

22 December 2010

Dr Krutika Pau
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Dear Dr Pau

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within the London Borough of Brent 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 Brent 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.

Four of the areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in December 2009 have been addressed. The need for children in need and child protection plans to have explicit and measurable outcomes, remains an area for development.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ A comprehensive and thorough audit framework and good management



oversight ensure that senior managers are well aware of strengths and areas for development which has led to significant improvements in service delivery.

- The strategy for the recruitment and retention of staff has resulted in a stable, experienced and appropriately qualified workforce within the referral and assessment provision. The referral and assessment service is now fully staffed. This is enabling improvements in practice. Social workers now have manageable caseloads, are completing assessments on time and are able to offer consistent and comprehensive support to children and families.
- Excellent structured support is available to front line staff. Newly qualified social workers benefit significantly from a good support and protected caseloads. The advanced practitioner role is further enabling improvements in the quality of service provided to children and their families. This includes significant opportunities for learning through co-working with advanced practitioners. All team managers receive good professional development opportunities which effectively develop their management skills and this is reflected in good supervision.

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

- Decision making on contacts is appropriate and timely. There is good recording of decision making and clear management directions to social workers.
- Thresholds for prevention and early intervention are well established. Partnership working between children's services and the voluntary and community sector results in good support and service provision to children and their families. The common assessment framework is well embedded and results in clear plans and comprehensive step-up and step-down processes.
- The council has been successful at reducing caseloads to a more manageable level in the referral and assessment provision. The locality teams also have sufficient resources to meet the demand for providing services to children and their families who are referred.
- Case recording is up-to-date and there is evidence of good management oversight and decision making on case files. Chronologies are routinely created for each case and updated regularly.
- Child protection investigations are timely and are appropriately prioritised. These are always carried out by suitably experienced and qualified social workers. Child protection investigations demonstrate comprehensive information gathering, and decision making is robust and evidence based.
- Children are routinely seen alone and where appropriate their wishes and feelings form an integral part of assessments and planning for their future care. Families are routinely sent written assessments detailing the outcomes of

assessment processes and subsequent plans.

- The timeliness of initial and core assessments has improved and is now good. There is effective tracking of work and the information gathered assists performance management of the service. Cases are closed appropriately and demonstrate consistent management oversight.
- Quality assurance processes are sound and managers routinely attend core group meetings and case conferences. Managers also accompany allocated social workers on some visits to the family in order to assess needs of children and their families.
- Lessons learned from serious case reviews have been disseminated effectively to staff and these are routinely discussed in team meetings and have influenced practice.
- Links between the emergency duty team and the locality teams are good and information is shared promptly and effectively.
- There is good partnership working between the locality teams and the police. Partnerships with education and health are developing through regular meetings to improve multi-agency working.
- There is good consideration of identity, ethnicity and cultural issues in assessment and care planning.
- The electronic recording system has been reconfigured to ensure new information on open cases is accurately recorded.
- There has been a significant improvement in the timeliness of initial child protection conferences.

Areas for development

- Child in need plans are in place for children and young people but still do not consistently include clear and measurable outcomes or appropriate timescales. The council has taken action to develop new documentation following the last inspection, however this is not yet implemented. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- There is an inappropriate use of unqualified staff to complete initial and core assessments on children in need cases.
- Variations in the quality of information included in referrals to children's social care leads to additional work having to be undertaken by social workers before a decision can be made regarding the referral. Agencies do not always respond promptly to requests for information and this leads to a few assessments being signed off before full information from other agencies is received. The council

is taking robust action to improve this.

- Some strategy discussions seen by inspectors do not involve agencies, when appropriate, other than the police and children's social care when they would have benefited from wider involvement. This potentially leads to information from other agencies not being taken into account fully in decision making.
- The quality of assessments is improving. Assessments are child focused, and include all the key information and there is good evidence of observation of the home environment, social presentation and family interaction. However, the analysis of risk and protective factors are not always sufficiently explicit.

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

Yours sincerely

Emmy Tomsett
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Gareth Daniel, Chief Executive, London Borough of Brent Council
Donald McPhail, Chair of Brent Safeguarding Children Board
Robert Wharton, Lead Member for Children's Services, London Borough of Brent
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