

16 December 2009

Ms Pauline Newman
Director of Children's Services
Manchester City Council
5th Floor Town Hall Extension
Manchester
M60 2AF

Dear Ms Newman

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Manchester City 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 Manchester City Council which was conducted on 17 and 18 November 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 one area 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:

- Decision making in response to contacts and referrals in the cases seen was appropriate and timely. Referrers are kept informed of progress and outcomes.
- Practice and procedures for responding to child protection needs comply with statutory requirements and guidance, and ensure appropriate levels of involvement from all partner agencies.



- Child protection enquiries (Section 47 Children Act 1989) are undertaken in a timely way by qualified social workers. As a consequence children in need of immediate protection are safeguarded.
- Practice is sensitive to ethnic, linguistic and cultural needs of children and their families, for example through the use of interpreting and translation services. Operational staff and managers take a proactive approach in seeking to understand the diverse range of needs of communities in the area.
- Reporting on assessment and child protection activity and performance to the Manchester Safeguarding Children Board is regularly undertaken. The influence of the Board in promoting service improvement between partner agencies is demonstrated, for example in its support for the development of the First Response service.
- Senior managers are aware of the challenges faced by front line services and are taking robust action to minimise the impact of these such as securing additional resources which are being deployed effectively to meet the demand for services. Additional staff with appropriate qualifications, including some that are other than in social work, are deployed appropriately to cover elements of work in the absence of social workers arising from vacancies or long term sickness.
- A successful recruitment strategy has resulted in a high number of new appointments which have the potential to remedy the current shortfalls in the staffing establishment. However, these appointments are yet to be finalised.
- The Emergency Duty Service provides a satisfactory and responsive out of office hours service to children in need of protection with evidence of effective communication with daytime services.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The First Response service provides robust scrutiny of contacts and effective initial screening of referrals. This recent development has already reduced levels of inappropriate referrals to district teams. ▪ District and team managers are reported by staff to be accessible and providing a good standard of support. This contributes significantly to high levels of staff morale. ▪ Staff have access to good opportunities for training in core responsibilities and benefit from information being disseminated effectively through regular team meetings.

- Learning from a recent serious case review has been translated into robust action by managers at all levels and resulted in improved management oversight of casework practice and more focused quality assurance processes.
- Performance monitoring at a strategic level and audits of front line practice are systematic and increasingly effective.

Areas for development

- Many social workers carry caseloads that are too high and include too many cases requiring complex work. This contributes to delays in progressing assessments and completing planned work which have been exacerbated, in some districts, by high rates of staff turnover during the past year.
- Newly qualified social workers acquire complex caseloads, including child protection cases and court proceedings, too soon in their careers. The structured induction to support these staff, for example the enhanced frequency of supervision, is not being consistently delivered.
- Staffing difficulties over the past 12 months have impacted adversely on the timeliness of the completion of both initial and core assessments. Current performance is below both national and statistical neighbour authorities.
- The quality of many initial and core assessments is variable and some are poor. Most are narrowly focused on the presenting problem, contain insufficient information and analysis, and include limited evidence of the views of children, parents or carers. While inspectors found no cases where the immediate risks of harm or safeguarding concerns had not been addressed appropriately, these weaknesses have the potential for children's needs not to be fully identified or met.
- Some strategy discussions or meetings between social care and police agencies are conducted by social workers with insufficient seniority or experience with the result that the criminal and welfare aspects of investigations are not always sufficiently balanced when determining the process for child protection investigations.
- Management decisions and case discussions conducted in supervision are not routinely recorded on the child's case file.
- Low numbers of Common Assessment Framework (CAF) assessments are undertaken. Partner agencies continue to refer children to social care where an inter-agency focus on prevention would have been expected. The Children's Trust Board acknowledges this and is taking action to strengthen the use and impact of the CAF and increase access to preventative services.
- Recording of assessments on to the computerised records system is not always carried out promptly leading to potential difficulties known to be associated

with gaps in recorded information about children. The new electronic recording system in social care is perceived by staff as difficult and time consuming to use.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action.

Area(s) for priority action

- Some core assessments are unallocated and 39, while allocated, are not being progressed with some delays being up to three months. This is due to staffing shortages and workload pressures. Other agencies are involved with these children but have not been requested to increase their input during this period, resulting in some children potentially not being safeguarded effectively or receiving the services they need. However, the local authority has risk assessed and prioritised these cases.

The area 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: Sir Howard Bernstein, Chief Executive, Manchester City Council
Ian Rush, Independent Chair of Manchester Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr Sheila Newman, Executive Member for Children's Services, Manchester City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families