appropriate managerial oversight. They contain clear and sometimes comprehensive recording of management discussions, decisions and actions from both informal and formal supervision. In some cases there is evidence of reflective supervision.
- Assessments and social work reports to initial child protection case conferences are thorough and include sound analysis of the identified risks. Most assessments are well informed by effective information gathering and liaison with other agencies and professionals.
- Children and young people are consistently seen and their views sought. They are usually seen alone. In most cases their views inform the outcome of the assessment. Good efforts are made to engage with parents and their views are well documented and generally inform assessments.
- Initial and core assessments take account of ethnicity, religion and culture with often good reference to the impact of this on children and young people's identity.
- Managers use a range of performance information through both electronic and manual systems to monitor the progress of cases at every stage ensuring that actions are completed within expected timescales, avoiding drift and delay in planning for children and young people.
- All staff report that they have good access to training.
- A range of thematic audits are undertaken and reported to senior managers and the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). These include audits of thresholds, re-referrals and supervision.
- Findings from serious case reviews are disseminated to and discussed with staff and there is evidence of actions arising from recommendations from serious case reviews being appropriately implemented.

Areas for development

- While staff report that they receive regular supervision this is not consistently recorded in supervision files.
- Some initial assessments of children in need cases are undertaken by social work assistants. There was no evidence of additional oversight by or joint allocation to a qualified and experienced social worker. This is contrary to the national guidance (*Working Together (2010 para 5.41)*). Some initial assessment work undertaken by social work assistants is not accurately recorded as an initial assessment but as a task.
- Chronologies are not always sufficiently comprehensive and are not in place in all cases.
- Staff report that the electronic recording system is fragmented and cumbersome and does not support them and managers in recording their activity on individual cases.
- The use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is increasing but is not embedded across all agencies. CAFs are sometimes not completed by agencies until they are at the point of making a referral to children's services.
- A high proportion of referrals to children's services do not include information about ethnicity, as a result it is not known if services are reaching the whole community in this very diverse area.
- The number of child protection enquiries regarding children with severe and complex disabilities is very low in comparison to the number of enquiries undertaken in the wider population of children and young people. Child protection concerns for these very vulnerable children and young people may not be sufficiently recognised by external professionals and agencies.

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: Mike Moore, Chief Executive, Westminster City Council
Terry Bamford, Chair of Westminster Safeguarding Children Board
Nickie Aiken, Lead Member for Children's Services, Westminster City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education