

8 December 2010

Ms Jo Olsson  
Director for Children, Education and Families  
Thurrock Council  
Civic Offices  
New Road  
Grays  
Essex  
RM17 6SL

Dear Ms Olsson

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Thurrock Council 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 Thurrock Council which was conducted on 9 and 10 November 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 on 3 and 4 November 2009 have been addressed but have not all been fully resolved. There is not yet in place an effective protocol between partner agencies to screen and consider the most effective response to incidents of domestic abuse that are referred to the council.



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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Senior managers are visible and accessible to front line staff. This contributes to positive staff morale and gives senior managers a detailed awareness of operational issues. Managers also have a very positive approach to external scrutiny and challenge and have used this to enhance their understanding of the service, enabling them to appropriately use resources to improve the quality of services for children and their families.</li> <li>▪ Workforce development, including support provided for newly qualified social workers and the front line management development programme is of a high quality. Social work staff are provided with good opportunities for professional development.</li> <li>▪ Effective use is made by the council of a wide range of services provided by the voluntary sector aimed at a continuum of need and particularly those most vulnerable. These services, which include parenting programmes, therapeutic support for victims of child sexual abuse and intensive family support and counselling are highly valued by children and parents.</li> </ul>
<b>The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Referrals are responded to promptly, at the point of inspection there were no unallocated cases and social workers had manageable workloads. Practice and procedures comply with statutory requirements and ensure children are protected.</li> <li>▪ Children identified as suffering or at risk of harm receive an immediate response and child protection enquiries are carried out by qualified and suitably experienced social workers.</li> <li>▪ Assessments, including those for disabled children, are clear and include some analysis. They are completed in a timely manner and gather appropriate information. Children are consistently seen and seen alone when required. Their perspectives and views are reflected clearly in the assessment process.</li> <li>▪ Record keeping is up-to-date and decision making is clear and well recorded. This assists out-of-hours services and managers to respond effectively and safely if required to do so.</li> <li>▪ Out-of-hours duty arrangements are clear, provide effective safeguarding and are well linked to daytime services.</li> <li>▪ The high volume of re-referrals has been scrutinised by managers and levels are reducing so that they are now broadly in line with national averages.</li> </ul>

- There are clear case transfer protocols between teams which are applied consistently and effectively and which enable cases to be safely transferred.
- Staff access relevant training and receive regular supervision which focuses both on issues of case management and professional development. Management oversight of cases is consistent and results in improved practice.

### **Areas for development**

- The recording of children's ethnicity on case files is not always accurate or timely and case records do not sufficiently demonstrate that work is being undertaken by social workers to ensure that issues of diversity, equality and identity are fully addressed. Information on race, religion, language or culture is not consistently used to design and deliver service improvement.
- Safeguarding thresholds are not consistently adhered to by all referring agencies resulting in some unnecessary referrals. Some cases being referred and responded to by social care could be appropriately managed through use of the common assessment framework and the provision of more broadly targeted services. Other cases, while appropriate for social care intervention, are sometimes escalated too readily into child protection processes leading to children and families being subject to inappropriate levels of intervention.
- Referral information provided by partner agencies is not of a consistently good quality. This is particularly so in respect of notifications regarding incidents of domestic violence. There is no effective protocol in place between partner agencies to screen and consider the most effective response to incidents of domestic abuse.
- Information from case audits is not systemically analysed and used to inform service improvement.

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

Yours sincerely

**Nicholas McMullen**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Graham Farrant, Chief Executive, Thurrock Council  
 Amy Weir, Chair of Thurrock Safeguarding Children Board  
 Charles Curtis, Lead Member for Children's Social Care, Thurrock Council  
 Andrew Spencer, Department for Education