

3 August 2011

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 5 and 6 July 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 strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements on 27 and 28 April 2010 have all been addressed. The council has responded promptly and diligently to identified deficiencies and has actively promoted service development.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">There is timely and highly effective use of a range of specialist resources to



support families and safeguard children. These include the 'Exit' team, working with children vulnerable to sexual exploitation, the education-based travellers support team and the early use of family support staff. The type and range of support helps to prevent the escalation of problems and promotes better family participation in assessments.

- Workforce maintenance and development strategies provide very effective support to staff. Their impact is evidenced by exceptionally low sickness rates amongst social workers and a well motivated, stable and fully-staffed permanent workforce. This contributes to consistency of involvement with families and partner agencies to achieve good outcomes for children.

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

- There are clear and robust systems in place to provide effective management oversight of initial referrals and assessments. Inspectors saw evidence within the majority of recent cases of clear managerial involvement and identification of practice issues.
- Child protection procedures comply with statutory requirements and are understood and used effectively to manage risk of harm.
- Thresholds for assessment are effectively applied and reviewed. They are understood by referring agencies ensuring appropriate referrals and increasing use of the common assessment framework to enable early support to children and families.
- Most plans for safeguarding and for children in need are sufficiently detailed and specific and assist outcomes to be monitored to ensure progress.
- Section 47 child protection enquiries are effectively carried out by suitably qualified and experienced workers and ensure children's safeguarding needs are appropriately addressed. Decision making is timely and leads to suitable intervention where this is required.
- Record keeping is mostly up to date and demonstrates action taken to address risk of harm.
- Staff workloads are balanced, manageable and reflect the levels of worker experience. Cases are transferred promptly to provide continuity of service and there are no unallocated cases.
- Out of hours arrangements are clear and well managed. Prompt and effective communication between the emergency duty team and daytime services supports timely action to protect children at risk of harm.
- Performance reporting provides clear and appropriately targeted data from the electronic data system. This combines with a well-established audit culture at

local level to give team and senior managers a good understanding of service pressures and development needs.

- Staff training is regular and accessible. All teams engage in practice evaluation activity resulting in strong team development plans designed to improve the ability of staff to assess and respond to risk and need.

Areas for development

- Although staff are clear about the issues relating to equality and diversity in individual cases, detail of the work undertaken is not always sufficiently recorded to demonstrate how it has been taken into account.
- Although staff report they are well supported and directed through regular supervision the extent of critically reflective discussion is not always evidenced in the supervision record.
- Although there are clear arrangements to receive and respond to police notifications of domestic violence, the effectiveness of this process is impaired as notifications do not consistently evaluate the level of risk to children and subsequently require additional work to determine priority for response.
- The extent to which the views of children and parents inform service development is variable. Although children are routinely seen their views are not always evidenced as having been taken into account in assessments and plans. Arrangements for obtaining service user and partner agency views do not yet provide sufficient information to support effective service development.
- The quality of analysis within assessments is inconsistent. Whilst inspectors saw some recent good examples of assessments, a significant number were insufficiently evaluative and demonstrated a limited understanding of the impact of a child's history. The use of chronologies to inform practice for example is also inconsistent.

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

Yours sincerely

Jeff Banham
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Sean Harriss, Chief Executive, Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education