

17 November 2010

Ms Anna Wright  
Director of Children's Services  
Reading Borough Council  
Civic Centre  
Reading  
RG1 7AE

Dear Ms Wright

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Reading 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 Reading Borough Council which was conducted on 19 and 20 October 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.

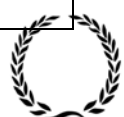
The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising any child abuse and neglect. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including: electronic case records; supervision files and notes; observation of social workers and 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.

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

**Strengths**

- The restructure of the access and assessment team has resulted in a more streamlined assessment process which reduces the necessity for different social workers completing the initial and core assessment.
- There are strong quality assurance systems which actively seek the views of children and families and assist the development of service provision.



**The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas**

- Although the volume of domestic abuse referrals is high, decision making about the appropriateness of those cases requiring assessments is soundly based.
- Children in need plans and initial and core assessments, seen by inspectors, are comprehensive and analyses clearly identify risk and protective factors.
- Child protection enquiries are appropriately prioritised and always carried out by qualified social workers.
- All children in need and child protection cases are allocated to suitably experienced and qualified social workers.
- Case recording is generally up-to-date, comprehensive and there is evidence of appropriate use of chronologies in some cases.
- Supervision of staff is carried out regularly and in accordance with the council's supervision policy.
- Social workers are well supported by their managers and are positive about training opportunities available to them. Newly qualified social workers receive a good induction and have protected caseloads.
- The content of assistant social workers' caseloads is appropriate and they receive effective support and management.
- The council has been recently successful in recruiting and retaining permanent social workers to the access and assessment team. This reduces reliance on agency staff and promotes stability of the workforce.
- There are robust transfer arrangements for cases moving into area teams or multi-disciplinary children's action teams from the access and assessment team which supports timely continuity of service provision.
- The existence of children's action teams, combined with the strong promotion and extensive use of the common assessment framework provides a responsive local support service to families.
- The council has a well established and comprehensive audit programme which includes all management levels up to and including the Director.
- Robust systems and communication arrangements are in place for the transfer of information between the access and assessment team and the emergency duty service.
- There is evidence that appropriate learning from recent serious case reviews has been disseminated and has raised awareness for future practice.

- There is evidence that consistent attention is given to the diverse needs of children and that children and their families' views are actively sought.

### **Areas for development**

- Rates of re-referral, particularly for cases involving domestic abuse are still too high although the commissioning of appropriate and specific domestic violence services are planned.
- Although a considerable amount of work has been done to embed the common assessment framework process, thresholds for referral to the access and assessment team are still set too low and are impeding its effectiveness.
- There is a significant backlog of long standing children in need cases where assessments need to be completed and in a number of cases closed. Delays in the completion of this work are impacting on the efficiency and effectiveness of the access and assessment team.
- Initial and core assessments are not always completed on time. While the quality of initial assessments is good in most instances they are often too detailed. Currently some initial assessments contain the depth of information required for core assessments and as a result social work time is not well targeted in order to meet core assessment timescales.
- Some section 47 strategy meetings are used for ongoing case review rather than either taking a case to an initial child protection conference or making a decision to continue support through section 17 services via a children in need plan. For those children who are in need of protection, the impact of this practice is that they do not benefit from an early multi-agency conference; child protection plan and core group and exclude the child and parent.
- Where the outcome of a single agency section 47 enquiry leads to a decision not to proceed with the enquiry, formal notification of this decision is not routinely communicated to members of the original strategy meeting.
- The current process for child protection enquiries and the management of cases which involve both the children with disabilities and the access and assessment teams lacks clarity and in some instances leads to confusion.
- Management oversight and decision making is evident on case files however, case tracking and follow up to ensure actions have been carried out is not sufficiently robust.

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

Yours sincerely

**Emmy Tomsett**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Michael Coughlin, Chief Executive, Reading Borough Council  
Stephen Barber, Chair of Reading Safeguarding Children Board  
Mark Ralph, Lead Member for Children's Services, Reading Borough Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education