

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 020-7421-6666
Direct F 020-7421-6746
sue.leaver@ofsted.gov.uk



17 July 2009

Mr Roger Crouch
Executive Director for Children and Young People's Services
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
PO Box 41
Shaftesbury House
402 High Street
West Bromwich B70 9LT

Dear Mr Crouch

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter contains the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 17 and 18 June 2009. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but some areas for development, which are detailed below.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including: electronic case records and paper files; 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. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

From the evidence gathered, the inspection identified a number of areas where the referral, assessment and contact services were satisfactorily carrying out their responsibilities in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- Practice in the referral and assessment service ensures those risk factors that impact on children's safety and welfare are identified and managed effectively.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

- All child protection cases are allocated promptly.
- Managers provide regular supervision and staff report good management support and training opportunities.
- The views of children and parents are sought and are taken into account when assessing and planning cases.
- The referral and assessment team and children with disabilities team have appropriate joint arrangements in place to investigate child protection concerns.
- The common assessment framework has been implemented across the area with dedicated coordinators overseeing the processes.
- The cultural and religious needs of children and families from Black communities and minority ethnic backgrounds are given proper consideration.

From the evidence gathered, the following strengths and areas for development were also identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Action taken to respond to child protection referrals and concerns is timely and appropriate, ensuring that children most at risk were helped to be safe. ▪ Partner agencies are clear about thresholds for access to social care services and report effective working relationships. They report effective prioritisation of those children most at risk. ▪ The initial and core assessments seen during the course of the inspection were generally of a good standard and were responsive to individual needs. ▪ Senior managers and elected members have provided temporary additional social workers to meet shortfalls in capacity. ▪ The council has effectively identified the key areas for development in the referral and assessment service. Appropriate action is being taken to drive improvement, although some of this is recent and has not had sufficient impact on the quality of the service.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The service is well-resourced but performance, such as the speed of completing assessments for children not at risk of significant harm, is being adversely affected by a combination of sickness, staff turnover and the use of agency staff.

- A number of low priority cases remain open longer than necessary because staff have insufficient time to complete and record the work required to close or transfer them. The council has recently identified short-term measures to address this issue.
- There are significant variations in workloads and practice methods between the four teams in the referral and assessment service.
- Systematic case file auditing processes have only recently been established to monitor and report on the overall quality of practice; it is too soon to see significant impact on the quality of work with families.
- The links between the referral and assessment team and arrangements to provide family support at an earlier stage, through the common assessment framework, are underdeveloped.
- The Contact Centre accepts initial referrals, excluding those raised by the police service relating to children at significant risk of harm. These go directly to the referral and assessment service. However, the current quality of information about individual referrals forwarded by the Contact Centre is variable, and too often poor, which results in unnecessary duplication when the referral and assessment service respond to them.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a horizontal line underneath.

Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Cc Allison Fraser, Chief Executive, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Paul Meredith, Chair of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Safeguarding
Children Board
Ian Jones, Lead Member for Children's Services, Sandwell Metropolitan
Borough Council
John Browning, Department for Children, Schools and Families