

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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Ms Pauline Pilkington  
Executive Director for Children's Services  
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council  
Room 39, The Council House  
Lichfield Street  
Walsall  
WS1 1TW

Dear Ms Pilkington

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Walsall 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 Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 30 November and 1 December 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 an area of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The majority of areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in February 2010 have been addressed although, further work is on-going to improve the quality of analysis in initial and core assessments and this remains an area for development.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There are strong multi-agency partnership arrangements in place, particularly with the police to ensure a prompt and effective response to children, young people and their families affected by, or at potential risk of, domestic abuse. There is a high level of multi-agency commitment to resourcing the daily consideration of domestic abuse incidents strengthening the safeguarding arrangements for the affected children and young people.</li> </ul>
<b>The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prompt and effective action is taken to ensure that children and young people at risk, including those with disabilities, are safeguarded through timely child protection investigations which lead to clear outcomes. Investigations are always carried out by qualified social workers.</li> <li>▪ Clear inter-agency thresholds to access social care services are in place and are applied consistently by the initial response team (IRT), although the recently agreed threshold for referral to the children and young people with disabilities team is not yet fully embedded with partners and its impact is yet to be evaluated. Appropriate decisions about incoming contacts and referrals are made in line with statutory timescales.</li> <li>▪ Children and young people are involved in their assessments and are routinely seen alone with good evidence that their feelings and wishes are taken into account to inform case planning.</li> <li>▪ The council has taken appropriate action to gain feedback from children, young people and their families to learn from their experience of the service, although the impact on service delivery is yet to be evaluated.</li> <li>▪ There is evidence of appropriate attention to the diverse needs of children and young people and their families in assessments with good examples of the use of interpreters to support their involvement. Assessments demonstrate suitable awareness of and sensitivity to cultural diversity and disabilities.</li> <li>▪ Appropriate management systems are in place to monitor the work and performance of the IRT although the council recognises the need to review the format in which management information is produced so that it is easily accessible. The Walsall Local Safeguarding Board receives regular performance monitoring information which is used to challenge practice and management decision making in order to deliver a more effective service to children, young people and their families.</li> <li>▪ Completed cases to be transferred to other teams are audited and the decision</li> </ul>

is signed off by managers enabling a prompt transfer of cases between teams.

- Staff morale is good and is supported by high quality supervision and manageable caseloads. Social workers and their managers demonstrate a strong commitment to continual improvement of the service offered to children, young people and their families.
- Newly qualified social workers speak highly of the support provided by managers. This includes good induction, protected caseloads, and regular supervision to promote their professional development. They benefit from co-working alongside more experienced social workers on child protection cases.
- The council's commitment to their staff is demonstrated through the recently developed staff recruitment and retention strategy which includes clear career pathways, a reduction in the use of agency staff, and a good range of training and development opportunities.
- Lessons from serious case reviews have been disseminated to front line staff and social workers say they value the emphasis placed on the lessons to be learned to support their professional development and inspectors saw evidence that this has resulted in improved practice.
- Social workers are supported by readily accessible inter-agency policies and procedures which are known and used well.
- Case records are written up in a timely manner and are used to inform case planning and intervention and include chronologies.
- The common assessment framework (CAF) activities are well established across most agencies and professionals. The council has responded well to an identified need to co-locate CAF co-ordinators in the IRT to ensure vulnerable children and young people and their families are offered timely and appropriate support from a good range of preventative services.
- The emergency response team arrangements are well co-ordinated with those of the IRT and provide an effective out-of-hours service to children and their families.

#### **Areas for development**

- The quality of initial and core assessments seen by inspectors is variable with some lacking sufficient analysis of risk and protective factors. The quality of analysis was identified as an area for development at the last inspection.
- While effective action is taken to ensure that children and young people are safe, the record of strategy discussion is not always sufficiently detailed in making clear which agency will undertake the work. Senior managers recognise and acknowledge this is an area for development.

- There are clear management decisions recorded on most files. However, the rationale underpinning the decisions and actions taken is not always explicit.

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

Yours sincerely

**Lolly Rascagneres**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Paul Sheehan, Chief Executive, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council  
Jane Evans, Chair of Walsall Safeguarding Children Board  
Councillor Rachel Andrew, Lead Member for Children's Services, Walsall  
Metropolitan Borough Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education