

16 March 2011

Mr John Gilbert
Group Director Children's Services
Swindon Borough Council
Sanford House
Sanford Street
Swindon
SN1 1QH

Dear Mr Gilbert

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Swindon 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 Swindon Borough Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 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 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 in July 2009 have been met.

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

Strengths

- Children's views are taken into account fully in child protection conferences through the funding of independent advocates to support all children over the age of nine years. Positive feedback has been provided by children who value this service.



- Excellent partnership working contributes well to safeguarding children. Monthly multi-agency meetings to discuss cases of concern enable services to respond proactively in assessing and delivering effective interventions to children with identified additional needs.
- The staff group is suitably qualified and experienced with an effective mix of experience and skill. Staff retention is good and sickness levels are extremely low. Almost all staff are permanent and have manageable caseloads. Morale is good. Staff value the management support they receive and the training opportunities available to them.

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

- Child protection policies and procedures are used appropriately and provide a clear framework for agencies to meet their responsibilities.
- Clear thresholds for access to children's services are applied consistently. Protocols for joint working are agreed with, and well understood, by partner agencies. For example a review by children's services and the police of the use of police powers of protection has resulted in changes to practice with a significant and appropriate reduction of inappropriate usage.
- The use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is well established across partner agencies and provides a wide range of preventative services. The co-location of a CAF worker within the duty team is effective in ensuring children and families, where appropriate, have access to early preventative interventions without the need for a formal referral to children's services.
- Equality and diversity issues are addressed and explored appropriately in casework assessment and planning. For example, safeguarding assessments of unaccompanied asylum seekers demonstrate a clear appreciation of the issues facing young people arriving in the United Kingdom. Where child protection concerns are identified within the disabled children's team there is a swift and appropriate response.
- Cases that require Section 47 enquiries are identified effectively. Assessments are undertaken by social workers who are suitably qualified and experienced. In most cases action is implemented appropriately, assessments are at least satisfactory and carried out in a timely manner.
- Children are generally seen alone and their views are appropriately recorded within assessments.
- Effective and robust out-of-hours arrangements are in place which link well to daytime services. Where a child protection or child in need plan requires unannounced welfare checks to be made out of daytime hours the team fulfils this function to ensure specific children are safeguarded.

- Overall records, including case chronologies, are up-to-date, clear and inform case planning.
- In most cases the outcome of assessments and managerial oversight on child protection cases is satisfactory. Clear and appropriate case directions are well evidenced in the case and supervision records.
- Arrangements for the transfer of cases to long term teams are clear, flexible and effectively implemented which means that children and young people do not experience unacceptable delays to the continuity of the services they receive.
- Senior managers have commissioned audits of the service, using them to focus specifically on service development in areas of poor performance. Operational managers track and regularly audit individual cases to raise performance and identify training needs.
- A pilot project in the duty and assessment team of using appropriately trained and vetted volunteers to provide practical non-social work support to some service users is proving effective. The project is to be expanded to enhance capacity within the team.

Areas for development

- Decisions on initial contacts are not always made in accordance with statutory guidance. While child protection cases are identified and effectively managed in accordance with guidance, appropriate decision making in other cases is not completed within 24 hours. Assessments which exceed statutory timescales are not consistently or robustly monitored. In some cases this leads to delays in assessments being concluded.
- Significant improvements have been made since the last unannounced inspection with regard to improving the quality and timeliness of initial assessments. However, data indicates that performance in relation to core assessments has deteriorated. The inspection determined that while thorough assessments are being carried out they are often in a different electronic format. Operational difficulties with the electronic recording system result in these assessments not being counted as core assessments. Senior managers have taken corrective action to address this issue with changes to the system due to become operational from 1 April 2011.
- Assessments for teenagers do not consistently reflect sufficient focus on key risk and protective factors. Weakness in analysis means that case planning for a minority of teenagers in need of protection is insufficiently robust and timely.

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

Yours sincerely

Lynne Staines
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Gavin Jones, Chief Executive, Swindon Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education