

4 January 2010

Mr Steve Titcombe
Executive Director of Children, Schools and Families
Chair of Rochdale Safeguarding Children Board
Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council
Municipal Offices
Smith Street
Rochdale
OL16 1YD

Dear Mr Titcombe

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Rochdale 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 Rochdale council which was conducted on 1 and 2 December 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.

The inspection identified three areas for priority action and a number of 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; 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 contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- The response to domestic abuse has recently improved and is satisfactory. Reports to the police are jointly assessed with children's social care services, ensuring children at risk of harm are promptly identified.



- Information from regular case audits is routinely used by managers to monitor individual practice and service quality. Issues arising from these relating to systems and individual practice are beginning to be addressed.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board receives quarterly updates on the children’s services safeguarding action plan, which is regularly updated and monitored by senior managers, ensuring satisfactory oversight of the implementation of priorities.
- A satisfactory proportion of initial assessments are conducted in a timely manner, despite the pressures created by a high volume of work in the duty team.
- The authority has recently agreed to increase the numbers of social workers in the duty team in recognition of the high caseloads currently being carried.
- Translation and interpreting services are easily accessible.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff interviewed, as part of this inspection, report that managers are accessible and provide timely support and advice when needed. ▪ All staff interviewed reported that training is widely available and of good quality. Training is appropriately targeted at improving the quality of practice. ▪ The council has reviewed the duty team service and is implementing a programme of monitoring and continuous improvement. This includes the creation of the duty team dealing with all contacts, referrals, and initial assessments, which is an improvement on previous arrangements and enables a clear focus on risk assessment. Staff are enthusiastic and committed to making the new arrangements work. ▪ The local authority has undertaken a systematic review of the out of hours service, including learning arising from recent serious case reviews. The council has decided to create a dedicated out of hours service for children and their families, which will be closely aligned to the duty team.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Thresholds for the access to children’s social care services are not fully understood by partner agencies. This results in a high level of inappropriate contacts being received by the service.

- The Comprehensive Assessment Framework is under-utilised by partner agencies and thus the benefits, in terms of prevention and early intervention, are not being felt by children and families. This is contributing to the high levels of demand currently being made on children's social care services. The council and partners are aware of this and are taking steps to improve take up.
- Initial and core assessments are of variable quality, with some lacking analysis or clear evaluation of risk factors. Information was, in some cases, incomplete, for example some had little or no contact recorded with other agencies. Some assessments were, however, of a good quality.
- Views of children are not systematically recorded and it was not clear from all files whether children had been seen.
- Cultural and linguistic needs are not always recorded in assessments. In one case, the specific needs of a young child had not been taken into account despite his recent arrival in this country without a parent.
- The timeliness for the completion of core assessments is poor in comparison with other authorities. This reduces the effectiveness of assessments and delays the provision of services.
- Record keeping is not up to date. There is evidence of a backlog of work requiring input into the electronic recording system. For instance, decisions about cases discussed in supervision are not immediately recorded on the child's electronic record and there can be a delay of up to five months before this is done.
- Systems are not sufficiently developed to enable senior managers to have a comprehensive oversight of workloads and unallocated cases. This has led to delays in some cases being re-allocated following staff departure.
- While some supervision files demonstrated regular, good quality supervision, some staff do not benefit from the level of contact and quality of supervision from line managers specified within the local authority supervision policy. This has led to workload pressures not being fully addressed.
- There is a significant backlog of core assessments for children with disabilities waiting for respite short term breaks, some dating back nine months. The local authority reports that these cases have been screened for risk and the waiting list for assessment is regularly reviewed and prioritised. While the assessments remain uncompleted, there is the potential that children and families are not receiving the services they need.

This visit has identified the following areas for priority action.

Areas for priority action

- The service does not manage the assessment of potential risk of harm effectively at the point of first contact. Three out of ten closed contacts sampled by inspectors had been closed when risks to children had not been adequately assessed. These cases have been brought to the attention of the local authority.
- Child protection investigations are not always progressed in a thorough and timely manner, potentially leaving children at risk of harm. In one case seen by inspectors, the child protection investigation had been significantly delayed despite information having been received indicating a high level of risk.
- A large proportion of initial child protection case conferences are held outside the required timescale, very significantly below those of similar authorities.

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

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Roger Ellis, Chief Executive, Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Zulfiqar Ali, Lead Member for Children's Services, Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families