

4 June 2010

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 Merton's 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 5 and 6 May 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 satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Staff have good morale, are well motivated and value the professional advice, support and training that are readily available.</li><li>▪ There is ready access to a wide range of preventative resources and targeted services within the community.</li></ul>



### **Satisfactory practice**

- Clear procedures and practices are in place to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are met.
- Systems for receiving referrals are sound and effective. Administrative processes function well to support work within the Access and Assessment team.
- Contacts and referrals, including child protection referrals, receive a prompt response.
- Links between the Access and Assessment team and other agencies in the use of the common assessment framework process are effective. This leads to appropriate and prompt referrals between the services to enable children and families to access provision.
- New staff receive appropriate induction and support to enable them to undertake progressively more complex work.
- All cases, including child protection referrals, held within the Access and Assessment team are allocated to and assessed by suitably qualified staff.
- Managers at all levels routinely audit cases. Senior managers use performance management systems to maintain accurate awareness of issues affecting the service and to take action where necessary.
- Information is effectively shared between the out of hours service and the Access and Assessment team.

### **Areas for development**

- Lack of stability within the Access and Assessment team as a result of significant staff turnover, impacts on the quality, consistency and continuity of practice and management. Recruitment and retention strategies and action plans are beginning to stabilise the team but have yet to have sufficient impact. Most of the staff in the service are new agency staff and many of those with permanent contracts are also newly appointed.
- Screening of referrals undertaken by different managers results in some lack of consistency in relation to children in need cases. The basis for risk assessment and decision making is not consistently or clearly recorded.
- Children are routinely seen and interviewed where appropriate during assessments but it is not always evident that their views influence the services that are provided.
- Systems are in place to share information between partner agencies. However,

relevant information is not regularly sought by Access and Assessment team staff to inform case planning and assessment.

- Assessments are generally satisfactory in quality, with some evidence of good practice. However, some are not timely and lack clear analysis or sufficient detail. In some cases this results in unnecessary re-referral.
- Diversity issues are not sufficiently assessed and considered in case planning.
- Managerial oversight and case planning, including the recording of management decision making on case files, are not sufficiently robust or consistent.
- Formal supervision of staff is inconsistent and staff have not received annual appraisals in accordance with the council's requirements.
- Case information is recorded in a number of different formats. While staff have received training in how to record and access information, social workers and managers sometimes have difficulty in locating information. This makes it difficult for managers to monitor casework.

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

Yours sincerely

**Pietro Battista**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Ged Curran, Chief Executive, London Borough of Merton  
Tony Eccleston, Chair of Merton Safeguarding Children Board  
Cllr Debbie Shears, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, London Borough of Merton  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education