

13 January 2011

Ms Yvette Stanley
Director of Children, Schools and Families
London Borough of Merton
Civic Centre
London Road
Morden
Surrey
SM4 5DX

Dear Ms Stanley

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within the London Borough of Merton 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 Merton Council which was conducted on 7 and 8 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 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 5 and 6 May 2010 have been addressed.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Funding has been made available for additional social worker and supervisory posts to address high caseloads. As a result, there has been a considerable improvement in the timeliness of assessments which, in the last two months,



have exceeded national targets, and also increased the throughput of work.

- Comprehensive assessments and planning by staff in the children with disabilities team combined with effective partnership working ensures that the specialist needs of this group of children are well met. The team has recently undertaken some safeguarding workshops in targeted local schools which have resulted in better quality of referrals sent though to them.
- A wide range of multi-agency preventative and targeted services are available to children and families in need of additional support. These include 'Caring Dads', a groupwork programme for fathers who have been involved in domestic abuse. The course, run jointly with London Probation Trust, helps men develop skills in effectively interacting with their children.

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

- The Merton 'Well-being' model provides clear multi-agency thresholds for service delivery and is understood by staff and partners. As a result, appropriate referrals are made to children's social care and resources are targeted effectively.
- Contacts and referrals to the access and assessment team receive a timely response. In most cases, well-documented decisions are made by duty managers in progressing cases and, where cases do not reach the threshold for the involvement of children's social care, appropriate referrals are made to preventative services.
- Referrals about children at risk of significant harm receive a prompt response from a qualified social worker. Good working relationships with the police ensure that strategy discussions are timely, and Section 47 enquiries commence on the day of the initial contact.
- All social workers are suitability qualified, experienced and committed to improving outcomes for children and young people. Staff are encouraged to participate in the comprehensive training opportunities that are available to enhance their professional development and practice.
- The recent appointment of permanent social worker and management posts to the access and assessment team has reduced the use of agency staff. This has improved the overall stability of the team and provides a more consistent service to children and their families.
- Children and family members are routinely seen during assessments and their views are recorded and contribute to case planning.
- Assessments of children and their families take account of their culture, language and personal identity.
- A developing culture of performance management within the children's care service is improving the timeliness in the provision of services to children and their families. Weekly meetings and regular performance reports are actively

used by managers to monitor the progress of work within the team and address any deficits or inconsistencies.

- Transfer arrangements between the access and assessment service and the children in need teams are clear and robust. Cases are allocated promptly on transfer and appropriate liaison undertaken between the teams.
- Effective out-of-hours arrangements are in place which link well to daytime services.

Areas for development

- Although the frequency of formal staff supervision is improving, the quality is inconsistent and does not generally provide sufficient opportunity for reflective practice.
- Recording in case files is timely but, in some cases, not sufficiently comprehensive to reflect all the key issues in the case.
- Some core assessments lack sufficient analysis of all the identified risk factors and the impact on the welfare of the child. This is particularly evident in more complex cases where plans are not sufficiently realistic and outcomes are not always achievable.
- The overall quality of management oversight of casework is not sufficiently rigorous. As a result assessments with deficits in analysis or with limited plans are authorised by managers.
- The role and importance of the local authority designated officer in safeguarding children and vulnerable adults is not fully understood and utilised by the service.
- Information sharing protocols with the probation service regarding adults who pose a risk to children are not sufficiently developed.

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

Yours sincerely

Karen McKeown
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Ged Curran, Chief Executive, London Borough of Merton
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education