

9 December 2009

Mr Tony Howell
Strategic Director
Children, Young People and Families
Birmingham City Council
Council House
Victoria Square
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Dear Mr Howell

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Birmingham City 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 Birmingham City council which was conducted on 9, 10 and 11 November 2009. 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, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified one area for priority action and a number of 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:

- No children were found by inspectors to have been left at immediate risk of harm and prompt action is being taken to safeguard children in need of protection.



- The Emergency Duty Team is well established and provides city-wide out of hours cover to safeguard children. Some good examples of effective inter-agency working out of hours were observed.
- Staff receive effective supervision and managers are supportive and accessible.
- Responses to contacts and referrals in most cases seen are appropriate with timely decisions to progress to initial and core assessments and initial child protection conferences. Strategy discussions are taking place in accordance with agreed procedures and are being suitably recorded.
- In almost all cases children are routinely seen and their views taken into account during assessments.
- Case records are satisfactory and are mainly up to date.
- Local practice is sensitive to cultural difference in families, reflected in team composition, staff deployment and use of interpreters.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Senior managers are demonstrating clear and focused leadership. ▪ The local authority and key partners have a good understanding of the challenges facing children's safeguarding services. Clear priorities for action have been set, are being implemented and are underpinned by additional resources. ▪ The clarity of leadership and prioritisation is valued by the social care workforce and this is playing an important part in strengthening services and improving outcomes for children and young people. Staff motivation and commitment are good.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Birmingham Local Safeguarding Children Board does not have a consistent method for assuring the quality of front line services or the effectiveness of the contribution partners make in safeguarding and responding to children in need. ▪ Lessons and themes arising from service quality and compliance audits by all key partners are not being sufficiently well used within a coherent approach to help inform service improvement. ▪ The Newly Qualified Social Workers Scheme has been introduced but this is not providing newly-qualified staff with the phased induction they need. They

are acquiring heavy caseloads, including child protection and court work, too quickly.

- Social work assistants, although appropriately supervised, are undertaking some complex work and carrying responsibility for conducting assessments beyond their level of responsibility.
- The quality of analysis in assessments, although improving, is too variable. While a few examples of excellent assessments, which made good use of research, were seen by inspectors, most are satisfactory and a few are inadequate.
- Although a major child protection training programme has been commissioned and suitable supervision arrangements are in place by qualified social work managers, some referral and assessment officers are yet to receive their training.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action.

Area for priority action

- The range of services for children in need and their families who require more intensive multi-agency support but are not in need of child protection is too limited. This contributes to high referral rates to children's social care and unmet need as some serious cases are not diverted to relevant family support provision.

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

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Mr S Hughes, Chief Executive, Birmingham City Council
Mr T Howell, Chair of Birmingham City Council Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor L Lawrence, Lead Member for Children's Services, Birmingham City Council
Mr C Tucker, Service Director Children's Social Care, Birmingham City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families