

2 December 2009

Ms Jo Olsson  
Director of Children Education and Families  
Thurrock Council  
Civic Offices  
New Road, Grays  
Essex  
RM17 6SL

Dear Ms Olsson

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Thurrock 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 Thurrock Council which was conducted on 3 and 4 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 no areas for priority action but some 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:

- Contacts made by professionals and the public about the welfare of children, young people and their families are recorded clearly and presented to managers in a timely way.



- Managerial decisions about contacts and referrals are made in a consistently timely way and recorded clearly on case files.
- Referrals, assessments and other case records contain appropriate information about the ethnic origin, religion, and cultural issues regarding children and families which is used effectively to inform decision-making in casework.
- Allocation of referrals for assessment is prompt. Inspectors found that Initial Response teams had no unallocated cases or cases awaiting assessment at the time of inspection.
- Timeliness of completion of initial and core assessments is in line with comparable authorities and national averages.
- The quality of most initial and core assessments is at least satisfactory, with some examples of very good practice seen by inspectors. Assessments are child and family focused with the individual needs of siblings given due consideration.
- Caseloads are of manageable proportions, despite the demand for assessments having increased.
- Priority is given to ensuring that children are always seen, and seen alone when necessary, by social workers during visits; the views of children and families are taken into account appropriately in assessments and care planning.
- In all child protection cases seen by inspectors, the response was prompt with risks identified at an early stage and most initial intervention plans are timely and effective.
- Consistency in application of a clear method of co-working between the Initial Response and Children with Disabilities teams on complex cases helps to ensure that the needs of children and young people are fully understood and responded to appropriately.
- Inter-agency work is effective with evidence of frequent and necessary communication between partner agencies to ensure proper assessment and initial case planning.
- The Emergency Duty Team is accessible and responsive and works well in collaboration with mainstream services.
- Sound processes and rigorous management ensure smooth and timely transfer of cases to longer term teams.

- Performance monitoring is used regularly by relevant managers, with periodic quality audits that are independent of line management. In combination, these provide a sound basis to improve practice further.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Good use is made by practitioners and managers of the council's electronic record system and the integrated children's system. These support front line practice and provide good evidence of outcomes in individual cases.</li> <li>▪ Consultant social workers are deployed within the Initial Response teams and are making a positive impact on the quality of the service. There is good evidence of expert advice and clear intervention in the many cases in which domestic abuse and alcohol and substance misuse are features.</li> <li>▪ A combination of good team management and staff support, accessible and focused supervision, and relevant training and development opportunities, has helped to establish strong teams with good staff morale, ensuring that the high levels of demand for service are consistently met by well considered practice.</li> <li>▪ Senior managers contribute frequently and positively to decision-making in complex cases, and are closely involved in improving the quality of the contact, referral and assessment service.</li> </ul>
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There is no effective protocol between partner agencies to screen and consider the most effective response to large numbers of incidents of domestic abuse that are referred to the council. Consequently, resources in the contact, referral and assessment team are not used in the most efficient way.</li> <li>▪ The proportion of referrals that are repeat referrals within 12 months of a previous referral remains higher than in comparable councils and well above the national average. Analysis of data on referrals and management is insufficient to establish the underlying reasons.</li> <li>▪ Although the council collates some service user views to help improve children's services, insufficient use is made of their views to improve the effectiveness of the contact, referral and assessment system.</li> </ul>

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a long, sweeping underline.

Heather Brown  
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy:     Bob Coomber, Chief Executive, Thurrock Council  
             Amy Weir, Chair of Thurrock Safeguarding Children Board  
             Sue MacPherson, Lead Member for Children's Services, Thurrock Council  
             Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families