

19 August 2009

Ms Rosemary Archer
Director of Children's Services
Leeds City Council
Merrion House
110 Merrion Centre
Leeds LS2 8DT

Dear Ms Archer

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Leeds City Council 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 Leeds City Council which was conducted on 21 and 22 July 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 areas 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 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 and administrative staff. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

The inspection identified a number of individual examples of satisfactory and good child-focused work delivered in accordance with national guidance.

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

Strengths

- Both teams visited by the inspectors were fully staffed by qualified workers and managers who spoke positively about working for Leeds City Council.



- On being informed of concerns, the Director of Children’s Services and her management team responded robustly and appropriately. Immediate action was taken. This included visits the same day to those children identified as at potential risk and changes in managerial decision-making to ensure that in future all cases of concern would be seen by a senior manager. An action plan was made available by the end of the inspection, in response to inspectors’ findings.

Areas for development

- Performance management systems to ensure the delivery of contact, referral and assessment arrangements which meet guidance are not evidenced as having an impact on the improvement of services. Senior managers are aware of inconsistencies in practice but were not aware of the full extent of the critical flaws in identifying, assessing and managing risk.
- Inspectors did not see examples of quality assurance and case recording audits carried out by Leeds City Council children’s services or the Leeds Safeguarding Children Board.
- The quality of information recorded and passed on to relevant services by the city council contact centre, which receives most referrals, is inconsistent. The council has recently seconded an experienced manager to the contact centre to assess these issues.
- Multi-agency thresholds for access to children’s services are unclear. The quality of referrals to children’s services from other agencies is variable. Some lack the necessary information and are not confirmed in writing.
- Key children’s services procedures, including those for child protection, are out-of-date and do not provide sufficient guidance to staff and managers. The council has formally adopted the West Yorkshire Local Safeguarding Children Board child protection procedures but some staff indicated they were not aware of these.
- Leeds City Council reorganised the delivery of its children’s services in May 2009, partly to respond to an identified issue about inconsistency in social work practice. However, this has yet to have a full impact. Inconsistent practice continues to be a significant problem in the teams visited, both within and between teams, especially concerning the quality and timeliness of the completion and recording of initial and core assessments. Many of the assessments seen lacked effective risk assessments and evidence of management consideration and decision-making about potential risk.
- Record-keeping is poor, with significant delays in staff completing forms and keeping electronic records up-to-date. Assessment reports are not routinely shared with parents, carers, children and young people and significant delays were seen in the sharing of the completed assessments by social care services with other agencies.

- Performance indicators show a variable performance across the teams, with an overall worsening performance in the completion of assessments in a timely manner. The management recording of when an assessment is concluded is not consistent with national guidance. There is acknowledged inaccuracy of data resulting from recent changes in the electronic data system.
- The quality of supervision of staff is variable, although there are examples of good managerial support.

This visit has identified the following areas for priority action:

Areas for priority action

- The response to child protection referrals does not meet statutory guidance and does not ensure that children are adequately safeguarded. Child protection strategy discussions with the police and other agencies do not take place in a timely manner or in all relevant circumstances. Children are not always seen, even when there are concerns about their safety. This practice is not consistent with guidance in *'Working Together to Safeguard Children'*.
- During the initial reading of case records, children were identified as having been left at potential risk of serious harm. Inspectors therefore reviewed records from an additional sample of cases involving risk of physical harm. Seven children from these 23 case files were identified as having been left at potential risk of serious harm. Two further cases had not been written up and it was unclear what actions had been taken to protect these children.

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: Paul Rogerson, Chief Executive, Leeds City Council
Judith Dodd, Chair of Leeds Safeguarding Children Board
Stewart Golton, Lead Member for Children's Services, Leeds City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families

