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Ms Eleanor Brazil  
Interim Director for Children and Families  
Birmingham City Council  
Council House Extension  
Margaret Street  
Birmingham  
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Dear Ms Brazil

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Birmingham City 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 Birmingham City Council which was conducted on 11 and 12 October 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, with some areas for development.

Due to the poor performance of children's services in Birmingham, the Secretary of State issued an improvement notice in February 2009 and a further improvement notice in September 2010. An Improvement Board was established to provide challenge to drive progress through an improvement plan. Progress has been made on the areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in November 2009, however most areas require further work. Progress has also been made on the relevant areas for improvement from the safeguarding and looked after children inspection in July 2010, however most areas require further work.



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**

- Senior managers demonstrate a significant determination to achieve a sustainable and much improved service. They share a good understanding of the challenges that remain and have detailed plans in place to tackle them.
- At the time of this inspection, the service was being reorganised into new teams with clear remits and a focus on improving performance. New integrated service teams commenced operating on 12 September 2011. It is too early to see evidence of the improvements that these changes are intended to make.
- There is a good and much needed focus from the new management team in moving to a service with an emphasis on prevention. Considerable investment has been made by the council and other agencies in new teams co-located in schools and children's centres. The Director and senior managers demonstrate strong leadership in engaging with partner agencies to raise awareness of the new ways of working. The limited range of services for children in need was an area for priority action at the last unannounced inspection.
- Staff from partner agencies are based within the integrated access teams and this is contributing to an improvement in the quality of referrals received from agencies.
- The council has recently developed a comprehensive set of practice standards and a Social Work Academy in partnership with the University of Birmingham to improve the learning, development and standards of practice among social work practitioners. This was formally launched on 10 October 2011.
- Significant work has been undertaken to recruit permanent staff and, where necessary, suitably experienced and skilled agency staff. Almost all front line posts in the service are filled although 20% of posts remain held by agency staff.
- In the majority of cases, contacts and referrals are dealt with by the new integrated access teams in a timely manner and passed on appropriately for social work assessment with robust management oversight.
- Most initial and core assessments seen by inspectors complied with the procedures in the national guidance. There had been appropriate consultation with other agencies, children were seen and, when age appropriate, seen alone.
- Multi-agency domestic abuse arrangements appropriately screen and prioritise cases, responding in a timely manner to the needs of victims and families.

- In most of the cases seen by inspectors, where it had been identified that there needed to be an initial child protection conference, the assessments were of a high standard, appropriately addressing risk and identifying actions that needed to be taken to safeguard children.
- Ethnicity, culture and diversity are appropriately recorded and considered during assessments. Sensitive practice was observed by inspectors regarding young people's sexuality.
- Workers express a sense of improving morale in working for Birmingham City Council and describe improving services.
- Most workers report recent improvements in the numbers on their caseloads allowing them more time for direct work with children.
- In the majority of cases, supervision is held regularly, focusing on casework and performance issues. The quality and recording is, however, variable.
- Most newly qualified social workers report improvements to the support available including a detailed induction to the council and a career development pathway. The support varies though across the council, with some staff reporting that they do not receive the benefit of additional supervision and that they carry large caseloads of complex statutory work. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.

### **Areas for development**

- In a few cases seen by inspectors where child protection concerns had been appropriately referred to the council, risk had not been adequately assessed. The senior management team responded immediately to address the concerns identified by the inspectors. The council is aware of some poor individual practice and is addressing these through a range of procedures. Achieving a detailed understanding of the deficits in casework practice was an area for improvement at the safeguarding and looked after children inspection.
- The quality of analysis in assessments remains too variable. In the majority of cases, assessments are not timely. Although inspectors saw examples of good work, many of the assessments were poor, focusing on the needs of the adults rather than the children, and lacking robust plans. The quality of analysis in assessments was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- Management oversight is variable. Inspectors found examples of good and robust management but also examples of poor recording and casework being accepted. In addition the rationale for management decision making was frequently not recorded.
- Multi-agency strategy meetings are not routinely held to review the progress of child protection investigations and to forward plan on what action should be taken when further information becomes available. The quality of recording of

these meetings is poor and does not adequately detail the response to the referral.

- Quality assurance and audit arrangements are not sufficiently embedded to enable senior managers to identify and address the poor quality of individual cases seen during this inspection. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection and an area for improvement identified in the safeguarding and looked after children inspection.
- There are a high number of repeat referrals. The council is undertaking further analysis to identify the specific issues for the agencies concerned.
- Social workers based in the integrated access teams appropriately undertake analysis of information about more complex referrals. However, some unqualified staff are undertaking assessments beyond their level of responsibility. This was an area for development at the last unannounced inspection.
- Social workers and their managers spend a disproportionate amount of time responding to a number of separate electronic systems used for case recording which require continual cross-referencing.
- In a minority of cases seen by inspectors where there were concerns about the safety of children, assessments and daily records had not been completed and although work had been undertaken there was no evidence that this had occurred.
- Some social workers were critical of the range of training available and reported to inspectors that it did not always support them in developing their skills and knowledge.

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

Yours sincerely

**Neil Penswick**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Stephen Hughes, Chief Executive, Birmingham City Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education