

9 September 2010

Ms Lesley Heale
Director for People
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
PO Box 20
Council House
Solihull
West Midlands
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Dear Ms Heale

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Solihull Metropolitan Borough 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 Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 10 and 11 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The Local Safeguarding Children Board provides strong leadership to improve inter-agency safeguarding practice and has agreed appropriate thresholds for



referral to the duty, assessment and referral teams.

- Staff are regularly and actively involved in consultation and feel engaged in making improvements to the service.
- Internal evaluation of the referral and assessment process has been undertaken by the management team. Better ways of working are significantly improving ability to monitor the timeliness and quality of the service.
- Social workers value the good quality induction, accessible and relevant training and development opportunities. This has a positive impact on staff recruitment and retention.

Satisfactory practice

- The process for managing incoming contacts and decision making is satisfactory in most cases.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board provides a good range of training programmes including learning from serious case reviews.
- The quality of analysis in initial and core assessments is adequate. Positive elements are that the views of children, parents and carers are taken into account, that assessments reflect the needs of a culturally diverse community, and that a suitable format for reporting core assessments helps service users to understand the findings.
- The emergency duty team makes prompt and suitable interventions that are passed on appropriately to the relevant daytime service to follow up any concerns.
- Where children are identified who may be at risk of significant harm a prompt inter-agency strategy discussion takes place to agree an appropriate initial investigation plan.
- All child protection cases are allocated to suitably qualified and experienced social workers.
- Initial child protection case conferences are convened in a timely way in most cases, and involve appropriate participants. Parents and carers are encouraged and enabled to contribute.
- Core assessments appropriately inform initial child protection case conferences about risk and protective factors to guide decision making to safeguard children.
- Staff value the access to informal and formal support, guidance, and supervision on a regular basis.

- The currently effective but resource intensive process of managing suspected or actual domestic abuse cases is being further evaluated in partnership with the police and health service, to provide a more efficient local and regional response.
- Active steps are being taken to provide better quality management information from the client record systems, providing managers with a more accessible and helpful analysis of the quality and timeliness of casework.

Areas for development

- In two cases seen by inspectors, Accident and Emergency services in local hospitals delayed informing the council about injuries to children, thereby compromising the effective and timely investigation of concerns. Immediate assessments were undertaken once the referrals were made and the problem of the initial delay has been addressed.
- A high number of cases are held by some social workers. Capacity to respond across the range of work is only achieved by significant additional hours being worked by individuals.
- Initial assessments take too long to complete in nearly half of the total number of cases.
- The number of interim managerial arrangements and temporary posts affects the sustainability of day-to-day operations and the improvement process.
- The council has recognised that thresholds for a children's social care assessment have been unnecessarily restrictive and are discussing revised procedures with relevant stakeholders. Arrangements to publicise the changed referral criteria are not yet in place.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Briggs
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Mark Rogers, Chief Executive, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, and
Chair of Solihull Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr Norman Davies, Lead Member for Children's Services, Solihull Metropolitan
Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education