

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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Mr Martin Pratt
Corporate Director Children and Learning
Luton Borough Council
Unity House
111 Stuart Street
Luton
LU1 5NP

Dear Mr Pratt

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Luton 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 Luton Borough Council which was conducted on 23 and 24 November 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 last unannounced inspection in January 2010 identified one priority action and six areas for development. This inspection identified progress in all these areas. The progress made in the timeliness and management of initial assessments was sufficient to remove it as an area for priority action but the relatively recent nature of the improvement achieved means it remains an area for development, alongside the need to improve the timeliness of core assessments. Adequate progress has been made in five of the six areas for development but concerns remain regarding the quality of electronic recording and management information systems.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Forced marriage protection orders are used effectively to protect young people. The council has also developed good links with a range of its local communities in order to improve its response to the diverse needs of children living in Luton, for instance a safeguarding policy for mosques and madrasahs has been developed in consultation with the local Muslim community.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Referrals are responded to promptly in line with statutory requirements. ▪ Where children are clearly seen to be suffering or at risk of significant harm child protection processes work well. ▪ Strategy discussions are timely, well attended by partner agencies, clearly recorded and lead to effective planning of Section 47 enquiries. ▪ Section 47 enquiries are completed in a timely manner. Risks and strengths are usually clearly identified and, where necessary, action to ensure children's safety is promptly implemented. ▪ There is good access to a wide range of interpreting services enabling assessments, where English is not a family's first language, to be effectively undertaken. ▪ The use of early intervention services and the common assessment framework is well established and having some impact in diverting children appropriately away from specialist services and providing good quality information in support of referrals to social care. ▪ Initial and core assessments adequately identify and analyse risk. Partners are engaged in the assessment process and contribute appropriate information which informs assessments. ▪ Partnership working, particularly with the police, is strong and promotes effective safeguarding. ▪ Emergency duty arrangements are effective and there is good communication and management liaison between daytime and out-of-hours services. ▪ Senior managers demonstrate good awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of referral and assessment services. They provide appropriate challenge and are taking action to strengthen the service. ▪ The process of case auditing is well established within the service and is used

to inform service improvement. Luton Safeguarding Children Board also undertakes an annual programme of multi-agency case auditing.

- Children and family members are involved in assessments and their views and feelings taken into account.
- Assessments are shared with families and outcomes fed back routinely to referrers.
- Staff report that they receive regular supervision which provides opportunities for critical reflection, professional development and case management oversight. Suitable training is provided and accessed by staff.
- Staff workloads are manageable and enable most work to be completed in a timely way to safeguard children. No work was unallocated at the time of the inspection. There is good staff morale and a strong commitment to delivering a responsive service to children.

Areas for development

- Appropriate inter-agency thresholds are in place but there is inconsistency in their application. There are variations in responses to referrals involving domestic violence and in the application of criteria for undertaking initial assessments. As a result not all children receive an appropriate level of service.
- Record keeping is not always up-to-date and while workers describe management oversight and direction of casework this is seldom evidenced in case recording.
- In some cases Section 47 enquiries had been undertaken by social workers with insufficient experience to confidently manage these. Senior managers were aware of this and taking steps to avoid this in the future.
- Whilst ethnicity is usually accurately recorded in referrals and assessments, the recording of assessments does not consistently demonstrate how needs arising from ethnicity, culture and religion have been considered or addressed.
- While most assessments include key information and analysis of risk, case plans often fail to fully reflect this or provide sufficient clarity to assist families make the required changes.
- There is insufficient management capacity in the initial referral and assessment team. The council has recognised this and is taking action to address the shortfall.
- The council is taking action to improve the timeliness of assessments. Recently there has been significant improvement in the timely completion of initial assessments although this has yet to be sustained. There has been little

improvement in the timeliness of core assessments which also remains an area for development.

- Although some recent improvements have been achieved, the management information provided by the electronic system is not easily available in a format which supports service requirements. This impacts on the efficient use of social workers' time and does not support effective performance management.

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

Yours sincerely

Nicholas McMullen
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Trevor Holden, Chief Executive, Luton Borough Council
Michael Preston-Shoot, Chair of Luton Safeguarding Children Board
Tahir Khan, Lead Member for Children's Services, Luton Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education