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Ms Judith Pettersen
Director of Children's Services and Lifelong Learning
London Borough of Hounslow Council
Hounslow Civic Centre
8 Lampton Road
Hounslow
TW3 4DN

Dear Ms Pettersen

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within the London Borough of Hounslow 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 the London Borough of Hounslow Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 June 2011. 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 practice that met requirements and areas for development.

Most of the areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in June 2009 have been addressed. Areas of development that have not been fully addressed are identified below.

The area of priority action which identified a backlog of work and delays in transferring work to long term teams, following service restructuring, has been fully addressed.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

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

- Practice and procedures comply with statutory guidance and ensure that risk of harm to children is effectively managed to achieve good outcomes.
- Management oversight of contacts and referrals is timely and effective. Referrers are routinely advised of the progress of the referral and the decisions made by children's social care services.
- Written thresholds for children's social care services have been updated and agreed with partner agencies and are well understood and applied. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- Early intervention through the common assessment framework (CAF) is supported by qualified social workers who promote, advise on, and review the quality of common assessments. Monitoring and evaluation of CAF activity undertaken by the local authority confirms that children and families are able to access family support services relevant to their needs.
- Children's wishes and feelings are routinely taken into account and contribute to assessments of their needs and care planning. Parents, carers and young people are informed of the outcome of their assessments in a timely fashion. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- Most initial and core assessments seen by inspectors are timely and of good quality, with some evidence of research informing assessments.
- Good attention is paid to children's individual needs including their age, gender, ethnicity and cultural heritage, which inform their assessments and plans.
- Cases seen by inspectors demonstrate evidence of planning which is clear, measurable and subject to timely review and management oversight. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection, and at the inspection of safeguarding and looked after children's services in September/October 2009.
- Child protection enquiries are facilitated by timely strategy discussions. Face to face meetings between representatives from children's social care, the police and other agencies as appropriate, are held for particularly complex cases. Strategy discussions are multi-agency and are well recorded. All child protection enquiries are carried out by qualified and suitably experienced social workers.
- Transfer arrangements of cases between teams are clear and timely, ensuring that social workers in the intake service are able to respond promptly to new referrals and children who require ongoing support are allocated to other

specialist social workers.

- Staff have access to appropriate training opportunities and receive regular supervision, although this does not consistently meet the local authority's specified minimum frequency in the west team. However staff do have access to frequent informal support from their managers, which they value. The local authority plans to recruit permanent practice consultants who will have a responsibility to ensure that supervision frequency is at the expected standard. Supervision was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- Lessons from serious case reviews conducted across London as well as within the local authority are used to inform practice, for example, in changing the management arrangements for care leavers who are also young parents, to help ensure that the safety of both the parent and the child is given sufficient attention.
- Senior managers have recently started auditing cases to ensure that referral and assessment processes are effective at identifying, assessing and managing risk of harm and that casework and decision-making are robust. The impact of this work has yet to be established.
- Out of hours duty arrangements are clear and link well to daytime services.

Areas for development

- Social workers are carrying a high number of cases. However this is not a true reflection of their workload as a significant proportion of these cases are awaiting closure because of the need for case records to be updated on the electronic system and/or management agreement for closure to be recorded. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- Current multi-recording systems do not facilitate good case management which leads to difficulties in effectively tracking a child's journey through assessment and provision of services. Consequently it is time-consuming and difficult for managers to ensure that cases are being responded to appropriately. The local authority is currently procuring an alternative client database to provide a single electronic record for each child. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Sheena Doyle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Mary Harpley, Chief Executive, London Borough of Hounslow Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education