

31 March 2010

Mrs Gladys Rhodes
Strategic Director Children's Services
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council
The Exchange
Ainsworth Street
Blackburn
BB1 6AD

Dear Ms Rhodes

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Blackburn with Darwen 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 Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council which was conducted on 2 and 3 March 2010. 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.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but some 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:

- Where children and young people are identified as being at risk, appropriate and prompt action is taken to investigate concerns and ensure children are safeguarded.



- The Blackburn and Darwen Continuum of Need and Response framework provides clear guidance and is used appropriately to inform decision making on the provision of services for children and families.
- The work undertaken by multi-agency staff in the reception and assessment service is supported by readily accessible policies and procedures.
- Effective information systems are in place to support managerial overview and decision making on cases within the duty system. Regular case file audits targeted at different aspects of the work and process are undertaken.
- Reflective supervision has been introduced for all staff drawing on the expertise of external agencies. This is an innovative approach to improve the quality of assessments.
- Cases do not transfer from the referral and assessment team until they are audited and confirmed that recording and reports are completely up-to-date. Good communication between the emergency duty team and the referral and assessment team ensures that concerns about children and young people are followed up appropriately.
- Child protection concerns regarding children with severe disabilities and their siblings are responded to appropriately by effective joint working between reception and assessment and children with disabilities social workers.
- Up-to-date chronologies are available on case files to inform planning and work with children and young people.
- Case files seen showed that issues of equality and diversity were well recognised and responded to.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The new supervision framework has led to good quality, regular supervision with very clear evidence of individual case discussions, decisions and actions. Staff report feeling well supported as team managers are easily accessible between formal supervision sessions. ▪ There is good evidence of clear, managerial decisions, guidance and direction on children’s case files. Decisions made in both formal and informal case discussions are all recorded on case files. This ensures clarity

for staff in their work with children, young people and families.

- The common assessment framework is well established. Multi-agency working through this framework supports children and young people well and there is effective monitoring and overview of this work.
- A good multi-agency system is in place to support families affected by domestic violence with strong links to multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) and the Wish centre (Women's Aid support service).
- The inclusion of staff from a range of agencies within the referral and assessment service ensures effective joint working for children, young people and families from assessment to service delivery.
- Learning from serious case reviews has been disseminated and discussed with front line staff. Examples have been seen where actions implemented following serious case reviews have resulted in improved practice, for example to safeguard expectant mothers affected by domestic violence.

Areas for development

- When contact is first made with the referral and assessment service about a child in need sufficient information is not always gathered from external agencies to help inform the judgement made regarding what action needs to be taken.
- The local authority's latest data show that the number of re-referrals has increased. Inspectors saw examples of children in need cases being closed at too early a stage leading to them later being re-referred.
- Not all case records and assessments are written up in a timely manner leaving the potential for important information not being available to inform decisions, especially in the event of the absence of the key worker for those children.
- The quality of assessment and analysis is variable. Although examples of good assessments were seen by inspectors, not all assessments were sufficiently thorough or well focused on identifying children and young people's needs. Historical information is not always used to inform assessments.
- Children and young people are seen appropriately but their views, wishes and feelings are not always recorded in sufficient detail.

- While recording of ethnicity has improved, there are still gaps in information making it difficult to determine if services are being provided appropriately to children and young people across the whole community.

Yours sincerely

Pat O'Brien
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Graham Burgess, Chief Executive, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council
Laurence Loft, Chair of Blackburn with Darwen Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Chris Thayne, Lead Member for Children's Services, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families