

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 Chris Kiernan
Director of Children's Services
London Borough of Waltham Forest Council
2nd floor, Uplands Business Park
Silver Birch House
Blackhorse Lane
Walthamstow
London
E17 5SD

Dear Mr Kiernan

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within the London Borough of Waltham Forest 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 Waltham Forest Council which was conducted on 1 and 2 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 an area for priority action alongside 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 on 27 and 28 July 2010 have been addressed. Those that remain outstanding are identified below.



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

- All children who are referred for a service are allocated to qualified social workers who promptly undertake all assessments and child protection enquiries.
- The diverse needs of children are recognised and recorded and these are used appropriately to inform practice and assessment of need. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- 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.
- Where the risk of significant harm to children is identified at the point of referral, there is a prompt response to undertake further enquiries. Timely strategy discussions with the police identify appropriate plans to progress child protection enquiries.
- Clear action to improve the quality of referrals from partner agencies has been taken, for example, training for school staff alongside the implementation of a clear escalation arrangement. This has resulted in most referrals to the referral and assessment service being appropriate and sufficiently detailed.
- Partnership working and information sharing with the police in relation to investigating allegations of child abuse and responding to domestic violence is effective.
- Initial and core assessments that are undertaken to identify children's needs are generally satisfactory and contain a suitable level of analysis. Agencies are appropriately consulted to inform assessments.
- Action to improve the timeliness of core and initial assessments has been effective in the referral and assessment service and the children with disabilities team. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- The views of children, young people and their families are generally recorded and inform planning and assessments.
- Record keeping is up to date and there is evidence of management oversight of case planning and decision making on children's files. Delay in case recording was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- Children's records include up to date and detailed chronologies which clearly summarise the child's journey and assists planning for them. This was an area

for development at the last unannounced inspection.

- Out of hours arrangements are robust with a seamless transfer of information to the day service, ensuring there is no delay in assessing children's needs.
- There is an established system of quality auditing of contacts, referrals and assessments by managers which takes account of lessons learned from serious case reviews and previous inspection findings. Suitable corrective action is taken where shortfalls are identified. Findings are now reported to the Local Safeguarding Children Board which was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- All social work staff including agency social workers are suitably trained and qualified and have access to good support arrangements which include a range of training opportunities, regular and thorough supervision and manageable caseloads.

Areas for development

- Referrals relating to children with disabilities are of variable quality with some containing insufficient information about children's needs. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- The consistent recording of the views, wishes and feelings of children with disabilities, although improving, remains an area for development.
- Some children and their families are referred to other agencies for services following an assessment of their needs when ongoing support through the implementation of a child in need plan, overseen by an allocated social worker, would have been more appropriate.
- Inter-agency thresholds for access to children's social care services are generally understood. However the use of the common assessment framework to meet children's needs at an earlier stage, whilst increasing, remains underdeveloped.
- Joint working arrangements with the metropolitan police specialist sexual assault unit are underdeveloped and children and young people who are victims and/or perpetrators of sexual assaults are not able to benefit from clearly defined responsibilities of each agency to ensure that both prosecution and support needs are fully addressed at all stages of police inquiries.
- Written agreements with parents which set out the requirements of what is required of them are sometimes used inappropriately. In some cases seen by inspectors, children's social care services were withdrawn and undue reliance placed on the effectiveness of these agreements to protect children and on parents' ability to comply with the agreements without prior evidence of their capacity to do so.

This inspection has identified the following area for priority action:

Area for priority action

- In a significant proportion of recent cases reviewed during the inspection children were placed at risk of inadequate protection. Some referrals which clearly indicated that children were at risk of harm were inappropriately progressed as initial assessments rather than as child protection enquiries. These were then prematurely closed without the full range of risks being recognised and appropriately assessed. In other cases where children were subject to child protection enquiries, planning and analysis of emerging risks was poor. The failure to effectively engage children and young people led to an incomplete understanding of the risks to them and other children and young people. As a result protection plans were inadequate leaving them at continued risk of harm. Management oversight of this work was poor and failed to remedy these significant weaknesses. Senior managers gave an immediate commitment to re-examine these cases and also to audit other recent cases to ensure there is no unidentified risk of harm to children.

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

In addition, the findings of this inspection and the identified area for priority action may have a significant impact on the annual children's service assessment. If the concerns raised by the identified area for priority action are not resolved by the findings of a subsequent inspection, the overall rating of the local authority's children's services is unlikely to be better than 'performing poorly'.

The identification of an area for priority action is likely to lead, at an appropriate time, to further inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements, a full safeguarding inspection, or a full safeguarding and looked after children inspection. If such an inspection takes place before the decision on the annual assessment, the findings and judgement of that inspection will supersede the findings of the unannounced inspection.

Yours sincerely

Sheena Doyle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Martin Esom, Chief Executive, London Borough of Waltham Forest Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education