

27 May 2010

Mrs Margaret Asquith  
Director Children's Services  
Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council  
Town Hall  
Victoria Square  
Bolton  
BL1 1RU

Dear Mrs Asquith

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Bolton Metropolitan 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 Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 27 and 28 April 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 and other practitioners.

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:

**Strengths**

- The authority has improved the quality, timeliness and consistency of response for children and young people referred to the referral and assessment teams. This has been achieved by the creation of locality-based teams with additional social work and management posts and the development of eight key assessment standards to underpin the practice across agencies.



- Work to support children in need is well co-ordinated and delivers significant improvements in outcomes for children and young people. This includes an innovative system of multi-agency child action meetings which are routinely held to identify what type of agency support is required.
- Staff demonstrated a good and comprehensive recognition of the needs of the ethnicity, diversity and communication needs of families. Children's services have readily available interpreters and translators for over 100 languages spoken in the borough. A specialist post provides an excellent service across the referral and assessment teams ensuring good and relevant support is made available to families.
- Workforce strategies are highly effective in ensuring there are sufficient trained and skilled workers. For example, the referral and assessment teams have a number of newly-qualified staff who are well supported through protected caseloads, mentor arrangements and co-working of cases.

#### **Satisfactory practice**

- All cases seen by inspectors which required immediate action following concerns regarding a child or young person, were responded to immediately ensuring appropriate protection.
- All cases are dealt with by appropriately qualified and supported social workers.
- In the majority of cases, the actions taken to complete initial and core assessments are to a satisfactory standard. Agency checks are completed and where appropriate children are seen and interviewed in a timely and appropriate manner.
- The emergency duty team has good links with daytime services.
- Workers report that they benefit from manageable caseloads, effective supervision and readily accessible support from their managers.
- Staff benefit from good access to relevant training.
- Senior managers regularly scrutinise work undertaken on individual cases as part of a programme of audits. Inspectors saw examples of this having a positive effect through appropriate challenge of practice.
- The common assessment framework is increasingly being used by all agencies although in some cases the analysis is limited and lacks sufficient detail.

#### **Areas for development**

- There is an inconsistent response to contacts from the Greater Manchester

Police that feature domestic violence. While all cases are scrutinised there is too much variation in the level and type of final response provided by individual social workers.

- Although in all cases seen by inspectors children and young people were appropriately seen and spoken to, a small number of initial assessments had been signed off by managers prior to the interview with the child and feedback to agencies and families. The authority has acted immediately to end this practice.
- In many cases the recording completed by social workers and managers is poor and does not reflect the quality of practice.
- Feedback forms are routinely sent to service users and professionals following referrals to children's services, which is good practice. However there is no clear process to respond to any negative response that is received.
- The Children with Disabilities team does not have in place adequate management oversight systems. For example, it is not clear from recording systems when a management decision has been made to start or sign off an assessment.

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

Yours sincerely

**Neil Penswick**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Sean Harriss, Chief Executive, Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council  
Mike Tarver, Chair of Bolton Metropolitan Borough Safeguarding Children Board  
Councillor Madeline Murray, Executive Member for Looked After Children and Safeguarding, Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families