

Freshford House
Redcliffe Way
Bristol BS1 6NL

T 0300 1231231
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 03000 130570

Safeguarding.lookedafterchildren@ofsted.gov.uk



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Miss Jane Porter
Acting Director Children's Services
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Westox House
1 Trinity Road
Dudley
West Midlands
DY1 1JQ

Dear Miss Porter

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Dudley Metropolitan 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 Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 9 and 10 February 2011. 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 practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in June 2010 have been considered during this inspection. Some improvement has been achieved in all areas for development identified in the last inspection apart from the recording and quality of supervision sessions which remains as an area for development.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

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

- Social workers and managers in referral and assessment teams are suitably qualified and experienced and can demonstrate they have attended relevant training courses to update their knowledge.
- Section 47 enquiries are carried out by qualified social workers in a timely manner. Strategy meetings enable prompt liaison with relevant agencies so that action needed to ensure children's safety is identified and implemented in accordance with statutory guidance.
- There has been good progress in the development of the common assessment framework (CAF) with increased numbers undertaken. Some referral and assessment teams have established good links with local CAF partnerships and this improved multi-agency working helps children and families receive preventative services in a timely manner. This was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection.
- Family support services routinely collate service user views and these are used to inform and plan services. There is a good variety of family support services available to meet the differing needs of children and families.
- Staff report that they are well supported in their work by managers who are readily available for advice and support. This ensures timely decision making in child protection cases.
- There is clear evidence of improvement in the quality of performance management information that is routinely available to team managers. This now enables managers to have a clear overview of the timeliness of assessments being undertaken. This was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection.
- Working arrangements with the out-of-hours duty team are clear. Children and young people benefit from good communication and collaboration between the daytime and the out-of-hours team.
- Assessments undertaken as part of child protection investigations are thorough, and children and young people are seen and their views are recorded. A clear analysis of risk and protective factors inform actions and ensures that children and young people are adequately protected.
- Senior managers have a good understanding of the challenges facing the service and are actively engaged in actions to address these in order to further develop the effectiveness of the duty, referral and assessment service.

Areas for development

- The range of diverse needs arising from Dudley's population including race, culture, religion, and disability are not consistently considered by social work staff undertaking assessments or in management information available to senior managers. As a result, children's individual needs are not always adequately assessed and managers do not have the relevant information that would enable them to quality assure this area of work.
- There are delays in commencing initial assessments for cases identified as children in need. In some cases seen, social workers commence work and focus on the presenting problems of children and families, only completing an initial assessment at the end of their involvement. This means that their actions are not appropriately informed by assessment.
- Although caseloads have reduced since the last inspection some social workers' caseloads remain high which limits their ability to complete work in a timely manner.
- While inspectors found evidence of some good quality initial and core assessments which included thorough consideration of children's views, the quality of assessments seen was not consistent. Poor recording and insufficient analysis was evident in some assessments and this resulted in ineffective case planning.
- While social workers report that they receive regular supervision the quality of the recording of supervision continues to be variable with insufficient evidence of critical reflection and challenge. Annual appraisals of professional development were not recorded in those supervision files seen by inspectors. This was an area for development in the last unannounced inspection.
- Social workers and managers report that there is inconsistency in the understanding and application of thresholds across partner agencies. This is contributing to the high number of referrals received by the duty and assessment teams. Work has been undertaken in developing a revised threshold document. This has not yet been implemented.

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

Yours sincerely

Wendy Ghaffar
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: John Polychronakis, Chief Executive, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education