

1 December 2010

Ms Eleanor Schooling
Director of Children's Services
London Borough of Islington Council
159 Upper Street
London
N1 1RE

Dear Ms Schooling

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within the London Borough of Islington 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 the London Borough of Islington Council which was conducted on 2 and 3 November 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 next 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.

The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements on 19 and 20 January 2010 have been addressed.

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

Strengths

- At the first point of contact with the referral and advice service children, their families and other agencies, have direct access to a wide range of advice and support provided by specialist social workers and multi-agency professionals. For example, the service offers specialist advice on domestic abuse, mental



health and drug and alcohol misuse.

- Highly effective collaborative working and co-location with local voluntary organisations provides direct access to services for children and young people referred who have additional needs but do not meet the threshold for a statutory service.
- Specific groups of vulnerable children and young people are effectively safeguarded through a range of targeted service initiatives. For example, there is an excellent multi-agency approach to the identification of children privately fostered or subject to trafficking; children on the edge of care receive responsive and intensive home based support.

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

- Managers effectively prioritise work to ensure assessments of children and young people identified as at risk of significant harm are timely and of sufficient quality to inform initial child protection conferences and child protection plans.
- Children and young people identified as in need of protection are appropriately safeguarded through child protection processes which are undertaken in line with the pan London protocol and statutory guidance.
- Effective targeting of referrals is supported by locality teams and multi-agency working which is strengthened by social workers having designated community links and participating in team around the child processes.
- Children and families receive support including direct work from the children in need and children with disabilities teams. Most children are seen regularly and within timescales.
- The council and managers demonstrate a commitment to maintaining caseloads at a reasonable level through regular monitoring and challenge.
- Most initial and core assessments routinely record ethnicity and give explicit consideration to risk and protective factors are completed within statutory timescales.
- Child protection cases are appropriately allocated to suitably qualified and experienced social workers.
- In the majority of cases seen by inspectors, recording and chronologies are up-to-date with clear management oversight.
- Effective and accessible management support at all levels is available to, and valued by, social work staff.

- Supervision is regular and, in most cases, recorded on the electronic records with actions clearly identified.
- Staff benefit from good opportunities for training and development. Lessons from serious case reviews are disseminated widely and multi-agency seminars are a mandatory requirement for social workers to attend.
- Service improvement and quality is robustly promoted through a strong performance culture. This is supported by regular thematic audits which identify specific areas for further investigation and analysis. Review audits are undertaken to assess and monitor improvement.
- A well-established hospital social work service works effectively with medical staff and other local authorities.
- An effective social work service is provided to the mother and baby unit at Her Majesty's Prison, Holloway. As a result, in partnership with the prison service and other local authorities, the safeguarding and long-term needs of the babies are appropriately addressed.
- A robust action plan developed following the previous unannounced inspection has resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of common assessments completed under the common assessment framework arrangements.
- A consistent social work service to children and families is supported by effective workforce planning, staff recruitment and retention.
- Newly qualified social workers are well supported with protected caseloads. Staff report positively about working for the council and this supports retention of experienced staff. This reduces the reliance on the use of temporary staff.

Areas for development

- In some cases, contacts from other agencies are not sufficiently detailed to enable a timely referral decision. The Islington Safeguarding Children Board is aware of this and is addressing this with partners.
- In cases seen by inspectors children and young people were being detained inappropriately in police cells overnight without an assessment being undertaken by the emergency duty team.
- Timescales set for the completion of identified activities within children in need plans are not routinely recorded. Some children in need cases are being closed without appropriate recording of work completed or outcomes achieved.

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

Yours sincerely

Chris Sands
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: John Foster, Chief Executive, London Borough of Islington
Janet Mokades, Chair of Islington Safeguarding Children Board
Richard Watts, Executive Member for Children and Young People, London Borough of Islington
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education