

17 December 2009

Ms Helen Jenner
Corporate Director of Children's Services
London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
Town Hall
1 Town Square
Barking
IG11 7LU

Dear Ms Jenner

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Council children's services

This letter contains the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham which was conducted on 18 and 19 November 2009. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified one area for priority action and a number of areas for development, which are detailed below.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of 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. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

From the evidence gathered, the inspection identified a number of areas where the contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- Clear inter-agency thresholds for access to social care services have been agreed by all statutory and voluntary partners and are applied consistently by the assessment teams.



- The Local Safeguarding Children Board has good processes in place to monitor performance across agencies. The Board has effectively informed social care staff of the lessons learnt from a recent serious case review.
- The referral and assessment service has sufficient resources to meet the demand for services for the children and young people referred to it.
- Staff report that morale is high. They feel well supported by their managers and demonstrate a strong desire to continuously improve the services they offer to children and families.

From the evidence gathered, the following strengths and areas for development were also identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Equality and diversity issues are effectively considered within assessments and, where English is not a first language, interpreters are used appropriately. ▪ The Emergency Duty Team arrangements are well co-ordinated with those of the assessment teams and provide a well resourced, robust and effective out of hours service for children and their families. ▪ Children and carers are regularly and appropriately consulted about service provision. In particular, this has impacted positively on the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and the work of the Local Safeguarding Children Board where the Young People’s Safety Group discusses safeguarding matters and makes suggestions about improvements to services. ▪ Multi-agency partnerships led by the Children’s Trust are successful, particularly in relation to the implementation of the CAF. Effective inter-agency working also ensures children receive timely support from appropriate agencies.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Although the timeliness of initial and core assessments is in line with that in similar authorities, the quality of assessments is too variable. Children’s views are not always fully considered; most assessments do not show where the evidence for analysis comes from; and too often case plans following core assessments lead to further unnecessary assessments and a delay in service provision.

- The percentage of referrals that go on to be initial assessments at 20% is well below the percentage achieved by statistical neighbours. Inspectors found some referrals that should have led to initial assessments but did not do so, even though work was undertaken to ensure that the child was safe.
- While management oversight of individual cases is adequate, the quality assurance system does not support the systematic audit of key front line processes.
- The content of staff supervision and decisions by management is not recorded in sufficient detail to ensure staff performance issues can be properly addressed.
- Practice managers are carrying too many cases and therefore have insufficient capacity to oversee effectively the work of the social work teams. This results in insufficient challenge of social workers and variability in the quality of the service being offered to children and their carers.
- The infrastructure supporting the Integrated Children's System is insufficiently robust; it breaks down when overloaded and loses information about children. A solution is being developed but is not yet in place. Local arrangements mean that the Integrated Children's System is complex to operate with information being stored in four different domains. Training had not ensured that all staff are competent to operate the system and are able to find all relevant information about children when they need it.
- Reports from the police about domestic violence do not contain a risk assessment, thus making it difficult for the children's service to prioritise quickly whether a service should be provided to the family.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action.

Area for priority action

- Management oversight and decision making in relation to child protection practice are insufficiently precise, leading to poor practice on some cases and resulting in the guidance in *'Working Together to Safeguard Children'* not being adhered to. For example, decisions about contacts and referrals are not always made within prescribed timescales; the recording of the decisions is sometimes unclear; and visits to children in need of protection not always being carried out and written up in line with procedures.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Rob Whiteman, Chief Executive, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.
Simon Hart, Chair of London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Safeguarding Children Board.
Cllr Rocky Gill, Lead Member for Children's Services, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families.